

The Hypothesis of Incommensurability and Multicultural Education

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This article describes the logical and rhetorical grounds for a multicultural pedagogy that teaches students the knowledge and skills needed to interact creatively in the public realm betwixt and between cultures. I begin by discussing the notion of incommensurability. I contend that this hypothesis was intended to perform a particular rhetorical task and that the assumption that it is descriptive of a condition to which intercultural interactions are necessarily subjected is an unwarranted extension of the hypothesis as originally conceived. After discussing the hypothetical nature of the notion of incommensurability and its critical role within the discourse of the human sciences, the article examines the usefulness of utopian narratives as examples of incommensurable systems that can be put to pedagogical work. I argue that the comparative study of utopian narratives can provide insight into possible means of creating passageways that lead not from one bounded system to another, but rather to mutually generated and generative pluralistic public cultures in which new norms can be articulated, shared and potentially legitimised. What is crucial to the point I am trying to make is that 'incommensurability' was initially posed as a hypothesis that, while impossible to prove, still served a critical discursive or rhetorical function. This function is one that it can still serve and in an important educational manner, outside the discourse of the human sciences, within a larger, increasingly multicultural and global society.

This article describes the logical and rhetorical grounds for a multicultural pedagogy that teaches students the knowledge and skills needed to creatively interact in the public realm betwixt and between cultures. It begins with an examination of incommensurability not only because it is a hypothetical limiting condition to all intercultural understanding, but also because a proper understanding of the function of the hypothesis of incommensurability teaches a valuable lesson for those who would seek to work in educational contexts where issues of cultural difference come starkly into play. This lesson is not of the impossibility of such work, but

rather of the demands it places on existing cultural discourse, and of the possibility of and means for increasing knowledge through mutual engagement across difference.

After discussing the lesson of the hypothesis of incommensurability, this article examines the usefulness of utopian narratives as examples of incommensurable systems that can be put to pedagogical work. Utopian narratives are closed, symbolic systems and as such serve as exemplary texts displaying conditions potentially productive of incommensurability of a radical sort. But as textual stories that are ever told anew, their pretensions to totality often lose out to the practical interests of their readers. Because these narratives pretend to the conditions of closedness while being open to the interpretive actions of readers, the utopian narratives serve as useful and engaging pedagogical tools for introducing students, through the comparative study of such narratives, to the possibilities and limitations of systemic and normative interaction between different cultural systems. They can help students understand the conditions that make symbolic systems unique and cohesive, as well as dynamic and evolving. Their comparative study can also provide insight into possible means of creating passageways that lead not from one bounded system to another, but rather to mutually generated and generative pluralistic public cultures in which new norms can be articulated, shared, and potentially legitimised.

I begin by discussing the notion of incommensurability as a hypothesis generated within linguistics and applied to cultural issues by the anthropologist Benjamin Whorf. I contend that this hypothesis was intended to perform a particular rhetorical task, and that the assumption that it is descriptive of a condition to which intercultural interactions are necessarily subjected is an unwarranted extension of the hypothesis as originally conceived. I do not claim that it is therefore irrelevant to the analysis and understanding of intercultural relations, but rather that the significance of the hypothesis emerges in its promotion of a critical and reflexive movement within the discourse of the human sciences. What is crucial to the point I am trying to make is that 'incommensurability' was initially posed as a hypothesis that, while impossible to prove, still served a critical discursive or rhetorical function. This function is one that it can still serve and in an important manner, outside the discourse of the human sciences, within a larger, increasingly multicultural and global society.

THE PROBLEM OF INCOMMENSURABILITY

When the problem of incommensurability is raised today, it most often arises as a paradox haunting the discourse of the human sciences and our attempts to make sense of and to others who speak other languages and are members of different cultures. Proponents of a strong conception of incommensurability argue that barriers are not only possibilities in intercultural exchanges but rather that they are necessary conditions to be faced in all such exchanges (Lyotard, 1984, 1988; Levinas, 1998, Young,

1990). Others have taken a less extreme view of the possible implications of incommensurability, neither denying its relevance nor asserting its necessity, but rather considering it as a variable of differing value within different cases of intercultural exchange (Habermas, 1987, 1990; Benhabib, 1996; Burbules and Berk, 1999). In the more moderate discussions, incommensurability is raised, not as a given, but as a possibility; a possibility that can be faced and dealt with by the interlocutors through further communicative efforts either to make the incomprehensible understood or to articulate the previously unspeakable (Dhillon and Standish, 2000).

As an interjection within this debate between those who regard incommensurability as a necessary condition of intercultural communication and those who regard it merely as a possibility, I would like to offer an examination of an early formulation of the notion of incommensurability. It is hoped that by examining the hypothetical nature of its early articulation the incompatibility of the idea with a description of necessary and real conditions of intercultural relations will be made evident. The crucial point is that the notion of incommensurability was posed as a hypothesis, as an ‘as-if’ proposition, that was not meant to describe reality, but to effect a critical-reflective movement in a particular scientific discourse.

The anthropologist Benjamin Whorf is credited with persuasively bringing the problem of incommensurability to bear on cultural interaction. Aided by the linguist Edward Sapir, Whorf argued for seeing language as more than a passive medium through which ideas are communicated. For Whorf, following Sapir, language was to be regarded as a structure within which individuals form their thoughts. Accordingly, language provides a way of dividing up and combining the various elements and possibilities of thought and action in the world.

Thinking itself is in a language—in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese. And every language is a vast pattern system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness (Whorf, 1956, p. 252).

The proposition that ‘the world is organized by our minds . . . and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds,’ is commonly referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Sapir, 1949, p. 149).

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis directly challenged the then dominant analytic orientation in modern linguistics, which focused upon reference and the referential function of the word or sign. Sapir-Whorf turned attention to the arrangement of signs within sentences, their selection and organisation. ‘The “patternment” aspect of language overrides and controls the “lexation” or name-giving aspect’ (Whorf, 1956, p. 258). ‘That part of meaning which is in words, and which we may call “reference”, is only relatively fixed. Reference of words is at the mercy of

the sentences and grammatical patterns in which they occur' (p. 259). For Whorf, the selection and organisation of signs was guided by a set of rules or a grammar in accordance with which the play of terms could generate communicable notions of reality, or truths. Such patterned arrangements of signs were determined and restricted by the particular language's grammatical rules. The meaning of propositions was not merely dependent upon the referential precision of the terms of the language. 'Reference is the lesser part of meaning, patternment the greater' (p. 261). The structure of a particular language provided the background against which signs were arranged; and only certain arrangements created a meaningful, recognisable pattern within particular linguistic/cultural groups.

Whorf, as an anthropologist, was concerned with the implications of this linguistic reorientation for the study of cultural systems, arguing that because cultures were symbolic systems sharing and participating, if not grounded in, linguistic grammars and vocabularies, different cultures reflected radically different world-views (Lee, 1991, p. 208). That the Hopi have a different notion of time was not presented by Whorf as a curiosity of a pre-scientific society, but rather an alternative way of understanding the world. The Hopi temporal and spatial construct was internally consistent and produced results that could account for phenomena of time and space that Western European languages were less apt at representing. For example, the Hopi understanding of process-based physical phenomena allowed for the conception of waves not as independent physical phenomena, but as temporal transformations of substance (Whorf, 1956, p. 262). The Hopi's way of speaking of the motion of water as producing a rippling of the surface of a continuous body was closer to our scientific understanding of the natural phenomena. The way of speaking of 'a wave' in English actually misleads us into thinking of waves as individual parts of the body of water that are in motion. Hopi notions of time and space permit an understanding of waves as a continuous, propagating and harmonious transformation of substance.

From recognising this capacity of Hopi language to represent a different picture or understanding of processes in the world, Whorf hoped that we could then learn that attention to our language's role in constituting our understanding of the world would lead us towards a critical understanding of the conceptual limits of our discourses and provide a means of getting us out of some of the conceptual traps we found ourselves in due primarily to the structure of our language. The examples used, such as the absence of a word for 'black' within a complex serial notion of greyness in Navaho, or the above Hopi example, were simple examples meant not to prove linguistic relativity, but to point to much more complex and deeply imbedded issues of alternative patterns of thought and action rooted in linguistic and cultural differences.

That this notion of conceptual difference between linguistic groups in the understanding of worldly phenomena and social relations should be taken as an argument for the impossibility of understanding or communicating across cultural difference was not part of the intent of its original proponents. Rather, they saw themselves critically challenging other

scientists who were unquestioningly confident in the power of their own linguistic conceptual schemas to represent the world as it was absolutely and universally. In this discursive context, the presentation of the possibility of conceptual relativism was a means to undermine that self-confidence and encourage reflection upon the limits of the existing discourse, especially in its relation and imposition upon other cultural and linguistic worlds.

Many of the arguments against conceptual relativism and incommensurability contend that there is a contradiction in the theory of incommensurability that is internal to the articulation of the theory itself. One can accept this criticism without rejecting the hypothesis by acknowledging that the issue is a paradox, and it is the presentation of the paradox and the need to wrestle with its implications that is the intent of its early proponents such as Whorf, along with other related versions offered by Kuhn (1962) and Quine (1960). One eminent critic of these theories of linguistic or conceptual relativity states his objections clearly and distinctly, 'Whorf wanted to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot, as he put it, "be calibrated", [yet he] uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences' (Davidson, 1985, p. 130). Donald Davidson argued that different versions of this internal inconsistency exist in all such theories of conceptual relativity. 'Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common coordinate system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability' (p. 130). According to Davidson, therefore, there is no way to represent and therein no proof of incommensurability. Incommensurability thus stands within the philosophical discourse as a self-contradictory and nonsensical theory—its very logical possibility being dependent upon the powers of the discourse to articulate what it claims cannot be articulated in another language.

But it may be that Davidson's critique was intended not as a refutation but as a signalling recognition (or pointing out) of the theory's internal significance for the discourse in which it was first uttered. In this acknowledgement by Davidson, that the basis of proof or falsification resided within the rhetorical qualifications of the particular discourse rather than in the referential capacities, the significance of the theory is indicated, in such a way that it cannot be stated. If this is the case, then Davidson is making practical use of the Wittgensteinian distinction between pointing to and stating the case (Wittgenstein, 1953). But this interpretation of Davidson's intent is only a guess. Whether he intended to point to the significance of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis through a stated refutation is moot. The point that remains relevant for this article's contention is that the hypothesis of incommensurability, as presented by such exponents as Whorf, was not intended as a proof of an empirical fact. It was not intended to be corroborated through referential testing. Such an intention is self-contradictory as made clear by Davidson. Rather, the significance of the theory is to be found in its indication or pointing out of a paradox within the Western scientific discourse in which it was articulated.

It is due to an understandable misunderstanding that Whorf's argument has been taken as proposing the truth of radical cultural relativity and

incommensurability. In accordance with the criteria of the scientific discourses in which he participated, the validity of his argument could only be judged by the degree of the correspondence of his claim to the actual reality that it purported to describe. But the argument had that very criterion of truth and validity as its target. The truth of the argument, that is, its correspondence to an external reality and its ability to accurately represent that reality, need not be the only criteria for judging its significance. The goal of Whorf's argument was not to re-present given conditions, but rather to challenge the given conditions for understanding reality within a particular discourse, that is, the Western social scientific discourse of his time.

Whorf argued that languages are transindividualistic structures, which predetermine how groups conceive the world, and he provided evidence that different languages structured the world in radically different ways. But for all these differences, not only in language, but also in the very 'way of seeing,' of segmenting and organising the world, Whorf did not pose an absolute barrier to the possibility of future mutual understanding between them. As with the example of the Hopi language's capacity to express a phenomena consistent with findings of Western science even better than the traditional forms of Western European languages, Whorf saw the radical differences of symbolic systems as a resource for the advancement of our understanding and knowledge through a process of inquiry into alternative possibilities (other languages and logics) and the opening up of our conceptual world-view through the repatterning of our own modes of representation.

Linguistic knowledge entails understanding many different beautiful systems of logical analysis. Through it, the world as seen from the diverse viewpoints of other social groups, which we have thought of as alien, becomes intelligible in new terms. Alienness turns into a new and often clarifying way of looking at things (Whorf, 1956, p. 264).

This hopeful statement from the co-author of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that posited the strong notion of cultural relativity urges not a passive tolerance of radically different others, but sees in this radical otherness a source and possibility of intellectual, scientific, and cultural growth.

What then did he *mean or intend to achieve* by his offering of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis? If he did not accept the truth of radical incommensurability, why then did he raise the spectre of incommensurability within the human sciences? He certainly recognised that this spectre contravened the laws of scientific discourse. It called into question not only the role of language, the focus on referentiality, the correspondence theory of truth, which undergirded the natural sciences, but also the very meaning of logic and knowledge. Under the influence of the hypothesis and the critical reflection upon linguistic orders, the terms 'logic' and 'knowledge' became pluralised. 'Logics' and 'knowledges' became commonplace usages within the discourse of human science, though somewhat possessed of a grotesque significance. They challenged the very goals and the

metaphysics of the Modern Western disciplines of scientific inquiry. The hypothesis served as an inquisitional tool for opening these disciplines to a new wealth of meanings that had hitherto been excluded. Once linguistics and rhetoric became legitimate areas of scientific examination, the spectral projections of other worlds broke through the boundaries of our discourse and were found to be made of a material that registered on our scientific instruments. Whorf's linguistic studies provided persuasive evidence of anterior worldviews and turned our attention to unrecognised possibilities. The hypothesis of incommensurability was meant to turn our attention to the bars of the cage in which we unknowingly had confined ourselves. Not for us to accept that confinement, but to see that we were in fact confining ourselves in our attempts to encompass all possibilities within a single discursive and normative system.

Incommensurability served a purpose as a hypothesis within the discourse of the human sciences, though it had no proven, or even prove-able, referent outside the discourse itself. Davidson's critique clearly draws out this implication of 'unproveability'. But this only calls the interpreter of the hypothesis to see its significance as a rhetorical, or discursive catalyst. The hypothesis drew its significance, its meaning, not from its ability to refer to an exterior reality, but from its relational effect when juxtaposed and associated with concepts such as universality, correspondence, referentiality, and objectivity within the discourse of human science. It is this relational function that we must grasp in order to see what is *meant* by the hypothesis of incommensurability and what use-value, or performative function, it has. The meaning of the hypothesis is thus better grasped through a rhetorical lens, as a tactical gesture within the particular discourse of the human sciences at a particular time and place. If incommensurability and the theory of linguistic relativism are understood as propositions making traditional truth claims about an external reality, the significance of this argument is lost. Taken as a straightforward empirical claim to represent reality, the notion of incommensurability becomes less a hypothesis to open up thinking to new possibilities, and more a gesture used to block inquiry into new or different regions.

One can see the rhetorical impact of the notion of incommensurability in the current debates around multiculturalism. If incommensurability is understood as a hypothesis with a reflexive payoff, rather than an attempt to describe a hard reality, then it offers a means for moving beyond an impasse, which otherwise threatens the possibility of negotiable resolution to cultural conflict. 'Incommensurability' is an example of what Lévi-Strauss refers to as a 'zero term', Derrida as a 'supplement' and Barthes as a 'transition' (Lévi-Strauss, 1987; Derrida, 1979; Barthes, 1976). It is a term that has no specific referent external to the discourse, but that serves to provide sufficient ground to move on where meaning is lacking but some sign or signifier is needed to maintain the integrity of the system. 'Incommensurability' is a catalyst, which produces a needed reaction within a particular system, but itself contributes no substantive elements to the resulting product. 'Universality' is a similar term, which played a

similar function in the historical development of the liberal discourse in its opposition to the ‘transcendent particularity’ of the monarch. Now, as we move from a liberal position to a multicultural one, ‘incommensurability’ has played the role of another such discursively pragmatic catalyst.

The interpretation of the significance of the theory of incommensurability must be made in accordance with a different set of criteria than that used by those who regard intercultural relation-building as a process of translation. The process of translation relies upon the notion that different languages rely upon an ultimately shared referential world. Translation converts the language of the stranger through the re-representation of the other’s speech in accordance with the rules and the vocabulary of the home language. The goal of translation is the establishing of a correspondence between symbolic orders based upon a shared sense of the representational truth of propositions. In his critique of the theory of conceptual relativism, Davidson offers a possible solution to the problem of cultural difference in line with the goal of translation. He argues that a resolution of differences can be achieved through ‘agreement in the large mediated by a theory of truth contrived by an interpreter for speakers of another language’ (Davidson, 1985, p. 142). This conclusion rests upon a notion of commensurability achieved only by the reduction of the differences between the schemes through a process of translation.

Contrarily and in sum, what Whorf held out as a hope, and what he intended the hypothesis of incommensurability to *do*, was to open the borders of the existing Western social science discourse to accommodate difference, different criteria of truth, and to assist in the expansion of human knowledge through cultural intercourse. The proponents of linguistic relativism should be cast in a sophistic role presenting the case for a pragmatic interpretation of the significance of the theory of conceptual relativism. Whorf foresaw the role of linguistic anthropology as encouraging a reflexive orientation among practitioners of the human sciences as they face conditions of increasing cultural confluence (Whorf, 1956, p. 240). This is an odd way of defining incommensurability, not as a description of conditions of intercourse between cultures, but rather as a goad to reflection on the impact of one’s own cultural position in a changing world. But this is precisely how one needs to understand the notion if one is to understand the lesson of the hypothesis of incommensurability in the human sciences since its initial articulation. Incommensurability, or linguistic relativity, was not originally conceived by those who proposed it as a description of conditions undermining intercultural understanding, but rather as a hypothesis that would encourage heightened self-awareness and critical reflexivity in the West’s own cultural and scientific discourse.

UTOPIAN INCOMMENSURABILITIES

The above interpretation does not claim that incommensurability is impossible or ‘merely rhetorical,’ only that its significance is to be found

in its reflexive impact within a particular discourse. But to have this impact incommensurability must be seen as a possibility, if not a fact. I will argue in this section that incommensurability does occur, but only in special, restrictive, 'utopian' circumstances. This section provides examples of such instances as they arise in the comparison of utopian narratives. The analysis of incommensurability as it arises between utopian narratives is meant as a demonstration of the condition of and the conditions giving rise to incommensurability. The relations between these narratives exemplify the conditions of incommensurability due to the particularly hyperbolic nature of the narratives themselves. Through the study of the conditions revealed in the relation between such texts, I hope to be able to offer a diagnosis of a problem that has pragmatic consequences in non-utopian cases. The examination of these special conditions inherent in utopian narratives can teach us lessons about the possibilities inherent in intercultural engagement, especially in those cases exhibiting particular difficulties in mutual understanding.

Strong incommensurability, in which there is a radical difference between cultural systems that makes intercultural understanding impossible, requires the co-existence of at least two closed symbolic systems. Systems that are closed are those in which the meaning of symbols in that cultural repertoire and the rules of symbolic association are fixed and unalterable by speakers. Historical and existing cultures cannot be so wholly defined, but will always be open in the sense that they are subject to internal and external forces of conflict, exchange and union. We know closed symbolic systems only as they are represented in narrative constructs, such as Plato's *Republic* and Marxist-Leninist accounts of a final stage of Communism. These systems to the extent that they are held as true or real are functionally incommensurable—that is, hybridisation between these systems and any other is or would be impossible. The impossibility of hybridisation results from the inability of anyone embedded within one of these symbolic systems to recognise the sense of a statement uttered in accordance with another's symbolic code. For example, the statement that the Philosopher-King will determine the laws for the Silver and Bronze races, could not be held to have any validity by a Communist, and the statement that the rule of the Vanguard must wither away to allow for the full flourishing of the Proletariat would make no sense to a Republican. The only way we can assume that these statements could be understood by those occupying a place within the other system is if the utterance of the other could be imaginatively articulated and understood as a metaphor within their own discourse. But such imaginings of metaphoric possibility are impossible within a *closed* symbolic order. This is because the vocabulary and rules of association (that is, the patternment, or grammar) of each discourse is strictly established and does not allow for any metaphoric interpretation or alternative arrangements of signs.

In their utopian narrative forms, Communism and *The Republic* are closed. They are constructed according to laws and principles that brook no alteration. The vocabularies and rules of relation are established as

universal and absolute. Both the Marxist-Leninist and the Platonic accounts are clear in their declaration of this absolutist determination of the unalterable and permanent nature of the orders they imagine. In the case of *The Republic*, Plato states that that the principle of justice is in essence each performing his role and not stepping outside the boundaries of that pre-ordained role. In the case of the Communist utopia, what is referred to as 'species-being' defines, coordinates, and guides the populace as an essence of humanity. The closed nature of the system are dictated internally as well as explicitly within the narrative constructions themselves.

We will first look at the utopian narrative of *The Republic* to better describe the conditions of a closed system making incommensurability possible. In *The Republic*, the value, purpose, and meaning of all roles are determined by their relationship to the philosopher-king. The 'guardians' share the same substantive, 'metallic' nature and are given the same education. They are close comrades, yet one is elevated within the chain of command to become the philosopher-king. The artisans and the rest of the population are defined by their differing 'metallic' natures and their concomitant lower position within the hierarchy. Each lower stage of the hierarchy derives its role from the dictates of the philosopher-king, and is under the authority of the guardians. There is no appropriate movement between positions within this system. The one character that is a potential source of disturbance through the symbolic the movement of positions within the system is necessarily banished. The 'poet' plays an alterior role, not found in the system itself, but only in the expression of the system; the poet is the 'anti-republican'. It is this oppositional, binary relation 'republican/poet', that has turned out to be an interpretive key for many readers of *The Republic*. It is certainly the key by which many critics condemn the argument, unmindful of the power Plato attributes to the poet in his required banishment from *The Republic*.

In his argument for the exiling of the poets from *The Republic*, Plato makes the significance of the poet clear through the narrative, though only in the explanation of the poet's inappropriateness within the utopian construct. The significance of the poet in her transgressive relation to the utopian system is her capacity to disturb the order of the Republic by offering alternative metaphoric constructions of its foundational myth, i.e. the myth of the metals. The poet draws her significance from her alterior position in relation to the signifying power of the philosopher-king: not an oppositional law-giver, but an alternative myth-maker. The founding metaphor of this utopia, like all utopias, is what makes the system work. Such metaphors are the founding myths, which serve as master signifiers, defining, coordinating, and guiding the signifying possibilities of other terms within their sphere of influence.

That such symbolic systems are utopian is not to say that they are *merely* symbolic as opposed to real. It is rather to say that they are a particular type of symbolic system in that they posit themselves as perfect. They exist as particular narrative constructions in which their reality is wholly symbolic and only possible as symbolic. They are static forms, not systems really but static orderings. The arrangement of elements within

these systems cannot be changed or altered. They are closed to any manipulation internal or external. But it is precisely the static arrangement, the selection and organisation of the signs, in accordance with an essentialised set of rules of association, which gives them their permanent and immaculate meaning and provides the vision of perfection.

They are systems of symbolic meaning because they dictate a particular arrangement of symbols productive of a series of meanings building up from a few basic relational series—metals or classes or races. These systems are not derived from a natural order. They do not merely represent a natural or human condition. They are systemic constructions based upon metaphor. They are symbolic systems because as Lévi-Strauss puts it, they ‘diverge from nature. A kinship system, [as another symbolic system,] is not a description of the objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals. It exists only in human consciousness; it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 50). Utopian narratives as arbitrary systems of representations based upon a particular foundational metaphor, present this network of relations as universal and absolute, as frozen in time, as an abstraction for observation. They are laboratory specimens of symbolic, socio-cultural systems. They exemplify for us the synchronic grammar of signs and symbols, which make up a system of normative meaning. But they are closed and clearly bounded systems in their narrative form.

Existent symbolic systems, to the extent that they are lived, rely upon ongoing communication within an historical field. They are thus ‘open’ systems in that they exist only through ongoing exchange and must allow for articulation between differing social parts or groups. An existent cultural system is one that has evolved through the intercourse of historical actors, not articulated in closely bound form as a purely narrative construct. In its complexity, such an existent cultural system relies for the articulation of its many parts upon a metaphoric process, not merely the stating of a foundational myth, but the use of analogy to draw connections across differences. Thus, for example, the functioning of the economy, the military, and the religion of a particular society are integrated through metaphoric symbolic relations. It is this openness to a required process of metaphoric analogy that can be used to give voice, sense, and validity to alternative, new symbolic imaginings. Radical, reformative, or revolutionary symbolic imaginings can be articulated in a manner understandable within an *existent cultural system* with all its symbolic complexity by taking advantage of this quality of ‘openness’.

In the substitution of primary or master symbols, we recognise the historical challenges to existing regimes—for example, the substitution of the ‘divine right of kings’ by the ‘rights of men’, or the substitution of ‘the city of God’ for the seat of the Roman Empire. Such substitution can occur at many levels but at the level of the master signifier we see their effects much more clearly and extensively. These substitutions can only occur in open systems. Such open systems rely upon the powers of analogy and connotation in order to maintain a sense of connectedness and relative coherence amongst an ever-changing complex of multiple sub-systems

(Eco, 1976). In such lived, historical systems, as opposed to utopian ones, the transfiguration of existing metaphors and adjustments to the rules governing the relations between normative symbols are necessary to maintain coherence and accord between differently developing social entities. So, what from a utopian perspective may seem radical or subversive, i.e. the poetic alteration of core symbols and myths, is within historical systems a necessary aspect of growth and development.

The reason *The Republic* and Communism are utopian, i.e. literally ‘no place’, is that their metaphors are deemed referential truths, yet cannot be. For the story to be attributed the status of truth it must deny the metaphoric displacement at its heart. Such utopian political narratives close off the signs and sign-relations to any further semiotic play, any further substitution and development of meaning. But this closure cannot be maintained as narratives enter the public domain and are retold, translated, and transfigured. It is one of the inherent aspects of symbolic narratives that they are forever subject to metaphoric alteration. Metaphors leave themselves ever open to a slippage of meaning in the moment of their utterance. No symbolic system, once entering the public realm of exchange, can be closed. All metaphoric speech actions, all symbolic rhetorical tactics, can be employed in an open, complex, existent public realm. All existent discourses are open to ongoing metaphoric manipulation. Utopian narratives are representations of systems of human intercourse; communicative engagement is their life-medium. As engaged and spoken, thought and acted, any rigid definition and ordering of terms can fall prey to both the articulatory competencies and incompetencies (such as prophetic errors) of actors. In their retelling, as they enter into a public discussion, Plato’s *Republic* and Marx’s Communism continue to generate new readings and spin off new republican and communist narratives as they become topics of discussion.

There is no group of people called ‘poets’ who have a lock on metaphoric or figurative speech acts and whose exclusion would effectively end the imaginative and creative manipulation of the given codes and repertoires within an existing symbolic system. Symbolic systems are products of peoples’ creative speech and will always be subject to manipulation by creative speech acts. All speakers have the capacity. It is built into the system of communication relying upon signs and relations for the production of meaning. The capacity to employ metaphor is not so much an innate and universal attribute of humanity as it is a necessary outcome of the enactment of a symbolic system by a population of speakers. It is an ability that must be learned and the poetic practices, though learn-able through trial and error, are so vast an array, and so often only unconsciously engaged, that an effective poetic mastery requires instruction.

POETIC PRAXIS AND LEARNING FROM UTOPIAN NARRATIVES

The restriction of incommensurability to utopian conditions does not mean that we have nothing to learn from the study of incommensurability that

impacts our real worldly affairs. We have just as much to learn from the incommensurable relation between utopias as we do from the utopias themselves regarding our everyday ethical and political practices. Idealistic formulations, such as *The Republic* and Communism, help guide actions in diverse, complex circumstances even though they do not correspond to the reality of the given lived situation (see Marin, 1993, pp. 412-414). Beyond the normative insights provided through examination of individual utopian narratives, the comparative study of the incommensurable relation betwixt and between utopias can help us to understand the logic of symbolic systems. This understanding of the logical and rhetorical conditions of incommensurability can inform interaction in moments of intercultural engagement that occur more and more frequently in our increasingly global society. In this symbolic laboratory of utopian analysis, we gain not merely an understanding of particular systems but moreover a knowledge of the systemic properties that determine norms of meaning-making, signification, and action. We observe their metaphoric foundation in isolated and controlled conditions, how they come to be, how they are maintained, how the relations between elements are established, and how they may be altered.

Analysing utopian narratives as symbolic structures brings out their underlying, internal systematic relations, while analysing them as rhetorical practices announces their partiality, incompleteness, and contingency as they function within an external, public discourse. As reified symbolic structures utopian narratives are an idealised set of relations, as narrated representations they are an utterance given to the contingencies of that particular retelling. In this distinction lies the key to understanding the conditions of possible transfigurative engagement between symbolic systems. The engagement occurs not between the systems, but between speakers who are more or less reliant upon these symbolic systems for their normative expressions. It is not the structures that speak, but the individuals that speak by making use of the symbolic repertoires and codes underlying the narratives. This goes against the deterministic grain of structuralist interpretations by emphasising the role of the speaker as agent, who not only speaks the language but who often speaks it poetically. These doctrines and codes, systems and structures are put into play and altered in each such utterance. They become no longer an account of ontological essences, but rather the means and medium by which people articulate their beliefs and hopes in time, in public, and in practice.

Once embedded in history and subject to the practices of a public, utopian narratives such as *The Republic* and Communism become open to the possibility of transfigurative manipulation. These systems of justice, which appear so perfect in their ideal state, are but stories told in time to a group of interlocutors, and as such they are always already being rearticulated. Resistant to such historicisation, there are those who would like the meaning of these utopian stories to have a fixed referent, arguing that the stories correspond to reality. But these stories, by their very own nature as utopian, deny the existence of just such a referential ground. Their meaning is derived not from a correspondence with facts, but from

an ordering of signs symbols in accordance with a primary mytheme. Their meaning is unfolded in the juxtaposition between their closed order and the normative relations lived by the hearers of the narratives. It is in the establishment of new relations between symbols and the drawing of relations between the closed utopian and the lived normative systems, that these narratives generate a significant meaning for those who share them. Because of this necessary interpretive relation to existing, complex, lived orders, the utopian narrative's meaning is discovered in its relative correspondence to the reader's own cultural, social, economic and political situation. For example, any interpretation of *The Republic* draws its meaning not only from the narrative's internal relation of signs and symbols, but also from the system of justice that dominates the society in which the utopian tale is retold. *The Republic* is understood differently when read today in the United States, than it was when read in Athens or in a *samizdat* publication in the USSR. If there is an original meaning of the text, it may only be found by revisiting the moment of its initial writing by Plato in Ancient Athens—though even Plato represents it as a retelling of a conversation.

To make a utopian narrative meaningful, and instructive, it is necessary that the storyteller/teacher draw links between the hearers'/students' lived system of justice, by which the symbols of the narrative will be interpreted, and the utopian system being narrated. This is not a mere possibility to be engaged in by the rare poetically inclined teacher, but is a necessary part of the practice of retelling the story. Even the individual reader, alone in their room reading the ancient Greek text of *The Republic* must retell it to themselves drawing the relation between the system of justice under which they know justice, for example Bush's America, and the system of justice laid out in the text—e.g. homeland security/guardians. This juxtaposing of terms is the simplest of manipulations, more interpretive than poetic. Still it is in this juxtaposition of symbols that an interpretive key is created. It is by relating the symbols and symbolic constructions of the narrative to this interpretive key that a significant meaning, an action in the public arena, is produced. The readers, through their exercise of poetic practices, produce this symbolic key and the hybridised, transfigured interpretation that arises out of its being put into play.

THE LESSON OF INCOMMENSURABILITY

Utopian narratives can be used pedagogically to teach students the skills and the knowledge they need to interact across differences with those whose 'way of life' is governed in accordance with different symbolic systems. Few are so completely absorbed within a particular system that they cannot employ metaphor and analogy so as to understand the claims of 'others.' As I argue above, every actual existing cultural or political system must already employ metaphor in a dynamic fashion in order to reconcile an internal set of subsystems. Poetic praxis is thus something

that all have a working familiarity with. It is a familiarity that teachers can take advantage of through the focused and comparative analysis of utopian narratives in order to help students come to an understanding and mastery of skills for the manipulation of those symbolic systems active in the public realm of their own society. In what follows, I will discuss the pedagogical usefulness of utopian narratives, taking advantage of their exemplification of the condition of incommensurability to reveal to students the mechanisms by which symbolic systems restrict and permit intercultural communication, especially communication of a transfigurative and hybridising sort.

In *The Differend*, Lyotard discusses the use of the 'as if' as a rhetorical tactic through which difference can be engaged but not forgotten.

The 'as if' . . . neither hollows out nor fills in the abyss, it passes or comes to pass over it, and takes it therefore into consideration. It is an *Uebergang* which is the model of all *Uebergänge* . . . The as-if depends upon the transcendental imagination of the invention of the comparison, but it depends upon the faculty of judgment for its regulation (Lyotard, 1988, p. 123).

Here Lyotard argues that the imagination and aesthetic judgment of interlocutors is capable of transcending boundaries created by difference between symbolic systems. Lyotard is normally cited as one who argues that there is a necessary generation of untranslatable meaning in any dialogue between speakers of different discourses. But here we find him arguing for the existence of means to create passageways (or *uebergangen*) between these different symbolic systems. Pradeep Dhillon has noted the possible interpretation of Lyotard's argument stressing less the incommensurability of differences, than the ethical imperative to seek a means to transcend them. She notes, 'Lyotard turns . . . to a Kantian romanticism . . . by arguing for aesthetic judgment as an analogy for the resolution of the differend' (Dhillon and Standish, 2000, p. 121). It is in the hypothetical, creative, and transfigurative deployment of different grammars and vocabularies that the idiom for the expression of a passageway-creating or hybridising narrative may be pursued.

Transfigurative articulations, emerging through the use of analogy and metaphor, are imaginative inventions. In the mode of the 'as if,' symbols within and between genres of discourse and symbolic orders are manipulated in order to produce shared meaning across pre-established boundaries of discursive difference. The mode of the 'as if' can be engaged in many different ways. A list might include, irony, inter-reference, transference, and wondering amongst some of the rhetorical tactics (see Fischer, 1986). One example of dialogue involving such reconstructive moves generating hybrid narratives between symbolic systems or cultures can be seen in the poetry of Derek Walcott (see his *Omeros*, 1990), which takes advantage of natural correspondences between the Aegean and the Caribbean to draw out the cultural yearnings of a post-colonial population. Another is found in the negotiations

between the Canadian government and the representatives of indigenous peoples over the development of shared territories (Tully, 1995). The Canadian-Inuit example, an instance of political negotiation, points out the usefulness of the recrafting of symbolic representations in a hybrid form to articulate a political position between an indigenous and a national order.

Such examples both challenge those who have put forth the notion of incommensurability, such as Whorf and Lyotard, while at the same time fulfilling their hope for the expansion and growth of knowledge through the generation of new idioms in which the unspeakable can be spoken. Lyotard expresses his hope early in his text *The Differend*, and it serves as a positive motive for proceeding with his apparently pessimistic analysis.

The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be ... A lot of searching must be done to find new rules for forming and linking phrases that are able to express the differend ... What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them (Lyotard, 1988, p. 13).

Lyotard's analysis of conflicts between genres of discourse is built upon the hope of making it possible to speak the unspeakable through the production of creative, mutually-appropriate idioms. But to understand the positive potential Lyotard cites one must see the differend as an outcome of particular disputes, not a universal and absolute condition. The generation of differends and potential idiomatic passageways are localised events between speakers. The hybrid and transfigured representations, those that serve as passageways, are small local narratives appropriate for the moment of their articulation by the specific participants of that multi-cultural dialogue.

Educators can bring out this transfigurative possibility in particular moments of intercourse by making the subject of a multicultural pedagogy the teaching of practices of hybrid and transfigurative articulation. These taught skills and tactics for engaging betwixt and between symbolic systems are useful not for a grand reconstruction or the assertion of a new system, but rather, for the production of micro-narratives meant to articulate a particular felt need in a particular time and place. The instructor, by focusing on the rhetorical tactics employed in each and every retelling of cultural or symbolic narratives, teaches the poetic skills and tools necessary for their transfigurative and imaginative manipulation in relation to the norms and needs of a particular public or classroom. This pedagogy requires that normative, symbolic narratives be treated in an openly interpretive manner and taught in a comparative fashion. Such a pedagogy would require of the students their own re-articulation of stories relying on shared and juxtaposed elements of the narratives they bring with them.

Such hybrid micro-narratives will often have a grotesque appearance and may provoke opposition from those who hold particular narratives as essential and authoritative. There is a loss of particular meaning, and a

normative cost associated with the rearticulation of cultural narratives in a transfigurative and hybridising manner. I do not mean to underplay the significance of such loss but there are also dangers and costs associated with an incommensurable and utopian understanding of cultural narratives. Such dogmatic or closed belief needs to be shown to be neither logical nor pragmatic in a multicultural context. The rearticulation of cultural narratives can lead to positive results where intercultural conflict or misunderstanding is common. But to be just and democratic, such rearticulation would necessarily require a process of critique and negotiation in the public in which it is introduced. Such transfigured cultural narratives would be a product of a public process of telling, adaptation, and retelling. In the teaching of this type of transfigurative rhetoric, the sharing, criticising, adapting and reworking of hybrid narratives as a collective task would be a requisite pedagogical component.

It is not in their saving of the forgotten and shunning of the unjust that hybrid, transfigured narratives evince their ethical power, but in the forging of new combinations and new idioms. These stories, transgressive and participatory as opposed to closed and utopian, teach the possibility of justice through a display of the tactics of transfiguration within a field of cultural confluence. Hybrid narratives reveal possibilities attainable by students and agents within a multicultural public, and teach the means for participating while opening existing narratives to creative alteration. They displace the static authority of founding myths by substituting symbols from one cultural system into the normative narratives of another. These hybrids demand of extant cultural authorities an explanation, a justification for the appropriateness of their power to determine the significance of normative symbols and codes. Hybrid retellings replace utopias as the appropriate narratives of justice in a multicultural, globalised society by taking advantage of the context and process evident on a daily basis within the public realm. By retelling within the public, by subjecting symbolic and normative narratives to the transfigurative rhetorical tactics commonplace in today's popular media as well as contemporary literature, by putting existing authoritative narratives into recombinatory play, by demanding participatory engagement of the audience, new passages between different normative systems are made possible, imaginable, and potentially legitimate.

The teaching of particular rhetorical techniques and skills is needed for the articulation of micro-narratives that are generated through the transfiguration and hybridisation of existing authoritative cultural narratives. This sounds manipulative, and it is. But it is not the pedagogy that manipulates, but rather the students who through the pedagogy are learning the skills and techniques by which they, as interlocutors within a multicultural public, can manipulate existing cultural, normative, and symbolic narratives and systems. The creative, transfigured narratives that emerge from such local articulations are limited by the vocabularies and the rules of the systems that pre-determine the terms of the intercultural engagement. But this limitation and determination, while restricting the

outcomes and discouraging any purely fanciful articulations, cannot block the articulation of hybrids that voice a mutually felt normative assertion challenging existing cultural orderings.

This process of hybrid transfiguration between systems is already occurring, but not necessarily in a democratic, critical, or reflective manner. The skills necessary to be effective in a multicultural public must be learned, and taught to as large a part of the population as possible, if the requisite systemic growth and the generation of passageways is to occur in a democratic fashion. Public education has a crucial role to play in this process. But by understanding incommensurability as a description of necessary conditions, and too reverently attending to existing cultural narratives as authoritative, we have been underestimating the creative potential of those who live within shared, multicultural publics to become the authors of their own normative orderings. Incommensurability must be understood as a hypothetical condition and employed in education as a catalyst to encourage students to question the universality and absoluteness of their normative assumptions. Utopian narratives can be employed, not to teach particular notions of justice, but to teach the relations between different systems of justice. And rhetoric can again be engaged as an essential curricular topic that teaches not merely proper articulation, but rather creative skills promoting ethical and progressive engagement in a multicultural society.

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