



Refugees, Germany, Willkommenskultur and Intercultural Communication: Response to Dominic Busch's guest post

Guest post by Peter Praxmarer

I find myself in almost full agreement with what Dominic Busch writes.

In particular, I find his reflections on language in what he calls “internal social discourse,” pertinent and well taken. Also, the fact that “the cultural argument” has been hijacked by the far right and the national populists, in our times, is not surprising. This would, by the way, merit a little more research: attention to the culture of others has more often than not been a child of animosity, enmity, hostility, rejection if not outright war, as the history of exclusion, but also of conquest, colonialism, imperialism, and domination in general, amply testifies. As we (should) know, the very idea of “intercultural communication” as a more or less independent field of study, research and practical application was born during WWII, as part of the “war effort” of the US (viz. Leeds-Hurwitz, 2010). From this, also, stems the particular and sometimes incongruent vocabulary of the field, which is utterly US-social-science-lingo dominated, with some inroads from languages which still claim their *droit de cité* in the global social science supermarket (or, more benignly stated, the Global Republic of Letters), e.g. French and German. The field of study called intercultural communication became less war-related only later (but not everywhere), when nation- and culture-crossing processes and constellations other than war started to play a more important role in the modern world-system (to follow Immanuel Wallerstein's still pertinent terminology, preferring it to the shallow term “globalization”) – but it has kept its very peculiar vocabulary, at least in the mainstream.

Aside from that, while reflecting upon the present discourse on refugees in Germany and the “cultural” problems of the more or less autochthon residents (the “Old Germans”, as Busch cites a fellow professor in his piece) with them, it is worthwhile also to reflect on the position of the very term *Kultur* in Germany. In Germany, and not only during Nazi times, there has long existed an attitude which was described as *Am deutschen Wesen mag/soll die Welt genesen*, meaning that German culture is the remedy for all other (cultural) ills, all over the world. The Allied Propaganda posters, both in WWI as in WWII, took up this cultural theme. Thus, e.g., US War Propaganda during WWI showed a Mad German Brute holding a club with written *Kultur* on it (seen here: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/b7/05/98/b705983c1a384debd63b1472885862ac.jpg>), or an US Sleeping Beauty by the name of Civilization (as seen here: <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/>

ww1posters/4963), calling every man, woman and child to war – these and similar illustrations were meant to convey that *deutsche Kultur* is not so peaceful as other civilizations. In historical perspective, one has to agree. Looking into what was done in the name of German *Kultur* and how *Kultur* was used during WWII and before, would just confirm the very xenophobic and worse essence of it, inhumanely and most horrendously. (*Caveat*: Allied war propaganda is not presented here as an authoritative source, but only to provide a stark illustration of the use of the cultural argument; and many other than German “cultures” and “civilizations” certainly also have their share in war, conquest and violence-in-the-name-of-culture, epitomized, e.g., by “The White Man’s Burden” or the “*mission civilisatrice*”).

Therefore, and also in view of the fact that the populist right wing and nationalistic parties have been able to hijack the term “culture” for their purposes, it is so good to see how civil society in Germany has **constructed a new culture** which is not national or *völkisch*, nor aggressive or expansionist, but welcoming: *Willkommenskultur*. In addition, even the counterpart to civil society, the German state, not least through its Chancellor, is, to varying degrees and for various reasons, in favor of taking in refugees, as is, again for still other reasons and purposes, the economy and a great part of the media. A beautiful page in the otherwise not always so beautiful book of contemporary Europe. And also a great example of (co-)constructed (inter-)culture, as well as of the fact that “culture” never stands alone and cannot be meaningfully explained without taking into account history, society, economy, the polity, as well as, in our day and age, the many influences and experiences of mediated virtual reality in all its forms.

Yet, I also want to mention a point of potential disagreement with what Busch writes, regarding the role of Intercultural Communication Studies and Research. It is certainly true that the term “culture” has been critically evaluated, and the field is rapidly moving away from an essentialist and relatively static position to a more constructivist interactional and dynamic view of culture, in very simple terms privileging “communication” and “inter” over “culture”. However, by and large the main concern of intercultural communication research has been predominantly either relatively elite or middle-class or strictly utilitarian, covering, e.g. management or other professional groups, hospitals, schools, the military, police, development cooperation, etc. Relatively rarely concerned with, e.g., social integration per se (if not in special trainings for social workers, etc.), or with social integration from below (viz. the reference to Conflict Discourse Ethnocentrism in Busch’s text). In other words, the field has been center- and middle-class- or elite-focused, and not periphery- and non-elite, and where non-elite, then mostly only in terms of social management of deviations from norms or dangers from (culturally defined) others. This has also impacted our methodology: we have not always tried to understand, but we have been “overstanding”, as Raimon Panikkar (1990) so masterly phrased it already a quarter of a century ago. This is exacerbated when interculturalists (have to) jump on data-driven “fast science” jets instead of cultivating philosophy-fertilized “slow science” gardens (<http://slow-science.org/>), since this leaves no time to reflect either on the *cui bono* question or on participative methods or more sophisticated research questions than the ones required and funded by the global social science marketplaces – and it most certainly does not give a voice to those directly researched upon and with. Also for these reasons (conceptual, exemplified by “culture”, as well as methodologically), I would argue, we have so little to say when it comes to refugee crises, or to horrorism/terrorism (Praxmarer, 2015), or to many other social “problems”. One reason why “the cultural argument” has been so successfully hijacked by the right and the nationalists, could therefore probably be that

the interculturalists have far too long worked – even if engaging in what Busch calls a “sophisticated” debate – with a de-historized, de-socialized, de-materialized, de-economized, de-politicized and overly value-oriented and psychologized concept of culture (and communication, for that matter). In other words, if one wants to understand (parts of) social reality in terms of culture and communication (and “inter” dynamics and processes), one has to look at it as what Busch calls, following Michel Foucault a “Dispositiv” (“*dispositif*” or “*apparatus*” in Foucault’s terminology). Likewise, it is necessary to overcome the “Unbearable Lightness of Communication Research”, as *The International Communication Gazette* tellingly titles its forthcoming 2016 Special Issue (Servaes & Anderson, 2016).

This critical look at the field is of course not meant to belittle the many initiatives of academic interculturalists in Germany, of which “Helfern helfen” of the intercultural campus of the *Interkultureller Hochschulverband* is but one (<http://www.intercultural-campus.org/>). Or the numerous other initiatives undertaken by people who have studied intercultural communication and want to put their knowledge to good use; not to forget all those who practice sustainable – and sustained -- intercultural communication in their daily dealings with the Stranger, the Migrant, the Refugee, the Other. It is simply a call for more “social” intercultural communication studies – more social in more than one sense.

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