

How to Promote a Perspicacious Intercultural Dialogue?

Written by Dieter Senghass

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DIETER SENGHASS, FEB 22 2013

At the end of his argument about the threatening, or actual, “clash of civilizations” Samuel Huntington pleaded for openness, collective learning, even cultural innovation (probably as a result of intercultural dialogues) – a plea which seems in discrepancy with his overall assessment of the main development trend in our world: the clash of civilizations. But left unanswered is the question “how to implement this plea in practical terms?”

Starting an intercultural dialogue with a good prospect of mutual understanding one has to omit one extremely counterproductive trap: the “essentialization” of cultures by which cultures, old and present, are assumed to be homogeneous or uniform entities. Instead, one has to enter such a dialogue with the readiness to cope with the real history of heterogeneous entities. What does such a perspective imply?

Europeans (and Westerners) should participate in an intercultural dialogue in the knowledge of their own real history. They should have previously understood that many politically motivated cultural debates at present taking place in the wide world had their analogous precursors in Europe. The cultural struggles observed today are not unfamiliar, let alone new, so long as one recalls one’s own past. Such an entry into the dialogue has been found to work discursive “wonders” in that it protects against a mostly unconscious essentialization of a late phase in European (Western) culture (this would equate European culture as such with modern value opinions and organizational principles of a modern public order). Such an approach also counteracts any temptation of essentializing other cultures (still in comparable upheaval), i.e. of perceiving them as quasi-monads. The point is that any essentialist cultural self-image and any essentializing image of another culture leads any cultural debate into a dead end, the more so if, as happens not infrequently, it takes place under politicizing conditions. A fruitful cultural dialogue therefore presupposes knowledge of the controversial paradigms that characterize the real history of every cultural sphere and especially of all global cultural regions.

As for the extra-European partners of such a dialogue, it would be important that these do not allow themselves to be elevated into representatives of their respective cultures or religions, nor to be forced into such a position. Since, in view of profound acute cultural conflicts within cultures, such “representative representatives” do not in fact exist. What we do find are representative champions of the most varied trends, who have long been present, though quantitatively diverging, in all cultures marked by structural heterogeneity. There they are in conflict with one another: traditionalists and modernists, theocrats and secularists, modern value-promoters and reactionaries, universalists and communitarists, unbelievers and fundamentalists, status-quo followers and dissidents. Their differences are often to be found not so much in specific cultural contents that are regarded as non-exchangeable and non-negotiable. Instead these controversial and often antagonistic positions reflect modernization-conditioned analogous socio-economic and socio-political problems that as a rule transcend the individual cultural orbits. They also reflect analogous action perspectives for the management and mastering of cultural conflicts within individual cultures (civilizations) – all this today is taking place outside Europe, but no different from what it used to be in Europe itself.

To cope with this empirical evidence, the past and ongoing clash *within* civilizations as an inescapable fact is likely to help escape the clash of civilizations where it sporadically threatens to take place locally, regionally or even globally.

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