

## Culture, arts and heritage: background paper

### Intercultural dialogue and the cultural arena

The need for intercultural dialogue fundamentally arises because of the inevitable tendency in a world of infinite complexity and information for individuals to act in relation to others based on stereotyped conceptions of the group of which 'the other' is purported to be a member. Such collectivised attributions often take on a negative connotation and they can even become enemy images, which are taken as justification for the perpetration of violence. This is a particular risk when 'ethno-political entrepreneurs' exploit such fault-lines for political gain, sometimes backed by powerful economic forces that benefit from a fragmented civil society which might otherwise compete for privileged access to the state.

Interventions in the cultural sphere may break open these power relationships in a manner which makes social solidarity possible. One of the reasons why they can do this is that they play in the same arena of the battle for hearts, as well as minds, in which the preachers of hate are protagonists. Public manifestations of intolerance are visceral occasions—the blare of martial music, the waving of flags, the rhythmic chant of slogans, the ritual display of weapons.

If intercultural dialogue is to be the antidote to such intolerance, it must reverse the degenerate spirals of ethnic and nationalistic stereotyping. It must recover the individual from the ascribed 'community'; it must recognise that individual's complex and labile identity, constructed in relationships with others; and it must place human relationships in a context of a common humanity which is reciprocally recognised. This, in turn, requires a capacity for individual reflection, for perspective-taking, to see things from other standpoints. And this is where cultural practitioners can play a key role.

Intercultural dialogue cannot be confined to the official political stage if it is to prevail but must engage the popular classes, including through non-written forms. It must be a carrier of that emotional affect which a powerful cultural product can summon up in the reader, viewer or listener—an effect powerful enough to countermand the affective appeal of the ethnic, sectarian and nationalistic claims which lead to violence. The Bosnian film *No Man's Land*, for example, graphically presents the absurdities to which aggressive nationalism can lead and humanises its individual victims, while managing to 'entertain' through the black humour which is endemic to such ethnically divided regions and through which individuals can distance themselves from the dead hand of ideology.

It is unsurprising that many states and political forces seek to control the cultural arena very directly, through censorship, intimidation or selective allocation of funding. Perhaps no more extreme example can be imagined than the explosion by the Taliban regime of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan in 2001. To the degree to which cultural practitioners enjoy independence from private patronage and autonomy from political direction, they can clearly maximise their freedom to act purely upon creative impulses and in the process stimulate intercultural dialogue. Hence it is critical that public bodies which promote the arts are at arm's length from the state, are able to make purely professional decisions and enjoy strong financial support. That is obviously an increasingly challenging goal in these times of global economic crisis.

By the same token, care is needed in recruiting practitioners behind well-intentioned causes such as Artists for Dialogue, launched at the Baku ministerial conference in December 2008. There can be no suggestion of a 'made to order' constraint on where those creative impulses lead—beyond, that is, the general restriction on the right of freedom of expression, applying to all citizens, where such expression takes a racist, xenophobic or otherwise intolerant form.

Tolerance is not merely an aspiration to 'live and let live'. More profoundly, tolerance is about the inclusion of the other within oneself<sup>1</sup>—including in being willing to accept that the 'self' is enriched, and not threatened, by incorporating aspects of the identity of the 'other'. Intercultural dialogue is thus about bringing the self and other together in a more conscious and deliberate fashion. It is pursued with a view to ensuring that at the societal level—and even in terms of a global ethic—a culture of tolerance prevails over a culture of exclusion. As Tolstoy suggested of happy families in *Anna Karenina*, well integrated societies are all alike, whereas those where dialogue fails are each dis-integrated in their own particular way.

If intercultural dialogue allocates a particular role to the arts, it is thus not because these represent a 'higher' cultural form but because their various genres have one feature in common. It is inherent in the work generated by the visual, aural, performative and written arts that they present the viewer/listener/reader with characters and scenarios outside of their daily routines and physically exterior to them—on a stage, a screen, a plinth or the pages of a book—which places them in a position requiring reflection for the work of art to be appreciated.

### **Imagination and the novel**

According to the Nobel prize-winning writer Orhan Pamuk, 'central to the art of the novel' is 'the question of the "other", the "stranger", the "enemy" that resides inside each of our heads, or rather, the question of how to transform it'. Novelists, according to Pamuk, 'can begin to test the lines that mark off that "other" and in so doing alter the boundaries of our own identities. Others become "us" and we become "others".' And even as the novel 'relates our own lives as if they were the lives of others, it offers us the chance to describe other people's lives as if they were our own'.<sup>2</sup> This enables the individual to remove themselves from immersion as a routine actor in their quotidian world, to become an analyst of its contradictions and an observer of its horizon of possibilities.

As to analysing the contradictions, reading Simon Mawer's *The Glass Room*, for example, we share the pleasure of the character Viktor that in pre-war Czechoslovakia his children are acquiring German from their mother and Czech from their nanny: 'They mustn't be labelled,' Viktor has always insisted, 'not by language, nor by culture, nor family or anything. They must be brought up as citizens of the world.' But a few pages later we sense what it is like to be on the receiving end of an ominous confrontation over dinner with an overbearing guest sporting a Nazi party badge, who insists that each Czech German has a 'duty towards his national culture', and how in that context Viktor is forced to retreat from this ambition: 'But I am not a German, Herr Schreiber,' he says. 'I am a Jew.'<sup>3</sup>

As to the horizon of possibilities, the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie insists that she is 'Nigerian, feminist, Black, Igbo, and more' and finds it 'limiting' when she is categorised as one, as this 'makes it almost impossible to be seen as all of the others'.<sup>4</sup> This insight, that what gives each of us his or her identity is the complex combination of identifications which makes us individually unique, is of course central to any possibility that overlapping identities, and so solidarities across ethnic 'groups', are possible. Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* showed just how such solidarity broke down in Nigeria at the time of the failed secession of Biafra, as characters who might have seen themselves, *inter alia*, as fellow Nigerian citizens came to see each other under the pressure of polarisation and violence as simply Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa.<sup>5</sup>

Xenophobes, including the voices of Hindu nationalism in India, always represent cultural diversity as a threat and a source of insecurity. Intercultural dialogue will therefore only widely appeal if it is associated with a sense of enrichment and pleasure. Tishani Doshi's novel *The Pleasure Seekers* achieves this in two ways. The principal characters seek pleasure in the sense of being a man from Madras and a Welsh woman whose relationship becomes a decades-long mutual process of self-

discovery. And we, as readers, take a vicarious delight in observing that these role models of how diversity can be a basis for intimacy rather than social distance are able to enjoy more moments of growth than setback in their journey together through life.<sup>6</sup>

### **Writing and revolution**

The challenge of intercultural dialogue needs however to be met in the full range of cultural domains. This begins from a recognition that 'culture' is not a thing, an unquestioned 'tradition' into which one is automatically born and which is for all time set in aspic—if that were so, there would literally be nothing for intercultural dialogue to discuss. Rather, what we are talking about is a set of cultural *practices* which are constantly being reinvented under the pressures of changing contexts and whose meaning is contested among various social actors—particularly where globalisation is accelerating contextual change and the associated flow of people and images is bringing an ever-more-diverse range of actors into relationships with one another.

For example, the idea that there is a single 'Muslim culture' assumes that this supposed object is shared by every individual of Muslim background everywhere, regardless of his or her national or other affiliations and regardless of their actual level of religiosity (if any), in a manner which only makes sense if it is presented as the undifferentiated 'other' to the taken-for-granted 'self'. As it has been put, a 'Punjabi ballet' is a reasonable idea; a 'Muslim ballet' is not.<sup>7</sup> Yet this category error was so widespread in 'western' coverage of the Arab world that the popular revolts across north Africa and the middle east in early 2011 came like a bolt from the blue—not only in the fact that they happened but in their diverse and largely secular-democratic character. A closer engagement with the complex fabric of cultural life in the region would have prevented this stereotyped misconception.

In what became for two years the best-selling novel in Arabic, Alaa Al Aswany used the simple device of presenting a range of characters who move in and out of *The Yacoubian Building* in Cairo to represent the cultural diversity and so vibrancy of life in the Egyptian capital circa 1990, highlighting how it was being squeezed between authoritarianism and fundamentalism.<sup>8</sup> Al Aswany was to become a frequent media interlocutor to explain the Egyptian popular revolution.

Similarly, Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis*, which was converted into an award-winning film of the same name, allowed us to reconceive modern Iran by depicting its trajectory over recent decades through the eyes of a woman growing up in Teheran, an urban milieu characterised by a considerable pluralism of opinion, as the 'green' revolution was to manifest.<sup>9</sup> A popular Saudi situation comedy, *Tash ma Tash*, which is broadcast annually during Ramadan and has become increasingly bold over the years, has meanwhile presented Christian characters in a positive light rather than as 'apostates'<sup>10</sup>—a key starting point if states hitherto officially defined in terms of one or other brand of Islam are to come to terms with the universal requirement of non-discrimination among the various individual bearers of freedom of conscience.

### **The visual and aural arts**

Visual artists obviously have a particular capacity to encourage the viewer to reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions. No one can fail to be moved in circling Michelangelo's *Les Esclaves* in the Louvre in Paris. This monumental sculpture powerfully evokes that empathy on which a common humanity depends. To the viewer, that is the only, and indeed compelling, reaction. Yet slavery throughout history has of course been 'legitimised' by the official insistence that slaves are *Untermenschen*, deserving of no other fate. Erich Hartmann's arresting black-and-white photographs of relics of the concentration camps a half-century earlier embody his belief 'that if we decide that we

must link our lives inextricably—that “me” and “them” must be replaced by “us”—we may succeed in making a world where gas chambers will never be used again’.<sup>11</sup> Hartmann’s status as a member of the international Magnum photographers’ co-operative provides a good example of how practitioners with a public purpose can be shielded from the power of private money.

Two specific approaches by which cultural practitioners can promote dialogue without their work being politically instrumentalised can be seen through focusing on music. One is to bring players from different cultural backgrounds together within the frame of a universal form.

In establishing the East-West Divan Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim involved Israeli and Palestinian musicians in a common project, which offered a symbol of how particularistic identity claims in the region could be transcended. And in Iraq in 2009, a teenage pianist, Zuhair Sultan, literally took up this baton, initiating a National Youth Orchestra embracing musicians from a range of ethnic background. Given the obvious physical challenges of assembling the team, auditioning videos were posted on YouTube.

Musicians experimenting with the potential of fusion among various cultural ‘selves’ can equally produce compelling results. The emergence of jazz in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century US would have been inconceivable outside of the contribution to American popular music of Jewish refugees from the pogroms of eastern Europe and the role of the blues in African-American life.

Similarly, Youssou N’Dour has become one of the leading figures in ‘world music’, in a career spanning decades, through his eclectic intermingling of traditional Senegalese music with a range of other genres around the globe. And the ensemble Los Desterrados have created a unique folkloric sound, expressed through Judeo-Spanish, by mining the vein of musical sedimentation laid down by Jews wandering across the Mediterranean basin in the centuries following the expulsions from Spain in 1492, before the cultural boundaries created by 19<sup>th</sup>-century nation-states.

### **Popular memory and heritage**

Internationally, co-productions, particularly in high-cost artistic products like film, and travelling exhibitions and shows present important opportunities for intercultural dialogue to straddle fault lines defined by aggressive nationalism. Against a backdrop of tensions between the two countries which had been intractable for politicians, a South Korean soap opera shown on Japanese television some years ago became very popular in Japan and led to many more Japanese learning Korean.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, in 2010, the Japanese prime minister, Naoto Kan, expressed ‘deep remorse’ for his country’s 35-year occupation of Korea, a gesture welcomed by his South Korean counterpart, Lee Myung-bak, as ‘a step forward’.<sup>13</sup>

The competing narratives which comprise nationalistic popular memories inevitably draw heritage into the sphere of intercultural dialogue. Hence the particular significance of monumental statuary and memorials, which often present the state in the ‘triumphal’ image of a dominant majority—history as written by the winning side. The Vietnam war memorial in Washington, by contrast, in simply naming all the American victims, not only encourages visitors to reflect on the human cost of war but also ensures the many African-American soldiers who died—the Vietnamese remain, of course, the anonymous ‘other’—at least achieve equality in death.

Museums play a key role in this regard. Northern Ireland’s Ulster Museum has recently been renovated. As part of the process, its account of the history of that divided region was re-curated. Sadly, the result was a superficial recounting, organised around bland texts for successive periods, rather than around artefacts and the different and contested perspectives these evoke. It thus failed to

grasp the nettle of challenging the polarisation which continues to beset society in the region, where the nationalistic battle to control the past—key, as Orwell suggested, to control over the future—continues unabated.

In sharp contrast, any visitor to the Museum of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn will be struck by the stark honesty of the representations of the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships from which the modern unified republic emerged. Germany's historic determination to say 'never again' to totalitarianism has been associated with a commitment to the universal norms of democracy, human rights and the rule of law that disavow ideological narratives of the past motivated by aggressive nationalism.

## Conclusion

It is easy to undervalue the capacity of cultural practitioners to pursue intercultural dialogue. Dealing with the challenges posed by cultural diversity, within and among states, has usually been understood as a narrowly political task for states themselves to conduct. But states can no longer be omniscient nor omnicompetent in the complex world of late modernity. They can, and must, frame the policy context in which cultural diversity is managed and they can, and must, show political leadership in intercultural dialogue, rather than exploiting division for populist ends. But they cannot 'do' intercultural dialogue by themselves.

Cultural practitioners have critical parts to play in intercultural dialogue. This is partly because they are working in the cultural arena where such dialogue must take place. It is partly because they work on the evocation of emotional affect, where the forces of intolerance are active competitors. And it is partly, specifically, because they can imaginatively deconstruct and reconstruct often taken-for-granted social roles and positions. Since the latter include stereotyped conceptions of the 'self' and 'other' they thus can allow intercultural dialogue to play out in front of the observer and offer pointers as to how its dilemmas can be addressed in everyday life.

Success in this regard depends on a framework of cultural policy which guarantees autonomy. Including significant financial autonomy, to the individual practitioner. That, however, is a necessary rather than sufficient condition. It is inevitably the responsibility of every such individual to determine the extent of their commitment to promoting dialogue through their work. That may require them to transcend another stereotype—that such 'political' admonishments are best ignored if the sanctity of the artist in his garret is to be assured.

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 176

<sup>2</sup> Orhan Pamuk, 'As others see us', *Guardian* review, 19 October 2005

<sup>3</sup> Simon Mawer, *The Glass Room* (London: Abacus, 2009), 89, 95

<sup>4</sup> taken from a 2005 interview with the author, available at [www.l3.ulq.ac.be/adichie/](http://www.l3.ulq.ac.be/adichie/)

<sup>5</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006)

<sup>6</sup> Tishani Doshi, *The Pleasure Seekers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010)

<sup>7</sup> Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), 126-9

<sup>8</sup> Alan Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007)

<sup>9</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (London: Vintage, 2008)

<sup>10</sup> Souhail Karam, 'Saudi sitcom row tests tolerance towards Christians', Reuters, 15 August 2010, available at [www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE67E0QB20100815](http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE67E0QB20100815)

<sup>11</sup> *Magnum* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 179

<sup>12</sup> as reported by Prof Kosaku Yoshino to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Council of Europe Intercultural Forum, Troina, November 2004

<sup>13</sup> Justin McCurry, 'Rocky relations between Japan and South Korea over disputed islands', *Guardian*, 19 August 2010, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/18/japan-south-korea-disputed-islands](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/18/japan-south-korea-disputed-islands)