Knowledge Organization from a “Culture of the Border”: Towards a Transcultural Ethics of Mediation

Abstract: The social construction of the digital memory, let us call it “exomemory”, has traditionally been a task related to aseptic procedures and tools but, in fact, it is an activity crossed by complexity and mediation. The positivist model claims for objectivity as the frame and goal in and for which electronic and external memory workers and thinkers have to fight and strive. The theoretical concept of multiculturalism is a dangerous slogan and not sufficiently critical as to tackle the rights of diversity and singularity even within a given (but not real) “monocultural society”. Exomemory mediators as librarians, archivists, documentalists or virtual curators are not capable of addressing their tasks from a holistic approach compatible with every culture without determining their products and services of symbolic value from an hegemonic position, should it be at local, national or global level. So, these professionals and scholars have to practice reflexivity and include other metatheoretical concepts in their ordinary actions so that users may know who is behind the analysis, “whose are the tracks”. To achieve this aim, the field of research called “Knowledge organization” must be opened to a new paradigm in which Critical Theory and Hermeneutics go together. Several theoretical and metaphorical terms commonly used are reviewed and forced to their paradoxical limits. The essay stands for a “culture of the border” as the best imaginary place to depict and accept those contradictions denied by dogmatic and hermetic intelligence.

1. Introduction

Let us think, as a starting point in the mood of this theoretical essay, of what I understand as a “culture of the border”: Let us take the ambiguous prospect, privileged by this metaphor, that invites us to observe and describe the whirlwind of a world in permanent mutation –too quick or too slow to be completely perceived by our rude senses, as it was stated by Nietzsche-, either visible or imaginated, internal or public, objects or phenomena, from hybrid and forever-changing positions. The border, as a complex place –in terms of the epistemology of Edgar Morin (1996) and Boaventura Santos (1989)- favours the adoption of new and coherent logics about what a limit means. A boundary is, in the end, both a noological (non-physical) body and a “chrono-topos” (time and space entity). In that territory, we have to take into consideration, evenly and in its full integrity, the connecting points as well as the “rupture lines” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). The limit means here a brand new meeting between the same old enemies, established as opponents by the positivist paradigm: closure and opening, rigidity and flexibility towards an external and alien environment to which we are also external and foreigners, in the middle of a never-ending identity that only a theory admitting the existence of closed systems is capable to deny.
The closed system conception is protected by a demarcationist logic constitutive of the modern sciences' paradigm, whose effects may be verified in our elemental and ordinary way of approaching, working, possessing or thinking of an individually and socially constructed world that, even as a mere construction, is not mutation-free. The world, that we know and we are, is just the perception of a devastating inter-action (or else, a trans-action) that desintegrates everything so that everything may fortuitously re-integrates itself into new entities. We have to bear in mind too, as a part of the concept of demarcationism, an old practice of power and a fight already present in the evolutive spring of all species. This unstoppable force of nature has also reached human reason diverting it towards rationalization, as a unique/exclusive mode of perception, already in the path of a mental illness (Morin, 1996).

The history of the organization of knowledge has been the history of a process of rationalization of knowledge that has forced other real and modal ways of cognition to the exile, ruling out, for instance, the actuality of a irrational mind which cannot be simply excluded either from participation in our representation of nature or from decision-making. Obviously, all this affects the construction and organization of knowledge in the electronic environment, what I would like to call now "digital exomemory" (García Gutiérrez, 2002) a space which has not yet been fully demarcated but, through a step-by-step policy of occupation, it is being reduced by the same old forces and aims of domination and colonialism which have re-adapted to these new digital territories.

Demarcation, as a human practice in the field of knowledge, is a useless utopian approach to reality when it systematically intends ontological cleansing. Nonetheless, if "demarcanism", as a doctrine (teleologism) or just as a simple goal, is based on the simplification of the difference (and not in search of singularities), "to demarcate" is not itself an intrinsically negative practice: what we have to take into account is the code and intentionality of the demarcation forces and the symbolic imagery that could be displaced, regenerated or wiped out.

Our field of knowledge, by the way, "knows" a lot about lineal classification and conceptual cleansing. However the wake of reality and the cognition world "organize" and shape themselves in a rhizomatic and paradoxical "order". For this reason, I am committed to the new emergent paradigm based on a doubly critical-hermeneutical approach, in taking the theory and practice of classification and knowledge organization, biased by positivist model, to their limits, so that to provoke the crisis of our intelligibility matrix right in the absurd of the border. So, after the deconstruction of a text, as solid as three centuries of positivist sediments and important success (also accompanied by certain mental and sociocultural dystrophies), I take up the opposite route towards the reconstruction of "integral sense", that comes, paradoxically again, from de-classification and disorder. This implies seeking other possible organizational orders of the world as well as admitting the disorder itself as a possible form of order from a caologist version of the concept (Prigogine, 2000). Some of the traits of the new thinking, depicted here, are constituent features of what I would like to introduce as "Interactive Epistemography" (García Gutiérrez, 1998, 2002), a transdisciplinary configuration that sets up, among other principles, the search of opened-horizontal semantic networks counteracting (against) human and political imposition of verticalism and techno-cultural hierarchies. The tree, as a botanic phoroi since Empedocles,
"naïvely" conveys structures, moulded on scientific and political power, to the organization of the digital exomemory.

The demarcationist rule operates in the knowledge organizer's subconsciousness as a guideline notion of the "otletian" positivist universe. Its well-known maxim, "a single place for each thing and a single thing in each place", illustrates that reduction of diversity. Time has come to balance our, so far unavoidable, segregationist and decontextualist task restoring, in the core of it, a consciousness of the re-interpretation role that we all play, as both mediators and end-users, in order to get an epistemological framework whose ethos should be the bluring of borders, fading away those imaginary walls raised on behalf of discrimination and purification. In their place, linking-concepts, based on a crossbred status, instead of fencing-concepts, should be located.

Let us have a look at some preliminary considerations about the formal collision of knowledge organization with other alter-ego constellations (that is, following hegelian synthesis, a sort of external entity to our construction, dwelling, at the same time, in the heart of it): discourse, memory and culture:

1. As to the operation, knowledge organization not only deals with organizing, as it is well-known, but also addresses selection schemes, analysis, transcode procedures, representation and access supplies. This last expression should be replaced by the concept of participation in order to remember democracy and the public property of knowledge on a global scale rather than private property and market distribution. These operations, far from being neutral, banal or aseptical, are, all of them, deeply mediated.

2. As to the application field: we are not just coping with knowledge itself (this is a metaphor, too) as an equivalent to recorded wisdom or exomemory but also with any raw inscription or trace over which a discourse has already been elaborated comprising a diversity of predetermined structures and conditions existing at any other discourse production level: human beings not only file what they know but what they feel, imagine, remember or dream of, too. That is the reason why we have to overcome the reduction of the concept of knowledge, bringing to our practices an open debate on the co-existence de facto of epistemical, doxological and emotional elements in a threefold level: text producers, users (participants) and mediators (epistemographers).

This new rhetorical conception of scientific knowledge includes incursion-studies on common sense, psychagogics (ancient aristotelian concept related to non-rational argumentation directed to persuasion), emotions and, obviously, on rational arguments themselves when pointed at persuasion which is the goal of every text and statement, obviously including those of exomemory mediators (vid "sense communities" in Berger and Luckmann, 1998). Thus, information is not free from emotion and rhetoric. Emotions and passions are transferred ergo they are also informations.

To reflect on possible organizations of our external memory, we have to combine several angles of observation relating to a general theory of mediation, both in terms of Michel Foucault's suspicions hermeneutics and from the ideological analysis drawn from the perspective of the School of Frankfurt, namely Jürgen Habermas (1999) and Otto Apel (1996) (and their call for the need of a dialogical ethics seeking consensus). Nevertheless, other fields addressing meaning and sense from individual, social and cultural points of view must imperatively be
run: symbolic interactionism, etnomethodology, knowledge sociology or social psychology among others.

So, our theoretical task is committed to a social perspective of the procedures and tools but at the same time any proposal has to be workable and feasible as an industrial activity which is not incompatible with the care of sense, diversity, plurality and social transformation. This means to introduce *esthesia* (Sodré, 1998) - rather than anaesthesia - in the industrial process of knowledge itself.

2. From multiculturalism to transculture

Let us analyse, now, the concept of multiculturalism under the suspicion of a double-edge. If a culture is an open system, how can anybody demarcate it? The expression “multiculturalism” uses a prefix, “multi-” which is acceptable when it means variety although it may prevail a mere sense of quantity over a complex process, the culture, that impedes any enumeration and even hinders proper naming. Do we know the external and internal limits of the Andalusian, Spanish or European culture? Can we inventory and purify cultural taxonomies sharply underlying their components and borders? If the answer is no, then we are in the presence of an abstract notion —multiculturalism— that does not deserve a deeper ethical discussion.

To understand the concept of multiculturalism we should previously try to explain what a culture is, which is the main drawback. Culture rejects single and simple theoretical approaches without determining the concepts taking part in the definition (Jameson and Zizek, 1998; Olivé, 1999). Every epistemic subject is beforehand a cultural actor. This obstacle hampers a single conception of culture and even more a single classification of cultural typologies. The theory of culture shares this “setback” together with the theory of discourse: Both of them only admit empirical, biased, intentional and simplified typologies, therefore, hardly sustainable.

The knowledge organizator is also trapped by these inconveniences. That is why, rather than simplify cultural realities, scholars and practitioners have to work together to build a transcultural ethics which gives legitimate support to the social construction of the exomemory, using categories transculturally acceptable, and a body of rules helping to detect racial, ethnic, gender or any other prejudices of the like. This deontological code should be linked to an *ad hoc* propedeutics of mediation that do not need to deny mediation, as a real presence, but must foresee a way of making it explicit and prepare wide-awake participants.

Another big problem for epistemography is the propensity to convert cultural stereotypes in formal categories of organization, for the seizure of a set of cultural traits, from a given group or society "culturally pure", is distorted by the redundant use of topics and stereotypes in a sort of categorial rank defined in an imaginary “cultural catechism” brought up as a single photography of a cultural reality complex enough and fast to be frozen by cameras, intentions or theories. So, any reliable approach to that changing world has to be as nimble as reality is.

If, in the end, we manage to simplify a culture, or a well-bordered set of cultures, that is multiculturalism, if we tackle all that stuff as steady entities permitting it fragmentation into independent and parallel subsets (even under the suspicious goal of preservation) we will get well-limited and isolated cultural
frames that have nothing to do with the real world. And we may also get an even worse result: the isolation of a culture, based on the emphasis of different features, could lead some political projects to "mummify" their cultural realities in order to both export them as simple commercial stereotypes of the country or prevent them from foreign pollution, in the line of current ultra-nationalistic doctrines. Under the pretext of preserving a local culture from alien invasions, or from a single global culture, there could be the risk of turning that frozen culture into a single compulsory local scheme for all the citizens living in a given territory.

That is the reason why I only accept those multiculturalist theories that consider a culture as a dialogic, interactive and wide-open system fed and grown from actual and current interaction and not only by means of traditions and nostalgias, most of them constructed or reconstructed a short time ago or to the convenience or extracultural interests. A democratic and open cultural system must strengthen its actors with a high level of education on democratic, human rights, and local values. But these measures must respect and also protect the right to choose any other cultural preferences either radically different, hypocultural or even an anomic behaviour. The only acceptable cultural policy is that favouring heteroculturalism, i.e. that policy which lives up to the human right to singularity. That principle must also be conveyed to any categorial scheme of knowledge organization. This general position taken so far is what can be understood as transculturalism, a transversal look that has to be placed in the contradictory and complex heart of metacognitive demarcation, that is, in classification of human knowledge and memory.

3. Prejudices under indictment: Towards a transcultural ethics of knowledge mediation

Finally, I have to bring up some ballast and ingrained bad habits, so far inseparable from our research and practices. Knowledge organization researchers and practitioners should be aware of them in order to detach them from exomemory construction:

1. The principle of hierarchy based on the porfrian tree, as a dualist scheme and plan of reality, has to be replaced by a rhizomatic conception of the world. This conception not only sees every single element, as a product of previous interaction process, but the interaction itself.

2. Demarcationist logics, grounded on the principle of exclusion instead of assuming and striving differences as a inclusive force, is active in all levels and status of operation and theory. Disjunction has to be overcome by consensus measures leading to the rapprochement of far and opposite ends. These radical (from the common roots) approaches must protect diversity and singularity as individual instances resuming and harmonizing concrete and holistic perceptions. Positivist demarcation programme generates fragmentation, decontextualization and hyper-specialization, that is, drastic interdisciplinary disconnection. Fragmentation opens up the door to free manipulation by extracientific entities and interests.

3. Positivist demarcation is also responsible for the exclusion, from an authorized single model of cognition, of other ways of perception and construction of knowledge and reality: from Philosophy to Metaphysics (detached from
material Physics since Galileo and Newton), from Humanities to common sense. Positivism accused prior integrated ways of cognition of creating polluted knowledge. In order to cleansing knowledge, positivist dogmatism ruled out observers from observation imposing, for this purpose, the directives of natural sciences over social and human sciences. At present, however, even the new Physics itself deny full neutrality, since Heisenberg, Gödel, Bohm or Prigogine.

The positivist doctrine has established a conception of the world based, to my mind, on wrong values as exclusion, competitiveness, exploitation, functionality, success and merchandising. These values have swamped our societies, mentalities and daily practices. Our field of research must get rid of those élite habits, most of them imposed by a global policy of market interests, consumption fostering, and a non-a-septical technical language that stands out for concepts such as Quality, Efficacy, Welfare or Innovation, new totems expanded as indicators of modernity and progress (also of new ethics?). All these concepts should be reformulated mainly from social and critical perspective.

We have to turn towards a new social framework of epistemological, ethical and technical principles in knowledge organization, summed up now as deontic statements:

- No discourse will prevail over the others (natural sciences over social sciences, social sciences over humanities and culture, élite culture over popular culture, popular culture over mass culture, etc.)
- No cognition process will prevail over the others (including emotional and persuasive discourses) unless the organization of a specific application field needs it (scientific discourse will need an overall logical and categorial rationality, a given culture will privilege, on the contrary, emotion, tradition and affection).
- No culture will prevail over the others. No cultural category or feature is superior to its neighbour’s. There is neither a Great Culture and auxiliary ones, nor the big science and the minor sciences, nor the perfect discourse and the secondary discourses that have to imitate the model.
- No users will be privileged over the others (scientists, politicians, journalists, lawyers) unless required again by a specific application. There is no great modelic user and the grey audience. Whatever the application, no knowledge system should ignore the existence of a general and transversal user.
- No system has to ignore its antigravitational and leaking forces for these centrifugal lines set up points of prolific intersystemic linkage. Every entity in a system has also its centrifugal forces providing more intrasystemic coherence.

References
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