



University, University Education and the Challenge of Interculturality as a Form of Life and Thinking*

❖ Raúl Fornet-Betancourt



© 2023 Urbaniana University Press
This work is licensed
under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
Creative Commons license

Abstract

This contribution takes as a starting point the claim that, in general, the current university institution is not only part of the hegemonic capitalist civilization of today but also represents one of the pillars that supports this civilization. This means, in the interpretation presented here, that the university has largely become a place that promotes the uniformity and homogenization that characterize the so-called “global culture”, which is understood here as a culture that reduces the plurality of the world and thus paradoxically disseminates a world that is “not much of a world”. Thus, in this contribution, the author argues in favor of an intercultural transformation of the university and the education it provides as a cultural and social necessity for the restitution of the depth and breadth of the world.

Keywords

University – Society – Civilization – Formation – Interculturality

Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (Cuba 1946) received his Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Aachen and the University of Salamanca. He obtained his “Habilitation Doctorate” at the University of Bremen. He is also an honorary professor at the University of Aachen and at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, Peru. He is currently director of the International Research Institute for Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Collaboration (ISIS) in Eichstätt and the International School of Intercultural Philosophy (www.eifi.one). He has received, among other honours, the Karl-Otto Apel International Philosophy Prize, an honorary doctorate from the University of Zulia in Venezuela and the Universitätsmedaille from the University of Eichstätt. He is the founder and editor of “Concordia”, International Journal of Philosophy. He is the founder and coordinator of the North-South philosophical dialogue programme and the dialogue programme with Cuba. He is also the initiator and organiser of the International Congresses of Intercultural Philosophy and a member of the Société Européenne de Culture. His works have been translated into Russian, Polish, Italian, Portuguese, French and English. There are more than 150 books, academic papers and articles on his publications list.

* Translated from the original Spanish by Kathryn Baecht

Introductory remarks

If I have understood its theme correctly, this International Congress takes as its central focus of reflection and discussion the issue of the challenge represented by intercultural education today, in particular within the framework of the pontifical universities.

In line with that concern, I would like to begin by indicating that I understand the title of my paper in the sense that interculturality, just as it demands a new way of life and of thinking born of the resonance in it of the polyphony of the world, constitutes a challenge for the current university institution in general, both in terms of the ordering and classifying of knowledge and also in relation to the education that it imparts.

At the same time, this understanding of the title of my paper means that I begin with a perception of the current university in which it appears as an institution that does not respond to the requests of cognitive justice, hermeneutics, and methodology, nor to the demands of anthropological transformation, which in the vision of intercultural philosophy will be necessary for the realization of a humanity that not only recognizes its factual multiculturalism and functionally manages public spaces for the tolerant coexistence of differences – as they may be, for example, specifically, universities that, for whatever reasons, juxtapose diverse knowledges in their order of studies; but also it rebirths, qualitatively enhanced in humanity through intercultural resonance in the loving coexistence of the differences in which it is embodied.

What explanation can be given for this negative perception of the current university as a place resistant to interculturality, moreover, as a place that contradicts the hope of a humanity in intercultural coexistence? In short, and to state it with total clarity, for me the reason that explains this perception lies in the fact that the current university has made a pact with the capitalist, hegemonic civilization that today decides the course of the development of the peoples of the world and, along with this, also the direction of the education needed in the so-called global societies of this world. In the context of this explanation, I permit myself to remember that in the Introduction of the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium* Pope Francis wrote the following:

In all countries, universities constitute the main centers of scientific research for the advancement of knowledge and of society; they play a decisive role in economic social and cultural development, especially in a time like our own, marked as it is by rapid, constant and far-reaching changes in the fields of science and technology¹.

Pope Francis is totally correct with this assertion. But it is worth asking: Does this “decisive role” that universities now play in all of the countries of the contemporary world not come from the fact that they have been captured by the capitalist and hegemonic system of our civilization – a civilization that specifically has modern science and technology as one of its most decisive pillars and which claims for itself the monopoly of true access to the real and to life in general?

I think that this is the case, that this question can and must be answered in the affirmative; despite the undoubtable spaces of liberty that many professors and researchers find in universities, they are spaces that don't have sufficient influence to liberate the institution from the “fabric” of the system. For this reason, I think that one can also recognize that the difficulties that universities have with interculturality come from how institutions of education and research are, in general, at their base in the service of a world that constructs the civilization that it has captured. In other words, what obstructs the relationship between universities and interculturality, which should be an internal relationship and “innate” for the same idea and mission of the university as a “community conjured in the search of truth”², is its seat in and in its belonging to a mechanistic civilization that exploits it precisely to optimize the dynamics of its progress and consolidate its hegemony at the global level.

Obviously, in a world where there is hegemony, more specifically, where the interest in intensifying predominates, together with the help of formative institutions that disseminate a “global education” based in knowledge and skills that are supposedly universal and “necessary” for all of humanity, in such a world, I repeat, dialogue and interculturality cannot but appear as adversaries to keep at bay, that must be maintained “out of the walls”, because they endanger the civilized “order”. For this paper, it follows from the above that a critique of the established university system and the education that it imparts must commence by being a critique of the world that has domesticated the spirit of the university and that has exploited it to such an extent that it has robbed it of the original *ethos* that was alluded to previously.

My first point, then, will be a brief critical reflection about the “global” world that constructs the hegemonic civilization of today and that, in my opinion, as I have stated, is the backdrop for the current disagreement between university institutions and the vision of an alternative, intercultural world. A second point will then follow in which I will attempt to outline some considerations to meditate upon regarding the question that, for me, is critical because its answer depends on the university and interculturality being reunited and recognized as moments for the common spiritual movement for the good of humanity.

The question is the following: How can this, at times tacit, at times clearly explicit “pact” between the university and the world of hegemonic civilization be cancelled? The reflections that I share below are structured on these two points. I move now to the first reflection.

1

Today’s world of hegemonic civilization as a project adverse to intercultural humanity

It will be noted that I have alluded to the contemporary world that hinders the relationship between the university and interculturality by referring to the world of hegemonic civilization. And at this point, I speak from this world, in other words, I speak about the world in the limited sense that is imposed on it by the civilization that configures it, and I begin this point with this clarification because in order to understand the intention of the critique that follows, it’s important to keep in mind the following: this world of today is adverse to and challenges interculturality not because it is *the* world, but for quite the opposite, because it is not much of a world. Certainly, we have at our disposal many objects, apparatuses, and techniques of all kinds, including from a world with “new idols” as Pope Francis has indicated³. But all of this throws a shadow over the world as an open and welcoming space for places to live that have lives of their own.

What do I mean to say by this? I refer to a world that has been reduced to a model of civilization. So just as Ludwig Wittgenstein was able to declare that “...die Grenzen der Sprache... die Grenzen meiner Welt bedeuten” (“...the limits of language mean the limits of *my* world”)⁴ and Martin Heidegger for his part could affirm that: “Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins. In ihrer Behausung wohnt der Mensch” (“Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells”)⁵, so too could the man of today say that the limits of his civilization are the limits of his world or that his civilization is the house of his world and that he has found his dwelling inside. This is, incidentally, very far from that other conception of the world by whose light Pope Francis says in his circular *Laudato si* that the “world”, even *today* is not only a problem to solve, but also a mystery⁶ that confronts its contemporaries with the work of caring for it as “the common house”.

I speak then of a world, if you will allow the expression, that has been put into the container of our civilization. There are many names that sociologists, above all, have tried to designate as the common denominator of the complete contents of the afore-

mentioned container. To cite only a few examples, we may recall names such as “the scientific-technical world”, “the world of consumer society”, “the world of risk society”, “the world of information and knowledge-based societies”, “the liquid world”, “the virtual world”, “the secularized world”, etc. etc. They are all, without doubt, names that help us to orient ourselves in our modern societies. But they are also names that betray a willingness to homogenization and, for the same reason, the intent to reduce or conceal the diversity of human life and its worlds. And they are equally names that conceal the paradoxical situation in which we find ourselves – a situation that has grave consequences specifically for the task of the forming of an intercultural consciousness – namely, the historical situation in which the more we progress in the construction of this world tailored to the hegemonic, mechanistic and capitalist civilization, the more we reverse in the experience of the world as a living organism with a metabolism marked by the open coexistence of differences.

In this way, in our so-called world of today, we witness, in fact, a spectacular process of substitution of the world in which a construction or program of civilization is being substituted for the world, to put it in traditional terms, as an organism or creation. It is necessary to pay attention to this because in the referred to process of substitution there occurs a change that intensifies the adverse character of the construction against interculturality. I refer to the fact that with the said substitution the fundamental references or cardinal points for the orientation of the human search for meaning are changed because it entails a rupture of the bonds with transcendence, with the natural, and even with the community.

The aforementioned substitution also implies a process of detranscendentalization of the real, of denaturalization of the human being, and decommunization of coexistence. But with this rupture of the bonds of connection that previously permitted man to feel like a being with roots in “heaven and earth”, the substitution of the world that we speak of here confronts us with one of those frightening issues that, if recourse to the title of a book by Kierkegaard⁷ is permitted, are issues that when dealt with provoke “fear and trembling”. The issue is the following: In this “world of today” will we not also be witnesses to a substitution of the memory or the *human* in the being of current man? This issue, as it appears appropriate to me to observe in an intellectual context in which the impacts of post humanist ideologies are discussed, does not put on the table the problem of the challenges that would be posed by a cultural situation in supposed transit towards a transhumanist perception of man⁸, but rather searches to figure out if in that “world of today” a type of human is emerging that, designed as a necessary analog to assure the establishment and optimize the operation of this its world, is content with being something like a store window or a display case for the contents of the container in which the hegemonic civilization encloses the world.

I confess that I don’t dare to give an affirmative answer to this question. Moreover, I think that it would not be prudent or just to affirm it, since we all know that there is more world than what the hegemonic civilization presents to us. But, on the other hand, I also think that there are abundant symptoms of individual and social behaviors in the “man of today” that permit us to speak of an *anthropological mutation* in progress, simply because of the impact that the current civilization exercises on the manner in which man understands and practices the relationship with himself or, if one prefers, with his interior life.

That is why I think we would do well to take this question seriously and ponder any reservations that we have, be they religious or secular, in order to confront that possible *anthropological mutation* and try to revert it. In short, we see that for interculturality the challenge of the “world of today” also contains, perhaps at its very heart, the anthropological challenge to clarify the human quality of men and women that must inhabit the world as their “common house”. I move now to the second point.

How to cancel the pact between the university and the world of the hegemonic civilization?

From what has been stated in the previous considerations, one can deduce that the relevance of the question that we raise in this second part, comes from the idea that without cancelling the pact with the epistemic, social, pedagogical, etc. order established by hegemonic civilization – in a word – without an *exodus* from hegemony, the university will not be able to convert itself into a place of education for intercultural coexistence situated in a world that has been freed for the diversity that gives it its density of meaning and as a world and that opens, along with it, the mystery that inhabits its own reality.

But how to become aware of the necessity of this rupture without naturally encouraging to offer “recipes” for the answer to this question – which in reality is a question that one must face from the respective contexts in which each university or academic community finds itself. Firstly, I would say the following: above all, in the framework of the pontifical universities, catholic or inspired by Christianity, in which this congress is situated, we can help ourselves begin by looking with honesty at the factual membership of the universities in the hegemonic order or to take charge, to put it in the terms of Father Ignacio Ellacuria SJ, up until his assassination in 1989, University of Central America “José Simeón Cañas” rector in San Salvador, of the “bourgeois structure” to which the administration and the programs of study of the university of the contemporary world respond⁹. And pause and think about the demands for the direction of education that derive from this membership, in order to contrast them with the higher requirement to contribute, as in intuitions of Christian inspiration, to the advent of the King of God and his justice.

Secondly, I would say that by discerning the mission of the university that entails the aforementioned contrast and conflict of demands that one uncovers a call to “take a stand” that could grow awareness for a change of seat or, as the theologians would say, a change of *Sitz im Leben* of the university. In other words: to cultivate the consciousness in order to leave the system and to enter into dialogue with life, which in this case signifies a dialogue with the cultures in which humanity cares for the diversity of the human and its roads of perfection. This second moment, if I do not misunderstand, incidentally corresponds with one of the fundamental criteria that Pope Francis named in his *Veritatis Gaudium*, specifically “Against this vast new horizon now opening before us, what must be the fundamental criteria for a renewal and revival of the contribution of ecclesiastical studies to a Church of missionary outreach?”¹⁰. It is the criteria of dialogue, that in this pontifical document is also specified in the precise sense of a dialogue that promotes a “culture of encounter” or “a culture of encounter between all the authentic and vital cultures”¹¹.

Thirdly, this dialogue would indicate in a precise manner the road to embark on for the change of place of the university, for its *exodus* from the hegemonic perspective, over the base of a new cartography that would make visible the multiple places of meaning of the human that have been buried, marginalized, or discredited as anachronisms by the mechanisms of the “planetary” system. In this manner, the university, would walk with the cultures and their wisdoms, seeing in them not simple and mute “objects of research” for knowledge professionals and students with a hunger for “data”, but as companions in the pilgrimage for the diversity of the world. Fourth, and finally, I would say that with this new cartography, the university can renew itself from a pluritopic perspective and nevertheless project itself at the same time as a place that summons the *congregation* of solidarity of the knowledge of humanity.

Why? Because if something can be learned by mutually allowing oneself to be accompanied by the “authentic and vital cultures”, in the pilgrimage for the world, it is that humanity again asks in each place and with its own accent the ancient question of Job: “But where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understand-

ing?"¹². And is this not perhaps the question that an intercultural education should help to ask with increasing intensity? And is it not also the question that, as a last resort, should move us to the *exodus* of every system?

Final Observation

In conclusion, I would like to return to an issue that I presented earlier as open for debate, namely, the question of the *anthropological mutation*. I return to it, not because I want to specify my position in the debate, but rather because I think what is at issue within it serves as a fitting example to highlight the importance of intercultural dialogue in the current processes of university education. Therefore, this final observation is as follows: a university education that desires to prepare and train to confront the challenge that is already drawn on our horizon of life with what I have named the *anthropological mutation*, has need of a dialogue with the cultures of humanity, especially with the “authentic and vital” cultures.

Faced with the rise of a type of human that projects their existence, not in continuity with the memory of humanity that has oriented us until now, but rather from a rupture with it, the dialogue with traditional cultures and wisdoms that guard the memory of what is human as its most sacred possession, that dialogue represents, without a doubt, an inestimable aid in the development, for example, of a pedagogy of the resonance of the density of meaning in contexts and subjects in which those aforementioned memories barely find possibilities of echo anymore, whether it be because of processes of secularization, dynamics of rationalization of life, or the objectification of the subjective.

Nor does it seem superfluous to me to end this observation by adding that, specifically for the development of a pedagogy of intercultural resonance that helps to “wake up” the memory of humanity, migration, far from bringing a threat, as is thought of in many countries, represents a privileged field for teaching pedagogical practices of reciprocal resonance starting with daily coexistence.



Endnotes

1. FRANCIS, Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium* on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, 5; https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html; <https://archive.is/PhXWg>.
2. Cf. R. FORNET-BETANCOURT, *Elementos para una crítica intercultural de la ciencia hegemónica*, Verlag Mainz, Aachen 2017, 45-58 (in particular the chapter “Universidad e interculturalidad”).
3. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, 55 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html; <https://archive.is/Gi8l0>).
4. L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/M. 1976, 90. Italics in the original.
5. M. HEIDEGGER, *Brief über den Humanismus*, en *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 9, *Wegmarken*, Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, Frankfurt/M. 1976, 313.
6. FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* on Care for Our Common Home, 12 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html; <https://archive.is/tO7OI>).
7. Cf. S. KIERKEGAARD, *Fear and Trembling*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2006.
8. Cf. R. FORNET-BETANCOURT, *Con la autoridad de la melancolía. Los humanismos y sus melancolías*, Verlag Mainz, Aachen 2019; and the bibliography provided therein.
9. Cf. I. ELLACURÍA, *Escritos universitarios*, UCA ed., El Salvador 1999, 72: «Es... innegable la fundamental estructura “burguesa” de la universidad, más allá de su intencionalidad transformativa o revolucionaria. Se entiende aquí por estructura burguesa, una estructura exigida por un sistema capitalista y abocada a un sistema capitalista. Desde este punto de vista, no es fácil negar no sólo la estructura burguesa de la universidad, pero que ni siquiera que ese carácter burgués se presente con ciertas características de necesidad».
10. FRANCIS, *Veritatis Gaudium*, 5.
11. *Ivi.*
12. *Job* 20, 28.