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Stranger to us than the birds in our garden?

Reflections on hermeneutics, intercultural understanding and the management of difference.

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If it is to be held that to be unbiased one should be 'objective' in the sense of depersonalizing the person who is the 'object' of our study, any attempt to do this under the impression that one is thereby being scientific must be vigorously resisted (Laing, 1969: 24).

'When all is said and done, they are stranger to me than the birds in my garden', said the reknowned psychiatrist, Eugen Bleuler, of his schizophrenic patients. According to R.D. Laing, who quotes this remark in his book, *The Divided Self* (Laing, 1969: 28), Bleuler would approach his patients with 'a scientific curiosity', as clinical cases whose condition could be diagnosed by observing the symptoms of their disease (Laing, 1969: 28). His patients were, like the birds in his garden, at once intensely familiar to him - they were after all the stuff of his everyday life - and ineffably strange. Like those birds, they could be observed, described and taxonomised, and then a suitable clinical treatment prescribed - but to understand them would mean attempting to see the world as they saw it, making him to all intents and purposes as insane as his patients themselves. Laing himself departed radically from this clinical tradition, arguing that irrespective of how much clinical information psychiatrists amassed about their patients: case histories, observations of behaviour, tests and so forth, this would not necessarily help them 'to understand one single schizophrenic' (Laing, 1969: 33).

Instead, he claimed that in order to help his patients, it was necessary and possible to understand their ‘existential position’. Otherwise, one risked making objects of one’s subjects of study. As he said: ‘the methods used to investigate the objective world, applied to us, are blind to our experience, necessarily so’ (Laing, 1982: 9).

These two very different modes of approaching the other –information-seeking and understanding - provide the framework for the following discussion of the growth of handbook-type literature on ‘intercultural communication’, i.e. communication among people from different national cultures. The article focuses on intercultural handbooks written for a business audience. It is not the intention of the article to provide a substantive critique of this literature, as a sizeable body of critical literature already exists.¹ Neither are other types of cultural differences such as gender, organisational or regional cultures dealt with here. The intention is, rather, to reflect upon the mode of knowing and of apprehending difference that is represented by this literature, and upon why interest in the subject is flourishing precisely at a time when it would seem that the concept of ‘national culture’ is fast becoming obsolete. On the one hand, the notion of ‘bounded cultures’ is being contested by theorists arguing that globalisation² is leading to cultural convergence or integration (Fox, 1988 in Gessner and Schade, 1990: 259; Kramsch, 2002; Featherstone, 1990: 1). And on the other, we are witnessing the ‘weakening of the nation as a source of identity’, in favour of cultural complexity and diversity, cosmopolitanism and transnational identities that coalesce around non-national foci, e.g. multinational corporations or indeed transnational social movements (Hannerz, 1996: 81; Serbín, 1997; Sklair, 1999).³ Concepts such as cultural ‘deterritorialisation’, ‘homogenisation’, ‘hybridisation’ and ‘creolization’ have been coined to describe these changes (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 9; Escobar, 1995; García Canclini, 1989; Hannerz, 1992). It is indeed curious that ‘Western social scientists should be elaborating theories of global culture just when this “new world order” is breaking down into so many small-scale separatist movements, marching under the banner of cultural autonomy’ (Sahlins, 1993 in Friedman, 1994: 13).

Why should handbooks that catalogue and reify national cultural traits be necessary when on the one hand globalisation is wresting explanatory power from the concept of national culture at a theoretical level; and on the other at the level of politics

¹ See e.g. Söderberg (1999); Söderberg and Holden (2002); Hannerz (1992); Prasad (2003).

² I.e. the increased movement and mingling of people, flows of commodities, capital and labour, knowledge and images which causes local events to be ‘shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa’ (Giddens, 1990: 64; Wallerstein, 1991: 98)

³ But see, inter alia, Hall (1996); Smith (1991); Fog and Hastrup (1997) and Friedman (1997) for a critique of this position. These authors contend that, in fact, both the national and the local remain key foci of identity for the vast majority of people, and that voluntary cosmopolitanism - ‘free migration’ as opposed to ‘forced migration’ (Hall, 1996: 4) - remains the privilege of a small elite.

‘national cultures’ display a stubborn tendency to fragment into myriad groups all claiming cultural identities of their own? As Fog and Hastrup (1997: 3) put it, just as anthropologists are questioning the very concept of culture, ‘it has become embraced by a wide range of culture builders [and] anthropological works are increasingly being consulted by people desiring to construct cultural identities of a totalising sort’. These culture builders have spawned a veritable ‘culture shock⁴ prevention industry’ (Hannerz, 1996: 108).

This paradox is treated in the following as a contemporary reflection of a Western assumption that cultural differences can be explained and managed for strategic purposes. Information about foreign cultures is believed to be an economic imperative in today’s global market, where large-scale commercial success is coloured by how well brands travel and businessmen can communicate. Websites and literature on intercultural management offering advice along the lines of ‘how to avoid mistakes when doing business in country X’ abound.⁵ I shall argue that what distinguishes this type of approach to intercultural communication from the other fields that also employ the concept⁶ is that its motivation for studying foreign cultures is chiefly strategic: cultural understanding is seen as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself; and as something that can be manipulated to achieve that end. As Lautrup Nørgaard (this volume) puts it: ‘Interculturality as a scientific field is still and foremost interested in the instrumental side of insight’. Cultural differences must not be permitted to stand in the way of successful transactions, yet at the same time they must be accounted for and dealt with, and they are part of a flourishing and lucrative ‘cross-cultural training industry’ in themselves (Jack and Lorbiecki, 2003: 213). As Hannerz indicates: ‘Cross-cultural training programmes are set up to inculcate sensitivity, basic rules of etiquette, and perhaps an appreciation of those other cultures which are of special strategic importance to one’s goals; for Westerners in recent times, as culture follows business, especially ... those of the Arab World and Japan’ (Hannerz, 1992: 251-2).

The chapter draws parallels between contemporary attempts to manage difference exemplified by such prescriptive, handbook approaches to intercultural

⁴ The term ‘culture shock’ was coined in 1954 by the anthropologist Kalvero Oberg, who defines it as ‘the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse’ while living in another culture’.

⁵ See e.g. Redding (1995); Redding and Stening (2003); http://stylusinc.com/business/india/business_india.htm; http://www.tmpsearch.com/research_articles/new_global_exec/3c.html; <http://gbr.pepperdine.edu/982/china.html>; <http://atn-riac.agr.ca/region/britishcolumbia/e3328.htm#Introduction>

⁶ Such as education (especially bilingual and minority education) and linguistics (notably translation studies and foreign language teaching).

communication; and the colonial powers' efforts to 'manage diversity' by plotting the supposed cultural traits of the colonised peoples. To do this, the author draws on the work of an early critic of these colonial endeavours, Victor Segalen, and his concept of the aesthetics of diversity. Finally, based on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, it is proposed that differences should be seen as part and parcel of comprehending people from cultures different to our own rather than as barriers to communication that must be explained away before they are actually encountered. Encounters between people from different cultures cannot be 'managed' by applying general rules or prescriptions learned at a distance without objectifying and doing violence to the subject studied. In this way, the article also raises the question of ethics in popular intercultural communication methodologies. Gadamer's hermeneutics is employed with the intention not of criticising the idea of intercultural communication for strategic purposes per se, but rather to point out that its presentation as neutral *knowledge* in the handbook genre must be very carefully distinguished from any notion of intercultural *understanding*.

Managing difference

Communication among different cultures has been 'an obsession of the last century' (Kramsch, 2002:276). Whereas international communication was accorded a high priority in the aftermath of World War 1, with the creation of the League of Nations, the promotion of Esperanto and a surge in cultural exchanges intended to foment friendly relations and understanding among nations; after World War 2 emphasis shifted to cross-cultural communication as a defence against unhealthy nationalisms (Kramsch, 2002: 276). Literature on intercultural communication, however, is a comparatively recent phenomenon that has emerged in force over the past 20-25 years.⁷

Theorists of intercultural communication have sought to categorise different national cultures in two main ways: by constructing typologies of their values, and by documenting their supposed behavioural traits. The values 'measured' in this way include, for instance: a culture's degree of 'uncertainty avoidance', its 'power-distance' relationship, its degree of masculinity/femininity, whether it has an individualist or a collectivist orientation, its degree of personalness or formality, or even the 'deviation allowed from the ideal role enactment' i.e. how far people's actual behaviour is

⁷ Although some literature under this heading has existed since the 1970s, e.g. Condon (1974), and the International Journal of Intercultural Relations launched in 1977. Newer journals on the topic include Journal of Intercultural Studies (launched in 1998), Intercultural Education (2000), and Language and Intercultural Communication (2002).

'allowed' to deviate from the 'ideal roles' of their society (Hofstede, 1980; Gudykunst and Yun Kim, 1984: 73). Behavioural traits include aspects such as body language, attitudes towards time, and etiquette. The idea is that knowing about these values and traits will help to reduce 'friction', 'uncertainty' and other 'barriers' to communication such as inappropriate modes of address, or the 'wrong' kind of nonverbal communication, which are seen as jeopardising the likelihood of smooth interpersonal communication (Gudykunst and Yun Kim, 1984: 179; Jandt, 2001). Box 1 contains examples of this type of recommendation.

Much of this work has been pioneering and influential in that it has served to sensitize the field of management to cultural differences (Søderberg and Holden 2002; Kwek 2003). However, it presents some striking features. What immediately stands out in the excerpts in Box 1 is the attitude to cultural difference that they reflect, which is at once defensive and adaptive. It is defensive inasmuch as differences are seen as problematic sources of 'misunderstanding, pain and conflict' that must be eliminated if people are to communicate effectively (Kramsch 2002: 282). Difference is depicted as potentially 'insulting' (Extract 1); a 'source of serious misunderstandings' (Extract 2); breaching certain dress codes is described as a sign of 'bad manners' in Britain, and the female business executive is warned against wearing trousers (Extract 3)⁸; and generally the excerpts assume that behaving differently to one's interlocutor will lead to a perilous breach of his 'expectations'. And it is adaptive in that in order to avoid this type of misunderstanding it is solicitously recommended that one match one's behaviour as far as possible to that of one's interlocutors, e.g. the visitor to Mexico is advised to adapt to his host's presumed work pace if he wants to get anywhere (Extract 4). This adaptive strategy is warmly recommended in Gesteland's (2003) volume *Cross-Cultural Business Behavior*, which states on its opening page that adaptation is 'Iron rule #1' of business behaviour for the seller: 'In International business, the Seller Adapts to the Buyer'.⁹

The implicit message in this type of recommendation is that difference is a problem, a threat to harmonious communication, and thus to successful business transactions. Rather than cultural difference being seen as a positive point of departure from which to build communication, understanding and intercultural contact, the

Box 1:1

Example 1: Extract from a well-known handbook on intercultural communication:

Misunderstandings can easily occur in intercultural settings when two people, each acting according to the dictates of his or her culture, violate each other's expectations. If we were to remain seated when expected to rise, for example, we could easily violate a cultural norm and insult our host or guest unknowingly' (Porter and Samovar, 1991: 19).

Example 2: Extract from a website offering tips to US executives working in foreign countries also stresses the pitfalls of different behaviour and body language.

... cultural misunderstanding can lead to costly and irrevocable mistakes. Differing concepts of time and punctuality, for example,

void recommending
harting countries'

(2002: 15).

handbooks tend instead to ‘spread the idea that different means bad’ (Pavlovskaya, 1999: 114), i.e. that it poses a threat to successful communication. As Søderberg and Holden (2002) point out, it is ‘striking how author after author within the field of cross cultural management treats culture as a barrier to interaction and an all-pervading source of confusion’.

The attempt to adapt to and over-identify with other cultures, however, ‘often comes at the expense of knowledge of cultures/cultural groups other than one’s own’ (Huggan, 2001: 17). This is because attempts to adapt to an interlocutor prior to an encounter must necessarily be based upon assumptions about the cultural traits of the

interlocutors in question, assumptions inevitably based on generalised, stereotypical beliefs.

Similarly, the extracts in Box 1 contain an implicit assumption that people expect foreigners to be well versed in the local cultural codes. This is curious: as anthropologists have attested (Keesing, 1981), foreigners typically enjoy considerably more leeway than locals to commit faux pas without incurring censure precisely because they are not expected to be familiar with the local ways. It is hard to imagine a Japanese businessman, for instance, expecting his American counterpart to be fully versed in and to observe Japanese business protocol and body language, or vice versa. The incongruity of this assumption is fully revealed if one imagines a meeting between two manual readers, both of whom have read up on the other's culture and consequently bend over backwards to mimic what they suppose are the other's norms and behaviour. The resulting scenario would, at best, be baffling for both parties. An anecdote once recounted to this author comes to mind here about a group of Danish businessmen who, prior to a meeting with an English company, tried to adapt their dress to what they assumed was the English business style by wearing very formal suits and ties, only to find the English studiously attired in their shirtsleeves, equally sure that they would hit the correct relaxed tone amongst the informal Danes.

The point here is that the manual concept is designed for use by one party in an intercultural encounter, not both. The extracts quoted above reflect a modern Western worldview whereby linguistic and cultural differences can be reduced to a "'communication" problem' that can be 'managed' and overcome by applying the correct tools (Kramsch, 2002: 283; Kassing, 1996 in Min, 2001). These tools are inevitably greatly simplified, with questions of form (what style of dress and address to employ, how many meetings to hold per day, etc.) replacing more substantive issues: information substituting understanding. As Friedman (1995: 186) puts it: 'How you build a house, or how you distribute food at a party is not the same as knowing how you hate, or how you interpret your own immediate social circumstances'.¹⁰ Culture in the handbook approach is thus depicted as a variable (Søderberg, 1999: 143) that can be learned away or disarmed through imitation, a communicative wrinkle that must be smoothed out prior to an encounter.

Paradoxically, then, it would appear that the very same handbooks that claim to chart the spectrum of cultural diversity in fact operate with an implicit universal notion of personhood, where only the outer 'layers' of culture are truly

¹⁰ Author's translation from the Danish text: 'Hvordan man bygger et hus, hvordan man foretager fordelingen ved en fest, er ikke det same som at vide hvordan man hader, hvordan man fortolker sin egen umiddelbare sociale sammenhæng'.

different. Once these are revealed or imitated, a common basis for human understanding lies just beneath the surface. Warning against this type of approach to cultural difference, Keesing (1974: 74) points out that ‘any notion that if we peel off the layers of cultural convention we will find Primal Man and naked human nature underneath is both sterile and dangerous’.

The defensive/adaptive approach to difference also reflects a more profound assumption that the handbook reader possesses the capacity to transcend his own culture and adapt to the other’s presumed cultural norms, whilst the other remains unreflexively ‘himself’: passive, static, and culture-bound. Behind this adaptive stance lies the presumption that another’s culture can be ‘seen through’ and the threat posed by its differences neutralised under a knowing gaze. That this gaze is assumed to be one-sided discloses all the more clearly how the idea of managing difference presupposes the existence of a culturally-bound object that is amenable to manipulation by a culturally literate subject with a cosmopolitan identity.

The manipulative intent behind this modern approach to intersubjective encounters and communication is not limited to the sphere of intercultural communication, but is a more far-ranging contemporary phenomenon, as is adeptly illustrated by, *inter alia*, Hochschild in her book, *The Managed Heart: the Commercialisation of Human Feeling*, which looks at how emotions are managed in the airline industry. ‘What is new in our time’, she indicates, ‘is an increasingly prevalent instrumental stance toward our native capacity to play, wittingly and actively, upon a range of feelings for a private purpose and the way in which that stance is engineered and administered by large organisations’. Hochschild sees the assumption that such responses can be managed as a result of the growth of the service sector, where ‘communication’ and ‘encounter’ constitute an increasingly important dimension of today’s work relationships (Bell, 1973 in Hochschild, 1983: 9). Others, such as Sennett (1998), have similarly attributed this phenomenon to changing work conditions in the new ‘flexible’ capitalism, where employment trajectories are fragmented and trust and loyalty downplayed in favour of ‘fleeting forms of association’ (1998: 24) such as networks which are characterised by brief and instrumental forms of interaction – what he calls ‘the team-work “we” of shallow community’ (1998: 147). In this post-Fordist scenario, workers must be able to perform effectively in groups and engage in a more participatory and proactive relationship with management, turning abilities that were not previously involved in concrete work tasks, such as communication, sociability and sensitivity to others, into marketable skills that are sought after in the great majority of white-collar job descriptions nowadays (Fairclough, 1992: 7; Melucci, 1997; Du Gay, 1994).

Thus, 'people's social identities as workers are coming to be defined in terms that have traditionally been seen not as occupational, but as belonging to the sphere of private life' (Fairclough, 1992: 7). This is construed in contemporary management discourse as a positive development leading to more 'human' organizational forms where 'work and leisure, reason and emotion, pleasure and duty are once more conjoined and thus the human subject is again a plenitude – restored to full moral health' in contrast to former, alienating bureaucratic organisational forms where these spheres were strictly separated and where work did not necessarily constitute an arena for individual workers' self-realisation and identification (Du Gay, 1994: 661).

The increasing blurring between private, personal qualities and professional skills, however, 'often ignores 'the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative relations among people and, thus, lowers communication to the status of a technique – an instrument used for furthering one's personal or national ends' (Macintyre, 1985 in Abhik and Starosta, 2001). Qualities such as empathy, courtesy, solidarity, good-humouredness, etc. must be simulated (if employees do not already possess them 'naturally') and then harnessed to personal or organisational goals. The point of communication becomes not to promote understanding but to improve productivity and efficiency: as outlined before, it becomes instrumental rather than an end or a desirable form of communication in itself. As Martin (1992: 102) has asked, however, what kind of ethics are at play among those who would 'intrude into people's "hearts and souls" for the sake of selling more hamburgers'?

When applied to intercultural communication, this type of approach produces a deductive form of knowledge about other cultures based on information about cultural values that is systematised and detached from its bearers, rather than on a context-specific, inductive understanding based on intersubjective communication (Søderberg, 1999; see also Clausen, this volume). The values extrapolated are depicted as anchored not to people but to particular places, usually national territories (Søderberg and Holden, 2002); indeed, the very notion of 'inter-cultural' communication assumes the prior existence of bounded cultural systems that can be observed as independent scientific 'objects'. However, as Hastrup and Hervik (1994: 9) have pointed out in their discussion of cultural understanding in anthropology, cultural models viewed as de-linked from human subjects can preclude a deeper understanding based on experience:

A central methodological problem in anthropology today is how to deal with the flow of intersubjective human experience without dehumanising it, that is without

deconstructing it as experience and transforming it into totalising professional models of knowledge ...

In the attempt to explain and manage foreign cultures, the cultural handbooks superimpose categories originating in one cultural context onto another (Kramsch, 2002: 277), making the appraisal of foreign cultures a self-referential exercise, and precluding the possibility of uncovering categories or meanings that may not exist at all in the worldview of the handbook in question. This type of literature may thus actually hinder rather than promote cultural understanding.

The instrumentalism that characterises approaches to communication and cultural differences in today's post-industrial capitalism is, however, not a new phenomenon, as I shall attempt to show in the following section, which looks back at how the colonial powers sought to manage cultural difference through superimposing taxonomies in a way not dissimilar to the 'intercultural' literature discussed above. To do this, I draw upon the ideas of Victor Segalen, a prominent early critic of such attempts to categorise and manage the cultural other.

Disarming exoticism: managing cultural difference in colonial times

The management of differences through assimilating them into familiar categories long predates the arrival of literature on intercultural communication. Neither is it only Westerners who have tended to interpret what they perceived as exotic or incomprehensible by applying their own categories to it – a technique known as 'anchoring' in social representation theory (Jahoda, 1999). According to anchoring theory, foreign or disturbing elements are integrated into our own system of categories, thus rendering them 'familiar' and less threatening (Moscovici, 1984 in Jahoda, 1999: 10; see also Zølner, this volume). This is thought to be a universal way of reacting to others perceived as different from ourselves (Jahoda, 1999).

In this way, for instance, explorers and conquerors in the Americas attached their own categories to the things they encountered on their travels. For instance, according to the famous explorer, Alexander von Humboldt, travellers to the New World would name unfamiliar plants they encountered after plants that resembled them back home (Jahoda, 1999: 11). This 'anchoring' process worked the other way around too: in the famous encounter between the Mexican emperor, Moctezuma, and Cortes' soldiers, Moctezuma equated the Spanish conquistadores to gods, 'the men about whom his ancestors had long ago prophesied'; whilst the conquistadores described Moctezuma as

‘in every way ... like a great prince’ in the manner of the European monarchs (Díaz del Castillo, 1963: 220-21; Bitterli, 1971 in Jahoda, 1999: 10). This ‘principle of familiarity’ (Jahoda, 1999: 11) was at times so extreme that the Europeans’ descriptions had very little to do even with the objective physical characteristics of the peoples they encountered:

the case of the American Indians was an outstanding example of European encounters with hitherto unknown peoples, showing how difficult it was for Europeans to fit them into their pre-existing world view. For at least two centuries, discourse about the Indians, and their pictorial representations, was laden with traditional images often grossly at variance with the physical reality of the Indians and their actual ways of life (Jahoda, 1999: 23)

Thus, for instance, in the initial phases of colonisation, Indians were repeatedly described and represented in pictures as ‘hairy’ – an image signalling wildness and sexual licentiousness in Europe at that time – despite numerous eye witness testimonies that the opposite was in fact the case (Jahoda, 1999: 24). A similar example concerns the writings of the abbé Cornelius de Pauw, who described¹¹ the American Indians as ‘like idiot children, incurably lazy and incapable of any mental progress whatsoever’ (Gerbi, 1973 in Jahoda, 1999: 21). When confronted with contradictory arguments pointing out, for instance, the sophisticated culture of the Incas, manifested, *inter alia*, in their fine architecture, de Pauw simply refuted this outright, insisting that the Incas lived in ‘crude little huts’ (Jahoda, 1999: 21). European representations of the Indians also varied notoriously according to the motives of different categories of Europeans: missionaries, for instance, tended to see them as potentially improveable, whilst the conquering forces classed them as ‘irremediably sub-human’ (Jahoda, 1999: 24).

Whilst anchoring appears to be a typical reaction to strange elements in most cultures, it took on a particular instrumental purpose in the European colonisations. The colonial powers endeavoured to control the colonies by demystifying them and accumulating knowledge of different kinds about them: the maps, taxonomies, ethnologies, and histories which Said (1995: 40) has referred to as ‘the whole series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West’. This classificatory exercise, purportedly carried out from the standpoint of ‘universal reason’, served to rationalise and explain away differences, so that cultural difference could be reduced ‘to the grids of Western conceptual thought’. Otherness ‘represented not a challenge to be encountered but rather an object to be classified’ to facilitate

¹¹ In his *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Américains*, published in 1768.

domination (Michel, 1996: 3). In Said's terms, this 'nexus of knowledge and power' both created "the Oriental" and in a sense also 'obliterat[ed] him as a human being' (1995: 27).

A contemporary critic of these colonial attempts to dominate through 'objective' knowledge and domestication of cultural traits was Victor Segalen, whose reflections on the exotic, known as the 'aesthetics of diversity', constitutes a radical critique of the assimilationist, colonial attitude to difference. Segalen was a writer, traveller and medical officer in the French Navy whose work, which includes novels, poetry and prose writings, deplors the way in which otherness was constructed through the Western concept of the subject, and laments what he saw as the loss of genuine diversity resulting from colonialism, modernisation and Westernisation. Segalen was fiercely critical of the colonial invasion of non-Western countries, and of colonialist representations of foreign cultures in the work of his contemporaries writing on the 'exotic', criticising them for focusing more on themselves and their own reactions than on the differences with the cultures they supposedly studied, and neglecting to portray what the people from those cultures actually thought, said and did themselves (Michel, 1996: 2-4; Longxi, 2001). In Segalen's view, traditional portrayals of exoticism were one-sided, representing only the European view of the encounter (Michel, 1996: 4). He belittled the activities of the colonialists and colonial bureaucrats of his time for the way they sought to impose their own obliterating order on the colonies:

Sweep away: the colonial, the colonial bureaucrat ... The former comes into being with the desire for native trade relations of the most commercial kind. For the colonial, Diversity exists only in so far as it provides him with the means of duping others. As for the colonial bureaucrat, the very notion of a centralized administration and of laws for the good of everyone, which he must enforce, immediately distorts his judgement and renders him deaf to the disharmonies (or harmonies of Diversity) (Segalen, 2002: 35).

Instead, Segalen championed a radical attitude to difference involving a sensory experience and enjoyment of it, but at the same time a full acceptance of its otherness that defied assimilation or imitation:¹²

Let us proceed from this admission of impenetrability. Let us not flatter ourselves

¹² In his later work, Segalen criticises the aestheticist ideal that prevailed during his lifetime, calling it 'sensation without experience', and advocating instead the sensory experiences of travel and encounters with foreign peoples and difference (Michel, 1996: 8)

for assimilating the customs, races, nations, and others who differ from us. On the contrary, let us rejoice in our inability ever to do so, for we thus retain the eternal pleasure of sensing Diversity (2002: 21).¹³

In Segalen, distance expresses both the ‘essence of exoticism ... [and] the philosophical relation between subject and object’ (Michel, 1996: 8). Unlike many of his contemporaries, he explicitly rejects any attempt to explain or represent the exotic Other, seeking rather to protect it from being ‘assimilated or familiarised’ (Longxi, 2001: 4) since any attempt to classify it and thus bring it closer will annihilate it. Equally, for instance, to Segalen tourists are mere ‘pseudo-exotes’ whose experience of the exotic is simulated and superficial:

Exoticism is therefore not that kaleidoscopic vision of the tourist or of the mediocre spectator, but the forceful and curious reaction to a shock felt by someone of strong individuality in response to some object whose distance from oneself he alone can perceive and savour. (The sensations of Exoticism and Individualism are complementary)... I call them [tourists] the Panderers of the Sensation of Diversity.¹⁴

For Segalen, a positive and enriching experience of diversity is dependent upon a strong identity. To domesticate diversity by applying one’s own categories to it, or to expose oneself to it only in a superficial way, as tourists do is, for him, a sign of a weak identity incapable of withstanding exposure to difference:

if we increase our ability to perceive Diversity, will we enrich or impoverish ourselves? Will this rob us of something or endow us with something greater? The answer is clear: it will infinitely enrich us with the whole Universe (Segalen, 2002: 20-21)¹⁵

Segalen did not only apply his notion of the exotic to cultural differences but to many other types of difference as well: gender, nature, time (the past and the future), the experiences of children, the alien (i.e. extra-terrestrial) and moral differences, though he

¹³ Partons donc de cet aveu d’impénétrabilité. Ne nous flattons pas d’assimiler les moeurs, les races, les nations, les autres; mais au contraire éjouissons-nous de ne le pouvoir jamais; nous réservant ainsi la perdurabilité du plaisir de sentir le Divers (Segalen 1978: 25).

¹⁴ L’exotisme n’est donc pas cet état kaléidoscopique du touriste et du médiocre spectateur, mais la réaction vive et curieuse d’une individualité forte contre une objectivité dont elle preçoit et déguste la distance...Je les nomme les Proxénètes de la Sensation du Divers ... (Segalen, 1978: 34).

¹⁵ ... augmenter notre faculté de percevoir le Divers, est-ce rétrécir notre personnalité ou l’enrichir? ... Nul doute: c’est l’enrichir abondamment, de tout l’Univers¹⁵ (1978: 25).

points out that the exoticism of human races is ‘the only one which is recognised’ in literature (Segalen, 2002: 22).

Like Said, Segalen has been criticised for ‘condemning any attempt to represent the other’ (Schlick, 1998: 12; Grossberg, 1996: 95). If Segalen’s reasoning is taken to its logical extreme, ‘then all knowledge – and the construction of any object of knowledge – must be condemned as inappropriate and oppressive’ (Grossberg, 1996: 95). In Todorov’s words ‘Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be’ (1993 in Huggan, 2001: 17). Moreover, critics point out that Segalen’s concept of the exotic is ultimately paradoxical, since on the one hand his vision recommends that the exotic should remain as pure, undefiled and inaccessible as possible; whilst on the other he advocates replacing the cognitive approach towards the exotic that he is so critical of with a sensory, poetic experience that preserves the exotic as an abstraction, an object for Europeans’ aesthetic contemplation (Schlick, 1998). For instance, his novel, *Les Immémoriaux*, depicts Tahiti in the days before the Europeans settled there, narrating the destruction that their arrival occasioned among the Polynesian indigenous population from the perspective of a non-European narrator (Michel, 1996: 2). *Les Immémoriaux* is dedicated ‘To the Maoris of forgotten times’,¹⁶ showing that he considered the exotic already wiped out by Western colonialists – but this is clearly an exotic both invented and lost by the Europeans – a self-referential notion (Schlick, 1998: 2).

Thus, in Segalen, the power to construct and preserve the different, the exotic, also lies exclusively with the Western subject. His is more an aesthetic argument than an explicitly political one, unlike the postcolonial and development theorists who were later to level criticisms against Western representations of the Third World.¹⁷

The new Orientalism: ersatz familiarity and consumption

Segalen’s position on diversity is undoubtedly extreme, obviating as it does the possibility of apprehending and representing difference in a way that does not merely

¹⁶ Author’s translation of the French: ‘Aux Maories des temps oubliés’.

¹⁷ E.g. criticising the way in which Western categories such as participation, modernity, freedom, ownership and democracy are transferred to contexts that often operate with very different perceptions of social reality. This ethnocentric approach to development has been criticised by, among others, Escobar (1995); Nanda (2001). Similarly, within postcolonial theory, criticisms have been levelled against writing that is accused of being ‘largely oblivious to non-western articulations of self and identity, and has thus tended to interpellate the non-western cultures it seeks to foreground and defend into a solidly Eurocentric frame of consciousness. Postcolonial theory thus operates with the paradoxical tension of relying on the secular, European vocabulary of its academic origins to translate non-secular, non-European experiences’ (Majid, 2001).

reify existing power relations and do violence to that which is represented. Nonetheless, it carries an important message: that difference should not be obliterated or taxonomised according to pre-given categories, but must be assumed as the point of departure for encounters with diversity (see also Cristofanini, this volume). Difference is, in Segalen, never depicted as a problem or as an inconvenience that can be dismissed by applying the correct categories to it, as it is in much of the intercultural literature.¹⁸

Today, global capitalism has opened the field that can potentially be dominated through managing difference. Now it is no longer a question of dominating 'Orientals', Africans or Americans, but of penetrating as many national foreign markets as possible. The distinction between 'centre' and its dependent 'periphery' that featured in conventional exoticist approaches is no longer current (Huggan, 2001: 15). The market imperative means that even cultures that appear very unexotic to us – say the Swedish, the German, the Dutch - must have their differences, however slight, exposed, managed and exploited. The 'logic of capital works through specificity: a new regime of difference produced by capital' (King, 1991: 14). Thus, global capitalism 'does not attempt to obliterate (local capitals) but operates through them. It has to hold the framework of globalisation in place and police that system' (Hall, 1991: 28-9). This new form of exoticism is 'suitable for all markets' (Gallini, 1996 in Huggan, 2001: 15).

Whilst the familiar is subjected to scrutiny and rendered exotic, the exotic appears to become ever-more familiar. Foreign cultures can now apparently be so easily accessed, sampled and consumed due to commerce, tourism and the media (Hastrup, 1992: 7), facilitated by massive technological advances that enable us to 'reach beyond our senses, and concepts, even beyond imagination ... tak[ing] us outside what we know directly' (Laing, 1982: 17). The sheer quantity of instantly accessible information available in the information societies of the modernised 'centre' countries (Hannerz, 1992: 31-33) offers an ersatz familiarity with, and proximity to, far-off places, an apparent dissolution of the boundaries between the spatial and the cultural known and unknown. Distance is compressed: it is no longer necessary to interrupt the flow of our daily lives or encounter foreign cultures in the flesh in order to 'know' about them. Cultural difference is thus subjected to a process of global commodification (Huggan, 2001: vii). We can 'experience' Mexico, for instance, by watching a TV programme, surfing the net, buying a taco dinner in the supermarket or maybe taking a fortnight's holiday in Baja California. Foreign artefacts and 'experiences' are to be had with no challenge to our own cultural premises (Knudsen and Wilken, 1993) – what Huggan has called 'imagined access to the cultural other through the process of consumption;

¹⁸ In this sense, Segalen's approach to difference is close to the concepts of *différance* and alterity employed by, *inter alia*, Derrida and postcolonial theorists.

reification of people and places into exchangeable aesthetic objects' (2001: 19). As Bauman (1996: 29-30) notes in his writing on tourism, in a similar tone to Segalen:

The tourists want to immerse themselves in a strange and bizarre element (a pleasant feeling, a tickling and rejuvenating feeling, like letting oneself be buffeted by sea waves) – on condition, though, that it will not stick to the skin and thus can be shaken off whenever they wish ... In the tourist's world, the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightens; shocks come in a package deal with safety ...

As foreign cultures become commodified in the neocolonial global marketplace, cultural understanding is also increasingly conflated with knowledge of a culture's consumable products: its music, its literature, its art, its food. As some theorists have argued, the contemporary global economy increasingly produces and exchanges signs that keep consumers at a distance from the material objects they represent and from their producers, whilst providing an illusion of reality (Lash and Urry, 1994: 4 in Hannerz, 1996: 24; Baudrillard, 1993: 16). As Baudrillard (1998: 34) writes:

The image, the sign, the message – all these things we 'consume' – represent our tranquillity consecrated by distance from the world, a distance more comforted by the allusion to the real ... than compromised by it.

There is an expectation that this abundance of information will unproblematically lead to greater understanding of foreign cultures, or to the gradual erasure of cultural differences: a universal cultural homogenisation. This ersatz familiarity with the strange becomes normality, so that experiences of radical difference become disconcerting, hence attempts to order them into familiar and non-threatening categories rather than to treat them a useful means of learning more about others. Despite an abundance of information, cultural differences between people remain very real and they are not always amenable to 'management', despite the modern cosmopolitan's apparent ease with the exotic. Arguably, in today's Western world difference is dealt with through a paradoxical combination of consumption - 'consuming' the disembodied products of Others - and simultaneously eschewing contact with differences embodied in real human subjects by creating totalising forms of knowledge about them that a priori preclude any real encounter.

It is curious that the very same handbook literature that claims to offer a 'learnable' methodology for communicating successfully with foreigners at the same

time often concludes that interpersonal skills are ultimately the most important factor in such encounters. Such skills are, paradoxically, usually precisely those that are hardest to learn, for instance: being an extrovert personality type, being open and reflective, being intuitive, regarding others as basically good, having a positive self-concept, being willing to disclose information about oneself, or being 'secure' in oneself (Gudykunst and Yun Kim, 1984: 192; Jandt, 2001; Hoffman, 1999: 464). These are usually qualities that typically vary just as much within cultures as between them. If culture is understood as a system of meaning intelligible to a given group of people, then it must also be stressed that not all people share all aspects of a culture, and some share characteristics and views with people from other cultures. The focus in much literature on intercultural communication is almost exclusively on nationality, with little attention to the fact that this constitutes but one dimension of cultural difference. As Abhik and Starosta (2001: 14) point out: 'the greatest share of research in intercultural communication assumes pre-existing, consistent differences in populations, and does little with domestic co-cultural variation'. Along similar lines Rosaldo (1984: 141) argues:

it makes no sense to see in culture personality writ large. But neither, from the "interpretivist" point of view, does it make sense to claim that individuals - with their different histories, different bodies, and different ways of being more or less emotionally involved - are cultural systems cast in miniature.

Successful intercultural encounters, then, as in Segalen, depend on the inherent human qualities that enable a dialogue to take place between individuals with strong identities who are unafraid to meet and acknowledge difference. The handbook approach to knowledge about foreign cultures is, however, predominantly cognitive and unmediated by such messy encounters between real human subjects.¹⁹ In the following section, I seek to show how hermeneutics offers an approach to apprehending cultural difference that neither seeks to obliterate it nor denies the possibility of understanding it.

¹⁹ Perhaps to a lesser extent in the case of tourism; however, tourists are also typically shielded from all but the most superficial contact with locals: they are also typically accompanied by friends or relatives from their own culture, and they usually have the option of retreating to an anonymous hotel if things get uncomfortable (too hot, too busy, too poor, etc.). The type of activities carried out are also usually of the 'spectator/consumer' type: sight-seeing, shopping, eating out etc.

Hermeneutics and the notion of (productive) prejudice

Somewhere in between the adaptive handbook approach and Segalen's radical recommendation to preserve diversity intact lies the hermeneutic approach to understanding. Although Gadamer's hermeneutics has not been greatly used in discussions of intercultural understanding (though see Abhik and Starosta, 2001), a number of his concepts and reflections can usefully be applied to it, particularly as a counterbalance to the prescriptive and totalising approaches popular in this field of research. Gadamer's hermeneutics offers 'a method to interpret other cultures that transcends seemingly lawful regularities to appreciate the uniqueness of individual cases... [and] offer[s] extensions beyond positivistic views of intercultural communication' (Abhik and Starosta, 2001: 11; see also Lautrup Nørgaard, this volume).

Thus, in contrast to the two positions presented above, Gadamer's hermeneutics does not advocate the imposition of one's own categories in order to understand the other as in the handbook literature; and neither does it condemn any attempt to depict differences as violence through misrepresentation, as Segalen does. Gadamer's major work, *Truth and Method*, focuses on the problem of understanding in the realms of art, historicity and language. In the chapters on historicity, Gadamer discusses the concept of prejudice from a hermeneutic standpoint. Whereas the handbook approach engulfs and assimilates others' categories by superimposing its own onto them, in hermeneutics preconceived ideas and prejudices are taken as a means of enabling us to apprehend the differences between our own and another's position, hence gaining greater understanding. Rather than seeing violated expectations as a source of misunderstanding, then (as in the examples cited in Box 1 above), hermeneutics would consider these an invaluable insight promoting deeper understanding, since they serve to reveal our own, often implicit, preconceptions. The cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner (1986: 46), whose work is also inspired by hermeneutics, describes this approach:

Surprise is an extraordinarily useful phenomenon ... for it allows us to probe what people take for granted. It provides a window on presupposition: surprise is a response to violated presupposition.

Applying this idea to the study of texts, Gadamer claims that this sensation of surprise arises when: 'Either [the text] does not yield any meaning at all or its meaning is not

compatible with what we had expected', an experience he calls 'being pulled up short by the text' (1990: 26). This positive role played by surprise (i.e. breached expectations) derives from a key premise of hermeneutics: that our prior experiences enable us to apprehend particular aspects of a situation precisely through the distance between our perception and that of the phenomenon we wish to understand. Learning occurs through the juxtaposition and comparison of the new with that which we already know (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For Gadamer, then, prejudice is not something to be overcome but a precondition for understanding, a point of departure for apprehending difference that is neither positively nor negatively tinged (Abhik and Starosta, 2001: 8). Distance, either in time, language or perception, is seen as enabling understanding, rather than as an obstacle to this.

In this respect, Gadamer's thought has much in common with Segalen's reflections on the need to maintain a vivid awareness of difference through preserving distance, though whilst Segalen explicitly rejects any attempt to understand or portray difference, hermeneutics advocates dialogue amongst interlocutors precisely in order to further understanding: 'the important thing is to recognise temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding' (Gadamer, 1990: 297). Thus, in hermeneutics, rather than projecting our prejudices onto others in an attempt to reduce distance, 'other people become a means for us to correct our understanding' (White, 1994 in Abhik and Starosta, 2001: 9; Abhik and Starosta, 2001: 7). Conversely, the handbook approach precludes the need for dialogue by explaining away differences prior to an encounter. It is a strategy driven by the search for efficiency, a closed, unproductive prejudice rather than an open, productive one (Abhik and Starosta, 2001: 9; see also Lautrup Nørgaard's discussion in this volume of closed and open attitudes to cultural difference).

Gadamer's notion of prejudice derives from his critique of the Enlightenment's 'discreditation of the concept of "prejudice"' (Gadamer, 1990: 277). The Cartesian dictum 'that methodologically disciplined use of reason can safeguard us from all error' leads to the 'subjection of all authority to reason' and the resulting imperative to overcome all prejudices deriving from one's situatedness within tradition. In hermeneutics, however, this constitutes a fundamental error, since tradition is always and inescapably part of human beings (Gadamer, 1990: 277-8):

Does understanding in the human sciences understand itself correctly when it relegates the whole of its own historicity to the position of prejudices from which we must free ourselves? (Gadamer, 1990: 282).

The Enlightenment's legacy, manifest in the attempt to overcome all prejudices, will thus itself become a prejudice (Gadamer, 1990: 276). The hermeneutic endeavour to locate meaning in its historical context and to take on board the implications of tradition and experience is in stark contrast with the handbook literature, which supplants knowledge of history with immutable descriptions of values and behaviour that seem to exist in an ahistorical universe disconnected from human experience.

Gadamer's emphasis on the importance of historical context in understanding the meaning of others' actions is combined with a focus on the other as an individual situated within his tradition – what he calls the 'Thou orientation'. In this explicit orientation towards the individual interlocutor hermeneutics also brings an ethical dimension to the problem of understanding, which it sees as a key difference between the nature of understanding in the human sciences and in the natural sciences. According to Gadamer, this difference is not so much one of method, but of the *objectives* of knowledge. The attempt to understand another human being is a moral endeavour since 'the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us ... the object of experience is a person' (Gadamer, 1990: 358):

There is a kind of experience of the Thou that tries to discover typical behaviour in one's fellowmen and can make predictions about others on the basis of experience ... We understand the other person in the same way that we understand any other typical event in our experiential field – i.e. he is predictable. His behaviour is as much a means to our end as any other means. From the moral point of view this orientation towards the Thou is purely self-regarding and contradicts the moral definition of man. As we know, in interpreting the categorical imperative, Kant said, inter alia, that the other should never be used as a means but always as an end in himself (Gadamer, 1990: 358).

To objectify the Other and seek understanding of him with a view to controlling or manipulating him is unethical according to the hermeneutical method. As Abhik and Starosta (2001: 10) put it: 'a relationship, characterised by the author attempting to discover, control, manipulate or predict the text in an involved manner, falls under the rubric of scientific methods in which the text loses its uniqueness as a "being", and instead becomes an "object"' (see also Cristofanini, this volume). We may amass information in this way, but understanding will continue to elude us.

Concluding remarks

The article reflects upon the approach to cultural difference manifest in the growing handbook-type literature on intercultural communication. It is considered a paradox that literature detailing the specifics of national cultures should emerge at a time when the foreign has become an almost banal fixture of our everyday lives. An explanation for this paradox is sought in the workings of contemporary global capitalism, which differentiates ever more sharply between cultures, 'exoticising' the familiar so that it can better be rendered marketable. At the same time, however, this differentiation ensures that these cultural differences become banal due to the ever-increasing global circulation of goods, images and people. Thus, whilst Western identity rests upon the individual's ability to differentiate him or herself from others, at the same time true experiences of radical difference are nowadays few and far between. The resulting 'anxiety of contamination by [the] other' (Grossberg, 1996: 97) produces an ever-subtler differentiation between and taxonomisation of cultures, which effectively neutralises difference as far as possible before it is encountered.

The article also reflects upon the ethical basis of literature that treats intersubjective communication as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself. To construct difference in terms of closed, reductionist systems based on pre-established categories objectifies the other in order to better manipulate him and obviates the possibility of intersubjective understanding. In this connection, it is suggested that intercultural communication literature designed for business audiences should explore in greater depth the ethical implications of the ways in which it constructs the cultural other.

A reader might well ask at this point: understanding is all very well but what can such an approach offer business? The hermeneutic approach certainly does not offer an intercultural tool-kit that the business traveller can master on a short-haul flight. Hermeneutics can, however, serve to sensitise those engaging in intercultural encounters to the importance of acknowledging difference and regarding it as a productive resource rather than a barrier to communication. In practice, this means attempting to understand the other *on his or her own terms* – exactly the notion that Bleuler, quoted at the beginning of this article, would doubtless have found scandalous. It means trying to gain some idea of the other's self-understanding. In practice, what this means is: drop the culture manuals. Instead, buy a couple of novels or a history book written by an author from your target destination. This will prove a far more illuminating – and pleasurable – route to understanding the foreigners you are about to meet – and just as easy to digest on a plane. The merits of using fiction to further

understanding have been well documented by Nelson Philips, who has used this method in management and organisational research, and considers it a valuable resource that does not circumvent or attempt to simplify the complexity of the real world. Rather, 'it creates a space for the representation of the life-world within which individuals find themselves (Bruner, 1992; Ellis and Flaherty, 1992b; Huxley, 1963 in Phillips 1995: 4). For Philips, then, fiction is tantamount to 'vicarious experience': the closest thing to getting inside somebody else's head (1995: 10).

Otherwise, foreign cultures will remain as strange to us as the birds in the garden: strange by virtue of their very familiarity, creatures that populate our gardens and add life and movement and colour to our daily lives, whom we can observe and name and classify, but with whom we would never dream of trying to communicate on an equal basis. They will remain yet another potent reminder of the hegemony of information over understanding that characterises today's information societies, a hegemony that separates supposedly objective knowledge from experience and encounter and thus de-links the process of understanding from human subjects.

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