CULTURE AND CULTURES: THE WORLD’S THOUSANDS OF VERSIONS COMPARED TO GLOBAL MODERNIZATION

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Current modernized and global perspective has had a significant impact on the many world cultures. Reflecting on this theme is a precise responsibility of the educational system and of teachers, who have the task of training young people in order to face the future. The University in particular plays a crucial role in the knowledge society and in nowadays deep economic crisis.

“Digital Universities: international best practices and applications” aims at enhancing and contributing to the academic debate with articles of international relevance privileging case studies and applied researches, mainly related to four specific research topics, namely pedagogy, science, technology and business. In this perspective, the new publication aims at providing a new space for the exchange of knowledge among international experts and practitioners.

I would therefore propose to start with a brief analysis of some terms - that are at the basis of the mission of the University - such as, first of all, culture. This term carries several meanings, sometimes ambiguous and often used improperly by the media. In this context, however, we are interested in the meaning that has been given to the term “cultural and social anthropology”, that is to say the whole of techniques, traditions, economy, values, beliefs, that men acquire as members of a society. With the term culture we mean everything that is not innate in men but which comes from their living experience with other human beings.

In fact, culture is a sort of whole in which all human beings have been living since their birth and that determines their vision of world and life: we can therefore say that the many different visions of world and life can vary according to those human groups and societies that produce them. In other words, we could say that if the questions that people ask themselves about life and world are the same, if the needs to be met and the needs of social order are the same, the related answers are basically different.

Hence a general concept of culture exists. On the other hand we can notice the presence of a wide range of cultural varieties whose multiplicity takes each human society to compare itself with diversity.

When there is diversity it is therefore inescapable that different reactions happen.

Claude Lévi-Strauss explains that the contact with the different generates an attitude consisting of: “a total rejection of the moral, cultural, religious, social, aesthetical forms that are the most distant ones from those in which we identify ourselves”.

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GUIDE Association and Marconi University dedicated the VI International GUIDE Conference to “The global economic crisis and its consequences on the national educational systems. Can online education contribute to overcoming the crisis?” (Athens, 3-4 October 2013), also in “Formamente”, Vol. VIII (2013), n. 3-4 (Selected papers).
It follows that, coming across different cultures, it is easy to develop an ethnocentric vision: namely, an attitude that could be briefly called as “the tendency to consider your own group of origin as a distinct reference model, while all other groups as distant, strange, inferior”.

In other words, some form of ethnocentrism is innate in individuals and groups and, in the long mankind history, its structure can be observed in any human society expressed in various forms, with higher or lower pervasiveness.

Moreover, if we think about the term modernity, the most immediate reference should be the Western societies which, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have presented themselves as an expression of a concept of modern version intended as a superior model to be imposed on other social and cultural forms.

It follows also the oscillation we can notice in the semantics area of terms such as civilization, development and globalization.

It can be seen that, again in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in all terms emerge a reproduction of ethnocentrism that characterizes the relationship between the Western culture with otherness.

In this regard we can recall a President Harry Truman's speech given on January 20th 1949, where he divided the world into two specific areas: developed and underdeveloped countries. On that basis, he invited the United States and Western societies in general, to “share the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas”.

This ethnocentric vision privileged the concepts of growth and progress according to an economic believe developed in a specific period of time and in a peculiar historical moment. It was based on a high level of industrialization and urbanization and on the use of the resources of science and technology to control the nature and optimize during the passing of the years the agricultural production first, and the production in series later. Finally all these processes aimed to arrive to the exaltation of consumerism considered the higher level of wealth and welfare.

This conception of the development process inserted into the perspective of globalization is responsible for the cultural shock experienced by traditional societies and also for the related feeling of disorientation and loss of people’s coordinates. Pope Paul VI made a warning about this situation in 1967 with the Encyclical Populorum Progressio where you could read:

“The clash between the traditional civilizations and the news brought by the industrial civilization has got a disruptive effect on the structures which do not combine with the new conditions. Within the scope of these structures that was often rigid, personal life and family life used to find their main essential support. Old people still remain attached to this aspect of life while young people, as they consider it a sort of useless obstacle, tend to get away from it in order to face new forms of social life. In this way the generational conflict reflects a tragic dilemma: either preserving institutions and ancestral beliefs but giving up with the progress, or opening towards foreign techniques and ways of life but rejecting the traditions of the past and all its richness of human values. It happens too often, in fact, that moral religious and spiritual supports of the past are missing with the consequence that entering the new world is not assured nor granted”.
So, it was believed that the future could be shaped by destroying the past: though we well know that it is impossible to build the future without the memory of the past, as there can be no identity without the past. In addition, without the identity, in some way the human being does not exist. On the basis of these considerations that acquire an unprecedented strength over time, some things have changed for the better. Some form of self-criticism has developed, at least in part, which also involved the international organizations intervention, multilateral bodies and UN itself, also thanks to the presence and participation of traditional societies representatives in these same organisms. For example, in 2001, at the United Nations, the Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues was established, which represented a crucial bridge between the different notions and culture realities on earth.

So, we are witnessing a gradual recovery of the tradition and its related values, uses, techniques, and basic references, according to which the development concept is combined with those of identity and culture. In this context, the idea of a development process able to operate in respect of the culture and identity of different populations has been established, including also their society structures, land and resources conservation, which are considered the community collective heritage with sacred value, and not individually owned.

The so-harsh story of this comparison between modernity and tradition, change and duration, identity and loss, can produce what can be called “an excess of identity”, a feeling of radical opposition to anything that is perceived as culturally different: this complex merges values and sensitivity, in certain cases has resulted in the rising of extreme identity standings.

Indeed, in the course of the long human history, the different cultures have always been in contact with each other, even if their relationship in most of the cases ended up with causing wars and bleeding overthrow.

The clash of civilizations has always existed and its consequences still persist, considering the several and tragic examples of ethnical conflicts and religious fundamentalisms. Moreover, the technological revolution and its consequences on the global socio-cultural processes shaping human societies, has made the issue of multiculturalism even more current. If once upon a time the West countries moved elsewhere, nowadays it is the elsewhere which actively and deeply influences and permeates the conception of life and life itself in the globalized world. Human sciences have refused for a certain period of time the ethnocentrism advocating the equal dignity of cultures; while UNESCO has firmly recognized the right to diversity.

It is however necessary to remark that Multiculturalism should not be meant as the coexistence of monadic cultures whose equal dignity is proclaimed, but rather as the opportunity offered to people who are willing to know, understand and dive into different cultural universes. In this so complex framework, it is therefore essential to act in a resolute way, in order to create a synergy among the different conceptions of life in the globalized reality; this effort is not to be considered as a superficial validity recognition of all the cultures. It is rather:

“a discussion addressed to everybody and to cultures as a whole, which does not concern mutual celebrations of people's identities through ethnic food exchanges and ethnic festivals, but concerning the conditions expected to create exchanges and comparison, even though with clashes, but exchanges of ideas and conceptions of life and world”. 
The historian of religions Angelo Brelich claimed that cultures produce a historical creativity which contributes, in their mutual exchange, to reshape the existing, that is to say to use everybody's cultural heritage as living material for new constructions, reflecting the new historically determined needs.

Nowadays, the main need for history is to succeed in finding, through the meeting of cultures, the methods to face the new globalized world.

It is therefore important that young people diving into cultural diversity react in a positive and proactive way.

It is a responsibility of education processes to make learners understand the richness of cultural diversity, also according to what the anthropologist Marc Augé affirms:

“The individual and global identity is always related to the other, it is relationship-wise, it is the result of a non-stop negotiation. As everyone knows from direct experience: we change, we evolve, sometimes we enrich ourselves and, anyway, we change by being in contact with the others. The crystallized and conventional identity means solitude and, on the other hand, the less I am alone, the more I exist”.

The Anglo-Pakistan writer Hanif Kureishi states:

“Every time we talk about teaching to young people, we have the human duty to explain them that there is more than one book in the world and more than only one voice, and if they want their voice to be heard by the others, everyone else should have the same right”.

It is important to remember for that reason, the thought of the ethnologist Ernesto De Martino when he affirms that when we meet the Other we will never totally spoil our cultural categories and we will always be a little ethnocentric. However, our ethnocentrism may have a critical nature. The solution, according to what De Martino states, stands:

“.. in the continuous comparison: between history having strange behaviors as result and the cultural history of the West countries, which has been settled in our categories... this double conception of history in itself and history of the Other is carried out in the perspective of reaching that universally human point in which the one and the other are surprised as two historical possibilities to be man”.

In other words, we have to realize that there are different ways of being men in society; and that ours is only one of the possible ways. The modern communication system and the permeation of social networks represent an element of constant exchange among men, especially among young people. It is true that many disapprovals are constantly expressed about the excess of information and about the cognitive and psychic risks deriving from the abuse of the internet and its virtual imageries.

In fact, a society based on networks creates a dramatic risk for the fact that its constitution, which is based on communication streams, comes to substitute the joining value of institutions. In that virtual world, social relationships change together with the individual nature in their mutual
relationship: so everyone’s identity risks to close itself in an insane relationship with the networks. The cyberspace has been classified as the place in which an excess of present reality is fulfilled, in which everything seems to happen and should happen, here and now: and according to Marc Augé, all that seems to happen in such a way that both past and future are lost.

“It has been one or two decades since the present has become hegemonic. In the eyes of mere mortals, it is not anymore the result of the slow evolution of the past, it does not offer any possible trace or view of the future, but it lays down as a crushing, accomplished fact, whose essence makes the past vanish and prevents the imagination of the future”.

In such a whole slew of excesses, one’s feeling of identity is changing, undertaken by too many options: that is one of the features of our present days that we have to think about. From these considerations, a new responsibility of the current education processes emerges, which consists of educating young people to actively exploit the media. The new communication forms of the digital world must be addressed to enrich one’s own knowledge heritage, also through an harmonic integration process between the traditional cultural forms and the new forms coming from the present change processes.

In this way the learner is able to develop mutual exchange opportunities that can promote a fair exchange among cultures.

To conclude, the educational system is essentially requested to privilege, in the work of teachers and in the education of new generations, the importance of the principle of mutual respect among people, and the importance of leading students to make an aware and responsible choice among the many options that modernity can offer. Education should help the youngest ones to understand:

“what living in harmony with Mother Earth means, what being integrated with the other human beings, with the creatures and the invisible, means”.