Habermas’s Communicative Rationality and Cultural Dialogue: The Case of Babel.

By:

Pr. Hamid Masfour

Faculty of arts, Sultan Moulay Sliman University, Beni-Mellal.

Abstract:

The argument of this paper focuses on the vital role of cultural theory in understanding and exploring the complexity of the elements that cultural dialogue underlies. Through the theoretical insights of the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, this paper aims to exploit a lifelong intellectual work in dissecting some aspects and formulating some of the controlling principles that can potentially give rise to cultural dialogue. Proceeding from theoretical preliminaries on cultural dialogue and Habermas’s communicative rationality as a salient philosophical contribution to cultural theory, the following paper studies Babel as a cinematic case to put to test Habermas’s conception of dialogue. By the conclusion, ample room is left to critically reflect on the strengths and limitations of communicative rationality and to assess its scope of enhancing cultural dialogue.

Key words: Cultural dialogue; communicative rationality; universal pragmatics; discourse ethics; difference.
I-Introduction:

The argument of this paper focuses on the vital role of cultural theory in understanding and exploring the complexity of the elements that cultural dialogue underlies. Through the theoretical insights of the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, this paper aims to exploit a lifelong intellectual work in dissecting some aspects and formulating some of the controlling principles that can potentially give rise to cultural dialogue. Proceeding from theoretical preliminaries on cultural dialogue and Habermas’s communicative rationality as a salient philosophical contribution to cultural theory, the following paper studies Babel as a cinematic case to put to test Habermas’s conception of dialogue. By the conclusion, ample room is left to critically reflect on the strengths and limitations of communicative rationality and to assess its scope of enhancing cultural dialogue.

II-Cultural dialogue: A tentative definition

Bilateral or multilateral, dialogue can be conceived as a method of mutual understanding and a process of exchange and expansion of the participants’ views. While debate is negotiation based on exchange of interests, dialogue can be described as that far-reaching process of accepting the other. Hence, cultural dialogue goes beyond mere social and political issues to embrace dialogue between the religious and the scientific mind and bring about a rapprochement between their conflicting worldviews. These latter function to make sense of the world in peculiar ways in order to enable psychological reinforcement systematise people’s perceptions amid a given community and elucidate adaptation. With such awareness of the importance of each participant’s worldview in constructing subjectivity, even the scientist and the cleric can positively converse. However, since culture is bound up with its community, difference should be acknowledged and accepted on the basis of a belief in coexistence and diversity. In this regard, cultural dialogue has been caught amid an
epistemological deadlock that ensues from relentless polemics between homogenising universalism and postmodernist discourse of cultural relativism.

III-The implications of Habermas’s “communicative rationality” and cultural dialogue:

III-1-Communicative rationality as a counterdiscourse promoting dialogue and consensus

A-Definition:

According to Habermas, communicative rationality refers to our permanent use of argumentative speech and dialogue in order to achieve consensus, ward off differences and make communities.\(^1\) This is rooted in language as a primary mechanism of social integration based on argumentative communicative rationality that achieves agreement and non-violent intersubjective understanding. In the framework of his theory, Habermas’s main preoccupation has been to sustain a democratic critique to capitalism since he views it as a utilitarian and a monological system that suppresses communication and dialogue to suppress social subjects and reduce them to mere pleasure seeking consumers. In this context, Habermas argues that between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries the middle class succeeded in articulating their public opinion thanks to communication and dialogue in French salons, in German literary societies and in English coffee houses as key institutions of a bourgeois “public sphere”.\(^2\) However, Habermas explains, with the advent of the modern social welfare state, the state penetrated society and overwhelmed the public sphere as a space of public opinion, which resulted in the “refudalisation” of the public life. This dislocation of the public sphere, according to Habermas, is enacted by organised capitalism that monopolises opinion through media and propaganda institutions. With the dominance of media, systemic colonization has replaced social coordination and social dialogue with dismantled common

\(^1\)Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society.* (Toronto: Beacon Press, 1979)

\(^2\)Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*, 175-177.
ways of life, differentiated social roles, money rewards for alienated labour and welfare state-conditioned imaginary.

**B-Agenda**

With modernity, dialogue and communication were reduced by breaking reason into differentiated zones of science, art and law, which creates separate institutional entities and lead to cognitive specialisation and normative knowledge that destabilises the unity of consciousness. This fragmented reason contributes to a culture that lacks consensus and dialogue and engenders instrumental forms of reason motivated by commodification and self-interests that are disconnected from collective purposes. Habermas concludes that the media and the state have gained ground to neutralise oral language as a capital means of communication, dialogue and cooperation that enables “social action.”

The fragmentation of everyday social consciousness, according to Habermas, contributed to reification of reason and of the thinking subject; and, in the long run, to alienation effects of modernity that led to sociopsychological predicaments such as neurosis, addictions, psychosomatic disorders, criminal and antisocial actions, protest groups and religious cults. However, unlike Adorno and Horckheimer, Habermas is optimistic that argumentative rationality can resist utilitarian instrumental rationalisation and reification as it has enough power to downplay capitalist control and upkeep the privileges of social communication. In this context, reason stands as an immanent offspring of sociality of which language is a strong social part and parcel of fostering rational dialogue and exchange on the basis of communicative rationality. This latter enables communities to communicate knowledge and preserve its regeneration thanks to consensus and mutual understanding. Moreover, it is communicative rationality that provides the vital processes for people to make viable identities as well as to participate in framing networks of solidarity that resist instrumental reason-driven media.
III-2 The structure of communicative rationality (universal pragmatics: ideal speech situation and discourse ethics)

Having recourse to rational enlightenment, Habermas abides by the ideal of reason to defend the “lifeworld” as a matrix of producing social culture on the basis of redefining rationality as thinking which is open to criticism, liable to evolve continually and ground itself on arguments. Accordingly, Habermas shifts the emphasis to a concept of rationality that surpasses the individual and embraces social intersubjectivity as a generator of dialogue, consensus and understanding. Aiming at the heart of post modernism, Habermas claims that the presuppositions of argumentation and communication are universal. To carry his critique further, he introduces the concept of “universal pragmatics” which on the one hand constitutes a basis for mutual social interaction and understanding and, on the other hand, proves that rationality overweighs the postmodern paradigm of difference, indeterminacy of meaning and precarious communication.

A- Ideal presuppositions of communication and ideal speech situation

Habermas postulates that universally communication requires a non-egoistic perspective and a decentered understanding of the world. This principle enables communicative rationality to take place and provide every day communication and dialogue with a validity basis, provided that ideal presuppositions of communication fulfill the following:

1. Only the force of the better argument is to be persuasive
2. Nothing can motivate communication and dialogue participants other than a tendency for the better argument.

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3. The validity claims which are universal are not free from critical evaluation within argumentative constraints.

4. Everyone capable of speech and action is entitled to participate, and everyone is equally entitled to introduce new topics or express attitudes needs or desires.

For Habermas every form of communication that satisfies these presuppositions is called discourse. Discourses operate within institutionalized norms of argumentation that have specific sophisticated and rigorous premises that can fulfill the requirements of universal norms. In this regard, Habermas defends the thesis that specialized discourses (law, science and morality) cannot exist if knowledge does not abide by discourse ethics or gives in to relativism.

**B-Discourse ethics:**

“Discourse ethics” or argumentation ethics,\(^5\) refers to a type of argument that aims to set up normative or ethical truths through close examination of communication conformation to the presuppositions of discourse. Thanks to discourse ethics, it becomes binding that the validity of a moral norm depends on intersubjective communication and dialogue strengthened by argumentation and the above mentioned presuppositions of ideal communication. Discourse ethics presupposes that norms exist only because they can meet the conditions of universalisation. This latter grounded in the presuppositions of communication, can express a universal necessary condition to sustain impartial judgement in and consider others’ point of view in a large framework of exchange based on reason.

\(^5\) Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," 86.
IV - Communicative rationality as cultural dialogue in Babel

IV-1 - The manifest level

Babel has been attractive to the five continents because of its overt claimed humanistic and universal scope of approach. As it is, it attempts in many ways to give a microcosmic portrait through three continents in an attempt to fathom a universal meaning of life and human predicament regardless of race, class or other aspects of distinctive belonging. In four interlocking stories, through interlocking languages (Moroccan Arabic, English, Japanese and Mexican), within cultural diversity and interrelated fates in a single tragic universal story, the film ends in open questions about the essence of difference between cultures from extreme east to the west. In deconstructed stories, fragmentary but interrelated, Babel is redolent with tension. A stray bullet, as an unintended absurd act, engenders a tragical series of events. Yet, this very bullet is what brings the American couple closer after their relationship has been strained, makes the old Moroccan woman recite the Coran to the wounded American woman, and makes the Japanese father embrace his naked daughter and break the stiffening distance after her mother’s suicide.

Manifestly, unlike other films, Babel attempts to undergo cultural dialogue with different cultures across the world. Concerning Moroccan culture, the camera reeling Babel shows no disdain for the Moroccan mind or tradition, be it modern or traditional. As an act of humanistic solidarity an old Moroccan woman is shown offering the best she can to help the wounded tourist, and a young boy and his father are praying and reciting the Coran to Susan. Besides, the Moroccan interpreter declines to take the money reward offered by Richard for his help. In such a move the film seeks to bring cross-cultural viewers into dialogue with the cultural spirit of Morocco in order to explore humanistic and universal facets involved within this culture in a cross-cultural situation dominated by life affirming universal drives and a will-to-survival tendency. What the viewer comes up to at the first
glance is rhetoric of respect towards the other regardless of their civilisational achievement. Moreover, labelling the other as terrorist is cinematically denounced in an act of listening to the Moroccan culture that voices a critique to the hurried news report broadcast by an American T.V channel. This latter mediatic tool is alluded to as an active factor of fragmenting the American consciousness and penetrating the public sphere in an instrumental way that directs opinion and makes it antagonistic to dialogue with a different culture that is officially represented by the univocal systemic world view driven by capitalism. Furthermore, it seems that Babel criticises the validity claims of the American providence to uncover its latent meaning of dominance which is demonstrated by the film over three continents. In Morocco the intervention of the American embassy is grossly conducted to change the ambulance with a helicopter disregarding diplomatic scruples as a sort of aborted macro-cultural dialogue. In general, Babel invites the viewer to approach alterity as a field of understanding and dialogue through an obvious note calling to rethink differences as essential values to understand the self and the other, and to believe that humanity is one and that caring and sharing, love and universal affinity are our last salvation.

In a sense, on the manifest level of Babel, the film seems to enact some principles of Habermas’s communicative rationality as it implicitly holds that all the involved cultures are matrices of subjects who are competent to produce speech and participate in discourse, as well as it implicitly alludes to the fact that cultures are voices that should not be restricted in questioning hierarchical claims or in making new claims, attitudes and desires.

**IV-2-The latent level**

On the latent level of the movie, every twist and turn of the plot is redolent with cases of failing cultural dialogue. On this level, through essentialist stereotypes, the film univocal and monological attitude articulates rhetoric of blame to responsibilise the Moroccan society and the whole culture that determines the actions and deeds of its inhabitants. Moreover, it
views pessimistically the conflictual condition of mankind and the superiority – inferiority dichotomy as the only inevitable universal human doom.

The camera reeling Babel captures Moroccan mountains and their stern callous and hostile barren scenery to scan as many signs as possible of ascetic life details. This is to foreground contrasts with the American space and portray the village of Tazarine to convey its dislocation from modern life and civil society. In such primitive surroundings, there is no least inkling of sanitary institution and the only hope for the wounded American woman lies in the village veterinarian. In the American consciousness, the stark surroundings in Morocco inhibit them from the start to expect convergences with their infrastructural norms of modernity that they deem universal, central and representative of normality. Consequently, the cinematic selection of the spatial context in Babel prepares the tourists for cultural misunderstandings that eclipse any such thing as universal pragmatics to take place since the American participants insert their Moroccan interlocutors within a hierarchical worldview that considers them uncivilised. With other symptoms of discourse, the harsh environment consolidates and coheres with other elements for the Americans to assume uncritically that the predispositions of nihilistic terrorist drives are inborn in the “primitive” Moroccans.

Likewise, in one of the opening scenes, Youssef takes leisurely gazing at his sister’s naked body while she is bathing. This act of voyeurism makes the girl pleased and aware of her body’s appeal to her elder brother. Moreover, the father is too lenient as he discovers his daughter plainly exhibiting her naked body to his son. Primitiveness, poverty, intellectual void, ill-breeding and lust coupled with easy access to arms are all cinematically combined as if to support the view that these flaws are exclusively Moroccan to breed social decay and moral deterioration and, axiomatically, feed violence and terrorism. This latter statement, skilfully kept at the bottom recesses of the film’s argument, falls in perfect harmony with the usual
trophe used in the political stand of the American administration that Arabs are terrorist by force of determinism.

Although both sides are in Habermas’s terms rational human beings, their language difference is ironically capable of arousing strange and deep suspicion of each other’s counterpart. This is well exemplified in the American tourist who cannot help looking suspiciously at the old woman who holds her wounded arm to stop her bleeding. Inspecting her face meticulously, Susan betrays excessive feelings of fear and unrest as if difference, of which language is a salient feature, is reasonably enough to make of the old “indigenous” woman another world teeming with evil and destruction. This is further embodied in Babel when Richard, Susan’s husband, shows an alert face while he is waiting for the ambulance, suspecting all the strange faces and landscapes around him. He neither understands the language of these immediate surroundings, nor does he have a free will to downplay the impact of received stereotypes and to accommodate rationally and sensibly to a new human situation that manifests its own rules and codes. Ironically, the villagers after all prove far less hostile than their village geography, and the only rules they impose in their ascetic environment is the rule of sympathy and disinterested generosity as a dialogue of deeds. All the humble inhabitants rush to help the wretched Americans and the Moroccan interpreter and the tourist guide decline to take the money offered by Richard for their help. However, even if Richard shares large language communication with the guide and the interpreter, he cannot grasp their unselfish acts at their depth as part of a large distinctive cultural repertoire. What Richards fails to see is that Anwar’s assistance is a symptom of a fundamental Moroccan custom which is hospitality, even with foreigners and wayfaring stranger.

Furthermore, of all the Moroccan characters in Babel, Anwar the interpreter is depicted as the only agent capable of stimulating dialogue. Wearing, to some extent, a global type of dress, His body and facial gestures coupled with his ability to speak fluent English inspire
Richard to talk to him respectfully. In fact he is the only one to enjoy American trust. What is significant and ironic in this context is that the American confidence and readiness for dialogue is boosted through signs of similarity which superficially converge with the American norm of “the universal”. Inklings of cultural dialogue are possible only because Anwar imbibes some western values and norms he has acquired from the western culture. In other words, Anwar’s “civilised” character, which marks him from the indigenous villagers, is stereotypingly and shrewdly demonstrated as noble only in as much as it can replicate and reflect the American standards. Otherwise, if it reflects its own culture and norms it would be savage and untrustworthy in the eyes of the American tourist.

Nevertheless, the link between the title and the film story will not be understood until the end of the film. The title Babel draws on an oriental Biblical and Coranic parable that narrates how mankind consented to erect a high tower that would get them up to God. Therefore, God punished them for their blasphemous plans, blurred their languages and made them different so as to hinder their communication and baffle their ambitions. This may be the main theme of the film: in this globe people don’t differ, because there is only one rational creature which is man. But language differs from a place to another, causes deep disparities and alienation and obliges man to consider a different interlocutor speaking a different language a source of evil to heed.

However, is this not in a sense a relaxed way of defending the conflictual status quo of culture and the superiority –inferiority stereotype on the grounds that we are doomed to unsolvable conflicting misunderstanding due to language difference? For sure, Babel’s plot could have departed from more positive “universals” and human bonds, apart from language similarity, to solve parts of the human misunderstanding predicament.
V-Conclusion

In theory and in practice, Habermas’s communicative rationality provides an idealistic model for social action and dialogue. Yet, as it relies on the premise of universal pragmatics and consensus, it eclipses the cultural nuances that interfere within intercultural dialogue. As Habermas fails to take into account the element of difference, he offers a totalising theory that presupposes universality to suppress particularities. Moreover, advocating the universal is a basic feeding resource for hegemony since Habermas’s universal ethics reinforces an imaginary consensus and aborts polyphony which is inherent in the multiplicity of voices within one culture and across cultures. Namely, since meaning is produced differently by different groups and cultures as it is constrained by codes that change according to spaces, moments of history and interpretive communities, it becomes precarious to claim a vantage point adequate to appropriate the universal. Rather, communicative rationality implicitly and selectively imposes a position to exclude other positions in the name of an ontologically real universality. For this reason, communicative rationality is to be revised in order to consider difference, explore it and exploit it for the sake of including multiplicity within dialogic principles that promote coexistence of different “essences”, rather than essential compatibility.

Furthermore, the rational in Habermas flatly negates the affective factor involved in signifying human experience of which dialogue is a case. Beside reason, culture is produced through the intervention of emotions and imagination of which myths and stereotypes are strong instances. Consequently, it can be said that communicative rationality seems to privilege dialogue between intelligentsia rather than ordinary agents who are caught within uncontrollable multilayered cultural processes.

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6 For further details, See David Ingram, “Foucault and Habermas on the Subject of Reason,” 215-61.
Practically speaking, in Babel the cultural dialogue breakdown is largely due to a self-centered view of the American couple that fails to conceive that a cross-cultural encounter involves a negotiation between different narratives and spheres of norms that signify the self, the other and worldly experience in different ways that are not anchored in any universal pragmatics.

Works Cited:


