

Olaf Kaltmeier (Ed.)

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# Transnational Americas

Envisioning Inter-American Area Studies  
in Globalization Processes

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July 2013

Olaf Kaltmeier

## Multiculturalism and the Traffic of *Difference*

MABEL MORAÑA

Ask not what liberalism can do for multiculturalism, ask what multiculturalism is doing for the attenuated life of late liberalism!

—Homi K. Bhabha (1995, 118)

Multiculturalism, a concept which has been present since the 1960s in western cultures and politics, has been defined as an ideological positioning which evaluates diversity (of opinions, experiences, race and ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, physical capacities, etc.) as a potential source of strength and growth, rather than a disruptive element in contemporary societies. Therefore, the topic of multiculturalism can be approached in relation to pluralistic and conciliatory practices which promote attitudes of intercultural tolerance; or it can be treated in connection with a politics of support or integration of ethnic and social diversity in a specific society. Accordingly, the debates on multiculturalism almost always carry a demanding tone when referring to cultural patrimony, the processes of acculturation, the aggression towards minority groups, or lifestyles different from mainstream society, the internal experiences of colonization, xenophobia etc. That means that in reference to extremely sensitive areas of collective subjectivity linked to social struggles, historical or present incidents, or situations in which dominant cultures defend their rights to exist are being defended by those who identify with their specific claims. Since the appearance of multiculturalism as a scholarly topic it has been subdivided into concepts dealing with conflict / social consensus, difference / diversity, dominant cultures / subordinate cultures, authority / power, identity / otherness, which I will refer to later.

In postcolonial societies marked by a collective memory of *difference*, the topic of multiculturalism points at the very heart of the social problem. It inserts itself into the (bad) conscience of the dominant and more advantageous sectors of society and the same way it is inserted in the well-meaning agenda of groups as well as individuals exploring possibilities of coexistence of ethnic and racial subcultures in sometimes claustrophobic spaces of national culture. Therefore, the topic of multiculturalism is, because of its polemic nature—even if the repertory of humanitarian reasons—, committed to the integration of all sectors which integrate a particular social form, developing a counter series of topics related to the structuring of power and to the forms of domination which, generally in a democratic context, define the social relations and the political culture in the present world. In the age of globalization, there is no doubt that the scorching topic of integration on a global level has contributed to

reviving the same debate as well on a local, regional, national, and continental level, where many challenges related to this intercultural topic are not yet resolved.

In addition to that, one has to consider that the topic of multiculturalism, while articulating related problems with collective identities, the notion of otherness, the governability etc. it is also part of the current political and philosophical reflection. Topics such as violence, immigration laws, terrorism, and the recent bankruptcies of global capitalism have also led to a reconsideration of the relationship between nations, ethnic groups, cultures, and social sectors belonging to the diverse traditions and economic stratum, whose belligerency may put the precarious equilibrium of the social system in danger. Despite all this entanglement, we should not forget the importance of multiculturalism with regard to the market which not only has to respond and meet expectations and desires marked by cultural diversity, but at the same time has to attract and subsume this very same difference in the standardized space of global goods.

This article analyzes the topic of multiculturalism from an ideological and theoretical perspective, exploring questions linked to the notion of cultural differences in postcolonial and postmodern contexts. Furthermore, it revises a number of critiques that the topic has received from various perspectives, with regard to problems of race, social inequity etc. As a starting point we take into consideration the approach towards multiculturalism that has been circulating in several European as well as U.S. scholarly debates. In the end, we will consider how all the above mentioned can be applied to Latin America.

### **Multiculturalism in European and U.S. Scholarly Debates**

Primarily, we have to acknowledge that the topic of multiculturalism confronts us with the idea of "limits": not just the idea of a limit which distinguishes cultures, but the more essential notion which allows us to define the notions of identity and otherness, subjectivity and alteration on distinct levels. And we face these limits not because multiculturalism is the answer to these challenges but because they constitute the core of the crisis—in the moment of radical change—a fact which is recognizable at global and local levels. Multiculturalism is, in this regard, a symptom, not a solution nowadays. It is concerned with the ways in which cultural boundaries can be transposed, relativized, or negotiated, but it is also linked to the reasons that guide these strategies of integration and the ways in which these strategies affect the community in the short and in the long term. This limit, however, can be noted in the same processes of saturation such as the liberal models of exclusion or minimal integration of minority groups in the national project which has been occurring since the emergence of the nation states in postcolonial societies, and due to the obvious increase of international belligerency about topics related to ethnic and/or religious fundamentalisms. Phenomenons such as the above-mentioned make the category of a *civil* society in certain contexts completely ineffective and impede the implementation of forms that are at least acceptable for intercultural coexistence and understanding at a transnational level. In

this sense, multiculturalism is, in my opinion, a strategy of emergence—in the sense of emergency, not of emergence—which tries to account for the colonial inheritance and the liberal failure that followed it, trying almost desperately to control the pain those systems have caused in the social context throughout the centuries.

Without having to go back too much in history one could argue that the most obvious and best-known reasons for the emergence of multiculturalism, as a “first-class” topic in a cultural policy environment, are numerous and concentrate on aggregating situations in the western panorama, which have resided with us in the past. Some of the most important reasons are: the increasing migration, the transnationalized nomadism of financial capital, the regulations of flexible work, the unlimited entrepreneurial expansion, the constant traffic of real and symbolic merchandise at a planetary level, the simultaneity of space and temporality due to the inclusion of virtual worlds in our daily lives, etc. All these factors have dramatically changed the construction and value of modernity and have given extensive evidence to their inherent depravity and limitations. They also accelerated the necessity of global perspectives and the use of macro-categories for the analysis of a new world order. At the same time, since the beginning of these changes, there is a decrease in the validity of national cultures as a primary and fundamental platform on which the political, economical, and cultural reflection is based.<sup>1</sup> *Modern* categories, such as nation, citizenship, identity, etc.—without disappearing completely from the conceptual program of cultural criticism today—have made room for current more fluid and more provisional notions such as (virtual or real) communities, political or cultural affiliation, and collective subjectivity which seem to better channel the spirit or the *ethos* of a postmodern society. These notions—largely useful in countering the universalist and essentialist characteristics of the Enlightenment tradition—transmit two perceptions that are worth considering: firstly, the positions of power are firstly more than ever temporary, fluctuating, and negotiable in the current world system; secondly, in a growing depersonalized and verticalized world, paradoxically, social *agency* is a crucial factor for the interpretation and transformation of the world we live in.

In this regard—assuming the space which would correspond to cosmopolitanism in modern times—multiculturalism emerges as an ideological strategy that stretches out to compensate the limitations of modernity and in more recent sceneries, also of globalization and of neo-liberalism. In an increasingly homogeneous, integrated, and anonymous world, multiculturalism provides a platform for intercultural tolerance and ideological relativism. In societies traversed by violence and marginalization, multiculturalism presents a conciliatory, maybe even utopian message of tolerance, harmony, and mutual understanding.

In the United States—with a large part of the debate on multiculturalism being raised here—a well-known approach to understanding the question refers to what Charles Taylor would call “politics of social recognition.” In the context of the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on these discussions, see Moraña 2010a.



society, the topic of multiculturalism obviously does not assume the form it may have in peripheral societies where the postcolonial question continues to provoke serious structural challenges on all levels of society. It is, however, thought of as a functional and administrative problem of liberal democracies. Within these parameters, politics of social recognition arise with a demanding character and strongly support the cultural standard, with little interest in economic or political standards. It hardly needs mentioning that politics of social recognition function in the private sector—linked to the definition of individual identities in relation to those surrounding us—as much as on a public level—promoting an egalitarian recognition—although the links between both of these goals are diverse and obvious. Taylor recognizes that, above all in the public sphere, the topic of social recognition involves elements of universalism (all human beings should have the same rights) and elements of particularization related to the topic of *difference*. However, the relationship between identity and *difference*, as well as between particularism and universalism, is complex and sometimes even contentious. When does the difference have to be treated as a criterion of justice and when does it have to be considered the basis of discriminatory politics?<sup>2</sup> Also, K. Anthony Appiah points out in his critique on Taylor's model that the topic of social (auto)recognition involves a classifying aspect functioning as the compartment of subjectivity which in many cases remains reduced to *one* of the features of the life of a subject (his/her nationality, his/her race, his/her sexuality, his/her physical capacities). This is what turns identity into a practice of *identifying the other*, or identifying oneself as limited to only one of the aforementioned aspects which will monopolize the perception of the individual. This leads to the assertion of the subject itself as an obligation defining itself in a way in which predicted and institutionally conducted models of social recognition are satisfied. As Appiah states: "Between the politics of recognition and the politics of compulsion, there is no bright line" (Appiah 1994, 163).

### Criticism on Multiculturalism

Generally, the abundant criticism on multiculturalism from the left as well as from the right deserves a careful reflection because these two perspectives depart from very distinct backgrounds and are integrated in very diverse ideological, social, and philosophical programs of various contexts. Certainly, the different focuses of the topic between cultural critics, political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers from, for ex-

<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, you can think, for example, of the difficulty posed by social inequality, which may require emergency measures to restore certain social groups which live below the poverty line, or in cases such as disabled people, who require, due to their special condition, special dispositions. Obviously, different social groups require different policies. On the other hand, racial or gender difference, for example, may also cause practices that harm certain sectors by limiting or preventing access to opportunities for equal integration at a social, occupational, and institutional level. Thus, while in some cases the difference must be addressed, in others we must eliminate it as a criterion.

ample, North America, Europe, and Latin America are obvious. Therefore, it may be of major interest to carry out a more careful comparison of these positions which the limits of this article forbid. This is why I wish to concentrate only on some of the above mentioned ideologies, namely the more outstanding ones, when considering the question of multiculturalism.

Completely entering the global criticism this topic has received in the field of cultural criticism, one might have to start by indicating that for some analysts of multiculturalism this is not more than a new toy of the neoliberal elite which is preoccupied with the necessity to inhabit a planet, which is ever growing, proliferate, diversified and, at least on the surface, without hierarchies<sup>3</sup>. To put it in the words of Stuart Hall:

Since cultural diversity is, increasingly, the fate of the modern world, and ethnic absolutism a regressive feature of late-modernity, the greatest danger now arises from forms of national and cultural identity—new or old—which attempt to secure their identity by adopting closed versions of culture or community, and by the refusal to engage with the difficult problems, that arise from trying to live with difference. (Hall 1993, 360)

For some people, the problems associated with what is perceived from certain perspectives, like the “promiscuity” of integration and transculturalism, are numerous and complex and they require a defiant and defensive attitude. Although the notion of multiculturalism evokes a number of ideas of pluralism and relativism, it touches other, more crucial topics such as race, ethnicity, and the formation of collective identities. In heterogeneous societies which are racially marked like the United States, these are all closely related topics to concepts of a nation, citizenship and democratic governability and specific politics which have been implemented not without opposition or polemics.<sup>4</sup>

Without constituting or indicating the coming of post-racial societies or being an indication of politicization, many discussions these days take place in the political arena of the United States of America which are connected to multiculturalism, identity politics, global integration, and intercultural relations in one way or another. All this has sparked an extensive debate that better demonstrates the persistence of prejudice and social antagonisms, which the “politically correct” discourse has reached to abol-

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Stuart Hall, Žižek, Bhabha, Jameson, Spivak, Moller Okin, etc. to mention only a few of the most prominent scholars, who neither coincide completely on the basis of their discrepancies, each of them adding various arguments to a debate which is connected to other topics, such as: the criticism on modernity and on ongoing capitalism, the difficulty of the subaltern, the migratory question, violence, gender, the postcolonial debate, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Among the most obvious ones, we have to mention “affirmative action” and equal opportunities, destined to open doors to minority groups, who are traditionally underrepresented in professions, centers of education, etc., such as the quotas which are imposed and indicated as “desirable” on an institutional level, as a way of securing the racial and social integration in the United States. The concrete criteria for the implementation of these politics were discussed and withstood on different levels and with diverse argumentations but in other cases they function as an obligatory prohibition of the racial discrimination, converted like this into a concrete violation of official politics.

ish from the surface of the social dialogue, although obviously not from the collective unconsciousness. The issue of race and its ethno-cultural conflicts, therefore far from being magically exceeded by evolution of social ethics itself, remains deeply rooted in the same structure of a collective feeling particularly in specific levels of society presenting themselves with a different face in distinct moments of history. Conceptually, the topic reminds us of a colonial concept of power strongly associated with the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano and his discussion of what he calls “americanidad” [“Americanity”], in the article written together with Immanuel Wallerstein with the objective to define the space the Americas occupy in the modern world system. It is well-known that Quijano emphasizes the importance of race and the system of a “social classification” which derives from a colonial domination, and, in distinct ways and various degrees, still crosses the social and ideological fabric of contemporary societies in Latin America as well as Anglo-Saxon America. Identifying the remnants of discrimination that the past projects onto the present requires a removal of liberal mortification, and a close observation of the social context and its symbolic products. It also requires reading between the lines and against the grain of current processes, which in some cases are interpreted with comprehensive, although maybe excessive, triumphalism.

Although the term “acculturation” is not in use anymore due to more dynamic and bilateral concepts, on a collective level the idea still persists that the modification of traditional regimes of social participation in the public sphere entails a radical loss of symbolic and social capital in certain branches of society.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, for example, the topic that the press identified after Barack Obama’s victory as “the end of a white America,” (Hsu) precipitated a series of reactions which, in one way or another, referred to the loss of cultural identity in those groups who fear for the loss of their social superiority.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars interpret the new social dynamics as a form of re-

<sup>5</sup> The notion of acculturation refers to an irreversible process of dispossession of culture itself or radical change of cultural paradigms due to the imposition of dominant models. Cultural criticism speaks rather in current contexts, acculturation process, emphasizing the dynamics of symbolic transfer between cultures in contact, meaning that none of the poles of these processes, nor the loss of one’s culture or the absorption of the dominant culture, are total and unidirectional. Furthermore, these relationships are always asymmetrical. And Fernando Ortiz, using the notion of acculturation, refers to the limitations of the concept of acculturation, issues related to his intercultural contact with Angel Rama who expanded his theory of transculturation applying it to the field of literary studies. On this subject see Moraña 2010b.

<sup>6</sup> Here I take as an example the article “The End of White America?” published in *The Atlantic* in the January/February 2009 issue, which is a series of topics related to the theme of multiculturalism and political topics articulating popular cultural issues. Although this is a popular article, I think it is useful as a symptom of the concerns shared by some sectors of American society, especially after the election of Barack Obama, and thus allows us to capture the atmosphere of the multicultural theme of a collective imaginary level. From this source I took some of the references that follow on interracial relations in the current context.

verse colonialism, manifested in the fact that traditionally dominant sectors now conquer the foreground of the political scene, a transformation that some people fear might be followed by an economic and political encouragement of a new “colonizing” elite of social spaces.

This perception has generated a feeling of apprehension and anxiety in a large part of U.S. society, linked to the possibility of losing social control and a predominant economy, something the privileged elite had owned for generations. Social sectors which seem to have been sustained because of a feeling of superiority and social security, now complain about the loss or the softening of cultural heritage, myths of joint cohesion, common traditions, and a cultural memory that distinguishes the aforementioned factors and facilitates the process of social recognition in diverse and changing societies. They especially accuse the lack of symbolic elements of historical, cultural, and ethnic nature which would be able to fortify and enrich the individual subjectivity such as the collective imagination, incorporating the “high” white culture and the official discourses with a touch of rebelliousness and alterity. There is a certain social epic intertwined with values, struggles, and certain beliefs; just like the history of slavery in the black culture, the myth of Aztlán and the drama of illegal immigration in the case of Latin America, the Jewish cultural memory of the Holocaust, the (social) struggle with patriarchy and the social movements for gay and lesbian equal rights. All of these examples not only constitute crucial moments in history and in the definition of identity, but also constitute a *social capital*. In this function, they nourish and fortify the processes of social differentiation indispensable of a multicultural society in which no sector likes to completely alienate and lose itself in totality. To different degrees—from the more conservative elite up to the perceptiveness of the middle class—the feeling of cultural inadequacy and emptiness that certain groups have been experiencing until today, aims at the crisis of a *status quo* which in fact has been agonized since the end of the Cold War and has suffered an unthinkable and devastating shock caused by the attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

As mentioned in an article in *The Atlantic* (Hsu 2009), the decline of “whiteness” as a social value (or at least the decrease of its symbolic contribution) has become—just like masculinity—a popular topic in cultural studies due to the social, cultural, and political consequences. In fact, the demographic changes have dramatically modified the face and heart of the United States of America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2008, the racial minorities—African Americans, Hispanics, and East and South Asians—will become the majority in the American population by the year 2042. Some scholars talk about the appearance of a post-racial society, or less optimistic, an inauguration of a Third World Anglo-Saxon America. Accordingly, this article indicates the following:

The Election of Barack Obama is just the most startling manifestation of a larger trend: the gradual erosion of “whiteness” as the touchstone of what it means to be American. If the end of white America is a cultural and demographic inevitability, what will the new mainstream look like—and how will white Americans fit into it? What will it mean

to be white when whiteness is no longer the norm? And will a post-white America be less racially divided—or more so? (Hsu 2009, 46)

The racial topic is reapplied, and the components (skin color as a (cultural) marker and symbol, the race-power relations etc.) are re-signified. These transformations, far from being acted out in all sectors as a progress of the democratization process, are in many cases assimilated as a form of threat and social chaos in a society that celebrated its very own cultural metaphor of the “melting pot,” while never admitting a danger of a real change in the disposition of values and power, and even less of a de-hierarchization of civil society.<sup>7</sup> This problem arises correlatively to the political and social changes that are performed, not incidentally, at the same time as the recording of the global capitalist crisis. It accelerates the migratory flow and terrorism forces us to recall the Benjaminian idea that the state of exception has become the norm in our society. In this context, the issues of collective identity, otherness, and more broadly the political (multi)acculturation, acquire a prominent place in political debates and in the intellectual and academic scene. Nonetheless, as Benjamin suggests, the question also makes us reflect on the fact that the very concept of history that we continue to sustain, as well as its forms of representation, are what enables those exceptions to achieve self-regulation and appear among us as if they were a *necessary* consequence and inescapable in the current “order” of the world.<sup>8</sup>

In his controversial book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World* (1996), but even more in the pamphlet entitled *Who Are We?—The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004), Samuel Huntington expresses the concerns of conservative and sophisticated sectors that are confronted with the challenges posed by cultural and social interactions in an ethnically and culturally diverse world, which is integrated due to the processes of globalization. Huntington predicts that international

<sup>7</sup> As has been reported, even before the historic election of Barak Obama as President of the United States took place, there has been a remarkable increase of terrorist threats in the country, not only from external enemies but also nationally, by groups advocating white supremacy (KKK, neo-Nazis, etc.) and a significant radicalization of some religious organizations, cults and other fundamentalist groups. Even the emergence of the academic field of “whiteness studies” or even better, the “white-trash studies” (“field conceived as a response to the perceived marginalization of the white working class” sector, which describes itself as the “real America”) indicate the transformation of traditional society and the emotional repercussions of these changes in the most conservative sectors of society. For those unfamiliar with the term “white trash” (literally “white trash”), it is used in English nomination derogatory to refer to white areas economically and culturally disadvantaged, lacking “symbolic capital” and occupying the margins of society with non-integrated ethnic minorities, illegal immigrants, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin’s eighth thesis on the philosophy of history is well known: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. [...] The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that his view of history which gives rise to it is untenable” (Benjamin 1978, 257).

disputes will threaten the unstable equilibrium of globalization in the twenty-first century. According to him, the existence of solid and fixed identities, based on religious factors, traditions, history, etc., is something that needs to be defended and perpetuated, as these identities help strengthen positions of power and adjust the interactions between cultures. Huntington's argument is that in the future, cultural identities and antagonisms between different civilizations not only play a role but will be a key factor in relationships between nation states.<sup>9</sup> According to Edward Said, Huntington creates an "imagined geography" in support of his elaboration related to the conflicts between different civilizations in order to justify his politically conservative position. For Said and many other critics, Huntington's position is an attempt to internationally legitimize U.S. aggression and its interventionism towards other nations on a military as well as financial, cultural, and political level, perpetuating a state of war, or in other words, the continuity of the Cold War under other premises. All this in the name of preserving national identity in the U.S. and social harmony that supposedly guarantees this identity. *Who Are We?—The Challenges to America's National Identity* cut even deeper into the intricate meanders of U.S. internal politics as well as issues of immigration and identity politics in this country. In a nation where over 40 million people speak Spanish and where Hispanics and other so-called minority groups represent a very substantial part of the national economy (referring to aspects of production as well as consumption), Huntington's argument is that bilingualism and multiculturalism favor the formation of ethnic ghettos, prevent the Americanization of immigrants, obstruct the implementation of democracy, and ultimately lead to national disintegration. For him, the English language, Protestant values, ethics of productivity, and the emphasis on individualism, are the foundation of national identity in the United States of America. The problem is, of course, who is in the position of defining and who is recognized—in national culture—as a historical and ideological construct that should represent the economic, political, and cultural rights of all citizens, not only the sophisticated elite who perceives itself as the repository of legitimate values and historical legacies of the entire country.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The main—always quoted—idea which guides Huntington's position is the following one: "It is my hypothesis that the major source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation States will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future." (Huntington 1993, 22)

<sup>10</sup> One of Huntington's role models is a political scientist named Robert Putnam who received the David Johan Skytte Prize awarded to the most valuable contributions made in the social sciences in 2006. His most famous and controversial book, *Bowling Alone* (whose story began to circulate in the form of an article in 1995) argues that mainly starting in the 1960s and as a result of cultural diversity, the confidence between different ethnic groups and within each one of them has greatly diminished, increasing the inter-ethnic

However, enthusiastic claims of *difference* populate the imaginary and popular practices at all levels but often also carry negative aspects.<sup>11</sup> Although representations of the diverse cultures that populate popular culture are, regulated primarily by market forces as generally known, it is obvious that these same laws are an indicator for recent currents that are at work, often submerged in society and which are also elaborated at an academic or political level, in many cases, according to simplistic and biased characterizations. According to some critics, the representations, which often derive from a multiculturalist approach, are not only based on an encoding that is stereotypical of cultural sectors, ethnic groups, etc. However, by indulging in the illusion of a harmonious intercultural coexistence between minority groups and the current dominant cultures, these multicultural approaches contribute unwillingly to the perpetuation of the marginalization of social groups that are not identified with mainstream society.<sup>12</sup>

For Slavoj Žižek, one of the most incisive critics of multiculturalism, this trend has come to replace or reformulate in a much more diplomatic or—if you like—more hypocritical way, the racial struggles of the past. In the place of the opposing positions that previously made clear the interests and demands of each sector, he proposes a

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hostility and resulting in an unprecedented collapse in the communities, maybe at a level of civil society, institutions, and political life (Putnam acknowledges this as “social capital”). The issue was widely discussed during the Clinton administration. The issue of changes in the process of accumulation and the loss of “social capital” are developed by Putnam and other sociologists and political scientists in relation to France, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Australia and Japan in *Democracies in Flux*.

<sup>11</sup> As mentioned in the aforementioned article in *The Atlantic*, although there is a concern about the destabilizing of the privileges of race, especially since the election of the 44th President of the United States, the social thermostat indicates other temperatures at the level of popular culture. The icons of diversity are mainly those in which priority is given to the representation of otherness, a commodity of great symbolic value in the United States focusing largely on the paths of otherness, respecting the values and tastes of white culture. This preference for cultural difference and social otherness has captured more than any other offer currently available on the cultural market, the voracious imagination of the consumer culture. In the audiovisual and online representation of diversity, the difference stems from the multiplicity of ethnic and social aspects that constitute the cultural fabric, and is expressed through the support of the dominant alternative values on issues of civility, “good taste” etc., and from the preference of aesthetic elements that could be described as heterodox. Rap and hip hop include multiple forms of body art, usually exaggerated gestures of notorious sexual content, excessive ornaments, eccentric behavior, use of slang, all of which evoke traits of urban subcultures (gangs, marginal, drug addicts, etc.). These practices do not fail to include references of social resentment, violence, and the lack of confidence in institutions and bourgeois values.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Moller Okin’s reflections on the relationship between gender and multiculturalism and the way that liberal democracies face the problem of minority cultures, which are secured as a way to protect them, special rights and privileges. His reflection also relates to the fact that multiculturalism stereotypes social groups, tending to emphasize more the differences between them than there are in the very heart of each, making any consideration of homogenizing sectoral identities inappropriate.

conciliatory platform of “empty universalism” that allows the absorption or cooptation of otherness and the evaluation of relativistic and trivialized cultural diversity. For the Slavic philosopher, multiculturalism is a form of “elegant”, conciliable racism, defined by a condescending attitude towards the other, in order to receive its *difference* as a number of fascinating features that enrich the world without threatening the *status quo*. According to Žižek:

Al igual que el capitalismo global supone la paradoja de la colonización sin Estado-Nación colonizador, el multiculturalismo es una forma inconfesada, invertida, auto-referencial de racismo, un “racismo que mantiene las distancias”: “respeta” la identidad del Otro, lo concibe como una comunidad “auténtica” y cerrada en sí misma respecto de la cual él, el multiculturalista, mantiene una distancia asentada sobre el privilegio de su posición universal. (Žižek 2007, 56)

What Homi Bhabha qualifies as the “anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism” (Bhabha 1995, 206) is for Zygmunt Bauman “the life experience of the new global elite” (Bauman 2004, 95).<sup>13</sup> If, on the one hand, this shows the “worldliness” and social sensitivity of the most educated people in society, it is, on the other hand, also “a declaration of indifference” towards the values, interests, and lifestyles of others to whom we give, at the most, the benefit of our interest and tolerance (Bauman 2004, 96).<sup>14</sup> Following the same direction, Žižek argues that the idea of multiculturalism as the prominent feature in a post-ideological universe is highly misleading. According to him, multiculturalism is precisely the ideology of global capitalism. This imposes a “repressive tolerance” of *difference* from a supposedly neutral, but certainly condescending and depoliticized position of the subject. As in the case of “good” colonialism, multiculturalism is a “universal” platform capable of enabling the articulation, orchestration, and absorption of particularism, which is valued for its rarity and uniqueness for exotic forms through which the openness of our cultural identity is tested, confirming and consolidating our ideological and spiritual position. “El respeto multicultural por la especificidad del Otro no es sino la afirmación de la propia superioridad” (Žižek 2007, 57).

In other words, multiculturalism would then constitute for Žižek, a renewed and strengthened form of fundamentalism, as it allows the consideration of local cultures and indigenous forms of otherness, and as harmless and even exotic representations of *difference*, we are obliged to recognize and tolerate in order to avoid social conflicts

<sup>13</sup> Bhabha’s distinction between diversity and cultural difference has been fundamental in guiding the multicultural discussions. It appears at first as part of “The Commitment to Theory” in *New Formations*, 5, 1988, and later was reproduced elsewhere, in Ashcroft et al. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. It is interesting to note that when this article was republished as part of *The Location of Culture*, the word “anodyne” is suppressed (Bhabha 1994, 34). It, however, still seems to be an appropriate qualification.

<sup>14</sup> According to Bauman, the age of multiculturalism “displays the new ‘cultural omnivorousness’ of the global elite: let’s treat the world as a gigantic department store with shelves full of the most varied offers, and let’s be free to roam one floor after another, try and taste every item on display, pick them up to our heart’s desire” (Bauman 2004, 96).



that could eventually destabilize the precarious balance of our societies. The *Other*, in this context, is not real: it is a subject we treat as an object of desire, that we alternately have to “glamorize”, celebrate, romanticize, essentialize. According to what Žižek suggests, that is how we give at the same time both, too much and too little to the cultural specificity of the *Other*. The *Other* is both strange and fascinating, intriguing and irritating, a promise and a threat. It is a cultural and ideological construct whose intrinsic nature and particularism remain strangers to us, and whose final “truth” and real necessities turn out to be, somehow, *lost in translation*.<sup>15</sup>

But probably the most acute critiques of multiculturalism deal with the ideological ramifications of this practice, particularly with the complex connections between the economic, political, and cultural domains. According to some cultural analysts, our current, almost obsessive, focus on cultural *difference*, has replaced the economic and political struggles that were central to modernity. Fredric Jameson warned us years ago that *difference* was becoming the new identity of postmodern times, severely criticizing this concept in the context of Marxist and post-Marxist thinking.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Homi Bhabha has spoken of “the anxiety of difference” that accompanies “the splitting of the subject” when it tries to confront the contradictory processes and living conditions that characterize the globalized world. In an essentially unjust world order, which however tends to homogenization, the celebration of *difference* leaves the foundations of the capitalist system intact. The recognition and acceptance of both, cultural difference as well as marginal identities—disadvantaged, subordinate, or peripheral—, obviates a more radical approach to the basis on which the *status quo* has been resting since the colonization of American territories and the subsequent formation of the nation state. This facilitates the perpetuation of injustice and the perception that the Empire is an unavoidable and totalizing reality which cannot, and probably—from this perspective—does not need to be combated and overcome. If any dispute can be resolved in the cultural arena, it does not require further action or elaborations at other levels of society. Hence, Žižek performs his “defense of intolerance” as a reaction to the processes of blurring the social conflict which thus fails to have political implica-

<sup>15</sup> Žižek concludes that homogeneity, not the real openness to difference, is what characterizes multiculturalism in times of globalization: “Se concluye, por tanto, que el problema del imperante multiculturalismo radica en que proporciona la forma (la coexistencia híbrida de distintos mundos de vida cultural) que su contrario (la contundente presencia del capitalismo en cuanto sistema mundial global) asume para manifestarse: el multiculturalismo es la demostración de la homogeneización sin precedentes del mundo actual” (Žižek 2007, 59).

<sup>16</sup> “Much of what passes for a spirited defense of difference is, of course, simply liberal tolerance, a position whose offensive complacencies are well known but which has at least the merit of raising the embarrassing historical question of whether the tolerance of difference, as a social fact, is not the result of social homogenization and standardization and the obliteration of genuine social difference in the first place.” (Jameson 1991, 341) The issue of difference runs through the reflection of Jameson’s book on postmodernism. See especially the pages devoted to “The Ideology of Difference,” 340 ff.

tions neither requiring adjustments nor profound changes at an economic level. If social tensions can be reduced to partially sectoral demands, which are particularized, contingent, linked to identitarian essentialisms and culturalist claims, they need not reach the political level nor require a radical transformation of society. To put it in the words of Samuel Huntington—who cannot be accused of being an advocate for cultural difference—after the end of the Cold War “the Iron Curtain of ideology” has been replaced by “[t]he Velvet Curtain of culture” (Huntington 1993, 31).<sup>17</sup>

The transformation of the antagonisms of *differences* inherent in liberal politics is a seductive but misleading proposal of important ethical and political implications (Laclau/Mouffe 2001). The politics of cultural difference and the ideology of multiculturalism propose to consider and even change some things, so that the total system basically remains unchanged. This correlates with the depoliticization of the economy and with the weakening of the politics that Marxist critics have been referring to in the last decades. The “return of politics” that Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, and others have been urging for, is somehow stuck on the cultural level.<sup>18</sup> It can be assumed that culture strengthens and empowers various social sectors to promote the emergence of a social consciousness and the development of political agendas, that is, to create the conditions not for erasing or denying the social and political conflict, but for the recognition and production development. The opposite, however, is what seems to be happening, at least in regards to certain articulations of the multicultural question. As Chantal Mouffe has outlined, the focus is (would be) primarily on consciousness raising, with otherness and difference as the “constitutive exterior” of any identity, so that in current processes of elaborating multicultural difference must unquestionably be seen as an attempt to revise and redefine social identity. Additionally, places of certainty and social security of those who still occupy positions of power and who feel threatened by the development of the *Other* in different social, economic, and political registers. Mouffe argues for what she calls an “agonistic pluralism” as a way to establish new political imaginaries for the development of the bases to provide a “radical democracy” where the difference could integrate various epistemological, political, and institutional registers, and where intercultural conflicts could be productively developed.<sup>19</sup> Laclau, on his part, works towards a new theory of universalism, a notion that underlies the whole development of identity and all conceptualizations of Otherness. Therefore, he proposes to consider the universal as “the symbol of a miss-

<sup>17</sup> According to Žižek, these multicultural strategies, “la verdadera lucha política se transforma en una batalla cultural por el reconocimiento de las identidades marginales y por la tolerancia con las diferencias” (Žižek 2007, 59). We speak of intolerance, according to Žižek, where we should speak of inequality, social injustice, exploitation, and the need for programs that promote emancipatory agendas which are able to lead a social struggle openly and unabashedly.

<sup>18</sup> See mainly Mouffe (1999) and Laclau (2005).

<sup>19</sup> The idea of agonistic pluralism and review of global models (cosmopolitan or multipolar) are developed further by Mouffe in *On the Political*.

ing fullness”, suspending the dialectical moment in which the particular is faced with the universal to overcome it. Since, according to Laclau, in the universal there are no possibilities to fill the gaps with the particular, which can be conceived as binary conceptual systems as contingent, lacking, incomplete.<sup>20</sup>

However, it is obvious that, despite the severe criticism that the ideology of multiculturalism has been receiving in distinct (academic) contexts and from different perspectives, a lot of the problems towards those who are influenced by this position, constitute ethic, political, and ideological challenges, especially in a globalized world. Consequently, the problem we are facing is how to politicize the cultural debates and how to cultivate the politics without renouncing economic approaches that foresee the necessary basis for the social and ideological analysis. To put it in broader terms, like reinventing politics as much on the national as well as the transnational level in the times of globalization: how to articulate, therefore, locality and globality, particularism and universalism, contingency and transcendence.

It seems to be obvious that without a political-economic criticism of the liberal modernity—meaning the system that established the bases from which the global system today developed—would be impossible to attend many of the urging problems of contemporary society. This was, for example, the question that guided Homi Bhabha’s reflection in *The Location of Culture*, the book in which the criticism of the modernity, of colonialism, and multiculturalism is addressed and whose thesis is defined by the author with the following words:

What was modernity for those who were part of its instrumentality or governmentality but, for reasons of race or gender or economic status, were excluded from its norms of rationality, or its prescriptions of progress? What contending and competing discourses of emancipation or equality, what forms of identity and agency, emerge from the “discontents” of modernity? (Bhabha 1995, 83)

At the same time, it is important to remember that the market for difference (something that I have mentioned in “The boom of the subaltern”) also is concerned with the development that this topic is receiving on different levels in intellectual debates. It is related, for example, to the reformulation of the role of intellectuals after the end of the Cold War in the framework of Marxist and post-Marxist notions. More broadly speaking, it is linked to the weakening of U.S. hegemony, the financial collapse and commercial crisis that have been present since the beginning of the new millennium. All these factors have animated a profound transformation of collective subjectivity, have destabilized the positions of power in different registers, and even have had an impact on the rhetoric used in the power discourses at a global level. However, since global integration is a reality—and with it the creation of new forms of domination along with new forms of social conflict and political resistance—, multicultural issues seem destined to disappear from the political and social radar. To summarize some points

<sup>20</sup> According to Anna Marie Smith (1998), in this regard, “[t]he evaluation of multiculturalism requires a differentiated approach to difference.” (186).

presented on these pages, it might help to demarcate some guidelines on the concept of difference that has been guiding the presented reflections in this article.

First of all, from a conceptual standpoint, it is important to draw the distinction between *difference* and diversity. I will only mention three levels of differentiation here. According to Bhabha, who, as indicated above, has long been calling attention to these two concepts, multiculturalism is an attempt to both, respond as well as to control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference, while managing the existing consensus on the issue of cultural diversity. For him, the notion of diversity is basically descriptive and carries no philosophical significance. The concept of cultural diversity refers merely to the existence of the systems of values, behaviors, etc. that exist separately in a certain culture. The notion of diversity can only confirm and record the existence of this multiplicity of cultural meanings like in traditional and ethnographic reports. Cultural *difference* facilitates an attitude of questioning culture, particularly the mechanisms that attribute a specific meaning and various degrees of cultural and ideological authority of symbolic commodities.

Secondly, from a political perspective, it is crucial to distinguish between *difference* and inequality. As has been indicated so far, the first notion points to the idea of disparity and proliferation and evokes the concepts of diversity and pluralism. Diversity is thus a feature that can be perceived, recognized, tolerated, and even celebrated. Inequality, in turn, points to the idea of social injustice and the need for structural changes that respond to the demands of all sectors of society.

Thirdly and finally, from an ideological perspective, the reformulation of the aforementioned antagonisms of differences, in turn requires a more careful elaboration. As Ernesto Laclau records in several of his works: while antagonism is a notion that implies recognition of opposing and even irreconcilable views, its conceptualization such as *difference* eradicates the political potential of social dynamics, suggesting the idea of a consensual coexistence between actors of competing interests or at least contenders, canceling any possibility of a more productive social struggle, in which such positions would be discussed, addressed, or negotiated; that means, blocking the possibility of vindictive and political practices of a transforming potential.<sup>21</sup>

Multiculturalism therefore relinquishes us to one of the defining limits of social interactions. Therefore, it is as impossible to demarcate the cultural and political repercussions only on a theoretical level, without grounding the debate in regard to the real conflicts to those which so difficultly could be applied and to the historical developments that allow us to rescue the materiality of intercultural conflicts and define the horizons of expectations of both the minority sectors as well as the dominant culture in a certain society. In any case, multiculturalism, like few other topics today, can be considered as a thermometer to measure social temperatures of the global system, and

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<sup>21</sup> This can be noted from his first book, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory to On Populist Reason*, in which the issue of the development of antagonisms as differences consistently appears to be discussed often in regard to the topic of populism and the construction of hegemony.

tensions on a national and regional level, and to evaluate this “reduced life of late liberalism” (Bhabha).

### **Addenda: Multiculturalism in Latin America? Multiculturalismo en América Latina?**

In Latin America, the problems related to multiculturalism are very different from a social, political and cultural standpoint, likely because the question of economic inequality has never been absent from the political horizon. The recognition of coloniality, as defined by the aforementioned sociologist Aníbal Quijano—in this structure of power that has its origins in the colonial period—perpetuates itself in modern times, and makes it impossible to omit the debates on national factors of race and ethnicity, class struggle, and gender discrimination, which are the basic levels on which social injustice has materialized over the centuries. Additionally, the multicultural debate has necessarily, since the formation of the nation-state, included problems of multilingualism, religious diversity, and multiplicity of present civilizational levels even though they are repressed and subalternated in the modernizing and homogenizing project of Creole elites.

The debate on *mestizaje* provided, particularly after the Mexican Revolution and during the development of populist regimes in the early twentieth century, an ideological and political framework for the discussion of the problems that characterize multiracial societies. In the center of this debate there was the desire of the elite to unify the scattered and heterogeneous populations with the help of categories of knowledge and well-defined Eurocentric models of political and social organization. Already from the point of populism in the interwar period, and then throughout the 20th century—rather than focusing on issues of multiculturalism—political and cultural debates mainly focused on problems of intercultural relations, particularly those related to the domination of indigenous cultures or African Americans who never were productively integrated into the national project. Today, despite the progress being made both socially and politically, the problem is not how to articulate the difference within the institutions of state power, but how to claim alternative epistemologies that have the right to exist in their own terms beyond the aura of universalism that characterized the models of knowledge and European domination since the “discovery of the New World”.

*Mestizaje*, which is theorized as a saving formula at a continental level, resulted in a fraudulent and hypocritical ideology which advocated what Antonio Cornejo Polar would call an “impossible harmony” between people torn by centuries of strife stemming from the colonial system of domination.<sup>22</sup> *Mestizaje* was based on an inclusive proposition that excluded—without consideration or acknowledgment—, centuries of

<sup>22</sup> See also Quijano, Cornejo Polar, Rama, García Canclini, and my book *Crítica impura* (2004), in which these topics are discussed.

genocide, marginalization, and social injustice ignoring the disjointed and broken nature of Latin American societies, particularly the nations of a rich indigenous population, such as in the case of the Andean region and Central America. The notions of *colonialism*, *non-dialectical heterogeneity*, *transculturation*, and much later *hybridity*, as well as *peripheral modernity*, emerged as critical tools for the more liberal *national culture*, which was too narrow and exclusive as to contain a multifaceted nature. A nature, troubled and nomadic in Latin American societies, crossed from the beginning by the problems and tensions imposed upon them by imperial domination and perpetuated by liberalism. The challenges that Latin America is facing today are too deep to be translated only into cultural terms. More than ever, one of the most important challenges is the development of regional agendas that could counter globalization or at least establish a fair dialogue on a national level, but also in the transnational arena in defense of the Latin American historical and cultural specificity, without falling into the trap of provincial and fundamentalist thinking. Defined as *interculturalism* (relationship between cultures with equal rights for existence, social, political, and economic development and integration), the first task of the debate on multiculturalism is the recognition of inequality and implementation of policies which are necessary to eliminate it. The consideration and legislation of *diversity*, or even the development of cultural *difference* only makes sense if the urgencies of inequity are recognized and addressed at all levels.

*Translation from Spanish by Stefanie Gabriel and Alexia Schemien*

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