The Crisis of Cultures: Identities and Differences

Speaking about the destiny of Man and his future is principally mixed with an argument about the destiny and the future of culture. Human destiny is determined by the culture through which he reaches perfection within his “human” identity. Now, in our times, the issue of whether culture could secure mankind from the dangers of the exploding political situation of the world is considered very important. Why that the future of the life of nations depends upon answering these sort of questions.

Today, I would like to discuss the philosophic principles underlying this issue. This is not only useful for the study of the history of consciousness, or should I say, historical consciousness, but it also allows for reflection upon theoretical and practical politics. Culture is not a matter to be neglected by politicians and political brokers of the society. A philosophic approach can shed light on the essence and identity of culture in our times, and via this perspective we can arrive at a useful vantage-point during this transitory period towards eventual globalization. I think, as much as the issue of culture and its identity is important to the right, it is also important for the left. Traditionally, both sides of the spectrum have been sensitive to this issue.

Culture is embedded in human wisdom and it is a decisive attempt at eliminating the immediate dominance of Nature. Culture is man’s mission towards attaining unity with the absolute and his capability to free himself from his restrictive individuality. In my opinion, culture is a grand human issue, which is comprised of both macro and micro topics. Indeed no aspect within the concrete domain of human culture can be exempt from such separation. Within the definition of culture lies the point of coexistence of the undercurrents of individual experiences and varied human manifestations. No where in this amalgam can one separate the constituent parts from one another. Furthermore the dimensions of human civilization can only be
determined by studies of culture. This is clearly manifested by the interrelationship that exists between the different disciplines of humanities and anthropology. Two famous anthropologists, Herder and Von Hamboult, more than any other scholar stressed upon such interdependence. Their studies are fundamental to the understanding of the worlds of culture.¹

We pointed out that the destiny of Man is defined and determined by culture. However we should keep in mind that Man is by nature both a social and political animal. As such the identity of culture is both social and political. It is necessary to delineate the boundaries of the identity of culture and the identity of state. It seems that the identity of culture, even more than the identity of nations and people, is connected to the concept of state. It is the state that ratifies the different methods of gaining acquaintance with or absorbing cultures. However the life span of civilizations and cultures have been more or less longer than that of governments. Cultures are not at the mercy of new governments. The security of cultural identity is more than the security of this or that state.

The cultures, like the nature of Man, have an anarchic behavior that guarantees the security of their identity. Such a disposition makes the study of cultures more difficult. The study of the process of culture perceives this issue from a higher perspective, which in turn goes beyond the destiny of governments. In fact, such a study contrasts the principle of identity of culture from that of governance political and social.

One can not imagine any situation without the condition of culture for man as a whole. The distinction between men and nations should be seen basically according to the continuity and the inclusion of their cultural identities. Human nature perseveres in different societies through different fundamental features, and it is the perseverance of cultures that attests to its distancing from and promotion over animals.

Clearly men and animals, despite similarities, do not share the same predilection when it comes to culture. Anthropologists can acknowledge that culture is something alive that endures human generations. Philosophers can claim that culture is an uninterrupted historical identity, which is grounded in political, linguistic and literary phenomena pertaining to a nation or nations.

Since culture also embodies a historical foundation, we therefore can not behold nor grasp any culture in its entirety. It has been said that culture has not yet been circumscribed definitely nor has its identity been defined clearly. ‘Its content is shaky, not fixed; the confines of the realm are not given but have to be created.’

Facing this indefinition and inexactitude, there is this doubt that maybe the whole of “culture” is a feat of the anthropologists’ imagination. One is reminded of the phrase: “The more you identify yourself with the people, the less you are being an anthropologist”. Therefore, if an anthropologist espouses totalistic approach, he will face the problem of how to differentiate between social and individual phenomena.

When we ask him what have you found as the identity of culture that encourages you to seek its totality? Without an initial assumption about the identity of culture, how can you perceive an image of culture, which is solely based on the totality of human behavior? This quandary has no solution, unless we assume that there exists a totalitarian premise of culture, based on which human societies construct their cultural identity individually.

Man possesses a unique nature. The mere fact that there exist similar conceptions and feelings, comparable traditions and behaviors, and above all unanimously accepted international regulations, it is therefore indicative of the existence of some kind of uniformity / totality in human nature. The protection of this nature in its entirety is in turn a human task. According to Rousseau, there are things that invade this uniformity in human nature with the aim of its destruction. The distinctness of cultures, which in itself is indicative of the elevated status of humans

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3. Ibid, p. 43.
in comparison to other animals, does not challenge this concordance. In his view, social inequalities act as the destructive forces. However, while discussing the mutual incursions of nature and human culture, Rousseau favors human nature and tries to identify the potentially menacing social factors. His reasoning is that the human nature seeks natural goodness and the absence of equality has not brought about conditions to corrupt it.⁴

Contrary to Rousseau, Kant interprets history as a continuous process of culture through which the animalistic aspects of human nature are subdued and replaced by its totally human counterpart; while simultaneously sounding the alarm on the unsociability of mankind at the level of state. He in fact paves the way for culture to attain the highest degrees, even above that of political authority. This doctrine can become universal if it is grounded in hermeneutics. It can consequently be used to help alleviate many of the problems associated with globalization.

We must examine how the identity of a culture can be propagated under the present day situation. Hermeneutics of culture is the unique knowledge through which, we can understand culture; more so than any human or natural sciences, even humanities and anthropology. It appears that “culture” has the ability to protect its essence as it is submitted to the assault of analysis and interpretation. In Hermeneutics this is referred to as the theory of “authenticity of text”.

Similar to a text that does not remain confined within the restrictions of a single set of interpretations, so does cultural identity, seek new manifestations. Yet me must note that the straightforward analysis of identity of a cultures, based on their associated presuppositions as opposed to their varied external manifestations, will always occupy a unique place in the study of cultures.

It appears that there would be no end to a culture that can influence other cultures by recapturing its own strength through seeking shared venues of narratives and perceptions laid out within a suitable framework of understanding. A culture can realize its potential when other cultures can protect their own identity. We can

therefore say that there are no domineering or defeated cultures, but rather stronger and weaker.

The notion of popular identity linked to a particular culture depends upon that particular culture’s ability to withstand the onslaught of stronger cultures. Nevertheless, a culture never fades thoroughly. Despite the occasional devastation of peoples and nations, their culture has found its pertinent place among other cultures and has continued existence in new forms within the confines of other cultures.

It is therefore more appropriate to state that cultures secure nations, rather than nations preserving their favored cultures. This is a universally valid point and may be extended to issues of cultural globalization. Speaking of regional or global nations would be scientifically valid only if “culture” is examined independently, with its own set of definitions and entities independent of nations or states.

Fortunately for us Iranians the issue of “cultural crisis” has been examined strategically for many years. This implies that within academic circles “culture” has been addressed independently. In our opinion the crisis of cultures shall diminish in intensity only if scholars and politicians can identify and implement venues of education and accessibility of one culture versus the other. Clearly, cultures do not stand alone as islands facing tidal waves emitted by other “islands” of culture. Not now, but always, cultures have been interconnected. Cultural interactions can on the one hand trigger an enriching process; while on the other create the opportunity for cultures to test their vitality within new contexts. The identity of cultures is therefore much more effusive to be threatened easily and much more expansive to be solely the concern politicians. Globalization is not a dismal finale for cultures or an end to their ability to their accomplishments. As long as politicians do not interpret and apply globalization one-sidedly, similar cultural zones shall find common fields of extension within one another.

Just as cultural domains shall expand and find their new global identities, so shall national identity find new definition. It seems that no restricted definition of national identity would suffice, rather regional/national powers shall come to terms
with their own newly expanded global culture. The safe and secure identity of a nation depends upon the degree to which it can claim to be a global culture, or phrased differently, globally constructive culture. Despite the difference and distinction between the identity of culture and the identity of state, the cultural proclivities of a nation, including our own, is a basis for political authority and its hermeneutic framework.

Should the understanding and conception of other nations fail to officially recognize and respect the unity and identity of a culture, the immediate consequence would be the endangering of the totality, pride and self-respect of the affronted nation.

On the other hand, a strong sense of national unity can enable a nation to extend its culture globally as part of its expansive historical progression. It appears that the unity and identity of culture proceeds in limitless time without having been able to achieve complete manifestation within different stages of national consciousness.

The constructive materialization of a culture through different levels of identity constitutes the fortitude of a nation, a group of people or an individual. Foucault in his famous book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, expounds upon the importance of the identity of a culture. In accordance with Foucault's overall view of archeology, one can say that identity of a culture is manifested through objects in such a way that culture is always in agreement with specific discourses. This book combines the identity of culture with the positivity of discourse, which in turn allows for the definition of identity and unity of culture “throughout time, and well beyond individual oeuvres, books and texts.” In short, for Foucault, the unity of culture is defined in such a way that it is related to a particular mode of existence. Foucault does not consider the a priori nature of culture as formal, but he has rather combined it with historicity⁵.

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On this basis, we can state that the matter of identity and unity of culture is not a celestial and anachronic abstraction dislodged from terrestrial affairs. This identity is in fact defined by a set of codes that signify a discourse; codes that have been implemented from the outside. Cultures in their interaction with each other organize sets of regulations within themselves, which are dictated from the outside. The \textit{a priori} nature of this discourse is not a system lost in time; it is rather one that is malleable and transformable\textsuperscript{6}.

We can therefore postulate that we are facing a world where cultures are incessantly on the move, while individual and national identities are threatened or are in the process of disruption. In this sense all cultures would be “global”, resulting in anarchy and madness. On the global stage, we witness how every culture absorbs its adherents, strengthens their solidarity and absorbs all that is beneficial for their identity. We should emphasize at this point that the escape of some people from their own cultural domain and espousal of another \textit{mode de vie} does not signify the destruction of the original culture. This can not constitute the basis for labeling one culture “liberal” or on the other hand “dogmatic and conservative”. International systems and politics rather than criticizing endangered cultures should use all their intellectual capacity to enrich the world of cultures.

We must not promote confrontation of cultures. Although some of the cultures may be evaluated as “liberal”, but essentially what is at stake is the desire of that particular culture to persevere. Based on this survival instinct, a “liberal” culture has found means of its perpetuation within fields of other cultures. As we have repeatedly witnessed since World War II, policies of rejection and disregard for other cultures are futile. They have never been able to terminally eradicate the identity of a culture.

On the other hand, cultural commitments and affinities of people are matters that necessitate profound cognition, as they are vital to the identity and unity of cultures. At first glance, it may appear that matters of morality follow a descending path of defeat in their confrontation with globalization of economies. The issue of

\textsuperscript{6. Ibid, p.127.}
entry into such a global market presents a dilemma for the politician. On the one hand there is the matter of initial entry of his culture into this arena and testing these new waters which present innumerable opportunities. On the other hand, by encouraging the creation of a global cultural market by city dwellers from other cultures, he may jeopardize his own cultural identity, the focal point of his national authority, by entering an unbalanced one-sided globalization process.

Nations possess their roots and identities from ancient times. Despite this fact, in some regions, after the cold war, there has been a threat of demolition and disappearance for some nations and cultures. In recent years, in geopolitically important regions of the world, the concept of national identity has come across difficult situations. If one examines Bosnia Herzegovina, Macedonia, Palestine, Quebec and Kurdistan, these ethno/politically-marred regions, one shall encounter enormous human and financial loss. Governing states that have been unable to fulfill the rights of varied people under the same flag have resorted to historically discredited methods, including disruption of cultural boundaries, to attain national authority. “Despite legal discrimination, social prejudice, or plain indifference, these national minorities have maintained their sense of having a national identity.” 7 The sense of possessing a distinct national culture and identity continues to be attractive and empowering. It seems that it would not be possible to eliminate the definition of a distinct national identity. As it embraces all particularities and specifications of a culture, which plays the most important role in the resistance of national groups.

The interpretation of culture is not a discourse attained merely by collecting sporadic and ambiguous views of the politicians about the destiny of nations. A culture resembles a unique text, which has risen form of the humanized nature of man facing the vast panorama of life. It is from our own culture that we reacquaint ourselves with “culture”. The language, which unites the text of culture with its interpretation, is the same. This is a reminder of that hermeneutic principle which states that it is the source or the text of interpretation that incites interpretation itself.

Any cultural challenge has its roots in culture itself. One must try to deliver a culture with a contemporary globalized language to present interpretations for challenges it shall encounter.

Contrary to Hegel's interpretation of the future of religion, by carrying out research into some cultures including that of Iran, one can perceive that the future of the two is intertwined. The future of religion is not separate from the future of Iranian culture. Their rank and esteem is interwoven. Based on this fact, the Iranian culture seems better equipped to face the aggression of other cultures during this era of globalization. Facing the challenges to his/her culture, an Iranian possesses a unique form compatible with a mysticism that acknowledges the unity within different levels of existence and the theory of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity. The “Challenge” facing the Iranian culture is the task of conceiving new structures within which religion, philosophy, mysticism and contemporary world products can be grounded in conjunction. In this culture the earth and the heavens have been linked together lovingly an intimately. Within the realm of globalization, this is on one hand the best venue of introduction of and other hand the worthiest contribution by the Iranian culture. Hegel had said the conclusion of the issue of love is the reconciliation of and unity of the heavens and earth, preserving the superior and the inferior within.\(^8\) The question is whether this Hegelian love is conceptual and philosophic or is it of the kind found in mythologies and principles of religion – animated and vivacious. The language of love in our culture is the mellifluous language of ecstasy and self-sacrifice.

After having discussed Foucault, it would be appropriate to examine Derrida’s perspective on cultural identity. Derrida welcomes \textit{Difference}, which at first glance would appear conducive to the issue of a cultural identity. Derrida argues that \textit{Difference} is the disappearance of attentive presence. It is at once the condition of possibility and impossibility of truth. Based on \textit{Difference}, the being which is present in its truth, in the presence of its identity and in the identity of its presence, is

multiplied as soon as appearance. Identity for Derrida possesses a dual space function. When one of the two is itself replicated, identity becomes insecure, plural and continually ungraspable. However this replication results in another identity. This view of Derrida finds expression in the globalization of culture. The making of culture rises from its essence, however this creativity will not constitute the essential unity of culture, nor its horizon, nor its subject in entirety.

Therefore, the gesture of identity would be bipolar. The mere embodiment of identity within this or that is not sufficient. Identity is destined to become untrue. Nevertheless, one can surmise that it is possible to assist and guide culture towards the achievement of a unique identity on the globalized stage. According to Derrida one can not create unity by regulating means of synthesis, but rather by promoting links, alliances and communications.

One can not neglect temporal distinctions and differences, while at the same time one must not think that culture is defined only by its past. Culture is not based only on what has been achieved in the past, it is in fact an issue of the future and as such not repeatable. Culture could not be replicated unless it is grounded spatially. Culture is not history to be written “outside of time and space”. Culture possesses an identity unlike a myth or an atemporal matter. Culture is recognized at any time and any place. It is only through this identity that the past and the future are introduced to us.

We must clarify what do we mean by “the changing of culture”. This is the task of philosophers to go beyond the outcome of the interpretation of anthropologists to envision the future countenance of culture.

The more we approach future, the more we become aware of the accelerated unfolding of pace of events. No cultural event finds expression on the margins of human wisdom, and as mentioned above the nature of the identity of culture is such

11. Ibid.,p.176.
that it digests all events and happenings within itself. The reason why certain accidents or global events are more threatening to certain nations than others can only be understood if one refers to the cultural identity of those nations.

The expression “cultural imperialism” is more political than cultural. “Imperialism” comes from the word *imperium*, which signifies empire, dominance, and ruling power. The dominance and control of one country over another is referred to as ‘imperialism’. Now, one must inquire whether the logistics of exerting influence among cultures is similar to or as simple as that between countries and states. The answer is clearly negative. One can say that in cultural imperialism, the domineering and aggressive state considers culture as another instrument of exertion of power. The expression “cultural imperialism” is ambiguous and incapable of describing the phenomenon of “cultural globalization”. Cultural globalization is a flowing, unanchored institution which tries to dominate regional and national cultural institutions with the consent of the people of that region or that nation, considering the different levels of their cultural receptivity and malleability. In this sense, globalization is a conceptual phenomenon that is a function and consequence of internal evolutions of imperialism or capitalism, which has now arrived at a considerable size and scale to pursue its goals alongside the qualitative evolutions of its resources and methods within the domain of culture. Evaluating the status of world culture in light of the dual themes of “universalization of culture” versus “cultural globalization” articulates the realm and subject matter of cultural imperialism.

In the new cultural imperialism, man is no longer an obedient, powerless and exploited entity. What are poised to be demolished are the cultures themselves; cultures that have secured the link between people and their society, traditions, nationality and history.

Clearly, facing globalization, the cultures of the world shall not opt for uniformity. The expansion of cultures is not a unidirectional process nor is the trajectory undertaken by a universal culture. The hegemony of western capitalism can not solely warrant such linearity. Sahlins has demonstrated that although the
powers of the free market have gained new momentum, their driving force has been circumscribed and modified by the cultural outlook of recipient cultures. It is not a simple case of a “universal culture” being absorbed by a “global system”. One can therefore be hopeful that during this post cold war era, contemporary pluralistic societies shall promote their own interpretations and commitments by their respective governments, while a just and commendable mode of existence within this new global spirit shall be found. Although real threats are poised against the lifeline of cultures - including ours, one can not solely blame outside forces for all the weaknesses of national cultures facing globalization.

Cornel West’s views on this topic are constructive. He claims that cultural policies that are founded on the concept of respect for differences and distinctions do not simply oppose the mainstream of absorption nor are they transgressive towards conventional bourgeoisie. Enlightened individuals align themselves with the demoralized and depoliticized in order to empower and enable social action.

It should be stressed that the “questioning of culture” is as much in turmoil as culture itself. Culture, as it reflects crises in anthropology, has also placed modern philosophy in front of a critical situation. Why? Philosophers, like anthropologists, are members of a particular society, gender, age group and a social class. However a philosopher’s perspective on culture differs from that of sociologists and anthropologists. He/she seeks broader definitions that are not spatially bound. Moreover, philosophy and modern hermeneutics are obliged to find new boundaries for humanities, including anthropology, in order to find a more admissible understanding of culture and identity, than what has been professed so far. Nevertheless, they are witnessing their own cultural evolutions on the world stage. The development and evolution in the lifestyle promoted by capitalism appears to be much faster and more agitated than the tranquil and composed conjectures of the philosophers. The time we have to study the circumstances of passage from a culture of “social existence within a particular group” to that of “global existence” is very short.

12. The Archaeology of Science, p.169.
Cultural emplacement is one solution for the preservation of cultural identity. It is the task of seeking an advantageous position for a particular collection of actions, reactions and operatives of culture, which are not naturally disconnected from the cultural knowledge base.

As mentioned above, space and time for culture transcends beyond a specific temporal setting. However by positioning culture, one is confronted with a specific set of political, social and cultural endeavors that are chronologically fixed and spatially defined. Therefore, the degree of importance assigned to different “places” will vary from one culture to the other. Privileged seats (places) of culture may be considered to be spatial arrangements, which embody, or rather emplace the regularities that govern structures of power/knowledge. However if global sustainability is to be achieved, the identity of culture is destined to operate through and within complex combinations of sites, emplacements, and networks. The nature of these combinations and the importance assigned to spatial factors must presuppose a share for the presence of the “other” within its own spheres of action.

We mentioned that culture is man’s mission towards attainment of unity with the absolute and signifies his ability to rid himself from the limits of his individuality. For the realization of such a task, the more powerful cultures of the world have paid less attention to inner nourishment, absorption and objective internalization. This is attested by the enormous variety in cultural productions, which attract adherence for a limited time, for a few days and not more. While ‘internalization of culture’, referred to as ‘Bildung’, is one of the most common expressions of culture. Internalization of regional cultures functions more effectively than the internalization of a globally structured culture. Perhaps, in comparison to globally structured cultures, geographically bound regional cultures exhibit greater absorption capabilities. If we accept Herder’s conjecture that cultures that have submitted to ‘Bildung’ have undergone a humanizing process, then it would be doubtful that a globally structured culture would fall in such a category. A globally structured culture does not pursue

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an internal process for its creativity and production, even though paradoxically none of its goals could lie outside of itself either.

World leaders must contemplate the promotion and enrichment of a global culture compatible with other cultures. This would only materialize through fostering awareness of and reconciliation with the national wisdom of all nations at large.

The global spirit of culture can harmonize all frictions contrived by modern evolutions and appease diseased policies aimed at culture promulgated by astringent and constrictive parties unaware of the future of the world.

Cultural distinctions shall remain valuable, however, the global spirit of culture shall scrutinize the value and merit of all such differentiation. It shall direct the will of nations to defend their rights within their respective cultures towards historical objectification. Cultural distinctions shall remain valuable and rightful as they increase the options facing mankind, as the expansion of human choice strengthens national and cultural identity.