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Culture in the Age of Globalization

Report

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(I) The Dynamics of Cultural Identity in the Global Context

For today's citizen, "globalization" has come to mean an ever more complex system of *interdependence* in the economic, but also in the social and cultural fields. Unlike in previous centuries, individual as well as community are faced with the *global* reality of "constant interaction," a process that has been further accelerated by the rapid development of information technology, with pervasive anthropological consequences.¹ It is stating the obvious that, under those circumstances, the sovereign nation-state – whether large or small, weak or powerful – cannot continue to operate as a strictly insular entity, and that, due to the multidimensional nature of globalization, the balance of power among states has become much more dynamic, and at the same time more fragile and unpredictable.

At first glance, this process is characterized by two different trends, both in the direction of cultural uniformity, and both overlapping and mutually reinforcing:

1. In the framework of global interconnectedness, the strongest culture – by virtue of economic, technological and military superiority – tends to impose itself upon the "life-worlds" (to use a Husserlian term)² of relatively weaker communities. This has led to the creation of *hybrid cultures* all around the globe, whereby the most powerful community (civilization) has been able to become a trendsetter of life styles especially among the youth, and most obviously in pop culture. In the decades since World War II, this has been most visible in the fields of music, fashion, entertainment, or esthetical perception in general. In Europe, the most drastic example of this trend towards uniformity along Anglo-American lines (often generalized as "Western") has been the development of the so-called "Eurovision Song Contest" – from a celebration of the diversity of national cultures to a rather boring display of the homogeneity of Western pop music, mostly interpreted in English.

The loss of the distinct features of ethnic traditions on our continent has been the price of "Americanization" (in more general terms, "Westernization") in the period

¹ For details see Hans Köchler, "Philosophical Aspects of Globalization: Basic Theses on the Interrelation of Economics, Politics, Morals and Metaphysics in a Globalized World," in: Hans Köchler (ed.), *Globality versus Democracy? Studies in International Relations*, Vol. XXV. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2000, pp. 3-18.

² The term was introduced to describe the multitude of human perceptions of the world – in distinction from the uniformity of an abstract ("objectivistic") approach: Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Ergänzungsband: Texte aus dem Nachlass, 1934-1937*. Husserliana, Vol. 29. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993.

that was dubbed the “American Century,” a process that has been further accelerated in the *unipolar setting* after the end of the Cold War. As early as 1941, in the course of the Second World War, Henry R. Luce, in a programmatic article for *Life* magazine, defined the essentials of what, as of now, is generally identified as “globalization,” but what started as the very project of reshaping the world along American lines. He stated, as a fact, that, “for the first time in the history of the world,” our world is “fundamentally indivisible,”³ and outlined – in declamatory style – four areas of life and thought where the American vision of the world would be realized: the economic (particularly in terms of freedom of worldwide trade), technology, arts, and humanitarian commitment.⁴ It is important to understand that this proclamation – at that early stage – was borne out of an assessment of military superiority, though euphemistically described as necessity of “defense.”⁵ This aspect has later become dominant also in considerations of the role of culture in world order in general, when culture was described as so-called “soft power.”⁶ In whichever way this role may be justified or rationalized, it is essentially about the “strongest” (i.e. most powerful) culture that imposes itself upon the others.

2. Independently of the above-described dynamics of global interconnectedness, backed up by military power, the trend towards cultural uniformity has also been a basic element of *technological civilization* as such. Technical processes – according to organizational, logistical, or efficiency requirements of production – have increasingly shaped cultural perceptions. This has meant a kind of *functionalization* of our life-world according to maxims of efficiency, and not of aesthetics or morality. The *tools* of economic exchange and social interaction have indeed acquired a life of their own. Functionalization of this kind, oriented at the mathematical (technical) form, is *universal*, not culture-specific. In the era of technology, the *interdependence* between technical development and the processes of globalization has become one of the main determinants of world order. While technological development has fuelled the process of economic and socio-cultural globalization, the ever more complex interdependencies – and synergies – in the global world have enabled further rapid advances in the domain of technology.

³ Henry R. Luce, “The American Century,” in: *Life*, 17 February 1941, pp. 61-65; p. 64.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁵ “WE GOT IN VIA DEFENSE.” *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

This interdependence has also been an important factor of social change, which, in many regions of the world, has meant a permanent state of social and political instability. A further result, and factor of instability, has been the earlier mentioned emergence of “hybrid cultures,” indeed “hybrid cultural identities” (if one may use this term, combining contradicting notions), with “Western” cultural traits as common denominator. This has also been evident in the increasing dominance of one language over all the others, with English effectively having become the *lingua franca*.

While culture, under the pressures and dynamics of technology and globalization, is undeniably becoming more and more a “hybrid phenomenon,” the *dialectics of cultural identity*⁷ have taught us that this process is not irreversible, and certainly more complex than the advocates of a “New World Order” under the aegis of Western “*Leitkultur*” (lead culture) are prepared to admit. Pressure towards uniformity of the life-worlds (in terms of specific cultural traits, perceptions of the world, value systems, forms of political organization, and life styles in general) creates *counter pressure*. This has been particularly obvious in the course of military interventions, falsely labeled as “humanitarian,” since the end of the bipolar world order, but also in earlier policies of the colonial powers.⁸ Through all of history, the mechanism of *action and reaction* has shaped the processes of cultural identity. In an earlier analysis of the role of culture on a system of peaceful co-existence, we have described this as the “dialectics of cultural self-comprehension.”⁹ The features of this dialectics are even more salient under the conditions of today’s globalization, with a multitude of interacting factors at different levels of social action and cultural awareness. It could be argued that what is nowadays famously described as “clash of civilizations” is the ultimate consequence of forces that are determined to negate the essentially dialectic nature of cultural identity.¹⁰

⁷ See also Hans Köchler, “Culture and Empire: The Imperial Claim to Cultural Supremacy versus the Dialectics of Cultural Identity,” in: Hans Köchler, *Force or Dialogue: Conflicting Paradigms of World Order. Collected Papers Edited by David Armstrong. With a Foreword by Fred Dallmayr*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXXIII. New Delhi: Manak, 2015, pp. 263-273.

⁸ For details see the author’s analysis: “Civilization as Instrument of World Order? The Role of the Civilizational Paradigm in the Absence of Balance of Power,” in: *IKIM Journal of Islam and International Affairs / Jurnal Islam dan hubungan antarabangsa IKIM*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2008), pp. 1-22.

⁹ Hans Köchler, “The Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations (Introductory remarks, fundamental considerations, structuring of problems),” in: *International Progress Organization*. Innsbruck: International Progress Organization, 1974, pp. 10-15. See also Hans Köchler (ed.), *Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations*. Studies in International (Cultural) Relations, Vol. I. Tübingen/Basel: Erdmann, 1978.

¹⁰ On the notion of “clash of civilizations” see Hans Köchler, “Clash of civilizations,” in: Bryan S. Turner, Kyung-Sup Chang, Cynthia F. Epstein, Peter Kivisto, J. Michael Ryan, William Outhwaite (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. 1-3. Chichester, West Sussex (UK): Wiley-Blackwell, 2017.

In the environment of technological and global civilization that, in the logic of cultural imperialism, tends to establish itself as *common denominator* of all national cultures – in what Marshall McLuhan much earlier has described as “global village,”¹¹ the conditions under which culture (cultural identity) develops and asserts itself have become much more complex and challenging for each and every community, and in each and every nation-state. We can identify here only some exemplary characteristics of the “status quo of cultural self-realization” under conditions of “globality”:¹²

- **Simultaneity** of life-worlds: In the globalized environment, the “simultaneity” of cultures, i.e. their constant “presence” in each other’s life-world, has become a determining feature of cultural identity (which, by many, is perceived as a threat).
- **Interaction** as need of self-realization: No one, whether individual or community, can “shield” himself anymore from outside influence lest being marginalized in the global interplay of forces.
- **Multidimensionality** of interaction: The simultaneity exists not only at the *global*, but also at the *local* (domestic) level, and both overlap. Herein lie the *challenges* and *risks* of “multiculturalism.”
- **Constant self-assertion** (more precisely: the inevitability of the assertion of cultural identity) is the direct consequence of the above-listed factors, and constitutes a permanent source of conflict and instability at the local, regional and global level, but with the chance of the emergence of a new balance of power in the latter two domains.
- **Volatility**, in the absence of a global balance of power, due to the dominant player’s claiming a status of cultural – or, more generally, civilizational – hegemony: The overbearing influence of one particular system, proclaiming to be the “paradigmatic” or “indispensable” civilization,¹³ risks triggering a chain reaction of “clashes of civilizations” – a scenario now playing out (since the end of global bipolarity) in the region of the Middle East.

¹¹ *Understanding Media: The extensions of man*. London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001 (first published 1964): “As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village.” (p. 5)

¹² For details see the author’s analysis, “The Philosophy and Politics of Dialogue,” in: *Culture and Dialogue*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2011), pp. 5-19.

¹³ For a critical analysis of this claim in regard to the United States see Stephen M. Walt, “The Myth of American Exceptionalism,” in: *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/the-myth-of-american-exceptionalism>.

Against this background of perpetual interdependence and competition for influence, the major question is that of the *resilience* of culture (i.e. the assertion of cultural identity) in a technological-cum-globalized environment – where the structural pressure towards uniformity is further reinforced by the dominant global player. One of the major issues, in this regard, will be that of *religious identity*. Can Western secularism effectively “neutralize” religion – as it appears to have done in most of Western Europe, or can there be “sanitized” versions of religion, making the assertion of religious identity compatible with the “modern” secular state? This will become the major challenge in relations between the Western and Muslim world, and the answer to this question may ultimately decide about social and political stability not only in the greater Middle East, but also in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

(II) Culture and World Order

The consideration of the dynamics of cultural identity in today’s global environment takes us to the more general question of world order. What are the implications of culture for peaceful co-existence among states, and what are the risks of political instrumentalization of culture in the global concert of powers?

As we have explained above, culture – more specifically, cultural identity – is a *dialectical* phenomenon. Culture cannot be understood as a never changing “substance,” exclusively determining an individual’s or a community’s world- and self-perception within strictly defined parameters. Culture is constantly being shaped and reshaped by interaction with other cultures – and in the era of globalization considerably more so. Cultural *identity* is not something static, but a never-ending process that stretches over space and time, a continuous flow of world perceptions – “life-worlds” – through the history of mankind.

World order is the status of relations between states, peoples and cultures (or civilizations, in the most universal sense) at a given moment in history. In our era of globalization, it has become an ever more complex system of interaction and rules. Ideally, it will result in a *balance of power*, but often in history, as in the present transitory phase, it has been characterized by its absence.¹⁴

¹⁴ On the dynamics of power relations among states see also Hans Köchler, “The Politics of Global Powers,” in: *The Global Community. Yearbook of International Law and Jurisprudence, 2009*, Vol. I, pp. 173-201.

It is exactly in the latter case – namely in the absence of a balance of power – that the role and position of culture in the global interplay of forces is most *fragile* and *delicate*, but at the same time also must crucial, indeed *indispensable* – as is now the case – for the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar order. Only the latter is conducive to stable and peaceful co-existence among a multitude of actors, states and peoples alike, in our ever more interconnected “global village.”

In a unipolar constellation, the imbalance of power relations is exploited by the dominant actor for the sake of “canonizing” his own position, and almost unavoidably so as far as the psychology of power is concerned. As has been evident throughout history, hegemonic powers tend to negate the “dialectics of cultural identity” in a twofold manner:¹⁵

- (a) Cultural exclusivism: Hegemonic powers make efforts to “civilize” those who are subordinated to them, by imposing their peculiar worldview and system of values, thus marginalizing “lesser” cultures or stigmatizing them as “primitive.” A claim to cultural universality – in fact, exceptionalism – has been typical for imperial rule, and in particular for the self-perception of colonial empires. This has been even more so in cases where polities have been able to claim a status of effectively “global” rule of the then-known world.
- (b) Instrumentalization of culture: At the same time, the dominant player – in many, though not all, instances – uses his own culture as a tool to *legitimize* and *perpetuate* his rule. (This has also been evident in the so-called “humanitarian interventions” since the end of the Cold War.)¹⁶ This essentially *ideological* strategy goes in tandem with the above-described trend towards *cultural uniformity*.

It would be worthy of some further reflection as to whether, and in what sense, “culture” may indeed be seen, or characterized, as an intrinsic *element of power*, as is also evident in the earlier mentioned “soft power” approach of recent international relations discourse.¹⁷ Can culture adequately be perceived as one aspect of a broad spectrum of power relations

¹⁵ For details see the author’s analysis, “Culture and Empire,” *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ For a general analysis of this practice see Hans Köchler, *The Concept of Humanitarian Intervention in the Context of Modern Power Politics: Is the Revival of the Doctrine of “Just War” Compatible with the International Rule of Law?* Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXVI. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2001.

¹⁷ For a critical analysis of Joseph Nye’s concept (fn. 6 above) see also Steven Lukes, “Power and the Battle for Hearts and Minds,” in: *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 33 (3), 2005, pp. 477-493.

that, as far as states and world order are concerned, includes the use of armed force as last resort?

Whatever the answers to the questions about the structural relationship, or interdependence, between *culture* and *power* and its implications for the international system may be, the *dialectics of cultural identity* will always make itself felt in some shape or form. Especially under conditions of unequal power relations and social injustice, whether perceived or real, a forceful assertion of a cultural paradigm, its propagation as *universal* standard, may provoke an attitude of *resistance* and lead to new *self-awareness* of those who are expected to adapt to a dominant culture.

The dynamics of this process were manifest in the period of decolonization since the 1960s, especially on the African continent where intellectuals and activists such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire or Léopold Sédar Senghor, the founding president of Senegal and philosopher of *négritude*, reminded Europe, in particular, of its cultural arrogance, and identified the core issues of cultural alienation between the colonizing and colonized world.¹⁸

In recent decades, around the turn of the century, the dynamics of cultural identity has been particularly felt in relations between the Muslim and Western or, more generally, secular world, albeit in a different kind – one that now appears to shake the very foundations of world order and challenge the underlying paradigm of peaceful co-existence. The emergence of Islamic revival movements – whether Sunni- or Shia-inspired – has marked a process of ever increasing cultural alienation, often fuelled by conflicts of interests and geopolitical aspirations. It is important to stress that the so-called “clash of civilizations” is, to a large extent, a *consequence* of these “clashes of interests” on the geopolitical scene.¹⁹

One of the most consequential events, in that regard, was the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. Though dismissed by most pundits outside of the country, a broad popular movement eventually prevailed against an Emperor who considered himself invulnerable – as ally of some of the most powerful countries of the time – and who had arrogantly lectured leaders in Europe about political stability and good statesmanship. The most recent

¹⁸ See e. g. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Translated from the French by Richard Philcox. With commentary by Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha. New York: Grove Press, 2004. Cf. also the more “hermeneutical,” conciliatory, approach of Léopold Sédar Senghor, President of the Republic of Senegal, “Preface,” in: Hans Köchler (ed.), *The New International Economic Order: Philosophical and Socio-cultural Implications*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. III. Guildford (Surrey): Guildford Educational Press, 1980, pp. vii-ix.

¹⁹ See Hans Köchler, “Clash of Civilizations,” *loc. cit.*

development in this field – though structurally and ideologically different from what happened in Iran almost four decades ago – was the proclamation of a so-called “Islamic State” in the course of the disintegration of the state system in Iraq, Libya and, partially, also Syria, with ramifications in the wider Arab and Muslim world, whether in Egypt, Tunisia, Mali, Nigeria, the Balkans, or even Mindanao in the Southern Philippines. Whichever its organizational form or actual status may be in terms of governance and territorial control, this new movement understands itself as the very *antithesis* to Western (secular) civilization. It derives its strength not only from the *alienation* of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria (since the events of 2003 and 2011 respectively), and the centuries-old Sunni-Shia rift, but from a deep sense of cultural humiliation that accumulated over decades of colonial tutelage and foreign, essentially Western, supremacy in the region – in fact since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I.²⁰ These events have contributed, and still are contributing, to a dramatic shift of the regional power equation, and have triggered a chain of events that has now also reached Europe.²¹ The migration crisis – with the crisis of multiculturalism at the domestic level of European nation-states – is one of the most serious consequences.²²

As these and many other examples have drastically demonstrated, a claim to cultural superiority, backed by measures of conventional power, may, so to speak, “dialectically” produce a counter-claim, or a new, more radical form of cultural exclusivism. Especially as religious belief, one of the most decisive factors of cultural identity, is concerned, time and again efforts at “reeducation” – by way of “enlightenment” or “modernization” campaigns – have proven unsuccessful in the long term. This is a lesson that should be heeded by those global actors that have embarked on a strategy of exporting their culture in the name of universal values. As Amy Chua has brilliantly shown, even the most powerful actors in history, the global empires, were not immune from the dynamics of cultural identity. Only those that were prepared to *include* into their realm the cultures and religions on the territory they ruled, to accept and integrate distinct identities instead of trying to *exclude* and eventually eradicate them, were able to preserve their rule and guarantee a stable order over

²⁰ On the aspect of cultural alienation, with Islam as focus for the assertion of identity, see also the author’s analysis: “Using History to Understand Muslim-Western Relations and the ‘Arab Spring’,” in: *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*. The Fletcher School / Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA, 1 May 2013, <http://www.fletcherforum.org/2013/05/01/kochler/>.

²¹ On the wider geopolitical implications see also Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Toward a Global Realignment,” in: *The American Interest*, Vol. 11, No. 6 (July/August 2016), pp. 1-3.

²² Hans Köchler, “Mass migration and state failure – legal, political and cultural aspects of the refugee crisis,” in: *Current Concerns*, Zurich, No. 21/22, 10 October 2016, pp. 5-12.

a longer period of time, often over centuries.²³ The destiny of radical exclusivist approaches, however, has almost always been their sudden demise. The fate of German fascism upon the end of World War II is a case in point.

A just and stable world order will require mutual respect among cultures and civilizations – and even more so in our era of *global interconnectivity*. Culture must not be made an *instrument* of world order, or a tool to enforce *obedience* from the less powerful. Culture must be accepted as *expression sui generis of a community's identity* on the basis of *mutuality*.²⁴ At the international level, neglecting this principle may trigger a cycle of aggressive self-assertion on the part of those ignored, which it will be difficult to arrest. Trying to recreate, or "reinvent," other cultures in the image of a dominant one will ultimately be an exercise in self-deception. No one can arrest history and impose his paradigm upon the rest of the world until the end of times. The world has rather quickly woken up from the post-Cold War proclamation of the "End of History."²⁵

A stable world order requires a balance of power in a *multidimensional* sense (including politics, economy and culture). In the 21st century, and under the conditions of globalization, this is expected to be a *multipolar* one, based on a system of rules agreed upon among sovereign nations. Sovereign equality of states should be complemented by *sovereign equality of cultures* and civilizations if "culture wars" – that always in history have carried the risk of perpetual conflict – are to be avoided.²⁶ It goes without saying that the principle of *equality* cannot be defined, and practiced, without *mutuality* (mutual respect) and that there can be no tolerance vis-à-vis those who reject it.²⁷ There must be no self-contradiction in the assertion of cultural identity. This is exactly the dilemma the world is faced with when cultural paradigms exclude each other in the name of universality.

Thus, *good statesmanship* on a global scale will try to avoid actions that can trigger an aggressive assertion of identity by any ethnicity or state²⁸ – as difficult and delicate a task

²³ Amy Chua, *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance – and Why They Fail*. New York: Doubleday, 2007.

²⁴ On the importance of this principle in the domain of foreign policy see Hans Köchler, "Cultural Diplomacy in a World of Conflict," in: *Current Concerns*, Zurich, No. 2, 22 January 2018, pp. 1-4.

²⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada; New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992.

²⁶ The so-called "global war on terror" risks to become such a perpetual war.

²⁷ This particularly holds true for the groups that presently articulate themselves under the banner of a so-called "Islamic State."

²⁸ The United Nations' initiative for an "Alliance of Civilizations," co-sponsored by Turkey and Spain, is a step in the right direction. The Alliance was established in 2005, in the spirit of President Mohammad Khatami's 2001 call for a "dialogue among civilizations," and following an initiative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

as this may be in today's multicultural world.²⁹ World order – with peace as its ideal quality – is ultimately also a function of culture, implying mutual respect among different expressions of collective identity. Negation of this truth may lead to a state of global disorder – with no end in sight.

²⁹ “Multicultural” relates here to the level of *international* relations. The multicultural reality at the global level does not necessarily imply “multiculturalism” at the domestic level.