Challenging global citizenship through interculturality: Crossing borders and practicing solidarity

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Two weeks after a Global Citizenship Conference organized by the North-South in Ljubljana in November 2011, a Slovenian fair trade partner to my organization (Humanitas) who was from Burkina Faso tried to enter the European gate at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. Equipped with a visa and a guarantee letter claiming her partnership in the EU project, she was denied entry. After twelve hours, and without even the basic right of a formal chance for a phone call, she was deported to Morocco. Whilst promoting global citizenship and intercultural discussions, at the same time (in this manner) the EU hindered the realization of such a project (which it happily promotes), hampered its performance, and even violated human rights.

I am not referring to this case because of its uniqueness but because of its frequency. Despite political declarations such occurrences have become part of standardized procedures. This makes me wonder whether it is (really) possible to talk about global citizenship. What is it that we practice? Where can a call for interculturality actually enter these discussions, and how? Defined as “a right to reside with rights”, or “a right to have rights”, as a perspective to be able to see experiences of local community as interconnected with experiences of others around the world, etc., in general, global citizenship is mainly discussed as identity (as belonging to the world), and ethics (as being in the world).

Numerous critics (postcolonial feminist scholars in particular), however, shattered the concept of global citizenship by showing its dubious nature. Despite representing the idea of universal inclusivity, global citizenship produces insiders and outsiders: not everyone is a global citizen. We should thus ask ourselves, as importantly remarked upon by David Jefferess (2008, p.28), whether the appeals for global citizenship, currently circulating in OECD states don't produce specifically positioned subjects: those capable of acting in a responsible way (North) and those waiting for help (South). In these contexts, the evil of poverty gets tackled by those in a privileged position. As indicated by a postcolonial feminist critique: “We get white men rescuing brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988, p.297).

As an anthropologist, I argue for differences between people, cultures and societies, diverse experiences, interpretations and perceptions. I tried to implement such ideas into intercultural communication workshops, in the context of global education that I used to co-design at Humanitas, A society for human rights and supportive action, in Slovenia. The idea of the workshops was not only to introduce new topics and learn about different forms of discrimination and racism, but to rethink dominant views and attitudes towards differences. The emphasis was on reflection and reflexivity. I argued for intercultural learning in the frame of global education to open up perspectives and point to the world outside the EU, drawing attention to global interdependencies, emphasizing relationships.

I believe global education can be (and has been) successful in many ways: in particular in making us aware that global poverty is not a distant problem. Global education reveals stories that are literally inscribed in our lives. Everyday, from the moment we get up, and get dressed in clothes that were produced globally, and drink a cup of coffee; we take part in reproducing a
global imbalance. We can fight these problems, by critically discussing them, and as taught by global education, also by being active responsible consumers. But, is a division of the world really that simple: there are producers in the south and consumers in the north? Isn’t this division by itself problematic? Doesn’t it mark boundaries which enforce dichotomies of “us” and “them”?

The International Development agenda has divided the world into enclosed entities marking them with specific labels: ‘north and south’, ‘developed’ and ‘developing’. Intercultural learning should shatter these illusions by questioning the simplicity of these categorizations, divisions, boundaries; by bringing in the perspective of the “Other”. If we talk about mal-distribution (economic inequality) we should be aware of (mis)recognition, and (mis)representation, too, (Fraser, 2008). Terms and meanings get mixed easily in everyday language and politics, that is why I will first draw a clear distinction between the following two terms: intercultural and multicultural.

The difference between the two is not only an issue of a cosmetic makeover. Whilst ‘multicultural’ emphasizes the coexistence of different cultures it does not include connections between them (meaning people living together but not interacting), ‘intercultural dialogue’ is about relations. Intercultural dialogue argues for a dialogical character of identity: identity is constructed through interaction with another subject. Once, a teacher asked me whether I find it important for a child to first learn about their own culture (local and national) and then about others. Even though I agree with a learning principle based on what is familiar and already well known, I stand for the idea that learning about ‘us’ is not and should not be excluded but intertwined with learning about ‘others’, we learn about us through relations with others.

The next problem is the definition of culture. A popular belief is that a group is defined by a distinctive culture and that cultures are discrete, clearly defined and internally homogenous entities featuring fixed meanings and values. The view of the world as a mosaic of separate cultures is called essentialist. Within such contexts slogans such as ‘bridging cultures’, were issued to promote intercultural dialogue (as was the case on various occasions in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008). These slogans had a clear mission: a bridge was supposed to connect two worlds as if they were separated, clearly bounded entities, as if the world was made of separate and distinct billiard balls (Wolf, 1982, p.6), cultural units, which are in our minds most often represented by nation states. Critiques have implied that culture must be seen as less unitary, more fragmented, partial, fluid and changing. For example by speaking of postcolonial transnational subject migrants studies question not only notions of stability in cultural identity, but also ties to a single nation-state or even to a single imagined community (Ong, 1999). Such identities escape in part from either-or classification and become defined more by the logic of both-and-and in which the subject shares partial, overlapping identities (Kearney, 1995, p. 558).

Speaking of culture has strong political implications. In particular, within the previously described essentialist perception of culture that was promoted by multiculturalism, popular in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century within the struggles for the recognition of difference. These views were significant for the promotion of political rights of certain groups, for example black activists or indigenous groups criticizing the melting pot idea and celebrating differences in the USA. Cultural claims were used to ground and justify different kinds of claims: to land (for ex. indigenous or minority rights), environmental protection, political autonomy, etc. The aim was to politically use identity politics to reify group identity. Contrary to what was said about the relational character of identity, identity politics as a part of politics of recognition and multiculturalism, ended by valorizing monologism—supposing that people (can and should)
construct their own identity. Identity politics was used to claim (national) sovereignty, but also to ground nationalisms, and even bloody genocides in the Balkans and Rwanda.

Despite the term change, this essentialist understanding (including identity politics) did not disappear entirely. The anthropologist Unni Wikan (2002) revealed how cultural claims are used in Norwegian courts. Wikan presented several stories of a modern form of sacrifice, which is performed on the altar of culture: cases where Muslim culture was used to legitimate the rape of a 14 year old girl or deportations and forced marriages of Muslim girls born and living in Norway. Similar cases, without the presence of an anthropologist at the court also happened in Slovenia, when Roma girls were kidnapped and sexually abused, yet, the act was justified by the explanation of “Roma cultural specificity”. Unni Wikan revealed that treating culture in fixed and absolute terms is dangerous and disguises the complexity of human existence. She argued that we are all both children of our culture and at the same time individuals. Cultural difference is essential in intercultural dialogue, and global education. These concepts were constituted on the notion of “difference”, treating it as the most decisive factor. But, are we really marked only by differences and distinctions? There are many parallels between societies, groups and cultures and it is important to acknowledge them. On the other hand, by talking only in terms of differences, we make others even more distinct. It is important to emphasize connections between societies, to understand cultural differences in a critical way, not as an (decisive) all embracing criteria.

Culture, when politicized, is understood as something static and homogenous. Such a reductionist way of understanding culture is among some scholars of nationalism explained as a new form of racism. The new racism is not about biological differences but cultural ones, it is about the incompatibility of lifestyles and traditions (Balibar, 1991, p. 17-28). By researching multicultural policies in the EU, Ben Pitcher (2009) explored how the politics of race/racism actually occur when all social actors are in agreement on the facticity of difference. The EU programs foster European identity and define citizenship based on multiculturalism. Yet, it was multicultural politics that strengthened national identities. By highlighting national cultural boundaries and differences in the contexts of strong nation states, multiculturalism actually built on exclusion. Acts of exclusion are, however, masked; they do not stress the inferiority of “others” but the cultural difference itself. These cultural differences are perceived as definite and unchangeable. In such an understanding, culture behaves in a racist manner; it acts like nature, by locking individuals and groups into genealogy (Balibar, 1991, p. 17-28).

The promotion of intercultural dialogue in the EU (2008) aimed at strengthening the idea of a united Europe («to foster European active citizenship and sense of belonging» (EC EYID 2008). In this sense it was intercultural dialogue that served to promote national interests and strengthen national partnerships within the EU. Cultural entities were thus defined by following nation-state border lines and exclusively within the EU, leaving out the “problematic Others” (migrants, refugees whilst also treating (political) minorities in a very narrow sense). Migrants are people from outside the EU, as well as from other EU Member States. Discriminative practices towards the latter can be, in some cases even compared to practices towards the former, in particular, this is the case with people from the former Eastern bloc, as for example, Romanians in Italy. What I found problematic and would like to challenge is the understanding of culture and the way the term is politically excessively (mis)used. The issue in question is: what do we actually do (or have done) in the name of culture? By locking cultures behind “their” borders, isolating them from others, we produce cultural representatives: individuals with specific “cultural repertoires”. By constantly evoking culture as an explanation for people's behavior, cultural difference is naturalized which can lead even to the collectivization of guilt which is often ascribed to Roma or migrants. The idea of cultural representatives is very closely
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connected to stereotypes and prejudices. The danger of “cultural” borders becomes even bigger when these borders turn into solid walls as when leaving EU member states. A South-Mediterranean Fence, not merely a hyper-border, is a concrete realization of these politics, it produces insiders and outsiders by marking a concrete division of geopolitical spaces: “The EU and the rest of the world” (Balibar, 2006, p. 3), the same goes with the Israeli fence or the iron curtain constructed by the US at the Mexican border.

Global citizenship can be and often is very exclusive. The question is whether it is possible to build on inclusion, and how? I see global citizenship, in particular the question of social inclusion, intensely related to solidarity. Solidarity, not limited merely to empathy, transforms to readiness to take action in support of others. By aiming at eliminating opression, appealing to a shared struggle, it differs from charity (Gould, 2007, p. 157). I would like to think about solidarity in relation to three representations: showing dying children in Ethiopia; exploited migrant construction workers (as is the case in Slovenia at present); or a man covered in blood in Afghanistan. These representations don’t point to the problem, they expose victims. We may sympathize with the victims but we are not fighting the problem. The solidarity at stake here is charity, pity, compassion. By looking at the victim we cannot move towards dismantling mechanisms of power. These representations actually mask the real problem: the mechanism of making workers invisible, children starve and die; the mechanism behind the war in Afghanistan. Why don't we see military cooperation, corrupt African local elites, statesmen, multinationals companies exploiting workers, destroying forests and polluting land, IMF, WB, managers robbing workers, politicians acting as if they were blind and deaf?

By putting a dying child on a poster (in order to bring a direct experience to the public) we do not capture the problem - mechanisms producing victims. We produce a victim: subjects become objects; they get robbed of agency, of their right to have rights, to be included in the fight. British Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) reminds us that ethical action begins not with what we can do to ‘help’, but with understanding why (my emphasis) the child is dying (cited in Jefferess, 2008, p. 35). Solidarity, a result of active struggle, constructs the universal on the basis of particular, on difference. “What turned different people into fellow subjects of justice,” writes American philosopher Nancy Fraser (2008, p. 65), “is neither shared citizenship or nationality, nor common possession of abstract personhood, nor the sheer fact of causal interdependence, but rather their joint subjection to a structure of governance, that set the ground rule that govern their interaction”: WTO, IMF, organizations regulating interaction of large transnational populations.

When I recently interviewed a dismissed worker from the largest textile plant in Slovenia, she talked about exploitive conditions of industrial workers in Slovenia, referring to all workers as “us”, emphasizing the importance of solidarity among workers in Slovenia. Yet, when depicting managers' impossible and exploitive demands, she cynically asked: “Do they think that we are in the Philippines?” Her reaction points to the impossibility to relate in any way to a Philippine worker, which is not surprising. This is what she sees in mainstream media, Philippine workers are mentioned in the context of low labor costs as part of the neoliberal agenda. Yet, such views are connected with the development agenda, too. It is about miseries and victims, hard conditions and exploitations. Not much is said about spaces of contestation and resistance. I believe it is important to see how the conditions of people around us are organized, how they are connected with the lives of people in different parts of the world, north and south, and behind/within these boundaries. Connections and relations should be emphasized.

The most powerful struggles are transnational ones. But to grasp that idea fully, we must acknowledge struggles that are already taking place in other countries, spaces of contestation
and resistance: not to see female workers in the Philippines merely as victims, but to explore how they are organized, alternative accounts should be produced. By arguing for transnational feminist solidarity Chandra Talpade Mohanty claims we need to focus on both, collective and individual experiences of struggles, resistances and exploitations or oppressions. Differences and commonalities exist in relation and tension with each other in all contexts, the emphasis should be on the relations of mutuality, co-responsibilities and common interests (2006, p. 242). My point is that it matters how stories are told. The realm of representation is important, to engage the deep level at which the political economy is racialized (Fraser, 2008). Representations are about power and agency. I discussed representations in connection with solidarity. By dismantling the mechanism of making workers invisible, children starve and die, the mechanism behind the war in Afghanistan (the mechanisms of power) we can build a space for solidarity, a frame for agency and resistance across the borders. Questions on boundaries, connections and relations are intensely related to history writing. Therefore, alternative histories should be written through distinct perspectives to provide new accounts. Slovenia used to belong to another world once. As a part of the Socialist Yugoslavia, it belonged to “the other” side of the iron curtain, at first, and then later to the nonaligned world. By actively co-shaping non-alignment it fought against the Cold War division in the world. The non-aligned politics could be (and should be) further discussed. However, it can be also a story to learn from. Due to its different position, Slovenia experienced a distinct perspective; it shared specific alliances, meanings and knowledge. This should not be forgotten. We should rethink historical relations and distinctions, and learn from them.

The iron curtain dividing the World into the East and the West was dismantled. However, a new one was set up. We should try not to repeat mistakes by fortifying the walls. We should focus our strengths on building cross border solidarity: grounded on participation in a fight with, not for, people around us. It is important to work towards overcoming dichotomies us/them, to provide alternative narratives and histories to the ones taken for granted, to capture connections and relations, within and between the south and north divisions - as in the world.

References


