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# IDENTITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY CHALLENGES ARISING FROM GLOBALIZATION

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## **Abstract**

We live in a shrinking world, a world where local societies act as participants of wider systems in which the respective nations are economically and politically interdependent. The various groups within a multicultural society live by different moral laws and share little common values. Globalization, migration, the world in constant change may cause the individual to 'get lost' at the border between cultures. Thus we can understand the puzzling experiences that result for many of our contemporaries into feeling disoriented. Relativism seems to dominate the moral life of our society, as we find that no idea and no reference can prevail over the diversity. Given this context, we must acknowledge the renewed quest for identity, whether it is ethnical, religious or of any other nature. This is a conjectural basis for such manifestations as nationalism, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism or other kinds of extremist movements.

But it is not the purpose of this paper to analyze this. We wish to emphasize the positive results emerging from these kinds of experiences. The complexity of the world may be shocking, leaving us questioning the limits between right and wrong, but it also grants us the possibility of choice which we cannot oversimplify. It is imperative to be able to remain tolerant and respect the other along with his/hers values. If the search for identity did not determine us to see the other as a potential threat but teach us to take him/her as a dialogue partner, it would become most likely to thus uncover the true value of diversity, the freedom of choice and the possibility of self-knowledge.

*Keywords:* culture, identity, tolerance, communication, self-knowledge

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## **1. Introduction**

The world we live in is a globalized society where local groups are swallowed by wider systems and within which states are politically and economically interdependent. It seems that nobody can now live separately, outside the large web that appears to include us all. But this interdependence, along with the shrinking of the distances and the migration on large scale and even the contact between cultures facilitated by mass media, could portray the wrong impression that the entire world is 'uniform', globalized and that cultural differences are by common consent understood and accepted. Although this may be true for certain media, the world is still shaken by conflicts and wars related

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to cultural differences or, mostly with cultural differences, as Samuel Huntington considers [1].

The study of modern history teaches us about the conquest, submission and domination of the Western powers over the rest of the world. And Western Europe was indeed mostly successful in its attempt to assimilate the others in the name of its universal values. Nowadays, we can recognize its way of thinking and its values all over the world. But this is much unlikely to create, as, by contrary, previously assumed for numerous times in the past, a united or peaceful world. We live in a multicultural world and this is, regardless whether we like it or not, a reality we can no longer deny. We understand that it becomes more and more difficult to separate us from the others. Far from the attempt of becoming all similar, our experience shows us that, if we want to create harmony in the world, we should understand that diversity matters and all the voices are important to be heard.

As we have underlined, history is a decisive element in the process of understanding our world. We observe that realities, nations and identities seem to last in time, even if they change their exterior aspects. But history does not offer prophecies or explicit life lessons, even if it can help us understand the depth within ourselves and others, as well. Consequently, the geopolitical and historical culture becomes necessary for the reason that it represents the alphabet that helps us distinguish and better read the surrounding reality. It would be well-advised that we learned from history and use it as a model that could prevent us from repeating sore mistakes of the past.

It is well known that, over its long time domination over the world, the Western civilization tried and succeeded too, most of the times, to impose its own culture traits on others. Fed by ideas of superiority of its thought and lifestyle, the actions of the Western powers mirrored the typical contempt and lack of understanding towards others. This way of seeing things caused a state of restlessness and conflict, especially as the parts under domination began to get back their voice. All the societies try to preserve themselves along with their beliefs and customs, their language and religion, as well as their economic and political independence. Nowadays too, as Samuel Huntington underlines in his famous book [1], the cultural maps become increasingly important. The global politics are dominated by rivalry between different cultures.

Today, when others appear on the scene of the world's politics, the western civilization must take them into consideration. This situation creates both new challenges and new possibilities for all partners. The previous model that was successful for so long needs to change and this seems to leave the West somehow puzzled. Apparently, the globalization in the name of the western values now needs the contribution and acceptance of the others. It is very likely that our future actually depends on the ability of communication as well as that of true dialogue in which all partners ought to be heard and understood. It is of crucial importance for the West to find new ways of communicating not *to* but *with* the others. However, what stands as even more vital, perhaps, is the need to

realize that this is not something to be done all on its own, but side by side with the others.

Globalization made our society become more and more complex. Migration, the multitude of contacts and the dissolution of visible borders are evident facts. Multiculturalism teaches us that the specific values of each culture should be preserved. It is in time that we learned that demanding conformity means sacrificing diversity. But on the other hand, the recognition of multiple cultural identities that should preserve their essence by not ‘contaminating’ with the others cannot be achieved without facing problems. “The politics of recognition states that all cultures deserve not only *respect* but *equal respect*. But why does the respect have to be equal? The answer is as follows: because all cultures are of *equal value*. (...) To give *equal value* to all cultures means adopting an absolute relativism that destroys the notion of the value itself. If everything has value, than nothing actually has value: the value loses any value” [2]. By stating the equal value of cultures, multiculturalism leads to a closure; if all cultures have ‘equal value’ than we end up in an axiological and moral relativism.

It is essential for us today to be able to live in a multicultural world and to learn to understand the values of foreign cultures as well as to relate to foreigners. Because of this axiological relativism, life in multicultural societies may seem complicated and puzzling for many of our contemporaries due to the multitude of possible options and choices. But finally, this problem can be reduced to a question of values.

As stated above, today we live in pluralist societies, societies that lack common adhesion to one religion, one ideology or one set of leading values. This possibly explains the confusion and disorientation experienced by some of our contemporaries. Religion and ideology used to be references that ordered the fundamental decisions of the cultural life, economy and social organization as a whole, in other words a factory of law. That was the case of the holistic society, as it is common for anthropologists to name it, a society where the unity of thought brings together different aspects of life on the ground of common principles. This was the case of traditional societies. As we have seen, in our current society, the situation is completely different. Now we have a very large diversity of believes and ways of thinking and acting, a fundamental pluralism in all levels of life. It is no longer possible to rely on one uniting principle, reference, value in order to rebuild the lost unity.

Our values no longer find their unity from one perspective that proves to be a constant base. This impossibility to put everything under one perspective or this pluralism represents the end of the holistic society. It is obvious that there is something puzzling and intriguing about all this. It also seems to explain why so many of our contemporaries are disoriented because of these transformations in the way we refer to reality. A consequence of this relativism of values is that everything appears as possible because anything is no longer absolute or incontestable. The very idea of tolerance comes from the loss of certainty regarding the truth and the recognition of a number of different faiths. If nothing

is preferable in an absolute manner, nothing is imposed as absolute truth, all this implying that anything can be justified and also the fact that the option for something over something else is arbitrary.

This is the reason for which when an individual finds himself at the border between different cultures, he could tend to 'get lost'. A tension may appear between contradictory values. The person that leaves his own culture and enters a new one has the potential shocking experience of discovering a whole new system of perceiving the reality; the symbols, the very perception of time and space, the way of people relating one with the other, all this change with the adoption of a new point of view.

Seemingly, this might be an explanation for the rise of all kinds of fundamentalist movements and all reactions against modernity [3]. These kinds of movements show us the deep disappointment and the end to the spell of modernity. We can also detect the fear of living in a modern and pluralistic society and that of identity loss. By the return to the origins, be it religious or ethnical or of any other kind, people seem to regain the sense of identity.

## **2. Culture and identity**

Culture is not, as Anthropology teaches us, something superficial in the human mind, an external coat that one can easily change [4]. All human societies have their own 'view of the world' written wisely, spread by education, containing the mentalities and patterns of behaviour. The cohesive and unifying forces that work to help a society define itself and be efficiently organized, also strive to distinguish it from the others and make it fear from them just because they are not familiar. There is a tendency deep rooted in the human mind to picture this in a bipolar way. Thus the perception of one's own identity in ethnic groups is accompanied by delimitation with regard to an external world that is felt to be totally different from oneself. The forming and perception of our own identity also supposes the meeting with the others. This need to separate between us and the others is at the origin of xenophobia, as we call it today, ethnocentrism and nationalism and many other related concepts.

The preference for our people/kin over the others is recognized since ancient times as a characteristic of all human groups. This preference or, as we can name it, 'patriotism' or even 'ethnocentrism', seems to be the transposition of individual egocentrism at the level of the group. And as egocentrism seems to be a characteristic largely spread if not universal, the same preference for one's own kin over the others is a spontaneous reaction, prior to any learning. Nevertheless, in the transition from individual to group, the egocentrism couldn't remain unchanged. The difference between 'taking care of yourself' and 'taking care of your family/group' is radical; it is the difference between egocentrism and its opposite, the self- sacrifice. Accordingly, the attachment for the group is two folded; it supposes solidarity and exclusion in the same time.

We can find the true school of solidarity in small groups like the family or the clan/tribe. In these kind of groups, the child learns how to surpass his/hers natural egocentrism. The child learns that the members of the family share a bond of a special kind that supposes both a right (to get help) and an obligation (to offer it). The love for mankind doesn't mean too much if it doesn't firstly mean love for those being close to us. This love and devotion for those close to us (our family) has to be present so that we can learn, by extension, to apply it for the whole mankind, as the moral principles teach us.

The people or the nation is very far from the small groups we have talked about. They are so large that we cannot find in them a good school for solidarity, or an easy transition to the respect of humanity in general. This is why the history abundantly shows us examples where the devotion for the family goes hand in hand with the respect for the others, for the foreigners and the devotion for the state never leading to this.

### **3. Tolerance and freedom**

Today we condemn nationalism and ethnocentrism as extremist movements and we agree that all democratic societies should be open and tolerant. But the questions and problems arise because it's very difficult to establish what should be tolerated and accepted and what not, and also how open a society can afford to be without running the risk of disintegration. A society is kept together by common laws and possibly also common traditions and customs. By accepting the others, with their different ways of life, this unity is lost, as we have showed before. But even the pluralist societies must require conformity when it comes to fundamental laws and principles. The talk about the limits of tolerance is complicated and the limitations much debated.

Karl Popper in his book *The Open Society and its enemies* [5], considers that a society should not accept the intolerant attitudes. John Rawls discusses the same problem, whether a society should admit intolerant members and attitudes, in a section of his famous book named *A Theory of Justice* [6]. He thinks that a good society ought to be tolerant, consequently the intolerants should be tolerated otherwise the society at risk to become intolerant, thus proves to be unjust. We should also note that Rawls, like Popper, insists on the fact that the society and its institutions have the right to self-preservation, right that surpasses the principle of tolerance. In other words, the freedom of an intolerant group should not be put under question unless the society (just and tolerant) has justified reasons to believe that the group in question is threatening its security and democratic institutions. Among others, even the old Herodotus [7] is conscious that the beliefs and customs of peoples are dominated by a great relativism. He tells us so nicely about this describing the different populations of his *Histories*. But there is a tendency to separate between traditions, customs and popular beliefs, where everyone is free to practice his beliefs and the great virtues that define a human ideal. We can translate this today in conformity to the basic principles in pluralist societies.

Tolerance supposes an open and respectful attitude towards the existing differences between people. It expresses, in the same time, respect for the others and the desire to learn from them, protecting the diversity, building bridges between cultures, rejecting the unjust stereotypes. In many ways, the tolerance is the opposite of preconceived ideas. Tolerance equally means respecting the others for what they are, but without the obligation of accepting all kinds of behaviour. Attitudes that violate the human dignity and personhood should never be tolerated.

The ideas of tolerance and respect for diversity lead us to understand and appreciate the wide range of possibilities opening before us. Nowadays, more than ever, more people in many different places are able to imagine a wider set of 'possible lives'. In the past, societies were, more or less isolated, thus the risk of 'contaminating' their culture with others was far less likely to happen than today. We also saw before the problems arising from this closeness with the other, the sense of insecurity, the cultural shock and the inability to adapt. But for other of our contemporaries, what first appeared to be a burden can in fact be an immense opportunity. The direct meeting with the others, the travelling or mass media leads us to discover a rich and ever-changing store of possible choices and possible lives. We should learn to appreciate this new sense of freedom. Something like this, that today we take for granted, was not available of our forefathers. But this freedom is much related to the axiological relativism. It is presumably difficult to determine the limits between right and wrong, what is morally correct and how to act justly. But considering the complex world we live in, we should not expect our choices to be simple.

The pluralism, as we have seen, opens up our possibilities and our freedom seems unbounded. The debate and democracy are possible only when we talk of different points of view. We have to choose between different options, that do not go together, but in front of this multitude of choices and possibilities, we have yet to decide. Our moral freedom is unbounded. We are no longer asked to conform to traditions or rules, we have to find ourselves the principles that we choose to obey. We all need now the strong will Nietzsche was talking about [8]. To some people, this may seem too much and thus, it causes them restlessness but for others, this could prove an unprecedented opportunity.

#### **4. Intercultural attitude and self-knowledge**

For the ones finding the experience of living in a multicultural, democratic society as overwhelming, the most convenient solution seems to be found at the level of the intercultural attitude. This simultaneously implies the affirmation of each culture with its specific values, attitudes, customs, believes, but also its opening towards other cultures. The intercultural attitude shows us how to regard the values in a new light and also how to distinguish the significant differences from the less significant ones, to live in a plural society.

We talked of tolerance and its importance. We should also note that tolerance does not necessarily imply indifference. The one who is tolerant owes this attribute to his personal beliefs and convictions. He stands firm to his beliefs but he ‘tolerates’ the others who share different convictions. It is important to notice that there are no multicultural principles to affirm, in the name of cultural equality, that those practices violating the human dignity or personhood should be tolerated. This statement that certifies the true value of the Kantian moral imperative and the human rights can help prevent any individual that views the intercultural experience as rather troubling from losing his way.

It is true that the human rights are a European ‘invention’ and the intercultural attitude tends to promote a less Eurocentric approach but maybe in order to get the opening we reach for, and to become ‘citizens of the world’, we should make our start from re-evaluating our own values. The revealing of our true individuality stands on the very fragile equilibrium between the acceptance and understanding of the others and the exploration of our inner selves.

The meeting with the others is a far more complex experience that it may appear at first glance. The others stand for a means to explore and discover our own identity. The Socratic knowledge, the discovery of one’s self passes by the knowledge of the others; to get to the self-knowledge that the Delphic oracle demanded – ‘Know thyself’ – we should reflect ourselves in ‘the mirror’ of the other. Only the other can get us closer to our true self.

The Socratic self-knowledge shows us the necessity of permanently measuring ourselves under the menace of losing ourselves in exteriority and multiplicity. Thus we remember the Socratic doubt, the fact that the great philosopher kept repeating that the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing refusing a knowledge based on particular points of view. To the sophists who claimed to know everything, ignoring the essential, Socrates is opposing his ignorance in the name of a greater science that seems to elude them. This is the task that we have inherited from the Greek philosopher: the duty of a rational effort that will lead us to reflection and bring us, if not the complete self-knowledge, then at least the awareness that will protect us from being deceived by the multiple masks of truth.

We have the duty of educating ourselves, of searching the self-knowledge that Socrates was referring to and this to be done not only by accumulating knowledge, data and information. This is the way of life of the one who is constantly pursuing himself despite being conscious that the destination is out of reach. This experience will make us understand our limits and thus knowing them, we will constantly be looking for the others, accepting them and making efforts to understand them, learning from them. Thus we can become more aware that we do not know everything, we are not in possession of the ultimate truth and the absolute key to Universe and knowledge, and we understand that, by accepting and trying to know the others, we are improving ourselves. For a long time, the others either represented a threat or an inferior race, or were simply neglected. But if we gradually learn to take them as dialogue partners, we

have the promise of a totally new kind of experience that will reveal the better parts of ourselves and others too.

## 5. A few closing lines

Globalization produced homogeneity but, in the same time, it also posed a serious threat to it. By spreading ideas and values, and shaping the way of life of countless people, globalization also raised doubt and determined many to return to the basic principles shaping their identity. There were times when this search for identity became desperate in its confrontation with modernity and led to extremist movements with disastrous effects. But life as part of a multicultural world also taught us how the various cultural identities do matter and they should be respected for what they are, as well as different and particular ways of seeing reality. Although the emerging relativism of values has something puzzling and confusing about it, it also paved the way to mutual respect and tolerance. The very idea of tolerance came from the loss of a central idea, one truth and one common way of life for us all. Thus we are bound to admit that diversity matters and, as we have stated before, it is highly influential in many aspects of our lives. Today, we believe in the value of diversity and the importance of freedom. Yet freedom is about options and we cannot talk of options in the absence of diversity. As we have previously stressed upon the diversity of options despite all the inconveniences of relativism, it is therefore important for people to shape their lives. It is true that the acceptance of this unprecedented freedom and the responsibility of choices may find some of us unprepared, but we should be willing to take the chances opening before us. Globalization provided both diversity of options and growingly intense human interconnections. It seems that the more we realize that we are all connected together in this web of life, the more we accept diversity and understand its deep significance and its future relevance.

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