I. BORDER EPISTEMOLOGY

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From Ortiz to the Decolonial Option: Transculturation and Border Epistemology in Contemporary Sociocultural Thought

Abstract

The article touches upon the genealogy of the concept of transculturation as opposed to the better known and long established acculturation and traces the views of its creator – the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, thus restoring justice in relation to his role and place in anthropology. It also focuses on the contemporary enfolding of these problems in the global sociocultural reflection, stressing the rethinking of transculturation in the decolonial option in relation to border thinking and epistemology and double translation.

Key words: transculturation, border epistemology, decolonial option

In the majority of interpretations transculturation is seen as a process of changes in the material culture, values and customs of a sociocultural group taking place as a result of a prolonged and close contact of this group with a different group carrying its own cultural tradition. This definition neglects the dynamic power asymmetries between the dominant and suppressed cultures. Neither does it take into account today's rethinking of transculturation within the massive changes in the architecture and grounds of knowledge including anthropology as a discipline. Comparative studies of peoples, races, cultures, languages have been invariably marked by a Western striving to regard itself as a norm, hiding behind the objectivity principle and regarding everyone else as a deviation from this norm – temporal, spatial or both in accordance with the progressivist evolutionary logic. As early as in the 1930s Anglo-American anthropology was marked by an intense interest in diffusion, acculturation and cultural contact which made it necessary to go beyond the frame of previous problems of the primitive and traditional and turn to contemporary material and thus to the cultural contact of Western modernity and its colonial others. This radically changed the object of the study but not yet its methodology. The main element of the civilizing mission was that of acculturation as a secular variant of conversion into the faith of modernity, while anthropologists were busy legitimating this mission and rejecting any dynamic historization or cultural contextualization, which threatened to destroy their constructs and taxonomies by demonstrating the hidden political links of science and colonialism.

Completely different impulses stood behind the book from 1940 *Cuban Counterpoint. Tobacco and Sugar* written by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (Ortiz 1995). An introduction to this work, written by Bronislaw Malinowski, was a structural functionalist attempt to appropriate Ortiz's ideas which were in reality quite different from functionalist linear theories of cultural contact and acculturation. Ortiz's accent on the counterpoint of history, marked by politics instead of functionalist static ahistorical sanitized patterns, was interpreted by Malinowski as a concession necessary for a better understanding of the changing patterns of tobacco and sugar production and not the painful issues of colonialism and imperialism which stood at the center of Ortiz's attention. According to Fernando Coronil, in "the reflection of a sugar crystal" there was the "history of colonial domination". Ortiz's pride as a Cuban anthropologist was "not in the volume of sugar produced" in his country, as Malinowski seemed to think, "but in the creation of a culture in Cuba that countered the degradation of this history", while "the quality of its tobacco served as a metaphor of Cuba's unique culture" (Coronil 1995, p. XXXV).

There is a clear gap between the way transculturation is understood by Ortiz, who expressed in this term not merely the dynamics of cultural exchanges, but a critical category capable of exploding the anthropology of both colonial locales and the metropolis from within and a rather technical and applied understanding of this concept by Malinowski and his followers. It is not a coincidence that Malinowski applied the term only twice, while his followers even neglected to mention Ortiz's original contribution to the theorizing of mutual influence under cultural contacts (Kaberry 1961).

Third World intellectuals' reflections on transculturation came to be recognized only after similar concepts had been shaped within the postmodernist frame in the Western social sciences. In accordance with their right of provincially cosmopolitan ignorance, they ignored the similar views of non-Western scholars expressed long before. The legitimation and revival of Ortiz's contrapuntal method took place almost half a century later with the emergence of postcolonial theory when Edward Said applied the same term in his *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1994) and stressed the complex interaction between the suppressed and the dominant cultures, never resulting in a complete dissolving or appropriation of one by the other, or in absolute dominance. The contrapuntal transcultural process generates specific identities which cannot be properly analyzed by means of structural functionalist taxonomies. This refers also to the non-linear and complex relations and identities of the anthropologists of the center and the periphery. As Coronil points out, all travelling theories in contemporary academia (and theories travel usually from the center to peripheries and very seldom in the opposite direction) are marked with this non-linear complexity and hence are essentially transcultural (Coronil 1995, p. XLII), although later their trajectories are strengthened and the undesirable authorities coming from the "underside of modernity" (Dussel 1996) are erased. This is what happened with transculturation. In this model spatial sameness and otherness are not properly divided from each other as was usually the case with other anthropological models. Here "home" as a space for formulating theory, a place of an anthropologist's birth and the other colonial space (or a space of diaspora,

periphery, exile) and its identities as the objects of study, usually strictly divided from "home", interchanged, mingled, became problematized and relativized. This also questioned the fundamental (for Western anthropology) image of the anthropologist as a disinterested objective observer of an other space which always hid the real ideological motives of science and its actors.

Ortiz's position may be defined as a negation of the Archimedean reference point and by investigating Cuban culture from within being its part and not a detached observer. The next step which has emerged in the late 20th century is not simply participatory anthropology but epistemic and political projects in the center of which there stand the interests and strivings of indigenous people working together and on equal terms with anthropologists. This refers to THOA (Taller Historia Oral Andina), several projects connected with Zapatistas, as well as other regions and local histories (Cusicanqui 1990; Shami et al. 1990). An anthropologist then becomes a part of the world he/she describes, coming into close interpersonal relations with the subject of his/her investigation and avoiding the othering mode as a methodological basis of traditional anthropology, demonstrating its historical links with missionary and civilizing discourses. The self-positioning and self-reflection of an anthropologist, his/her locus of enunciation become then also the focus of investigation, discussion, questioning, creative transformation in the process of transcultural interaction.

In article from 1942 Malinowski came back to transculturation and remembered Ortiz as the author of the concept (Malinowski 1942). Malinowski left the Archimedean point and for the first time allowed himself to express his identity as a marginal European in front of the global catastrophe of Nazism, to feel an other and let his previously suppressed and hidden geo- and body politics go. This logically brought him back to transculturation and to Ortiz (Malinowski 1942, p. 665). Instead of an objective anthropologist studying the others fallen out of modernity we encounter here a passionate thinker who does not shun from historicity or political engagement any more. The fragmentation of Europe ruined by Nazism, yet another tragedy of his native Poland – a symbolic home, allowed Malinowski to feel as a vulnerable internal other of Europe and speak from that position.

Ortiz needed the concept of transculturation in order to describe the diversity of sociocultural phenomena that have emerged in Cuba and wider in Americas, as a result of the "complex transmutations of culture" and non-ending migrations of various groups of people. The scholar celebrated the self-consciousness of the periphery, the point of confluence of binary oppositions, a counterpoint allowing people to turn a margin into a center and create fluid, changing, yet significant identities instead of fragmented histories (Coronil 1995, p. XLI). He was writing not only about the remaking of human subjectivities, but also about goods and commodities, the social life of things and objects, such as sugar and tobacco, where transculturation also works in both directions and contrapuntally – it translates objects which change the lifestyles and the way people think, simultaneously changing the initial meaning, usage and, in fact, the very life of the objects themselves.

Ortiz opens his book with a peculiar personification of sugar and tobacco which deceived Malinowski, claiming that these are the main characters of Cuban

history, but imperceptibly the focus is shifted to the problems of human identity and a specific mechanism of the constant remaking of identities in a peculiarly Latin American excessive style, by means of negotiating and juggling bits and pieces of multiple meanings of different cultures and value systems (Ortiz 1995, p. 98–310). Transculturation becomes then a truly human history whereas the fate of its subjects becomes that of globalization against their will and much before the coming of globalization on a world scale. Ortiz could not have known that, but today his book can be seen as a prehistory of globalization written from the perspective of colonial difference.

The scholar also turns to the concept of the border, striving to define the dynamic process of transculturation as a continuous change. He claims that in a world which has been marked by conquest and colonization the fixed boundaries separating the West from other territories, the White from the Black, men from women and so on – are always in an unstable equilibrium defined by the asymmetry of power relations. Turning to such binary oppositions Ortiz interprets them not in a mutually exclusive, but in a transcultural hybrid way, stressing the transitive unstable nature of such dualities in Cuban history. In this sense the model of transcultural selves, which is to be found in Ortiz's book, is opposed to abstract universalism, as it focuses on the globally, multiply and contrapuntally interconnected particularities.

In term "transculturation" the Latin prefix "trans-" means "over", "through", "across", "beyond". These meanings somehow already presuppose an inclusion of several cultural reference points, a crossing of cultures, a transit between them and a state of a specific cultural in-betweenness – not "here" and not "there" or "here and there" at once, depending on the individual attitude to this positionality. Equally important is the disintegration of cultures and the creativity of the new cultural unions, as well as the dynamic shift in transcultural identity, linked with the complex processes of mutually directed cultural interactions, under which the dominant culture experiences the constant influence of the dominated cultures, as a result of which new meanings and new cultural codes are born. This is an essentially non-conflicting model. It adjusts to the given power relations by means of deceiving them, always creating something new out of the destroyed or censored and transcending the passive or active resistance in the act of re-existence (Alban-Achinte 2006).

Today the term transculturation is much wider than historical anthropology and is often regarded as no less than a principle of functioning of contemporary society and culture and as an epistemic model corresponding to globalization. It is important to differentiate between transculturation as a process of mutual interaction of cultures (which has intensified today due to the development of telecommunication technologies, mass migrations and the growth of cultural penetrability, that is transculturation as an unquestionable social reality) and transculturation as a new vision of the world, problematizing the monocultural nation-state – a highly provisional and historically as well as geographically limited construct. Critics of transculturation often operate with a mythical construct of a pure cultural identity uncontaminated by hybridity, although such culturally pure models were and are impossible either in the past or today.

A successful sociocultural communication presupposes following some particular ethical rules. It is important to understand who establishes these rules, whose ethics they express and in whose interests they are shaped. In a transcultural model the ethical communicative asymmetry becomes more balanced and the new rules shaped as a result are no longer based on the egopolitics and theopolitics of knowledge as was the case in Western modernity, but on geo- and bodypolitics of knowledge in the new epistemic paradigm at the crossing of imperial and colonial differences (Mignolo, Tlostanova 2006).

Transculturation is opposed to the models which do not take into account the human diversity and the pluriversality of history. It does not operate with abstract people in abstract contexts and it does not assume that the social is homogenous and consists of identical individuals living in the smooth space of unified language, culture, religion and values. Transculturation retains the meaning, the dynamics, the drama of real lives of real complex people.

A transcultural model attempts not merely to see an other and draw attention to its lack of rights, but also to give it a voice not in order to complain, but in order to express its cosmology, ethics, epistemology, aesthetics. This requires a thorough rethinking of the dominant episteme. In this context we can see transculturation as a new type of discursiveness and as an important element of cultural and political unconsciousness of the époque, defining the agency and the world vision of its subjects (Tlostanova 2004, 2007). Transculturation constantly problematizes difference and diversity, in contrast with epistemically traditionalist celebratory neoliberal multiculturalism.

In the basis of the shift in perception of social reality and human relations initiated by transculturation lies a striving to rethink the logic of modernity, based on the colonization of knowledge and of being. In accordance with temporal and spatial matrix of modernity, the latter regards itself as the only reference point while all other models are marked as traditional and interpreted negatively. In contrast with multiculturalism based on progressivist and orientalist schemes, transculturation rehabilitates space and subjectivity of the other, questioning the fake opposition of modernity vs. tradition and argues for the real dialogue of equal but different cultures including contemporary ones.

An important element of transcultural model is the concept of the border, understood both semiotically, epistemically, ontologically and ethically. Borders are spaces of metaphoric translation-transformation where new meanings and new texts are abundantly generated (Lotman 2002, p. 273). Transcultural tendencies, as a result of diversification in the processes of global cultural interaction and reproduction, are accompanied by the epistemic dimension of transculturation as a critical border thinking. Transculturation has marked the whole sphere of contemporary cultural imaginary, always stressing its imperial-colonial dimension. It is based on cultural-epistemic polilogue where there is never a complete synthesis, a complete merging or a complete cultural translation, where cultures meet, interact but do not melt into each other always retaining their right to opacity. The Caribbean thinker E. Glissant stresses the importance of not merely the right to difference but also this right to opacity, "that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but

subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand this truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its component" (Glissant 1997).

Transculturation is a specific type of border thinking and consciousness in the sense of thinking beyond the dichotomies which emerged as a result of the rhetoric of modernity and its hidden logic of coloniality. This is how transmodernity (Dussel 2002) emerges – an epistemic and ontological space where the other resides, a border space where exteriority becomes visible and its subject realizes that it was constructed as an other by the same in order to dominate in modernity. This allows us to see transculturation through the concept of double translation and link it to border thinking. Border thinking is a rethinking of the geopolitics of knowledge as a new epistemic modality, shaping at the crossing of Western tradition and the multiplicity of traditions and models suppressed by the Western system of knowledge, disciplinary divisions and modes of thinking.

Border thinking is born at the moment of problematizing the epistemic division. It is a thinking that goes beyond the categories of Western epistemology and is performed from the position of those forms of knowledge that were delegitimized in modernity (such as tradition, folklore, religion, non-rational knowledge, art, etc.). Yet it is not a simple replacement of one (Western) epistemology with a different one(s). All of them continue to exist and remain viable as sources and targets of critique. This coincides with Zapatistas' principles discarding agonistics and proclaiming the pluriversality of many worlds coexisting side by side but not connected with each other hierarchically or through a mutually exclusive duality any more. What is important here is to *be* a border and *thought from* the border instead of *studying* borders and those who *cross* them. It is crucial to remake geographic frontiers, imperial and colonial subjectivities and territorial epistemologies.

Border thinking and consciousness is a typical realization of transcultural identification and subjectivity giving birth to bidirectional cultural and epistemic translation, constantly commuting between the West and the non-West. The concept of translation then should be regarded not in a strictly applied linguistics sense but in the geohistorical frame of the modern/colonial world system in its relations with modernity and with coloniality as the two faces of the same coin. Translation as an act of communication can be regarded as a part of a larger process of transculturation and they both become fundamental for the very idea of modernity/coloniality.

Double translation changes the direction of transculturation processes, established in Renaissance and having prevailed since then. The champions of modernity, imposing their reference system onto the rest of the world, applied the mechanisms of cultural, epistemic and linguistic translation but the translational and transcultural processes remained unidirectional and strictly hierarchical for a long time, which helped in propagating first colonial and later imperial differences. Translation based on the idea of the superiority of Western modernity, often led to enormous distortions and misreadings because the position of Western translators remained that of obnoxious assuredness in their own normativity. Therefore, the translation of any non-Western forms of knowledge and expression has been unidirectional

– they were merely studied, described and classified by the Western subject – in the capacity of objects, lacking the ability to speak or act rationally.

The changing concept of translation/transculturation was clearly expressed in the double translation model as formulated by Walter Mignolo and Freya Schiwy (Mignolo, Schiwy 2003). The scholars reflect on translation/transculturation from the position of colonial difference. They demonstrate that previous links between language, nation and writing are destroyed, as well as the links between language, place, subjectivity and epistemology. Today transculturation can be most adequately described, precisely as a social conflict between the languages and cosmologies of the dominant and suppressed traditions. What happens is the emancipation of the mind, of thinking, which places translation and transculturation into a totally new epistemic context. Transculturation is expressed in a specific border multiple identity, problematizing both previous images of integrated cultures and holistic identities and the postmodernist total fragmentation of disintegrating private "selves".

Transculturation pervades the global space of culture and society today. It is a new way of thinking, tracing new relations between languages and cultures, a new understanding of translation and communication, of new subject–object and logical links. Transculturation is based on a complex rethinking or rejection of the previous grounds of the dominant Western modernity/coloniality, while the major element rethought within the transcultural model is the interpretation of difference and diversity, as well as communication of and with various other(s). This model of thinking paradoxically looks for the ways of unification of different others at the time when all previous metanarratives have been discredited and does it through the emancipation of consciousness and cultivation of another thinking as a thinking of the other or the "damnes" of modernity (Fanon 1963). Transculturation is attainable only through pluriversality as a dynamic interaction of various world models and cosmopolitan localism as a specific positioning of the postnational individual, balancing between and avoiding the discredited Eurocentric universalism, the postmodernist ideology of total decentration and antilogocentrism as well as the fundamentalist essentialism of any isolationist kind.

Yet, a transcultural model is not a new metanarrative. It is a cautious attempt to define at least some possibilities of understanding and solidarity which would potentially lead to a constructive polilogue and a transmodern world where many worlds would coexist and none of them would be the only reference point, a world, where treating the other would not be based on subject–object dualism and agonistics any more and where ultimately, there would be no others.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł ukazuje genealogię koncepcji transkulturacji jako alternatywnej w stosunku do bardziej znanej i od dawna używanej „akulturacji"; zgłębia poglądy jej twórcy, kubańskiego antropologa Fernanda Ortiza, przyznając mu zasłużone miejsce w antropologii. Skupia się także na współczesnym ujęciu tej problematyki w światowej myśli społeczno-kulturowej, zwraca uwagę na ponowne przemyślenie teorii transkulturacji w kontekście postkolonialnym, a także w odniesieniu do tematyki i epistemologii Pogranicza oraz podwójnego przekładu.