

THE FAILURE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION – FROM ALBERT CAMUS TO KAMEL DAOUD AND “CHARLIE HEBDO”

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Abstract: *The present paper aims at analysing a sad paradox of contemporary civilisation: despite the extraordinary development of the technical means of communication, still multicultural communities (and especially cosmopolite cities) seem to be confronted to a serious failure of intercultural and inter-ethnic relationships. Although the postmodern world proclaims itself a society of “Difference” (Derrida, Deleuze) and a space of tolerance, the understanding of ‘the Other’ and of ‘otherness’ still remains problematic. This rather frustrating fact is reflected by literary works such as Albert Camus’s famous fiction “L’Étranger”/‘The Stranger’ and Kamel Daoud’s recent novel “Meursault, contre-enquête”/‘Meursault, Counter-Inquiry’ (Goncourt Prize nominee and winner of the “Prize of the Five Continents” in 2014). But nothing is more self-evident than reality itself: the violent attacks in Paris, of 7-9 January 2015, against the journalists and cartoonists of “Charlie Hebdo”, revealed (beside the over-discussed problems of security) a serious communication problem and a dramatic cultural hiatus between the Islamic and European cultural discourses.*

Keywords: *intercultural communication, multicultural community, culture clash, otherness, communication failure.*

1. THE UPS AND DOWNS OF HISTORY

The evolution of modern society was marked, during the 20th century, by two major phenomena: on one hand, the two planetary conflagrations swept away mankind’s dream of a more human and peaceful world; on the other hand, the disintegration of modern colonial empires engendered dangerous resentments between the post-colonial countries and the ex-metropolises. After World War One, the economic crisis of the 1930 came to aggravate the general climate of distress and deepened the gap between rich and poor countries. The period that followed to World War Two increased the general feeling of instability and undermined the mutual trust between nations.

Besides these latent tensions, the post-colonial era brought about a dangerous revival of some old, problematic oppositions (such as: centre/periphery, metropolis/ex-colonies, developed/under-developed countries), which led to a sharpening of inter-ethnic and interracial conflicts. Both the young “liberated countries” and the former colonial states had to face a multitude of unpredictable new problems (Onfray, 2012). On one hand, the emerging post-colonial nations – somehow disconcerted after the departure of the colonists – underwent a difficult, painful process of identity

reconstruction, which encountered unexpected obstacles and generated internal conflicts between “fundamentalists” (followers of old traditions and religion) and “moderns” or “reformists” (adepts of a more liberal, European vision of the World). On the other hand, new situations appeared inside the borders of the motherland, bringing to light important discrepancies between the West-European cultural pattern and other types of socio-cultural patterns, (principally caused by the gap between religious beliefs, mentalities, traditions, educational systems, social behaviours etc.), which engendered what sociologists call the “culture clash”.

2. ALBERT CAMUS AND THE FAILURE OF INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATION

The bizarre story told by Albert Camus in his novel *L’Étranger* /*The Stranger* (published in 1942), takes place in French Algeria, probably around the 1940s, after a series of uprisings of the Arabs, brutally repressed by the French administration. Meursault, the main character, is an average French clerk who lives his life in a total indifference towards everything and everyone around him (friends, colleagues, family and society); moreover, he shows the same indifference towards his own person.

Along the story, we remark that none of Meursault's acts makes any sense; his deeds or gestures never seem to obey any logical "cause-effect" development. In fact, Meursault is a fatalist, he has concluded some time ago that the universe was absurd and, whatever he (or the others) may do, the result would be the same. It is the reason why most of his replies contain, like a leitmotiv, the automatic phrase: "Ça m'est égal" / "Never mind, I don't care". Every step in his life is taken at random; he never thinks about the consequences of his own acts, never asks himself a serious question about his relationship with the others, with the universe or with a possible God, in whose existence he refuses to believe. He manifests the same absolute lack of curiosity about his inner self, never analysing the motivations of his deeds or the morality of his behaviour.

He doesn't seem to feel much grief when he is announced, in a telegram, that his mother died (all alone, in a retirement home); no tear was seen in his eyes during the funeral ceremony, a fact that will be evoked, later on, as one of the important aggravating circumstances, in a trial where he will be sentenced to death. The day after his mother's funeral, he goes swimming in the sea and makes love to a woman, Marie, to whom he has never paid much attention before. But when she asked him whether he loved her, his sincere answer was: "I don't know", which confused her, but reflected, in fact, just an authentic, unbiased conduct.

The day after a violent incident with a group of Arabs, Meursault kills one of them, by five gunshots, because he is blinded and confused by the sunlight, and because the Arab takes out his knife, in an obviously aggressive attitude. A trial follows, where he is accused of "cold blood murder", and where all his previous gestures and deeds are interpreted against him. Meursault is sentenced to death, because nobody understands him (the judge, the jury, his defence attorney, and finally, the entire society). And that is because he is completely unable to explain his acts – to society or to himself. He could have evoked a justified clause of self-defence – and the French administration would have been happy to accept it, and grant him attenuating circumstances. But Meursault is in a situation of complete communication failure. Asked by the judge "Why did you kill that man?", he answers: "Because of the sun", which was true; but his answer sounded more like an ironic reply to the judge and jury, who took it like a real offense. Meursault is sentenced to death by his own incapacity of expression, by his position of "incommunicado":

he is just a dumb and deaf prisoner within his own body.

This is a typical situation of individual (or personal) non-communication. Meursault remains a stranger to the others, to the world and to himself, because he never even tried to initiate a real dialogue with any of these instances. He is guilty of... "complete alienation". And he pays this fault by his life. But, besides this tragic individual story, Albert Camus seems to bring forward a serious question about society's tolerance to difference. All these people who judge Meursault – in a Court of law, or outside it – never tried to look more closely at this strange case, to know the man behind his acts and find out his motivations; because, if they had tried harder, they might have seen a human being who did not resemble them, a man of few words, very little talkative, but very authentic in everything he says or does. They might have seen a white man, crashed under a heat of 45° C, on an Algerian desert beach, frightened by an Arab who took out his knife and threatened him. The defence could have pleaded for temporary suspension of mental faculties, or, more likely, for a justified self-defence situation. But no one is interested in knowing anyone in this novel: neither the Judge, nor the Jury; neither the defence, nor the prosecutor; neither Meursault, nor the society he lives in. All of Meursault's movements are considered by the others like the acts of an insensitive person, he looks like a cold-blood criminal, almost inhuman. In fact, Camus's hero is sentenced to death because *he is different*, and his society is not ready to understand or accept the right to *Difference*. His story would have been one of an utmost banality, if Misfortune hadn't decided to make a serious turn in his life. Beside the philosophical illustration of the absurdity of human existence, Camus's story is a pleading speech in favour of tolerance and of the acceptance of otherness, as bizarre as it may seem.

As Camus shows, a coincidence of unfortunate circumstances led to the death of his hero – a harmless, peaceful man (Todd, 1996; Vircondelet, 2010). The absurd, the "infernal machinery" (in Jean Cocteau's words) consists in the aleatory association of different elements that compose a human destiny; and, irrespective of the equation, the result is always the same: the only certitude in life is that we shall die. Camus's hero never seems to realize the inter-ethnic nature of the conflict between him and the Arab; his total indifference to the surrounding world keeps him blind to the latent tensions between the colonists and the native population. By the time, the two categories – the

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white people and the Arabs – lived in different neighbourhoods; they had different stores, different schools and different churches. They usually didn't mix up much and they rarely interfered or communicated with each other. From Meursault's point of view, no intercultural dialogue was necessary between the two communities, and he had never tried to find out anything, whatsoever, about the way of life, the philosophy, the traditions, the habits, or the beliefs of the people belonging to the other group. In fact, Meursault never seemed to perceive *otherness*; for him, *alterity* was practically inexistent. He unconsciously accepted the colonial privileges that came to him, in the most natural way; there was no question or doubt in his mind about the colonial relationships; as far as he was concerned, the man he killed was just an Arab, and nothing more. And this is precisely the attitude that will be reproached to him (and, implicitly, to his author) by the contemporary novelist Kamel Daoud.

3. KAMEL DAOUD AND THE FAILURE OF INTER-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Half a century after the publication of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, the Algerian writer and journalist Kamel Daoud gives him a literary reply, in a fiction entitled *Meursault, contre-enquête / Meursault, Counter-Inquiry*; the book was first published in 2013, in his native country, and in 2014, at “Actes Sud” Publishing house, in France. Daoud presents the same events as Camus, but... from the opposite point of view. The story of the Arab killed on a beach by a French colonist is told, in a never-ending *soliloquy*, by the brother of the victim, Haroun, fifty years after Meursault's execution. He has some glasses of wine every night in a bar (one of the few ones left, where alcohol is still served) and tells each time one episode of his brother's story; he seems to be so caught in his own souvenirs, that no one can say for sure if he really talks to an interlocutor, or if he utters his story in the ether, talking to an imaginary person or a ghost.

Apparently, Haroun's intention is to communicate *his* side of the events, together with his feelings of anger and disappointment, to a young Frenchman, apparently a PHD candidate, who is writing a thesis about Meursault. Haroun tries to make him see the facts from the reverse angle as well, like in a real trial. He demands that the principle of *audiatur et altera pars* should be granted to him and to his dead brother, since it is

considered as a fundament of justice and equity, in most legal systems.

The leitmotiv of Haroun's discourse is the absence of the Arab's name in Camus's novel; his mother and himself, as well as the whole community, consider this omission as an ultimate offense to the victim, to his family and to his people. Haroun blames this error on the white colonists' complex of superiority, which made them see in the Arab not their fellow-man, but a sub-human entity. They never thought of Moussa (Haroun's brother) as an equal human being, but just as one of their numerous, impersonal servants. Haroun obsessively repeats the name “Moussa”, over and over, as if he wished to engrave its sonority in his interlocutor's memory. What bothers him most is the anonymous figure of his brother in the Frenchman's book, and he speaks out his mind in a burst of bitterness and frustration:

Me too, I have read his version of the facts. Just like you, and millions of others. From the very beginning, you could understand everything: he had a man's name; my brother had the name of an accident. He could have called him “two o'clock”, as the other one called his Blackman “Friday”.¹ (Daoud, 2014:15).

Kamel Daoud deliberately mixes up the references in his book: he attributes the authorship of Camus's novel to Meursault himself, who allegedly wrote *The Stranger* in prison, while he was waiting for his execution. Haroun's entire life was subordinated to two main purposes: to give an identity to his brother, and to avenge his death. The night Algeria gained her official liberty, he killed a Frenchman whom he didn't know, just to offer some comfort to *M'ma* (his mother), who had grown old, waiting for an opportunity to see her elder son avenged. But Haroun didn't get the expected satisfaction after this crime: this was not *his* way of making justice and of putting things in their right place. He realised (unfortunately, too late) that *his* view upon life was quite different from his mother's. *M'ma* belonged to a revolutive world: she blindly believed in the Islamic religion and held to a primitive law, whose basic principle was “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”. Haroun finally adopts a more relative philosophical position: he concludes that religion is just a way of

¹ Original text: *Moi aussi, j'ai lu sa version des faits. Comme toi, et des millions d'autres. Dès le début, on comprenait tout : lui, il avait un nom d'homme, mon frère, celui d'un accident. Il aurait pu l'appeler « quatorze heures », comme l'autre a appelé son nègre Vendredi.*

manipulating people, and the old law has to be left behind, in favour of the modern values of individual liberty. Approaching the end of his life, he realizes that his whole existence was a waste of time, that he has lived in his mother's shadow, executing *her* orders, doing everything *her* way, accomplishing *her* wishes, and never doing anything for himself.

After taking the Frenchman's life, Haroun was not punished by the new indigenous leaders of his country, under the excuse that the killing took place during the last minutes of the Liberation War. In exchange, his new local chiefs looked at him in a superior contempt, because he had not joined the *maquis* (the forces of the Algerian Resistance), like the other young men in his town; he is not accepted as one of them, because he hasn't killed any Frenchman *before* Liberation. He draws the (ironical) conclusion that if you kill one man, you are a criminal, but if you kill lots of people, you are a hero. Moreover, being an atheist, Haroun never goes to the mosque, and he is regarded with circumspection and disapproval by all the citizens of the small town. In the end, he remarks that he has become a *stranger*, just like the Frenchman who killed his brother; and thinking of Meursault, he feels that he is somehow bound to him, in a sort of universal fraternity of criminals.

By writing this book, Kamel Daoud's intention was not to deny the literary and philosophical value of Albert Camus's novel, but to initiate a dialogue between the two cultural patterns: the French one and his own (see also Daoud, 2013). Brought up in the French educational system, Daoud (just like his hero) acquires a more complex and more nuanced vision of the world, as compared to his compatriots; through his multiple readings, he came to relativize some "sacred" values of his culture (such as the Islamic religious precepts); besides, he gets to appreciate the elegance and refinement of French language, as well as the liberal principles of French society. Therefore, his book is also a tribute paid to Camus and to the French culture. Very often, he makes subtle intertexts with *The Stranger*. Camus's novel begins by the following phrase: *Mother died today*² (Camus, 1942:5); with a slight irony, Daoud commences his novel by the phrase: *M'ma is still alive today*³. (Daoud, 2014:13). He writes his novel in French language, in order to open a communication way between the ex-colony and the metropolis. And Daoud's dialogic attempt was

rewarded: the metropolis responded, by publishing his book in France, by nominating him among the finalists of the prestigious "Goncourt Prize", and by attributing him "The Prize of the five continents" and the "François Mauriac Prize" – all during the same year, 2014.

The only problems of Kamel Daoud came from his own homeland; some of his compatriots did not seem to appreciate his close relations to the Occident, and especially to the French culture. On December 2014, an imam gave a *Fatwa* (i.e. a recommendation, released by a specialist in Islamic law) against Kamel Daoud, requiring his execution, for the following accusations:

he has put the Koran under the sign of doubt, as well as the sacred Islam; he has hurt the Muslims in their dignity and sang the praises to the Occident and the Zionists; he has attacked the Arab language. (Coquet, 2014).

The same month, the imam launched a call on Facebook, demanding his death, for "apostasy and heresy" (Coquet, 2014). Daoud has lately been the target of several failed criminal attempts, perpetrated in the name of the 'sacred values' of the Islam, under instigation from a religious authority.

Kamel Daoud's good intentions to create a bridge between his country's culture and a West-European ones were obstructed by some extremists, who do not represent the majority of the Algerian population; even if the metropolis responded to his call by the affirmative, the fundamentalists replied by the negative. A real dialogue cannot take place without the good will of both sides.

And, as a frightening coincidence, one month later, the editorial staff of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* was going to be the victim of a horrible tragedy, caused, once again, by an extremist group of Islamic fundamentalists.

4. CHARLIE HEBDO AND THE TRAGEDY OF NON-COMMUNICATION

The entire civilised World was shaken by the tragic events that took place in Paris, in the beginning of this year, between the 7th and the 9th of January, when a group of masked extremists, armed with Kalashnikov rifles, attacked the journalists and cartoonists from the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. Eleven people were gunshot on the first day of the massacre, in the Charlie Hebdo's offices: a police bodyguard, a caretaker, an editor and four cartoonists of the

² Original text: *Aujourd'hui, maman est morte.*

³ Original text: *Aujourd'hui, M'ma est encore vivante.*

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magazine, along with three other people of the editorial staff, and a guest. Witnesses said they had heard the gunmen shouting “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad!” and “God is Great!” in Arabic, after calling out the names of the assassinated persons.

The journalists and cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* have been repeatedly threatened by Islamic extremists on different occasions; they also had been the targets of some failed attempts to their lives; but they believed in their cause – the liberty of expression – and never gave up their ideals. They knew that they were exposed to multiple dangers, and they assumed this risk. Who said that “the pen is mightier than the sword”? He must have been an incurable dreamer.

Nothing can justify the unimaginable cruelty of the Paris incidents; but the fanatics who caused this massacre sincerely believed they had praised their God by killing innocent civilian people: they considered themselves as “true-believers”. Therefore, should we draw the conclusion that the *Koran*, Allah or Muhammad the Prophet, require from the Islamists to kill those who have a different religious belief? or those who have no belief at all? Kamel Daoud, through the voice of his hero, Haroun, proves quite the opposite, by quoting the Islam’s sacred book:

Le seul verset du Coran qui résonne en moi est bien celui-ci: "Si vous tuez une seule âme, c'est comme si vous aviez tué l'humanité toute entière". [The only verse of the Koran that has a resonance inside

me is the following one: “If you kill one single soul, it is as if you had killed the whole mankind”]. (Daoud, 2014:101).

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