



## Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017)

Tzvetan Todorov was a Franco-Bulgarian historian of ideas, philosopher, literary critic, aesthetician and writer, author of more than forty monographs amongst which the most relevant to intercultural philosophy are *Mikhail Bakhtine, le principe dialogique* (1981), *Nous et les autres* (1989), *L'Homme dépaycé* (1996), *La peur des barbares* (2008), and *La signature humaine* (2009). Whether Todorov reflected on contemporary society, politics, history or literature he embodied cultural [dialogism](#) and expressed what it means to be at the crossroad of different cultural horizons. In one way or another the nature and possibility of the dialogue was always for Todorov a central question to address, should we take the time and the trouble to think of how to bring out the best in the human condition. Learning from the spirit of the dialogue would allow us to transmit to our fellow human beings what he called 'that fragile legacy, those words that help us live a better life'. His dialogism betrayed a profound humaneness that contravened any *order of ideas* whose totalitarian drive had the potential to translate into some of the worst forms of human barbarism. In this light, the communist totalitarianism that he experienced in his native Bulgaria undoubtedly left a mark; but he was also (albeit to a lesser degree) critical of the ills of modern democracies. In a way Todorov advocated a form of *concrete dialogism* that rested on a profound understanding of the nature of self-identity and alterity against both the totalitarian propensity of cultural ideology and the kind of cultural relativism found for example in the anthropological work of Claude Levy-Strauss.

The dialogue was for Todorov the precondition for cultural diversity – a relational mode of existence broadly ignored by European colonialists in their conquest of Native Americans that led to one of the worst predicaments in the history of humanity, as expounded in his *La conquête de l'Amérique* (1982). Todorov's [intercultural philosophy](#) indisputably amounted to a dialogism articulated around conceptions of self-identity and alterity; but it was also and crucially sharply distinguished from any form of 'Manichean', moral dualism, be it in its ideological or relativist version. Furthermore, he pointed out that rejecting not only the validity but also the possibility of generalising from cultural particulars and practices destined for establishing self-identity – rejection that comprises a radical form of cultural nominalism – would prevent knowledge, awareness and therefore recognition of other cultures, values, practices and trends. The answer to the dangers of cultural ideology could not be cultural relativism; this answer, rather, had to be found in the essence of the dialogue.

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See [Carnavalesque](#)

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