

## **AN UNUSUAL APPROACH TO CONFLICT STUDIES: RELATIVISM, CULTURAL COGNITION AND METAPHOR**

A teaching proposal for the UNESCO Chair of Bancaja International Center  
for Peace and Development 2004/2005

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In recent years, there have been successful efforts to reconnect the humanities to practice, to make it again a relevant and fruitful contributor to acute public concerns. Apart from areas such as Bio-, Medicine- and Business-Ethics, or Human Rights, it seems to be particularly worthwhile and highly topical to apply new approaches in the human sciences to Intercultural Communication and Conflict Studies. The intricate nature of today's cultural conflicts, deep disagreements and divergences, and their complex causes, demand for new perspectives.

In the course of a five-year research and teaching project, *Relativism, Cultural Cognition and Metaphor* "RCM 2003-2007" a group of associated social scientists and philosophers aim to encourage interdisciplinary approaches to conflict studies by designing exemplary analysis of intercultural conflicts on a micro level; with (1) the rigor and precision of analytic philosophy, (2) the reconciling effects of a robust relativistic (second-order) policy and (3) the integration of relevant contributions from up-to-date- (first-order) empirical research: constructive processes of perception and memory, scheme-guided transformations in communication, and cultural background phenomena as dispositions to violent conflict escalation.

### **I. LECTURE PROPOSAL**

The proposed lecture for the Bancaja International Center for Peace and Development 2004/2005 shall present this model of interdisciplinary cultural conflict's analysis. I have designed a three-series course (with 5 units each), aiming to fit into the curriculum of the MA Program in Peace and Development Studies of UJI.

As to the form, I offer either a lecture or a seminar<sup>1</sup> with contributions by the students who will prepare small presentations for each session, and discussion. Their particular interests and the focus of their respective field, as well as our own research and field projects shall enrich the discussions.

#### **(1) Themes**

Generally, the themes of the course will be drawn from the project as described below. The course aims to be balanced in second-order theory and first-order exemplary case studies, although the focus shall be prone to concrete examples whenever possible and appropriate:

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<sup>1</sup> I prefer the seminar, however, a lecture proper would be fine too.

### (I) First Series: The Construction of facts and artefacts in intercultural conflicts

- Introduction: relativism and interpretation;
- A robust relativism and Conflict Studies
- Presentation of the film “Rashomon”; discussion of the constructionism in “Rashomon” (Gergen 1986, Heider 1988);
- Constructive processes I: N. Goodman and P. Strasser;
- Constructive processes II: P. Feyerabend and T. Kuhn;

### (II) Second Series: Background Phenomena

- Dependence relations I, *biological* (human ethology, inherited schemas, fixed action patterns: E. Fromm, K. Lorenz, I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt);
- Dependence relations II, *psychological* (Gestalt Theory, S. Freud, C.F. Bartlett’s scheme-theory, Cognitive Psychology);
- Dependence relations III, *linguistic* (E. Sapir, B. Whorf, M. Bowerman);
- Dependence relations IV, *cultural* (case study: Scheme-guided perception among Indian tribes in Nicaragua, “cognitive communities” and cultural identity).
- Incommensurability: semantic and conceptual (J. Margolis)

### (III) Third Series: Application and Case Studies

- Emotional Bias (case study: corpus analysis, quantitative bias in normative attitude in the British print media);
- Paradigms and metaphor: R. Rorty’s concept of a “creative philosophy” (incl. M. Black, D. Davidson, T.S. Kuhn);
- Conflict studies and the arts (case study: Local identities and mediation between cultures – A sculpture park in Nicaragua);
- Peace education (case study: “Mirno More”, the post Yugoslav “Peace-Fleet” in the Mediterranean).
- Changing perspectives (case study: “Anamorphosis” A vexing sculpture for Jerusalem);
- Conclusion

## **(4) Goals**

The primary goal of the course is to introduce the students to the manifold aspects of cultural cognition and other background phenomena, and their import on intercultural conflicts. We shall explore the various constructive processes and dependence relations from an epistemic, psychological, biological, linguistic and cultural-philosophical perspective in order to enhanced the students’ sensitivity to those subtle and often unconsciously effective dispositions crucial to understanding the nature of intercultural conflicts and to comprehend apparently irrational dynamics of their violent escalation. The case studies discussed in the third series represent paradigmatic attempts to apply the theoretical insights to local intercultural conflict settings.

The design of the course aims to develop and enhance higher order thinking abilities. It shall improve skills to take on multiple perspectives and invite further investigation and analysis of the relations between cultural cognition, relativism and conflict studies.

## **(2) Course requirements**

The course shall address intermediate and advanced students enrolled in the MA program. Acquaintance with the more specific subjects and literature will not be required, although I expect the students to be at a general level familiar with the discussed traditions (such as cultural relativism, sociology of knowledge or cognitive psychology). Further requirements:

- regular attendance
- seminar paper (incl. presentation as described below)
- final exam
- complementary mini-presentations in class (e.g. video clips / newspaper articles / brief reflection papers) are encouraged but not a prerequisite for completion of the course.

The seminar paper shall include power-point presentations produced in small groups of 3-5, in which students are asked to apply ideas of a selected theme (discussed in the course) to case studies of their choice. For this presentation, students work in groups, with each group being assigned a different general theoretical perspective. *Within* each group, students take on different roles based on the various conflict parties' perspectives. Each group will present their 25-30 minute power-point presentations analysing the case from their assigned theoretical perspectives. The presentations shall be presented during the third module (class no. 11-15).<sup>2</sup>

### **(3) Reading List**

A reading list will be compiled from items in the bibliography (cf. end of the proposal), depending on the level and background of the students.

## **II. RESEARCH CONTEXT (RCM 2003-2007)**

### ***(1) Method***

RCM is designed interdisciplinary, including anthropological, socio-psychological, and psycholinguistic aspects, yet under the heading and coordination of a broader philosophical framework. Why should philosophy in general, and a moderate relativistic policy in particular, head such interdisciplinary research? We propose three good reasons:

The first reason turns an often deplored deficit of modern philosophy, namely the decry of “professionalisation”, into a decisive advantage: Having abandoned the traditional ground of the discipline, the grand themes and ambitious projects of uncovering elusive metaphysical truths almost a century ago, analytic philosophy has been chiefly concerned with self-consciously analysing the structure of ordinary discourse, concepts and propositions. In the course of the last 50 years, it has thus attained an impressive degree of analytical precision and rigor in the design and assessment of arguments, a quality that the often polarized discussions over intercultural conflicts may take great advantage of.

Second: Within the analytic tradition, a relativistic framework in particular will be apt to mediate naturally between conflicting ideas, claims or whole conviction-systems,

- (1) because the relativist is used to manoeuvre in an adroit and elastic way from one such system to another;
- (2) since a relativistic methodology will in principle allow for the possibility that in cultural contexts there are more than one possible and equally justifiable claims on one and the same issue;
- (3) since this gives room for *prima facie* unbiased assessment of conflicting alternatives; which in turn
- (4) entails being usually well accepted by the conflicting parties involved, for its intrinsically impartial stance; and
- (5) a relativistic framework will be particularly effective in dealing with *intercultural* conflict because on this level there is, up to date, no superior, generally accepted and binding authority (political, ethical, legal or religious) with efficient sanctions to settle a dispute or mediate between the involved parties.

The third reason for why it pays to vote for a second-order relativistic framework in coordinating interdisciplinary conflict studies is linked to the concept of metaphor, which, according to a family of views among relativists, contains a highly creative potential for problem solving strategies. Roughly speaking, the creative element comes in with an implied theory of language and the importance their proponents assign to the function of a metaphoric

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<sup>2</sup> If we have groups of four people working together and time reserved for 5 presentations, the total number of students in this seminar should not exceed 20-25.

invention: the ability to supersede language boundaries, and in doing so, superseding the horizon of so-far-possible conceptualisation and understanding. From this perspective, cultural development and intercultural interaction are conceived as an essentially non-linear, non-teleological process in open systems, evolving due to the creative potential *qua* metaphorical invention.<sup>3</sup>

## (2) *Conceptual frame*

Under the heading and coordination of a robust relativistic policy, the research encompasses a variety of themes: cultural relativity, relativism and constructive realism, incommensurability and problems related to the concept of interpretation and understanding. Each of those items are treated first on the second-order level, and then by discussing examples from current (empirical) first-order research, however always confined to their relevance to conflict analysis in intercultural contexts.

### (A) Cultural relativity and relativism

First we prepare the conceptual ground for the planned research project. To start with, we reconstruct the relation between “cultural relativity” and a “robust relativism”. As a first-order social fact (and uncontested pedestrian phenomenon), cultural relativity entails neither relativism nor constructivism on the second-order level, but it may be explained by them. We argue along the lines of J. Margolis that there are formally consistent and substantially attractive forms of relativism and constructive realism that can account for cultural relativity more adequately than their objectivistic rivals. The reason, in short, is that the entities in question, human actions, decisions, expectations, judgements and the like (broadly speaking the realm of the cultural world), display intentional properties so that claims incorporating such properties are contingently dependent on the kind of evidence that a person brings to bear on, and thus, that such claims given in a conflict situation, may be justified only relative to the context of a given socio-cultural practice.<sup>4</sup>

### (B) Interpretation and constructive realism

If the cultural entities involved in a conflict situation are intentional phenomena which are intrinsically interpretable, we have to address the decisive question of what interpretation is. The debate has, of course, a long and complicated history in itself, and the project shall not aim to reconstruct it. We argue, in short, that interpretation is not merely description under conditions of a certain kind of difficulty, but that it lies in the nature of cultural entities themselves, that there is no uniquely correct interpretation. In describing cultural entities, objectivists believe, they see a discursive structure which would allow them to “plug in” standard logic, and we argue that there are good reasons to believe they are wrong<sup>5</sup>. However, if intentional properties do require a non-standard logic, it may turn out that there *is* no uniquely

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<sup>3</sup> -- a tradition spanning from Nietzsche to I. A. Richards, M. Black, R. Rorty.

<sup>4</sup> We take the relativistic methodology not as an all-encompassing doctrine but as a general framework of second order considerations in the sense of a policy, leaving room for the possibility of interpretations under formal conditions other than strict bivalence. The minimum conditions for such a relativistic policy in cultural contexts have been formulated by J. Margolis on various occasions and can be summed up by the following items:

- (1) Relativism is at its best in discourse about cultural phenomena.
- (2) Cultural phenomena exhibit intentionality.
- (3) Intentional phenomena are intrinsically interpretable.
- (4) Interpretations tend to require a relativistic logic. (cf. eg. Margolis (1989) or (1999)).

<sup>5</sup> This relates to the fundamental thesis of N. Chomsky, namely that grammar is not effected by semantics. In opposition to this, each field of inquiry needs its own appropriate discourse: because (following Aristotle) the *structure of an argument is a structure that belongs to the discourse of someone who argues well*. That is, one has to know the discourse, in order to see what its structure is. One must not expect more rigor than the discipline allows (cf. e.g. Margolis (1995)).

correct description. We can – and should – speak of the independent world, but only in the sense of a constructive realism. There may be many ways of characterizing the world, and all of them depend on the essential fact that one cannot describe the world without implicating the conditions of knowing the world.<sup>6</sup>

By analysing concrete micro-conflict situations, we discuss the question of whether under certain conditions, the data at hand may be construed in decisively different ways, even though the parties involved in the conflict are presumably looking at the same part of the world. If this is the case, that is, if the data already seem to be infected with conceptual schemes and other “background phenomena”, then, looking at the cultural world in general, it is entirely possible that one could construe the data very differently (cultural relativity admitted), so that there are no neutral data at disposal, but rather that each time the data posited are characterised as different. What’s so interesting about this side of a longstanding issue – and ongoing debate – (cultural relativism), is the fact that many philosophers have closely studied in an abstract way the constitutive principles involved in perception and cognition (e.g. N. Goodman (1978), Feyerabend (1983 and 1987), or Strasser (1980)), but have rarely applied it to an actual analysis of ideology driven discourses. We see a great explicative potential here.

### (C) Incommensurability and Understanding

Besides cases of cultural relativity and relativism, we consider specimen of semantic incommensurability and incommensurabilism. In this context, again, a long-lived dispute in the analytic tradition (lead by D. Davidson (1973), (1984) and H. Putnam) has been carried out on a very technical level, hardly taking into consideration concrete examples (with some exceptions). In the general spirit of J. Margolis’ analysis<sup>7</sup>, we analyze model cases of conceptual incommensurability and their bearing on potential intercultural conflicts. Semantic incommensurabilities, a philosophically barely disputed first-order phenomenon, can be reconciled by the second-order theory of incommensurabilism (T. Kuhn and P. Feyerabend). We aim to demonstrate that the design of such a second-order theory will have benign consequences for the treatment of intercultural conflicts.<sup>8</sup>

A discussion of conflicts between social groups (inter- and even intra-culturally) involving conceptual incommensurability is closely linked to the concept of understanding. In recent proposals from advocates of discourse-relativism (of post-modern variants in particular, notably in R. Rorty), it has been argued that one may choose one’s framework or “vocabulary” ultimately depending on one owns interests (Rorty 1989). Against this, we hold that understanding any people is understanding in a dense way how they live. So if one doesn’t have that familiarity, then, in a way, it hardly matters what conceptual choice one makes. We therefore need to include the analysis of other cultural “background phenomena” related to Wittgenstein’s concept of a *Lebensform*, A. MacIntire’s (1989) “key-metaphors” or “canonical texts”.

## **(3) Specific focus: cultural aspects of conflict analysis**

### (A) Dominant and underrepresented aspects

From a large scale historical vantage point, Conflict Studies is a relatively new field in the social sciences. Nevertheless, innumerable proposals have been developed to the present day, approaches originating from very different disciplines – sociology, political sciences and behavioural psychology, some from biology or game theory and others. Many of those, however, tend to address political, diplomatic, economic, military and legal aspects, or the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. A. Shweder (1989)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g. Margolis (2003)

<sup>8</sup> Apart from rather obvious reconciling effects, incommensurabilism needs to be delimited from scepticism, solipsism or anarchism. Feyerabend, unexpectedly, has given himself important clues pertaining to the issue in his later work. I have tried a “tame” interpretation of Feyerabend in Kranz (2001).

strategic management of conflicts, and only recently cultural-philosophical aspects have been address. For the most part of its history as an academic enterprise, conflict studies has furthermore focused predominantly on the *international* level, rather than on the *intercultural*, stressing conflicts *over goods and their distribution* rather than *over values and norms*. For that reason, it seems to be promising to address those relatively neglected levels and to encourage contributions from underrepresented fields such as cultural anthropology, human ethology, socio-psychology or psycho-linguistics.

### (B) Background dispositions

In substance, the research and teaching project RCM focuses on the analysis of so-called “background phenomena”<sup>9</sup> and cultural cognition in particular involved in intercultural conflicts, such as: collective normative attitude (M. Scheler, E. Rosh), myths, key metaphors, (N. Goodman, A. MacIntyre), stereotypes and scheme-guided perception and memory (F. C. Bartlett, U. Neisser, R. Brewer), “cultural conceptualisations” (F. Sharifian) and others.<sup>10</sup> Heterogeneous in many respects, they all seem to be critical to what constitutes cultural identities and entire forms of life (*Lebensformen*), at the same time marking their differences. Seen that way, “background phenomena” of this sort are all likely causes – however subtle and often unconsciously effective – of intercultural conflicts, sometimes implicitly responsible for their violent escalation, e.g. by legitimating the freeing of aggressive potentials.

These background phenomena will be first analysed on an abstract level with respect to their constructive functions relevant to conflict situations: They guide perception, memory, assessment (of human actions, decisions, expectations, judgements, and the like), by selection, addition, omission, transformation and similar processes. Exemplary inquiries shall demonstrate the ubiquity of these processes, often even within one and the same “culture”.<sup>11</sup> In a second step those abstract processes will be analysed with respect to their relevance in concrete conflict situations.

### (C) Creative potentials of metaphors

Apart from conflict analysis on the level of cultural background phenomena – as potential causes of disagreement and conflict escalation – the project also looks into exemplary cases of conflict resolution which have been possible by metaphoric invention, thus mediating between hitherto incommensurable positions. Following the “creative conception of metaphor” (I. A. Richards, M. Black, R. Rorty), the idea is that a mediation process sometimes reaches a point where both parties recognize they are at a limit of the usefulness of literal ways of speaking; and they capture some *new* insight metaphorically that, they realise, goes beyond whatever may or could have been said before. In conflict resolution this may turn out to be a very effective way of – without much labour – getting *beyond* a certain point in negotiation, by metaphoric penetration of a new area, that had not been noticed before.

## **(4) Research questions**

We have developed two sets of specific research questions that are being addressed apart from the theoretical second-order considerations described above. The first set is put in the form of

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<sup>9</sup> “background dispositions”, “predispositions”, a family of concepts I discuss in my dissertation, Ch. II. “Varianten der These der Abhängigkeit” (Kranz 2001).

<sup>10</sup> This approach crosscuts the traditional division between functional and behavioural conflict analysis (J. W. Burton and O. R. Holsti), because the phenomena in question have an impact on communication mechanisms as well as on individual and collective behaviour.

<sup>11</sup> Schematically: Conflict situations (*a refugee camp looted, development-agencies acting in indigenous communities, racial suburb riots, displacement of Miskito-village by the Sandinistas*) contain intentional aspects (*human actions, decisions, expectations, judgements*) which are being interpreted differently by each party/culture (“*positions, accounts, perspectives*”); – How? Through the constructive functions (*selection, addition, omission, transformation*) of “background phenomena” (*mentality, key metaphors, stereotypes, schemes*) involved in cognitive activities (*perception, memory, categorization, assessment*).

hypotheses, the second contains more specific research tasks and questions directly derived from the first set:

### **(A) Hypotheses**

1. A robust relativistic policy is more effective in treating intercultural conflicts, theoretically and practically, than its absolutist alternatives.
2. Theoretical concepts can be applied fruitfully to practice:
  - (a) Applying the analysis of *constructive principles* to concrete conflict situations, is a promising way to better understand the nature of intercultural conflicts and their possible non-violent transformation.
  - (b) Also, models of *conceptual incommensurability* need to be tested in practice.
3. Cultural background phenomena are potential causes – however subtle and often unconsciously effective – of intercultural conflicts, because cultural background phenomena guide cognitive activities by their constructive functions.
4. Cultural Background phenomena seem to be critical to what constitutes cultural identities and entire forms of life (*Lebensformen*), at the same time marking their differences.
5. Metaphoric invention has the ability to supersede language boundaries between hitherto incommensurable systems.

### **(B) Research Questions**

- 4.1 What **theoretical advantages** does a relativistic policy have (as opposed to objectivism) in conflict analysis?(from 1)
- 4.2 What **practical advantages** (social benefit) does a relativistic policy have (as opposed to objectivism) in conflict transformation?(from 1)
- 4.3 Identify cases of intercultural conflicts which exemplify the **constructive principles** involved in cultural cognition. (from 2)
- 4.4 Identify examples where **conceptual incommensurability** is crucial to the escalation of a cultural conflict. (from 2)
- 4.5 What defines culturally distinguished “**key notions**” that have a general bearing on the potential escalation of intercultural conflicts?(from 3)
- 4.6 In how far do processes of **chain-reporting of facts** and events follow the constructive principles of **scheme-guided** “serial reproduction”? (from 3)
- 4.7 Identify exemplary cases in the history of conflict transformation in which **scheme-guided** shifts through chain-reporting of facts and events have caused the **escalation** of cultural conflicts. (from 3)
- 4.8 Recent neurobiological research suggests that the **escalation of physical violence** is caused by false estimation of a supposed appropriate (“equal”) retribution. How could this be analogously demonstrated in estimating the appropriateness of **non-physical** retribution (e.g. verbal, or indirectly through orders)? (from 3)
- 4.9 Can **Corpus Analysis** identify structural aspects of cultural cognition (and in the long run help predict critical development of cultural conflicts towards escalation)?<sup>12</sup> (from 3)

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<sup>12</sup> Computer-aided corpus analysis has proven to be a useful psycho-linguistic tool in tracking some of the above mentioned cultural “background phenomena”. Through quantitative analysis (by identifying

4.10 How do scheme-guided spontaneous **normative attitudes** affect the assessment of **out-group- practices**? (from 3/4)

4.11 How do scheme-guided categorisations affect the **criteria of boundary conditions between in- and out-group**? (from 4)

4.12 Identify exemplary cases in the history of conflict transformation in which agreement could be achieved by **metaphoric invention**, thus mediating between hitherto incommensurable positions. (from 5)

4.13 Which **metaphors** could expand the horizon of understanding cultural conflict and so bridge semantic incommensurabilities? (from 5)

4.14 What is the connection between **metaphor and paradigm** with respect to their role in problem solving strategies? (from 5)

## (5) Schedule

### 2003

In 2003 we have developed the conceptual frame of RCM: a moderate relativistic methodology and an interdisciplinary research strategy.

The empirical component for the first year consisted of a preliminary field study conducted among indigenous groups on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua in May of 2003, with the Ludwig-Boltzmann-Institute of Intercultural Cognitive Research, Vienna.

### 2004

In 2004 we shall focus on concepts of “cultural cognition” and try to connect them to concrete examples in conflict analysis. Exchange is planned with cooperation partners and guest lectures at other institutions (EUI Florence, RMG at Harvard Law School, and others).

Empirical research during 2004 will embrace a second, extended field study on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. Preparation of tests on force escalation (see below).

### 2005-2006

Between 2005 and 2006 we plan to continue research in Vienna and Graz/Austria with particular focus on patterns of conflict escalation on the symbolic level. For this purpose, we design settings to test non-physical dispositions to violent conflict escalation, and scheme-guided perception. The Joanneum Laboratory of Perception in Graz will provide its new lab facilities for interactive (video-monitored) experiments.

### 2007

Evaluation and presentation of results (planned with Rodopi, Amsterdam)

#### Idea and Planning

Dr. Johannes Kranz (Graz/Ganada, Nic.)

#### Cooperation Partners:

Doz. Dr. Gerhard Benetka (Vienna)

Prof. Dr. Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia)

Prof. Dr. Peter Strasser (Graz)

Georg Kranz (research assistant, Vienna)

#### Prospective

Prof. Dr. Heiko Haumann (Bern)

Dr. James Ost (Portsmouth)

Prof. Dr. Andre Gingrich (Vienna)

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irregular frequency distributions within the analysed samples – large quantities of text) this technique can identify subtle and otherwise invisible tendencies, e.g. normative attitude involved in a conflict situation.



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