

**International Conference**

***Probing Misunderstanding***

**University of Liège (Belgium)**

**July 2-3 2015**

*La possibilité de ce mal (le malentendu, la mécompréhension, la méprise),*

*ce serait à sa manière une chance.*

J. Derrida, *Papier machine*

Human and social sciences are currently affected by tensions inherited from modernity concerning the sharing of norms and values. Consequently, doubts have arisen concerning conditions of understanding. This inheritance leads us to take account of a plurality of points of view without surrendering universality. A series of paradoxes emerge concerning the epistemological positioning of research as well as field work.

Undoubtedly one of the great constants featured in our liberal societies of today is the confidence placed in individuals, these theoretically autonomous entities having freedom of action. For some this freedom is guaranteed, precisely, by a plurality of values, concepts and principles of justice. Thinking about the relationships between different individuals, different cultures, or between individuals and states in the form of a “simple” negotiation of values, or of a “naïve” normative pluralism that denies from the outset the very possibility of a hierarchy of values, can nonetheless lead to masking the institutional dimension of norms, and to neglect relationships of domination between the “universe of heterogeneous meanings” and to disqualify *a priori* any form of conflict resolution involving violence.

There is a similar concern for taking into account individual particularity that explains the development of new ways of governing, regulating, educating, mediating speech, etc., that all have in common that they contractualize relationships and place the accent on both the responsabilization of actors and the necessity of understanding (agreement, harmony, satisfaction, etc.). But these two implicit normative are in themselves contradictory. In the field they may reveal themselves as the carriers of social pathologies. Perhaps why, despite the intervention of multiple acts of passing the baton that are supposed to bring out what every person has to say, despite all these new mediators working to satisfy users or guaranteeing their rights and their duties, the feeling of not having been heard is increasingly stronger. We get the impression that the game is rigged. How and by whom? This manifests itself as much in our societies as in international relations between states, and also in the areas of development and conservation. Exchanges

seem to be carried out in a context that itself establishes or postulates new conditions for understanding itself.

Faced with all these institutions, capabilities and examples of social engineering, all put in place to regulate exchanges so that the heterogeneous meanings in the universe of the same might understand one another and become more like each other, it seems important to pose the question of misunderstanding.

We could consider that the possibility of misunderstanding is a condition for communication. So wanting to eliminate it leads to forms of communication that are susceptible to being co-opted by violence, whether psychological, political, social or cultural. Denying the possibility of misunderstanding supposes that meaning is being monitored. This most often leads to domination and/or violence. Along with misunderstanding we must consider the question of the legitimacy of speech and the possibility of “speaking oneself” in one’s own language, and the same for the many languages there are, etc. The question itself is thus liable to involve many disciplines, from psychiatry to cultural anthropology by way of literary and cultural theories, sociology, international relations, the politics of development and the sciences of interpretation. Possessing an epistemological range as well as a practical one, it emblemizes many important human and political issues. How can we function in a context of misunderstanding (or indeed thanks to misunderstanding)? How do we speak of it? How do we assign it a place? Are there places (prisons, asylums, businesses, etc.) in which a managerial logic of communication renders all misunderstanding impossible? And what, then, are the strategies that are developed for individuals, who must exist despite this impossibility, to find a place, a word to speak, a subjectivity? What can they recover, what do they wish to recover, and what was the result of their efforts in this direction?

This colloquium will take up the question of the conditions of understanding based on the possibility of misunderstanding. We wish to identify its habitat and forms, unmasking it whenever it manifests itself as consensus. We analyze situations in which it stands revealed, illuminating the political processes leading to that point, as well as operations and issues, be they political, human or scientific. We also take an interest in the fecundity of misunderstanding, the creativity that lies within its depths, for actors’ purposes, and for the opportunity it affords researchers to obtain new data and develop new methods of description. Our purpose is to contribute to the recognition of misunderstanding, not as a simple descriptive tool for situations of communication, but rather as a critical concept with which we can investigate the world anew, a world that has never stopped wanting to speak.

Our reflections may develop along these axes:

### ***Reflection 1 – politics and institutions***

It can be seen that the public authorities that traditionally had the job of producing homogeneity within the body politic are more and more involved in the biographical management of the individual. The beneficiaries of an increasing number of social arrangements find themselves called on to speak in order to “narrate their lives” and to produce a narrative of the hardships they have endured. Still, looking more closely at the use made of these narratives that are produced in the confines of the offices of intervention

professionals, one can hardly fail to pose certain questions. What is left, in the final analysis, of these pieces of memory, these unfortunate moments delivered by those requesting it to public audition, and to the multiplicity of their voices? What power is allotted to them? The notion of misunderstanding should enable the public and private dimensions of these initiatives to be articulated in a critical manner.

### ***Reflection 2 – modes of mediation***

Are modes of mediation (cultural, artistic, legal, scholarly, etc.) established by institutions capable, or not, of taking into account misunderstanding in all its forms, these being expressed for example in the form of a resistance on the part of target groups in the public (non-participation, explicit passivity, etc.)? At the heart of this resistance we can see antagonism between cultural democracy and the democratization of culture, between emergent norms and laws, between institution (the act of) and creation. At the same time, the fact of not recognizing oneself in mediated or cultural representations constitutes the interstices that can be the locus and the means of a subjectivation. In a similar vein, look at the reception of discourses (political, mediated) and in the way in which this reception can be conceptualized in terms of success/failure of communication. On another hand, it can also be conceptualized in terms of the emergence of misunderstanding in the form of a conflict of interpretations and/or a double discourse (hidden text/public text) (Scott, 2006), where misunderstanding is constitutive of a subject.

### ***Reflection 3 – intercultural contacts***

Cultural anthropology is confronted with the challenge of the seriousness of non-modern ontologies. What do upheavals do that imply for anthropological theory and practice, once we wish to distinguish our efforts from a pure work of interpretation/translation in the language of academic rationality? How much can we afford to change our theories? If the question is profoundly epistemological, it is also asked with sharpness in the field, especially in the case of conservation policies and “Local Environmental Knowledge.” How can we give a voice to peasants or hunters whose discourse turns out to be incompatible with our scientific rationality? It would be interesting to discover how far the figure of misunderstanding enables us to get beyond the current paradox in which we see environmental policies transferring responsibility for resources to communities at the local level. This transfer is occurring at the very moment when these communities are losing control over the management of their resources (Michon, 2007). The question is also methodological. It is thanks to misunderstanding that ethnologists have developed the relationship they have to the location of their field works. As La Cecla (2002) suggests, misunderstanding is the indispensable ferment of all intercultural encounters that are “successful.”

We will be happy to receive proposals for communications bearing on the epistemological or methodological dimensions of misunderstanding in anthropology, and for review or responses to field work in the area of ecological assets, local or not.

### ***Reflection 4 – Culture, arts, and literature***

Literary and cultural theories cause misunderstanding to arise in a different way. In Since their creation they have shown a tendency to privilege the polysemy of univocity and richness in information over

communicative value. The attention paid to the role of the receiver as well as to the variable contexts within which this reception is produced, has only reinforced this tendency. The idea that a divergent interpretation is to be considered as the result of a creative act, enriching the range of existing interpretations, has little by little been made into a *doxa*, and to the point where we may ask ourselves if the work is not at risk of becoming the victim of a misunderstanding, which would consist of neglect of the communicative function. How do things stand with their meaning-laden intentions and the intentions of its author? To what extent does an approach based on poly-interpretability cancel out the dimension of its own engagement? Can it be considered as the corollary of a hegemonic liberalism that masks relationships of domination and inequality? And what can we say about the truth of the work? Is it the case that meaning never stops disseminating itself, and therefore never stops generating misunderstanding as a result, without the work ever being able to arrive at its destination? Or is it rather a matter of “honouring a presence” (Lyotard), keeping one’s ear to the ground for a sound of its inaudible voice, poorly understood?

### ***Reflection 5 – Penitentiary and psychiatric institutions***

Within institutions such as psychiatric hospitals and prisons, we may legitimately ask if the possibility of conducting a discourse that is irreducibly personal and potentially “beyond norms” is even preserved. In a context in which care tends to respond to norms of evaluation and profitability, pushed further and further, is it still possible to recognize the impossibility of an overall understanding of subjective meanings, even at the centre of the clinical encounter? One might also ask if caregivers have enough to work with, to promote the emergence in their patients of “something else”, other than what they expected. Must we not therefore interrogate the operative arrangements themselves – or even confront them – in order to promote the enunciation of a narrative identity made out of “something else”, other than short, targeted answers, easily evaluated on questionnaires that attempt to measure and quantify suffering that was, in the end, “anticipated” and “expected”.

Validating the possibility of the existence of misunderstanding at the heart of care-giving relationships comes down, in reality, to admitting the fecundity, even to adopting the hypothesis, that misunderstanding can be an adaptation in behaviour – even a therapeutic one. This hypothesis implies showing that communication in the clinic cannot be reduced to the unidirectional transmission of “anonymous” information about a patient. The subject must be rehabilitated as the author of his or her own speech. Communication would concern, rather, the construction of relationships – partially opaque – and sharing – potentially in a discordant manner – acts of enunciation. In this sense, misunderstanding might reveal itself as therapeutic in the sense that it would indeed favour the emergence of a plurality of meanings coming out of “limit situations” that may be qualified in the end, as situations of non-understanding.