

Book Review

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Houman A. Sadri and Madelyn Flammia, *Intercultural Communication: A New Approach to International Relations and Global Challenges*, London: Continuum, 2011, 313p, plus Index.

Amid globalizing changes, the growth of social media, and a new wave of uprisings against political exclusion and economic disenfranchisement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Sadri and Flammia's *Intercultural Communication* makes for lively reading that

provides insightful context for all students and experts of International Relations alike. Several comparable contributions to the field of intercultural communication come to mind, of which the two most important ones are: Linda Beamer and Iris Vornier,

Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace (Boston: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2008) and Thomas K. Nakayama and Rona Tamiko Halualanit, eds., *The Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). While the former focuses primarily on business communication, the latter is a collection of essays addressing critical issues of intercultural and organizational communication.⁽¹⁾ The contribution by Sadri and Flammia, by contrast, puts the spotlight on the changing nature of international relations in an age of globalization and information explosion.

A few broader themes catch the reader's attention. One is the value of such communications for both students and professionals as global citizens in the twenty-first century. The theme of "*Mindfulness* is primarily a question of *awareness*" (p. 27) sets the tone

for such an exploration, as the authors underscore the importance of a "mindful" international communication, one which requires knowledge of diplomacy, politics, and history as well as an understanding of cultural issues. This theme merits particular attention in the face of a youth demographic boom and unrest engulfing the globalized world. The logic is simple. The younger generation will be on the run, seeking better living and cultural opportunities in their quest for a new life. But perhaps the most interesting development in this youth's search is how to come to grips with new multiple and fluid identities such as cultural, social, and personal interactions (pp. 55-56).

Facing the challenges of technology, media, and ethical considerations will shape the way in which such new identities are constructed. Theoretically, the book's strength lies in its

focus on the interpretative approach. Incorporating anthropological and linguistic studies, this approach examines “culture from the perspective of members of the cultures being studied” (p. 87). By emphasizing holistic and subjective ways of investigation, this approach is keen on grasping “the actions of a group from the inside.” (p. 88). Despite some of the ethnographic difficulties, such as the researchers’ emotional attachments to the subjects of their studies, this approach has much to offer. The same line of inquiry and its limits appear in the dialectical approach, with one exception—that is, the latter reveals contradictory aspects of such a holistic view of intercultural communication (p. 118).

If the reader is interested in deeper research and reflection, Part III offers a wide variety of alluring investigations on the subject of verbal, non-verbal,

and visual communications. Herein the relationship between language, thought, and culture is thoroughly examined. The contrast between high- and low-context cultures raises the question of whether the message or the context of the information being communicated is important (p. 141). In the context of conflict resolutions, such stylish distinctions are highly relevant to the rational or emotional resolution of a potential conflict (p. 151). The authors’ point about creating trust via intercultural communication is vitally significant at a time when information explosion and new media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, have opened new avenues for mass organization and mobilization, as well as getting key messages out to the world of public opinion.

Similarly, body language, eye contact, touch, clothing and physical adornments, facial

expressions, voices, and relationship to special and temporal spaces open new avenues of intellectual curiosity. Visual communications, such as perceptions, semiotics, images, and uses of color facilitated by all kinds of technological communication and information technology, can be helpful to intercultural communication. Of particular relevance to evolving changes in a globalizing world is the news and mass communication, such as satellite dishes and global media outlets. The easy access to books, periodicals, radio and recordings, and pop culture, has brought along both benefits and costs. The benefits have included the emergence of epistemic communities around the world and further international communications among different communities and people. The authors argue convincingly, however, that the costs have entailed resistance to cultural

imperialism and the fact that mass media outlets in the West have offered less in the way of constructing positive solutions to democratic and foreign conflicts. This is understandable given the profit-oriented nature of the Western media (p. 240).

One of the most fascinating discussions in this volume concerns “Ethical Issues in Intercultural Communication” (Chapter 9), where the authors raise a key question: Can we develop a code of ethics that can be applied to all intercultural encounters?” (p. 253). Given a myriad of challenges we face in our global community, including child labor, women’s rights, corporate responsibility for the environment, and political oppression, taking a universally-shared view is likely to be difficult and even problematic. The authors’ insights about ethical dilemmas we face in a culturally diverse environment and how to deal with such

difficulties are educationally poignant. Citing Bradford Hall, the authors seek a middle ground between ethical relativism and universalism by adopting “an approach to ethical issues that is a compound of the two” (p. 262).

Relying on the notion of contextual relativism, the authors offer a compelling argument: “As ethical communicators we must learn a great deal about the background and the surrounding economic, political, and social climate in which any behavior occurs” (pp. 264-265). In the ensuing discussions (pp. 265-268) they bring up the issue of child labor in Pakistan. They correctly link the issue of child labor with a number of socioeconomic woes, the most important of which is the existence of extreme poverty. Aside from the forced child labor, as enunciated in the International Labor Organization (ILO) Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (1999), such

as bonded labor and the use of children in armed conflict, this argument holds true without violating internationally recognized human rights laws and international labor standards.⁽²⁾

Sensitivity to local cultural values, beliefs, norms, and traditions, such as unwillingness to hire a female engineer from a U.S. corporation to work in certain Arab countries, serves as yet another reminder (p. 267). Notwithstanding these cogent arguments, the authors’ conclusion that “We must seek to reconcile the universal and relative approaches to global ethics and to develop a set of ethical guidelines to inform our behavior,” (p. 268) invites controversy and criticism from some quarters. Although publicly appealing, reconciling these positions may prove too difficult—if not impossible—to sustain over time. The book leaves unanswered the question

of just *how* such reconciliation can be practically achieved. The problem that intercultural moral diversity poses to an international practice of human rights cannot be underestimated. According to one expert, the broad normative scope of human rights doctrine with its modern features and means illustrate that human rights are unlikely to be neutral among the main moral conceptions found in the world's diverse societies and cultures.⁽³⁾

As a result, advocacy of human rights can appear disrespectful of cultures and communities in which such widely accepted norms conflict with their particular normative requirements and ultimately their enforcement. It is not clear why considerations of toleration in global politics should argue against such requirement. To allow cultural disagreements to militate against a normative requirement, which is otherwise well established and widely

recognized, seems to strip normative discourse of its critical force and legitimacy. The upshot is clear: "These perspectives are not easily reconciled."⁽⁴⁾ There needs to be more clarity on what is meant by toleration and the ways in which this concern should shape our thinking about the content of a human rights doctrine that is particularly suited for a culturally plural world.⁽⁵⁾

Furthermore, some hard-core human rights scholars warn against the degree to which tolerance for cultural diversity and deviations can be legitimately conceded. They argue that cultural differences in certain conditions deserve a sympathetic hearing and certain groups in society deserve, on their face, sympathetic consideration. Yet the free choices of free people should never be lightly dismissed, both conceptually and at the level of enforcement. "Much of the

progressive character of the contemporary political project of human rights”, they point out, “depends on the claims’ power of universality.”⁽⁶⁾

To promote universality, some analysts argue that the role of external pressures and factors is desirable and even necessary. The European Union (EU) played a crucial role in convincing the Islamic Republic of Iran to officially ban “stoning to death” as a punishment in the case of adultery. It also played a crucial role in effectively blocking Serbia from joining the EU. The arrest of General Ratko Mladic was a precondition for Serbia to join the EU. This external pressure, among other things, greatly contributed to the capturing of Mladic in May 2011.⁽⁷⁾ Public, external pressure surely can influence the calculations of autocratic rulers and other domestic actors. It can help delegitimize inept and corrupt leaders in the eyes of

their own people, while encouraging and amplifying domestic voices calling for change in repressive societies.⁽⁸⁾

The book’s concluding remarks return to this volume’s general theme that ordinary people can do extraordinary things as long as their soft power—that is their ability to communicate with “others,” cross-culturally as well as across nations—is mindfully managed and planned (p. 287). The implications of this book for war and peace, the process of globalization, and the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are worth contemplating. The authors’ central message that will stay with me the longest can be found in the concluding pages of the book: “Practicing global citizenship involves being aware of our global environment, responsibilities, and rights beyond our individual, local, and national commitments” (p. 310).

The wealth of ideas

embedded in an intercultural communication approach and its noticeable contribution to the study of International Relations makes this volume a welcome addition to a rising normative concern aimed at ensuring durable peace and human dignity. In some respects, this book may serve as a useful guide for designing a cultural intelligence capacity and discipline to support development, peace-building, nation-building, and counter-insurgency, where the proper imagery and improved communication and rapport with local communities could be used as a counter-narrative to violence perpetrated by insurgents in an attempt to win the public support.⁽⁹⁾ Such a cultural intelligence discipline, bent on closing the cultural knowledge gap, will most likely benefit from the perspectives offered in this book.

This volume is remarkably

lucid and easy to follow, rich in its arguments, and ideal for teaching. Each chapter provides a summary of key findings and policy options. Its broad perspectives are not only germane to social science and humanity disciplines but also to the erosion of excessive preoccupation in international relations with obsolete notions of clash of civilizations. This volume also serves an excellent example of how qualitative research can provide valuable knowledge accessible to both undergraduate and graduate students, as well as experts in Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and policymaking circles.



NOTES:

1. It is worth noting that several other important contributions can be cited in this regard, of which is the widely cited book by Robert E. Young, *Intercultural Communication: Pragmatics, Genealogy, Deconstruction* (Philadelphia, PA: Multilingual Matters, 1996).
2. Mahmood Monshipouri, "Human Rights and Child Labor in South Asia," in an edited volume by David P. Forsythe and Patrice C. McMahon, *Human Rights and Diversity: Area Studies Revisited*, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, pp. 182-204.
3. Charles R. Beitz, *The Idea of Human Rights*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 46.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
5. *Ibid.*

6. Jack Donnelly, "Universality," in David P. Forsythe, *The Encyclopedia of Human Rights*, Vol. 5, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 261-270.

7. Robert Marquand, "With Mladic Capture, Another Era Ends," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2011, p. 10.

8. Tom Malinowski, "Did Wikileaks Take Down Tunisia's Government," in March Lynch, Susan B. Glasser, and Blake Hounshell, eds., *Revolution in the Arab World: Tunisia, Egypt, and the Unmaking of an Era*, Washington, D.C.: Foreign Policy, 2011, pp. 57-62; see especially pp. 59-60.

9. For more on this subject, see Cultural Intelligence-net, available at << <http://www.cultural-intelligence.net/site/research.html>>>. Last accessed on August 16, 2011.