

Holy Wars, Passion and Reason, Scattered Thoughts on Cultural Superiority

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If anyone happens to have said anything tactless about the superiority of Western culture over the last few days, the fact is incidental.¹ If someone says something they believe to be right at the wrong time, it is incidental, and it is also incidental if someone happens to believe things that are wrong and unjust, as the world is full of people believing in wrong and unjust things, even a gentleman named Bin Laden, who is probably richer than our former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and has studied at better universities. What isn't incidental, and should worry everyone – politicians, religious leaders, educators – is that certain declarations, or even entire impassioned articles that have somehow justified them, become a subject for general debate, occupy the minds of young people, and perhaps induce them to fervent conclusions in the heat of the moment. It is our young people I am concerned about, as it is too late now to teach the old ones any new tricks.

All the religious wars that have bloodied the world for centuries are born from vehement adhesion to simplistic opposing views, such as “us” and “them”, good and bad, black and white. If Western culture has shown itself to

be rich (from the Enlightenment to our times, and also before that, when the Franciscan Roger Bacon urged people to learn languages because there was always something to be learned, even from the infidels), one of the reasons is that it has striven to “dissolve” these pernicious simplifications, through enquiry and the critical mind.

It hasn't always been like that, of course. Hitler, for example, burnt books, condemned “degenerate” art and killed off the “lower” races, and the fascism of my schooldays taught me to recite “God curse the English” as the “five-meal-a-day-eaters”, a bunch of gluttons who were inferior to the frugal, Spartan Italians, and all this is also part of the history of Western culture. But the most positive aspects of our culture are the ones we should discuss with our young people, of all colours, if we do not want the new towers we have built to crumble in their lifetime after we are gone.

One element of confusion is that we often fail to grasp the difference between identifying with our own roots, while understanding that other roots also exist, and the ability to distinguish between good and bad. Talking of roots, if I was asked if I would rather spend

1. This article appeared in the newspaper *La Repubblica*, 5th October 2001.

my retirement in a little Monferrato village in Piedmont, in the majestic surroundings of the Abruzzo National Park or in the rolling hills of Sienna, I would choose Monferrato. But that doesn't mean I think the other Italian regions are inferior to Piedmont.

So if, with his words (uttered by Westerners and edited out for the Arabs), the prime minister wanted to say that he would rather live in Arcore than Kabul, and that he would rather be attended in a Milan hospital than one in Baghdad, I am perfectly willing to go along with him (apart from the bit about Arcore). Even if I was told they've just opened the best equipped hospital in the world in Baghdad: because I feel at home in Milan, and that would also have an effect on my recovery. Roots can go above and beyond the regional and the national. I would rather live in Limoges, for example, than in Moscow. But how can that be? Isn't Moscow a beautiful city? Of course it is, but in Limoges I understand the language.

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But let's move on to opposing civilisations, because that's the point in hand. Even though often only for reasons of economic expansion, the West has always been curious about other civilisations. It has frequently put them down disparagingly: the Greeks called anyone who didn't speak their language barbarians, or "stutterers", as if they couldn't speak properly. But some more mature-minded Greeks, like the Stoics for instance (perhaps because some of them were of Phoenician origin) were quick to point out that the Barbarians were using other words that were not Greek, but that they were expressing the same thoughts. Marco Polo described the customs of the Chinese with much respect, the great masters of mediaeval

Christian theology translated the writings of the Arabic philosophers, doctors and astrologers, the men of the Renaissance went out of their way to recover the lost wisdom of the Orientals from the Caldeans to the Egyptians, Montesquieu tried to understand how the French might look in the eyes of a Persian, and modern anthropologists have made their first studies of the accounts of the Salesians, who sought out the Bororo tribes to convert them, if they could, but also to understand how they thought and how they lived, perhaps mindful of the fact that the missionaries of other centuries had totally failed to understand the Amerindian civilisation, thinking it was only fit to be wiped out.

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I've mentioned anthropologists here. I'm not saying anything new if I recall that from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, cultural anthropology has evolved as a mere attempt to alleviate Westerners' remorse in its dealings with Others, particularly if those Others were considered savages, a society without a history, primitive peoples. The West has never been kind to savages: it "discovered" them, tried to convert them to Christianity, used them, reduced many of them to slavery – with the aid of the Arabs amongst others, as the slave ships may have been unloaded in New Orleans by refined gentlemen of French origin, but they were also loaded on the African coasts by Muslim traders. Cultural anthropology (able to prosper due to Colonial expansion) attempted to atone the sins of Colonialism by showing that these "Other" cultures were exactly that: cultures, with their beliefs, their rites, their customs, perfectly rea-

sonable within the context they had evolved in, and perfectly organic, in other words governed by an internal logic. The mission of cultural anthropologist was to demonstrate that other kinds of logic other than Western logic existed, and that they should be taken seriously and not belittled or repressed.

That didn't mean that after having explained the logic of the Others the anthropologists decided to live like them; on the contrary, with very few exceptions, when they concluded their years of work overseas they all went back to enjoy a quiet retirement in Devonshire or Picardy. However, reading their books anyone could think that cultural anthropology upholds a relativist position, affirming that one culture is just as worthy as another. I don't think that's the case. At most, the anthropologists were saying that as long as the Others stayed where they were, their way of life should be respected.

The real lesson that should be learnt from cultural anthropology is rather that in order to assert that one culture is superior to another, we need to set some parameters. Describing what a culture consists of is one thing, but saying which parameters we judge it on is something else entirely. A culture may be described fairly objectively: these people act in such a way, they believe in spirits or in a single divinity pervading the whole of nature, they gather in parental clans according to such and such a set of rules, they think it looks beautiful to pierce your nose with rings (that could also be a description of youth culture in the West), they consider pork to be impure, they practice circumcision, they breed dogs for a fry-up on feast days, or – as the Americans still say about the French – they eat frogs. Obviously, the anthropologist knows objectiveness is always thrown to the wind by so many factors. I visited the Dogon people last year, and I asked a little boy if he was a Muslim. “No”, he replied in French, “I'm an animist.” Now believe me, an animist doesn't define himself as an animist unless he has at least a

diploma from Paris University, and so it's clear that the little boy was talking about his own culture as it had been defined for him by the anthropologists. African anthropologists told me that when a European colleague comes to visit them, the Dogons, who have become terribly clever, tell him all about what another anthropologist, Griaule, wrote about them years ago (although, as cultured African friends assure at least, the native informers had given him a pretty incoherent set of information which he then pieced together using a system that was certainly fascinating but probably not very authentic). Nonetheless, misconceptions apart, one can reach a fairly “neutral” description of one of these “Other” cultures.

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The parameters for judging them, however, are something else entirely. They depend on our roots, our preferences, our customs, our passions, and on our system of values. Take this example: Do we believe that prolonging the average life span from forty to eighty years is a value? I personally think it is, but many mystics would say that, between a mindless reveller who lives to the age of eighty and St. Aloysius Gonzaga who lived to twenty-three, the latter had had a fuller life. But we have to admit that prolonging our life span is a value: and if that is the case, Western medicine and science are certainly superior to many other medical practices and sets of knowledge.

Do we believe that technological development, the expansion of trade and rapid transport are values? Many do, and they have the right to consider our technological civilisation superior. But at the heart of the Western world there are also people who accord great value to a life spent in harmony with an unspoilt envi-



ronment, people who are perfectly willing to give up aeroplanes, cars and refrigerators and spend their lives weaving baskets and travelling from village to village on foot, so as not to damage the ozone layer. It can therefore be seen that to define one culture as being better than another, it is not enough to merely describe it (as the anthropologists do): we need to appeal to a system of values we think we cannot do without. Only at this point can we say that our culture is better, *for us*.

Over the last few days we have heard several defences of different cultures based on somewhat questionable parameters. Just the other day I was reading a letter to an important newspaper whose author sarcastically asked why it should be that the Nobel Prizes were always given to Westerners and never to peo-

ple from the East. Apart from the fact that the ignorant letter writer had no idea that numerous Nobel Prizes for Literature that have been awarded to black writers and to great Muslim authors, and that the Nobel Prize for Physics was won by a Pakistani called Abdus Salam in 1979, to affirm that science awards naturally go to people who are working in the sphere of Western science is like reinventing the wheel, because nobody has ever doubted that Western science and technology are at the cutting edge today. At the cutting edge of what? Of science and technology. How far is the parameter of technological development absolute? Pakistan has the atomic bomb and Italy doesn't. So is Italy an inferior civilisation? Is it better to live in Islamabad than in Arcore? The apologists for this discourse call for respect for the Mus-

lim world, reminding us that it is the cradle of great men like Avicenna (who in fact was born in Bukhara, not far from Afghanistan) or Averroes – and it’s a pity they always cite these two, as if they were the only ones, and never mention Al-Kindi, Avempace, Avicebron, Ibn Tufayl or the great fourteenth century historian Ibn Khaldun, who even the West considers to be the father of social science. They remind us that the Moors in Spain were studying geography, astronomy, mathematics and medicine when the Christian world was centuries behind. All this is true, but it is not good reasoning, because if that’s your reasoning you could also say that the Tuscan town of Vinci is superior to New York, because Leonardo was born in Vinci while Manhattan was home to a handful of Indians who had to squat on their haunches for another 150 years until the Dutch arrived and bought the whole peninsula off them for 24 dollars. It isn’t superior, of course: no offence meant to anyone, but the centre of the world today is New York, not Vinci. Changes happen. It’s of little use to recall that the Moors in Spain were positively tolerant with the Christians and the Jews while here in Italy the ghettos were being assailed, or that when Saladin reconquered Jerusalem he showed much more mercy to the Christians than the Christians had ever shown to the Saracens when they had conquered the city. All this may well be true, but today the fundamentalist and theocratic regimes in the Islamic world are met with intolerance by the Christians, and Bin Laden certainly didn’t show much mercy to New York. Bactria was a crossroads of great civilisations, but today the Talibans are blowing its Buddhas to pieces. Or the French may have been guilty of the St. Bartholomew’s Eve massacre, but that doesn’t mean we have a right to call them Barbarians today.

We shouldn’t meddle with history: it is a double-edged sword. The Turks impaled their victims (and that’s wrong), but the orthodox

Byzantines also gouged out the eyes of their dangerous relatives and the Catholics burnt Giordano Bruno at the stake; the Saracen pirates indulged in evil of all kinds, but the Corsairs of the British Crown happily reduced the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean to ashes; Bin Laden is a ferocious enemy of Western civilisation, but the Western community has also known leaders like Hitler or Stalin (Stalin was so evil that he has always been defined as an Easterner, even though he studied at a seminary and read the works of Marx).

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No, the problem of parameters is not a historical question: it is a contemporary issue. One of the most admirable things about the Western cultures (free and pluralist, values we consider irrevocable) is that they realised a long time ago that the same person can be led to apply different – and inherently contradictory – parameters to different matters. For instance, increasing our life expectancy is considered a good thing, and polluting the environment a bad thing, but we are aware that if we are to possess the great laboratories where we study how to prolong our life span we also need to have a system of communications and an energy supply which in turn give rise to pollution. Western culture has developed the capacity to freely lay bare its own contradictions. It may not know how to solve them, but it knows it has them, and it says so. When all is said and done the entire yes-or-no debate on globalisation is contained in this fact, except for the rioting black blocs: how can we sustain a certain amount of positive globalisation while avoiding the risks and the injustices of globalisation at its most perverse? How can we prolong the lives of millions of Africans who are dying of Aids (and prolong our own at the same time) without

accepting a global economy that will have the effect of starving the Aids sufferers to death and feeding us with contaminated food?

But it is precisely this criticism of parameters, pursued and encouraged by the West, that enables us to understand how delicate the whole parameters issue actually is. Is it just and proper to protect bank secrecy? Many think it is. But what if this secrecy allows terrorists to stockpile their money in the City of London? So is safeguarding this privacy a positive value, or should it be questioned? We continually question our parameters. The Western world does this to such a point that it even allows the citizens themselves to reject the parameter of technological development as something positive and become Buddhists or go and live in a community where no-one uses tyres, not even for their horse-drawn carriages. The parameters that govern our passionate affirmations should be taught, analysed and discussed at school.

Reflecting on our parameters means deciding that we are willing to tolerate anything, but that we consider certain things intolerable

The problem that cultural anthropology has never been able to solve is what to do when a member of another culture, whose principles we have learnt to respect, comes to live in our community. In reality most of Western racist reactions are not because of the fact that there are animists living in Mali (if they stay put there's no problem, as the Northern League says), but that the animists should come and live here, with us. It doesn't really matter if they're animists, or if they want to pray towards Mecca, but what happens if they want to wear the chador, if they want to submit their young girls to infibulation, if – as also happens in some Western sects – they refuse their ill children blood transfusions, or if the last remaining tribe

of cannibals in New Guinea (presuming there still are any, of course) want to emigrate here and roast a young man for Sunday lunch?

We all agree on what should be done with the cannibals – put them behind bars (especially as there are not many of them) – but I don't see why we should make such a big thing out of the girls who wear a chador to school, if they think it's OK. As for infibulation, the debate is open (some people are even so tolerant that they suggest having it done at the local health centre, where at least hygiene will be guaranteed), but what should be done for example when Muslim women want to have their passport photograph taken with their veil on? We have laws, the same laws for everyone, which establish criteria for citizen identification, and I don't think we should lose sight of them. Whenever I've visited a mosque I've always taken my shoes off because I respected the laws and customs of my host country. So what should we do about the veil photo? I think in this case negotiation is possible. Passport photos never give a good likeness anyway and they serve their own special purpose; magnetic tape that reacts to a person's thumbprint is being studied at the moment, and whoever wants this privileged treatment should be prepared to pay for it. And if these women attend our schools they may even become aware of rights they didn't even know they had, just as many Westerners have gone to Koranic schools and have freely decided to become Muslims.

Reflecting on our parameters also means deciding that we are willing to tolerate anything, but that we consider certain things intolerable. The West has spent money and energy on studying the customs of Others, but no-one has ever really allowed the Others to study the customs of the West, except possibly in schools run by whites abroad, or by allowing the wealthiest among them to get their degrees at Oxford or Paris. And then just look what happens: they study in the West and then they go back home

and start up fundamentalist movements, as they feel a link with their compatriots who have no access to these studies (but that's old hat, of course: some of the intellectuals who fought for the independence of India got their degrees in Britain).

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Ancient Arabic and Chinese travellers studied certain aspects of the lands of the setting sun, but these are things about which we know virtually nothing. How many African or Chinese anthropologists have come to study the West to be able to explain it not just to their compatriots, but also to us, in other words to explain to us how they see us? A few years ago an international organisation called Transcultura was set up to campaign for an "alternative anthropology". It sent African specialists who had never been to the West to describe the French provinces and Bolognese society, and I can assure you that when we Europeans read that two of things they found utterly stupid were the fact that Europeans walk their dogs and the fact that they undress on the beach... The mutual vision certainly began to function on both sides, and interesting discussions came out of it.

Imagine some Muslim fundamentalists were invited to carry out research on Christian fundamentalism (not on the Catholics this time, but on the American protestants, the ones who are more fanatical than the Ayatollah and try to stamp out any reference to Darwinism at their schools). My opinion is that anthropological research into other people's fundamentalism could serve towards a better understanding of the nature of one's own. They should come

and study our concept of holy war (I could recommend plenty of interesting literature to them, including some recent stuff) and perhaps they would see their own idea of holy war with a more critical eye. Basically, we Westerners have reflected on the limits of our own way of thinking by describing the *pensée sauvage*. One of the values the Western civilisation is always talking about is accepting differences. In theory we all agree; it is politically correct for someone to announce they are gay, but then behind closed doors we laugh at him and call him a fag. How do we teach people to accept differences? The Universal Academy of Cultures has created a website with material on different subjects (colour, religion, customs, and so on) for educators in any country who want to teach students how to accept people of different races.² Most importantly it has been decided that we should not lie to our children by affirming that we are all the same. Children can see perfectly well that some of their neighbours or schoolmates are not the same as them, that they have different-coloured skin, almond eyes, curlier or straighter hair, that they eat strange foods or don't make their First Communion. Neither is it enough to tell them that they're all God's children, because animals are all God's children too, although they have never seen a goat teaching them spelling. So we have to tell our children that human beings are very different among themselves, explaining exactly what the differences are and then showing them how they can be a source of wealth. A teacher in an Italian town should help their Italian children understand why other children pray to a different god, or listen to music that doesn't sound anything like rock. And a Chinese teacher should do the same for Chinese children living near a Christian community, of course. The next step will be

2. <http://www.academie-universelle.org/manuel/index.htm>.

to show them that their music has something in common with our music, and that their God also advocates some good things. A possible objection: we will do that in Florence, but would they do it in Kabul? But this objection is far removed from the values of Western civilisation. We are a pluralistic society because we consent to mosques being built in our area; we can't refuse just because they send Christian preachers to prison in Kabul. If we did, we would be Talibans too. The parameter of tolerating diversity is certainly one of the strongest and the most unquestionable, and we consider our culture mature because it is able to tolerate diversity, thinking all those who belong to our culture and who do not tolerate it are uncivilised. Full stop. Otherwise it would be like deciding that if cannibals still exist somewhere in the world, we should go and eat them, to teach them a lesson. We expect that as we allow mosques to be built where we live, one day there will be Christian churches where they live, or that they will stop blowing up their Buddhas. If we believe in the goodness of our parameters, that is.

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There's a lot of confusion under the sun. Strange things happen in our times. It appears that defending Western values has become a right-wing ensign, while the left is still as pro-Islamic as ever. But apart from the fact that the right wing exists and so does a fundamentalist Catholicism that is decidedly third-world, pro-Islamic and so on, we are not taking much notice of a historical phenomenon that is there for all to see.

Defending the values of science, technological development and the modern Western culture in general has always been a charac-

teristic of progressive secular political circles. What's more, all the communist regimes have appealed to an ideology of technological and scientific progress. The 1848 *Manifesto* begins with a dispassionate eulogy of Bourgeois expansion; Marx does not say it is necessary to make a U-turn and change to the Asian mode of production, he only says the proletariat should take possession of these values and these achievements. On the other hand it has always been reactionary thought (in the noblest sense of the term), at least since the rejection of the French Revolution, which has been opposed to the secular ideology of progress, affirming that we should return to traditional values. Only a few neo-Nazi style groups have embraced a mythical idea of the West and would be willing to cut the throats of all the Muslims at Stonehenge. The most serious of the traditionalist thinkers (including many National Alliance voters) have always looked to Islam – apart from the rites and myths of the primitive peoples or the lessons of Buddhism – as a source of alternative spirituality. They have always been keen to remind us that we are not superior, but impoverished by the ideology of progress, and that we should look for the truth among the Sufi mystics or the whirling dervishes. And I am not saying these things myself, it is they themselves who have always said them. If you want proof, you only have to go to a bookshop and look on the right shelves. In this sense a curious breach is opening up in the right wing. But perhaps it is only a sign that in times of great confusion (as we are undergoing now) non-one really knows what side they're on. It is precisely at times of confusion that we need to know how to wield the weapons of analysis and criticism, of our own superstitions and of other people's. I hope these things will be discussed in the schools, and not just at press conferences.