**I. Totality and Exteriority:**

**The Case of High-stakes Testing in Intercultural Education**

*Christian Ydesen*

High-stakes testing can be defined as testing whose results are directly linked to important rewards or sanctions for students, teachers, or institutions: in other words it is about attaching consequences to test scores. Today, high-stakes testing is a key issue in educational policy- making which has led to a heated debate in many countries among politicians and educationalists as well as in international academia.

Promoted by a new cultural patchwork in many countries, a special area of the debate pertains to the use of high-stakes testing in intercultural education. As the Israeli professor of language education Elana Shohamy writes:

*The social and educational consequences of [...] powerful uses [of tests] are of special significance in multicultural societies as tests are often used to force different groups to accept the knowledge of the dominant group and to serve as gatekeepers for groups such as immigrants and indigenous groups* (Shohamy 2004: 74).

In this context testing is particularly crucial because a test is most often conducted on the basis of a single cultural norm and on the assumption that there is an area of normality, identified through standardisation, which can serve as a standard for measuring deviations. These stipulations have a severe impact when it comes to the testing of groups who are different in one way or another, because of the gate-keeping function of high-stakes testing. More specifically, the problem, or perhaps the challenge, is that there is no room for diversity in testing, and every pupil must thus be evaluated according to the same yardstick. Consequently, ethnic minority children are often perceived as pedagogical and social problems since they lack the required cultural resources. In an attempt to defy and think beyond the contemporary setting and challenge master categories as well as to move beyond the scope of a gold-starred frame of research this article seeks to take an outsider position, introducing and employing the philosophical concepts of totality and exteriority inspired by a number of significant and radical philosophers. Thus, the article seeks to lay the ground work for an adequate methodological approach asking a different set of questions and providing new angles on the phenomenon of high-stakes testing in intercultural education.

**The Origins and Relevance of the Concepts of Totality and Exteriority**

The concepts of totality and exteriority are firmly rooted in the thinking of Martin Buber (1878–1965), Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995) and Enrique Dussel (1934–), who have all in one way or another sparked, addressed or developed the concepts. What is particularly interesting about these concepts is their mutually and inherently rooted eye for relations and proximity. This ability to take relations and proximity into account has profound relevance since all socio-historical phenomena, such as high-stakes testing in intercultural education, consist of social relations in an ontological sense. Consequently, “[...] their explanation and meaning cannot be uncovered except with the methodological ability to address a field of relations broader than that of the phenomenon itself ” (Quijano 2000). In other words: “To move closer to proximity is anterior to signifier and signified. It is to go in search of the origin of the signified- signifier relationship, the very origin of signification” (Dussel 1985: 2.1.2.3). And for this purpose the concepts of totality and exteriority will prove to hold an immense methodological potential in relation to high-stakes testing in intercultural education, because they offer an opportunity to unmask universals imposed upon the other, deconstruct processes of universalisation and recover the forgotten Other of history.

**Totality and Exteriority: High-stakes Testing and the Failing Test Taker**

The concepts of totality and exteriority serve an epistemological purpose, and can only be understood in relation to each other. This testifies to their rooting in the thinking of Buber, given his emphasis on proximity as a master category. In Buber’s thinking the concepts of totality and exteriority are embryonically present in his basic word-pairs *I-Thou* and *I-It,* each describing a mode of being in the world. Even though Buber does not make explicit use of the concepts of totality and exteriority in his writings, his ontology inspired Lévinas’s development of the two relational concepts (Lévinas 1999: 93f; 2007: 68f). Roughly speaking, in Buber’s terminology the concept of totality stems from the *‘I’* and the concept of exteriority stems from the *‘Thou’* or the *‘It’.* The human subject, or the ‘I’, in combination with human intentionality, seeks to bestow meaning upon the world. As such, a totality might be described as a construct dialectically bestowing both meaning and even visibility through categorisations in an alternating relation to exteriority (Lévinas 1999: 49).

More specifically, exteriority can be defined as the emergence of something new, something that cannot be contained within the totality: not the other *per se* but the otherness of the other. Dussel writes: “The other is the precise notion by which I shall denominate exteriority as such [...]. The other is the alterity of all possible systems, beyond “’the same’, which totality always is” (1985: 2.4.4.1). In other words exteriority is the negation of totality.

According to Dussel, totality can be defined as “[...] the horizon within which all beings (which can be objects or facts) find their meaning”(1985: 2.2.2.2). What is important to understand in this connection is that:

*The everyday world, the obvious one that we live in each day, is a totality in time and space. As a temporal totality, it is retention of the past, a launching site for the fundamental undertakings projected into the future, and the stage on which we live out the present possibilities that depend on that future. As a spatial totality, the world always situates the “I”, the person, the subject, as its centre; from this centre beings are organized spatially from the closest ones with the most meaning to the ones furthest away with the least meaning – peripheral beings* (Dussel 1985: 2.2.4.1).

On an ontological level, a necessary precondition for the existence of a totality is the dichotomising ability to categorize and establish a hierarchy, an ability superbly mastered by high-stakes testing. Thus, with regard to high-stakes testing these musings seem to have relevance on at least two levels. Firstly, if we move the perspective to the ontology of testing, it becomes clear that testing is a self-referential system reproducing its own logic and meaning through a binary and hierarchical true/false logic. Following Dussel’s definition, testing can be described as a totality in its own sense: it has its own logic, it has a meaning-bestowing force, it is inevitably constructed in the past and thus reflects the values of the past (notwithstanding that it may claim to incorporate the needs and values of the future – *a launching site for the fundamental undertakings projected into the future* – it is inevitably bound to the past) and as such is always a retention of the past, organising beings hierarchically, spanning from the closest ones to peripheral beings (i.e. the failing test takers). At the epistemological level high-stakes testing also bears the mark of a totality as it claims to be a place-neutral notion which is universally applicable and able to generate universal knowledge rooted in rational positivism.

Secondly, testing is always embedded in the world, in a totality, because it is constructed within a totality: it cannot exist in a void even if it claims to be objective by employing the language of science (mathematics and statistics). A test is necessarily rooted in certain ideas about value; otherwise it would be impossible to say that something is better than something else (Moos 2007: 68). Thus, testing is both a totality in its own sense and also part of a totality, given the embeddedness of the test.

This has the implication of employing a focus on both the test itself and on the context (i.e. the embeddedness or the setting) of the test when attempting to understand and treat high-stakes testing in intercultural education. But what should this dual focus comprise? In order to throw light on that question it is necessary to take an in-depth look at the proximity relation between totality and exteriority.

**The Dimension of Proximity: An Asymmetric Relation**

Lévinas makes a very important amendment to Buber’s thinking as he launches the idea of asymmetry in the relation between ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ (Lévinas 1999: 100f.). The idea of asymmetry means *inter alia* that the reception of the other, of the exteriority, entails the problematisation of the self-assertion, which is a key moment in the embedded asymmetry in favour of the totality. In other words: exteriority threatens to undermine totality.

But whereas Lévinas finds his starting point of exteriority in the infinite, Dussel defines exteriority as the oppressed, linking exteriority to the material conditions of the world. However, the Lévinasian dimension of asymmetry is taken into account when Dussel describes the relation between totality and exteriority as one of submission historically institutionalised and naturalised through opposing value categories such as rich-poor, male-female, tall-short, big-small, good-bad, and over- under.

With regard to high-stakes testing, the materialism of Dussel induces a focus on the material preconditions for the testing practice since testing is developed in a particular social context to fulfil a particular purpose. Perhaps this material dimension is best addressed through a number of questions: Was there a problem that testing solved and for whom was it a problem? Was there a supportive or remedial purpose of testing? And perhaps one might also advantageously include the ancient Ciceronian question: *Cui bono?* (e.g. Cicero: section 84).

What is also important to note is that the totality becomes the hegemonic ontology even defining being and non-being.[1] This is so because being always takes on meaning within the horizon of a certain pre-comprehension of the world.

The resemblance to the binary logic (i.e. pass/fail logic) of testing is striking. In the case of high-stakes testing, the dimension of asymmetry becomes particularly vibrant as the test becomes a force of domination judging the future of the test-takers. Moreover, the sentence of failure strips the test taker of his/her otherness in the process which causes alienation: “To totalize exteriority, to systematize alterity, to deny the other as other, is alienation” (Dussel 1985: 2.5.5.1).  Again, the practice of high-stakes testing bears a striking resemblance to the Dusselian thoughts on the alienating powers of totality. By its very nature, high-stakes testing systematises and denies the test takers their uniqueness – i.e. their exteriority – because they are forced to live up to the pre-constructed logic of the test which presupposes and anticipates the existence of some kind of invariant and path-dependent characteristic in the individual – i.e. an essence – which can be identified accurately.

The notion of asymmetry has general validity when attempting to understand high-stakes testing, but it is particularly relevant in the case of intercultural education. All other things being equal, it is reasonable to say that testing people with a different cultural and perhaps language background generates a higher level of exteriority, and therefore the dangers of alienation and domination are correspondingly higher. The ontological identification of the asymmetric and dominating powers of testing stipulates a methodological focus on the values, taxonomies and categorisations embedded in the test when attempting to understand and treat high-stakes testing in intercultural education. Moreover, the philosophical analysis suggests that from an epistemological point of view testing represents only a limited segment of reality. Therefore it is necessary to consider and to be very aware of the scope of the test results as well as their function in a wider context.

These reflexions have further implications for the substance of the dual focus on high-stakes testing identified above. First and foremost, power relations are crucial, both as defined by the test and as defined by the setting (i.e. the surrounding totality). A second area of focus is the value system of the test as well as of the surrounding totality: who and what is categorised as otherness? Thirdly, it is also pivotal to identify the room left for otherness both in the test and in the surrounding totality. With respect to high-stakes testing this has a clear implication for the life chances of the test taker. In other words: what is actually at stake and what are the direct effects connected with the test?

**The Dynamic Relation between Totality and Exteriority**

But can the dualistic abyss between totality and exteriority actually be bridged? In Dussel’s thinking the solution lies in human proximity, but he retains the tension between the two poles when he poses the question of how a totality approaches exteriority, as this might involve either a negative or a positive proximity (Albertsen 2008: 332).

Negative proximity results in the alienation of the exteriority as the totality tries to destroy or pacify the differences by either exclusion or inclusion, as described above. Positive proximity, on the other hand, induces liberation but it can only take place on the basis of an opening towards exteriority, this incomprehensible mystery which can only be penetrated by a belief in the difference of the other without reservations.

What separates Dussel significantly from Lévinas on this point is that exteriority for Dussel inevitably penetrates totality, making the transcendent exteriority an immanent part of totality (Albertsen 2008: 335f.). In other words, Dussel constructs exteriority as transcendence in immanence.

Now, what does this mean for the development of a methodology for understanding and treating high-stakes testing in intercultural education? It would seem that totality has a strange contradictory relation to exteriority. On one level, the emergence of otherness heralds the emergence of the problematic (as described above) – the totality casts a gaze of devaluation upon the other, whose mere visibility seems to be a threat to the normalized landscapes of totality. Simultaneously, alterity seems to be a necessary ontological precondition for the very existence of totality: the totality cannot exist in a void; it simply needs alterity.

What we learn from Buber is that a totality can only emerge as a totality through the exteriority (The ‘I’ becomes an ‘I’ from the ‘Thou’). This has several implications. Firstly, it means that in order to sustain its ontology the totality must unreservedly open its horizon towards the exteriority and must thus compromise its totalitarian nature of bestowing universal meaning. Secondly, it means that the totality must be *recognized* by the exteriority, *consciously or unconsciously, positively or negatively.* And thirdly, it means that proximity and relation take prior position. This dynamic relation between totality and exteriority indicates that totality as a phenomenon is not static; there is a constant interplay between the differentiating categories of the totality which continuously generates qualitatively new significance. It is therefore necessary to pay attention to the different constructions and logics of the categorisations as well as to their interplay.  In relation to testing, this point is supported by reflections on what a test actually is:

The first and most basic concept behind a test is that it is a sample of questions or situations – frequently called items – from some content domain or universe of interest. A content domain is a body of knowledge, skills, or abilities defined so that you can decide whether a particular piece of knowledge, or a particular skill or task is part of the domain (Madaus 1988: 30–1).

This means that a test subscribes to the idea of objective knowledge domains – e.g. intelligence and mathematics problem solving ability – as particular and well-defined areas of knowledge. But this is a highly problematic assumption given the fact that knowledge domains are historically and geographically constructed. This testifies to the importance of paying attention to the different constructions and logics of the categorisations.

These points have a very significant epistemological ramification: since exteriority is the construct of totality the focus of the methodology cannot be on exteriority (i.e. the test takers) *per se.* Rather, the focus must be on the logic and constitution of totality (i.e. both in the test and in the surrounding totality).The epistemological objects are the constructions of totality which are revealed through boundary work on phenomena that are in the twilight zone of totality: that which cannot be incorporated into the totality: the otherness.

But how do we avoid using the categories of totality as epistemological tools instead of as epistemological objects? One way of revealing a totality could be to pose the question: who and what have value in a certain meaning construct (i.e. a totality)?

Thus, it can be induced from the introduction of the philosophical framework in combination with some central characteristics of testing, that a methodology for understanding and treating high-stakes testing in intercultural education should profitably include a focus on both the test itself and on the context, including the material preconditions for the testing practice. This dual focus should comprise several dimensions: the setting, covering both space and time; the possible presence of alienation and domination; the power relations, both as defined by the test and as defined by the setting; the value system of the test as well as of the setting visible in the taxonomies and categorisations; who and what is categorised as otherness; the room left for otherness in both the test and in the setting; the constructions, logics, and interplay of the categorisations; who and what has value in a certain meaning construct (i.e. a totality); and finally what is actually at stake and what are the direct effects connected with the test?

Thus, the methodological concepts of totality and exteriority contain a suggestion for an answer to the question of how to understand and treat high-stakes testing in intercultural education.

**II. The Concepts of ‘Mediation’ and ‘Proyecto’**

*Torben Albertsen*

In elaborating this dialogical response I will be aided by two Dusselian concepts which might also help to explain why this project appears to be both novel and difficult. The first is that of *mediation* (“Mediations are what we seize upon in order to reach the final objective of our activity” (Dussel 1985: 2.3.1.1) and the second is that final objective, namely the *proyecto* (1985: 2.2.4.2). Very often Dussel is concerned with cases where the *proyecto* of the exteriority is nowhere near the *proyecto* of the totality, resulting in outraged alienation when the totality uses the exteriority as mediation towards its *proyecto.* Here the lines are drawn sharply.

In this project, however, it appears to be difficult to completely distinguish the *proyecto* of the exteriority from the *proyecto* of the totality. In other words, most of the test takers probably use the test as mediation towards their “proyecto [...] hoping for acceptance and inclusion in the totality [...]” (p. 1 zxz), just as the test is a mediation used by the totality. Framing this as a question, we could ask: if you agree in your context with Dussel when he says that “others are forced to participate in the system that alienates them” (p. 5 zxz), what then do you mean by ‘forced’ and ‘alienates’ in the context of high-stakes testing? Does domination here have a relation to the modern assertion that ‘if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it’? Perhaps we have become accustomed to believing that a certain level of alienation is normal and even healthy as long it helps ‘us’ to control?

In fact this project is novel and also difficult precisely because it seeks to understand an alienating process, which is far more normal than that with which Dussel is generally concerned, but also far more subtle. This subtle balance probably requires an equally subtle and refined distinction between different levels of totality/exteriority, proximity/mediation and alienation/liberation. Do you have any changes or redefinitions in mind that you think might better distinguish the subtle levels needed for this project than the categories presented and used by Dussel?

With respect to this issue, I would like to interrogate the envisioned exteriority, and specifically with this phrase in mind; “[...] have a very significant epistemological ramification; since exteriority is the construct of totality the focus of the methodology cannot be on exteriority [...]” (p. 8). An important difference in Dussel between the dialectical and the analectical methodology (1985: 5.3) is precisely that the dialectical begins from within the totality, whereas the analectical takes the exteriority as the starting point or the centre of the analysis, from which it then looks back at the totality, similarly perhaps to your wish to “take an outsider position” (p. 1). The idea that the other somehow has to mobilize the process is meant to help bring about the reversal of asymmetry between them. If the focus of the methodology is on the totality, how then can you be sure that what you discover is *real* exteriority related to “an outsider position” and not just *constructed* exteriority; or if you can’t, is that a problem?

It appears that a major problem with ‘a test’ is precisely the lack of proximity (e.g. Buber p. 6), which allows little or no chance of discovering exteriority. A ‘test’ is mediation and mediation is a human-to-being relationship (1985: 2.3.1.2), which in Dussel is seen as opposed [2] to the intentionality of proximity, the human-to-human relation. Is the purpose of this project to circumvent this strict opposition by trying to install more proximity in test mediations or in their surrounding test totality? If the totality *must* be recognized by the exteriority (p. 7), does this mean that the project wants to somehow reverse the asymmetry between those that use/make the tests and those that take the tests? Are there any other ways that the exteriority could threaten to undermine the totality? With respect to this question, do you distinguish between exteriority in the totality surrounding the test and in the test totality itself, and which one might be constructed so as to leave room for otherness? What do you mean by the context (embeddedness) of the test (p. 3)? Is it the paradigmatic or (theoretical) idea-historical context within which a test has a place or is it the surrounding (practical) context (e.g. a university) within which a test is given? “But how do we avoid using the categories of totality as epistemological tools instead of as epistemological objects?” (p. 8). What precisely do you mean by this? Is it related to the above point of *objective knowledge domains* (p. 8), and how might it be a problem to use them as epistemological ‘objects’ instead of as ‘tools’? Just a last and floating question: what do you mean by *inter-cultural* education? These questions are probably as much a reflection on your overall *proyecto* as they are on this specific article, so feel free to direct your attention as you see fit.

**III. The Gatekeeper and the Doppelgänger**

*Jesper Garsdal*

Christian Ydesen has written an interesting and ambitious text challenging, from what he calls an outsider position, the contemporary settings and master categories in the ideas and practices of high-stakes testing, i.e. the ideas and practices of attaching (severe) consequences to test scores. This project is of course relevant for immediate consideration as testing is obviously much in vogue at the moment both in the public schooling system and in the private sector. But also in a more critical perspective the project can be seen as extremely important as perhaps no other factors influence, socialize and/or discipline human beings into mind-sets regarding what is perceived as “normal” ways of being in the world as much as the educational systems. The ways these systems evaluate their students, and especially the consequences of these evaluations for those who are evaluated are some of the strongest normative “forces” in the social world. There is therefore good reason to examine more carefully what tests imply and reveal about the normative power structures they are embedded in, and what the tests reveal about these structures.

More specifically, Ydesen discusses what has been “promoted by a new cultural patchwork in many countries” (p. zxz), namely the use of high– stakes testing in intercultural education. It is here worthwhile to notice that this formulation of the idea of ‘intercultural education’ is connected with two other notions, namely ‘cultural patchwork’ and ‘country’. Ydesen explains the role of testing in such contexts as crucial, as “testing is most often conducted on the basis of a single cultural norm, and on the assumption that there is an area of normality, identified through standardization” (p. zxz). Ydesen quotes Shohamy for saying that testing can be used as a form of gatekeeper, which indicates that Ydesen is not talking about intercultural education as a comparison and mixture of different cultures, religious and non-religious worldviews and learning styles in power-free *terra nullius,* but instead of ‘intercultural education’, where this is connected with specific power structures. We might further speculate that Ydesen could be criticizing the notion of ‘country’ as something which 1) is claimed to have legitimate ‘normative culture’/ one (and only one) ‘normal way of life’, and 2) is connected with a power system, typically the state.

Ydesen is inspired by the social ontology presented in the philosophies of Buber, Lévinas and Dussel. More specifically, he focuses on three themes: 1) the emphasis on the relational nature of existence, which is a common theme for all three thinkers; 2) ethical responsibility and power structures, through the emphasis on the asymmetric relation between totality and exteriority, which is a common theme for Lévinas and Dussel, and 3) the emphasis on the necessary interdependent relation between otherness and totality, a common point for Buber and Dussel (for Buber the necessary relation between the ‘Thou’ and the ‘I’).

It is clear that for all three thinkers it is imperative not to submit to a kind of ‘mediation’ between totality and exteriority. In this regard, I would like to take my departure in the before-mentioned notion of a ‘gatekeeper’. A gatekeeper is normally perceived as keeping the other outside the gate, whereas ‘we’, the in-group, or ‘I’ (‘totality’) are inside the gate. But if we follow Ydesen’s analysis of the interdependency between totality and otherness (theme 3) it is obvious that the gatekeeper might be a more ambiguous figure than first imagined. Otherness is so to speak already inside despite, and maybe even partly because of, the gatekeeper guarding the gate.

In the context of Ydesen’s text, ‘the testing paradigm’ – or perhaps those who claim the importance of this paradigm – is the gatekeeper. It might therefore be interesting to examine how the gatekeeper functions not only as a legitimization of cultural norms in relation to the test constructor, the test imposers and the test takers, but also in relation to what could be called the secondary enforcement of the normativity of the test in the totality; i.e., the reinforcement of the power narrative in the surrounding totality. That is, the society’s acceptance of the necessity of the test. Is the necessity of the test more broadly accepted in a given totality and on what grounds? How is it possible from inside the totality to counter or at least to question the gatekeepers? It could be interesting to expand the inquiry of the social ontology in that direction.

Let me end by briefly mentioning two other figures, the Double/the Shadow, and ‘the Translator’. The Double (Doppelgänger) is an anxiety- imposing otherness, in form of a ghostly, metaphysical and sometimes evil being, which looks like or mirrors itself (totality), but somehow has a mind of its own. In contrast, the notion of translation and of ‘the Translator’ introduces the idea of ‘crossing’ (trans-) and ’carrying over’ (latus). In relation to the testing paradigm, the different metaphors might also indicate different ways of perceiving the paradigms: there is a great difference between on the one hand more or less consciously allowing the testing paradigm to express the shadow side of one’s own totality, and on the other hand allowing the testing paradigm to function as a sort of translation.

**IV. Approaching Proximity**

*Christian Ydesen*

It is no exaggeration to say that the responses of Torben Albertsen and Jesper Garsdal have sparked renewed reflections concerning the development of a methodology for understanding and treating high- stakes testing in intercultural education.The purpose of my reply will then be to specify, present, expand, elaborate and continue these new reflections with an ambition of reaching a more consistent methodological recipe. I hope to demonstrate that perspectives of otherness offer the benefits of outsider perspectives and the potential to gain a fuller understanding of the totality in question. I cannot guarantee that all the questions raised by Albertsen and Garsdal will be addressed, but it is my hope that my reply will throw at least some light on quite a few of their wonderments and that it will be apparent how their questions and angles have evinced my reply.

**The Distinction between Totality and Exteriority**

It has become apparent that the use of the concepts of totality and exteriority in a methodology for understanding high-stakes educational testing in intercultural education can be problematic, since difficulties arise in distinguishing between the *proyecto* of totality and the *proyecto* of exteriority, as the test takers probably use the test as mediation towards their *proyecto.*

In addressing this issue, I will introduce a distinction between an ontological level, an epistemological level, and an existential level. My point here is that the pitfall is only present at the existential level whereas the ontological and epistemological levels remain unaffected. However, at the existential level, diagnosing high-stakes educational testing as a totality might not be so simple because most of the test takers probably use high-stakes tests as mediation towards realizing their own *proyectos,* just as the test is a mediation used by the totality.

This subtle balance undoubtedly requires an equally subtle and refined distinction between totality/exteriority at the existential level. One way of working with this distinction might be to focus on the *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) of the actor and the actors’ horizons of action at a given point in time and space. The point is that actors – *consciously or unconsciously* – subscribe to certain ideas and notions of importance for his/her horizon of actions. As such the actor may not always be able to see through the context that he/she is a part of (the ontological level). Hence, the blurred lines between the *proyecto* of totality and the *proyecto* of exteriority do not disqualify the epistemological distinction between totality and exteriority at the existential level, but it certainly calls for careful reflection. This notion opens up for a concept of unintended actions and unconscious elements in the acts of the actors. Methodologically, the distinction might be achieved through a combined focus on both intentions and effects in both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, which will also prove useful in the distinction between alienation and liberation at different levels and in different conditions.

**The Nature and Levels of Totality and Exteriority**

Further reflection on the nature of totalities has made it apparent that multiple totalities exist – totalities that from the perspective of other totalities appear as exteriorities. In this context, this notion calls for the consideration of the asymmetric interaction between different levels of totality, spanning from the totality of a concrete high-stakes educational test to different totalities at the international level: a span from a micro to a macro level. In other words, it is useful to distinguish between totalities on a micro level (the tests themselves), a meso level (the immediate material and immaterial contexts of the testing practices), and a macro level (other concurrent totalities).

Since a totality is defined as a uniting structure, it is particularly interesting in this respect that other totalities are logically turned into exteriority from the perspective of a given totality, although not necessarily with a high level of otherness. A central trait of a totality is that elements, experiences and products which are historically discontinuous, distinct, distant, and heterogeneous are integrated, in spite of their incongruencies and conflicts, in a single loom which weaves them into a united structure (Quijano 2000: 5). However, a totality is not monolithic and it cannot move in a unilinear, unidirectional, or unidimensional manner, because it constantly faces exteriority on different levels and thus comprises the operation of multiple, heterogeneous, and even conflictive pressures or logics of movement. In other words, otherness is already inside the totality because exteriority is constructed as transcendence in immanence. This becomes especially clear when we recall that human needs, desires, intentions, options, decisions and actions are constantly in question. This means that totalities should be perceived as spaces rather than places in order to incorporate phenomena like travels, flows, viral effects, familiarities, connections, inspirations and influences. Such an approach evidently deconstructs and transcends a national frame of orientation and poses new questions to the research object. It calls for the identification of asymmetric trading places of proximity, where the totality of exteriority and the exteriority of other totalities become manifest, and where perspectives of otherness originate.

**The Undermining of Totality by Exteriority:**

**The Asymmetry of Proximity**

But how are we to understand this asymmetry of the proximity between totalities and exteriorities? In this connection it is fruitful to elaborate further on the notion that a totality can only emerge as a totality through exteriority.

In the sphere of high-stakes educational testing, this means that from an immanent perspective of a test it is itself a pure, coherent, self-referring system best suited without the wretchedness, impurity, and exteriority of the test taker. At the same time, however, it does not make sense to have a test without a test-taker; in other words, the test owes its very existence to the test taker and most notably the test taker must cooperate for the test to be successful. This cooperation is normally facilitated, but not guaranteed, by the power exertion of totality. Furthermore, the test taker continuously threatens to undermine the test at both the internal and the external levels. Internally, the boundaries and internal logic of the test might be challenged and even transcended by the unique exteriority of the test taker disclosing inconsistencies, narrowness and limitations within the totality of the test (i.e. unanticipated answers in a test). Externally, test takers quantitatively and/or qualitatively might give rise to a revision of the test, destroying and corrupting the preceding internal harmony of the original test. Such a process might be levered by recognition of the fallibility of the test by the test designer or society. Another external threat to the immanent totality of a test could be new societal demands, new scientific truths or merely a shift in the power structures of the surrounding context of the test: in other words, a shift in the surrounding totality of the test, that might in fact even be sparked by international developments; i.e. other totalities influencing the totality in question. This is tantamount to the exertion of power by exteriority.

**Understanding Proximity Methodologically**

It is clear that proximity between totalities (or exteriority for that matter) cannot be merely recorded and observed since it is a methodological condition that cases of proximity always have to be viewed retrospectively. Thus, proximity needs an active observer to construct it, which calls for second order reflections. It is however clear that it would be grossly misguided to just assume a 1:1 adoption of one totality (exteriority) into another totality since modes of alienation or liberation, power and local features such as cosmovision, culture, values, and structures of recognition have an irreducible nature. Thus, a crucial question is how the asymmetric proximity between totalities and exteriorities can be adequately comprehended methodologically.

The modes of alienation or liberation, power, and local mediation certainly have an impact on what passes as acceptable knowledge, on the actors’ horizons of action, and on how scientific claims are justified and consolidated – in other words, meaning is always locally constructed. This presents a difficult challenge for dealing with the asymmetric proximity between totalities or exteriority, as it obscures the possibility of identifying clear-cut cases of causal relations between totality and exteriority. It might be like looking for a small tile in a mosaic or even a vaguely distinct flavour in a melting-pot. But keeping the nature of proximity in mind, the room for surprise and unfinishedness is inevitably present, and thus an emphasis on “[...] resistances, inertias, modifications – in trajectory, form, and content – and new combinations that can both result from and develop themselves in the process of crossing” (Werner and Zimmermann 2006: 38) might be a viable methodological approach. Here the point is that neither totality nor exteriority will remain qualitatively intact and identical, whether the proximity is a process of alienation or one of liberation.  In the following paragraph, I will try to develop some purely methodological concepts that might be able to take these points into account.

**Transfer, Translation, and Trading**

First and foremost, it could be possible to conceive of a clear-cut *transfer* of ideas, knowledge and practice in proximity. Such a transfer might take place through the inspiration of influential actors who – *consciously or unconsciously* – subscribe to certain ideas, knowledge, and/or practice. Such transfers might be identified on different levels in discursive turns, via comparative studies or through studies of actors’ movements and network as well as of their influence and significance in a given totality.

However, as already implied above, a notion of a clear-cut essentialist transfer might suffer from severe weaknesses, as it leaves only little room for the inevitable mediation and interplay with other relevant areas of analysis and moderating factors in the process of transfer. Instead it is plausible to conceive of proximity as a generator of neologisms and equivalents. This leads to a second methodological concept: *translation.* It implies that key ideas, knowledge and practice change through translation. The paramount challenge in this approach is that the ideas, knowledge and practices might be rendered unrecognisable by the mediation of the translation. Hence, the identification of translated ideas, knowledge and practice again calls for a careful and alternating combination of both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. The reason is that influences from exteriority or other totalities might not disclose themselves immediately or they might even be significantly diluted in the totality in question. In the case of a dilution, this does not imply the irrelevance of focusing on outside influences as they might trigger a change – e.g. discursively and/or practically – because the existing conditions and features need to position themselves analectically in relation to the outside current.

Moreover, as in the transfer approach, focusing on proximity as a translation would seem to imply that a sole view on actors’ intentions is inadequate, as the emergence and influence of a new discursive neologism or equivalent might transcend or slip the minds of the actors. Instead it must be supplemented by a perspective of effects leaving room for unintended consequences and unconscious elements in the acts of the actors. Thus a focus on the translation of ideas, knowledge and practice presupposes a deconstruction and transcendence of dichotomous questions, such as whether or not there was an immediate and lasting influence. The point is that other totalities and exteriority can render the totality in question irrevocably different on different levels – with or without the knowledge and/or the consent of the influential actors in the field.

Finally, a concept of *trading* of knowledge and practice should be taken into account. In other words, this approach implies that the spreading of ideas, knowledge and practice takes place as acts of exchange – *quid pro quo.* Trading can take place as both transfer and translation, but the focus differs from the other two concepts as the trading approach has an unerring eye for the situation of proximity between totalities or exteriority – it focuses on trading spaces and the construction of meaning in these spaces. As in the ‘transfer’ approach, influential actors’ movements and network seem to be important. And as in the ‘translation’ approach, neologisms and equivalents are certainly not excluded. But the concept of trading has a more subtle dimension as it also has an eye for a spill-over effect and indetermination of the proximity between totalities or exteriority. The trading approach also reveals that totalities reproduce their own logic and discourses as well as ultimately their very own existence through the exchange of ideas, knowledge and practice with other similar totalities. This implies that the respective totality forms a joint and transnational field of totalities which is self-referential and self-justificatory.

**The Identification of Totality, Exteriority, and the Asymmetric Trading Spaces**

But how are totalities, exteriorities and the asymmetric trading spaces in fact identified methodologically, and how do we avoid losing sight of the research object itself in this maelstrom of multi- level effects and interwovenness?

Since the research object is high-stakes educational testing in intercultural education the study must be of the logic and constitution of totality *as seen from exteriority* – challenging the other on the micro, meso and macro levels. That way it is possible to obtain an outsider perspective on the subject matter, which might even be ground-breaking.

The identification of totalities, exteriorities and the asymmetric trading places is very closely concatenated because the totality discloses itself in exteriority and can then be characterized through values, power structures and structures of recognition, which are anchored materially. Exteriority can be identified through a focus on phenomena that are in the twilight zone of totality: that which cannot be incorporated into the totality: the otherness found in proximity – in other words, disclosures of exteriority through boundary work which simultaneously constitutes the asymmetric trading places. More specifically, this means a focus on the failing test takers and their test results at the micro level, a focus on subjugated knowledge and perspectives in the pedagogical context in order to disclose the space in the practical and political objectives of the pedagogical practices at the meso level, and the perspectives of parallel and international totalities at the macro level.

**Endnotes**

1. Dussel writes: “As an unconditioned, exterior other, the other as other is non- Being” (1985: 2.4.6.2).

2. ’Opposed’ with respect to accomplishing either alienation or liberation.

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