

MULTICULTURALISM AND THE DYNAMICS OF MODERN CIVILIZATIONS

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Multicultural situations are not a new phenomenon in the World history : in the Middle East and the Mediterranean World, a multiplicity of cultures coexisted in rural areas as well as in cities since Antiquity. From the time of Alexander the Great, Greek speaking urban elites dominated lower groups pertaining to a wide variety of languages, religions and cultural traditions from Egypt to Central Asia or Northern India. The Roman Conquest did not modify substantially this pattern. With Islam, the religion and language of ruling groups changed, but the cultural mosaic was not rubbed out. Diasporas played an important part in the religious and economic life of major kingdoms and Empires since the ancient times.

Contemporary multicultural situations differ however by many features from their antecedents. The process of globalization, which started at the time of the Discovery, was dramatically speeded up in the second half of the 20th century by the new technologies of rapid transportation and telecommunication. Because of the increased mobility linked with air travel, people in remote areas are discovering new styles of life through their contacts with tourists. International migrations develop and a growing number of foreign groups settle in the great cities of the developed or developing countries. Because of the new facilities of telecommunication, it is easy for migrants to maintain contacts with their home countries : it gives to their cultures more chance to survive.

Contemporary multicultural situations differ also from their antecedents because of the rise of a new type of ideology : multiculturalism. In the past, multicultural situations were tolerated by the ruling groups, but their aim was generally to integrate minority groups into mainstream cultures. In order to understand the problems of today, it is worth to investigate the dynamics of modern civilizations and the reason for which multiculturalism arose as an answer to the emerging spatial pattern of cultures.

Cultures are dynamic realities

The dynamic nature of cultures

Cultures are not static realities. They are dynamic ones (Claval, 1995). During the first half of the 20th century, anthropologists often conceived cultures as superorganic realities which were enforced on everybody in a society. Today cultures are generally considered as resulting from a complex process of handing on the practices and knowledge of older generations and taking advantage of personal experience : since every one is exposed to a different set of models and has a different life trajectory, what he learns is not exactly equivalent to what has been internalized by other persons. In this perspective, cultures appear as complex sets of practices, attitudes, know-hows, knowledge, beliefs and values. They are plastic realities : every one reinterprets constantly what it has received or experienced in order to deal with evolving environments. The meaning given to the basic creeds change from one to the other and differs for each individual depending on his age and his past experience.

Culture establishes strong links between the individual and the collective past since much of it has been inherited. It is geared to the present thanks to personal experience. It opens perspectives towards the future because of the values it includes and the horizons of expectation everyone is building as a result of his encounters and the models he chooses in his society or elsewhere. Because their culture is an inheritance, the members of a community have generally similar attitudes, preferences and values. Since everyone is responsible for the construction of his horizons of expectation, an anarchic dimension is at the same time always present in the cultural field.

There are mechanisms which prevent the orientations chosen by the members of a group from too much diverging. Two are particularly important : 1- the values cultures incorporate induce a selective process : all the features which are proposed at a given time can not be accepted, since they are contrary to the moral, religious or philosophical principles incapsulated in what people have received and believe; 2- people are never isolated; they live in groups; their image for the others, and their perception of those who are members of the same group or outside it, constitute a key element in the idea they build of themselves. Identities play a decisive role in the dynamics of culture, since they limit some forms of evolution, and favour others.

Values and identities give some measure of permanency to cultures, when horizons of expectation undermines their stability, since they introduce diverging tendencies on the social scene.

Key factors in the shaping of cultures

Cultures are built thanks to the passing over of attitudes, practices, know hows, knowledge, beliefs and values from an individual to the other, from one generation to the next. They depend upon the chanel and means of communication used by the groups under scrutiny (Claval, 1995; Goody, 1986; 1993). The transmission and permanent reappraisal of cultures may result from direct visual observation and verbal interaction. They may be at least partially passed over

through the written word. In the contemporary world, telecommunications play a growing role. Direct face to face communication is perfectly efficient for the handing over of gestures, practices or know hows. The spatial range of this process is however short : a few meters, ten or twenty at best. People keep moving, but as long as societies rely only on orality, know-hows, attitudes and values remain contained within small local areas. Since messages are not transformed into material memories, oral cultures can hardly accumulate abstract knowledge. The written word has a longer range. It is perfectly adequate for conveying knowledge, beliefs or values, but suffers severe limitation for transmitting gestures or practices. Because of its material form, it gives an accumulative dimension to the cultural processes. Modern telecommunications combine the long range of the written word and the advantages of orality and direct imitation

Low and high cultures

The content of cultures differs according to the prevailing means of communication upon which they rely. An opposition existed in the past between low and high cultures. The first ones rested on orality and direct imitation. They were shared either by the isolated groups traditionally studied by ethnographers or by the popular components of historical societies. They were mainly geared to the material aspects of life, productive and domestic activities, and the rules of social behaviour. They were often associated with animist or polytheist religions. Low cultures differed often widely from an area to the next since they relied on low range mechanisms of communication.

The high cultures depended mainly on the written. In order to build more secure memories, some oral cultures maintained specialists in this field, bards for instance. The blossoming of high cultures occurred however generally after the introduction of writing. Their content was different from that of low cultures : they were poor on the material dimensions of daily life, either productive or domestic. In the field of social life, they stressed rules more than customs and habits. Religious beliefs were generally central to them. They allowed for the development of intellectual activities, letters, arts and sciences. High cultures presented often similar features over wide areas, since they were built on writing, which is a long range communication mean.

They were evidently many relations between the low and high cultures existing within an area. High cultures classes tried to transform local low cultures by imposing their own form of belief and religious system. The process was a difficult one : the lower part of the population resisted this type of innovation, specially in the rural areas where peasants remained pagan longer than urban dwellers (peasant and pagan have the same latin root).

The opposition between low and high cultures was parallel to the existence of class structures, even if the two forms of division did not coincide exactly. As a result of invasion and war, the upper classes of a society had not always the same origin and did not use the same language than the lower ones : this was the first form of multiculturalism.

Mass cultures and specialized and technical cultures

A new dichotomy has been substituted, during the 20th century, for the old opposition between low and high cultures : the opposition between mass cultures and specialized and technical ones. Because of the growing role of radio, movies and television, the passing over of gestures, attitudes or know-hows through visual imitation and oral communication has ceased to be limited to small areas. The low cultures of the past are replaced by mass cultures. Their content is different : they are more centred on consumption than production, entertainment than work.

At the same time, high cultures are transformed. They incorporate a larger share of scientific knowledge and techniques than before and give less room to rhetorics, philosophy or religion. Thanks to the web, it is now possible for people to get instantly informed of new methodologies, procedures and technologies.

The new specialized and technical cultures do not play the same role as the traditional high cultures in the field of ethics and social regulation. They appear as subservient to the society as a whole, and are not intended to rule over it.

The new couple mass cultures/specialized or technical techniques is the translation in the field of culture of the process of globalization.

Cultures and civilizations

Culture is a useful tool to describe the luggage of know-hows, attitudes, knowledge and beliefs societies use in order to hold a grip over their environment and organize human interaction. When consideration is given to its normative and religious components, and to its role in the building of identities, it gives also insights into the way sets of uncoordinated attitudes and techniques are transformed into systems, with their own dynamics.

To deal with the cultural dimension of social life, another concept has to be used : civilization. The word began to be used in the 18th century (its first mention in French dates from 1732; its present meaning was defined by Mirabeau in 1754). Culture and civilization are generally conceived as the two terms of an opposition. Joël Bonnemaïson explained in this way :

"People generally consider that between culture and civilization, there is a difference of scale, and not a difference of nature. Civilization owns a broader meaning and a larger scale than culture. Civilizations, in essence, are 'great'. They are embracing cultures, often distributed over large and almost fixed areas, with an universal vocation. People speak of the Western civilization : it includes Western Europe and North America. People speak of Amerindian civilizations, of the Islamic of Indian civilization. Each of these civilizations includes a variable number of cultures and cultural systems" (Bonnemaïson, 2001, p. 86)

Axial societies and the rise of civilizations

Bonnemaison's definition is useful. It stresses the fact that civilizations are generally embracing a number of cultures, but does not go further on this line. Twenty years ago, the Israeli sociologist N. S. Eisenstadt developed a stimulating reflection on this problem (Eisenstadt, 1982; 1983; 1986). He showed how the emergence of civilizations was linked with the differentiation between low and high cultures.

During the first Millennium B. C., the agricultural societies of the Middle East, India and China were already deeply socially differentiated. A part of their population lived in cities. They had strong armies. States existed, with sophisticated political forms of organization. The authority of monarchs or emperors generally rested on a religious basis. During this period, new forms of religious or philosophical beliefs appeared independently in Palestine, Iran, Greece, India or China, specially around 500 B. C. : Judaism in Palestine, Zoroastrianism in Iran, Buddhism in India, Confucianism and Taoism in China, the metaphysics of Reason in Greece. These movements differed by many of their features, but shared a new perspective. The animist religions were based on the time immemorial and the belief in a past when things were clear : the forces behind each thing and being could then be observed; in the present, they have ceased to manifest themselves directly, but remained immanent in the realities they explained. Because of the introduction of the written word, religious beyonds could be built on new bases through the Revelation or through the achievement of Reason. The foundations of religious life changed : instead of being immanent, they became transcendent.

It gave to the high cultures of the axial societies a new dimension : because of their transcendental dimensions, their religious or philosophical beliefs did not explain the World as it was. It shew how it had to be transformed. The dynamics of high cultures became a dynamics of self achievement and surpassing. Religious life ceased to be aimed at the smooth functioning of man/milieu relationships and social life. People were asked to transform themselves in order to get a higher status in an other World. It meant also that they had to change the World.

Because of their transcendental basis, many of the axial societies developed a universalist dimension. Some believed in a Unique God. Others proposed universal rules of ethics. This evolution had important political correlates, since it legitimated expansionist policies : if the values were universal, why not to impose them all over the World ?

Because of the dynamics of self achievement and surpassing, literature, art and music developed and eventually gained some measure of autonomy relative to the religious realm.

The process of Empire building was not exclusively reserved to the axial societies : Eisenstadt knew perfectly that his interpretation did not fit perfectly the Japanese case, and that pre-Columbian civilizations could hardly be considered as axial ones. His model explained however sufficiently well the realities of the Ancient Continent to be used as a tool for understanding the dynamics of its civilizations.

Because of their axial dimensions, historical civilizations had two important specificities.

1- Their high cultures were able to transform at least partially their lower counterparts : the idea of a transcendental beyond was resisted since it did not cope as efficiently as the previous immanent systems with local environment and social problems. It appeared at the same time attractive for many persons because of its universalism. As a result, many forms of syncretism developed.

2- Because of their transcendental beliefs, Axial societies were able to transform the cultures of the areas they conquered. When these territories had not developed their own set of transcendental beliefs, the superiority of the winners' culture was generally accepted by most of the populations : hence the possibility of developing there legitimate forms of power. Wherever the conquerors found competing transcendental systems, some form of coexistence could be achieved through the acknowledgement of the right to practice their own faith for those who practice a religion of the Book, and the acceptance of the political domination of the conquering groups : it was a second form of multiculturalism, which played an important role in the Middle East and the Mediterranean since the First Millennium B. C.

Western civilization

Western civilization has a long history, with its roots both in Palestine in the religious field and in Ancient Greece and Rome for metaphysics, philosophy and socio-political organization. From the time of Emperor Constantine, its religious bases were founded on Christianity. Western societies evolved however during the Middle Ages along original trajectories. Because of the difficult relations between the Romano-Germanic Empire and the Papacy, political power and religious life became at least partly autonomous. Even if the King or the Emperor was a Christian and ran his country according to his religious faith, he did not depend on the Pope's authority. Conversely, religious life was not controlled by the State. This situation opened the way to new orientations from the time of the Renaissance. Because of the rise of Protestant Churches, religious unanimity had disappeared. Some subjects were prosecuted by their Sovereign because of their faith. Hence the development of a new reflection on the right to withstand political authority, and the rise of new forms of belief systems.

The political sphere ceased to be geared to the religious sphere. It gained a new autonomy. The Sovereign ceased to be held responsible for the religious achievement and the life in the other World of his subjects. He could develop original objectives. By the mid 18th century, a new type of beyond had been created. From now on, the aim was to transform societies in such a way that the conditions for everybody's happiness would be fulfilled on our Earth. Inherent to the idea of Progress was the belief that a new order could replace the disorderly situation of the present. Instead of happening in the Heaven, this bright future would be realized on this Earth, in the imprecise time of Utopia. The transcendency resulted from a move in time instead of a move in

space. The new system of belief differed from the religious conceptions of the past since its objectives were collective instead of individual.

Western civilization developed from that time an original structure, since it combined the religious belief in the Last Judgment of its Christian or Jewish members, and the lay belief in a better future on this Earth for all. This last perspective was more particularly attractive for its agnostic components. Both systems of beliefs possessed the transcendental aspect which provided a high culture with the universal dimension of its ideals and the appeal it exerted on all the components of a society, including the people moving in the spheres of its low culture. The idea of progress was a powerful factor for the development of arts, letters and sciences - specially sciences.

The relations of Western civilization and other cultures and civilizations until the mid 20th century

In its relation with other cultures and societies, Western civilization benefited from many advantages. The idea of Progress had been translated into a search for material performances in the field of economic activities. It was conducive to the development of new technologies and the improvement of the material conditions of life. Everyone all over the World grew conscious of this situation : new products and new types of consumption were rapidly incorporated into the low culture components of non-Western societies. The horizons of expectation of most of their population incorporated an increasing share of images and dreams coming from developed countries.

Since the Western Civilization was by now mainly based on the idea of Progress, it appeared as a lay civilization : its values could apparently be adopted without renouncing to the locally prevailing religious faith. Hence the temptation, for many members of the elites of non-Western societies, to incorporate in their beliefs a part of the Western ideas.

In order to achieve Progress, a deep transformation of the former value systems had indeed to be achieved. Japan was the only country which really acknowledged this necessity - and by the way, the only one to build a development process similar to the Western one.

When people moved from a traditional society to the modernized Western countries, either the United States, Canada, the other British Dominions, Argentina, Brazil or France, which attracted the main migration streams from the mid 19th century, they generally shared one of the low cultures of their home countries, but were not acquainted with their high components, except in the religious field. In their host countries, they were offered the possibility to integrate a more open form of high culture without renouncing to their personal religious beliefs. Their children benefited from good school systems. Integration into the host society and culture was the aim of the majority of migrants. It took time to be effective, but the melting pot ideal worked in many

Western countries. Mass migration was conducive to a higher occurrence of multicultural situations in developed countries, but most of them appeared as transitory.

Globalization, the crisis of Western civilization and the proliferation of multicultural situations and multicultural ideologies

Globalization and the standardization of daily life culture

Because of globalization, the diffusion of innovations, consumption patterns and new daily life patterns which was active from mid 19th century gained a new momentum during the last fifty years. Mortality experienced a sharp decline everywhere after the end of World War II, inducing progressively new attitudes towards procreation and life : the reduction of fertility rates appeared as a necessity, which generally meant a sharp break with previous religious attitudes.

In many respects, a process of standardization is at work in the cultural field. It results from the impact of mass cultures and the diffusion of new consumption patterns at the World scale. Production technologies have ceased to be included in the sphere of low cultures or their contemporary counterparts, mass cultures. They are increasingly incorporated into the new forms of high cultures, i. e. the technological or scientific ones. Since they rest on scientific knowledge and technologies, they are conducive to the uniformization of tools, machine tools and products.

The material content of culture is more uniform than in the past. It means that many attitudes, know-hows, practices are becoming the same everywhere : in order to cook their food, people increasingly use similar gas or electric cookers, steel pans and saucepans. The consumption of rice is growing in the temperate World, and that of bread under the tropics.

Because of higher mobility, cultural confrontations are more numerous than in the past, but they occur between cultures which are closer than fifty years ago. When visiting a country like Iran, which stigmatized strongly the Western civilization during the last twenty years, the rapid advance of modernization is striking : the scene of daily life is in many ways similar to that we are accustomed to in the West.

Globalization and the threat over traditional identities

The standardization of cultures is one of most striking features of today World. This process undermines however the bases of most identities. Cultures differed traditionally from place to place, technologies varied from a town to the next one and crafts were so long to acquire that people stick to the same job for all their life. As a result, the building of identities was easy : material realities were used as markers. People had the feeling to belong to the same group because they lived in the same type of house, ate the same food, drank the same beverages, wore

the same dress, and looked at landscapes which mirrored the agricultural technologies they used and their past history.

Standardization has rubbed out a good part of the traditional identity markers. At a time of mass cultures, young people are wearing the same jeans and dancing according to the same rhythms all over the World. As a result, globalization triggered strong reactions. People refuse to look like their neighbours. They protect the landscapes of the countries they live in, preserve their monuments and try to avoid a complete standardization of the food and beverage locally produced.

Identities were not based only on material markers. They were also - and generally mainly - anchored in the values shared by individuals and communities. In the pursuit of development, some of the values imported with the Western ideology of Progress proved contradictory with the central beliefs of the local non-Western religions. The new facilities of transport and communication allowed for a rapid transformation of the horizons of expectation of ordinary people all over the World : everyone wishes to have a motorbike or a car, to benefit from better health systems and to send their children to better schools. Because of these expectations, traditional religious values often appear less meaningful.

The threat over identities resulting from globalization has fueled many types of ideological or religious movements during the last thirty years : ecologisms, regionalisms, nationalisms or fundamentalisms.

It is in this perspective that the idea of a clash of civilizations was introduced by Huntington. A deeper analysis of contemporary processes shows that the situation is more complex and in a way less dramatical.

The crisis of the idea of Progress and its consequences on the Western World

In Western countries there always were people skeptical with the idea of Progress. They knew that the improvement of the material conditions of life would not necessarily be conducive to the control of passions and a better moral life. They were conscious of the waste produced by modern industries and the harm it caused to the environment. Their voice was however covered by all those who were confident in a better future.

The situation began to change after World War I because of the use of chemical weapons and the growing damage caused to civilian populations in total war. World War II had a deeper effect because of the millions of deads and wounded it left, the horror of Shoah and the use of nuclear weapons : people discovered that technical progress could be conducive either to a better situation for humanity or to its destruction. Within a few years, other factors concurred to the rise of this new form of pessimism. The use of pesticides, DDT more precisely, appeared so harmful to the environment that the only solution was to ban it. People discovered that a threat on the global environment was emerging.

Western civilization lost in its way its main foundation: the idea of Progress. The consequences of this transformation are paramount. At the global scale, other civilizations ceased to consider the Western one as the only model: hence the new dynamism of Islam, Hinduism, or, in the political field, the success of Asianism. Everyone is eager to borrow Western societies their techniques, but nobody wishes to accept their central values. The idea of a superiority of the Western civilization is forgotten.

Globalization and the rise of multicultural situations

Because of the increasing mobility of persons and the easier transfer of information, the contacts between cultures are closer than in the past. Migration from the South countries to the rich ones of the North appear to many individuals as the only way to escape local poverty and instability and to materialize their horizons of expectation. People do not move because Western civilization appears a superior one to them. Their personal situations differ from those prevailing in the past. Because of the generalization of primary and secondary education, a growing proportion of migrants is familiar with the traditional high cultures of their home country. Because of the modernization of local consumption patterns and modes of life, the gap between the material cultures of the home and host countries has been reduced.

Emigrants have ceased to be motivated by the search of a higher and better civilization. They move because they wish to get a job, earn higher salaries and enjoy better social security systems. Because of more rapid and cheaper transport, and new telecommunication technologies, the cultural links with the home country are not as completely severed as in the past. Diasporas subsisted only when they were supported by a strong religious faith. Today, they can last for a long period even if their religious basis is weak.

In many ways, a process of assimilation and integration develops, as in the past. It does not lead, however, to the easy fusion of the migrants in the host countries. They stick to their cultures because they wish to preserve their identities.

The crisis of the idea of Progress deprives in this way Western societies of a good part of their former power of integration and assimilation. Since the members of Western societies have ceased to believe that their own values had a universal dimension and ought to be shared by everyone, they have no reason to impose their own cultures to the newcomers.

The great cities of the Western World are increasingly made of a mosaic of cultures. Their reality is multicultural.

The crisis of Western civilisation and the rise of multiculturalism as an ideology

Western societies have not renounced to the logics of their own civilization. They still stick to the idea of progress, but they try to formulate it differently. The emphasis has ceased to be placed

material achievements. It is now put on the social dimensions of Progress. Western civilizations have still something to teach to other societies : their social techniques much more than their material ones.

There are different ways to reformulate the bases of Western civilization. Some people stress its political dimension : Western societies are made of responsible citizens who try to open their groups in order to integrate a growing number of active participants in the process of building a more equal and just society. They have thus something to offer to other populations. This conception of Western civilization is frequently defended by left wing intellectuals in France.

The mainstream reshuffling of Western civilization is somewhat different. It starts from the idea that all cultures have an equal right to exist : multiculturalism constitutes its deepest foundation. To accept multiculturalism is to give a new dimension to the old Western conceptions of equality (between communities and not only between individuals) and responsibility. Western countries can provide the rest of the World with their conception of human rights and democracy. Because Western people are conscious of their responsibilities, they have to be pioneers in the new struggle for environmental preservation.

Conclusion

Cultures are complex and dynamic realities. They evolve constantly. They are highly dependent on the technologies of communication upon which rests the passing over of inheritance from individual to individual and generation to generation. The forms of modernization characteristic of the 20th century were responsible for a rapid standardization of many aspects of material cultures all over the World, and the substitution of a new couple of cultures (mass cultures and technical or scientific ones) for the traditional one (low and high cultures).

The cultures present in a society are diverse, but are generally hierarchically structured. It was the case in traditional societies, in which low cultures were up to a point controlled by high ones. Thanks to the development of axial systems of thought, a process of civilization was in this way introduced in the dynamics of cultures.

This process worked for a long time in all the countries in which the written word played an important role. Western civilization was just one of these civilizations, with its special brand of axial values. From the 18th century, a shift occurred; its religious bases lost a part of its significance. The idea of Progress gained prominence.

During the last fifty years, globalization has triggered a proliferation of multicultural situations. At the same time, Western societies have lost what was central to their civilization because of the crisis of the idea of Progress. In order to find a new basis for their creeds, Western people stress the social dimension of the idea of progress, exemplified, according to them, by the ideals of democracy, human rights, multiculturalism and sound ecological management.

The new attitudes of Western societies will certainly contribute much to avoid the clash of civilizations predicted by Samuel Huntington : Western people are increasingly interested in the peaceful procedures of dialogue.

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