

# Intercultural Education and Competences



# Intercultural Education and Competences:

*Challenges and Answers  
for the Global World*

Edited by

Agostino Portera and Carl A. Grant

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# INTRODUCTION

AGOSTINO PORTERA AND CARL A. GRANT

The world in which we are living has radically changed. Globalisation and interdependence affect the human being in its entirety and are giving rise to ever more multiethnic and multicultural societies all over the world. While we still live locally, decisions are made globally. Citizens of all nations have become ever more dependent on people whom they have never met. Meanwhile, especially in Western societies, the culture of postmodernism is currently promoting an inward-looking human being, a person imbued with an individualistic and narcissistic attitude, one that is self-centred and goods-oriented; and the ideology of neoliberalism is influencing school culture, curricula, and teaching methodologies, where the priority seems to be the competitive market logic of profit, individualism, and efficiency (Bauman, 1977; Soros, 1988; Kincheloe, 1999). Such changes seem to have led to profound economic, environmental, political, social, and cultural crises, where the most notable influences can be seen in the field of education.

How is education possible without clear content (values, rules, and norms) and, especially, univocal goals? Which competences are most appropriate in a time of increasing interconnectedness between people, in which migration is no longer a prerequisite for coming into contact with other ethnic groups with different languages, norms, and religions, and in which a person's life is directly or indirectly influenced by contemporaneous events in other parts of the world?

The Council of Europe has a long history of involvement with such questions. Since the 1970s a great amount of official statements and declarations have been produced. One of most significant recent publications is the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: "Living Together as Equals in Dignity" (Council of Europe, 2008). The document was the result of a broad consultation with stakeholders (including the governments of the member states and numerous religious communities, migrant communities, cultural organisations, and other non-governmental organisations across Europe). Based on the semantic and conceptual development in Europe (Grant and Portera, 2011), the White Paper draws

a clear conceptual distinction and proposes going beyond the term of “multiculturalism”, by adopting the “intercultural approach”.

On behalf of the governments of the 47 member states, the Council of Europe (2008), considers it to be a priority to manage in a democratic manner the increasing cultural diversity caused by globalisation. The document argues that it is urgent and necessary to overcome a society of segregated communities, marked by the coexistence of majorities and minorities, and to work toward establishing a “vibrant and open society”, without discrimination and characterised by the inclusion of all residents and full respect of their human rights. In this context, solidarity, respect for every person (regardless of ethnic, religious, or cultural origin), and the promotion of cultural diversity are “essential conditions” for the development of inclusive democratic societies. The White Paper argues that a common future depends on the promotion of mutual understanding by means of the “ability to safeguard and develop human rights”, and “democracy and the rule of law”. In order to effectively manage cultural diversity, the “intercultural approach” is considered the most appropriate model of education. Intercultural dialogue has an important role to play, because it allows societies to avoid ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural division and enables them to deal with different identities “constructively and democratically on the basis of shared universal values”. Further, the White Paper argues that, today, the democratic governance of ethnic and cultural diversity requires the creation and extension of spaces for intercultural dialogue at the international level as well as the acquisition of “intercultural competences”.

The authors of the present book are strongly convinced that, in the age of globalisation, pluralism, and social complexity, in order to overcome the crises of values, governability, and decision-making processes, it is necessary to increase investment in education. All contributors agree with the Council of Europe (2008) that education is fundamental and paramount for promoting a free, respectful, just, open, and inclusive society characterised by social cohesion, mutual understanding, and gender equality. All over the world, education (formal, non-formal, and informal) should play a central role. Today, there is an urgent need to go beyond the neoliberal principle of the neutrality of the state, and to replace it with the goals of care and social responsibility. There is a need to overcome individualism, to build stronger communities, and to reduce unequal access to the best schools and universities, which risk being redefined only to meet business needs and therefore often benefit only a minority of students, a privileged *elite* (Nussbaum, 2010).

*Intercultural Education and Competences for the Global World*, is the scholarly product of the international conference held in Verona Italy in 2013. The Conference was organized by the Centre for Intercultural Studies at the University of Verona in collaboration with the Centres for Leadership and Diversity and Diversity in Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Toronto; IAIE (International Association for Intercultural Education); EERA (European Educational Research Association); and NAME (National American Association for Multicultural Education) - in response to issues addressed by the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, Nussbaum's (2010) thesis on "goals of care and social responsibility", and the respective authors' observations of their country's efforts to meet the challenges of globalization and interdependence. The contributors bring to the discourse on "living together as equals in dignity", illuminations that will help address care and social responsibility across countries, and within countries. Living locally, with decisions made globally, requires responsible and aspirational local living, within a context of a democratic governance that respects intercultural education, while at the same time, taking into account that the central thesis of democracy is the equal treatment of all parties, with the understanding that all parties have equal rights.

The White Paper, which solicited the perspectives of a broad range of stakeholders, underscores the importance of the 23 contributors' analysis and discussion of intercultural education in local contexts that differ by site (e.g., school, international), location (e.g., Canada, Italy, urban) demographic (e.g., young, older, gay), practice (e.g., cooperative learning, inquiry, social justice, and philosophical/methodological), and frame (e.g., grounded theory, socio-cognitive flexibility, "belonging"). The conference held in Verona and its product, *Intercultural Education and Competences for the Global World*, have responded in spirit and action to the charge of the Council of Europe, to promote intercultural dialogue for the purpose of "living together as equals in dignity." The editors and the authors request that their contribution to the efforts to bring about the goal of "living together as equals in dignity" be read, and critiqued, in order to stimulate necessary democratic debate.

The themes discussed in this book include: liquid modern challenges to education (Zygmunt Bauman), intercultural competences in education (Agostino Portera and Martyn Barrett), neoliberalism and education (Carl Grant), as well as many examples of the role of intercultural competences in educational practices (e.g., Yael Sharan and Margarita Sanchez). These issues divided across the subsequent chapters in the following manner:

In chapter 1, Zygmunt Bauman initiates the discussion by analysing the liquid modern challenges to education by defining the liquid-modern society (“nowist culture” and “hurried culture”) characterised by the renegotiation of the meaning of time. Time in the liquid-modern era is neither cyclical nor linear, as it was in past known societies of modern or pre-modern history. It is *pointillist* instead – broken up into a multitude of separate morsels or points that contain an infinite potential. Each point can be experienced as a new beginning and can be abandoned as soon as it is no longer expected. Bauman introduces the concept of the “tyranny of the moment” coined by Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2001) to describe how both the past and the future as mental categories are threatened by this new meaning of time: a pointillist is able to pre-empt the future and disempower the past.

All these changes in the social setting are challenges to education and they therefore involve teachers and learners. Bauman proposes the images of missiles to describe the way education has changed with the transition to liquid-modern times, moving from ballistic missiles, with fixed direction and a pre-designed course, to smart missiles, able to change their direction and to learn and forget fast.

Due to these social changes, education and learning, to be of any use, must be continuous and indeed life-long.

In chapter 2, Agostino Portera introduces the concept of intercultural competences in education and underlines the necessity and urgency of intercultural education and competence in order to face globalisation and interdependence, which seem to have led to profound crises concerning all aspects of human life, especially education. Investing in education by using intercultural approaches seems to be the best response to these modern challenges. Portera summarizes the results of a research project carried out at the Centre for Intercultural Studies in Verona in order to develop a theoretical model of intercultural competence (IC) based on the existing literature and empirical data, with implications at the practical-operative, methodological, and vocational levels. A subsequent study with the title *The Success of Professional Development Projects in Developing Intercultural Competences by Means of Innovative Teaching Strategies, ICTs, and E-Learning*, which was conducted at the Centre for Intercultural Studies from 2012 to 2015, attempted to validate the aforementioned model by testing it within the context of a master’s degree program in ICs for the fields of education, law, healthcare, and business. The model of ICs was preliminarily subjected to the critical evaluation of a panel of 68 national and international experts according to the Delphi method (Adler

& Ziglio, 1996) and then validated by using it as the foundation of the content and teaching methods applied in the master's degree program.

In Chapter 3, Martyn Barrett introduces a new project that is currently being conducted by the Council of Europe (CoE). The project is called *Competences for Democratic Culture* (CDC) and its aim is to develop a new European framework of reference of the competences which young people need to acquire to become effective democratic citizens. The CDC project, which includes four phases, treats intercultural dialogue as vital for democratic culture in culturally diverse societies.

The materials that are being developed by the CDC project are aimed at national education ministries, schools and universities, teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers.

For the purposes of the project, "competence" is defined as "the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and/or understanding in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges, and opportunities that are presented by a given type of context." The CDC model includes 20 competences falling into four broad categories: values, attitudes, skills and knowledge, and critical understanding. Although this project aims to empower young people as autonomous social agents who are capable of choosing and pursuing their own goals in life, democratic culture and intercultural dialogue depend not only on citizens' competences but also on the nature of the institutional structures which are available within any given society, that is on external factors.

In chapter 4, Marco Catarci introduces the concept of multicultural society: a context in which subjects from different cultural backgrounds live in the same environment. This type of society necessitates an intercultural perspective that is a political and educational response to the challenges of multicultural society. In particular, an intercultural approach in education aims to change the traditional perceptions and cognitive schemes generally used to understand others and the world, by means of an effective effort to promote dialogue and understanding, and mediate cultural differences. Marco Catarci stresses the key role of intercultural mediation as a prominent intercultural strategy in multicultural society for managing cultural conflicts and facilitating relationships between people of different cultures. He also stresses the importance of intercultural mediators: operators in charge of facilitating communication between individuals, families, and the community, as essential to measures to promote the removal of cultural and language barriers. Finally, he presents

the results of a quantitative study carried out by the NGO CIES (the Centre for Information and Development Education) and the Institutional Working Party on Intercultural Mediation (IWIM). The main objective of the project was to draft useful guidelines for the establishment of a national statement on the competence of the profession of intercultural mediators.

In chapter 5, Carl A. Grant reflects on education in urban spaces starting from the crisis of schools that have failed to prepare students for 21<sup>st</sup> century employment, especially students in urban areas. According to many studies, this not only depends on poverty but also on race and racism. Grant introduces theories of social justice as the frame for his discussion of education in the Black Belt, the predominately African American community on Chicago's South Side. The theories he discusses focus on the need for equality and civic engagement. However, real life in the Black Belt is characterized by exploitation and material deprivation and by the omission and misrepresentation of black identity and culture: a clear example of the influence of "race on an urban spatial structure". Grant further argues that neoliberalism operates in opposition to the social justice frames as well, increasing the gap between people receiving benefits from this economic model and those who are excluded and punished. This context frames his reflection on the failure of schools in the Black Belt and the issue of inadequate public expenditure on education. Grant's central argument is that money matters in education, especially for closing the achievement gap between students of colour and middle-class White students, while cutting investment in education negatively affects both high and low poverty school districts. Nonetheless, politicians and the media fail to recognize the systematic relationship that exists between funding and school quality.

In chapter 6, Roberto Franzini Tibaldeo undertakes an interdisciplinary inquiry into *diversity* within educational contexts, in order to highlight innovative and effective ways of enhancing intercultural competences. The aim is to successfully deal with the plurality of existing *diversities*, which are to be considered not as threats, but as opportunities for the development of individual and social self-awareness, maturity, and education. Franzini Tibaldeo believes that such an analysis can reap great benefit from the *mare magnum* of existing projects, experiences, and best practices. The author refers to recent research projects, such as Accept Pluralism at the European University Institute at the Robert Schumann Centre for Advanced Studies and other national and regional laws or

statements of best practice, such as the Region of Tuscany's decree D.R. 530/2008, *Per una scuola antirazzista e dell'inclusione* (For a Non-Racist and Inclusive School). He also describes Matthew Lipman's *philosophy for children/community* (P4C), which emphasizes two interesting aspects: on one hand, the multidimensionality of creative, critical, and *caring* thinking; and, on the other hand, the importance of thinking-with-others, that is of a community of inquiry. He concludes that the combination of mutual respect and philosophical inquiry can enhance intercultural competences, reinforce individual and social sensitivity to otherness and diversity, and give strength to any attempt to support differences.

In chapter 7, Victoria Perselli and Diana Moehrke-Rasul present a critical pedagogical review and discussion of various approaches to the internationalisation of education at the tertiary level, problematized through a critical pedagogic lens. There are two main issues within the existing literature and current trends: 1) the move from deficit and assimilationist thinking towards a "pedagogy of recognition", and 2) the function of recognition in positively repositioning international students and their learning. Perselli and Moehrke-Rasul argue that whilst new perspectives are emerging against this background which acknowledge international students as "resourceful peers" in their own right, the practical implications for learning and teaching in culturally diverse settings represented by this ideology require further explication. They believe the time for fully embracing intercultural learning has therefore come, as well as the need to grapple with the question of how this might be realised in internationalised educational contexts.

In chapter 8, Gretchen Wilbur outlines the role of reflective inquiry for the development of intercultural competence amongst adults by using Janet Bennett's intercultural positioning system. This system is based on the use of cultural mapping to identify and bridge intercultural positions. Through mapping, students can notice different ways of interacting, locate themselves according to contextual characteristics, and then clarify a perspective and compare it with others. Reflective inquiry promotes critical examination of observational patterns across different cultural contexts. In making such comparisons, students identify their own location, that is, they gradually become aware of their positionality and its impact on actions. To illustrate this model, Wilbur presents a travel course for adult students from a U.S. context. The course *Who Talks to Whom in Schools and Cafes?* was designed to develop intercultural competence through an inquiry approach. The course fostered intercultural competence

by engaging students while in public spaces in Italy and Estonia, with resident scholars who probed their assumptions and opened their eyes to different perspectives, an essential element of intercultural competence. Students applied theories of intercultural communication throughout the course and then began to reflect in action and to see opportunities for change that could lead to greater intercultural competence within their personal and professional lives.

In chapter 9, Alessio Surian, Chiara Greco, Marwa Mahmud, and Giuseppe Mantovani present the key results of Reggio Emilia's (Italy) secondary school intercultural education workshops run by the Mondinsieme Intercultural Centre. The workshops focused on historical periods that are instrumental for comparing European perspectives with South American and Indian perspectives. During the workshops, these epochs were discussed on the basis of texts that deconstructed a supposed superiority of the European world. The workshops were intended to encourage a reflection upon preferable and desired futures as well as dialogue, by taking into account the decolonial and transmodern epistemic turn as outlined by authors such as Quijano and Mignolo, which entails "delinking" from and a necessarily disobedient approach to hegemonic and prevailing historical canons. The authors focus on a specific workshop that was conducted with 16 year-old students from a *liceo classico*, as well as with 18 year-old pupils from a vocational school. *Liceo classico* students focused upon identifying and conveying the "voice of the other" and deconstructing the dominant stereotyped image of the other, while vocational school students had to approve their ideas and proposals with the workshop facilitator.

In chapter 10, Yael Sharan explores how cooperative learning (CL) responds to the linguistic and cultural challenges teachers face every day in the intercultural classroom. She also underlines the contribution of CL to the development of methods, models, and short term procedures, all of which promote learning together in small groups toward a common goal or outcome. The author explores the more common ways culture affects learning and stresses the importance of creating an *intercultural* setting where children of various religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds are "no longer regarded as a 'problem' or 'risk,' but as 'resources'". Sharan argues that teachers can help students in developing interpersonal communication skills, finding meaningful connections between the curriculum and their personal worlds, and redressing the loss of a sense of community by using CL models, methods, and procedures such as the

*group investigation model*. They can also guide small discussion groups that encourage students to relate concepts and texts to their personal experience, and compare and discuss how they understand them through *instructional conversations*.

Sharan concludes her reflection on the effectiveness of CL in dealing with modern challenges by stating that a balance between a judicious, gradual implementation of cooperative learning procedures, and a sensitivity to the multiple manifestations of diversity is essential to providing a safe environment in which all students can create meaningful connections between their worlds and school.

In chapter 11, Paola Dusi and Marilyn Steinbach focus on the concepts of community and the sense of belonging in multicultural schools. The *other* and our relationship with the *other* is at the heart of learning, and of knowing and becoming ourselves. Therefore it is essential for the teacher to know how to build a network of relationships in which each student feels involved and engaged. In multicultural schools, the process of constructing a community of living and learning becomes more difficult because of the high degree of heterogeneity that characterizes the group of children: a group of people who do not have a common language, history, culture, or membership. This is why teachers play a key role and can have a positive influence on the family's involvement in the child's education, on the attitudes classmates assume towards each other, and on the classroom environment.

The authors then introduce their study on sense of belonging, which involved future primary school teachers in Italy and in Canada. In Italy the study was conducted at two universities, Verona and Brescia, with students in primary teacher education programs following a course in intercultural education. In Canada, the study was conducted at the university of Sherbrooke.

In chapter 12, Margarita Sanchez-Mazas and Aneta Mechi analyse the current context of globalization and professional mobility and the need to develop new approaches to provide teachers with useful tools in order to deal with various problematic educational situations. The authors then present a social psychological approach to understanding the biases and shortcomings that are likely to affect teachers' perceptions of, interpretations of, and responses to the problematic situations they have to deal with in multicultural school settings. They also introduce the concept of *social cognitive flexibility* (SCF), which is related to social objects (individuals, situations, behaviours, and opinions) and emphasizes the

fluidity of passing through multiple possible categorizations, thus preventing the crystallization of a single and readily accessible mental category. SCF, according to the authors, is the central tool that may allow teachers to overcome biases such as the risk of reintroducing stereotyping modes of thinking while teaching, and to develop a professional competence through an appropriate training program. This program aims to guide the professional in the development of his/her teaching approach on the basis of two fundamental requirements: doubt (reflecting before accepting) and a plurality of viewpoints.

In chapter 13, Kenneth D. McNeilly and Michel Ferrari introduce McNeilly's investigation of school experiences of Canadian adolescents with lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents carried out by using semi-structured interviews. Children's responses are then analysed by using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), an inductive approach for investigating how individuals make sense of their experiences. The interview shows that children of LGB-led parents are accustomed to avoiding people perceived as homophobic and disclosing their parents' sexual identity to others. They also believe strongly in the potential of education to reduce ignorant peer responses, promote accepting attitudes, and debunk heteronormative stereotypes. The authors stress the importance of including non-heterosexual narratives via literature, history, law, and media in school curricula in order to make the children of LGB-led parents feel safer at school and more secure in articulating their personal identity, without fear of reprisal. They also underline the key role of teachers in the development of students' personal identity narratives.

In chapter 14, Giovanna Malusà and Massimiliano Tarozzi introduce the modern political challenge of combining educational quality and social equality by stating that E.U. and Italian policies consider the "quality" of school systems to be more concerned with efficiency, competitiveness, and the provision of human capital for the labor market rather than reducing inequalities and social asymmetries. The result is the increase in cultural diversity amongst students, especially those coming from an immigrant background as demonstrated by a report by the Italian Ministry of Education in 2013. The chapter then summarises selected results of a longitudinal study of a multicultural class from the first grade of primary school to the first grade of middle school in the Province of Trento in Italy, with the purpose of identifying current directions in quality education in multicultural contexts. This study sought to identify which process might enable quality learning in difficult contexts and aimed to

construct a social justice education model that addresses, in particular, the inclusion of students of foreign origin. After presenting the research setting, the authors describe the methodological approach adopted for the study and detail the data collection and analysis procedures. They then briefly sketch the categories that emerged in the constructed model by defining their essential features as steps toward an effective way to promote quality schooling for all, and conclude by highlighting possible elements that may be theoretically transferable to other school contexts. The authors stress the need to invest in education to train teachers and create a school environment that is open to intercultural dialogue, in which cultural diversity is recognized and respected.

In chapter 15, Dorota Celinska and Roberto Swazo reflect on the effectiveness of the traditional on-campus course in increasing multicultural competencies in trainees and propose valuable alternatives to this format: the community service learning (CSL) approach, the international service learning (ISL) approach and especially the faculty-led international course (FLIC) approach. The authors suggest that FLIC design may be a valid approach as it is based on the principle of extensive and intentional culture immersion; moreover, it creates unique opportunities for experiential multicultural learning in novel cultural contexts that are not accessible within the on-campus course format. A study of student perceptions of their multicultural learning in the context of the faculty-led international courses is then presented in this chapter. The participants consisted of 21 graduate students of a private university located in a Midwest metropolitan area of the USA enrolled in faculty-led international courses. They were asked to respond individually to the Post-Trip Reflection and Evaluation Questionnaire, a written semi-structured response instrument. The study attempted to identify the multicultural concepts and skills associated with the most self-reported growth, along with the mechanisms associated with the learning of these concepts and skills. Further, the study aimed at exploring the ways in which particular curricular and instructional components of the course contributed to student multicultural learning outcomes.

The underlying premise for all contributors to this volume is that in multi-ethnic and multicultural contexts there is an urgent need to rethink educational content, methods, and goals. The challenge is to overcome all past forms of dogmatism, ethnocentrism, and nationalism without falling into the trap of moral relativism (*anything goes*), spontaneism (*carpe*

*diem*), and standardization (*one-size-fits-all*). In this sense, the best response to our changing world is an *intercultural* approach.

**PART 1 –**

**INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION  
AND COMPETENCES FOR A GLOBAL WORLD**



# CHAPTER ONE

## LIQUID MODERN CHALLENGES TO EDUCATION

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

Stephen Bertman (1998) coined the terms “nowist culture” and “hurried culture” to denote the way we live in our kind of society. Apt terms indeed – and such has come particularly handy whenever we try to grasp the nature of the liquid-modern human condition. We may say that more than for anything else, this condition stands out for its (thus far unique) *re-negotiation of the meaning of time*.

### **From Linear to Pointillist Time**

Time in the liquid-modern “society of consumers” era is neither cyclical nor linear, as it used to be in other known societies of modern or pre-modern history. It is *pointillist* instead – broken up into a multitude of separate morsels, each morsel reduced to a point ever more closely approximating its geometrical idealization of non-dimensionality. As we surely remember from school lessons in geometry, points have no length, width, or depth: they exist, one is tempted to say, *before* the space and time; both space and time are yet to begin. But like that unique point which, as the state-of-the-art cosmogony postulates, preceded the “big bang” that started the universe, each point is presumed to contain an infinite potential to expand and the infinity of possibilities waiting to explode if properly ignited...

Each time-point is believed to be pregnant with a chance of another “big bang,” though this time on a much more modest, “individual universe” scale, and the successive points continue to be believed to be so pregnant – regardless of what might have happened to the previous ones and despite the accumulating experience showing that most chances tend to be wrongly prejudged, overlooked, or missed – that most points prove

to be barren, and most stirrings are still-born. A map of pointillist life, had it been charted, would have looked like a graveyard of imaginary or unfulfilled possibilities. Or, depending on the point-of-view, like a cemetery of wasted chances: in a pointillist universe, the rates of infant mortality and miscarriages of hopes are very high.

Precisely for that reason a “nowist” life tends to be a “hurried” life. The chance which each point might contain will follow it to its grave; for *that* particular, *unique* chance, there will be no “second chance.” Each point might have been lived through as a new beginning, but more often than not the finish would have come right after the start, with pretty little happening in between. Only an unstoppably expanding multitude of new beginnings may – just may – compensate for the profusion of false starts. The vast expanses of new beginnings believed to be waiting ahead – the points whose “big bang potential” has not yet been tried and so remains thus far un-discredited – allows one to salvage hope from the debris of premature endings or, rather, stillborn gambits.

In the ‘nowist’ life of the avid consumer of new *Erlebnisse* (experiences), the reason to hurry is not the urge to *acquire* and *collect*, but to *discard* and *replace*. There is a latent message behind every commercial, promising a new and unexplored opportunity for bliss: no point in crying over split milk. Either the “big bang” happens right now, at this very moment and at the first try, or loitering in that particular point makes sense no longer; it is time to move to another point.

In a society of producers now receding into the past (at least in our part of the globe), the advice in such a case would have once been “try harder”; but not in the society of consumers. Here, the failed tools are to be abandoned rather than sharpened and tried again with greater skill, more dedication, and better effect. And so should the appliances that stopped short of delivering the promised “full satisfaction” be abandoned, as well as the human relationships that delivered a “bang” not exactly as “big” as expected. The hurry ought to be at its most intense when one is running from one point (failed, failing, or about to start failing) to another (yet untried). One should be wary of Faust’s bitter lesson: of being condemned to hell while wishing the moment – just because it was a pleasing one – to last forever...

What, given the infinity of promised and assumed opportunities, makes the flow of time, which has been pulverized into an aggregate of “points,” a most attractive novelty, one that could surely be learned gladly and practiced with zeal, is the double promise of pre-empting the future, and of disempowering the past. Such a double act is, after all, the ideal of liberty.

The promise of emancipating actors from the choice-limiting constraints – which are particularly resented for their nasty habit of growing in volume and stiffening over time as the “past” expands and devours ever greater chunks of life – coupled with the promise to deny the future its similarly discomfiting propensity to dash the hopes and devalue the successes lived in the present, augur between themselves a complete, unrestrained, well-nigh absolute freedom. Liquid-modern society offers such liberty to a degree unheard of, and downright inconceivable, in any other society on record.

Let us consider first the uncanny feat of disabling the past. It boils down to just one, but truly miraculous change in human condition: the facility to be “born again.” From now on, it is not just the cats who live nine lives. In one abominably short visit on earth, bewailed not that long ago for its loathsome brevity and not radically lengthened since, humans – just like the proverbial cats – are now offered the chance to squeeze many lives, an endless series of “new beginnings.” Being “born again” means that previous birth(s), together with their aftermath, have been annulled; it feels like the arrival of the always dreamt of, though never before experienced, divine-style omnipotence. (Leon Shestov, the eminent Russian-French existentialist philosopher, thought the potency to annul the past – to prevent, for instance, the crime of forcing Socrates to drink hemlock – to be the ultimate sign of God’s omnipotence). The power of causal determination can be disarmed, and the power of the past to cut down the options of the present can be radically limited, perhaps even abolished altogether. What one was yesterday can no longer bar the possibility of becoming someone totally different today.

Since each point in time is, let us recall, full of potential, and each potential is different and unique, the number of ways in which one can be different is genuinely uncountable: indeed, it dwarfs even the astonishing multitude of permutations and the mind-boggling variety of forms and likenesses which the haphazard meetings of genes have managed thus far and are likely to produce in the future in the human species. It comes close to the awe-inspiring capacity of eternity, in which, given its infinite duration, everything may/must sooner or later happen and everything can/will sooner or later be done. Now, that wondrous potency of eternity has been packed into the not-at-all-eternal span of a single human life.

Consequently, the feat of defusing and neutralizing the power of the past to reduce the subsequent choices, and so to severely limit the chances of “new births” robs eternity of its most seductive attraction. In the “pointillist” time of liquid-modern society, *eternity no longer is a value and an object of desire*; or rather what was its value and what made it an

object of desire has been excised and *grafted onto the moment*. Accordingly, the late-modern “tyranny of the moment” with its precept of *carpe diem*, has replaced the pre-modern tyranny of eternity with its motto of *memento mori*.

## Chasing Elusive Identity

That transformation stands behind the new centrality accorded to preoccupations with “identity” in present-day society.

Though remaining an important issue and absorbing task since the early-modern passage from the “ascription” to the “achievement” society, “identity” now shares the fate of other life-pursuits and has undergone the “pointillization” process. Once a “whole-life” project coterminous with one’s life-span, “identity” has turned into an attribute of the moment. It is no longer “once designed and forever built,” but is intermittently, and ever anew, assembled and dissembled – with each of the two apparently contradictory operations carrying equal importance and being equally absorbing. Instead of demanding an advance payment and a life-long subscription with no cancellation clause, the manipulation of identity is now an activity akin to “pay as you watch” (or “as you phone”). It is still a constant preoccupation, but is now split into a multitude of exceedingly short (and with recent innovations in marketing techniques, ever shorter) acts which are constrained by an ever more fleeting attention span: a series of sudden and frenetic spurts which are not pre-designed and occur in unpredictable succession, but which have immediate effects that closely and quickly follow the act.

The skills required to meet the challenge of the liquid-modern manipulation of identity are akin to those of a juggler, or – more to the point – the artfulness and dexterity of a prestidigitator. Practicing such skills has been brought within reach of the ordinary, run-of-the-mill consumer by means of the expedient of *simulacrum* – a phenomenon, which, in Jean Baudrillard’s (1981) memorable description, is similar to those psychosomatic ailments which are known to cancel the distinction between “things as they are” and “things as they pretend to be,” or “reality” and “illusion,” or the true state of affairs and its simulation. What once was viewed and suffered as an interminable drudgery that called for mobilization and an onerous straining of any and all of one’s “inner” resources, can now be accomplished with the help of purchasable, ready-to-use contraptions and gadgets, with a modicum expenditure of money and time (though of course the attractiveness of an identity composed of bought trappings rises in proportion to the amount of money spent and,

most recently, with the wait time, as the most prestigious and exclusive designer shops have introduced waiting lists, clearly with no other purpose except to enhance the distinction with which the waited-for tokens of identity endow their buyer. As Georg Simmel (1969) pointed out long ago that values are measured with the sacrifice of the other values required to obtain them, and delay is arguably the most excruciating of sacrifices members of the society of consumers may be required to accept).

Annulling the past, “being born again,” acquiring a different self, reincarnating as “someone completely different”... These proposals are difficult to refuse. Why work on self-improvement with all the strenuous effort and painful self-sacrifice such toil requires? Why send good money after bad? Is it not cheaper, and quicker, and more thorough, and more convenient, and easier to cut one’s losses and start again - to shed one’s old skin, spots, warts and all, and buy a new one? There is nothing new in seeking escape when things get really hot; people have always tried to do that. What is new is the dream of *escaping oneself* – and the conviction that making such a dream a reality is within reach; not just an option within reach, but the easiest option, the one that is most likely to work in case of trouble; a short-cut that is less cumbersome, less time-and-energy consuming, and thus all-in-all a cheaper option.

Joseph Brodsky, the Russian-American philosopher-poet, vividly described the kind of life guided by a trust invested in this kind of escape. For those perceived to be the losers, like the “flawed consumers” (the poor eliminated from the consumerist game), the liquid-modern variety of social outcasts – the sole form of escape from oneself (from being tired of oneself, or as Brodsky prefers, from being *bored*) is alcohol or drug addiction: “In general, a man shooting heroin into his vein does so largely for the same reason you buy a video,” Brodsky (1995, p. 107) told the students of Dartmouth College in July 1989; this is as far as flawed consumers, the social rejects barred entry to the more refined and ostensibly more effective (but also more expensive) escape routes, can go. As to the potential haves, which Dartmouth College students aspire to become, they need not stop at buying a new video... They may try to live out their dream.

[Y]ou’ll be bored with your work, your spouses, your lovers, the view from your window, the furniture or wallpaper in your room, your thoughts, yourselves. Accordingly, you’ll try to devise ways of escape. Apart from the self-gratifying gadgets mentioned before, you may take up changing jobs, residence, company, country, climate, you may take up promiscuity, alcohol, travel, cooking lessons, drugs, psychoanalysis.... (Brodsky, 1995, pp. 107-108)

The haves may indeed pick and choose their ways of escape from the uncountable number on offer. And they are likely to be tempted to try as many as they can afford, one by one or all together, since what is much less likely is that any of them will indeed deliver that freedom from “boredom with oneself” which they promise to bring:

In fact, you may lump all these together, and for a while that may work. Until the day, of course, when you wake up in your bedroom amid a new family and a different wallpaper, in a different state and climate, with a heap of bills from your travel agent and your shrink, yet with the same stale feeling toward the light of day pouring through your window.... (Brodsky, 1995, p. 108)

Andrzej Stasiuk, an outstanding Polish novelist and insightful analyst of the contemporary human condition, suggests that “the possibility of becoming someone else” is the present-day substitute for salvation or redemption, which are now largely discarded and perceived as being unimportant. It is highly probable, he suggests that, the quantity of digital, celluloid, and analogue beings that meet in the course of a bodily life comes close to the volume which eternal life and resurrection in flesh could offer (2002, p. 59).

Applying various techniques, we may change our bodies and re-shape them according to different patterns. When browsing through glossy magazines, one gets the impression that they tell mostly one story – about the ways in which one can re-make one’s personality, starting from diets, surroundings, homes, and up to rebuilding of psychical structure, often code-named: “be yourself”.

Sławomir Mrożek, a Polish writer of world-wide fame and a man with a first-hand experience of many lands and cultures, compares the world we inhabit to a market stand filled with fancy dresses and surrounded by crowds seeking their “selves” (Mrożek, 2000, p. 122). One can change dresses without end, so that the wondrous liberty the seekers enjoy can go on forever... Let’s go on searching for our real selves, it’s smashing fun – on condition that the real self will be never found. Because if it were, the fun would end...

If happiness is permanently within reach and if reaching it takes but the few minutes needed to browse through the yellow pages and to pull the credit card out of the wallet, then obviously a self that stops short of reaching happiness cannot be “real” – not really the one that spurred the self-seeker to embark on the voyage of self-discovery. Such a fraudulent self needs to be discarded on the ground of its “non-authenticity,” while the search for the real one should go on. And there is little reason to stop

searching if one can be sure that in a moment another moment will duly arrive, carrying new promises and bursting with new potential.

### **Smarting Under the Tyranny of the Moment**

In a book with a tell-all title, Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2001) identifies the “tyranny of the moment” as the most conspicuous feature of contemporary society and arguably its most seminal novelty:

The consequences of extreme hurriedness are overwhelming: both the past and the future as mental categories are threatened by the tyranny of the moment... (E)ven the ‘here and now’ is threatened since the next moment comes so quickly that it becomes difficult to live in the present. (pp. 2-3)

This is a paradox, indeed, and an inexhaustible source of tension: the more voluminous and capacious the moment becomes, the smaller (briefer) it is; as its potential contents swell, its dimensions shrink. “There are strong indications that we are about to create a kind of society where it becomes nearly impossible to think a thought that is more than a couple of inches long” (Eriksen, 2001, p. VII). But contrary to the popular hopes beefed up by the promises of the consumer market, changing one’s identity, were it at all plausible, would require much more than that.

While undergoing the “pointillization” treatment, the moment is thereby cut off on both sides. Its interfaces with both the past and the future turn into gaps – hopefully unbridgeable. Ironically, in the age of instant and effortless connection and the promise of being constantly “in touch,” communication between the experience of the moment and whatever may precede or follow it needs to be permanently, and hopefully irreparably, broken. The gap behind us should see to it that the past is never allowed to catch up with the running self. The gap ahead of us is a condition of living the moment to the fullest, of totally and unreservedly abandoning oneself to its (admittedly fleeting) charm and seductive powers – something that would not be feasible were the currently lived-through moment contaminated with worry about mortgaging the future. Ideally, each moment would be modelled after the pattern of credit card use, a radically de-personalized act: in the absence of face-to-face intercourse, it is easier to forget, or rather never to think in the first place, of the unpleasantness of repayment. No wonder the banks, eager to get cash moving and thereby earn yet more money than they would if it were laying idle, prefer their clients fingering their credit cards instead of visiting branch managers.

Following Bertman's terminology, Elżbieta Tarkowska, a most prominent chronosociologist in her own right, develops the concept of "synchronic humans," who live solely in the present and who pay no attention to past experience or future consequences of their actions, a strategy which translates into absence of bonds with the others. The "presentist culture" puts a premium on speed and effectiveness, while favouring neither patience nor perseverance (Tarkowska, 2005).

We may add that it is this frailty and this apparently easy disposability of individual identities and inter-human bonds that are re-presented in contemporary culture as the substance of individual freedom. One choice that such freedom would neither recognize, grant, nor allow is the resolve (or indeed the ability) to persevere in holding to the once constructed identity, that is in the kind of activity which also presumes, and necessarily entails, the preservation and security of the social network on which that identity rests while actively reproducing it.

### **Drown in the Information Deluge**

The speed that creates the prospect of taming and assimilating innovations beyond the ordinary human's capacity must overshoot any target made to meet existing demand. New products appear, as a rule, first and only then do they seek out their applications; many of them travel to the landfill without finding any. But even the lucky few products, which manage to find or conjure up a need, a desire, or a wish for which they might demonstrate to be, or eventually become, relevant, soon tend to succumb to the pressure of "new and improved" products (that is, products that promise to do all their predecessors could do, only quicker and better - with the extra bonus of doing a few things which no consumer has yet thought they needed or intended to buy) well before their working capacity meets its preordained end. Like most aspects of life, the production of life-servicing gadgets grows, as Eriksen (2001) points out, at an *exponential rate* – whereas in all cases of exponential growth a point must be reached at which the supply exceeds the capacity of the genuine or contrived demand; more often than not, that point arrives before another yet more dramatic point is reached: the natural limit to supply.

Such pathological (and eminently wasteful) tendencies of all and any exponential growth in the production of goods and services could be conceivably spotted in time, recognized for what they are and they can perhaps even manage to inspire remedial or preventive measures – if not for another, and in many ways special, exponential process which results in an *excess of information*. As Ignazio Ramonet calculates, during the last