

# The End of Instrumental Culture

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We are in an era characterised by a process of decomposition of culture as a result of the division between the world of instrumental reason and the symbolic world. Therefore, cultures disappear and become, on the one hand, markets, and, on the other, identities. In today's world the tendency is not intercultural communication but rather processes of affirmation before the Other. This leads to the removal of citizen awareness, the political definition that enables the integration of different groups. The means through which this situation must be rectified is the individual; the affirmation of the subject, based on political guarantees, as an intermediate ground between instrumental globalisation and identity fragmentation.

We must define an approach that involves avoiding excessively soft discourses and comments. Thus, I believe it is necessary to begin with negative, or at least critical, comments in order to avoid those sometimes heard overly soft comments. From the outset, I would like to challenge two obvious aspects and diverge from two paths or intellectual positions. The first is the search for a civilisation, a culture – the word *civilisation* was more appropriate, as Germans suggested in the last century –, a universal civilisation. Almost ten years ago, there was a new outbreak of universalism after the fall of the Berlin wall, and some authors imagined an end of the history and participation of the whole world in the same model. A few years or months later, the situation had changed and today we have no doubt that Huntington was right in comparison to Francis Fukuyama, and that we are faced with excessive differentialism rather than an always ethnocentric universalism. However, we are also more convinced than

some years ago of the danger that a total differentialism, a total politically correct approach, represents. Because, if there are total differences, if there is a complete specificity of each culture, how will they communicate with each other? Even in the United States, for instance, where identity politics has been so successful in recent years, it is possible to clearly perceive a backward movement, not to abandon cultural multiplicity or to accept a monopoly of one hegemonic culture or another, but rather to try to combine the recognition of differences with the search for a principle, for a language enabling communication. There is no fully ecumenical solution, from an ecumenism of culture, as if the old issues of the Enlightenment were still useful, in the sense that religious beliefs and societies can slowly reach, some before others, the same end and the same rationality. Therefore, if we accept this first rejection and the rejection of a total differentialism, perhaps we may find a solution that, in keeping with a con-

cept that we all use, is intercultural dialogue, the dialogue between cultures. Unfortunately, I believe that this expression conceals problems rather than solving any of them. I would even say that it is a dangerous expression that makes some problems which were already difficult to solve almost insoluble, in the sense that speaking of dialogue between cultures means representing cultures as characters, as systems and as wholes; it means identifying, confusing a culture with an individuality, with a person, so that it seems impossible to define, to understand, the relations between people that, to a certain extent, represent wholes, continents and separate countries.

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I do not believe that the problem we are facing is a problem of communication between major entities, defined in very strong terms. I think that the starting point of any current of thought is the following: we are seeing in all cultures worldwide a process of decomposition. If we accept a classical definition of culture – i.e., that it is a system of symbolic and evaluative interpretation of practices –, what we see is that, over a long period, we have confirmed the link between the practices, way of living, ideas and beliefs through some concepts. Traditionally, there was no way of working in agriculture, trade and industry itself which was not profoundly linked to a religion, a form of family organisation or a class war. It does not matter as the technical, social and cultural aspects were closely related. Moreover, the central concept of modernism, mainly in Europe but later in many parts of the world, was the idea of reason, the idea of rationalisation or, as it was called in the 19th century, progress. The

idea of progress is that more production means more well-being and perhaps more freedom and, even, more happiness; this was how things were seen in the period of the French Revolution or the American Revolution. I think that the fundamental change is the separation of what is called the world of instrumental reason, the technical-economic world, so to speak, from the symbolic world, the world of representations. Thus, we must examine the consequences of this separation. We can easily see, especially today, that this technical-economic world can be fully unlinked not only from culture or politics but also from economics. We are living in a financial world profoundly unconnected from the economic world. The exchanges of goods and services represent less than 2% of daily financial flows; in other words, what we are witnessing is that, suddenly, a country with an apparently good economic situation is impoverished by a purely financial logic. The cultural world, instead of being defined as an interpretation of technical, economic and material change is unlinked from the other side of human experience and closes in on itself, and instead of being defined as interpretation, it is defined as identity, as essence. Hence a totally negative transformation of the cultural world in two tendencies: on the one hand, a globalisation of the technical-economic space; on the other hand, a fragmentation into identities. There are those who sometimes say, very superficially and hastily, that we are living in a globalised society; it is quite the contrary. We are in a world where the networks at a world level are being developed very quickly but, at the same time, in each country we can see a subjectivisation of cultures, which are no longer defined in objective terms of production, consumption, organisation and rationalisation. The problem is that, in the anthropological sense of the word, cultures are disappearing and are replaced, on the one hand, by markets and, on the other, by identities. Now there is no possible

communication. In a world that we will call the pure financial market or the information channels without determined contents there is an unlinking between the instrument and the symbols. This is because on the Internet it is possible to speak in any language, to conceive any belief, any kind of mathematics or politics, it does not matter; and this is not criticism but a fact. The rupture of this whole, of this more or less coherent system or the need for inter-relations between several aspects of personal and collective existence makes intercultural communication impossible, except – and we are well used to it – when communication is clearly and brutally hierarchical. Even today we speak quite easily of mixing, when the notion of mixing has no meaning beyond a strong hierarchical structure. The Brazilian or Haitian mixed race is halfway between the white and the black; that is, it is not a way of creating more communication and more unity but rather of creating more hierarchy, more distance and more domination. This unlinking is so wide-ranging, so profound, that almost everywhere in the world the mediating systems are being decomposed. This is what we call the political, which defines the institutional framework, the rules of the game, the norms, the laws, the education programmes; that is, the systems through which the fundamental link between practice, technique and symbols was organised. This decomposition, this unlinking of the objective and the subjective, the world of science and the world of culture, the world of the space and the world of the soul, as Descartes put it, is the most fundamental part in the modern world. But if I was referring to politics it is because we Europeans, at the moment of the birth of modernism, invented the political, a politics in the Aristotelian sense, in the sense of Machiavelli, Hobbes or Rousseau, and even of authors from the early 19th century. Of course, human existence is divided, but beyond this we were able to build a bridge, an

intermediate territory between the economic and the cultural: the political built upon the central concept of popular sovereignty.

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This ability of the political to organise everything, to integrate everything, has diminished because of capitalism, the increase in trade, technological changes and some aspects of this famous globalisation. The ability of the political to link – as used to happen in the 17th century with absolute monarchies, or with an American or French nation type – has vanished. Thus, we find ourselves in a world divided into two. In every part of the world, we are all participating in international networks, even indigenous Bolivians and poor Bangladeshi peasants. There are no isolated cultures. We are all participating in a system of world exchanges and, given that this system does not have any relation with our forms of social organisation, we define ourselves in an essentialist way rather than in terms of processes. As long as there is this separation, the problem in hand has no solution. And the truth is that the major tendency in today's world is not intercultural communication but rather the separation of cultures. The United States is the centre of most of the big world networks and, at the same time, is the most fragmented society imaginable, where women speak for women, Afro-Americans speak for Afro-Americans, homosexuals for homosexuals; and the people of a determined city, Church or ethnic group speak for themselves. None of them refers to a process of communication; all, to a process of affirmation. What is dying is the awareness of citizenship, a political definition enabling them to reunite.

As I have tried to be as pessimistic as possible, setting out a very critical and negative

discourse, because I believe that this is the way things are, the problem consists of knowing how we can reconstruct or recompose all the cultures and also enable communication between them. We already know the way. It consists of opening each one of these poles now considered closed, opening the economic world, opening the world of identities or the community world – Americans call it communalism because the word “community” has another meaning in English. The easiest thing to understand, as we already have experience, is that the world of cultures, the world of cultural identities, must be broken; this means that beliefs, laws and customs, these three levels of norms, must be separated. Using the old European word, this is called secularisation. We need, especially in the Mediterranean world, to attach more importance and give more life to the study and the practice, for example, of religions. We need better knowledge of Islam and of Christian or Jewish religious activity, with the condition of not confusing a religion with a set of laws, and not confusing a set of laws with a series of customs which are always well-defined in time and space. A determined way of living, feeding oneself or controlling sexuality is poorly linked with a religious vision. It is urgent to separate local and temporarily defined customs from sets of laws that can never be identified as a belief, and develop, analyse and give more life to beliefs and value systems, whether religious or any other kind. We must liberate the value or religious systems from an environment which is limited or managed in an authoritarian way.

The other aspect is more complex but is really a current issue. So that there is a possibility of re-establishing the links between the values and practices, we need to reconstruct some social and political control of the economic and technological processes. This is seen in many parts of the world, but if I only refer to the case of Western Europe it is because most

governments are centre-left, as in the case of the United Kingdom, and this involves a will to unify or link economic goals with political goals, I would say that this is the case of Catalonia too, because it is not a country that follows a totally liberal government logic either, as it practices a liberal economic policy linked to objectives of national policy. The national concept, the democratic concept, and the liberal economic policy are being re-linked in almost all countries and, very often, in the countries of Eastern Europe. Outside of Europe, I had the chance to discuss this issue with people in Morocco, where a socialist prime minister was appointed by an absolute monarch. In many parts of the world – I am thinking of the evolution in South Korea or Taiwan over the last twenty years – we see the reconstruction of a political economy, or of an economic policy, as well as the reappearance of policies, and a certain kind of political control of economic activity. On the other hand, in terms of cultures, a process of differentiation between various levels of norms is developing: the level of values, and especially of religions, of the codes or programmes, and that of customs, more or less informal, but often recognised as obligatory.

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The most complicated thing is to establish at what level we can make this link. I think that this separation of the universe of the instrumentality from the universe of identities is total. The mediating institutions, policies, social institutions and education have all been broken, destroyed so fundamentally, that I see no possibility of constructing intercultural communication from above, but from below.

When I say from below I mean that we all participate in the instrumental world and the world of identities, but fortunately we have only one existence. At present, and this would be my main thesis, the most genuine path, perhaps the only path of reconstruction of experience, is through the individual, through desire, the need of any individual, any group, any nation, and so on, to combine the world of instrumentality and the world of identities always in a different, singular, way. The demand for singularity, the demand for individuality, is what I call the process of subjectivisation, which today represents the main strength and allows intercultural communication. This does not mean – using Charles Taylor’s well-known word “recognition” – recognising that we are all similar or equal; neither does it mean recognising that we are all different; it means recognising, and this is a universalist value, that each and every one of us is trying to construct an always fragile, always limited, always individual, solution of combination of the system of means with the system of ends, of values. We are all endeavouring to live with distinct systems of values and meanings, within a general world, of technological and economic organisation, found in the whole world. The reconstruction cannot take place ignoring the globalisation of the instrumental world and the fragmentation of identities – which can transform into closed identities – but it needs the affirmation of an intermediate terrain, which is no longer the terrain of the political but the affirmation of the subject. Something similar to the declarations of rights of the Americans and French, at the end of the 18th century. It means putting the ability and right of each individual, all individuals – not only natural people –, to construct a synthesis, analogous and at the same time different to the synthesis that the Other is trying to carry out in another part of a city or world, above technology or the market and communities. Words such as *singularity* and

*individualism* can seem dangerous, because if one closes off within his individuality, how are we going to carry out inter-individual, to say nothing of intercultural, communication? It is exactly the opposite: an individual subject can only be affirmed through the recognition of the Other, any Other, as a personal subject too. First, we can talk here of amorous relations, in which the subject is constituted as a subject through the recognition of the Other, who, in his turn, recognises him as a subject. This indicates that the capacity of communication, in the sense of recognition, is fundamental. Second, this cannot be done, even on an individual scale, or an inter-individual scale, outside institutional guarantees. What is called democracy is not a system of participation or representation – following Isaiah Berlin, when he speaks of negative freedom. What we need today, more than anything, is a system of guarantees. Guarantees of expression, of vote, of development of our cultural activities, and so on, so that, to give only one example, in terms of immigrants – who in general are not immigrants but people of foreign origin, who are millions and millions in the case of Europe, the USA, Canada, or the Gulf countries and many countries in the world – the important thing is that the laws and institutions guarantee them equality of rights, equality of access, according to their abilities, work and, at the same time, a recognition of their identity and culture, of their personal and collective processes of creation and transformation of their values.

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I wanted to offer a more historical or more macro-social content, to my analysis, because we cannot talk of the whole world, of all men, of all nations and peoples, without making

distinctions. The central phenomenon we are experiencing is decadence, or at least the transformation, of what we can call the European model, the European pattern of modernisation. This model has not only been defined by rationalisation but, much more precisely, by opposition, by separation as strongly as possible of the rational and the irrational. We have lived in a world dominated by the separation between a warm pole and a cold pole, to speak in industrial terms. The European world has created and constructed many types of oppositions, many kinds of polarisations. The most visible and important seem to be four. The first, the most fundamental, is the men-women polarity. The woman has been invented as an irrational being precisely in this moment of modernisation. The second, also well-known and highly important, is the male adult-child opposition. The child, who is irrational, does not have self-control. The third is the opposition between the dependent worker and the businessperson, the educated and independent man. This is written in all the declarations of human rights of the late 18th century, or in whig politics, or in north American federalism. In other words, the opposition between the free man, capable of freedom, and the man that can be mentally ill or a simple wage-earner. And, finally, because it is also somewhat the synthesis of all the axes of polarisation, there is the opposition between the civilised and the "savage", because the savage, as well as being as lazy as the worker, is feminine and is a child. The social history of the one hundred or one hundred and fifty years we have just lived is dominated by the weakening of these bipolarisations. In the first place, we have tried to reincorporate in the social and political life the world of the wage earner, so they are considered rational beings, with the capacity to negotiate and participate in the decision-making system and in political life with some success. In the second place, the national

liberation movements have also represented a rupture of the colonial system, the system of colonial domination, which was global and at the same time cultural, political and economic. More recently, the movement of women is not defined only as a search for equality or specificity but means "we want to be both equal and different." And these are the words that can be applied to all the sectors of social transformation. There only remains one problem to be resolved, but I think we are on the way to do so: the liberation of children. We all agree. UNESCO has issued an important text on the rights of children, and what is happening in various countries, such as Belgium, in relation with issues such as paedophilia, is basically the affirmation of the rights of children; and this is the fourth great battle of recomposing the world.

To conclude, intercultural communication is important given its participation in this process of recomposition. We must undo the unities, the identities or the pseudo-globalisation of markets, return to an action, an initiative, of construction of oneself at the most elemental and existential level possible. And the result or historical meaning of all this is the recomposition of the world. Lastly, we must act in the Mediterranean, which has been the central place of all the dominations, of all the polarities. The Mediterranean was never a territory of unity and equality. It was basically a world of oppositions, of domination, wars, and misunderstandings, and its societies have always been very hierarchical, and at the same time very fragmented. This is why we must not seek an ideal model in the Mediterranean, but rather intervene in the place that is particularly sick, search for and find paths of reconstruction, both through the individual and the political systems and through this great cultural change I call recomposition, or ways of reconstructing cultures.