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Bringing Latin America's 'Interculturalidad' into the Conversation

Ana Solano-Campos

I wonder if one can seriously write about multiculturalism and interculturalism by relying exclusively on authors who write in English or by referring to historical experiences that are only accessible through this language. (Wieviorka 2012: 225).

Wieviorka's provocative interrogation of Anglo-Saxon and Western ethnocentrism in academia, particularly in conversations about models of diversity, reminds us that depending on the scholarship written in English fails to give voice to important conversational partners. One of the voices that is often absent from debates comparing ways to address diversity in modern states is that of Latin American scholars and their work on 'interculturalidad,' the most prevalent model of diversity in Latin America. Although underrepresented in the literature in English, Latin American thought on ways to approach diversity has a long rich tradition. Not only that, the historical, political, and sociocultural context in which Latin American 'interculturalidad' emerged and has developed presents important elements that differentiate it from both multiculturalism and interculturalism.

What is Interculturalidad?

Latin American scholars and scholars engaged with Latin America scholarship conceptualize interculturalidad as a sociocultural and political project encompassing ‘convivencia’ and social justice across cultural groups. As philosophical orientation, the concept of interculturalidad has been taken up and developed by contemporary Latin American political philosophers such as Fernet-Betancourt (2004 2006) and Dussel (2004), among many others, within ‘contextual political philosophy’ and ‘philosophy of liberation.’ However, individuals from many different fields and backgrounds have contributed along the years to the construction of the concept of interculturalidad.

First and foremost, interculturalidad is imagined as the moment of contact or the area of ‘convivencia’ among individuals from different cultural backgrounds; a ‘third space’ if you will (Hopenhayn 2009). The concept of ‘convivencia’ goes beyond plain coexistence; more than tolerance and non-interference, it involves reciprocity, relationship-building, and interdependence in a community (Maldonado Ledezma 2010 2011). This ‘convivencia’ or ‘third space’ has been explained as a “sumak kawsay,” or “existir armónico y equilibrado” “armonious and equilibrated existence” (Maldonado Ruiz 2011:27). Emphasizing the construction of a national model where mediation sets the foundations for peaceful and just convivencia, interculturalidad is defined as a tool for communication and interaction that centers on creating the conditions for dialogue, conflict management, and negotiation among individuals in diverse societies (Hopenhayn 2009, García Canclini 2004, Hamel 2008, Us Soc 2009). Interculturalidad is also considered an axiological vision; a theory of values or set of universal human rights and morals such as respect, tolerance, empathy, equilibrium, harmony, equity, and synchrony, which

are desirable for the creation of democratic societies (Giménez 2000, Bernal 2003, Salazar Tetzagüic 2009).

In addition, interculturalidad is conceptualized as a political eutopia, a process or journey towards a democratic society. In contrast with a utopia, which is an ideal that can never be realized, interculturalidad is considered a goal that can be reached, a work in progress (Goddenzi Alegre 1996, Walsh 2001, Gómez and Hernández 2010, Maldonado Ruiz 2011). Goddenzi Alegre posits that interculturalidad acknowledges a reality filled with conflict and unequal power relations, but aims at creating “dialogic equitable relations among members of different cultural universes” [author’s translation] (1996: 15). Latin American scholars are prompt to acknowledge that “la interculturalidad aún no existe, se trata de un proceso por alcanzar,” “interculturalidad does not exist yet, it is a process to be reached” [author’s translation] (Walsh 2001:7). Thus, interculturalidad as a eutopia involves actively and continuously working against structural inequality and oppression.

The gist of interculturalidad can be found on the idea of interaction as reciprocal social and political acts among cultural groups. However, Fornet-Betancourt (2004) has argued that Westernized and Eurocentric calls for a clear-cut definition of interculturalidad have the potential to fragment and objectivize the concept of interculturalidad, turning into un “proyecto de construcción teórica y sistemática... monocultural” “a project of theoretical and systematic monocultural construction” [author’s translation] (11). He proposes that “cualquier definición de lo intercultural debe hacerse cargo de su contextualidad, tanto cultural como disciplinar, y de presentarse no como *la* perspectiva que demarca los límites de lo que enfoca sino, por el contrario, como una ventana...” “any definition of that which is intercultural must take into consideration its contextualization, both cultural and disciplinary; it must also avoid presenting it

[interculturalidad] as *the* perspective that frames the limits of what is being observed, but, on the contrary, as a window...” [author’s translation] (12). Following Fernet-Betancourt’s suggestion, in the next section I present the historical and sociocultural context of interculturalidad as an essential element to understand interculturalidad and its importance to contemporary debates on models of diversity.

The Path Towards Interculturalidad

Comprising several linguistic, ethnic, and epistemological clusters across extensive geographical boundaries, the Latin American region was an extremely diverse setting before the arrival of the Europeans. With the conquest, the cultural and racial diversity of the region grew in new complex ways, incorporating Eurocentric hierarchies and power dynamics. Not surprisingly, Latin America’s colonial legacy, particularly its processes of racial and cultural mixing and its struggle against imperialism and hegemony have constructed interculturalidad as a Pan-American model of diversity situated within postcolonial discourses of diversity.

Two particular concepts, the concepts of ‘mestizaje’ and ‘transculturation’ have been used by Latin American scholars, political leaders, and artists to portray the cultural clash that ensued upon the conquest and colonization of the region and to problematize the colonial dominant narrative about the indigenous subaltern. Now a contested concept, mestizaje, the idea of racial mixing or miscegenation (Wade 2005), was championed by political leaders such as Jose Martí (1891) and José Vasconcelos (1925) as a narrative of racial unity and cooperation, becoming a marker of national identity for people in Latin America. Immortalized in art and literature, the narrative of mestizaje led political, economic, and social conventions across the region. A narrative that Miller (2004) posits “could be enlisted in the development of a regional

identity that both recognized internal differences and unified Latin America in its distinction from Europe and the United States.”

Later on Ortiz (1940) introduced the concept of transculturation as a multidirectional process of cultural transfer, in opposition to the unidirectional idea of acculturation. The conquest and colonization of Latin America did not take place in one direction, but in multidirectional “transculturation,” or the “thousand tiny confrontations and tacit negotiations taking place in people’s daily lives, always within the force field of hierarchy domination” (Chasteen 2001:74). More succinctly, Silvia Spitta explains that transculturation is “the complex process of adjustment and re-creation—cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal—that allow for new, vital, and viable configurations to arise out of the class of cultures and the violence of colonial and neocolonial appropriations” (1995: 2). Although initially used in reference to Cuban society, the idea of transculturation was expanded to the Latin American region by Rama (1982). Ideas of transculturation and hybridity have been further developed and debated by other scholars (Trigo 1996, García Canclini 2004).

Both concepts, *mestizaje* and transculturation, illustrate the centrality of continuous social cohesion, cross-cultural interaction, and hybridity that permeates descriptions of *interculturalidad*. In addition to the processes of racial and cultural mixing that took place in Latin America, *interculturalidad* is informed by indigenous struggles against cultural and linguistic oppression. In fact, many scholars identify *interculturalidad* as an act of agency and resistance in indigenous communities, particularly in the Andean region (Aikman 1996, Hamel 2008, López, 2009, Gómez and Hernández 2010). One of the most important sites for this resistance has been the classroom. López (1997 1999 2001 2009 2011) has written extensively

about the emergence and development of bilingual education initiatives across Latin America that put forth ideas and policies of interculturalidad.

According to López, and Küper (1999) and López (2009), there are accounts as early as the 1930s of local teachers in Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia creating and implementing bilingual education methodologies and resources for indigenous populations. López and Küper (1999) state that at the time, bilingual education had a linguistic focus and was used mostly to assimilate indigenous communities into the mainstream, a task that was often facilitated by religious organizations like the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). With time, subtractive, compensatory, and transitional bilingual education efforts shifted towards additive approaches for the maintenance and development of indigenous culture and language. During the 1970s indigenous movements in Latin American countries, particularly those countries with larger indigenous populations like Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guatemala, Venezuela, and Peru, established the cornerstone for policies and practices of interculturalidad that affirmed the linguistic and cultural identities of indigenous communities via ‘Educación Indígena Bilingüe,’ or Indigenous Bilingual Education, and ‘Educación Bilingüe Bicultural,’ or Bicultural Bilingual Education, for students in indigenous communities (López, 2009).

In the early 1980s, the emphasis switched from bicultural to intercultural. Hornberger (2000) states that “the earliest use of the term ‘intercultural’ in Latin America may have been in Venezuela's 1979 bilingual intercultural education policy” and “in a [1980] meeting of indigenists in Mexico” (178). She points out that according to López (as in Hornberger 2000: 179) “there was a political motivation for those adopting the term intercultural as a way of distancing themselves from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), which used the term bicultural in reference to its bilingual education programs.” By that time, increasing attention

from organizations like the United Nations granted greater regional and international recognition to ‘educación intercultural.’ In fact, it is in 1983 that the official change from ‘bicultural’ to ‘intercultural’ takes place at the UNESCO meeting of Latin American and Caribbean countries (Tubino 2005:87).

In the 1990s a regional and political movement that scholar Patricio Ortiz (2009:93) refers to as the ‘Indigenous Emergence’ continued to encourage “indigenous people across the Americas to begin deconstructing Western paradigms and (re)constructing Indigenous ones.” Since then, several authors have extensively studied the way in which individual Latin American nation-states have incorporated interculturalidad in their educational policies and practices (Zimmerman 1997, Moya 1997 1998, López 1997 2009, López and Küper 1999, López and Giménez 2001, Cunningham 2001, Herdoíza-Estévez and Lenk 2010, López and Sapón 2011, Maldonado Ruiz 2011). However, Viaña, Tapia, and Walsh (2010) have pointed out that interculturalidad “fue asumiendo un sentido socioestatal de burocratización,” “has taken on a bureaucratizing socio-statal sense” [author’s translation] (p. 81), making it “parte del aparato de control y de la política educativa estatal” “part of the control apparatus and of the statal educational policy” [author’s translation] (p. 81).

Interculturalidad, either as rhetoric, public policy, or educational practice has not been the norm in all Latin American countries. Countries with smaller indigenous populations like Costa Rica, for example, have remained at the margin of discourses of interculturalidad for many years and have just recently started to acknowledge the pluricultural and plurilingual composition of their societies (González Oviedo 2009). Scholars like Hamel (2008), argue that contemporary ideas of interculturalidad continue to conceptualize diversity as a problem. He suggests that in order to move beyond plain tolerance and cultural inclusion, there is a need for a model that sees

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diversity as “a resource for enrichment” (2008: 95). In such vision, Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) does not only acknowledge indigenous languages and cultures as a right and resource of indigenous communities, but as cultural capital for the nation. In other words, Hamel (2008) proposes IBE as an education for all members of society, not only for indigenous, immigrant, or “minority” populations; an “educación intercultural y bilingüe de doble vía” “intercultural and bilingual dual education” [author’s translation] (López 1997: 58), or intercultural education for the society at large.

Untangling the Differences

The issue of whether and if, how, multiculturalism and interculturalism are different has generated animated scholarly debates in the English speaking world (Castles 2004, Bouchard 2011, Naseem 2011, Kymlicka 2012, Levey 2012, Maxwell et al. 2012, Meer and Modood 2012, Taylor 2012). However, interculturalidad, multiculturalism, and interculturalism rarely appear together in the scholarly literature. Among the few scholars treating the three concepts side by side is Mexican scholar Rosa Guadalupe Mendoza (2011). Mendoza states that interculturalidad, interculturalism, and multiculturalism each have “distinctive connotations and meanings for its participating actors...Their differences have to do with the emphasis they place on relationships and dialogue, and with the prescriptive or descriptive/analytical character of the realities in which they are embedded” [author’s translation] (2011: 314). “In that sense” she continues “the proposals for transformation and/or improvement of relationships, for attending to and recognizing difference and diversity depend on those realities” [author’s translation] (2011: 316).

In the case of the Americas, each of the three models of diversity is associated with particular geographical and territorial areas. Multiculturalist models of diversity in the Americas

have traditionally been associated with Anglo America, mainly with the United States and Canada, whereas interculturalism is used almost exclusively to refer to the Canadian context, and interculturalidad to Latin America. However, these borders are fluid. For example, even though interculturalidad has been the main model of diversity developed throughout Latin America, multiculturalist thought has also emerged and evolved throughout the region (Salmerón 1993, Olivé and Villoro 1995, Villoro 1998, Beuchot 1999, Torres 2007, Arriarán 2009, Arriarán and Hernández 2010).

In addition to geographical correspondence, each model is connected with times of complex social struggles for justice and recognition of minoritized ethnocultural groups: Civil rights in the case of the United States (Banks 1994 2009, Sleeter 1996, Gay 2010); increased immigration patterns and national identity struggles in Canada (Joshee 2004, Ghosh 2011, Meer and Modood 2012, Taylor 2012), and indigenous rights in Latin America (Hamel 2008, López, 2009, Gómez and Hernández 2010). The focus of each model of diversity, then, has been directly linked to the purposes and social context for which they originated. For example, in the United States, a focus on recognition and redistribution has led multiculturalist movements. In Canada, interculturalism aimed at creating a common civic culture that acknowledged the presence of two nations within one state. In Latin America, interculturalidad is intrinsically linked to its colonial legacy and the linguistic and cultural identity and rights of indigenous communities.

The differences between interculturalism and interculturalidad have rarely been debated. Conceptually, interculturalidad shares many characteristics with interculturalism: An emphasis on dialogue, relationship building, conflict resolution, universal values, and democracy. This is in part, because “gran parte de la filosofía de nuestro continente se ha desarrollado y se desarrolla aun en estrecho dialogo con la filosofía europea” “a great part of our continent’s

philosophy has been developed and continues to develop in close dialogue with European philosophy” [author’s translation] (Fornet-Betancourt 2004: 28). In addition, there has been constant influence from international organizations in the Latin American region that promote intercultural agendas. However, one important difference between interculturalidad and interculturalism is the particular nature of the rhetoric of interculturalidad as a resource against oppression and assimilation by colonial and neocolonial forces.

Unlike the case of interculturalidad and interculturalism, many Latin American scholars have dedicated a significant number of conversations to establish the differences between Anglo-American multiculturalism and interculturalidad, often engaging the work of Anglo-American and European scholars. Most Latin American scholars seem to align with current trends to positively compare intercultural orientations to multiculturalism. However, their impetus is not new and does not necessarily come from European discourses about failed multiculturalism. Instead, rejection of the multiculturalist rhetoric can be considered an anti-neocolonial, anti-neoliberal narrative. As such, interculturalidad has a unifying function similar to the concepts of mestizaje and transculturation: It promotes greater identification of individuals with the Latin American region, in contrast or in opposition to identification with perceived Anglo-America or Anglo-American multiculturalist values.

These Latin American scholars see multiculturalism, even critical multiculturalism (see May and Sleeter 2010), as lacking an integrative element to breach differences among various cultural groups. For instance, Latin American scholars contrast multiculturalism with interculturalidad as focusing on recognition rather than dialogue, as encouraging affirmative action rather than “transformative” action, as creating parallel societies rather than integrated societies, as promoting tolerance but not convivencia, as describing rather than constructing

(López 1997, Cunningham 2001, Walsh 2001, Tubino 2001 2002, García Canclini 2004). In fact, scholars like Tubino have spoken to the need to “interculturalize multiculturalism” (2002: 63).

Overall, Latin American scholars seem to actively distance themselves from the discourse of multiculturalism because it is often perceived as an imposition from the North America canon. For example, Maldonado Ledezma (2011:60) warns that “to apply [multicultural] postulates to other multicultural contexts implies significant challenges and theoretical deficiencies that arise from borrowing approaches originated in contexts foreign to our realities; thus, their uncritical application becomes inadequate” [author’s translation]. Maldonado Ledezma adds that interculturalidad is “a proposal that seeks to overcome the obvious differences of a theoretical standpoint –multiculturalism—created in western social contexts different to ours, with extremely different histories, and particular challenges that need to be addressed, that are profoundly divergent from indigenous concerns in Latin America” [author’s translation] (2011: 63). In addition, Walsh (2001) sustains that interculturalidad reflects the Latin American experience of mestizaje as “part of the reality and of the cultural resistance” in the region (6), something that multiculturalist theories do not include. An exception in this trend is Arriarán Cuéllar and Hernández Alvidrez’ (2010) work on multiculturalism. Within the Mexican context, Arriarán Cuéllar and Hernández Alvidrez argue that interculturalidad “lacks a political project or vision” [author’s translation] (2010: 100).

Concluding Remarks

Rather than an evaluation, I have aimed to provide an introduction to Latin American thought on ‘interculturalidad,’ a model of diversity rarely discussed in the scholarship written in English. This introduction is by no means exhaustive. Latin American scholars have debated and continue to explore the various conceptualizations, implications, and implementations of

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interculturalidad (Viaña, Tapia, and Walsh 2010). Thus, this introduction is posed as an invitation to continue to engage Latin American scholarship in discussions about approaches to difference in diverse citizenries. In particular, it is an invitation to further explore 1) the points of divergence and convergence among interculturalidad, multiculturalism, and interculturalism, 2) the extent of cross-pollinization among interculturalidad, multiculturalism, and interculturalism, and 3) the continuities and discontinuities of interculturalidad across countries, and scholars, in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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