

**UNIVERSITY OF PADUA**  
**Awards Ceremony of the Honorary Doctor Degree**  
**in Education Science to Roberto Ruffino**

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**Lectio Doctoralis: “The Traveller’s Compass”**

**Honourable Rector**  
**Academic Senate**  
**Volunteers and Friends of Intercultura**  
**Ladies and Gentlemen**

Sixty-three years ago the allied armies who had won the war descended from the valleys of Appennino towards the Po river. Among the soldiers of many nations and languages (English, Polish, New Zealanders, Moroccans, French, Greek, Indian, Nepalese and American, all forming the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Armies) in their ambulances came some hundreds of volunteers from the American Field Service. Almost all were conscientious objectors or were declared medically unfit and they had searched for a different way to serve not only the cause of a single nation, but that of human kind. They were, in fact, the heirs and successors of the young men who had served in the AFS volunteer ambulance corps in the First World War and in some cases had expressed their memoirs in works of literature: I am speaking of Hemingway, Dos Passos, Julien Greene and others.

At the beginning of the war, the Second World War, these young men combined their own private funds with those of family friends to form an association that went to the frontlines to assist the wounded. And help they did; in south-east Asia, the Middle East, north Africa and also in Italy. Here in Italy, sixteen of them were killed by land mines and are buried in the military cemeteries of Nettuno and Florence.

The survivors prepared to return home in that April of 1945, transformed by the long period spent with comrades of all nations, facing common enemies at war, with whom they shared the banal routines of everyday life. Some of them remained in Europe: Bill Congdon settled in Faenza and rebuilt a ceramics museum, Bill Weaver returned to his friend Raffaele La Capria and learned Italian so well that he became the translator for Eco and Calvino. Some went

on to liberate the German concentration camps, while others simply found a house and a wife in Italy and prepared the foundation upon which, some years later, was founded Intercultura.

Today, I want to associate those young men of the 40's, a few of whom later became famous artists or politicians but most remained anonymous, to this day of celebration in recognition of my work, that could not have come about if it were not for their existence.

Bogdan Suchodolski, who, for merits greater than mine, in this room was honoured with my same academic title, often recalled Adam Mickiewicz's *Ode to Youth*, in which the courage of the young people dissolves prejudices and egotism and brings forth the light of liberty. He also added that the youth of whom Mickiewicz spoke is accessible to people of all ages: it is the opposite of a superficial acceptance of oneself and of the world, it is opposed to boredom and to an unfruitful existence, it is the refusal of indifference and selfishness. Youth is there where life seems worthwhile being lived, where the questions are more important than the dogmatic answers, and where there is a move towards a continuous dialogue with traditions and present life and a fancied future. *Youth* defined in this way allows for risks and calls to responsible action in support of others and nourishes itself with friendship, creating a link among groups, ages, projects, efforts and hopes. It can become the foundation of a new world order in which, and here I cite from the text of Suchodolski, "the growth of love between human beings, which occurs because of the friendships between young people becomes the source of a better reciprocal knowledge, which will shape the great dialogue in the field of the conceptions of culture and of life."<sup>1</sup>

None of our AFS ambulance drivers had ever met Bogdan Suchodolski, but it seems to me that his thoughts express well that cultural environment that sixty years ago transformed a humanitarian service of war ambulances into a peace service, to train young people for life in a multicultural society through encounters with other young people of many countries. This transformation occurred not out of respect to pedagogical theories, even if there were already many interesting examples of international school communities in the 40's, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, but out of the sensitivity acquired through the friendships of the war years

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<sup>1</sup> Bogdan Suchodolski, "Youth Exchange in a Multicultural World" in *Youth Mobility and Education*, EFIL, Bruzelles, 1978

and with the vision of a new order to build in the world, through the involvement of young people.

### **The Birth and Development of an Educational Project**

I have had the good fortune to participate in one of these international exchanges organized by the former drivers of the American Field Service, and I went to live with the McKay family in the U.S.A when I had barely turned sixteen. From that point I became increasingly aware of a cosmopolitan spirit that does not ignore its roots and of the need to look at the world from a multiple perspective. This seems to me to be a true challenge for contemporary pedagogy and Suchodolski seemed to agree with this idea, when he used to say, "Here (in Poland) the problem is how to remain a Polish farmer and at the same time to become a citizen of the world." I was grateful for that statement, that we included in the mission document of Intercultura.

Like the ambulance drivers of 1945, I have embarked on intercultural education not as a scholar but rather as a practitioner and a participant: a participant in international gatherings with young people, families, schools and colleagues from one hundred countries, in an Association that was the first ever in Italy to use the name "Intercultura." The volunteers and staff of this organisation have been my comrades and I would not be here today to receive this degree without their desire to row counter-stream together with me. Some of them are here today and I receive this recognition also on their behalf.

The student exchanges, that we ran with young people from all over the world, stimulated our first reflections on the differences that exist between a mono-cultural pedagogical approach and another that is based in a multicultural context, where memories, values, beliefs and behaviours of the actors may diverge, without a clear awareness on the side of those who are involved in the process.

It was a professor of this university, who can no longer be with us today, much to my regret, Francesco De Vivo, the national Vice President of Intercultura at the time, who guided us towards our first pedagogical reflections when, in 1973, the regional government of Valle d'Aosta offered to set up an international school with our help.

It was Danilo Dolci, the leading spirit of many meetings in Trappeto (Sicily) where he was preparing an experimental school in Mirto, who introduced us to Johann Galtung and to the educational experiences

of the Ford Foundation as well as to the anthropology of education. To him I owe a great debt of gratitude.

In the same years, through our membership in SIETAR (the Society for Intercultural Education and Research) we became more familiar with the intercultural research of the Anglo-Saxon world, counterbalanced by the French researchers from Sorbonne, and we explored the scholarly world of intercultural communication. Those were the years when a now-famous Dutch anthropologist, Geer Hofstede, was investigating the work culture in seventy-two countries where IBM ran its operations.

Our effort was that to translate those lessons, conceived largely for the business world, into educational theories and methodologies for an intercultural exchange of teen agers - and we found interested ears in the European Commission of Brussels and in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, that hosted a series of colloquia centred around the theme of interculturalism, between 1978 and 1985.

In Strasbourg, in 1980, we proposed a definition of intercultural learning that the Council used in the final report of the first Conference on Intolerance in Europe. We spoke of *“a new learning situation where students coming from different cultural environments are helped to see their differences as resources to acquire a greater understanding of themselves rather than as deviations from the norm. That is, a situation where every culture is explained in the context of the others through a process that stimulates doubts about self, curiosity about others and an understanding of reciprocal relations and... involves students both intellectually and emotionally.”*<sup>2</sup>

The International Youth Year (1985) finally gave us an opportunity to meet with Arab and African educationalists in the UNESCO regional conferences on youth, all of them in agreement on the necessity of intercultural education for the youth of their countries, torn between the rediscovery of their indigenous values and the influence of a school inherited by the colonial powers.

## **Cultures and Globalization**

In these last 20 years, intercultural tensions have dominated the front pages of all newspapers (such as, recently, the age-old conflicts

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<sup>2</sup> Council of Europe, Conference on Intolerance in Europe, 9-11 December 1980, Report, CEJ/CI (80) 14, pag. 39 of the English version.

between the Israelis and the Palestinians, or those between the Serbians and the Croatians, or between the Chinese and the Tibetans) also because of the impact of massive migrations, the enlargement of Europe and the globalization of production and trade.

The technology of communication and transport has given us the physical possibility as well as the illusion of being in all places of the world, even if our hearts and minds frequently stay at home and continue to dwell on memories of the past. Precisely in places where local memories are stronger, identities are less flexible and restrict the ability to interact with the world.

Eleonora Masini notes that today culture has a predominant role in the construction of the global society: *“Cultural values seem to emerge most vigorously in reaction to the globalized society; exposing differences that at one time appeared to have been overcome... for this reason it is legitimate to speak of a global culture with growing priority values, and at the same time of a coexistence of different cultures.”*<sup>3</sup>

To this point, Edgar Morin makes an interesting observation when he compares the present-day human condition to that of a hologram: *“Not only is every part of the world present in the whole world, but the world as a whole is always more present in each one of its parts. This is true not only for nations and peoples, but also for individuals. Just as every point of a hologram contains information about the whole, now every individual receives or consumes information and materials that come from all over the universe.”*<sup>4</sup>

But, I would add, unfortunately the awareness is missing.

The situation that Federico Rampini describes in one of his *Reports on China*<sup>5</sup> is a perfect example.

In Xi Zhuang, 60 kilometres from the centre of Beijing, there is a factory that produces in continuation plastic Christmas trees, Santa Clauses of various dimensions, garlands of synthetic flowers, illuminated crosses, along with Hindu deities, Islamic half moons of pine-needles and colourful ikebana for Japanese celebrations. *“Santa Claus and the Befana, New Year and Easter, Islam and Vishnu, all of*

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<sup>3</sup> Eleonora Masini, “The Role of Future Studies in a Global Society,” *FUTURES Bulletin*, Vol. 24, No. 3, September 1998, pag. 14-16

<sup>4</sup> Edgar Morin, *Terra Patria*, Cortina Editore, Milano, 1994

<sup>5</sup> Federico Rampini, Pechino. “L’officina delle festività altrui.” *La Repubblica*, 31 dicembre 2006

*the traditions and all of the religions of the world, the floral crowns and fake plants of the pantheon of four continents – all have in common the cabbage smell of a suburb of Beijing and the quick fingers of Chinese labourers... who cannot imagine the purpose of the trees, decorations and coloured characters who leave their hands by the millions every day: they are senseless objects, for a world far away, in observance of some mysterious customs.”*

The same daily paper that contains the *Report* on China, on the same day, dedicated its front page to the news of the execution of Saddam Hussein, followed by many comments: is it still lawful to murder a tyrant? From which perspective of legality and morals is the concept of “lawful” considered? On what grounds was the date of the execution chosen (the day of Abraham’s Sacrifice, *Aid al Adha* in the Sunnite Islamic world) with regards to the rest of the world? In this case, a symbolic element is added to this historic event, that evokes various connections and marks cultural limits within our “Western world”, but even within the Islamic culture.

These are two different stories, symbolic of our current human condition.

The first story, that of the Chinese labourers who produce festive symbols and incomprehensible divinities, presents us with a narrow but not uncommon case of *alienated globalization*, made possible by technology but lacking instruments of interpretation.

The second story presents us with an even more demanding problem, that of a *behavioural code for a globalized world* and consequently that of the values and responsibilities that have to inform the education of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

They are stories that highlight two difficulties within the discourse of intercultural education in an interdependent world: the *transferability of symbols* for an effective communication and the *sharing of an ethical code* for a global citizenship.

International organisations have made some progress on the level of defining human rights and of translating them into political institutions, but little progress has been made on the level of global communication or of education for co-existence; the same noble ideals of preservation of all cultures proposed by UNESCO are contrasted by the economical differences between rich and poor, the

hegemony of international languages and technological monopolies, the dominant and arrogant politics that prevent an egalitarian dialogue among cultures, which would in turn guarantee respect, cultural survival and an even distribution of influences.

### **Intercultura's Model**

The field of experimentation in the sector of intercultural education is wide and diverse. We at Intercultura propose a learning model that uses international student exchanges, with the belief – based on experience but supported by research – that an extended stay abroad during adolescence initiates a process of deconstruction of one's certainties (acquired often unconsciously) and introduces a change in perspective that helps to grasp the complexities of the world.

Why this belief?

Because one does not perceive the limits of one's own culture until one sees it from the outside and suffers because of the differences. When a young person is taken out of his/her familiar environment and is placed in a new environment where he/she finds him/herselves in a "minority" or "marginal" situation (*minority* or *marginal* with respect to the culture of the host country), this situation challenges emotions and intelligence in order to be accepted and to feel adequate. It is a process that stimulates new sensitivities, the exploration of unknown behaviours, the capacity to interact on a social level. Recent studies have searched to define this process in terms of competence and of indicators of multiple perspectives, which are still difficult to sanction or measure.

Many in Europe don't share this radical vision and tend to view intercultural education as a new "subject of study" to add to the school curriculum. But intercultural competence is not a new area of study. It is a change in perspective and proposes a new *way of living and viewing the world*: that is what the Greeks called "**metanoia**", a changing of the mind.

In our orientation courses to live abroad for our students, in Intercultura we insist on three requirements that help to prepare a dialogue with and an understanding of others.

The first is to *know where one comes from*: it has to do with identity and memory, with knowing oneself and one's values, not as absolute

values, but as the result of an historic process of which one is both part and product.

The second is the *acceptance of emotions as a means of knowledge*: growing fond of someone or something that one does not yet know is the first step towards understanding and towards putting one's beliefs in a greater perspective.

The third is *tolerance of ambiguity* that goes hand in hand with the containment of anxiety in the face of the new and the different, with the capacity to hold off judgement to a later phase of acquaintance, with the refusal to see the world in black and white at the disadvantage of the many shades of grey.

The methodology that we modestly use departs from an analysis of familiar situations, daily activities, life organization, religious traditions, manufactured and artistic products, dietary habits, local and national celebrities – observed from both *the inside* and *the outside*, thanks to that special workshop that is our network of local groups in which coexist people of different cultural traditions.

The view from the outside is essential. Umberto Eco notes in his introduction to a research conducted at Transcultura in Bologna in 1988<sup>6</sup>: *“Perhaps a project of reciprocal knowledge and mutual description arrives at this time when it is truly possible... when all of the inhabitants of the world are close enough to really be able to understand their mutual diversity. These views that arrive from a distance are by now mitigated by a lot of information... leaving the hope that in the future these games of mutual descriptions can produce, with respect to differences, a less painful proximity.”*

To the students and the families that take part in our programmes we offer an exercise in which culture is graphically represented as an *iceberg*: the small part above the surface is the visible culture (man-made works, language and art); the larger submersed part represents the invisible culture of values and norms that people often ignore. The collision with a different *iceberg* – another culture – creates a shock and a stimulus to look below the surface of the water and to become aware of one's own hidden reasons and those of the others. From the analysis of the submersed *iceberg*, conducted with people of other

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<sup>6</sup> Alain Le Pichon e Letizia Baronina, *Sguardi Venuti da Lontano*, Editore Bompiani, Milan, 1991

countries and other cultures, comes a double process of re-evaluation and perception:

- A re-evaluation of individual and cultural history: memories, models, heroes, canons of beauty and justice, outlines of social organization
- A different perception of the future, no longer seen as a continuation of the present, but as a projection of what is sustainable and compatible in a multicultural context.

### **The Compass That Is Not**

Indeed we work along fine lines that divide our personal and cultural identities, often unknown by us, for the purpose of letting them emerge from unconsciousness and of learning to converse: in order to build – together with others – the common house of the future. But here lies a serious limitation, because we still lack the support of a compass that indicates the ethos and the organization of a global city, for which we would like to prepare the citizens. This absence of vision and norms transforms also our work into an exercise in tolerance of ambiguity.

And yet, today there is a common wish – among people of good will – to “ferry humanity from *modus vivendi* to *modus cum-vivendi*.” This expression is taken from Zygmunt Baumann<sup>7</sup> who later clarifies: “*From a curse, globalization may even transform into a blessing: we have never had a better occasion to demonstrate our ability to raise our identity to a worldly level, to the level of human kind...*”<sup>8</sup>

I share this hope: that our uncertain and fragmented identities, our multiple or scattered loyalties, our weakened or fanatical memories, through the inevitable comparison among people of different cultures, may open the way towards greater unity and solidarity in the world. “*We must help each other,*” said Raimon Panikkar a few months ago at a conference in Milan, “*to be conscious... that the truth is not a personal possession... We need to understand that the truth, when it fell from heaven to earth, it broke into a hundred pieces, one piece at the disposal of each one of us.*”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Zygmunt Baumann, *La vita liquida*, Editore Laterza, Bari, 2006

<sup>8</sup> Zygmunt Baumann, “*Intervista sull’identità*” a cura di Benedetto Vecchi, Editori Laterza, Bari, 2003, pag. 100-101

<sup>9</sup> Raion Panukkar, Intervento video al Centro San Fedele di Milano, 17 ottobre 2007

Could it be, therefore, that our intercultural educator's compass is *the ethics of doubt*? This is an expression of Gustavo Zagrebelsky,<sup>10</sup> when he elaborates on some topics that were dear to Norberto Bobbio<sup>11</sup>, who had imagined *an ethics of the labyrinth* - in which hope is cultivated "adapting the means to the ends, recognizing mistaken roads and abandoning them once they are recognized."

It is similar to what Umberto Galimberti calls *the ethics of the traveller*.<sup>12</sup> the end of man as we have known him in the past, under the restrictions of property, of boundaries and of laws, and the birth of a new man, more difficult to place, because he is an unending traveller in a space that is not guaranteed... "If we adults," says Galimberti, "are ready to renounce our deep-seated convictions when our roots have no depth other than our old habits, then the ethics of the traveller can offer youth a cultural model that educates, because it doesn't immobilize, because it never offers a stable and secure terrain on which to build their constructions, because the openness that it requires... offers no reassurance and yet avoids the boredom of repetition that young people hate..."

In this vision I find again the words of Suchodolski and Mickiewicz about *Youth*. I also find a thought that has stayed with me for well over 30 years, from when I (as a young person myself) organized in Strasbourg the first encounters on intercultural education: a thought which I offer you as a conclusion of this morning, in which you have opened your university to intercultural dialogue. I said at that time and I repeat today for you:

*Our cultures are like concrete structures  
that hold buildings together  
but also forbid a building  
from being any different from what it is.*

*Maybe the time has come  
to tear the building apart and get to know its pieces  
that are pieces of our lives  
and turn them into poles and beams  
to carry along  
as we walk through the wilderness of tomorrow,  
to be turned into tents and huts*

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<sup>10</sup> Gustavo Zagrebelsky, *Contro l'etica della verità* Editore Laterza, Bar, 2008

<sup>11</sup> Norberto Bobbio, *Autobiografia*, Editore Laterza, Bari 1997, pag. 226 and on.

<sup>12</sup> Umberto Galimberti, *L'ospite inquietante*, Editore Rizzoli, Milano 2007, pag. 143-144

*easy to assemble and easy to disassemble,  
as we settle for a short while on ever-changing grounds,*

*like tuaregs in the desert  
who link the people of the shore and of the green  
endlessly  
without walls.*

Roberto Ruffino  
University of Padua, 21 April 2008