Why Do We Need Active Policies for Intercultural Dialogue in Europe?

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Welcome everybody to the IDEAL Project,

It's a pleasure to have you all here, as a Co-ordinator of the project it is wonderful to see what a great audience there is: post-graduate students, Phd students and junior researchers, coming from different cities and countries. During the project there will be participants from many fields of work, such as education, social work and international mediation.

Objectives: With IDEAL project the Catholic University intends to give a European perspective to the studies of society, education, and social work and also an Intercultural perspective. All the project aims at linking together two main topics: _Europe_ and _Interculturalism_, so the first thing I hope for is that we all go out of here becoming more "European" and "intercultural". In fact, the IDEAL experience will make us able to cooperate with colleagues from different EU countries (Spain, France, Belgium, UK, Hungary, Switzerland) and to integrate one's other disciplinary perspectives.

Background: What are the main reasons that took us to make up this project? _Firstly_, the common agreement that history of Europe is a long attempt of cultural and social integration in itself; the current debate around the European citizenship and the hitches to the Union that we experience today clearly show that integration is an ambitious project, addressed more to future generations than to the present ones. _Secondly_, since 2008 the political agenda of the European governance includes the "intercultural issue" (see CoE, 2008) but the domestic curriculum is still not largely focused on this topic, whether we believe this is a specific mandate of University, and particularly of a Catholic University as we are. If we think, debate, and act little to make people from different cultures crossing one another, Interculturalism as a common achievement will never occur. _Thirdly_, the current situation in Europe is worrying, both for social, demographic and economic factors. Not only the age of "welcoming immigrants" is declined because of the stop of the job demand for foreigners, not only the average standard of living worsened (or the outlook of economic development stands stationary) and decreases the welfare level for everybody, not only the public debation about the enlargement of the European citizenship stuck (thanks to Brexit), but also the pressure of new immigrants inflows on the European boarders, from the East and from the South, still grows while the governance of the migrants crisis looks less effective day by day (Zanfrini, 2017). This is true at a global level, as well as at a national and local one. Let me only mention two empirical evidences: a) the paradoxical

solution of the externalisation of the refugees' camps in Turkey, and b) the failing "relocation" of the recognized refugees.

Statements: This is bad news for the intercultural dialogue. We are all aware that the migrants issue (I underline, "migrants" and not "migration" issue) is sensible, ambiguous, and counterproductive. It becomes pervasive and salient across mass media and social media, and has the power to remove or "dissolve" the basic idea of an open society, which originated the European project. We want to stop now, in neglecting these issues, and reflect on what is happening in Europe at a cultural level, as a consequence of all these trends. And how we could provide new materials, new ideas to stimulate the public debate around "what means to be Europeans" in times of great contradiction and uncertainty for the social cohesion itself.

On the behalf of my colleagues, I argue firmly that *Interculturalism is a priority for the future of Europe* and *we don't have any alternative approach to cope with the cultural diversity*. The more Interculturalism rises up fear and distress among the native population (Colombo, 2016), or even among immigrants of different statuses, the more is ineluctable to get more sophisticated interpretative keys, and comprehend causal correlations, explaining all these negative feelings before projecting any initiative or policy for intercultural dialogue.

The task of education: Recently in Europe, as well as in Italy, the public opinion has shifted from general (or tacit) agreement or neutrality towards immigrants, as "welcome low-cost labor force", to an explicit refusal of asylum seekers, and the cultural/religious intolerance became stronger especially against Muslim people (Eurobarometer, 2015; Forquet, 2016). The new evidence is that close-minded and selfish attitudes are not widespread only among low educated people but even among the more educated and skilled. Unceasing changes challenge most of us to adapt rapidly one to another and to recognize the Otherness beyond "cultural suspects" and the need to fight for resources (the two main factors that spring racism and xenophobia). Few of us can "dress" Interculturalism as a natural habit; mostly we need to learn it through practical experiences.

Where: Practicing Intercultural Dialogue occurs in many spheres: in neighborhood, public services, workplaces and educational contexts – both formal and non formal, administration, and overall where interaction and interpersonal communication are concerned. Education is the means to cultivate it, in three fundamental lines: 1 – contrasting *discrimination* in any forms and social environments; 2 – making higher threshold of *tolerance*, where the coexistence between population and minority groups becomes critical; 3 – removing the *fear* of others. If we will produce a positive impact (even little) on at least one of these points, we would have fostered Intercultural dialogue of a step forward.

How: The growing of an intercultural mindset and behavior comes across the consciousness about what challenges our routine when we are facing a stranger: fear of changes, defense of one's security, "dark" reputation of poverty, illiteracy, war, desolation and crisis (what normally is attributed to immigrants'

background). Paradoxically, a *sense of foreignness* (Nagy & Dobos, 2014) grows within ourselves when we interact with a foreign person: selfishness, lack of solidarity, lack of civility, are not only features of the Other, but also parts of ourselves - more than imagined. The very Stranger, as Julia Kristeva (1991), is Myself. Then, acquiring correct attitudes for Intercultural communication means to reflect about oneself's culture, habit and judgements. There is no intercultural competency without cultural competency.

During this Module we cannot set up all this work, because it is a cycle of academic lectures, but we can only evoke and suggest the complexity of "becoming intercultural" developing a set of skills (ideals) knowledge, attitudes, and behavior). In this classroom we have a group of participants, who attend the Master in Intercultural Competences, and can witness how hard and how long is the way to Interculturalism: the best representation of this complexity is that by Edward Hall (1976), the cultural *iceberg* and that by Griswold (1994), the culture's system *as a diamond*.
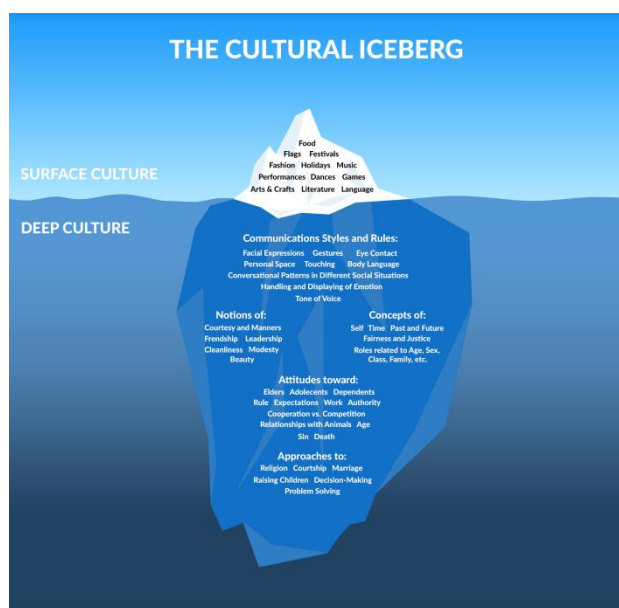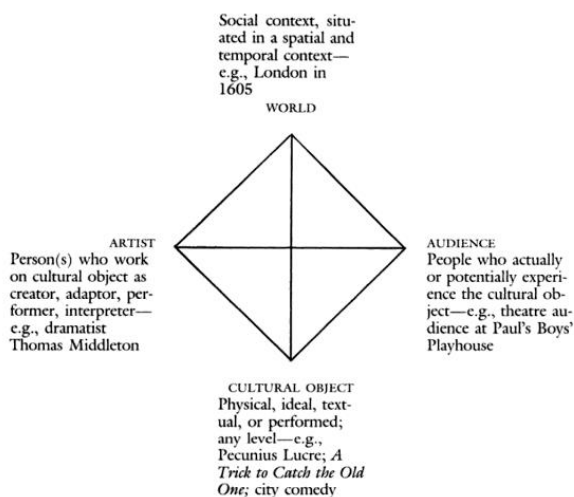
FIG. 1 The Cultural Diamond

In the light of this, the learning track designed for the IDEAL Jean Monnet Module has to be coherent with its content. It is interdisciplinary (history, law, ethics and philosophy, sociology, psychology and pedagogy), it promotes exchanges of viewpoints between speakers and participants. I hope nobody will hesitate to express a different opinion in this classroom, especially if that difference will come from a diverse national, cultural or religious belonging. Thanks to JMM each of us must broaden his/her knowledge, with more information, new basis for judgment and wider cultural horizons.

Final purpose: By considering the wide range of topics included in the first year of JMM, dealt by speakers from different countries and backgrounds, the final purpose is to make anyone more convinced about the European roots of her/his own position (more "Europeist"). Moreover JMM aims at making us aware of risks and pitfalls of the "methodological nationalism (MN)" (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003) that many studies and policies are based on. MN is a mainstream intellectual orientation within the social sciences, which gives "essentialism" to the Nation-State and leads scholars to study a society as it were overlapped to its national boarder. As a matter of fact, most of the subjects taught in many courses are still focusing on the national

matters, neglecting the European discourse and cross-national comparisons. This attitude is so rooted in academic practices that we are not aware of it enough. As future social workers and educators, you will meet the migration issue not at a national but at an international level, then we would like to prepare our students as "global professionals".

Be more active? In our perspective, attending IDEAL Module should lead us to become more active as "social promoters" of Intercultural Dialogue in Europe. What does that mean? To be competent: *firstly* in correcting one's own communication in international contexts (in academic, business, network and interpersonal situations, etc.). Using a proper language is more than a starting point, because often many barriers and impediments to reciprocal understanding lay in words (Biraghi, Gambetti & Tassone, 2015). *Secondly* in promoting "educational experiments", based more on curiosity and experiential learning rather than stereotypes (Reggio, Santerini, 2014; Onorati, Bednarz, 2010). *Thirdly*, in working in (and with) the local community. Local community can be an optimal learning space, where social ties appear in their authentic strength or looseness and every person can act and be understood beyond ethnic origins, family condition and structural bonds. For sure, the local and the "street" levels are embedded in a wider frame of social interrelations, but is at this level that intercultural skills will be implemented first.

> *"Any culture, religion or tradition can overcome the troubles of the world in isolation. East and West are neither geographical categories (because the earth is circular), nor historical references (because the destiny of the East is at stake in the West and reversely). In every human and in each society there is an east, an origin, a downing light, as well as there is a west, a sunset, an evening light»* .
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> (Panikkar R., *Kierkegaard e Sankara. La fede e l'etica nel cristianesimo e nell'induismo* (a cura di Milena Carrara Pavan; Jaca Book, Milano, 2017)

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