

## COVID-19 and Interculturality: First lessons for Teacher educators

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### Abstract

This exploratory article represents an attempt to examine and problematize the links between the COVID-19 crisis and interculturality for education. Aiming at teacher educators, we review problems with the notion of interculturality in light of the crisis. We argue that these problems were not created by the crisis, but that the crisis unveiled them. In the first part of the article we suggest that these issues should be approached by looking into interculturality (and companion terms such as “democracy” and “equality”) as an ideology that deserves deconstructing, unthinking, reconstructing and rethinking. We also describe the problems triggered by this ideology: the need to shift from “dead imagination” (culture, difference, etc.) to unearthing the “groundwater” of the economy and globalization in the way interculturality functions. We then propose a set of three principles that could be used by teacher educators to train future teachers to deal with interculturality afresh: “*Beyond comparison*”, “*The mirror: turning inward*”, and “*Questioning the unquestionables*”.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, democracy, equality, ideology, interculturality, teacher education

## Introduction

*“A Chinese proverb: “When one dog begins barking at a shadow, 10,000 make it into a reality” - An epigraph to any commentary on ideologies” (Cioran, 1983, p. 123)*

We finalized this article in early April 2020, 100 days after the new coronavirus (COVID-19 hereafter) was signaled to the World Health Organisation by the Chinese authorities. While some countries were seeing signs of COVID-19 slowdown, others were entering a crisis mode to fight against the virus. As we were planning an article for this special issue on interculturality and teacher education and training, we decided that we could not but write about the links between COVID-19 and interculturality. This crisis will have a massive impact on the world for years and will be remembered as the time when most countries went into confinement and lockdown, closing national borders in an unprecedented way. Since January 2020, many things have been said and written about different countries and peoples globally (such as associating the virus with particular groups of people and places), giving us “rising anti-stereotype nausea” (Barthes, 2012, p. 30). Although interculturality did not stop (billions of people were still communicating and doing business across borders through technology), we felt that it was already urgent to start discussing what could be considered as the shortcomings of global education in relation to interculturality.

Millions of people around the world have been introduced to, trained for, prepared to deal with intercultural issues; yet, as we shall see in this article, the current situation has unveiled problems with certain ideological treadmills about interculturality that have been with us for decades. The virus did not create this situation, but it did amplify it. Many scholars from around the world have warned about the pitfalls of intercultural communication education over the past 20 years (e.g. from the West: Abdallah-Preteille, 1986; Holliday, 2010; Dervin, 2012 but also Shi-Xu, 2001 from China, amongst others). This article pinpoints the problems that the virus situation has unveiled about interculturality, and offers some thoughts about preparing future teachers for dealing with these issues. The article is exploratory in nature and relies on our observations and experiences of discussions around the virus in different kinds of (social) media around the world (e.g. Twitter in the West and WeChat in China). Since we were all experiencing the crisis at the same time and in different parts of the world (Mainland China, Finland and Sweden), and were all frustrated by the way the virus was dealt with interculturality around the world – which confirmed many of the critiques of the notion of interculturality that we had expressed before (e.g. Dervin, 2016; Jacobsson, 2017; Chen &

Dervin, 2020; Yuan et al., 2020) – we wrote this article with a Chinese saying in mind: 骂人不带一个脏字, which translates in English by means of an oxymoron, “Swearing without a word”.

The article is targeted first and foremost at teacher educators who have a central role to play in preparing future generations of teachers (Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Dervin et al., 2020). Depending on the context, they have the power to decide which ideology (a concept that will be essential in this article) goes into teacher education and training, and/or to decide to simply follow rules and regulations imposed onto them by (local/national and/or supranational) decision-makers. Teachers will also find the article of interest, especially if they feel dissatisfied with the way interculturality is dealt with in their context of teaching-learning. We argue that all levels of the curriculum, from early childhood to higher education, will need to unthink and rethink interculturality after the crisis and for the years to come. The points we make relate to preparing teachers to unthink and rethink their own positions as social figures involved in interculturality, but also to unthink and rethink systematically what they teach in educational contexts.

In order to equip teacher educators with conceptual, theoretical and philosophical tools, we include a certain number of authors from different fields (e.g. philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies) that can help us unthink and rethink interculturality and liberate it from its current Eurocentric framework (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Many scholars have noted the importance of interdisciplinarity in intercultural education (e.g. Abdallah-Preteille, 1986), since this phenomenon goes well beyond education. Interdisciplinarity helps us to look into one essential characteristic of interculturality: it is a contradictory, often inconsistent and incoherent system of thought and practice that tends to oscillate between solid and more open-ended perspectives on self and other, us and them. This is why the authors we use in this article include, on the one hand, thinkers who have helped us problematize the idea of “change” (e.g. Henri Bergson, Paul Valéry, Michel Maffesoli, Confucius and Chuang Tzu) and, on the other, thinkers who have examined the “ideologies of society structure” (Louis Althusser and Rogers Brubaker). In order for us to be coherent with one of the messages that we are trying to express about interculturality – that unthinking and rethinking interculturality must occur through engaging with other ways of thinking – we have included thinkers from outside Europe whenever possible (Dabashi, 2015). Often, we found that their ideas were very much in line with, or complemented, the other thinkers to whom we refer; they have all experienced difficult times that had an important influence on their thinking (the First and Second World Wars for some; social unrests and wars in Ancient China and other

parts of the world for others). It is important to note that, unfortunately, most of the thinkers in this article are male, which limits, *nolens volens*, the scope of our arguments.

### **1. The “hidden king” of Interculturality as an ideology to deconstruct... and reconstruct**

The sociologist Georg Simmel (1983) uses the metaphor of the “hidden king” to refer to leading ideas of a given age. Interculturality – to which some scholars, educators and/or decision-makers, amongst others, might refer as *multiculturalism*, *transculturality*, or *globality* – is one of the ‘hidden kings’ of our times, which has led to developing certain narratives about who we are and about the state of the world. We should remember, however, that interculturality as a phenomenon is not new and that it has been with us since the beginning of times.

To start reflecting on COVID-19 and interculturality, we believe that the concept of ideology can be beneficial. We argue that any discourse on the ‘hidden king’ is always *ideological*, regardless of who utters that discourse and where. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990), who explored Marx’s belief that the individual is a product of society, and thus the importance of structure in understanding the fixed practices of societies, defines ideology as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 2001, p. 109). He argues that our choices and preferences, but also our judgements, are the products of social practices, i.e. they are produced by structures in our societies. In 2020 we should add that these structures are said to go beyond any given society, since all societies are globalized and influenced by external forces such as the global media, global educational discourses, without us being aware of them. This is why Althusser has it that “ideology has very little to do with ‘consciousness’ – it is profoundly unconscious” (Althusser, 1964, n.p.). He continues: “ideology never says, ‘I am ideological’” (Althusser, 2001, p. 108). So, in order to remove and get rid of certain ideologies we need to “carry out a radical revolution in [our] ideas” (Althusser, 2001, p. 12).

At least two strong ideologies have resurfaced with the COVID-19 crisis, especially in relation to societal positions and beliefs. The first one relates to Brubaker’s (2015) argument that, regardless of globalization being perceived as an overarching ideology and imaginary today, the structure of the nation-state (dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century) has kept its hold over individuals. He writes (Brubaker, 2015, p. 7), “the nation-state remains the decisive instance of belonging even in a rapidly globalizing world; and struggles over belonging in and to the nation-state remain the most consequential form of membership politics.” During the current crisis, similarly to the 2008 global economic

crisis, the nation-state stepped in, e.g. to save businesses; care for the people (to different degrees); and “clean up” the mess. At the same time, forms of nationalism reemerged, such as the (over)use of national flags on people’s balconies; singing of national anthems to support health workers; **ethnocentric**, a boom in xenophobic and racist discourses (although they never left us); and national comparisons operated by people, governments and the media. Discussing the COVID-19 crisis, unlike Brubaker, sociologist Michel Maffesoli (2020) believes that this will mark “the end of an epoch”. As such, the pandemic has questioned several modern ideologies: the nation-state as an infallible carer for the people (many people died because of a lack of medical equipment that nation-states could not provide) and progressivism (the belief that we can solve all problems and live in perfect societies) (Maffesoli, 2020).

The ideology of the “hidden king”, interculturality, goes hand-in-hand with these elements. Interculturality is positioned both as an ideology that oscillates between the nation-state and the global world, and as progressivism (people are made to believe that they can “control” interaction with people from other “cultures” and thus move beyond misunderstanding, racism, intolerance, etc). Since the notion has been “narrated” to and imposed onto scholars, educators and students in certain similar/different ways in different parts of the world (see Abdallah-Pretceille, 1999, about the dichotomy *intercultural* vs. *multicultural*), interculturality is part of both the structure of our societies and our way of thinking. Although it might be problematized and/or used differently in diverse contexts, and influenced by contrasting political and economic views (e.g. EU-centric positions on diversity), there appear to be a certain number of “ready-to-think” ideas related to interculturality around the world (Dervin, 2016). These ideas appear to form the groundwater that has infiltrated our global soil and been collected as subterranean knowledge. These ideas seem to revolve around the use of certain (problematic) concepts and notions, such as *culture*, *difference*, *democracy*, *human rights* and *tolerance*. In education these tend to be presented as central objectives and outcomes of interculturality to students, accompanied by learning objectives such as *reducing one’s stereotypes* and *refraining from racist thoughts and acts*. The focus is on the individual – the student, usually – who has to learn to avoid all these and respect *culture*, *difference*, *democracy*, *human rights* (amongst others, see Simpson & Dervin, 2019 about the problematic ideologies of the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture in this sense). These might appear as “noble” objectives, but because of the ideological treadmills of which they are a part, they can easily become so polysemic and confusing as to lose their meanings and intentions. What is more, being

constitutive of the ideology of interculturality, these concepts and notions are also constructed and used *by* and *for* the structure of our (global) societies. Their influences on our beliefs, practices and judgments are immeasurable. Considering the global tragedy that the COVID-19 crisis represents, it is not surprising that these concepts and notions have been used in discussions of “us” and “them” in trying to explain and understand how different countries and peoples have dealt with the virus. However, as we’ll argue in this article, they might represent “noble lies”, a phrase Plato (2000, p. 107) uses in *The Republic* to refer to myths or untruths propagated by an elite to maintain social harmony or to advance an agenda.

Teacher educators thus need to equip future teachers to dig into these ideological constructions and to deconstruct them in order to become conscious of them and to reconstruct alternative ways of thinking about interculturality, in times of crises and beyond.

## 2. The “death” of imagination

Approaching the Other always involves imagining to whom s/he is in contrast, and who (I believe) I am and vice versa (Dervin & Auger, 2012). It is primarily with the support of imagination that interculturality takes place (stereotypes, representations, categorisations, etc). The COVID-19 crisis has unveiled certain beliefs and discourses about “us” and “them”, which appear to be “the dead weight of vices and prejudices” (Bergson, 2002, p. 366). These have actually been with us since the creation of modernity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the form of (amongst others, in alphabetical order): *culturalism* (culture as the explanation for all), *ethnocentrism* (our ethnic group as the only positive reference group), *banal nationalism* (the everyday belief that our nation is the best), and *ontological nationalism*, but also different kinds of phobias such as *Sinophobia* (fear and hatred of the Chinese). When the national (which never really disappeared as an imaginary, and definitely not as the backbone of real structures in our global times) takes back its place at the centre of our belief and discursive system, we face what we call the “death of imagination” in this article. Imagination is a routine phenomenon by which humans approach and comprehend the complexities of the world. It tends to be multiform and multifaceted (Maffesoli, 1996). However, what the first two months of the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated is that “our” imagination is limited, functioning in binaries and very much barricading “us” and “them” inside iron cages (“the Chinese are...”, “the Italians are...”, “this is typical of Swedes”). Interestingly, these beliefs and discourses seemed to change targets for the two first months of the crisis: at times they were international (the Chinese, the Italians), at other times intranational (Wuhan people, Lombardy people).

During the first two months of the crisis, our imagination appeared to be utterly “congealed” by remnants of the modern ideology (Maffesoli, 2020). Here are some examples collected from (social) media:

- The “yellow peril” concerning China (the Other *par excellence*) resurfaced in all its problematic confidence, from discussions around “bat eating” to China “lying” about the number of COVID-19 deaths. China, with the USA, was one of the worst hit in terms of “dead imagination”;
- Pictures of Asians illustrated the news about the virus crisis, even when that news was about non-Asian countries;
- Someone on social media, who would tend to define themselves as open-minded and critical, referred to the 1957 virus crisis as the “Asian flu”, while also criticizing President Trump for calling COVID-19 the “Chinese virus”;
- Discourses about how clean and dirty some “cultures” are. For example, in a letter sent by the Italian ambassador in Holland to a Dutch Member of Parliament, the former complained about the latter’s comparison of Dutch and Italian hygiene standards to justify not closing schools in the Netherlands. The MP argued that “Italians have lower standards of hygiene in their schools and this is the reason for the spread of the virus”;
- Talking about confinement, some scholars and/or educators were also quick to generalize about how “the Japanese” do this, “the Brazilians” do that, “the Belgians” behave this way, etc. *ad nauseam*.
- Such lack of imagination also applied to “us”. For instance, the mayor of Helsinki (Finland) attempted to justify his idea of banning the sale of alcohol during lockdown by explaining that “isolation, alcohol and the national Finnish character are a problematic equation”. In an extraordinarily boastful manner, the former Managing Director of Finland’s National Emergency Supply Agency explained Finland’s preparedness to fight against the virus by biologizing it: “It’s in the Finnish people’s DNA to be prepared”<sup>ii</sup>;
- Newspapers and governments compared the number of cases and deaths across countries and regions. For instance, announcing the number of deaths in Finland (25 in total) a Finnish newspaper added in the same headline that Sweden had 400 deaths because of the virus – operating an indirect potentially ethnocentric comparison for the readers.

What we have seen during the first part of the COVID-19 crisis in terms of interculturality is clear *dead imagination*. Philosopher of process Henri Bergson (1859-1941), whose philosophy rests on the idea that change is the cornerstone of reality, describes this phenomenon nicely as follows: “We go back from cause to cause; and if we stop somewhere along the way, it is not because our intelligence seeks nothing beyond that, it is because our imagination finally shuts its eyes, as though over the abyss, to avoid dizziness” (Bergson, 1946, p. 72).

Government responses to the virus have varied (see below). However, one important aspect revealed by the crisis is how individuals from different “cultures” have behaved in similar ways, often beyond the “congealed” ideas that had been developed about them:

- Fear of death;
- Fear of losing their family;
- Adopting/refusing similar hygienic trends (handwashing, wearing a surgical mask, using hand disinfection gels, etc.);
- Wishing/refusing to protect themselves and others (“social distancing”, distance in stores);
- Panic buying (toilet paper, pasta, etc.);
- Dis/respect for confinement;
- Dis/respect for quarantine;
- Singing from their balconies and online to celebrate their heroes;
- Uttering racist/culturalist/tolerant discourses;
- Making memes online;
- Increasing domestic violence during confinement;
- Spreading of conspiracy theories;

Although the ideology of interculturality has often focused on cultural difference (Holliday, 2010), the COVID-19 crisis shows signs of much wider similarity across borders. Finns, for instance, have been described by many interculturalists (e.g. Lewis, 2004) as *law- and rule-abiding* (many tried to enter Helsinki when the city was in lockdown from the rest of the country at the end of March), *well organized* (it took a long time for the government to make concrete decisions about how to react against the virus; masks were unavailable to the general public and care home workers; in early April, the authorities spent 5m on much needed personal protective equipment from China through a tabloid celebrity and a payday lender, whose backgrounds were not checked, which led to getting equipment that could not be used in hospitals), *“lone wolves”* (many Finns “escaped” to Lapland to go skiing when the country started confinement and were partying at bars and clubs; many Finns continued going to bars and pubs; many went to see family members during confinement).

The “*dead*” imagination that was discussed here, which many have used to  about themselves and others during the crisis, seems to be (rightly) questioned by these similarities in behaviours and attitudes. In the past, many scholars have actually urged educators to help their students revise their views on cultures as something static and figments of imagination (e.g. Piller, 2010). This contrast between the

reality of what people do, and what they believe they do, is linked to interculturality as an ideology. For teacher educators the *here and now* is an excellent opportunity to place imagination of self and other at the centre of their training for future teachers and problematize established patterns of knowledge in their educational systems. Interculturality is not so much about cultural characteristics but about imagining and re-imagining such characteristics (Piller, 2010).

### **3. Digging into the groundwater: From misleading interculturality to liberating interculturality**

Interestingly, when one looks at the reactions and behaviours of governments around the world to COVID-19, one notices patterns in decision-making and actions that go beyond interculturality as an ideology. As such, the crisis has demonstrated that what seems to matter first and foremost is the economy and a governmental attitude of “keeping up appearances”. Saving the economy seemed to be the first priority. In Europe, lockdowns and confinements took place in March 2020, although there were already cases back in January. On 3<sup>rd</sup> March the *New York Times* published an article entitled “China stopped its economy to tackle coronavirus. Now the world suffers!”. On 6<sup>th</sup> March the Finnish Prime Minister gave a speech in New York explaining that Finland was well prepared for the virus crisis but that she worried about the consequences on the Finnish economy. In Finnish newspapers the number of newly unemployed people was published with the number of new cases and deaths daily. Finally, the Finnish government made exceptional offers to extend visas and to fly migrant workers from Russia, Thailand and the Ukraine to Finland to work in agriculture during the crisis – although the borders were officially closed.

It is now already obvious that many governments were not ready for the COVID-19 crisis and that they did not always prepare well between January and March. For example, many European countries lacked health care equipment (surgical masks, ventilators, hand sanitizer, etc.). As a consequence, some people were left to die because choices had to be made when “frail” health care systems were overloaded; many old people in care homes were infected and passed away; the general public did not have access to surgical masks in many countries. At the same time practices that would be deemed anti-democratic were adopted: e.g. the French government force-passed a controversial law about retirement (to cut costs) while deciding on general confinement; surgical masks imported from Asia and destined for different European countries by a Swedish company were seized by the French authorities from its main distribution warehouse in Lyons when President Macron requisitioned all stocks of protective masks; people were monitored by drones and Google mapping; some medicines were exclusively legalized

to ease the pain of those who could not be saved (mostly because of their age); Finland withheld information about people who had passed away (because of privacy, although the country had also voted for an emergency law allowing the authorities to bypass certain laws and regulations). It is also notable that Western media and governments were often busy criticizing China for how it dealt with the situation or for its “lies” about, for example, the number of deaths there (while at the same asking for the country’s help). One could wonder if this was distraction from what was happening “at home” (governments not being able to deal with the virus, but also domestic violence, poor children not getting fed when schools closed down, dualist discourses on science versus conspiracy, etc.).

The anthropologist Balandier (1980) uses the concept of “theatocracy” to describe any arrangement of society and organization of power. This theatocracy regulates daily life within the community. He argues that the myth of unity (“national identity”) is the scenario often guiding this theatricalisation of politics today. Considering the gaps between people’s similar behaviours across countries (beyond “dead” imagination) and the power of the economy in politicians’ decision about how to deal with the crisis (which can be similar or different across countries), one is led to wonder if the concepts and notions of *culture*, *difference*, *tolerance*, *respect*, etc. — which are used in intercultural education — but also democracy and human rights (as “~~own~~” characteristics in the West), are the right foci for educators. One wonders if these are just smoke-screens and substitutes for what really guides decision-makers and societies (profit, keeping the economy afloat, investments, etc.). In this sense, the ideologies of *culture*, *difference*, *democracy*, *human rights*, etc. have become part of the theatocracy described by Balandier, and might be misleading in education. What we might need is to educate students for a real critical sense of what our societies are *really* about. We thus do not entirely agree with The International Academy for Intercultural Research (an influential professional interdisciplinary organization dedicated to the understanding and improvement of intercultural relations), which published a statement in February explaining that “We acknowledge that available options and cultural practices in the affected nations or regions might vary in how to respond to the virus”.

To conclude this section, if we go back to the metaphor of the groundwater that has infiltrated the global soil that we used in the previous section, we might want to revise what the objectives of intercultural education could be in light of COVID-19. It might be time to shift the focus from what appears to be the “visible”, the “obvious” – but which actually represents filters – in the way we deal with interculturality

(*culture, difference, democracy, borders*), to what lies in the “groundwater”: the dependency between politics, the (social) media, education and research, all under the governance of the economy and globalization (see figure below). This shift could lead to liberating interculturality. We thus suggest that teacher educators equip future teachers with tools to analyse this “groundwater” and to examine what really matters in our societies, beyond what supranational organisations — for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Council of Europe, along with ministries, curricula, textbooks, etc. — present and construct as essential knowledge. There is obviously a gap between the “distraction” represented by what is visible and what lays in the groundwater. . . . Another objective is to prepare future teachers to clarify the connections and interactions between the visible and the groundwater (see table 1)

**Table 1.**

Visible
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Difference</li> <li>• Democracy</li> <li>• Human rights</li> <li>• Tolerance</li> <li>• Borders</li> </ul>
Groudwater
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependency between politics, (social) media, education and research</li> <li>• All governed by the economy and globalisation</li> </ul>

Having now observed interculturality as a condensation of a “Westernised” ideology, as unveiled by the COVID-19 crisis, we offer a set of interrelated principles that could help teacher educators in their endeavours to unthink and rethink interculturality *with* and *for* their students. These include: *beyond comparison*, *the mirror: turning inward*, and *questioning the unquestionables*.

### **Principle 1. Beyond comparison**

Comparisons have always been at the centre of interculturality – as a phenomenon, as a reality, and as an ideology in education and research. Comparisons often derive from the subjectivity of the utterer. They can be positive or negative for those compared, relegating one of them to an inferior position – a position that leads to in/direct judgment based on own beliefs and research ideologies. Comparisons can also be based on “white lies” and “semi-truths”. This appeared to be the main method used in discussing the COVID-19 crisis globally. For instance, the following phenomena revolved around comparisons:

- Hygiene issues: wearing a surgical mask or not? (Asians versus Westerners, who is right or wrong? Is it “cultural?”);

- China: reactions to pictures of Italian and Chinese nurses' faces bruised after long shifts wearing surgical masks (reactions to the Italian nurses in Western social media: "Face of a hero; thank you very much, you haven't impacted me but you have saved countless lives, bless you"; reactions to Chinese nurses: "I wish people would stop posting this fake shit; Somehow I don't believe anything that comes out of China this is probably fake");
- Preparedness for tackling the virus: some "cultures" were deemed more prepared than others. For example, the *New York Times* published an article about Finland on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020 praising the country for its preparedness (e.g. in having stocked surgical masks over the years; which was contradicted by news in the Finnish press and the massive orders of gear from China). In the readers' comments, culturalist discourses about Finland versus the US were identified. These discourses were in fact relying mostly on critiques of President Trump and supported by manipulated culturalist discourses ("Finns are well organized", "Finns are perfect", etc.).

In Chinese there is a saying that summarizes well the problems of comparing interculturally: "外国的月亮比中国的圆" ("the foreign moon is rounder than the Chinese moon"). Nothing is actually rounder than just *round*. This ironic saying represents a warning: In the examples above, are we really comparing the same things? Such comparisons appear "all too crude and useful for very few purposes" (Goody, 1996, p. 10).

Making comparisons is also problematic for the following reasons:

1. What is the starting point of a given comparison?
2. Who is making the comparison?
3. For what purposes?
4. For whom?
5. Based on what ideologies and political beliefs?

*The Book of Chuang Tzu*, an ancient Chinese text (476-221 BCE), is one of the two foundational texts of Taoism. It consists of anecdotes, parables and fables, urging the reader/listener to act spontaneously and to feel free from the human world and its conventions, especially in terms of reasoning ("sailing" rather than "rowing", Watts, 1975). The following parable summarizes well the problem of making intercultural comparisons:

井蛙不可以語於海者,拘於虛也;夏蟲不可以語於冰者,篤於時也;曲士不可以語於道者,束於教也。今爾出於崖涘,觀於大海,乃知爾醜,爾將可與語大理矣。

(A frog in a well cannot discuss the ocean, because he is limited by the size of his well. A summer insect cannot discuss ice, because it knows only its

own season. A narrow-minded scholar cannot discuss the Tao, because he is constrained by his teachings. Now you have come out of your banks and seen the Great Ocean. You now know your own inferiority, so it is now possible to discuss great principles with you) (Chuang Tzu, 2006, p. 31).

For Goody (1996: 10) we thus need more “sophisticated and yet insufficiently sophisticated ways of thinking” about the intercultural. Teacher educators need to train future teachers to examine the ideology of comparison, even when it leads to noticing similarity across people and “cultures”: *Why do we compare? What biases are created around the act of comparing? Can one approach the Other without comparing?* Students need to be able to look beyond their “well” and to consider the “ocean” with new eyes, modesty and liberation. Although comparing is “normal”, this normality deserves to be unthought and rethought, and somewhat resisted, since we often compare apples and pears when it comes to interculturality.

### **Principle 2. The mirror: turning inward**

We live in the “age of reflexivity” (Hertlein et al., 2014). Everyone is urged to be reflexive and critical. But in many cases, neither seem to function, since reflexivity and criticality can be unstable constructs. Interculturality should help us to look into the mirror: whenever we see something in the other (a characteristic, a flaw, an attitude, an opinion...) that we might like or dislike, we must look at ourselves and observe that same element, bearing in mind that individuals can be very contradictory, doing one thing one day, another the other day; thinking this way and then that way, depending on contexts and interlocutors.

In his diary written in China, Roland Barthes (2012, p. 8) expresses well the role of this mirror:

I feel that I won't be able to shed light on them in the least – just shed light on us by means of them. So, what needs to be written isn't *So what about China?* but *So, what about France?*

This is very much reminiscent of an excerpt from the Analects of Confucius (551-479 BCE), a philosopher and politician of the Spring and Autumn period, who emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice, kindness, and sincerity:

子曰:见贤思齐焉;见不贤而内自省也。

The Master said, “On seeing the worthy, think of how to equal them; on seeing the unworthy, turn inward and examine yourself.” (Ni, 2017, p. 143)

Two examples from the COVID-19 crisis can serve as illustrations:

- In a documentary about life in Beijing in February 2020, a French journalist is walking around with his camera pointed at people. One of them asks him not to film him. The French journalist comments: “The Chinese have become even more paranoid these days; they are really scared of censorship”. One wonders how the journalist would feel if a Chinese journalist in France pushed a camera into his face during a crisis, and if he would accept being filmed.
- Many companies have sent messages to their customers during the crisis to keep in contact and express their care. One Finnish education export company emailed a letter written by one of its owners (a scholar) who discussed the importance of “compassion” in times like these, asking the reader to be *compassionate for others*. At the end of the letter, the scholar mentions two “European” thinkers to support his argument: Aristotle and Rousseau. The choice of these philosophers *exclusively* is problematic as it seems to confirm that the idea of compassion is “European” and/or “Western”. The mirror effect (referring to thinkers outside the West) could have helped to make the argument more intercultural, more inclusive, especially in a letter written to an international audience beyond the “West”.

Describing and judging (which always go hand in hand) the other are easy tasks, especially when we choose ourselves what and how to describe and judge (what aspect? which angle?). Teacher educators might want to train students to look into themselves systematically while describing and judging the other.

### **Principle 3. Questioning the “unquestionables”**

As we have seen in an earlier section, many ready-to-think ideas about interculturality have become “natural” ways of thinking about today’s world: (randomly) *we are citizens of the world, our world has never been as global as it is today, travel broadens the mind*, etc. These constitute imaginaries but also collective illusions “dependent on presuppositions admired without discussion, with no contestation possible” (Ellul, 1966, p. 7). However, in agreement with Paul Valéry (1871-1945) “That which has always been accepted by everyone, everywhere, is almost certain to be false” (Valéry, 1943, p. 45). Considering what we noted in the first part of this article concerning the COVID-19 crisis and interculturality, it is indeed now educators’ duty to disagree actively with both “dead imagination” and the aforementioned slogans.

Questioning these unquestionables (accepted ideologies and beliefs) is a way of “seek[ing] the warmth and mobility of life” (Bergson, 2002, p. 350), and of making interculturality more complex. For teacher ed-

ucators this principle should be part of “the deeper education [which] consists in unlearning one’s first education” (Valéry, 1956, p. 20). Future teachers, like all of us, have been deeply integrated in a system and tradition of knowledge and trained to rehearse and respect certain accepted ideas. They should be supported in going beyond the ideologies these represent.

Although our paper has focused on negative aspects of the COVID-19 crisis and interculturality, it would be unfair to fail to mention the fact that many people have, of course, questioned the unquestionables of interculturality during the crisis. Although not directly related to the crisis, Scandinavian Airlines released a controversial advertisement **in China** on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2020, two weeks after the COVID-19 crisis started officially in China. In the video, the company describes so-called “Scandinavian” characteristics and systematically dispels their Scandinavian origins: “Your democracy? Credit goes to Greece”; “Even the Danish is not Danish, it is Austrian”. They conclude: “In a way Scandinavia was brought here piece by piece by everyday people”. The ad was met with both praise and critique. This is, we believe, a very good illustration of questioning the unquestionables, which can inspire us to unthink and rethink interculturality.

To conclude this set of principles Cioran (1911-1995), a philosopher and essayist, who is well-known for his pervasive philosophical pessimism, can help us summarize the set of three principles presented here (Cioran, 1983, p. 103): “To think is to run after insecurity, to be demoralized for grandiose trifles, to immure oneself in abstractions with a martyr’s avidity, to hunt up complications the way others pursue collapse or gain. The thinker is by definition keen for torment.” More insecurity and torment in the way we deal with interculturality might prevent us from falling into the traps of “dead imagination” and revising the way we deal with interculturality by focusing solely on the potentially faulty ideas of culture, difference, democracy. Again, what the COVID-19 crisis shows is that modern ideologies of progressivism and the nation-state may not be suitable for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory article represents a first attempt to examine and problematize the links between the COVID-19 crisis and interculturality for education. Aiming at teacher educators, we reviewed a certain number of problems with the notion of interculturality in light of the crisis. We argued that these problems were not created, but rather unveiled, by the crisis. In the first part of the article we suggested that these issues should be approached by looking into interculturality (and companion terms such as democracy and equality) as an ideology that

deserves deconstructing, unthinking, reconstructing and rethinking. We also described the problems triggered by this ideology: the need to shift from “dead imagination” (culture, difference, etc.) to unearthing the “groundwater” of the economy and globalization in the way interculturality functions. We then proposed a set of three principles that could be used by teacher educators to train future teachers to deal with interculturality in their work: *beyond comparison*, *the mirror: turning inward*, and *questioning the unquestionables*.

At this stage, these are preliminary reflections on what was happening at the time of writing. Obviously, it is too early to evaluate fully the impact of the crisis on intercultural issues, especially in the context of education. However, more than two months of intense discussions about this global crisis by politicians, decision-makers, all kinds of ‘experts’ (educators included), and the public in general already provide us with ample food for thought to reflect on what the COVID-19 crisis is revealing about interculturality as a system of thought and practice. We will need, of course, more time to pause, and to continue unthinking and rethinking what has happened.

The crisis will probably last for a long time, and changes might occur and allow us to look at what has happened differently. It is a long path. But if we could finish on a positive note with Albert Camus (1942, pp. 90-91) referring to Sisyphus, who is forced to push a boulder up and down a hill for life: “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy”. These are difficult times for all, physically and mentally, but these might be crucial times to change and make a real difference in the way we “do” interculturality. The etymology of the word *crisis* (from the Greek : *judgment, choice, decision*) reminds us that these special times can help us – based on our judgment of what we feel we should not accept any longer – to reject and discard certain aspects of interculturality in education, but also keep some of its aspects and add new ones in order to move forward.

### Notes

- <sup>i</sup> H1N1 from 2001 originated from the USA but was never referred to as ‘American’. The ‘Asian flu’ from 1957 which probably originated from Singapore is called H1N2.
- <sup>ii</sup> The same civil servant was ousted after admitting to buying millions of euros of protective gear from China through a reality TV star and a payday lender (both from Finland). The gear was unusable in hospitals. China was first blamed for selling poor quality equipment... while the mistake clearly came from the Finnish authorities.

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