Intercultural and interreligious dialogue in public and private spaces: how much and what kind?

JMM IDEAL 3rd edition Opening speech, the 20th of May 2019 - Milano

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Welcome to IDEAL Module, 3rd and last edition. As we have experienced during the 1st and 2nd year, this course is a very innovative learning path within the academic environment, because of its intensive and interdisciplinary nature.

Objectives: IDEAL project intends to give participants an European perspective to the studies of society, education, and social work and also an Intercultural perspective that links together two main topics: *Europe* and *Interculturalism* across different disciplines. 1) *Europe matters*: particularly in this election period we cannot feel distant from the fundamentals of the European project, rather we must think to the negative consequences of an anti-Europeistic turn in the public opinion (and doing something to prevent it). 2) Through the medium of a daily co-operation with colleagues from different EU countries (Spain, Portugal, Belgium, UK, Hungary, Croatia and others) and among students from different curriculums we ought to achieve a more "*intercultural habitus*".

Background: Three main reasons 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 of the Union that we experience today clearly show that integration is an ambitious project, addressed more to future generations than to the present ones. So we feel the responsibility to strengthen European identity of all students before it is too late.

- *Secondly*, despite since 2008 the political agenda of the European governance includes the "intercultural issue" (see CoE, 2008), the domestic curriculum is only partially focused on this topic. We believe instead that each University, and particularly a Catholic University as we are, has a specific mandate in order to make intercultural sensitivity grow in learners: if we do not think, debate, and act in this direction, Interculturalism as a common achievement will never occur. Recently in this Institution several extra-curricular activities have been provided (in all local branches) within the "*university third mission*" (the set of projects that aim to generate knowledge outside academic environments to the benefit of social, cultural and economic development). Actually UCSC is deeply engaged in different partnerships and lines of intervention in favor of migrant people, migrant receiving organizations, and intermediating agencies. But across IDEAL we want to speed up a significant change within the main institutional task: the teaching activity.

Thirdly, the current situation in Europe is worrying, both for social, demographic and economic factors. The age of "welcoming immigrants" has declined due to the stopping of the job demand for foreigners. The average standard of living has worsened (or the outlook of economic development stands stationary) and the welfare level is decreasing for everybody. The public debate on the enlargement of the European citizenship stuck (think to Brexit consequences), and the pressure of new immigrants inflows on the European boarders still increases; at the same time the governance of the migrants crisis looks less effective day by day (Zanfrini, 2017).

Apart from the migrant crisis, during the last year the role taken by mass media and social media has brought about a significant worsening of the general sentiment towards non-European people: many Europeans feel wrongly informed about immigration and integration related matters. There is also a significant lack of awareness of the real extent of immigration into the EU, with many Europeans overestimating how many immigrants are present in their country (Eurobarometer Report, 2018). Among all, Italy scores the highest level of overestimation of immigrant residents (Istituto Cattaneo, 2019). In all Europe there is a resurgence of xenophobia and religious phobia, also pushed along by the populist campaign of the nationalist parties.

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 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 it means to be Europeans*" in times of multiculturalism, global political change and uncertainty for the social cohesion itself.

On 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 and religious diversity*. The more multiculturalism creates fear and distress among the native population (Colombo, 2016a), the more it is ineluctable to get more sophisticated interpretative keys, and comprehend causal correlations before projecting any initiative or policy to foster intercultural dialogue.

The task of education: The explicit refusal of asylum seekers, and the cultural/religious intolerance against Muslim people (Forquet, 2016; Osce-Odihr, 2019) (see also data reported by Osce-Odihr on racist crimes in Italy, 2017) clearly evidence that close-minded and selfish attitudes are now widespread not only among low educated people but even among the more educated and skilled. Unceasing changes challenge most of us to overtake the natural ethnocentrism, adapting one to another rapidly and recognizing the Otherness beyond the "cultural suspects" and the "fight for resources" (the two main factors that spring racism and xenophobia). As a matter of fact, *few of us can "wear" Interculturalism as a natural habit; mostly we need to learn it through practice and then to interiorize it – through reflective practice.*

Where: Practicing Intercultural Dialogue occurs in many spheres, private and public,formal and informal situations, 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 the threshold of *tolerance* higher where the coexistence between population and minority groups becomes critical; 3 – removing the *fear* of others (even by counteracting the "fear politics" adopted by mass media and social media, see Wodak, 2015; Marini, 2017; Colombo, 2019). If we will produce a positive impact (even little) on at least one of these points, we will have fostered Intercultural dialogue a step forward.

How: The development 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 (which are normally 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 and lack of civility, are not only features of the Other, but also parts of ourselves - more than imagined. The real 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.
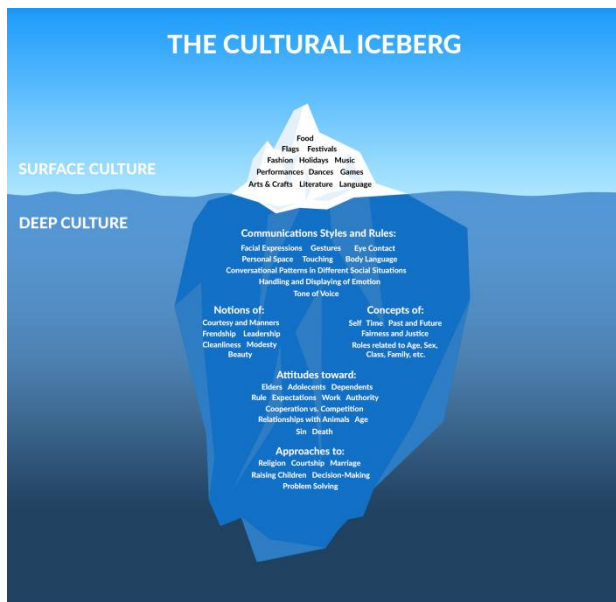
During this Module we cannot set up all this work, because it consists of academic lectures, but we can start by evoking and suggesting the complexity of "becoming interculturally competent" (Bennett, 2004): it requires developing a set of knowledge (ideals), attitudes, and behavior. In this classroom 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* .

In the light of this, the learning path designed for the IDEAL Jean Monnet Module has to be coherent with its content and purpose.

1) It is interdisciplinary (history, sociology, psychology and pedagogy);

2) it promotes exchanges of viewpoints between speakers and participants with horizontal relationships;

3) it shows how to establish a theory-practice link, by guiding participants into a real situation of intercultural dialogue (as far as the immigrant family is concerned: study visit to COMIN Family service, Milan).

4) Even the lecturers are requested to go through the same path, contributing to a collective book (a multi-disciplinary glossary on Intercultural dialogue in Europe), to be published at the end of project.

Thanks to JMM each of us may broaden his/her knowledge, with more information, new basis for judgment and wider cultural horizons.

Thematic focus (2019): This year we will pay attention to the family environment as a privileged field of application for intercultural dialogue. The family migration (or family "*in migration*") is a multi-faceted and dynamic process, as almost every migration project is – since its origins – a "family event" (Rossi, Scabini, 2008): it involves the individual but even his/her family background and it lies the migrant with the "left behind" relatives and generations, as well as with the future descendants. In the receiving country moreover the immigrant brings his/her social and familiar capital as a resource to foster the adaptation process and to reach the purposes of well-being and economic stability. Sometimes, however, this original capital does not facilitate a successful integration, rather it hampers the social achievement and pre-designs a poor destiny in the host society (Santagati, 2009; OECD, 2017).

During the last 25 years many immigrants, once arrived to Italy as single people, have begun a process of "family formation", both with co-national and non-conational partners, and they give birth to a significant number of children, the so called second generations. Data confirm the salience of the familiar dimension to picture the current situation of immigration in Italy: 1) the "Family reunification" is the first reason of long term staying (40.8% out of the total residence permits in 2014, vs. "work" 23%); and 2) the foreign womens fertility rate in Italy is still higher than the native women (1.98 children each vs. native women's fertility rate 1.24 children), although the whole fertility in Italy is decreasing because the demographic contribution of immigrant families cannot replace the decline (and it is declining itself due to the growing adaptation of foreign population to the living standard of natives) (Colombo, 2016b; Istat, 2018).

The main challenges the immigrant family has to cope with are: 1) intermediating between the new cultural environment and its own cultural identity and set of values, supporting its members in their successful process of adaptation both as individuals and as a specific group (bearing its own loyalties, traditions and folkways): this can be called a "particularistic affirmation"; and 2) participating in the public sphere to claim for rights of citizenship and to take responsibilities as an acknowledge member of the multicultural society: this is the "universalistic affirmation". Both processes are long and intense, according to the history, size, composition of family in gender and generations, and require to each family member a huge set of communication and negotiation skills.

The perspective of intercultural dialogue is permanent, within and outside the family itself, because – as in every family - parents and children must overtake the daily risk of mutual misunderstanding (inter-generational dialogue within the family) and afford the "developmental task" (Havighurst, 1952) to elaborate a new cultural identity in a mixed environment, mostly affected by the (supposed) negative image of immigrants coming from the outside (public opinion, neighbors, social services, other immigrants, …).

Episodes of *fragility* and *social isolation* of the migrant family have been highlighted by the social research and give the alert on the social and educational risks that affect these families. Sometimes when the loyalty to the family tradition is at stake (i.e. about gender roles, norms for public behavior, educational tracks and aims, religious prescriptions and others), the difficult balance between children's and parents' expectations and aspirations brings about negative interactions, aggressive reactions and deep cultural distance among generations (and also gendered conflicts). At the same time, migrant parents and relatives show a strong internal *cohesion* and a clear *resilience*, both in parenting and realizing economic improvement, that it is incorrect to label them as necessarily poor and week from a social point of view.

Like in other integration processes, the question is the same: Is there for a family with an immigrant background an "alternative way" beyond *assimilation* (loss of one's own roots and family traditions to foster adaptation) and *segregation* (when the attachment to one's cultural origins leads to family isolation and loss of the "bridging social capital")? We think that the Intercultural dialogue perspective may apply to the migrant family and its network – both local and transnational – as a means for supporting the mutual and common transformation along the path of social and cultural integration (Zapata-Barrero, 2017; Grillo, 2017) Of course any basic social support is due to the newly arrived family, to prevent deprivation and negative trajectories in poverty, unemployment and exclusion from the health services system. But I emphasize, there are many migrant families that can achieve their goals autonomously (I mean without a complete social assistance) and have the same level of social participation as natives – as long as the welfare system and the public institutions are universalistic, welcoming and culturally tolerant (ESN, 2018). This is one of the basic principle of the European social integration model (ECA, 2018).

Final purpose: during IDEAL Module we will come across all these notions and deal with the needs of migrant family in Europe and in Italy. We will also meet a Centre for Migrant Women and their Children' in Milan, run by Cooperativa Comin, witnessing how and how much the social workers and educators do every day to support them (see the Study visit program) in an intercultural perspective. *We do believe that Europe is the common house for all cultures, religions and political views, for any individual who can contribute to build such a democracy, no matter his/her history and family*. Our final purpose is to make everyone more convinced about her/his European belonging (becoming more "Europeist").

As scholars, engaged in the academic field, we aim at making us aware of risks and pitfalls of the "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003) that many studies and policies are based on. Methodological nationalism is a mainstream intellectual orientation within the social sciences, which gives "essentialism" to the Nation-State and leads scholars to study a society as if it overlaps to its national boarder. As a matter of fact, most of the subjects taught in many courses are still focusing on 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. As future social workers and future educators, you will meet the migration issue not only at a national but also 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 and Interreligious Dialogue in Europe. What does that mean? To become competent in:

Firstly, 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, 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 it 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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