DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY:
AGAINST WEST VERSUS THE REST

Hubert Hermans [*]

Abstract: Huimin Jin's article on cultural self-confidence is a welcome invitation to deliver a short commentary from a western point of view. My purpose is to show that in Western scientific publications of the past decades, there is an increasing interest in both the necessity and fertility of developing a dialogical self as part of a globalizing world society. In this context, I discuss (a) the dialogical self as an alternative to Western individualism (b) the origin of Dialogical Self Theory and some of its main tenets; and (c) tension between global and local positions; and (d) the necessity of recognizing the otherness and alterity of voices emerging from different cultures and selves. I show that recent developments in Western social sciences are well in agreement with some of Jin's main arguments on Chinese self-confidence.

In his plea for cultural self-confidence, Jin [1] proposes that identity is not something in itself, not an isolated entity and not something that is purely self-constructed or self-fulfilled. Instead, it is always "a structure, a discourse that has recourse to the other for its narrative to be completed". Only then, he continues, "the process of cultural self-confidence necessarily involves the way we deal with alien or heterogeneous cultures that have the potentials to position and reposition, shape and reshape, constitute and re-constitute ourselves."

In the past decades, a similar discussion has emerged in the social sciences in western countries concerning the question of how to define identity in a globalizing society. As part of this debate, the western ideal of the free and autonomous individual increasingly became the object of critical scrutiny. Under the influence of the autonomy ideal of the Enlightenment, a modern conception of self or identity was propagated that was assumed to function as a free and independent entity that could be defined and studied in separation of the social environment. Under the influence of this ideal, psychologists developed theories and concepts that considered the self as having an essence in themselves and having its own private ground in itself, with the social environment as something purely external. For sure, many psychologists acknowledge that the social environment has a significant influence on the self, but they persisted in the idea that the self could be defined as something that has a core essence in itself that can be studied in isolation of its social milieu. The many thousands of investigations of individual self-esteem are representative examples of this view.

One of the main critics of this 'container self', sociologist Peter Callero looked at some of the main trends in the psychology of the self in the 20th century. He listed and

---

[*] Dr. HUBERT HERMANS, Emeritus-professor of psychology at the Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
[1] Huimin Jin (2017). "Cultural Self-confidence and Constellated Community: Centering around Xi Jinping's Recent Speeches," *Philosophical Studies* (Beijing), no. 4, pp. 119-126. All the quotations from this article are not paginated throughout the text.

analyzed a series of psychological self-concepts in contemporary mainstream psychology, for example, self-consistency, self-enhancement, self-monitoring, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-presentation, self-verification, self-knowledge, self-control, and self-handicapping. In his conclusion, he listed three features that these concepts had in common: (a) an emphasis on the stability of the self with a simultaneous under-emphasis of its change; (b) a stress on the unity of the self with a neglect of its multiplicity; (c) and a neglect of social power. In his own words: ". . . There is a tendency [in mainstream psychology] to focus on stability, unity, and conformity and de-emphasize the sociological principles of social construction. The self that is socially constructed may congeal around a relatively stable set of cultural meanings, but these meanings can *never be permanent or unchanging*. Similarly, the self that is socially constructed may appear centered, unified, and singular, but this symbolic structure will be as *multidimensional and diverse* as the social relationships that surround it. Finally, the self that is socially constructed is never a bounded quality of the individual or simple expression of psychological characteristics; it is a fundamentally social phenomenon, where concepts, images, and understandings are deeply determined by *relations of power*. When these principles are ignored or rejected, the self is often conceptualized as a vessel for storing all the particulars of a person." [2]

I. The Dialogical Self as Criticism of Western Individualism

Criticism of the individualistic bias in mainstream western psychological concepts of the Self was also foundational in the formulation of Dialogical Self Theory [3] (DST), a development in the social sciences emerging at the end of the 20th century as a reaction to the predominant individualism and rationalism in social-scientific western conceptions of the self. This theory weaves two concepts, self and dialogue, together in such a way that a more profound understanding of the interconnection of self and society becomes possible. Typically, the concept of self refers to something "internal," something that happens *within* the mind of the individual person, while "dialogue" is associated with something "external," referring to processes that take place *between* people involved in communication. The composite concept "dialogical self" goes beyond this dichotomy by bringing the external to the internal and, in reverse, to introduce the internal into the external. In this theory, the self represents a diversity of relationships between different "*I*-positions" and considers society as populated, stimulated, and renewed by dialogical individuals in development.

For a proper understanding of the dialogical self, a distinction between social and personal *I*-positions is required. *Social* positions (e.g., I as a teacher, as a father, as a leader), are similar to social roles as they are guided by social expectations regarding one's behavior in a societal context. There are also *personal* positions (e.g., I as

---

[2] Peter L. Callero (2003). The sociology of the self. *Annual Review of Sociology, 29,* p. 127. Italicized mine.

[3] Hubert Hermans & Harry Kempen (1992). The dialogical self: Beyond individualism and rationalism. *American Psychologist, 47*, 23-33. Hubert Hermans & Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka (2010). *Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and counter-positioning in a globalizing society.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Hubert Hermans (2018). *Society in the self: A theory of identity in democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

humorous, I as lover of music of Bach, I as enthusiastic sportsman). This distinction enables the creation of personalized roles, in which social and personal positions are combined. For example, a teacher may present himself as a humorous teacher, a sophisticated teacher, an authoritarian teacher or a helpful teacher. In this way, social behavior receives a personal expression so that linkages between self and society are articulated. The self–society interconnection allows to abandon a conception of the self as essentialized and encapsulated in itself. Moreover, it avoids the limitations of a "self-less society" that lacks the opportunity to profit from the richness and creativity that the individual person has to offer to the innovation of existing social practices. Self and culture are conceived of in terms of a multiplicity of positions among which dialogical relationships can develop. This view conceptualizes the self as "culture-inclusive" and of culture as "self-inclusive". This conception avoids the pitfalls of treating the self as individualized and self-contained and culture as abstract and impersonal.

II. Dialogical Self Theory: Self as a Society of Mind

Dialogical Self Theory (DST) is not an isolated field in the social sciences. It emerged at the interface of two traditions: American Pragmatism and Russian Dialogism. As a theory of the self, it finds a source of inspiration in William James' [4] and George Herbert Mead's [5] classic formulations on the workings of the self. As a dialogical theory, it draws on the fertile insights in dialogical processes proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin [6]. In the course of time, the ideas of these authors have significantly contributed to the development of Dialogical Self Theory. However, we went beyond these authors by constructing a theory, which gives serious consideration to the idea that we are part of significant historical changes on a *global* scale.

In line with Peter Callero's vision, I would like to emphasize that there are in the self not only stable but also changing positions. There is not only unity in the self (centralizing movements) but also multiplicity (decentralizing movements represented by a diversity of positions, which have their own specific energies and developmental trajectories); and the organization of the positions is indeed deeply determined by differences in social power. Taking these characteristics into account leads to a definition of the self as a mini-society of *I*-positions, which function, at the same time, as integrative parts of the society at large.

At this point, we see a close connection between the dialogical self as a dynamic mini-society of mind and Jin's proposal of cultural self-confidence: "And if cultural self-confidence not only means insistence on one's own tradition but also absorption of the nutrients from other cultures in order to better survive and thrive, then it has something to do with inter-culturality, inter-subjectivity or cultural inter-subjectivity". In a complementing way, I would suggest that if personal confidence not only means insistence on one's own past behavior but also absorption of the nutrients from the selves of other people in order to better survive and thrive, then it has something to do

---

[4] William James (1890). *The Principles of Psychology* (Volume 1). London: Macmillan.

[5] George Herbert Mead (1934). *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[6] Mikhail Bakhtin (1973). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (2nd edn.; trans. R. W. Rotsel). Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis. (Original work published 1929 as *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* [*Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*]).

with inter-subjectivity and cultural-intersubjectivity". In this context, a well-developed dialogical self would serve as a fitting complement to a dialogical society as proposed by Jin.

In Jin's view, the self can never exist without reference to the other. It has to be found not in self-centeredness but self-in-other, or in Confucian terminology, "correspondence in difference" (和而不同), "by which a culturally constellated community is achieved otherness or alterity." Closely related to this view, DST assumes that significant other people or groups of people are not located purely outside the self, but are interiorized as "others-in-the-self." As populated by other individuals and groups, the self functions as a "society of mind". In this mini-society the self is a "self-in-other" and the others are "others-in-the-self" with the other working as "another" *in* the organization of the self. Significant others or groups of others may be represented in the self as more or less dominant or powerful others that function in the self as models, guides, authorities or as inspiring figures that organize the self of the individual person.

Moreover, the Confusion "correspondence in difference" fits with a conception of the self as "unity-in-multiplicity" or "multiplicity-in-unity" as typical of the dialogical self in DST. As such, the self exists as a multiplicity of *I*-positions , which function in coherent way, due to the quality of the dialogical relationships between different *I*-positions in the self and between the *I*-positions of different selves as constituting the society at large. [7]

III. Tensions between Global and Local Traditions

In a globalizing world society, individuals and groups are no longer located in one particular culture, homogeneous in itself and contrastingly set against other cultures, but are increasingly located at the interfaces of cultures. [8] The growing interconnectedness of nations and cultures does not only lead to an increasing contact between different cultural groups but also to an increasing contact between cultures within the individual person. Different cultures come together and meet each other as *I*-positions within the self of one and the same individual. This process may result in such novel identities as a business representative educated in a German school system but working for a Chinese company; English-speaking employees living in India but giving technical training courses via the Internet to adolescents in the United States; Algerian women participating in an international football competition but afterward praying in a mosque; and a scientist with university training in Syria desperately looking for a job as an immigrant in Great Britain. The focus here is on intercultural processes that lead to the formation of a multiplicity of cultural positions or voices coming together in the self of a single individual. Such positions or voices may become engaged in mutual negotiations, agreements, disagreements, tensions, and

---

[7] Hubert Hermans & Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka (2010). *Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and counterpositioning in a globalizing society.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
[8] Arjun Appadurai (1990). "Disjuncture and difference in the Global Cultural Economy." In Mike Featherstone (Ed.), *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (pp. 295–310). London: Sage. Hubert Hermans & Harry Kempen (1998). "Moving Cultures: The Perilous Problems of Cultural Dichotomies in a Globalizing World." *American Psychologist, 53*, 1111–1120.

conflicts (e.g., "As an Italian I'm used to giving my direct opinion in a situation of disagreement with my colleagues but in the Indian company where I work now, I discovered that it is better to be respectful"). These examples have in common that different cultural voices are involved in various kinds of dialogical relationships and producing positive or negative meanings in fields of uncertainty. In other words, the global–local nexus is not a reality separated from the individual mind but rather functions as a constituent of a dialogical self in action.

The dynamic relationship between the global and the local is even visible in studies of the process of civilization. Global system scientist W. Shäfer argued that not too long ago the big picture of human history showed a small number of large civilizations and large number of small local cultures. However, since a techno-scientific civilization has begun to cover the globe, the big picture today has been changed dramatically. We are increasingly living in a global civilization with many local cultures: "a deterritorialized ensemble of networked techno-scientific practices with global reach". (Shäfer, 2004, 81) The Internet provides crucial evidence for the emergence of such a global civilization. However, Shäfer added that despite the fact that the Internet has a worldwide reach, it remains local at all points. User terminals are the places where global connections and local cultures interact. This implies that information and knowledge emerging on a global scale are always transformed and adapted so that they fit with the needs of people in their local situation.

This treatment of the local and the global is in line with Jin's quotations from Huntington's work: "In the years to come, there won't emerge a single universal culture but instead many different cultures and civilizations that will have to live side by side", and therefore "the global politics will certainly become multipolar and multicultural". In addition, a visionary outlook at the future world is expressed in the quotation: "What I expect is that the attention I have called to the danger of clashes between civilizations will, throughout the world, promote "the dialogues among civilizations".

IV. Recognition of Otherness and Alterity

In a decisive way, Jin states that the self can never exist without reference to otherness or alterity. In a similar way, a dialogical self does not work without otherness and alterity. The potential of dialogue goes beyond the familiar situation of two people in conversation. Participants involved in conversation may express and repeat their own view without recognizing and incorporating the view of the other in their exchange. Innovative dialogue exists when the participants are able and willing to recognize the alterity of the other party in its own right. Furthermore, dialogue is innovative if they are able and willing to revise and change their initial standpoints in the direction of new and commonly constructed points of view.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle [9] argued that at the higher levels of communication, the other is experienced "alter ego". The other is like myself (ego), but at the same time, he or she is not like myself (alter). Dealing with differences in a globalizing world requires the capacity to recognize and respond to the other person or group in its alterity. As a central feature of well-developed dialogue, alterity is a necessity in a world in which individuals and cultures are confronted with differences,

---

[9] Aristotle (1954). *Ethica Nicomachea* [Nicomachean ethics] (trans. R.W. Thuijs). Antwerp: De Nederlandse Boekhandel.

which may not be comprehensible at the start but may become intelligible and meaningful as the result of dialogical interchange.

The recognition of otherness in the self is one of the aspects of the post-modern self that is of central importance to the dialogical self. The notion of otherness, including the other-in-the-self, gives access to the ethical implications of alterity. The alterity of the other is acknowledged if the actual other and the other-in-the-self are approached and appreciated from their own point of view, history, and particularity of experience. Expanding on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Cooper and Hermans [10] (2007) have proposed that in a well-developed dialogical self, not only the alterity of the positions of the actual other are appreciated, but also the alterity of the other positions in the self. Alterity in the communication between cultural groups or between countries should not be considered in isolation from alterity in the communication of the person with the diversity of *I*-positions in the self. Indeed, other-alterity and self-alterity, like self and other are mutually inclusive.

Summarizing

Dialogical Self Theory considers the self as a dynamic multiplicity of *I*-positions that are organized in a ''society of mind''. As focused on dialogical relationships both between individuals, groups, and cultures, and within different *I*-positions in the self, this theory represents a protest against any west versus the rest ideology. As such, it can be seen as a complement to Jin's plea for cultural self-confidence in contemporary globalizing society.

References

Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," In Mike Featherstone (Ed.), *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (pp. 295–310). London: Sage. Hubert Hermans & Harry Kempen. 1998.

Aristotle. 1954. *Ethica Nicomachea* [Nicomachean ethics] (trans. R.W. Thuijs). Antwerp: De Nederlandse Boekhandel.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1973. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (2nd edn.; trans. R. W. Rotsel). Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis.

Callero, Peter L. 2003. "The Sociology of the Self." *Annual Review of Sociology,* 29, 2003.

Cooper, Mick & Hermans, Hubert. 2007. "Honoring self-otherness: Alterity and the intrapersonal. " In Livia Simão & Jaan Valsiner (Eds.*), Otherness in Question: Labyrinths of the Self* (pp. 305–15). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

Hermans, Hubert & Kempen, Harry. 1992. "The Dialogical Self: Beyond Individualism and Rationalism." *American Psychologist,* 47, 23-33, 1992.

Hermans, Hubert & Hermans-Konopka, Agnieszka. 2010. *Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and Counter-positioning in a Globalizing Society.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Hermans, Hubert. 2018. *Society in the Self: A Theory of Identity in Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

---

[10] Mick Cooper & Hubert Hermans (2007). "Honoring Self-otherness: Alterity and the Intrapersonal. " In Livia Simão & Jaan Valsiner (Eds.*), Otherness in Question: Labyrinths of the Self* (pp. 305–15). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

James, William. 1890. *The Principles of Psychology* (Volume 1). London: Macmillan.
Mead, George Herbert. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Shafer, W. 2004. "Global Civilization and Local Cultures: A Crude Look at the Whole." In S.
A. Arjomand & E. A. Tiryakian (Eds.), *Rethinking Civilizational Analysis*. London: Sage.