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CHALLENGES FOR TRANSCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

**CHALLENGES
FOR
TRANS
CULTURAL
COMMUNICATION**

**ZDENKA
SOKOLÍČKOVÁ**

LUBLIN 2014



EUROPEAN UNION



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION,
YOUTH AND SPORTS



INVESTMENTS IN EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

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*To all children
who did not survive
the hatred of grown-ups*

I
AN INVITATION
TO THINK
ABOUT
TRANSCULTURALITY

In the 21st century, new challenges, new threats and new opportunities await the inhabitants of the planet Earth. Western science has evolved over many centuries into a brilliant instrument that helps us better understand the world in which we live, analyze the past and react to present issues. Yet our ability to predict the future is greatly limited. The importance of classic humanities such as history, philosophy, philology, etc., has never declined (even though educational policy in many Western countries, including the Czech Republic, contradicts this fact), but at the same time we are forced to interconnect knowledge from various disciplines in order to achieve a holistic understanding of complex changes taking place in global society.

The modest book that the reader is holding in his or her hands at this moment is an attempt to address the issue of transculturality, its meaning, connotations, possible applications and academic perspectives. This text is a result of almost two-years of intensive thinking and re-thinking of the idea of transcultural communication. What is it? Why do we need it? How does it work? Can we identify its basic foundations? What conditions enable it and what circumstances hinder it? How should it be addressed within academia?

It might seem a negligible output from such long duration of research; one would expect a solid monograph with hundreds of pages, overflowing with footnotes and references. Yet the aim of my effort was not to present a ready answer and gather evidence that would reinforce its validity. Of course, the phenomenon of transcultural communication is not new, but recent developments have shown how urgent the need for a non-violent transcultural dialogue is, how demanding it might be to preserve the well-being of those who already enjoy it and make it available to those who are deprived of fair opportunities to live a good life. The ideas and arguments presented in the following pages are intended as a starting point, as a reservoir of thoughts that should be criticised, falsified or agreed with, validated and discussed. The book needs both rationally and emotionally involved readers; students, scholars, and the lay public who are

aware of the relevance of the topic and who know and sense that difficult issues must be tackled before violence breaks out. Once people are suffering, fighting, struggling for their very lives, there is no time to read.

Let me relate an anecdote, a situation that took place during a seminar held for students of the Bachelor programme entitled Transcultural Communication at the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, University of Hradec Králové. The teacher inquires: “What does being European mean to you?” And one of the students replies: “That I’m superior to other people.” Within this naive answer of a Bachelor degree candidate the whole history of European thought, thousands of years of struggle, progress, achievements and failures are encapsulated. It illustrates what cultural anthropology has discovered, namely that people tend to believe that it is exclusively their community which is the most “human” – the Other is inferior, at best in need of civilisation, but in the worst case in need of annihilation. It is a fairy-tale recounted by habitual optimists that the world has learned from past mistakes and that the slaughter of fellow human beings in the name of culture (or race or religion or whatever else) can never happen again. As long as the feeling of superiority without any personal merit exists, based just on the simple fact of being born within a certain society, the idea of transculturality remains fragile and deserves careful attention.

This book consists of four chapters and each of them deals with one aspect of transcultural communication. The first chapter focuses on value dynamics and the prevalence of nihilism in Western society. Nihilism is generally considered a negative symptom of a culture’s approaching decline. When talking about the difficulties that our society is facing due to an intermingling of cultures, ideologies and religions, voices are raised to point out the negative side of disordered values and old certainties. Yet the phenomenon of nihilism can, apart from its darker impacts, also contain some constructive potential. The chapter mentions those aspects of value fluctuation in Western society that could be interpreted as an opportunity for a future course. These include ethical transvaluation, openness toward meeting the Other, and the great opportunity to temporarily abandon our culturally determined attitudes. The analysis is based on the arguments of a living Italian philosopher and psychologist, Umberto Galimberti, who elaborates on the nihilist climate among contemporary youth and refers to the teachings of Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Galimberti’s call for courage to meet the incomprehensible Other is applied to the question of transcultural communication which can be successfully stimulated through an approach described as active nihilism (or more precisely anti-nihilism). Equality, freedom and humility in relation to the natural world are listed among the suggested principles that a transcultural dialogue should not overlook.

These three principles (freedom, equality and ties to the natural environment) are more thoroughly examined in the second chapter. Our attention zooms in a little

on a problem rooted in the current situation in Central Europe, an Andersonian-imagined community that is facing economic, social and cultural, and environmental problems, which all need a common coordinated strategy. The region is diverse in many aspects, the historical development of its constituent parts differs, as does their contemporary economic, social, cultural and environmental profile. Freedom and equality, two concepts that are constructed and re/de-constructed in the social discourse, are identified as vitally important for successful transcultural communication. At the same time, the analysis proves that neither in the case of freedom nor equality does the abstract idea match actual practice in Central European countries. Apart from the assumption that only free and equal people can engage in a true dialogue, the second chapter presents a culturally neutral or, even better, culture-free priority, which is the preservation of an inhabitable natural environment.

Narrow paths that lead to mutual understanding, tolerance, respect and empathy are often circuitous, dangerous, precarious, deserted and sometimes seemingly impassable. Wide avenues of hatred and violence that can erupt in an instant are easy to walk and it is hard to get lost on the way – it always appears a good idea to follow the masses. Transcultural communication is of great importance in situations where cultures and ethnicities clash. In the third chapter, three cases from 20th century Europe are selected, namely the extermination of Lithuanian Jews, the violent expulsion of Czechoslovak Germans and the killings of Turkish Cypriots. The chapter identifies further conditions under which a transcultural dialogue is possible. These include, for example, the obligation not to remain silent, the deferment of truth, a clôtural reading of history, the rejection of collective guilt, and the political relevance of transcultural dialogue. As Vincent Crapanzano, an American specialist in anthropology and comparative literature, puts it, dialogue is a relationship of significant tension. When it fails, the tension needs to be released and the relief often comes in the form of a violent act – a strengthened prejudice, a verbal insult, a physical attack. Transcultural communication is difficult precisely because it never allows the involved parties to relax. It consumes time and energy, demands rationality and irritates emotionality. And given the importance and complexity of the topic, transculturality deserves the attention of academic scholars and researchers.

The academic format of the field of Transcultural Communication (hereinafter TC) is the topic of the fourth chapter. In Czech academia, TC has only existed since 2010. It responds to the question about the nature and principles of cohabitation in a society that is heterogeneous regarding the cultural (ethnic, religious, language, etc.) background of its members. Analysis from the perspective of TC emphasises the philosophical and ethical aspects of a problem. The term ‘culture’ is understood here as a determining factor, though not fully and absolutely

determining. Culture influences people, but it would be a mistake to regard people as culture's puppets. Human beings are capable of a detached view, they can overcome their own cultural determination through meeting and accepting the Other. The core challenge for TC is to find an answer to the following questions: Is it wrong to be indifferent when the Other is suffering? If so, why? The field of TC is rooted in the disciplines of cultural and social anthropology, philosophical anthropology, ethics and history. The fourth chapter also summarizes the weak points of the field and briefly introduces the structure of the study programme and the graduates' profile.

Throughout the book, the terms 'culture' and 'transculturality' are defined and redefined. Since both concepts are fluid in their meaning, it is impossible to achieve a final and exhaustive definition. This invitation to think about culture and transculturality is addressed to students of the field, to other scholars and researchers who work on similar topics, and last but not least to the wider public that might not be interested in academic debates, but whose lives are inevitably affected by the practical outputs of such considerations.

Methodologically, the text is based on the study of primary and secondary sources. The character of each chapter differs; the first chapter provides a commentary on the cultural theory of Umberto Galimberti, the second chapter combines a descriptive analysis and essayist interpretation, the third chapter applies the concept of cross-cultural dialogue as presented by Cosimo Zene, and the fourth chapter limits itself to a theoretical outline of the field of TC.

The more we learn about the history of human society, the greater our astonishment is: a creature capable of invention, artistic imagination, solidarity and compassion is equally capable of ignorance, irresponsibility, and terrifically violent acts against its very essence – humanity. People possess powerful talents and mighty weapons and the decision whether to use their creative rather than their destructive potential is rarely ever predictable. The search for transculturality, a specific state of mind that is mirrored in a specific societal order where otherness is a source of awe instead of a stigma, remains a daunting challenge. Hopefully, this work can be regarded as one further step on that long journey.

2

THE FRIENDLY FACE OF NIHILISM: CAN A DISRUPTION OF VALUES BE SEEN AS AN OPPORTUNITY?

2.1 Challenging Nihilism

The question of mutually incompatible or at least potentially conflicting values is always mentioned when waning efforts to establish a dialogue among people with different cultural backgrounds are discussed. This chapter's core interest lies in a thesis that might seem counterintuitive and controversial at first sight: whether the decline of the West, repeatedly proclaimed by Western scholars (Fukuyama, 2006; Kuras, 2011; Spengler, 2010) truly has only negative impacts. The aim is not to cast doubt on the fact that a disruption and relativisation of values is taking place in the Euro-American world, but rather to consider the possibility that next to its obvious disadvantages, this trend also has some potential for a future change for the better. Nihilism might not have a friendly face, but if it did and we had not searched for it, we may have overlooked something important.

The initial hypothesis of this chapter reads as follows: Losing their solid value basis can paradoxically make Westerners ready for a transcultural dialogue. In order to work further with this hypothesis, it is first necessary to explain how some of the key terms (nihilism, culture, transcultural) are used in the chapter. The historical overview of nihilism is only marginal since history is not the main subject of study in this text.

The phenomenon of existential pointlessness that is attacking the Western mind and is increasing globally will be studied through the approach of the Italian philosopher and psychologist, Umberto Galimberti (*1942). Galimberti has studied this issue systematically in his extensive work (see e.g. Galimberti, 2005, 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). We shall pay special attention to the relationship between nihilism and youth as presented in Galimberti's study on value dynamics among young Westerners (Galimberti, 2008). For the topic of transcultural communication, his ideas concerning encountering the incomprehensible Other are a source of inspiration. For Galimberti, teenagers are those "Others" whose world is not compatible with the world of their natural

superiors. This chapter applies the analysis of a conflict triggered by the clash with incomprehensibility to the question of transculturality in general.

The next section of the chapter presents three possibly positive aspects of the nihilistic character of society. First, we shall inquire whether challenging supposedly stable, yet not actually practiced beliefs can contribute to their revival or reformulation. Put simply: We often just talk about the foundations of our society, but in reality we cannot or we do not wish to respect them. If we challenge or cast doubt on these foundations, a platform is open for a true discussion about their revitalisation or – if that proves to be unsustainable – abandonment.

The next aspect is the possibility to deepen our understanding of people who are regarded as unfathomable by our culture. A society that clearly declares an affiliation with a certain value system offers minimal space to people who are at odds with the given values.

In contrast, an axiologically unstable society is in a critical (meaning likely to change radically, be it positively or negatively) situation that carries risk, but not every risk necessarily leads to a collapse or failure.¹

The third opportunity that prevailing nihilism might generate is the chance that an individual may perform the extremely difficult task of “stepping out”, the temporary abandonment of one’s culturally determined position. Such an act is considered as a basic condition for transcultural communication as such (Hojda, 2013b; Burda, 2013b). Stable and immutable, yet not consciously reflected ethical principles might be a hindrance to one’s capability to listen to the incomprehensible Other and understand him. On the contrary, critical thinking and readiness to doubt and revise is the type of mind set suitable for confronting otherness.

The three assumptions will be examined on the following pages. The aim of the chapter is to define the term of transcultural communication in the context of Western ethical emptiness.

2.1.1. Words and Meanings: Basic Terminology

Possible definitions of the word nihilism are manifold. We can see it as an attitude or worldview, as a philosophical movement or as a doctrine born at the turn of 19th century in Russia. Let us compare various approaches presented in philosophical dictionaries.

First, the general characteristics (Jan Sokol): “A belief that from the overall life experience of absolute worthlessness and senselessness deduces that nothing

¹ I am not trying to say that I find the idea of our society gambling on values appealing. I am not capable of such a reserved approach, and if I were, I would be worried because being a disinterested observer of one’s own culture implies a low chance of participating actively in the culture’s development. My aim is rather to underline that it is more rational to take part in a risky discussion about values than to claim the eternal validity of premises that are not only rejected by newcomers, but often also ignored by the locals.

is valid and nothing has a meaning. It rejects any possible foundation of truth or good that would be binding in the form of loyalty or faithfulness. More universally, doubt is cast on the validity of all respected values, religion etc.” (Sokol, 2007, p. 346).

Then a specification of various forms (Karel Floss): “[...] ontological nihilism (denying the existence of things), logical (denying the truth), gnoseological (denying cognition), religious (denying the existence of gods), ethical (denying the binding effect of moral values), political (denying the binding social order)” (*Filosofický slovník*, 2002, p. 289).

And finally its impacts (Jiří Olšovský): “Nowadays nihilism manifests itself through the incapability to ask questions and illustrate the present times; people only consume and enjoy their life” (Olšovský, 2005, p. 128).

Sokol’s definition oscillates between understanding nihilism as a destructive versus constructive phenomenon – a belief, thus an irreversible conviction, versus a doubt, thus reflection and a willingness to have a discussion. In this chapter, nihilism is understood in the second meaning. Concerning Floss’s division of nihilism into various types, we will mostly focus on ethical norms and moral principles. The formulation by Olšovský about the impacts of nihilism is a simplification and as we will see later on, it contradicts the active concept of nihilism. However, it captures the effects that Umberto Galimberti identifies in the behaviour of Western youth.

Two important thinkers who contributed to the discussion about nihilism in the history of European philosophy are Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. In Nietzsche’s work, we can distinguish between the passive and active form of nihilism (Nietzsche, 1926, 1999, 2009) that I partially adopt in this chapter. Heidegger, who is often in harmony with Nietzsche, but disagrees in the final judgement about metaphysics², understands nihilism as “a historical movement, and not just any view or doctrine advocated by someone or other. Nihilism drives history in the manner of a fundamental ongoing event. [...] Nihilism, thought in its essence, is, rather, the fundamental movement of the history of the West.” (Heidegger, 1977, cit. in Diken, 2009, p. 3). We should bare this observation in mind since it is related to a particular culture and its current situation.

To fully define the term of culture is probably an impossible task to fulfil.³ Nevertheless, it is a key term and without a consensus about its meaning we cannot understand Galimberti’s core thesis that “in the desert of senselessness spread by the nihilistic atmosphere of our times, our uneasiness is not only psychological, but also cultural” (Galimberti, 2008, p. 12).

² For more details on the polemics between Heidegger and Nietzsche, see Thurner (2009, p. 350–352).

³ Among recent Czech contributions, see Horáková (2012). Also the first issue of *Culturologia: The Journal of Culture* summarized several efforts to define culture in the context of the humanities and social sciences.

Our working definition of the term is as follows: Culture is a complex system that embraces all aspects of human existence, including material and immaterial entities. Culture (in singular) is an anthropologically universal phenomenon, but it resists unification – cultures (in plural) are diverse. In the citation quoted above, Galimberti understands the adjective “cultural” as “derived from the very essence of culture”, meaning the present culture of the West, as it will also be understood in this text.

Another word that might confuse the reader if its meaning were not contextualised is transcultural. In Czech philosophical dictionaries we would search for it in vain. Czech anthropological studies operate with the term inconsistently, often as if it were a synonym of intercultural or multicultural.⁴ Foreign sources⁵ use the expression, or more precisely a collocation of transcultural communication since 1990s, in the meaning of a spiral-like process “dialogue (→ openness) → intercultural education (→ intercultural competence) → multicultural identity → dialogue” (Baraldi, 2003, p. 179–180). The spiral is expected to lead to “a structure of relations between various cultural forms, based on their mutual harmonization, while the aim is to create a common “land-home”” (Baraldi, 2003, p. 179–180).⁶ It does not seem though that this approach moves the debate forward. What kind of communication is transcultural for us then?

For the time being we shall be content with the following: It is communication that results in the comprehensibility and believability (Hanvey, 1979) of the Other and their culture. How to achieve it and whether the nihilist character of today’s Euro-American society may help it is the theme of this chapter.

2.2 The Ordinary (Passive) Concept of Nihilism

On the first pages of his book, Umberto Galimberti characterizes the overall nihilistic atmosphere of the youth with the following words: “The present becomes the absoluteness of life with maximum intensity, not because this intensity brings joy, but because it promises to bury the anxiety that appears always when the landscape changes into a senseless desert” (Galimberti, 2008, p. 11). The nihilist setting is a life attitude that tears us from historical continuity, makes us adopt a temporarily hedonistic orientation and protects us from the much too disturbing awareness of the fact that we are completely indifferent to our own existence.

⁴ In order to mention all the usual contexts, there is also the field of transcultural communication in nursing and linguistic anthropology, but we leave these links aside.

⁵ So far there is no consensus about translation into the present *lingua franca*, which is English. The expressions of transcultural and cross-cultural are mixed and confused.

⁶ Baraldi himself is critical toward this concept and he claims that it is rooted in ethnocentrism (p. 183–190).

Also, the difference between the good and the bad, happiness and misfortune is insignificant, or as the case may be, those categories lose their meaning.

The biggest danger of nihilism thus consists in its ability to master our thinking. When that happens, all stable criteria, and moral and ethical rules are disqualified and abandoned. Such a risk, as Hannah Arendt noted, is not hidden in a singular thought, but in thinking in general: “Thinking can always attack thinking itself, it can turn old values upside down and declare that opposite values have become the new doctrine. [...] What we usually call nihilism [...] is actually a hazard hidden in the activity of thinking. There is no dangerous thought; thinking itself is dangerous” (Arendt, 2011, p. 194, cit. in Fine, 2011, p. 206). Arendt considers understanding as “a deeply *human* activity [...] and a specifically human way of life, because every individual needs to accept the world into which they have been born as strangers and where they will live as strangers until they die, each of them in his or her specific uniqueness” (Arendt, 2011, p. 308, cit. in Fine, 2011, p. 218). This is the basic foundation, the typically human need to reflect the world in which we have to live. At the same time, our ability to think inherently contains the danger of nihilism.

The Danish sociologist, political philosopher and theoretician of culture, Bülent Diken, briefly outlines the essence of passive nihilism in his laconically titled book *Nihilism*. Diken summarizes how Nietzsche or Deleuze understand nihilism and how it is mirrored in the works of Dostoyevsky and Turgenev. Nietzsche was also aware of the finding noticed by Arendt – that human reason can work as a weapon against life and values. He identifies the teaching of Socrates as the first step toward Western nihilism. Plato walks the same path with his understanding of the profane existence as a mere reflection of ideas from the outside world. This inability to establish values suitable for and from the mundane world was completed and confirmed by Christianity (Diken, 2009).

When a monotheistic religion (or any other institution denying that life has no value and there is no sense to be found in the world) fails (see Nietzsche’s thesis about the murder of God), people are doomed to be disoriented and without hope (Diken, 2009). Old values are discredited, the world in its actual form seems to be perverted. What mass reaction is at stake then? Umberto Galimberti offers quite a gloomy analysis of the passive nihilist stagnation, the paralysis caused by learning about the emptiness of the formal ideals of society. His study material is Western youth in the 21st century.

There are many spheres of life involved and we can make deductions about the destructive impact of the nihilist attitude of youth on themselves and the outer world from numerous manifestations thereof. On a general level, we may call it philosophical, the thing that is obvious from changing future expectations, which are very much a question of the present for young people. It is precisely when

meeting a child or a young person that we become aware of the continuity of life, we face our own past, we understand the flow of being and see quite clearly that it is children and young people who will have to face future challenges. Their readiness to answer those future questions (there is no need to call them problems right away) is to a certain level in our hands.

Galimberti quotes the Argentinean philosopher and psychoanalyst, Miguel Benasayag, and the French professor of child and teenage psychiatry, Gérard Schmit (Benasayag & Schmit, 2003), who characterize the change of the attitude toward the future as a move from a vision of the future as *a promise* to the vision of the future as *a danger* (Galimberti, 2008). The easiest remedy or rather a tranquilizing way to silence the existential suffering of a young person who is confronted on a daily basis with the fear of what is yet to come, is a hedonistic orientation.

We may add in this context that Diken cites the American cultural scientist, Karen Leslie Carr, who labels this state of mind as the banalisation of nihilism (Carr, 1992, cit. in Diken, 2009, p. 27). A situation that is in fact critical is seen as normal.⁷

Galimberti links attention focused only on the usage of present opportunities without considering possible impacts with a utilitarian attitude toward education, a narcissistic self-concept and a probability of being manipulated by the market (Galimberti, 2008). Diken adds an unlimited trust in science and scientism built on messianic atheism (Diken, 2009). This aspect of nihilism is not analysed in detail in Galimberti's work, but he points out the usual mechanistic approach of psychological and pedagogical counselling that is unable to handle the prevailing nihilist climate among youth and relies on pharmaceutical solutions.

According to Galimberti, the output of the passive nihilism of the youth, reinforced by a dysfunctional family background and a technicist educational system, is an eroded emotional and intimate life, drug addiction and a tendency to act in an extreme way, be it murder or suicide. If we do not manage to overcome this phase, the future of our society is in danger, because it is the nihilistic generations who will determine its further course. The way of interpreting contemporary nihilism is largely connected to our chances to defeat it. There is a different interpretation of nihilism that opens up the possibility of pushing it from a passive and negative phase to a qualitatively different phase – toward a (pro)active nihilism.

⁷ Galimberti illustrates the frightening aspect of considering nihilistic behaviour as normal through the example of the so-called case of guys from highway overpasses. This case occurred in Italy in 1990s when young men threw stones from highway overpasses onto cars passing by and caused substantial damage, as well as several deaths. These people were not able to understand the inhumane essence of their behaviour. They used words such as "nothing" or "normal" during interviews with high frequency. See Galimberti (2008), chapter Guys from Highway Overpasses and Nihilist Senselessness.

2.3 The Extraordinary (Active) Concept of Nihilism

In *The Uncanny Guest*, the creative surmounting of absencing values apparent in Western society is hinted at only. Galimberti does not present any focused analysis of the options for stimulating the move toward active nihilism, and he does not go beyond general statements:

“And if the remedy were elsewhere? Not in the tense search for meaning as required by the Judeo-Christian tradition, but in accepting what is inherent in us all – our virtues and our skills [...]? In that case, nihilism could, despite the absence of meaning that nihilism provokes, teach us that our existence is not justified by the revival of meaning, which we more desire (often without limits) than actually deserve according to our real competences, but by the art of living [...]. This art consists in the recognition of our capabilities [...] and in applying and developing them according to some measure [...]” (Galimberti, 2008, p. 14). However, this roughly sketched piece of advice is in accordance with Nietzsche and Deleuze, as presented by Diken. The point is that we cannot return to methods that led to the triumph of passive nihilism. The most efficient defence against it is not ordering “the uncanny guest” out, as Galimberti often reminds us by referring to Heidegger (1987), but courage to face it and accept the truth about the world that it reveals.

Diken calls this kind of defence transvaluation of values that we can only find in life itself, thus immanently. Transcendence, the sphere of metaphysics and religion, relies on values rooted out of the human universe. An active nihilism cannot again accept the belief in supernatural ideas. Its task is to find an anchor in the world here and now, without trust in any outer authority. Only immanence, the sphere of philosophy, is what enables us to achieve anti-nihilism, the perfect nihilism that is affirmative to this world and restores mutual dependence (Diken, 2009).

That is probably what Galimberti means when he calls for a direct confrontation with the nihilism of youth in its full strength.⁸ Such a confrontation can have serious consequences for anybody who is still living a lie about the validity about values and ideals that lost their meaning long ago. The truth that we have to interiorize is the truth about the banality of existence and the fake happiness in our everyday consumerist life. I have already described this moment of awaking elsewhere: “Uncovering this veil does not take place accompanied by ceremonial fanfares, like the uncovering of a famous compatriot’s sculpture. It happens quite indifferently and in the background we can only hear the noise of our streets and everyday conversations led without any real interest in the person with

⁸ “We must have the courage to experience fully the insignificance of human existence, otherwise we can never achieve a true dialogue with children. And only if we get closer to their truth, which is essentially a truth that nobody ever wants to accept, the doors for communication will open up” (Galimberti, 2008, p. 102).

whom we talk. The truth about our life flowing in an illusive and mechanistic way is certainly uncomfortable and worrying. As we can clearly see from the current social, political and economic climate, the longer we turn a blind eye to unpleasant facts about reality and hide ourselves in the presumed safety of our homes (be they material mental), the worse problems we will have to solve sooner or later” (Sokolíčková, 2013, p. 13). It is wise to endure the discomfort that we are experiencing when accused by young people of the insincerity with which we live our lives. An anti-nihilist is aware of the fact that absolute relativisation only leads us from insecurity to despair. That is why we need to actively direct critical thinking cultivated by the nihilist orientation toward a restoration of a mutual relationship with the real world and the real Other.

Galimberti is somewhat more concrete when talking about ethics that might succeed in the world illustrated and challenged by nihilism. He calls this ethical system *vagabond ethics* (*etica del viandante*), the ethics of a person who cannot be characterised as any of Bauman’s postmodern types such as the Tramp, the Onlooker, the Gambler or the Tourist (Bauman, 2002). Galimberti “invents” a fifth type of contemporary personality patterns. The Vagabond is not a pilgrim, and his journey has no evident goal, he is not attached to any transcendental horizon or transcendental vertical. He is focused exclusively on the present experience, he is only loosely bound to space (Galimberti calls this phenomenon de-territorialization) and he is ready for a never-ending confrontation with otherness (Galimberti, 2005, chapter 26: The vagabond ethics; Galimberti, 2008).

The active interpretation of nihilism that we have now briefly presented is the basis for the transformation of value relativism from a worldview to a mere method. It is impossible to live in a worthless and meaningless world, we can barely survive in such a place and mere life is probably not what we desire. Anybody, and especially those fostered by the Western culture based on the search for meaning for thousands of years, has to find the strength not to escape from the present social reality into a lie. And nihilism as an instrument (only a means and not a goal) can be seen as chance to live a Havelian life in truth.

2.4 Nihilism as a Method

We are now getting to the point whether and how to use the active interpretation of nihilism in the field of transcultural communication. As we have already mentioned in the introductory part of this chapter, the aim is communication that approaches a partner in dialogue as somebody who is understandable and whose culture is believable for us.

By believability we do not necessarily mean that we fully understand and above all accept and adopt all customs, cultural patterns and thoughts that derive from a person's cultural background. What is important at the beginning is to take such a stand that would originate neither in a tourist-like interest in anything bizarre and exotic, nor in a xenophobic refusal of otherness as something perverted and puzzling.

We have said that active nihilism means recognition of the fact that to rely *a priori* on values based in the European cultural tradition is unacceptable for the majority of society. The refusal of automatically transmitted values is particularly obvious by young people who, nevertheless, remain in a phase of passive nihilism that either leads to a passionate effort to get rid of existential burden through various distractions offering temporary pleasures, or to an unmotivated behaviour that annihilates life, one's own or somebody else's. In such a case active nihilism is a necessary condition on the way to an anti-nihilist attitude, which must be preceded by questioning deep-rooted, but long unfulfilled truths.

Which are those European (traditional) values that have been evoked by confident politicians, intellectuals and clergymen who would consider the possibility to regard nihilism as a positive phenomenon as completely mistaken? As a hypothesis ready to be falsified I suggest the statement that for European society, two principles are crucial for the future. Principles that indeed stem from our culture and that have developed here (which is something we could and should be proud of): equality and freedom. The third principle that I think cannot be omitted if transcultural communication is to help us achieve "a sustainable coexistence of people and of people and the world of all life" (Kohák, 2004, p. 25) is human humility toward nature. It is far more difficult to trace this principle in European history in comparison with equality and freedom, even though there were thinkers in every historical era who contributed to its consolidation.⁹ There is much study material still left in the history of non-European thought – some cultures have achieved a more developed stage of this attitude compared to ours.

Diken says that "the essential gesture of anti-nihilism is to propose returning to nature, the earth, as the source of values and belief" (Diken, 2009, p. 36). By this return, however, he does not mean any romantic illusion à la Rousseau or a mechanistic interpretation of Darwinism (Diken, 2009). The point is to accept and interiorize the fact that nothing is a more reliable guideline for the regulation of life in society than the mutual dependency of the human and natural worlds.

Natural ties are complemented with ties to the social aspect of human existence. Equality and freedom are (so far unfulfilled in any society completely) principles without which transcultural communication can never work. Inequality excludes the culture of the Other as unbelievable (if we are not equal, neither are our

⁹ Readers interested in environmentally based humility see Sokolíčková (2012).

cultures). The absence of freedom excludes the Other as incomprehensible (if the freedom of one of the communicating participants is limited, we are not talking about a dialogue, but about its caricature of power).

We can discuss other, supposedly key European values (immanent ones like the “traditional family” or transcendental ones, which active nihilism disregards as we have explained on the previous pages), yet I consider their importance for transcultural communication as secondary.

Another methodological benefit of the nihilist foundation can be the essential openness toward communication with newcomers. As Galimberti shows in the example of vagabond ethics, a person fully engaged in the present world who renounces revolutionary acts (because they would always have to bear in mind the final goal of such acts) is not selective in their readiness to engage in dialogue. There are no criteria that would enable one participant to silence a partner. The Vagabond does not travel anywhere in particular, he stops with anybody he meets, otherness is a natural quality of social existence for him.

The last potentially useful consequence of active nihilism is the chance that the Vagabond, used to diversity and carefully analyzing the relevance of all values that would help him regain stability again, manages to dwell in the liminal state of mind (*threshold*, it. *soglia*). We understand the threshold as a non-place, as a space where the differences between those who meet there can be put in parentheses (Baraldi, 2003). Here the problem of identity appears because identity cannot be constantly blurred. Cultural and social anthropology has shown that the construction of identity, even though it is a dynamic and multilayered process, is an anthropological constant. A person without identity is inhuman, without a face and thus unable to perceive the face of the Other.

The liminal position that an active nihilism can take is only temporary, but still painful (Baraldi, 2003). Nevertheless, the chances that an active nihilist will at least try to open up the borders of their life and step into no man’s land where all participants of the dialogue will feel equally (in)secure is higher compared to somebody who never doubts and feels rooted in their culture and values that are declared as eternally valid. As Robert Hanvey, an American specialist on global education, says, “dispelling the strangeness of the foreign and admitting the humanness of all human creatures is vitally important” (Hanvey, 1979, p. 55). As long as we stay in our culturally determined position, we are – quite naturally – under the influence of ethnocentrism. It is not possible to step out of one’s culture forever and it would not even be desirable, but the capability to meet the Other beyond the limits of our worlds will be the key skill for transcultural communication in the future.

2.5 Transculturality: Dialogue in spite of Culture

How do we define transculturality from the nihilist perspective, which can on the one hand be the fatal phase of a developed society as the “uneasiness in culture”¹⁰ of young people nowadays suggests, and on the other hand it can work as a method thanks to which we could smoothly overcome the critical phase?

At this moment it will be helpful to look closer at the terms of multiculturalism and interculturality, and how they differ from transculturality. We will not dive into a detailed study of all possible connotations of the words as they are used in the academic and public discourse because it would be a tedious and probably useless effort. It will be enough to specify the basic difference between these three terms, while only transculturality is a correct way (or even a state of society?) that might work out well.¹¹

The multicultural society / vision / strategy / ideology counts on the parallel existence of various forms of otherness next to each other, and it hopes that this simple “being together” will lead to mutual enrichment. It is a type of coexistence that is not essentially dialogical, but multi-monological.

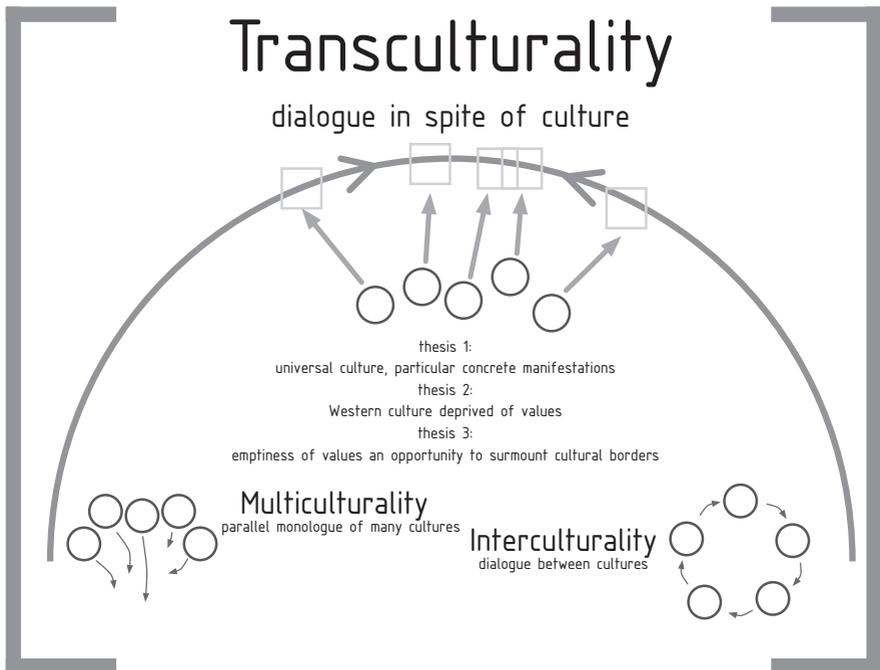
The idea of interculturality evokes the situation when several cultures establish mutual interaction. We can imagine this situation as a round table where representatives of each cultural entity sit and argue from their culturally determined standpoints. There have been numerous attempts to establish such an intercultural (or interreligious) dialogue, many of them with success. However, in this case we cannot speak about coming out from a respective position and reaching the liminal space of unconditioned acceptance of the Other as comprehensible, and their culture as believable.

Transculturality means a dialogue *in spite of* culture. It is inaccurate to use the preposition *across*, because when crossing something we necessarily remain inside it, whereas the Latin *trans* invites. A dialogue in spite of cultural differences that we establish (even though temporarily with a clear methodological motivation explained by the active nihilist approach) is a dialogue outside cultural determination. Despite the differences between people that occur within the process of enculturation it is feasible for them to communicate with each other. In addition, communication is enforced when active nihilism manages to deal with the destructive tendencies in today’s society. The Vagabond, who is bound to the natural world through humility and to the human world through the eternal demand for freedom and equality, can look into the eyes of the Other on his way from nowhere to nowhere and understand his otherness.

¹⁰ U. Galimberti repeatedly uses this term taken from the thought of Sigmund Freud, see Freud (1998).

¹¹ For questions related to a problematic multicultural approach see Krize v multikulturalismu (2012).

The illustration below tries to capture graphically the difference between the three terms mentioned above.



Picture 1: Interculturality, Multiculturality, Transculturality (Source: Author)

2.6 Nihilistic Anti-Nihilism

Any speculation about the potential positive impact of nihilism on transcultural communication should avoid an absolute generalisation of their outputs. The approach that has been analysed in this chapter is only one of many. The deviation from the transcendental level and the shift toward the immanent level can frighten a religious person who can see it as equally hopeless as passive nihilism itself. Yet for a non-religious person who considers the nihilist standpoint as more convincing and who does not intuitively experience the meaning of existence as predetermined and targeted, it can be a safer guideline on one's life journey than simple nihilist resignation.

To practice active nihilism that is supposed to lead to an anti-nihilist approach and a renewed relationship to being is an individual task of significant difficulty. The anthropologically conditioned tendency to live rooted within a societal order, and rely on the validity of cultural and ethical patterns and the credibility of institutions cannot be easily dismissed. Every human being has to struggle with it, even the most sceptical and critical ones. We cannot live in an environment from which we have no expectations and with which we never interact because of a pre-understanding. Without expectations, hope and trust it is impossible to relate to other people, too. Active nihilism requires a certain amount of courage to be solitary, to reconcile with the fact that a human being is alone in the world. This knowledge should not trigger a castaway's bitter fight for survival. Quite the contrary, it should be comforting as the Other whom we meet on our solitary (rather than lonely) journey has no extra support either. That is why we may dare to leave the safe space of our cultural identity. We return with the experience of having met another human being whose worldview is different from ours, yet it is still the legitimate worldview of an equal and free person bound to nature.

3

TRANSCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN REGION: FREEDOM, EQUALITY AND TIES WITH THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

What is the most urgent challenge for the present times? Which struggle is the most intractable in contemporary Central Europe? Well, it depends whom you ask. It is likely that economists would point to economic issues, sociologists would come up with sociological ones and environmentalists would suggest environmental problems. Social science (that is science that inquires into various aspects of the human relationship to the world, which implies that both economics and cultural ecology are included) suffers from the disease of specialization (Snow, 1964) and lacks a thoroughly holistic approach.

Despite the abiding wish of many experts to present their disciplines as exact sciences analysing hard data, social science remains tightly bound to subjectivity.¹² In addition, the questions it asks are inevitably linked to politics, which has no scientific basis at all, yet we often live under the illusion that social science is indeed an objective field of study without any political impact. Different actors on the political stage offer different solutions to the pressing problems of our society, and this is perceived as legitimate, but claiming that economics, sociology, philosophy or cultural ecology should also respond to the unresolved dilemmas of our times would be rejected as being overtly ideological. Scientists should describe and politicians prescribe, should they not?

Nevertheless, a closer look makes it clear that there is no chance of dealing successfully with any of the issues that the risk society (Beck, 1992) is facing unless all possible actors collaborate. In other words, we need collective action within the spheres of politics, and natural and social science including economics, civic society, and religion, just to name the most important ones.

Such a general call, however, would not lead to any tangible results if we were not able to specify the tasks awaiting us. This text elaborates on the issue of present-day difficulties in the region of Central Europe, including cultural

¹² By subjectivity I do not mean only stands taken by an individual but also "collective subjectivity", thus attitudes adopted by groups of people that have enough power to influence the public discourse.

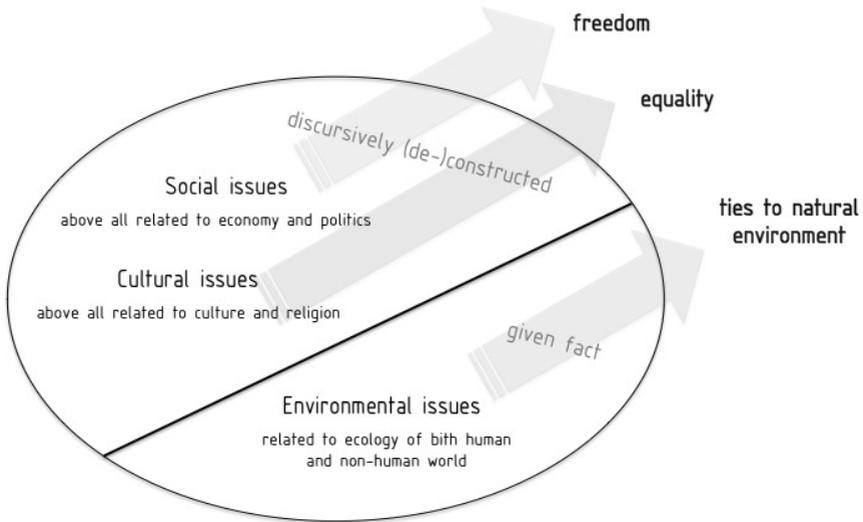
heterogeneity, and ideas (principles, postulates) that could lead us out from a chaotic social climate that has recently become quite violent.

There is plenty of literature on Central Europe, see e.g. Vávra, Lapka & Cudlínová (2014), even though it is hardly ever approached from an environmental perspective. The reader might feel puzzled – how could environmentalism be of use when discussing immigration, social disparities or cultural clashes? On the following pages, three phenomena are considered for a better overview of “the heart of Europe”: freedom, equality and ties to the natural environment. The first two concepts have been discursively constructed (and de-constructed), while the latter is the only given and unquestionable fact, i.e. humans have immutable ties to nature.¹³ And it is these bonds with the natural environment that we can learn from environmentalism.

The initial thesis of the chapter is the following statement: One of the main contemporary challenges of Central Europe is to learn how to deal with social, cultural and environmental issues in a coherent, interconnected way. Such a holistic strategy can only be built upon basic assumptions that would guide our society in the face of strong social, political, economic, cultural or ecological pressures. The text offers a response to each aspect of human endeavour facing challenges, as indicated in the illustration below:

The contribution is divided into two main parts. In the first chapter, the current Central European landscape is described, starting from the general characteristics in terms of culture, society, politics, economy, and ecology, and moving on to the more specific themes of society, culture and environment. The second chapter inquires into the principles of freedom, equality and bonds with the natural environment, their meaning and ramifications. Methodologically, the text is based on an analysis of primary documents and secondary data.

¹³ One might argue that everything regarding people, their relationship to nature included, is in a way socially constructed. I do not doubt that modern science substantially influences our attitude toward nature. Nevertheless, when I say that our ties to the natural environment are a given, I am not speaking about values or attitudes. I am merely asserting that whatever people think or believe, their life is dependent upon nature and culture does have an impact on the natural environment.



Picture 2: Challenges of Central Europe (Source: Author)

3.1. The Transcultural Overview of Central Europe

Before we dive into the actual analysis, basic terms such as *Central Europe*, *cultural heterogeneity* and *transcultural* should be defined.

In this text, Central Europe is approached as an ambiguous “mental community”¹⁴ rather than a closed geographical area. Nevertheless, there are some historical, environmental as well as cultural ties between Central European countries that allow us to conceptualize this part of Europe as a whole.¹⁵

The countries we include within the term is a question of consensus, e.g. there is a European Union grant programme called Central Europe that encourages cooperation among the following countries (or parts of them) in the region: Austria, the Czech Republic, parts of Germany, Hungary, parts of Italy, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and parts of Ukraine.¹⁶

¹⁴ It was B. Anderson (1991) who introduced the concept of an imagined mental community that is coherent and cohesive although it is impossible to know personally all its members.

¹⁵ “Central Europe [...] has never existed as a real or firm unit, it has always been just ‘in people’s heads’” (Havelka, 2006, p. 11–12). Havelka’s text neatly summarizes the discussion about the relevance and content of the term.

¹⁶ The fact that not always entire countries count as belonging to Central Europe illustrates the concept’s complexity. We shall not dwell on the issue of defining Central Europe further since it is not the purpose of the text to challenge the rationality of the expression. As for the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme itself, Ukraine has been removed from the list of cooperating countries in the 2014–2020 period, probably for political reasons.



Picture 3: The Region of Central Europe (Source: <http://www.central2013.eu>)

By cultural heterogeneity, what is intended is the existence of different cultural patterns within a (geographically determined or simply imagined) particular area. The word ‘culture’ comprises more than just folklore or the arts. It also includes material background, behaviour, attitudes and beliefs. Central Europe is (and has always been, even though the level of diversity is rising) culturally heterogeneous in the sense that people with dissimilar and sometimes conflicting worldviews live their lives next to each other, unable to avoid – as Emmanuel Lévinas would say – meeting the Other.

If one of the most striking features of culture is its variability, transculturality might be understood as a societal state in which cultures differentiate, become ever more complex, mix, network and hybridize (Welsch, 1999), and the need to communicate, despite cultural disparities, becomes vitally important. Our society’s *transcultural capital*, if I may coin such a term, does not consist of what various cultures simply have in common. Rather, it embraces ideas and principles that disregard cultural affiliation; in other words, ideas that are culturally independent. Whether there are any will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

3.1.1 Where We Stand: Central Europe Nowadays

The thrilling aspect of the region in question that covers over 1 million km² and is home to more than 140 million people (*CENTRAL EUROPE 2020*, 2014, p. 5) is the ambivalent nature of its identity. Throughout history, vast areas of Central Europe used to be included in mighty empires with a truly multicultural outlook (e.g. the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, as well as Prussia to some extent), while at the end of the 19th century the fight for independence fuelled by the idea of the nation state was initiated. After WWI, the map of the region looked quite similar to the current one. WWII caused immense changes again, mostly in regard to the structure of the population, but also the economy and politics as “West” and “East” began to mean a fundamentally different thing in the post-war period. Nowadays, we can speak neither of a unified Central Europe nor of a zone of completely free and independent countries; some parts of it belong to so-called developed countries with democratic laws and a civil society for almost a century, some (such as the Czech republic) have freed themselves from the influence of the totalitarian Soviet regime little more than two decades ago and there are places (such as Ukraine) where an external superpower still hinders the country’s authentic development. The political and economic entity of the European Union seems to work as a facilitator towards unity, even though there are voices raised against its proclaimed legitimacy and the future of the Union is unclear.

Central Europe “owns a large number of assets but also faces numerous challenges, [such as] globalisation and economic development; social cohesion; demographic change; climate change; energy; natural and cultural resources; accessibility, transport and communication infrastructure; and governance structures” (*CENTRAL EUROPE 2020*, 2014, p. 6). Let us briefly comment on the most important of these.

From an economic point of view, the share of welfare and investment potential is very uneven, due to a certain extent to the historical divide mentioned above but also because of the diverse character of particular regions. Urban agglomerations largely differ from rural areas that suffer from a brain drain; some locations are highly dependent on tourism as their only substantial source of income, which makes them vulnerable during economic crises such as the one we are currently experiencing (*CENTRAL EUROPE 2020*, 2014). A superficial impression from Central European cities might make one believe that the transition process has succeeded, yet the negative impacts of “the change in technology and the shift to consumer markets as the economic driving force, allied to the opening up of the countries’ economy to imports and the deregulation of financial markets” (Addy & Silný, 2003, p. 4) are very much present to this day. One of the most destructive effects of the badly managed transition period was a general loss of

trust¹⁷ – local authorities and politicians, foreign advisers, entrepreneurs, etc. – disappointed the population and strengthened the feeling of insecurity (rooted in people’s minds already under the communist regime) in an incomprehensible world.¹⁸ We shall get back to this point in the second part of the chapter where the values and core principles of transcultural communication are discussed.

Social conditions in Central Europe are correspondingly unbalanced. Social polarisation, segregation, unemployment, risk of poverty (*CENTRAL EUROPE 2020*, 2014) – those are some of the most pressing issues the region has to tackle.¹⁹ They are interconnected with rather gloomy demographic trends; there is a clear tendency toward an ageing and shrinking population. In addition, “enhanced migration to CE²⁰ as well as within CE to more affluent regions next to changes in family structures are likely to occur. Consequently, fast changes in social life are to be expected across CE and beyond” (Scopetta, Macháčová, Moser, 2013, p. 1). We shall reflect upon the topic of migration later in this text.

As for the question of the environment, Central Europe is expected to keep experiencing the impacts of climate change, especially floods and droughts. In almost every year recently, 2013 and 2014 included, the region has faced extreme weather conditions and unusual seasonal events. The fact that we still greatly rely on fossil energy sources²¹ and energy imports (e.g. from Russia) makes the area even less prepared for the future (*CENTRAL EUROPE 2020*, 2014). Among the most urgent issues regarding the environment we could list the following: “the fragmentation of habitats, biodiversity loss, water, soil and air pollution and unsustainable management practices and usage conflicts” (*CENTRAL EUROPE 2020*, 2014, p. 9). Generally speaking, Central Europe still is – environmentally – quite a pleasant place to live, but serious threats to public health and both human and non-human wellbeing do exist in particular areas.

¹⁷ I would like to acknowledge Peter Moreé, who mentioned it at the conference Our Common Present, Prague, in March 2013, for this idea.

¹⁸ “As well as the immediate economic problems faced by CEE economies, there is a huge problem that has been created by the way in which the transformation has been carried out. *The destruction of human and social capital has been enormous*” (Addy & Silný, 2003, p. 7, *my italics*). And elsewhere in Addy’s and Silný’s work: “The rapid privatisation was carried out in a way which did not respect positive *cultural and ethical values* within the region” (p. 8, *my italics*).

¹⁹ What is more, criminality, corruption and mafia practices increased dramatically in the region after 1989. (Addy & Silný, 2003)

²⁰ States in the former “West” are still more attractive as immigrant countries in comparison to newer EU Member States, despite the fact that the economies of Poland or Slovakia are growing much faster than those of Austria or Germany. There might be several reasons for it: the tradition of emigration to older Member States, networks of friends and relatives already settled there, established NGOs and state institutions working in the field, immigration and multiculturalism reflected in law, a well-organized system of social benefits for immigrants and asylum seekers, etc.

²¹ Renewable energy is on rise, but doubling or even tripling the share of the energy pie is still insufficient if we look at absolute numbers. According to Eurostat, in 2012, 14% of the EU-28’s energy came from renewable sources, 11% in the Czech Republic (Eurostat, 2014a).

Cultural and natural resources, on the other hand, are rich in variety. Diversity both in culture and nature are among the most apparent strengths of the region. Central Europe is home to numerous ethnic and linguistic minorities; its landscape is full of cultural and natural heritage sites and human creativity has the potential to boost their quality of life. And to do so, Central Europe has to become aware of its ruinous deficiencies in the social, cultural and environmental spheres.

3.1.2 Challenge #1 – Irresponsible Freedom and the Nightmare of Competitiveness

The year 1989 is often associated with the victorious fight for freedom that the communist regimes denied to Central Europeans who were unlucky enough to live to the East of the Iron Curtain. Freedom as such is a loaded expression; its meaning is culturally²² and historically²³ dependent. In other words, to explain and to agree on what freedom means is far more difficult than, let us say, describing and comprehending the idea of gravity. Many current problems and future pitfalls for Central Europe (such as low political participation, corruption, embezzlement of public property, etc.) are caused by the arbitrary uses and abuses of the word “freedom”.²⁴

A basic definition could be “the absence of constraint” (Blackburn, 1994, p. 146), yet the transition period in former communist countries such as the Czech republic, Slovakia or Hungary clearly proves that a lack of rules leads to chaos and misconduct rather than a free and flourishing society. A more concrete, positive definition is “a condition of liberation from social and cultural forces that are perceived as impeding full self-realization” (Blackburn, 1994, p. 146).

The opportunity to make the best use of one’s own talents was indeed greatly desired in the region some 25 years ago, but the development that took place in Central Europe shows that decoupling freedom from responsibility (political, social, ecological, etc.) has been a great failure. In fact, “the growth of freedom must encompass the growth of responsibility, which means accepting the ever growing restrictions which are necessary for the shared existence of humanity” (Kostolníková, 2011, p. 57). If we want to foster freedom, the absence of constraints leads us down a blind alley. The perverted concept of freedom, interpreted in

²² By cultural dependence, I mean the undeniable grounding of the concept of freedom – as e.g. the United Nations presents it in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* – in the Christian religion, which is the corner stone of the European (or more precisely, Euro-American) ethos. This fact is hard to ignore despite the reluctance of the EU to acknowledge it officially.

²³ By historical dependence, even within one (European) culture, I mean the dynamic evolution of the understanding of the term throughout the centuries, see e.g. freedom in ancient Greece versus freedom in the Middle Ages versus freedom after WWII.

²⁴ In the Czech context, a good illustration of how a different philosophical background can influence the specific political actions of a country’s leading politician would be the divergent notions of freedom according to former presidents Václav Havel and Václav Klaus.

the 1990s as freedom to do whatever one wishes, made the Central European nations believe that the Western welfare state could be copied-pasted overnight (Ágh, 2012), the failure of which led to bitter disappointment and scepticism.²⁵

Loosening the restrictions of economic activity in the name of a very limited and antisocial approach to freedom went hand in hand with the glorification of competitiveness.²⁶ On the website of the Centre for International Competitiveness, it is defined as “the capability of an economy to maintain increasing standards of living for those who participate in it,²⁷ by attracting and maintaining firms with stable or rising market shares in an activity” (Centre for International Competitiveness, n. d.). The European Commission, whose policies and measurements are crucial for the future course of Central European countries, has recently introduced the notion of regional competitiveness,²⁸ which is more elaborate and takes into account the various levels and multiple outcomes of economic activity than just the usual neoliberal focus on further profit. Nevertheless, in the rhetoric of the politicians of several Central European countries (and in the actions of their governments, too), competitiveness has become a mantra that justifies severe cuts to public expenditure and the introduction of austerity measures. As a result, if there is any positive legacy from the socialist past in the Central European region (such as the importance of fair access to health care, education, social benefits, etc.), it has weakened along the way “back to Europe”, and thus to the standards of Western countries that are (and that is the paradox of the current phase of capitalism) far from being globally competitive.²⁹

A true return to the idea of Europe³⁰ would mean a serious reconsideration of European values such as freedom and human rights. It is of great importance whether we evaluate quality of freedom and the level of human rights in absolute or relative terms. Compared to countries in Africa, Latin America, South-East Asia, or even the US where the death penalty still exists, Europe, including Central

²⁵ This fact is sometimes expressed as the paradox of “more freedom, less security” (Ágh, 2012, p. 5), but I would argue that separating the feeling of freedom from the feeling of security is just as unwise as separating it from responsibility. According to a poll conducted between the years 2000 and 2007 by the Czech Centre for Empirical Research, 88% of Czechs appreciate that more goods and services became available after 1989, while less than 20% recognize that fairness, security, order and the moral profile of society have improved (STEM, 2007). Consumerism is thus encouraged at the expense of solidarity and social cohesion.

²⁶ In general, the question of measuring and constructing relevant indexes is complex and there is not enough space here to elaborate on it properly. The paradigm has changed over the last decade or two and new, more holistic indexes (such as the Genuine Progress Indicator – GPI, Happy Planet Index – HPI, Sustainability Index – SI, Bertelsmann Transformation Index – BTI, etc.) have appeared in competition to the GDP. For more information see e.g. Andersen (2013).

²⁷ Please note that “standard of living”, not “quality of life” is at stake. Also, only economic participants, not people whose economic activity is limited or unquantifiable (such as child care, housekeeping, volunteering etc.), are expected to profit from competitiveness.

²⁸ For further information on the definition and broader context, see Annoni & Kozovska (2010).

²⁹ It seems that contemporary China, a country that has always eclectically adopted useful concepts and measures from the outside world, is also entering a period of economic stagnation, if not decline, which confirms that the global economy without global ethics (Küng, 2000) works to the detriment of human welfare.

³⁰ See e.g. Patočka (1992), Horyna (2001) or Reale (2005).

Europe, is a free continent where human rights are comparatively well respected. Nevertheless, if we look at the growing number of – often young and qualified – people living life on the breadline, at the working conditions of migrants, women, elderly and other vulnerable groups, or at the levels of xenophobia, racism and other forms of socially generated hatred, enthusiastic statements about freedom and human rights would seem out of place.³¹

Central European countries liberated themselves from the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century and even though the danger of totalitarianism is always present, we have the language at our disposal that enables us to describe and comprehend totalitarian mechanisms.³² We are speechless, though, when confronted with phenomena such as competitiveness, economic growth and asocial individualism, which have profoundly changed the mental landscape in the region. A new form of slavery, this time without an easily recognisable apparatus and identifiable leaders, is the political and social challenge of Central Europe in the 21st century.

3.1.2 Challenge #2 – 1st Class Citizens, 2nd Class Citizens and the Rest

Even though Central European states do not belong to the top European immigrant countries,³³ cultural heterogeneity has always been relatively high in the area and is rapidly increasing as a result of various global trends. The fall of the Iron Curtain was obviously a turning point. “Prior to 1990 migration was severely limited in all countries of the region. [...] Since the early 1990s the situation has been changing dramatically. [...] The region witnessed a huge increase in complexity of migration forms – from labour mobility through transit migration to forced migration of asylum seekers and refugees. In many countries of the region immigrants of different status appeared for the first time in the post-war history” (Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, 2005, p. 4).

It goes without saying that migration depends on complex demographic, economic and political factors. It is impossible to inquire into migration thoroughly in the Central European region – there are hundreds of pages containing statistical data and analyses thereof, and scholarly work on this topic is plentiful.³⁴ In this text, we shall examine the issue of equality that is at stake when cultures and religions clash. Examples of well-established democracies in Western Europe,

³¹ One sad example among Central European countries is Hungary where the state constitution was changed in 2013, putting clear constraints on freedom and liberty. In 2014, President V. Orbán stated that liberal democracy is not the right path for Hungary.

³² Starting with the analysis of Hannah Arendt in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* first published in 1951 and continuing up to the investigation of Timothy Snyder in his book *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, published in 2010.

³³ According to Eurostat, in 2012 emigrants outnumbered immigrants in the Czech Republic and Poland. All other CE countries report growing immigration (Eurostat, 2014b).

³⁴ In the Czech Republic, a valid source of information in this respect is Multicultural Centre Prague with its specialized library.

such as Switzerland³⁵ or the United Kingdom,³⁶ where freedom of movement is questioned and immigration quotas have been introduced, might indicate the future trend for Central Europe as well.

Issues related to culture, in the broad anthropological meaning of the word, attract a lot of attention as the superficial and formal ideology of multiculturalism loses its defenders.³⁷ It is remarkable though that it is often culture rather than social and economic causes that is often pinpointed as a generator of problems, whether it be the case of Roma citizens or Muslim immigrants. Culture certainly does matter and there are indeed cultural differences that can easily cause misunderstandings or even conflicts. Yet if we confuse cultural determination with social or economic factors, it would be difficult to achieve any solution that would not destroy the image of an inclusive society. Let me explain why.

Central European countries, as they all are Member States of the EU, comply with EU policies in the field of social inclusion. The official motto “Unity in Diversity” expresses the readiness of Europeans to accept and incorporate the various cultures and traditions of the continent. Such an enlightened notion of equality, where differences are legitimate and not discriminated against, is a theoretical concept that is unfortunately pushed to the sidelines as soon as the economy stumbles.³⁸ In other words, we agree with the idea of being equal and entitled to preserve our cultural habits as long as our material standard of living is guaranteed to increase. Central Europeans showed great enthusiasm and openness after 1989, but with the economic crisis that began in 2008, fraternity, which necessarily leads to a collective fate (of Central European countries together with all EU Member States), became an inconvenient burden. Western Europe looks down on Southern and Central Europe and since the mechanism of victimization (Burda, 2013a) works and the weakest link in the chain is always accused first, immigrants labelled as culturally incompatible are most unwelcome. We blame culture, but for economic reasons.

Visible acts of hostility towards “them”, whoever “them” may be (though they are certainly not “us”), take place in all Central European countries and the rate of violence and discrimination against migrants and minorities is alarming. According to the *European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey* published in 2009, Central Europeans report being the target of unfair behaviour in Western countries such as Ireland or United Kingdom, while at the same time Roma are heavily discriminated against in Central Europe.

³⁵ See the anti-immigration referendum held and won in Switzerland in February 2014 (Traynor, 2014).

³⁶ See David Cameron's negative stand taken on migration in the EU, expressed in the Financial Times on 26th November 2013.

³⁷ For deeper insight into the topic of multiculturalism and its future potential see Sokoličková et al. (2012).

³⁸ On 15th October 2013, the Financial Times published an article entitled “Europe: United by hostility” (Chaffin, 2013).

Among the “top five” countries experiencing the highest level of discrimination are three countries from the region in question, namely the Czech Republic,³⁹ Hungary and Poland (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009). We can hypothesise about certain amounts of “cascade intolerance” against migrants and minorities when injustice experienced abroad correlates with unfair behaviour towards the socially and economically disadvantaged in the country of origin.

Apart from irresponsible freedom and the nightmare of competitiveness, Central Europe is facing the challenge of an imbalance in terms of its inhabitants’ dignity. No matter how loud the EU elites protest against the common perception regarding 1st and 2nd class citizens (Barroso, 2014), civic equality is – for the time being – an illusion in Central Europe.

3.1.4 Challenge #3 – Ignorance of Being Tied to the Natural Environment

In 1989, those parts of Central Europe that are situated to the East of the former Iron Curtain stood on the cusp of a new era. The capitalist experience of Western countries could have taught them some lessons about the natural environment and the folly of sacrificing resources, clean air or whole landscapes for the sake of short-term economic benefits. In 1995, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, a German scientist and politician, made a speech in Prague in which he warned against the impacts of an ecological crisis that would be likely to occur unless action was taken on time. “Most Central Europeans do not perceive the challenges that Central Europe is facing nowadays as ecological ones. There exist good reasons, though, to take the natural environment very seriously in the heart of Europe” (Weizsäcker, 1995, p. 5). In his defence of ecological effectiveness, Weizsäcker rightly predicted the future risks of unemployment, low competitiveness and the consequent reluctance to invest in environmental protection because of its overly high costs. Cheap energy and natural resources would allow companies to increase their immediate profit at the expense of the population in the future said Weizsäcker, and encouraged Central Europe to strive for ecological efficiency.

Almost 20 years after his speech, the region is suffering from many diseases and hesitating about the introduction of identified yet unpopular re-

³⁹ “The issue of national minorities [...] is in many ways problematic in the Czech republic. [...] A negative view on Roma and a requirement of a hard stand against them belongs to fundamental program points of extreme right-wing movements. [...] For the Czech republic, the identity of national and ethnic minorities will continue to be an important topic in the following decades because there is an increase in the number of foreigners who want to live here permanently” (Nosková & Bednařík, 2011, p. 7).

medies.⁴⁰ It should be mentioned that a very optimistic view on the environmental aspect of the transition process in Central European countries is presented by Archibald & Bochniarz (2008) and Wilkinson (2008). Wilkinson praises the wisdom and courage of Central Europeans who supposedly underwent an elegant and environmentally responsible transition from communism to capitalism. The application of the Kuznets curve⁴¹ to Central European countries leads to the claim that “transition does not necessarily affect sustainability adversely” (Archibald & Bochniarz, 2008, p. 42). Alas, the high level of ecological vulnerability of the region (*Regional Challenges in the Perspective of 2020 – Phase 2: Deepening and Broadening the Analysis: Final Report*, 2011) proves the contrary. Some dangerous environmental legacies of the previous regime have been successfully overcome, others continue and new ones have emerged. “Many problems inherited from state socialism have persisted and new environmental problems have been created by some of the changes since 1989” (Pavlinek & Pickles, 2000, p. 286).

Changes, often irreversible, to the natural environment are closely related to human endeavours, but so far they have affected the marginalized and the poor much more than the privileged and the affluent.⁴² Central Europeans, despite their inferiority complex towards Westerners, are among the most advantaged peoples in comparison with the so-called Third World. Nevertheless, the level of exposure to natural hazards also differs greatly within the area according to social and economic status. Taking the Czech republic as an example, regions with the highest rates of air pollution such as northeast Moravia (Ostrava and its surroundings) or northwest Bohemia (Ústí nad Labem and its surroundings) are also regions struggling with social disparities and racism.

Mózes Szekély from the ELTE University in Budapest underlines the fact that “ecological and social problems cross conceptual and geographic boundaries” (2003, p. 97). He quotes Kofi Annan who concluded his report *We the peoples* stating that “leaving to successor generations an environmentally sustainable future emerge[s] as one of the most daunting challenges of all” (2000, p. 17). Central European countries have always been both socially and environmentally

⁴⁰ “Protecting the Central European environment now and for future generations is one of the pre-conditions for sustainable growth. This is particularly relevant for Central Europe where an economic catching-up process is taking place, creating both new opportunities as well as threats for the environment” (<http://www.central2013.eu>). Sustainable growth, itself a problematic concept, is thus the EU's goal for caring for the natural environment in CE. Some of the consequences of the “economic catching-up process” have been discussed in the previous pages.

⁴¹ “The environmental Kuznets curve hypothesizes that environmental damage first increases with rising income and then declines” (Archibald & Bochniarz, 2008, p. 35). According to this liberalist approach, environmental degradation is a necessary cost of economic growth in its initial phase. Several Central European countries, the Czech Republic included, applied this “act now, think later” attitude during the 1990s.

⁴² See e.g. the study *The geography of poverty, disasters and climate extremes in 2030* (Shepherd, 2013). The poorest, such as sub-Saharan Africans or South Asians, are often also those most exposed to natural risks. A strong voice advocating for the eradication of poverty as the most requisite environmental measure is Bjørn Lomborg.

intertwined, and so are their current problems, triggered by globalisation and environmental tragedies such as climate change.⁴³

But which institution is responsible for a positive development? A young woman from Prague told Robert Wilkinson when asked about the most urgent challenge facing a free Central Europe: “It is us, of course. It is our way of thinking” (Wilkinson, 2008, p. 12). The importance of top-down environmental policies is certainly not to be underestimated, yet what counts even more is what the people think, what they consider vitally important and what values they stand for in their everyday lives. In other words, “the focus of issues is determined by the awareness of values” (Szekély, 2003, p. 97). In the following chapter, we shall discuss the Central European notion of the value of freedom much invoked and misused in the economic sphere, the value of equality challenged by rising cultural diversity, and the value of respect for nature attracting deeper but not wider attention.

3.2 A Road Map for the Present Times

The idea of an ethos valid for the region of Central Europe cannot really be supported by documented facts and hard statistical data; in this part we move on to ethics and philosophical anthropology. I have argued that Central European countries are dealing with several issues, the nature of which might seem disconnected although they are in fact interlinked and therefore have to be handled holistically. First, economics takes precedence over politics and ethics, we distrust key state institutions and our opportunities in life (housing, health care, education, work, etc.) become gradually constrained. Second, distinctiveness in culture and religion is perceived as ever more disturbing, sometimes as a weak excuse for economic protectionism, sometimes as a sign of pure xenophobia and racism. And third, “nature’s life-sustaining services, on which our species depends for its survival, are being seriously disrupted and degraded by our own everyday activities” (Szekély, 2003, p. 96), while the pace of progress in sustainability is far too slow. Are there any ethical values that might guide us at present toward a better future?

Umberto Galimberti (2009b) claims that the old ethical systems that once worked in Europe no longer function due to the dramatic changes of living conditions in the so-called technological era. He proposes a provisional *vagabond ethics* according to which there are no stable principles and no perceptible horizon to anchor our values. Galimberti’s

⁴³ With the exception of Austria and the eastern parts of Germany, Central European countries show similar levels of vulnerability in almost all analysed areas. See <http://regions2020.oir.at/>.

convincing analysis dismantles any hope for the resurrection of traditional ethics and renounces dogmatic certainties. Let us follow his example and avoid the usual temptation to erect stable ethical pillars.⁴⁴

As has been already hinted, economics and politics in contemporary Central Europe muddle the notion of freedom and increasing cultural diversity questions the unassailability of human equality. Whether we like it or not, both freedom and equality are discursive, meaning that different societies understand the terms differently or even that the same society can modify its understanding over time with regard to various social and political changes. As the Slovak cultural scientist Slavomír Gálik (2011) observes: “Old ethos are subsiding in modern and central European society, but the new ethos has not come into being. Europe, or Central Europe, is not quite Christian anymore, and not quite utilitarian and pragmatic. [...] This state is highly unstable and if we witness no radical change then many of the present problems in Europe, including central Europe, will very probably continue” (p. 65–66).

If we accept Galimberti’s thesis that there is no new ethos that will come into being, two possibilities remain. First, we can evaluate whether any guidelines stemming from the old ethos still have any significance for today’s globalized society. Second, we can inquire whether there are any guidelines that would not have a cultural origin, or put differently, guidelines that are valid throughout history and for all human societies without exception.

3.2.1 Only Free People Can Be Equal

As we have already mentioned, the search for a solution to social issues in the Central European region tightly bound to economics and politics involves a discussion about the value of freedom. There is certainly not enough space here to elaborate at length on the roots and historical evolution of the term; others have done this already, see e.g. Patterson (1991). We should rather ask to what extent freedom belongs to the transcultural capital of the region and how important the concept is for the region’s future development.

It should be reiterated right at the beginning that my understanding of freedom is socially constructed (acknowledging that it was a Christian idea to transform the ancient Greek concept into a universal principle that was secularized later in the 18th century), and it is thus hard to share the confidence of Mária Klobušická (2011) who claims simply that “God created man free” (p. 67) and “the only true morality is the Christian morality” (p. 72). We could agree with Piotr Machura

⁴⁴ Adopting Galimberti’s vagabond ethics, we run the postmodern risk of constant moral relativizing, which is certainly not desirable. Being an ethical vagabond requires more responsibility toward other people and the outside world, and more rational and emotional reflection, not less.

(2011) who stresses the certainty of social imaginery⁴⁵ and says that “there is no simple symmetry between the demand of freedom [...] and the consciousness of responsibility among the societies of the [CE] region” (p. 103). Machura uses the Polish example, which is unique, but he offers a valid generalization about Western standards and the modern way of life that produces alienation from all possible institutions and a lack of solidarity, which has inflicted severe social damage on the new Central Europe. It is not surprising that human equality is regarded as dubious and even suspicious, because it is premature to ask Central Europeans to accept the otherness of the Other before they formulate a clear idea about their own freedom and responsibility that is derivative of this active freedom. “Neither idolatrous admiration of Western standards of living and institutions, nor self-focused conservative memory, is a remedy for the traumas and complexes of Central European societies. Hence one of the most important tasks that Central Europe faces is to find a convenient narrative, an appropriate social imaginary, which would [...] explain Central Europeans to themselves” (Machura, 2011, p. 109). Freedom in Central Europe is thus far from being a firm principle that is followed in people’s everyday lives. It is rather a process, an ephemeral goal never to be achieved. In addition, “we are always as free as it is possible to be within our culture and, respectively, we share responsibility with the whole community” (Machura, 2011, p. 110). This means that social imagination determines economics, politics and ultimately ethics as well. That is not to say that an individual is powerless – quite the contrary – but an individual action becomes empowering when it enters the social (and subsequently also the political) dimension.

Pavel Kvaltýn (2011) is harsh when he remarks: “Every single activity and choice is essentially dependent on social parameters, on the basis of a socially constructed symbolic universe. [...] In this sense, the idea of freedom is evidently just an illusion” (p. 120). But he continues: “If reality is socially constructed, as my identity is constructed, then my responsibility dwells in Martin Buber’s dialogue: I and Thou. [...] Every single encounter is the axis of the whole of being and the only possible way to change it. In this sense dialogue is omnipotent” (p. 121). We can conclude, in accordance with Galimberti’s call for vagabond ethics, that Central Europe, being itself a socially constructed entity *par excellence*, has to work hard on its never-to-be-completed narrative of responsible freedom, and this hard work can only be done collectively, within a transcultural dialogue.

⁴⁵ The term, inspired by Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, was coined by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2004): “The way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations” (p. 23).

3.2.2 Only Equal People Can Be Free

The idea of equality has played an inestimable role in the history of European philosophy and law⁴⁶, and in the Central European context it surely has a specific connotation due to the communist past. Communist ideology translated into real politics in Central Europe between the 1940s and 1980s operated with the concept of equality in an ambiguous way, which is likely to have partially corrupted the idea even for the generations born after the fall of the regime. “The long-lasting impact of the communist period on the range of social values, and hence on individual and collective behaviour, appears to be a common truth” (Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010, p. 107). Perceiving another human being as inherently equal has become, to some maybe surprisingly, rare if not completely absent in Central European socialist countries and their successor regimes. “The anomic and dual social order maintained a strong division between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010, p. 109). Furthermore, the transition from communism to capitalism was anything but smooth and after a short-lived feeling of unity, the fight for survival began once again. “If people emphasise economic and physical security, they feel more threatened by foreigners, ethnic diversity and cultural changes” (Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010, p. 110).

What is more, equality as such seems to be less universal in Central and Eastern European societies, the ethos of which differs from the West (Machura, 2010). First, ethnicity there matters greatly when it comes to solidarity based on the recognition of equal rights and needs of another person. Second, people still rely a lot on the state and are less interested in cultivating the notion of individual rights. Third, and this has already been mentioned as the result of a chain reaction, the feeling of inferiority towards Westerners and the desire to be considered equal are not be underestimated when trying to understand the extremely low level of solidarity with immigrants (Van Oorschot, as cited in Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010). Machura (2010) argues that “the claims to equality [...] are always rooted in a certain recognition and evaluation of historical heritage” (p. 23) and that thinking of Central European countries as an axiological union is wrong, but it is right to assume that there is a strong sense of solidarity among the region’s nations.

This ethnic and cultural bond within Central Europe only accentuates how loose the ties are with newcomers and the culturally different. Even though according to European Values Studies (data set from 1999–2000) tolerance toward people from a different cultural background is relatively high, the interpreters of the data set observe: “as acceptance of cultural diversity increases, any expression of non-tolerance becomes undesirable or unlawful behaviour in most European

⁴⁶ For a brief insight see Ježková (2010). Ježková’s analysis is rather superficial but she pinpoints some important definitions and names leading theoreticians, such as Locke or Rousseau.

societies, which strongly influences declarative and real expression of distance to immigrants and ethnic minority groups” (Rimac & Zrinščak, 2010, p. 127).

Is it possible to make any conclusion about the notion of equality in Central Europe? Is equality strongly emphasised in Central European countries and can we consider it as part of the region’s transcultural capital?

Rimac and Zrinščak note that social norms and values generally need to be individually internalized in order to strengthen social solidarity. The communist era has surely had an influence and so does the fact that cultural diversity is much higher in Western countries to where emigrants from profoundly different cultures head more often than to Central European countries. What also matters is economic performance and social trust; the higher both are, the more likely it is that people become sensitive to the needs of other people, even those belonging to distant cultural groups.

If individual internalization of values is decisive (and not social, country or regional characteristics), the same is true for equality as it was for freedom: one can learn about it exclusively in a relation with another person, through a dialogue that is not feasible if any of the participants is considered by the others to be inferior/superior.

3.2.3 Ties to the Natural Environment as the Ultimate Principle of Transcultural Communication

Freedom and equality are among the requirements of a transcultural dialogue which at the same time fosters and cultivates one’s feeling of both independence and inherent connectedness to other human beings. An ethical vagabond meets people, encounters situations, and makes decisions about his or her life path under the influence of social imaginaries and personal beliefs.

The Central European area has undergone much historical and ideological turbulence that shattered the understanding of freedom and equality. Central European peoples are striving for their own credible narrative of what it means to be free and equal, and this process is taking place in the midst of complex changes that include the economy, politics and culture. As the current crisis in the Ukraine shows, ethnic rivalries and the unhealed wounds of the past are still an issue of great delicacy, and both freedom and equality keep being re-defined as new circumstances arise.

Is it possible to find a principle with clear ethical connotations that is neither subject to change over the course of time nor culturally relative? With the failure of each new world summit or conference dealing with the theme of the natural environment, we can observe that ties with the natural environment have not become part of the world ethos, and despite all the positive development in Central

Europe since 1989 it would be incorrect to think that the attitude toward nature has changed substantially in the region. Yet there is no doubt of the intrinsic dependency of people on the natural environment, and there is no single example, either in the past or in the present, of a healthy economy and society located in a sick environment.

In the lecture given by von Weizsäcker quoted above, he advised Central European nations to be conscious of their natural wealth not *in spite of* the other difficult tasks such as the economic ones, but *because of* them. There is no attempt here to detail the multilayered discussion within anthropocentrism, biocentrism, deep ecology, etc. about the legitimacy of referring to human well-being when defending the environment. Let us limit ourselves to the simple thesis that regardless of what society or an individual thinks about nature, they are tied to it in the most compelling way.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, it should be emphasised that consciousness of the ecological vulnerability of each culture does not delegitimize efforts to ground a transcultural dialogue on different principles, e.g. human dignity (Burda, 2013b). However, such attempts to formulate a fundamental ethical base clash with the postulate of Galimberti's vagabond ethics according to which no absolute value has a chance of being shared by everybody in today's diverse world. All culturally determined ideas, including dignity, freedom, equality, brotherhood, etc., are condemned to being rejected by those who ignore or even detest ethical imperatives stemming from different cultural traditions. Ties to the natural environment are not a principle "invented" or "discovered" by human beings, but rather a basic condition of life in general. The idea of nature, of course, is strongly influenced by culture, and people have diverging or thoroughly opposing attitudes toward nature, but that is irrelevant due to the fact that a damaged natural environment means low quality of life or a direct threat to life.

The environmental danger for Central European countries is manifold and it cannot be understood without taking into account the economic, political, social and cultural aspect of the present situation. If Central Europeans had a shared and inclusive narrative of freedom and equality, their readiness to face current challenges would be substantially increased. In a totalitarian society, people are prevented from active participation in decision-making and their critical thinking is suppressed. What is more, totalitarian regimes, even though they might claim the contrary, generate rigid social stratification and the distribution of power is uneven. One may argue that Central Europe consists of democratic states and the principles of freedom and equality are thus guaranteed and respected. In the preceding pages, we have challenged this superficial presumption. Seen from an environmental perspective, only free and equal people can cooperate efficiently in order to tackle environmental issues because freedom implies the capability

to think, decide and act, while equality implies the right to be included in the community and the governance thereof.

At the same time, if the ties between the human world (demarcated by culture) and the natural environment were fully recognized, transcultural communication in Central Europe would have a solid base. Discussions about common values shared by “us” and “them” are long and rather exhausting, usually ending with a general relativization and the rejection of definite answers because of cultural differences. Being bound to nature is not a value to be shared; it is a fact we may or may not accept, but it cannot be falsified. Communication despite cultural differences is not a utopia if we realize that barriers erected by culture can be dismantled through the notion of a universally human interest – a habitable planet.

3.3 Chances for Central Europe

In his report on democracy, liberty and freedom, Attila Ágh (2012) comments on the so-called triple crisis, which includes a transformation crisis, a post-accession crisis and the global crisis, and he mentions that these processes have a socio-economic, a socio-political and a socio-cultural aspect. In the previous pages, we have presented the thesis that economic, social, cultural and environmental issues that weight upon the Central European region need a holistic response that takes all spheres into account. Three basic conditions, two determined by cultural interpretations and one universal, were discussed: a) freedom, the understanding of which affects economic and social measures; b) equality, which is difficult to obtain in a region that has complex historical legacies and has not yet found its way through cultural, religious and ethnic diversity; and c) ties to the natural environment, which is primarily relevant in ecological issues but also affects much more than that.

Transcultural communication in Central Europe, and thus interaction among participants with different cultural, religious, gender, racial and social backgrounds, is unlikely to take place unless the actors are mutually considered to be free and equal. I have claimed that the ideas of freedom and equality have a European origin. Even though they aspire to universal validity, the more culturally diverse Europe (Central Europe included) becomes, the harder it is to accomplish a transcultural consensus in this respect (which is not to say that it is pointless to make the effort). Ties to the natural environment might have a decisive say in transcultural communication, since it is not an ethical principle rooted in a particular cultural tradition, neither European nor any other. The close relationship between human life and the natural environment can be (and largely is) ignored for a certain period of time, yet it cannot be falsified. Central European peoples and newcomers from

other European and non-European countries have no other choice than to share a limited environment; we can invent and adopt an economic paradigm, but we are not capable of creating another natural environment.

Calls for a return to an old ethos or for a shift towards a new one are often motivated by the best intentions. Central Europe nowadays, though, does not manifest a readiness and willingness to unite and follow a common economic, social or cultural direction. We are muddling through, left at the mercy of the vagabond ethics proposed by Galimberti. There is much potential in Central European cultural capital and it is the task of politics (and science and arts) to elaborate upon it. A transcultural dialogue, however, needs to be built upon grounds that resolve conflicts rather than provoke them. Nobody, neither the immigrant, nor the poor and the marginalised, is excluded from the human species that relies ecologically on its terrestrial niche. If we accept and take seriously into consideration that we are and will always be tied to the natural environment, the chances are high that a constructive transcultural dialogue in Central Europe will occur.

4

TRANSCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: WHAT CAN IT OFFER? A DIALOGUE IN SPITE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN LITHUANIA, CZECH REPUBLIC AND CYPRUS

4.1 Not to Remain What We Were

In 2014, we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of WWI. The 20th century witnessed much hatred and violence among different cultural and ethnic groups and we might wish such animosities would never happen again, yet we can hardly consider the wounds of the past to have healed – take the current crisis in Ukraine as an example. Speechlessness before the incomprehensible Other, a silence of words accompanied by the rattle of weapons, such are the symptoms of a transcultural dialogue that has failed.

On the following pages, we shall focus on the topic of transcultural communication and its importance in contemporary society. Three specific cases will be presented as illustrations of transcultural failure: the mass murder of Lithuanian Jews during WWII, the violent expulsion of Germans living in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War had ended, and the Cypriot conflict that escalated in the 1970s and led to a tense international situation on the divided island that has persisted to this day. The reason for choosing these episodes in recent European history and not others is subjective; I spent short periods of time as a visiting professor in Lithuania and Cyprus in 2012 and 2013, and my objective is to analyze controversial issues in the 20th century collective memory of small European nations, to which the Czechs, Lithuanians and Cypriots certainly belong.

Academic writing on the theme of transcultural communication is manifold, yet usage of the term, often substituted by ‘cross-cultural’ and/or ‘intercultural’,⁴⁷ is far from being universally consistent. Luckmann’s work (1999) is an example of a relatively common context in which the expression is evoked – nursing practice where communication with people of varied cultural origins is necessary. The particular focus of Luckmann’s textbook is beyond our interest, yet the importance of perceiving others first “as individuals with unique experiences

⁴⁷ From now on, exclusively the term *transcultural* will be used to label the desired quality of dialogue among people with different cultural backgrounds.

and expectations, and then as members of different cultures” (Luckmann, 1999, p. 18) is valid for our analysis, too. Another field that focuses on communication across cultures is management and international business. Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (2000) study the usual dichotomies in values and attitudes (such as individualism versus communitarianism), first described by Hofstede (1980). Again, Hampden-Turner’s & Trompenaars’s field of study is only vaguely related to ours, yet we can agree with their opening observation that “foreign cultures are not arbitrarily or randomly different from one another. They are instead *mirror images* of one another’s values” (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000, p. 1). We could continue listing other areas where cross- or inter-cultural communication plays an important role, such as technical communication (Warren, 2006) or public relations (Carayol & Frame, 2012), but these environments would lead astray. We shall rather concentrate on the study of transcultural dialogue from an ethical perspective and avoid, at least temporarily, definitive solutions.

A valuable source of inspiration for the following pages will be the essay by Cosimo Zene (2001), a British-Italian anthropologist and expert on religious studies, in which he formulates his understanding of dialogue with an Other in the light of Bakhtin’s, Gadamer’s, Levinas’s and Gramsci’s thought. First of all, Zene reminds us that *dialogue* has become a magic formula in cultural and social anthropology, masking the old dominance of the ethnographer over the Other with pretentious good will. If anthropology is to foster a real dialogue, it has to reflect deeply on its philosophical connotations.

And what is it actually – a real dialogue? “A speech across, between, through two people. It is a passing through and a going apart. There is both a transformational dimension to dialogue and an oppositional one – an agonistic one. It is a relationship of considerable tension” (Crapanzano, 1990, as cited in Zene, 2001, p. 96). Entering a dialogue thus involves an inner change for all the participants, including the Western anthropologist,⁴⁸ and it is a risky endeavour that may not succeed. Accepting the fact that we cannot control beforehand the outcomes of a dialogue answers the question whether dialogue is “an end in itself or a means to a different end” (Murray, 1991, as cited in Zene, 2001, p. 99). Transcultural dialogue is not intended here as a method or an instrument that is supposed to generate solutions. It is rather a rupture in space and time, in which the Levinasian face of the Other “teaches me to be myself in spite of myself” (Zene, 2001, p. 110).

For our analysis of the three selected issues that are part of European history, three points made by Zene will be crucial. One, a transcultural dialogue cannot give up the search for truth completely, yet it must be held within a specific climate of openness: “Only when truth is suspended and the Other welcomed is

⁴⁸ “We do not remain what we were” (Gadamer, 1975, as cited in Zene, 2001, p. 105).

there a chance to discover the intensity of a project-discipline called *anthropos-
logia*, where the *logos* is not the violent *reductio ad unum* of Greek philosophy
but takes into account the diversity of positions even within European thought
vis-à-vis Otherness, as well as the presence of “Others” within Europe itself”
(Zene, 2001, p. 97). This requirement for a suspension of truth is similar to Claudio
Baraldi’s (2003) call for the courage to reside at a dangerous threshold, while
this threshold looks like a non-place, a space where the differences between the
meeting subjects can be put in parentheses.

Two, when studying historical failures of transcultural dialogue, the so-called
*clôtural reading*⁴⁹ is a useful method. Simon Critchley, an English thinker
specializing in Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction, coined the term meaning
“history read from the standpoint of the victims of that history” (Critchley, 1992,
as cited in Zene, 2001, p. 113), thus history that is aware of its ethical aspect.

And three, the route is not completed with the step from cultural and
philosophical anthropology over history to ethics. It is hence impossible to turn
a blind eye to politics. “The passage from ethics to politics in anthropology is
complicated and problematic, [...] but necessary, if we do not want to run the
risk of fostering a discipline which promotes a-political quietism and keeps
‘a murderous silence in front of the dying face of the Other’” (Zene, 2001, p. 115).
This text is by no means written as a political manifesto, yet its conclusions will
inevitably touch upon political issues related to the phenomena in question.

Let us now concentrate on the actual topic of the chapter, i.e. the unhealed
wounds of Lithuanian, Czech and Cypriot society. The main research question
reads as follows: What can the perspective of transcultural communication add
to the debate about the extermination of Lithuanian Jews in 1941, the violent
expulsion of Czechoslovak Germans after 1945 and the massacres of Turkish
Cypriot civilians in the 1960s and 1970s? Do these events have any common
characteristics that have determined their transcultural failure? It ought to be
remembered that “applying an ethical-dialogic interpretation, both as a theoretical
orientation and as a methodological “tool”, the writer can never, no matter how
much he/she wishes, have the final “concluding” word” (Zene, 2001, p. 118).
Without aspiring to present definitive answers, we shall now take a closer look
at the selected cases.

⁴⁹ The word *clôture* in French is translated as *closure* in English. Clôtural reading of history can be thus understood
as an outcome of the aforementioned effort to dwell on the border / at the threshold / in the liminality, suspend-
ing (closing out) the claim to truth.

4.2 The Unhealed Wounds of Lithuanian, Czech and Cypriot Society

The aim of our analysis is not an objective historical description of particular events, bearing in mind the theorem of clôtural reading that rejects the doctrine of so-called objective historical facts. Our focus is a cultural, or more precisely a *transcultural* understanding of these dramatic defeats suffered by humanity. It is important not to overshadow the aspect of self-reflexivity: thinking about these tragic episodes is useless when made from a safe mental and moral distance. As Davis puts it, “to get close to relevant cultural information [...], we have to stretch our own boundaries, our conceptions of reality, and our expectations and beliefs. [...] It is an exercise of our own humanity, pushing and pulling all that we take for granted in our mental, physical and emotional makeup” (Davis, 2011, p. 4–5). To achieve transcultural comprehension means that all of us, myself and my readers included, must accept some personal involvement since we belong to the same human species. It is necessary to identify both with the victims and with the perpetrators, and to come to terms with the fact that past atrocities and persecution of the Other are not an anomaly but rather a characteristic of culture (Burda, 2013a).

4.2.1 The Extermination of Lithuanian Jews in 1941–1944

We do not know the exact numbers of Jews living in Lithuania before the outbreak of WWII, nor the Jewish victims of the Lithuanian shoah.⁵⁰ Most probably (Snyder, 2013; Mrázková, 2011; Bubnys, 2005) there were more than 200,000 and fewer than 250,000, out of which more than 160,000 but fewer than 230,000 were killed during the years 1941 and 1944, thus 85–96% of the total Jewish population. Mrázková (2011) describes the course of the events in Lithuania as follows: In the first phase (within a mere 6 months in 1941), two thirds of all Lithuanian Jews were killed. Men were in most cases shot, but it was not an exception for wounded women and children to be thrown into the pits alive.⁵¹ The initiative was led largely by the so-called Einsatzgruppe A, with the worst massacres taking place in the forest of Paneriai (Ponary) and at the Ninth Fort in Kaunas. In the second phase (1941–1943), those who survived were exploited as forced labourers, suffering from maltreatment and dying in occasional mass

⁵⁰ If I am not mistaken, the Jews themselves prefer the Hebrew term shoah (meaning “catastrophe”) to the term holocaust, which means “total burnout” and stems from the Greek. Transcultural communication can only take place if all the parties mutually respect their linguistic preferences. We can hardly achieve a transcultural understanding if we continue using e.g. the term “Eskimo” (stemming from the French, meaning “a raw meat eater”) instead of “Inuit” (a native and neutral term, meaning “more than one person”), “black” instead of “Afroamerican” etc.

⁵¹ For an authentic source of information see Sakowicz (2005).

executions. The third phase (1943–1944) included the transformation of ghettos into concentration camps, mass murders of the sick and weak, and transports to camps elsewhere in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the Third Reich. The annihilation of Lithuanian Jews was extremely quick and efficient thanks to the readiness of ethnic Lithuanians to collaborate with the Nazis (Bubnys, 2005).

First of all, when trying to unearth the causes of the slaughter, we have to resist the temptation to barricade ourselves behind the mixed feelings of horror and awe, detaching our life from the lives of “Them”. We are obliged to speak in the face of terrible crimes committed by human beings, not to remain silent (Galimberti, 2008). What were the reasons for the horrific mass murders of men, women and children, literally eliminating Lithuanian Jewry from the occupied country?

To explain the extermination of Lithuanian Jews that would not have been possible, or at least not as fast and as brutal, if ethnic Lithuanians had not been ready to assist, we can approach the phenomenon from several perspectives. Burda (2013a) presents two schools of thought – functionalist and intentionalist. According to the former, economic and social reasons were decisive; according to the latter, it was Nazi ideology that fuelled the genocide.⁵² Mrázková (2011) tries to find the answer to two questions: who issued the orders and how exactly did ethnic Lithuanians participate in the killings. How the Lithuanian shoah is narrated and explained is thus of great importance, especially to the Lithuanians themselves, but also to the international community (Budryte, 2013).

We can speculate about the image of Jewish people in Lithuania at the beginning of the 1940s. As in many other European countries, it was an influential and wealthy ethnic group whose members often belonged to the country’s intelligentsia in numbers disproportionate to their percentage of the overall population. In addition, it was a “homeless” ethnic minority with strong cosmopolitan tendencies, which in the eyes of the Lithuanians turned the Jews into vile communists who welcomed Soviet occupation of Lithuanian territory. It might be partially true that the Jews sensed the danger of the Nazi ideology and hoped for Soviet protection,⁵³ but it was a vain hope indeed; the number of Lithuanian Jews transported, persecuted and murdered by the Soviet regime was disproportionately higher in comparison with the overall number of Lithuanians affected (Snyder, 2013). Furthermore, the pre-war nationalist discourse in Lithuania seemingly corresponded with the presumed goal of the Third Reich – independence for racially pure states. (It is unnecessary to remind the reader that this was not the case at all.) Mrázková

⁵² Burda himself argues for the mimetic theory and the scapegoat mechanism introduced by the French-American literary critic and philosopher René Girard.

⁵³ Truska (2006) presents well-grounded arguments against the lie about Jewish pro-Sovietism. This debate refers to the so-called “double-genocide theory, [...] according to which Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust should be explained as a response to Jewish participation in the sovietization of Lithuania during 1940–1941 and in the deportation of Lithuanians to Siberia in June 1941” (Bartasevičius, 2006, p. 388).

(2011) lists five explanations for Lithuanian participation in the killings: 1) the executors were often drunks and criminals; 2) it was an act of revenge on “pro-Soviet” Jews; 3) a completely new geopolitical situation arose, in which the interests of ethnic Lithuanians and Lithuanian Jews were contradictory; 4) it was a result of deeply rooted anti-Semitism, which could be easily expressed within the then presiding state of disorder; and 5) in the pre-war period, a fascist and nationalistic discourse was formed and flourished when the Germans invaded the country.

All of these hypotheses can be labelled as either functionalist (geopolitical situation, conflicting interests) or intentional (anti-Semitism, ideology).⁵⁴ And yes, some of the reasons listed above probably counted more, some of them counted less. Yet even if we identify some vaguely rational motives among the Lithuanians to collaborate with the German occupiers, this still does not explain the grisly events of the years 1941–1944. The disturbing question remains the same: Who killed the Jews of Lithuania?^{55,56}

From a transcultural perspective, the barrier between “Us” and “Them”, between ethnic Lithuanians and ethnic Jews needs to be torn down. For hundreds of years, Lithuanians and Jews shared the same territory, they all looked upon the lands of Lithuania as their home. Jewish culture was part – and not the opposite – of Lithuanian culture. It is very important not to forget about the suffering of Lithuanians under the Soviet regime and so is not forgetting to count the corpses, but no partner in the dialogue should be disqualified if the other simply states: “We lost more loved ones than you did,” precisely because it re-erects the barrier dividing the two worlds of ethnicity. Such is the requirement to suspend “truth” at the beginning of the process.

The second step is reading the history from the viewpoint of the victims. According to Burda (2013a), the mimetic theory of René Girard asserts that the victim must be recognized as guilty and not as innocent, otherwise the scapegoat mechanism would collapse (as it does in the Gospels). In fact, the opinion that “the Jews themselves caused the catastrophe that befell them while Lithuanians

⁵⁴ The fact that the killers usually became drunk before they started to perform their abhorrent tasks and that they sometimes had a criminal past does not at all provide us with an explanation of the events. Alcoholics and violent criminals have always been part of society, but not always do they participate in a genocide.

⁵⁵ On this occasion I would like to relate an anecdote from the Kaunas University of Technology where I held lectures in February 2013. I assigned the students, most of whom were studying social education, the question “What happened to the Jews who lived in Lithuania before WWII?” We wrote their collective answer on the whiteboard: “They were killed by the Holocaust organized by the Germans.” Please note the passive voice, the anonymity of guilt, the silence about the Lithuanian role, and the delegation of responsibility. It took us some time to amend the answer to the following statement: “Concrete, individual German and Lithuanian perpetrators killed them.”

⁵⁶ See the eponymous excerpt from an article written by an American historian with Lithuanian origins Saulius Sužiedėlis (2006).

were dragged into the bloody whirl mostly against their own will” (Vildžiūnas, 2006, p. 395–396)⁵⁷ is still present in Lithuanian society.

In order to foster a transcultural dialogue, it is crucial to research and collect evidence about concrete events, identifying both the victims and the perpetrators by name. In this way, all the parties have the chance to gain maximum information and contextualize past acts of violence. The history of the Lithuanian shoah does not “belong” to Lithuanian Jews only; it encompasses the Lithuanian people as a whole. After the annihilation of their Jewish fellow citizens, Lithuania can never regain its former cultural complexity. The Lithuanians, be they Jewish or ethnic Lithuanian, were severely oppressed by the Soviets and by the Nazis, and the wounds are common to both. Lithuanians who committed dreadful crimes against their Jewish fellow citizens betrayed their country. And at the same time, Lithuanians who risked their lives in order to save their Jewish neighbours are heroes never to be forgotten.⁵⁸

4.2.2 Violent Expulsion of Czechoslovak Germans in 1945–1946

It is difficult, if not impossible to count all the victims of an ethnic cleansing, since it often breaks out suddenly and in an intentionally disorganized way. The violent expulsion of Czechoslovak Germans in 1945 was no exception. By the end of WWII, more than 3 million Germans (Glassheim, 2000), or, according to other sources (Staněk, 1991) up to 3.6 million, lived in those parts of Central Europe which once belonged to Czechoslovakia.⁵⁹ Forced relocation of Germans occurred in many other European countries and according to the German census of October 1946, about 9.6 million people who originally lived abroad were made to settle in post-war Germany (Hahnová, 2012). These almost 10 million ethnic Germans⁶⁰ were deprived of their homes, yet they were among the lucky ones – they survived. Disregarding the deaths of war prisoners in the Soviet Union, about 100,000 Germans died after the war had ended, of which at least 30,000 tragically lost their lives in Czechoslovakia (Glassheim, 2000; Hahnová, 2012).⁶¹

Just as in the case of the Lithuanian Jews, historians divide the period into several phases. The most inhumane events happened immediately after the liberation in May 1945 and in the following summer months during the so-called “wild

⁵⁷ See the polemics in their breadth in the volume edited by Levinson (2006, pp. 394–408).

⁵⁸ May this text be a late reply to a comment I found in the evaluation forms of my lectures held in Kaunas in 2013: “The lectures were good but I don’t understand why we had to talk so much about Jewish people.”

⁵⁹ During the war, some parts were annexed to the Third Reich, some were governed as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and some existed as a client state of the Nazi Germany under the name of the Slovak Republic.

⁶⁰ The transfers continued occasionally even after 1946. By 1949, the expelled newcomers numbered about 11 million (Hahnová, 2012). Some sources speak about 12 (Krauss, 2010) or even 14 (Douglas, 2012) million by 1950, almost 2 million of them settled in Bayern.

⁶¹ In addition, about 5,600 local Germans committed suicide in 1945 (Arburg & Staněk, 2010b).

transfer”, in which men, women and children died in death marches, concentration camps, executions and massacres. Ethnic Czechs acted extremely cruelly in the Brno Death March, during events in Ústí nad Labem, Žatec, Postoloprty and elsewhere (Arburg & Staněk, 2010b). More organized transfers involving the expulsion of about 2 million Germans took place in 1946.

Historical analyses (Arburg & Staněk, 2010a; Brügel, 2008; Glasheim, 2000; Staněk, 1991) present a range of mostly functionalist causes that led to the ethnic cleansing of the Czech lands after WWII: 1) a complex political and ethnic situation in Central Europe already apparent in the 19th century; 2) the behaviour and attitudes of Germans living in the Czech lands and their leaders after the end of WWI,⁶² in the 1920s and 1930s, and during the war; 3) oppression and injustice during the wartime years; 4) the political revival of the expulsion plan that was supposed to guarantee democracy and peace in Europe; 5) the chaotic situation immediately after the liberation and the reluctance of foreign military powers⁶³ to prevent the escalation of violence; 6) scarcity in provisions and housing after the war; and 7) Czech nationalist radicalism, popular anger, calls for revenge and anti-German propaganda (e.g. the Werewolf danger).

It would be an exaggeration to classify the post-war massacres in Czechoslovakia as a German genocide,⁶⁴ even though the nationalistic rhetoric of Czech leaders in exile was strongly ideological.⁶⁵ The overall circumstances in the summer months of 1945 were highly unfavourable for a transcultural dialogue and neither international nor local authorities showed any interest in fully controlling the unfolding events. As an eyewitness to the killings in Žatec in June 1945 observed, “understanding for the Czech mentality, induced by the condemnation of German behaviour and compassion for the Czech people tormented by the SS, was transformed into deep hatred that will hinder the peaceful coexistence of the two nations for a long time” (Weiss, 1945, as cited in Arburg & Staněk, 2010b, p. 234).

Spontaneous reactions to the recollections of witnesses who saw the lynching of German men and women in the streets, bullying and barbaric murders, are of two kinds. Either the acts of violence are justified as an inevitable result of historical development and predictable revenge for the suffering of the Czechs during the war, or they seem shocking and incomprehensible. How could “ordinary people”

⁶² The position of ethnic minorities in the newly created nation states in Central Europe was rather weak and they were poorly protected, which contributed to a growth in their nationalistic tendencies (Staněk, 1991).

⁶³ In 1945, Europe stood on the verge of a Cold War and ethnic cleansing of the future client states of the Soviet Union was very much in Stalin's interests.

⁶⁴ Brügel (2008) criticises German journalists and historians, claiming that the Czechs paid the Germans back for their war atrocities with equal mistreatment.

⁶⁵ The president, Edvard Beneš, stated that “we must not hold on to an unrealistic *hope* that it will be possible to destroy or *exterminate* 3 million Germans, as several among us naively claim” (Beneš, 1940, as cited in Glasheim, 2000, p. 471, *my italics*).

who had just come through a war with piles of corpses left behind so quickly adopt the methods of the Nazis, persecute, arrest and kill their own neighbours simply because they belonged to the “wrong” ethnic group? Yet none of these reactions helps us understand the phenomenon.

A transcultural dialogue is supposed to overcome barriers of ethnicity and hatred based on the principle of collective guilt. According to Staněk (1991), the violent expulsion and massacres of Germans after WWII caused political, legal, socio-economic, cultural and moral loss on the Czech side. The same, this time related to war crimes, can be said about the German side. From this perspective, it is difficult to declare unambiguously who won and who lost – the unprecedented military conflict and its epilogue was in the first place a human (and not an exclusively Czech or German) tragedy. Transcultural communication is founded on ethical reflection, which is only feasible when there is enough relevant information about certain events. The imperative of suspending truth is valid, but so is the imperative searching for truth.⁶⁶ In other words, truth can only be revealed in a dialogue, not defended a priori.

To read the history of 1945–1946 in the Czech lands from the viewpoint of the victims means completely rejecting the ethnic criterion. The number of victims exceeds the number of perpetrators many times over and in plenty of cases the names of both the murdered and the murderers are unknown, yet it is still important not to imagine two anonymous crowds. Generalisation of the victims and their murders leads to ethnically biased judgements, and the essence of such thinking is equivalent to the black-and-white thinking that triggers the victimisation mechanism with its violent climax. Probably the most obvious political consequence of transcultural dialogue on any given topic is the simple willingness to stop its tabooisation.

4.2.3 Massacres of Turkish Cypriot Civilians in the 1960s–1970s and the Division of Cyprus

The image of a divided Berlin with its wall stirs emotions and operates as a powerful symbol. A city torn apart, with people living next to each other and yet unable to communicate, and in two worlds that are both intimately close and extremely distant. It is peculiar that only a few people are aware of the fact that there is another capital city of an EU Member State which suffers from a similar distortion as you have read here.

Over the last 1,000 years, Cyprus has never been an ethnically homogeneous island. In 1960, about 78% of the population was Greek Cypriot and about 18% Turkish Cypriot, with the latter first appearing in the 16th century after the Ottoman

⁶⁶ A recent example of such effort may be Kalckhoff's publication (2013) focusing on the case of Postoloprty.

conquest (Ker-Lindsay, 2011). Nowadays, the ratio is about 75% Greek Cypriot to 10% Turkish Cypriot, even though data about the population in the northern part of the island is incomplete (Souhrnná teritoriální informace Kypr, 2012).

In the past, periods of relatively peaceful coexistence were interspersed with episodes of tension (Fryštenská, 2013; Bell-Fialkoff, 2003; Hradečný, 2000) and the situation deteriorated substantially when Great Britain withdrew from its former colony and Cyprus became independent. In the years 1963–1964 and later in 1967 and 1974, violence and hatred escalated in a conflict with a clear ethnic background. Homes and businesses and above all lives were destroyed on both sides, but Turkish Cypriot victims outnumbered Greek Cypriots. During the first outburst of violence directed against Turkish Cypriot civilians, including women and children,⁶⁷ in 1963–1964, about 800 people were murdered or injured (Stephen, 2001). Since 1974, about 37% of the island (the north and north-eastern parts) has been under Turkish occupation, as seen from the perspective of international law. In a country with less than 1 million inhabitants, about 150–200 thousand Greek Cypriots were forced to leave their homes and move to the south, about 45–48 thousand Turkish Cypriots were obliged to settle in the northern part of the country, and about 1,400 people are still missing (Miltiadou, 2011; Fryštenská, 2013). The trauma of failed communication across ethnic and cultural boundaries is vivid and it plays a constitutive role for Greek Cypriot identity (Roudometof & Christou, 2011).

In order to identify the causes of the atrocities of 1963–1964 and further unsuccessful attempts to pursue a programme of ethnic cleansing (in the sense of eliminating the Turkish element on the island) in 1967 and 1974, historians and political scientists use mostly functional and partially intentional argumentation. Without wishing to present a complete list, we can name the following: 1) long-lasting tension between the desire of Greek Cypriots to reunify with Greece (the so-called “enosis”) and the Turkish Cypriot preference for division of the country based on ethnic criteria (the so-called “taksim”); 2) Turkish Cypriot rejection of the constitutional amendment proposed by Makarios III in 1963, the result of which would have been a substantial restriction of Turkish Cypriot political power in the newly independent country; and 3) Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot ethnocentric propaganda and terrorism.

The so-called “Cyprus problem” or “Cyprus question” is of great complexity because the massacres and mutual expulsions took place only several decades ago and eyewitnesses and survivors are still alive. The first condition of transcultural

⁶⁷ Gibbons (1997) even uses the term genocide to describe the “planned extermination” of the Turks of Cyprus. Stephen (2011, p. 34) quotes the Daily Express issue of 28th December 1963: “We went tonight into the sealed-off Turkish Cypriot Quarter of Nicosia in which 200 to 300 people had been slaughtered in the last five days. We were the first Western reporters there and we have seen sights too frightful to be described in print. Horror so extreme that the people seemed stunned beyond tears.”

communication – suspension of truth – is paramount, yet in the Cypriot conflict it is particularly difficult to achieve.⁶⁸ Again, to suspend the truth does not mean to trivialize crimes against humanity, such as the murders of Turkish Cypriot civilians, including newborn babies bulldozed into mass graves.⁶⁹ In the Cypriot case, it rather signifies the necessity to stimulate interest in how the other side was treated in reality; in other words, Greek Cypriots ought to enter into the dialogue with maximum information about specific acts of violence provoked and committed by Greek Cypriots, and likewise Turkish Cypriots. A suitable point of departure for the first condition of transcultural communication to be fulfilled is within a Cypriot (and not Greek Cypriot or Turkish Cypriot) identity. As Spyrou (2000) or Philippou (2005) argue, one of the most efficient institutions able to encourage the active construction of such an identity is education.

If we want to read the history of the Cypriot conflict from the victims' perspective, we first have to decide who its victims are. As already stated above, suffering and martyrdom of the Other has to be documented as well as the painful memories of one's own. The victims are those who died and those who lost their dearest ones. Once we have struggled enough to understand their perspective, we may continue to the perspective of those who were made to leave their homes, properties and businesses. It should be emphasised that no generalisation based on the criterion of ethnicity can lead to a clôtural reading of history – a killer's guilt is immense regardless of their ethnic background and so is the trauma of the victims.

The aim of a transcultural dialogue in Cyprus is also to establish a political solution for the current situation. There are voices defending the transformation of the status quo into two officially separate countries (Stephen, 2001; Fryštenská, 2013) while others are more favourable to reunion within a federal state (Ker-Lindsay, 2011). For better or worse, a political outcome stemming from a transcultural dialogue must be a result of mutual agreement and compromise, not a solution dependent on military force.

⁶⁸ I recollect an interview with a Greek Cypriot originally from Famagusta, with whom I spoke in April 2012. The woman had tears in her eyes when talking about her father who would never cross the Green Line (the border between the two divided areas that is part of the United Nations Buffer Zone, passable since 2003) because seeing his house inhabited by the Turks would break his heart. "They've raped our homes," she said. Among recent publications on the topic of Greek Cypriot homes lost in the north and mentally never abandoned, see Dikomitis (2012). A feeling of injustice is strong on the Greek Cypriot side.

⁶⁹ Materials published by Turkish governmental bodies (such as *Genocide in 1974, 1974*) operate on a regular basis with the term *genocide*. For an unbiased onlooker, it is somewhat peculiar that it is the government of the same country that refuses to recognise the fact of the Armenian genocide, committed by the Turks in 1915–1918.

4.3 Don't Take your Belongings, You Won't Need Them: A Story Repeated Over and Over Again

As Bell-Fialkoff (2003) and Naimark (2006) remind us, the cases of failed transcultural dialogue we have mentioned are not the only stories of ethnic cleansing⁷⁰ in 20th century Europe. To name but one, former Yugoslavia is also a tragically rich source for studies of conflicting ethnicities. Each country and each community has its own characteristics and ethnically motivated murders take place under specific historical circumstances. Yet the archive documents, statements of eyewitnesses and memoirs of survivors show stunning similarities. Let us have a look at the following excerpts from authentic testimonies. I substituted the names and ethnic labels with the letters XYZ. The deleted information and references are quoted in the footnotes.

“A big crowd was standing in the prison yard and some people were weeping. This baby girl was crying in her mother’s arms. A XYZ soldier yelled at the woman, ‘If you don’t make her stop, we’ll shoot her!’ The mother pleaded that she couldn’t help the child crying. The soldier shot the baby.”⁷¹

“[A woman] was brought to the forest with a baby. The baby clasped firmly the neck of its mother. XYZ shot at her with a pistol, and the woman fell down with the crying baby. It was still alive. Then XYZ let go a series of shots at the little child. The crying stopped.”⁷²

“Five 14-year-old boys were shot, too. [...] Not with machine guns, but with rifles, until the last one was dead. I still remember that one of them was shot in his neck and with the final beats of his heart, the blood was spraying like a fountain. The boy was screaming and calling his mother for help. His father, sitting three rows next to me, saw everything. One of us went mad, stood up and started to dance.”⁷³

To think that the lessons have been learned and horrors such as these shall never happen again in Europe is an illusion. It seems that René Girard has correctly recognized violence as the very essence of culture and the scapegoat mechanism as an ever-repeating phenomenon (Burda, 2013a). Yet what does it mean to agree that culture is inherently violent? Does it imply that dialogue among cultures and ethnic groups cannot be achieved and that transcultural communication is aberrant nonsense?

⁷⁰ Even the term „ethnic cleansing“ is somewhat misleading. As Bell-Fialkoff (2003) observes, the word „cleansing“ is an improper euphemism since it evokes water and soap but when applied to human populations, it rather implies refugees, deportations, jail, suffering and death.

⁷¹ “[...] A Greek soldier yelled at the woman, [...]” (Gibbons, 1997, p. 468).” Took place in Cyprus.

⁷² “[...] M. Paškevičius shot at her with a pistol, [...]” Then Šopys let go a series of shots at the little child. [...]” (Latvytė-Gustaitienė, 2006, p. 66–67).” Took place in Lithuania.

⁷³ Klepsch, as cited in Kalckhoff (2013, p. 333), my translation. Took place in Czechoslovakia.

Human culture has numerous driving forces, often antagonistic. The tendency to blame, marginalize and ultimately to kill the weak is one of them, but so is reciprocity, cooperation and compassion. Aggression releases energy; peace consumes it, that is certain. To build and maintain a heterogeneous community that would regard cultural, social and ethnic differences as an opportunity is extremely difficult and it requires both collective and individual action. Top-down and bottom-up approaches need to be coherent; in other words, politics and the institutions it influences (such as education or science) have to work hand-in-hand with civil society.

Apart from being hard to achieve, peaceful solutions to cultural clashes are also fragile and demand continuous work – spreading information, breaking taboos, investing in inclusive education and platforms for dialogue within the concerned community. One of the most challenging tasks is questioning the barrier between “Us” and “Them”. Ethnic identity is powerful, often linked to cultural and national affiliation, and broader geographical identities (Baltic, Central European, Cypriot) have much less emotional appeal compared to our primordial ties.

Nevertheless, to communicate transculturally does not mean denying or neglecting our inherent and early-acquired identities. If a dialogue is to be held, and not parallel monologues, the parties involved need to accept a set of initial conditions. Below I present a list of such conditions as they emerged from the studied cases.

- the obligation not to remain silent
- the suspension of truth
- a reluctance to compare the quantity and quality of suffering
- reading history from the victim’s viewpoint
- the unacceptability of choosing between two (or more) forms of violence
- the unacceptability of the principle of collective guilt
- the political relevance of the dialogue

In this way transcultural communication can work as a remedy. The conditions of transcultural dialogue guarantee a change of standpoint, a step toward the Other who is here to tell their story.

All three events that we have briefly discussed – the fate of Lithuanian Jews, Czechoslovak Germans and Turkish (and Greek) Cypriots – resemble each other, but one of their common traits is at the heart of our interest: the victims are denied the right to live a safe life in their home country, they are deprived of their human identity and they belong nowhere. That is why there is no point in packing their belongings before the killers drag them away – the victims lose their names, their faces, their uniqueness, their “being Somebody”. And once they become Nobodies, no form of dialogue is possible.

Transcultural communication is a project of an uncertain future. Its main

strength is that if its conditions are met, it prevents us from being indifferent and silent “before the dying face of the Other”. The question that follows is how and through which channels the concept of transcultural communication should be disseminated. That is an issue beyond the scope of this chapter, yet it is of great importance and certain to be further discussed by philosophers, anthropologists, teachers and politicians.

5

TRANSCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: AN ATTEMPT TO GET TO GRIPS WITH THE FIELD

5.1 New and Needed?

The spectrum of humanities that can be studied at Czech universities widened substantially after 1989 and successfully reflects international trends. Numerous study programmes are nowadays open to candidates at several educational institutions. Let us leave aside the question whether the existence of identical programmes is efficient; this chapter deals with the opposite problem, namely the design and the desirability of a brand new study programme called Transcultural Communication (hereinafter TC).

If we are to defend a concept that is unknown in Czech academia, it is necessary to explain several crucial points. First, we have to clarify what the merit of TC is, or in other words, what specific needs of contemporary society it is responding to and in which respect it adds value.

Defining key terms is another important issue to be covered. Terms such as culture, transcultural and communication are often used in dissimilar, sometimes even opposing ways. Defining them precisely is important if it is to be possible to further elaborate upon the field's methodology.

A third step in this attempt to come to grips with the field of TC is determining its area of interest. What kind of research questions and which phenomena are suitable for the transcultural perspective?

For the time being, the least clear and thus the most appropriate issue for further discussion is that of methodology. When searching for a method (or methods), already well-established disciplines that serve as pillars for the field of TC can work as a guide. One possible starting point might be the use of methodological techniques developed by cultural and social anthropologists, historians, psychologists or sociologists. Transcultural communication, as will be explained later, does not aspire to become a new humanity following a sequence of many others. There is thus no reason to speculate about an authentic transcultural method. Nevertheless, current pedagogical practice makes the methodological challenge quite obvious.

When the field is demarcated on a theoretical basis, the next step in thinking over its academic outlook would be the design of its pedagogical form. How should TC be taught, in which subjects should the candidates be tutored, what skills and competences should they acquire during their studies?

In the concluding part of the chapter, problem areas and conceptual challenges in the field will be discussed. Such a discussion is vital if the field is to eventually succeed in academia.

5.2 Current Questions for Transcultural Communication

In his devastating criticism of the current European educational system, the Austrian philosopher and aesthete Konrad Paul Liessmann refers to those redundant, philosophically empty and wannabe attractive study programmes mushrooming to the detriment of traditional disciplines that require systematic and focused studies (Liessmann, 2008). The field of TC cannot compete with classical humanities, it is not built upon any consensual canon and at first sight it might seem like another “trendy” offer for anyone keen on earning a university degree within three years. Yet the key areas of interest delineating the field of TC indicate that the study requirements are not trivial. (It is not appropriate for the author of this text to comment on the level of their actual fulfilment.)

TC is supposed to work as an instrument to respond to the following questions: What is the nature of social life when the cultural (religious, social, ethical, etc.) background of a society’s members differs? To what extent is the current state of human society, as far as cultural otherness and toleration is concerned, exceptional? What lies at the heart of the conflict that prevents different groups from harmonious (or at least harmless) coexistence? On what principles can a violent solution to intercultural, ethnic and nationalistic conflict be rejected? And finally: Can a principle be identified that would make it possible to establish an *a priori* positive solution?

It has already been made clear that the idea of TC is closely tied to the contemporary issues of our (read European or Western) society. In these times when humanities continue to suffer from an inferiority complex towards the natural sciences and worship so-called objectivity that is to be guaranteed through the quantifiability of studied phenomena, TC accepts the fact that within its area of interest, philosophical and ethical aspects cannot be ignored.

Any rejection of value neutrality is currently considered within the humanities as scientific dilettantism. Nevertheless, interpersonal communication is always determined and influenced by ethical values. To understand (not only to describe) a conflict between different groups means to also comprehend the cultural and

ideational background of their behaviour. In sum, the aim of TC is to challenge the fundamental anthropological question regarding the nature of the human world – culture.

5.3 The Terminology of the Field

When asking about the role that culture plays in human life, about the way it influences people and vice versa, the unpopular task of defining culture cannot be avoided. The issue has been widely discussed in cultural and social anthropology (in the Czech context see e.g. Budil, 2003; Eriksen, 2008; Murphy, 1998; Soukup, 2009; Soukup, 2011), nowadays it seems that the effort to exhaustively define culture is waning and some experts even consider the idea to be redundant (Horáková, 2012). The field of TC, however, cannot do without the term of culture.

Living in Western society today implies permanent contact with otherness. People of different geographic origins, professing different religions, claiming allegiance to various nationalities and ethnicities, and speaking diverse languages share the same space. A heterogeneous society is not always trouble-free and complex problems cannot be solved through reducing them to something simple and obvious. That is why the term culture can similarly not be simplified to a mere fragment of reality. At the same time, it would be useless to abandon the definition of culture by stating that culture is too complex and therefore unapproachable. The fact that it is a word of particular importance is proven by the disputes over the politically relevant issue of multiculturalism, the forms of which are necessarily rooted in specific understandings of culture (Hirt & Jakoubek, 2005; Sartori, 2011; Sokolíčková, Burda & Hojda, 2012).

The foundation of TC and its necessary condition is the rejection of culturalism (a culturally standard approach) on one side and moral relativism on the other. Culturalism means an exaggerated emphasis placed on the cultural factor to the detriment of other determinants of human thought and behaviour (Látalová, 2008). In other words, if we feel attached to a certain culture, it does not mean that we are unable to review it critically, that no culturally irrelevant circumstances influence us and that we scrupulously reproduce all cultural stereotypes. Passing to moral relativism, it assumes that if cultural relativism is correct (every culture is unique, no culture is superior to another) then it is impossible to judge which moral rules are universally right and which are wrong – each culture defines Good and Evil differently. A transcultural society accepts cultural relativism, but it does not give up the effort to expose the truth about what cultivates people and what is destructive for them, regardless of their cultural inheritance.

Culture in the context of TC is understood in a broad anthropological sense as a whole, including both the material and immaterial results of human thought and endeavour. This whole has been formed in different societies differently and therefore people are influenced specifically by “their” culture. Nevertheless, people are equally influenced by encountering other people and their cultures, or by challenging the attitudes that their own culture prescribes them. To sum up, culture is a determining factor in human life, yet not absolutely determining.

The adjective *transcultural* does not have a generally unequivocal meaning. Anybody (even if unwarranted) may attempt to define culture, but to say what transcultural means is difficult and the word is often confused with multicultural, intercultural or cross-cultural. The study programme of TC uses the term in the meaning deriving from the Latin (originally Proto-Indo-European) prefix *trans* that signifies *cross, over*, while the verb *transeo, transire* can be translated as *to cross, to go beyond, to break into* (Kábrt et al., 1996). A transcultural dialogue is aware of cultural differences, it reflects them and mainly does not reject culturally unrelated attitudes and ideas. Transcultural is not “what all cultures have in common”, and it is not a reservoir of common values. We could better translate the adjective transcultural as “intrinsic despite cultural differences, inherent”. According to Hojda (2013b), partners in a transcultural dialogue bear in mind the question whether or not it is acceptable to step aside when meeting an Other, and if not, then under what premise.

Finally, the term of communication, widely used nowadays in the field of cultural studies, is defined as a process that “takes place in a socially and culturally constructed world, which enables [communication] at the same time, meaning that culture and communication constitute each other” (Barker, 2006, p. 91). For the field of TC, though, the study of semiotics, discourse or philosophy of language is a central issue. It focuses on the philosophical background of the need to communicate interpersonally and between groups of people. The more conflicting such a communication might seem, the more the urgency of this need increases. We work on the presumption that silence between divided or even feuding communities is always more dangerous (likely to result in a violent solution) than an attempt to communicate.

5.4 Subject of Study

As we have already mentioned, TC draws inspiration from the experience of history, cultural anthropology, philosophy and sociology. All of these well-established humanities have their own subjects of study. Are there any phenomena

that can be studied from the viewpoint of TC without duplicating the knowledge already gained by other disciplines?

Cultural and social anthropology that concentrates on issues of culture, ethnicity, nationalism, multiculturalism, identity or globalization is probably the most important support for TC. Current topics as elaborated e.g. by Eriksen (2012) or Horáková (2012) in Czech academia are also relevant from a transcultural perspective. In the 21st century, it is impossible to speculate about human society without taking into account how diverse it is and how problematic this differentiation can be. If philosophical anthropology asks what a human being is (Sokol, 2008), then TC widens the question in the following way: Who am I and who is the Other whom I inevitably meet? Every year, about 1.7 million immigrants arrive in the countries of the European Union. In 2012, more than 34 million foreigners were living in the 27 Member States of the EU, of which more than 20 million come from a non-EU country (European Social Statistics, 2013). An approach that would enable us to handle these dramatic changes to the European cultural landscape is becoming increasingly urgent. Not only is pressure caused by the simple inflow of foreigners, but also by the combination of significant immigration with negative economic and environmental processes. As the living conditions of Europeans worsen, their feeling of threats and resentment (toward those who settle in Europe because their countries of origin do not allow them to live a dignified life) is increasing. The forms of multiculturalism that have been politically promoted so far have failed, yet rejecting the idea of sharing our space for life with other people is not a solution. As Burda (2012) puts it, “our suggestion how to modify the dominant politically preferred form of multiculturalism is based on its legitimate criticism and it consists in the introduction of TC, which is founded on the idea of human dignity and accepting a different Other as a person” (p. 82).

It is not only the current human situation that is a topic for TC, though. A historical view can also be inspiring, or more precisely a historical analysis of those phases in the development of human society when coexistence between people with different beliefs and cultural backgrounds worked well. Petráček (2014) focuses on the Middle Ages in Europe and states that if “the sense behind this discussion about plurality, multiculturalism and transcultural communication [...] involves creating conditions for the coexistence of people of various groups, so as to be able to endeavour for development and happiness in accordance with their own views, while at the same time not leading toward the disintegration of society, [then] medieval society managed this to a significant extent despite various even violent clashes. The basic prerequisite is a firm, intelligent, dynamic society, with an open ideological value and ethical framework involving modifications, but respected by the majority. This society should at the same time be able to

enforce respect even from those individuals and groups whose convictions and actions threaten the social order with collapse, anarchy and destruction.” (p. 116). Burda (2013a) offers an analysis of several periods from the history of ethnic conflicts and persecution of minorities (witch-hunts, the extermination of Jews, anti-Roma pogroms, etc.), applying the method of the French-born American historian and literary critic, René Girard. Burda’s analysis proves that there is an inherent mechanism embedded in culture that starts operating in times of collective danger. A society rids itself of this danger symbolically through the annihilation of an otherwise innocent scapegoat. If this thesis is correct, our society is situated right in the middle of a Girardian crisis.

The task lying ahead of TC then is to describe this situation and precisely analyze individual cases of failing dialogues that might trigger the violent mechanism of blame and hatred.⁷⁴

Transcultural topics are also numerous in the realm of the arts and each genre (theatre, visual arts, film, photography etc.) is to be explored here.⁷⁵ Philosophy, history, cultural anthropology and art criticism – those are the areas in which the transcultural perspective has been partially applied and has widened the knowledge about human society in today’s world.

5.5 The Problem of Methodology

While the natural sciences always have their methodological questions answered as accurately as possible (without a precise methodology it would be impossible for modern natural science to formulate a proper hypothesis), humanities often suffer from imperfect methodology.⁷⁶ In the field of TC, a common methodology has not yet crystallized, which may at first sight seem an advantage given the wide spectrum of suitable topics. The reality, however, the ambiguous methodological approach is more a barrier to the systematic study of selected phenomena and leads to a fragmentation of forces and a low level of interconnectedness among individual research outputs.

So far, the most viable path seems to be a consistent application of a certain theory of culture on a transcultural topic. An example of such work is Burda’s (2013a) already cited publication that uses Girard’s mimetic theory and scapegoat mechanism to analyze marginalisation and persecution of “the Others”. In general, for the field of TC in its current phase – which is still being tested in pedagogical

⁷⁴ An example of a high-quality Bachelor thesis that meets these requirements is Macháčková (2014) or Nevřalová (2014).

⁷⁵ An example of a transcultural study of artworks is Hojda & Pavienský (2012) or Hojda (2013a).

⁷⁶ It is peculiar that in Czech academia it has been only Soukup (2014) who has published a concise text that presents the methodology of such a well-established science as cultural anthropology.

practice – an analytical method on a theoretical basis seems to be the most suitable option. In this way, existing approaches are newly applied. Overall, it means work with primary and secondary literature and interpretation of available data.

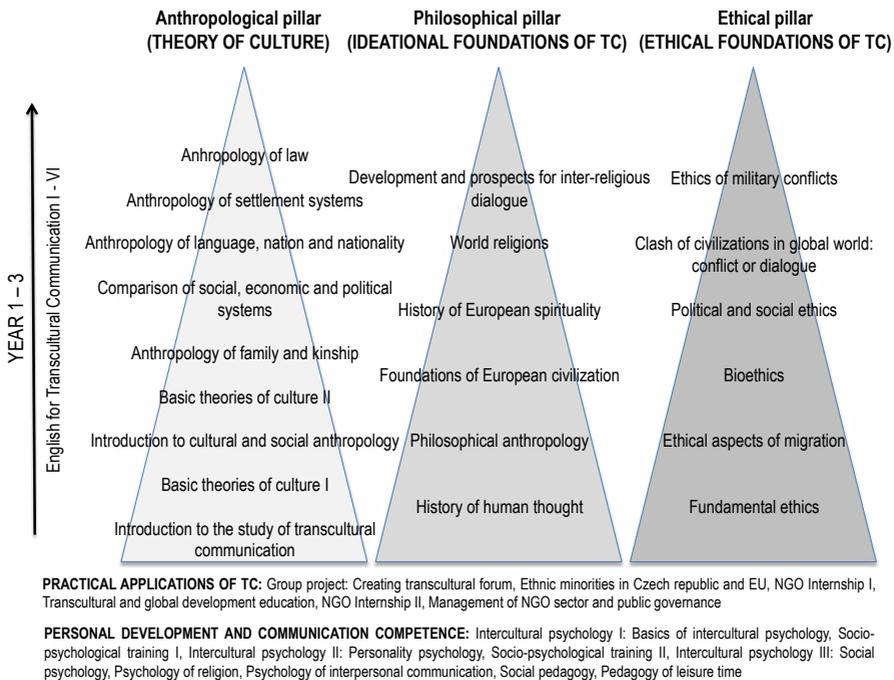
I suppose that for the future development of the field it will be necessary to evaluate the possibility of empirical research, which has not been taken into consideration so far. Given how transculturality defines itself in relation to multiculturalism to a certain degree (with an emphasis placed on individuality versus group similarities), methods of oral history⁷⁷ or self-reflexive essayistic anthropology⁷⁸ should also be explored. By no means should the field of TC be expected to deliver so-called “hard data”. It is important to acquire the ability to carry out quantitative research and it should not be disregarded *eo ipso*, yet questionnaires and statistics cannot substitute for theoretical research and personal contact during qualitative fieldwork.

5.6 Architecture of the Study Programme

The TC study programme will be offered at the University of Hradec Králové until 2015 under the Specialization in Pedagogy programme, while from 2015 on it will pass to the Humanities programme. Its architecture will be slightly modified due to this change, but the core of the field will still consist in three basic pillars: the anthropological, the philosophical and the ethical. These three subjects are studied throughout the three years of the Bachelor programme within their subdisciplines. Since Bachelor studies should also be a source of practical competences, theoretical knowledge is applied in subjects focusing on personal and communication development and language skills. The structure of the studies is illustrated in the table below.

⁷⁷ E.g. Roubal (2013) works with personal testimonies of people who populated areas abandoned by the violently expelled Czechoslovak Germans in 1945. In this highly individualized fieldwork, Roubal reconstructs their group identity.

⁷⁸ E.g. Davis & Konner (2011) edited a publication consisting of anthropological essays whose authors divested themselves of their scientific jargon and included personal attitudes and experiences.



Picture 4: Architecture of the TC study programme from 2015 onward (Source: Author)

As far as the employment and further studies of the graduates is regarded, there is not enough data available over a sufficient time period. The study programme has been offered in the Czech Republic since 2010 only and the first graduates received their Bachelor degree in the years 2013–2014.⁷⁹ In an ideal case, the graduate profile is relatively wide and employment is possible in the sectors of public governance, NGOs, including charity, media, and cultural, and educational facilities. Given the current labour market conditions, the breadth of acquired knowledge could in some cases hinder practical employment, in spite of obligatory internships in human rights organizations (e.g. People in Need, Multicultural Center Prague, ADRA, Centers for the support of the integration of foreigners, Charity Czech Republic). Therefore, students are motivated to proceed with their Master studies.⁸⁰ The most appropriate focus for TC graduates includes cultural and intercultural studies, international relations, cultural and social anthropology, development studies, media, psychology, sociology, political science, gender

⁷⁹ In the 1st year of study, approximately 30 students are accepted, approximately 20 successfully continue until the 3rd year, and about 15 students graduate each year (Source: Author).

⁸⁰ The TC study programme is accredited for neither a Master nor PhD degree. It only exists in the form of Bachelor degree studies, offered both in Czech and English, including a distance education programme.

studies, and possibly also further pedagogical studies in disciplines such as history or civic sector studies.⁸¹

The continuing instrumentalization of education, a process in which education is becoming merely a tool for finding satisfactory employment and is no longer a determining factor for personal and moral development, results in an emphasis on so-called practical skills (Liessmann, 2008). The field of TC does not explicitly oppose this trend, but it essentially resists it. A TC graduate is supposed to comprehend cultural mechanisms, understand their own cultural heritage, view history contextually and interpret the current development of society. A necessary condition for such an analysis is the ability to avoid superficiality and prejudice, know the difference between tolerance and indifference, take account of ethical aspects regarding phenomena that might appear as ethically neutral, and other “competences” that may seem inappropriate in a structured CV. And yet these are the very competences needed in our present times. The architecture of the study programme corresponds with this need.

5.7 Challenges for the Field of TC

The key challenge for TC is whether and to what extent it will manage to fulfil its goals in times when a concentrated philosophical and ethical reflection is disappearing from universities, students long for so-called efficient and flexible education that is transmitted as a rapid instruction, and scholars struggle with manifold bureaucratic tasks, and invest energy in a search for grants that would guarantee their salaries and therefore have no time to deepen their knowledge (Liessmann, 2008). For research and teaching activities to continue in a meaningful way, the field will have to deal with several conceptual challenges.

First of all, it is necessary to interconnect individual research outcomes. That does not inevitably mean an agreement on a common topic for all scholars who wish to focus on the transcultural perspective. Nevertheless, what the field needs is a common theoretical as well as a partially methodological platform. This platform does not need to be limited to selected disciplines; quite the contrary, it should be interdisciplinary because isolated research of separated humanities and social sciences is not desirable in the field of TC.

It is also difficult to adapt the field of TC to the Bologna Process, since it requires first only a Bachelor degree programme. If Bachelor graduates are supposed to above all gain practical knowledge that would ease their labour

⁸¹ The first graduates (2013) of the field were successful in 85% of their Master studies entrance exams. They are now studying programmes such as political studies, African studies, social and cultural anthropology, civic sector studies, intercultural communication, European cultural history, social pedagogy, social pathology and prevention, media and journalism (Source: Author).

market entry, the question is whether the field of TC can be designed for a Bachelor degree programme at all. The new structure of the field under the Humanities programme partially satisfies the need to teach practical skills, yet for the future development of TC an accreditation for Master and PhD degrees is a must. Only higher degrees of study will allow the students to deepen their understanding of key transcultural phenomena.

There is also the issue of teaching TC in English, not only because there is plenty of relevant literature in English but also because the personal input of foreign students working in an international team might stimulate research.⁸²

Two factors, an inner and an outer one essentially determine the further development of TC. The inner factor consists in the capability of scholars working on transcultural topics to unify/elaborate on their theoretical and methodological bases. The outer factor has several components: a) general conditions for the development of university programmes in the Czech Republic, b) degree forms of TC that will be officially accredited, and c) the successful launch of TC taught in English. And finally – no field of study can flourish without motivated students. It is the students of TC, both the current and future ones, whose interest and belief in the urgency of the topics in question will decide whether the project of TC will succeed or fail.

⁸² In the academic year 2014/2015, the study programme of TC is already offered in English but attracting foreign candidates seems to be a daunting task.

6 RESPONSIBILITY IN AN IRRESPONSIBLE WORLD

What can we say about the world in which we are living? What is its most apparent feature? Many tendencies, some of them described and discussed in this book, would have us believe that irresponsibility is the most suitable adjective that characterizes human behaviour in the 21st century. This publication is dedicated to all children who did not survive the hatred of grown-ups in the past, yet in this concluding part I would like to underline the aspect of irresponsibility towards children who have not been born yet. The biggest, perhaps even colossal challenge of transcultural communication is to contribute to a more responsible, less violent future for the people who will later sit in judgement of our lives.

The reader might now be thinking that pitiable statements cannot work in favour of realistic, practical measures that would indeed improve the human situation. I am aware of the very specific issues that need institutional support and political will to be resolved: economic decline, social disparities, the loss of cultural diversity, unprecedented environmental changes, moral emptiness, etc. Responsibility is one of those words that are so important and the meaning of which is so value-laden, that they are often misused and their legitimacy becomes discredited – see the current fashion of the expression “fiscal responsibility” that is an euphemism for austerity measures and radical cuts to state expenditure in the spheres of education, health care or social welfare. Yet I will still work with the term, and on the following pages I shall try to explain why there is a close link between transcultural communication and responsibility and why it deserves attention.

Today’s world is exposed to two parallel trends that might intuitively seem contradictory, yet they actually go hand-in-hand and determine each other. On the one hand, we are witnessing the massive homogenization of the world due to globalization processes – cities around the world are starting to look the same, people who have access to the Internet share the same information, the imperative of consumerism is spreading worldwide, and even though other Western values are not at all appreciated globally, the global capitalist system of transnational

markets has succeeded universally. On the other hand, the world is becoming ever more differentiated. The level of complexity is on rise, it is harder and harder to follow recent changes and adapt to them, the difference between the prospects of the wealthy and privileged and the poor and marginalized is abhorrently large, and old values are losing their meaning, as are other traditional guarantees of a coherent order.

In this disorganized world in which there is a correlation between diversity and mutual dependency, it would be foolish to distinguish strictly between various aspects of responsibility. We have to bear in mind their broader impacts in all spheres; when considering fiscal measures we cannot disregard their cultural, social, environmental and moral consequences, when drafting immigration regulations, we must take into account the economic, social, cultural, ethical and even ecological context, and so on.

It is an illusion to think that we can influence the future course of our society on the basis of value-free decisions. Nothing related to human society is axiologically neutral, in some spheres it is obvious (such as education or arts), in other spheres it is rather camouflaged (such as the natural sciences or the economy). In this respect, we can point to another double-edged fact about the present “liquid times”, as the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman would say. The more heterogeneous our society becomes, the more difficult it is to reach an agreement on common values, or more precisely, common interests. At the same time, such a consensus has never been more desperately needed.

In one chapter of the book, I presented the argument that there is only one value that is culturally neutral, meaning that it is not rooted in one particular society since it is intrinsic to all world cultures. This value may be called “commitment to the world in which we live”, and while we may substitute this long expression with “nature” or “natural environment” I still consider the emphasis put on its relational quality (people inhabit the world, which is an active process) to be useful for a proper understanding of it. This value is, I suppose, also valid when it is not reflected (consciously or unconsciously) and even when it is denied (as it indeed is in many parts of today’s world). The same cannot be said about so-called universal human rights, a concept that is clearly founded in the Judeo-Greek-Christian tradition. Loyalty towards the natural world is a true value and not a given fact (such as e.g. the dependency of our respiratory system on oxygen), since it can be disrespected, but it is evident that such an approach causes an aggravation of the human situation.

Any common value (or common interest) that is not essentially linked to one specific cultural legacy, as is the case of the commitment to the world we inhabit (or interest in life on a habitable planet) has a great potential for future development because to achieve a consensus about culturally determined values (or interests)

nowadays has been proven to be nearly impossible. Some scholars claim that human dignity and dialogical personalism are the fundamentals of transcultural communication, yet these principles are utterly foreign to many cultures and they make Western culture barely creditable and Westerners incomprehensible. What do you mean by human dignity if you let thousands of potential immigrants from Africa drown in the Mediterranean? How do you explain the concept of the uniqueness of every human being to cultures that traditionally prefer collective rights and collective interests to individualism? It seems that the fundamentals of transcultural communication cannot have implications in the form of the ethics of conviction, but in the ethics of responsibility (Weber, 2009). The principles of human dignity and dialogical personalism are legitimate for the sphere of individual morality – they can work as fundamental rules regulating individual behaviour, interpersonal relations and everyday decisions. Yet institutions (economic, political, social, cultural, environmental bodies) – if we agree that a responsible world offers more chances for humanity compared to an irresponsible one – must be based on the ethics of responsibility, taking into account easily but also only vaguely predictable consequences. What would happen if we applied the principle of human dignity fully to African refugees trying to reach the European coast? Who would accommodate thousands, millions of people, and who could guarantee they would live a dignified life in Europe? Through which channels can we convince people from cultures that traditionally regard individuals as mere links in the collective chain that they should treat every single human being as a person, and thus a unique and immeasurably precious creature? And how do we justify the right to convince “them” of anything at all? I am not saying that the dispassionate observation of suffering and death is the right thing to do; I would only like to make obvious the absurdity of the effort to elevate principles suitable for individual ethics to principles that should guide institutional decisions.

In this book I have claimed that human beings are dependent on the world that they co-create, but at the same time they seek independence through the development of culture and its instruments. Of course, the form and the speed of cultural independence varies greatly among different cultures, yet the idea of the complete autonomy of the human world (and thus the possibility to disregard the commitment to its natural quality) is misleading and in the long-term perspective irresponsible. To acknowledge this dependency and to take account of the implied commitment is – I believe – the essence of transcultural communication that will foster a responsible future.

There is one important and complex question that has so far been left aside: Can we establish our relationship to the Other on a principle that would work well also for our relation to the outer world? Can we infer that our responsibility

toward our fellow human beings ensues from our responsibility toward nature? I am afraid we cannot, since morality that is applicable to human relations needs to be derived from social reality, and analogously to the fact that a morality that is valid for the relationship between people and nature stems from the knowledge of the essential natural dependency of humans. How is one to deal with the Other who exasperates people with their otherness?

In the previous pages I have suggested that there are two principles stemming from Western culture, namely freedom and equality that can function as the basis for interpersonal relations that enable a dignified life in the chaotic world of today. Freedom is not understood here as independence, rather it means the notion of our reliance on the environment, its contemplation, the notion of our freedom's limits and the defence thereof – once we understand our duties, we also fight for our rights and we resist the powers that may tend to reduce them.

Mutual equality of all human beings is the condition for a transcultural dialogue. Only dialogue is a form of communication that can be labelled as responsible. There are obviously other types of communication that might be easier, yet fatally irresponsible: silence is likely to result in a violent conflict and the monologue of a cultural empire that suppresses its inferiors.

Freedom and equality are two premises of transcultural communication that cannot be reduced any more and it would be superfluous to add other principles. In the chapter that focused on the ethnic conflict and the failures of transcultural dialogue in the European past, I presented several conditions that can be helpful during the search for solutions (the deferment of truth, the rejection of collective guilt etc.). Those are, nevertheless, rules that can be respected by people who consider themselves free and equal. If we want to be philosophically honest, we should add that freedom is something that should not be considered as a starting point, but something that we are constantly heading for.⁸³ Still, the idea of freedom is crucial for transcultural communication, and as we have seen in the chapters dealing with the current problems of Central Europe and historical ethnic conflict, freedom is always accompanied by responsibility – tearing these two virtues apart is fatal for society.

Not all, but many failures of the past were caused by a lack of responsibility among leaders and the masses. Many problems of the present are of the same nature – a moral hazard has caused a severe economic crisis, a careless approach toward the marginalized has deepened social disparities, a predatory worldview has triggered a deterioration of the natural environment. Transcultural communication, the idea of communication in spite of the differences between people, must not become another cultural imperative of the West. If there is any potential within

⁸³ I would like to acknowledge Miroslav Pauza, who mentioned this idea at the conference Responsibility in Irresponsible Times, Prague, in November 2014.

the concept, it has to prove its acceptability to anybody whose pivotal interest is a life that never regrets having been lived. Human beings – stories that narrate their life experience – are responsible for what they become.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ I would like to acknowledge Erazim Kohák, who mentioned this idea at the conference Responsibility in Irresponsible Times, Prague, in November 2014.

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