SYMBIOSIS AND CLASHES AMONG CULTURES IN AN APPROACH BETWEEN GEOGRAPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Maria Paola PAGNINI
University of Trieste, Italy

Comprehension and evaluation of the possibility of communication between different cultures has always represented a challenge for the development of humanity. The ethnocentric vision, an attitude common to all cultures, with its limits and aberrations, has been the constant principle, which has regulated human relations through the centuries. Not yet overcome, it remains one of the most delicate questions for those, such as geographers, who are dedicated to the research and study of other civilisations. The exigency of defining mostly subjective cultural, social, political and linguistic borders through the creation of a group of reference values to be handed down, whilst excluding others, responds to the human mind’s need for order and stability. The examples are innumerable. In the Mahabarata, one of the most ancient texts of Hinduism, the warrior is defined as one who is opposed to chaos. The original meaning of temple coincides with that of fence, a construction that was probably originally thought up to distinguish an ordered space from one that was unknown, yet to be conquered or discovered. If the need to codify reality includes the exigency of defining an initial base for communication and comparison with others, it creates at the same time the premises and potential for conflict.

The contribution and influence exercised in this sphere by European geopolitical exegesis have been decisive. In ancient times, migratory movement and moments of contact between civilisations were determined for the most part by the presence of strategic resources in the territory and by elementary differences in technology amongst various groups. The implications proposed in modern times, with the expansion of various hegemonic stages of capitalism, the division of labour, the colonial praxis, the creation of that real and symbolic confine which, starting in the 19th century divides the First World from the Third World, are much more complex.

The difficulties inherent in the interpretation of European modernity are summarised in a quite lucid fashion through Kant’s lesson: emptying phenomena; reduction of the knowledge of mediation of the intellect; the neutralisation of ethical action within the schematics of Reason. What the German philosopher describes is a humanity loss for us in its experience and disappointed by the impossibility of pursuing the ideal ethic: the world becomes an architecture of ideal forms, the only reality which is permitted to us from here on.

The borders that divided Europe from the colonial world, from the 19th century on, were not only natural: they reflected material signals that have made possible a geographic division that is functional to western interests. The myth of progress, a concept which for a long time coincided exclusively with technological development, was repeatedly filled with ideological content. Alterity in these cases, was not given for granted, it was rather produced. This concept was also taken up by an ample range of studies published in the last decade. Amongst these we can mention, for example, the pioneering text of the Palestinian writer, Edward Said, in Orientalism. These analysis highlight the process by which the subjects of western geographical research were not far-off cultures as such, but rather a group of relative stereotypes and cultures presented as exotic, explicitly created by western discourse to be then exported elsewhere.

Beyond military mobilisation, European governments also made use of their notable cultural and intellectual resources to justify their modus operandi. The symbiosis between intellectual work and political rhetoric became absolute, and every conceptual formation was conditioned on the basis of profit and the pacification of any potential antagonisms. One of these, as it is broadly well known, was the exploitation and exasperation of Darwinist theories of the natural selection of individuals, intuitions destined to spill over into the geographical sphere and leave a sad wake in European contemporary history. The presumed civilising mission of the West throughout the rest of the world was thus legitimised, not only by men of state for geopolitical goals, but also by those who are commonly considered cultural reference points of our modernity. Voltaire, for example, a defender of Tolerance, was profoundly
convinced that “savage” and “primitive” peoples would gain undoubted advantage from their contact with civilisation, and concluded “... Whites are superior to Negroes, just as Negroes are superior to monkeys and monkeys to ostriches...”. The American President Franklin, in one of his speeches, said “... if a prince leaves living space to his population by conquering new territories, or removes indigenous populations, he thus guarantees the gratitude of his descendants...”. We could continue with other examples, but the words of the President of the United States represent the synthesis of a long process of colonisation which, beginning in Europe in preceding centuries, would have reached its apex during the 19th century. The European states, at the beginning of the 1800’s, claimed over 55% of the globe’s territories, even if they possessed around 35%. In 1878, the percentage had risen to 67% and in 1914 to 85%.

Racist myths kept developing during the 19th century, together with great scientific intuitions and this notwithstanding, a notable epistemological effort which, as Foucault reminds us, came to define the academic status of the principal modern humanistic disciplines, amongst which human and political geography. Paradoxically, the heritage which matured with the long European reflection on human rights, democracy and liberty, remained in large part unutilised. Instead of rationalism, progress, well-being and civilisation, Europe’s hegemony and positivist postulates culminated in and concluded with the Second World War, marked by the Holocaust, one of the greatest and most irrational crimes against humanity.

If we define the initial confines of the concept of sovereignty in its diverse developments through modern history, we realise that Europe is not a unitary and pacific reality. In the course of its evolution, the history of modern Europe has been inseparable from the principle of sovereignty. This concept, initially developed on European soil and co-ordinated successively with the evolution of modernity itself, constitutes one of the cornerstones of Eurocentrism: modern European sovereignty was determined and evolved within the continent, in the course of relations between the state and citizens, and outside the continent, in the field of colonialism and the resistance of the colonised. Dialectics should lead to movement, but today, the dialectics of western sovereignty seems to be resolved in a stasis.

Today, after centuries, the entire western hegemony is under harsh discussion originated not only by those civilisations, which have undergone to the brutality of western expansion. The European and American claims for a continuing management of global dynamics increasingly seem to be a slight wish. A deeper analysis reveals that this behaviour hides a lack of energy and a difficulty of self-definition, of invention of a new cultural and political role capable to compete with forms of radical antagonism against the leading role exercised by the white minority. The proof of this anxiousness is given by the re-usage of an antique biblical concept – the bellum justum - associated, in the past, to the medieval imperial charters, then categorically refused by the modern secularised thought which gave birth to the new bourgeois nation states. Recently, this concept became increasingly central to the international political discourse. Today, jus ad bellum seems to be an extreme effort in order to render sacral, through military means, a new kind of power which tries to exercise, with little success, anachronistic ethical functions.

This evolution, which rose up beginning from Seventies with the American crisis of legitimacy, traces a new phase in the history of world capitalism with still uncertain perspectives. At the moment three tendencies can be determined: each one of these challenges the model of the European nation states of the 19th century. On one hand, the emerging transnationalism coinciding with the genesis of multilateral agreements and supra-state organisms such as the WTO, is worth to be mentioned, on the other hand tendencies leading to a regionalism of economic blocs such as the EU and the NAFTA are being registered. Finally, tribalism, almost a compensatory phenomenon highlighting diversity and identity, is mounting.

It seems to be a relatively sudden admission, that the central actor of the capitalist development, the nation state, is no more adequate in order to face new challenges and needs of globalisation. For certain aspects it turns to be too huge a structure in order to address local needs. Contemporarily, it seems to be too limited, thus a need of transfer of authority downwards or upwards comes out.
Seemingly, the rise of a tribal identity, doesn’t seem to have univocal aspects, contrarily, it brings about geographically unedited and often unclassifiable features. For instance, if twenty years ago we had to ask to an inhabitant of the Balkans to describe his identity, he would have probably defined himself as a Yugoslav; after ten years, according to his provenance, he would have replied by saying to be a Muslim, a Catholic, a Serb or an Albanian; today, he is probably hoping for his country to enter the EU and feels the necessity to belong to a larger regional grouping. In other environments, on the contrary, the ethnic belonging acquires or loses significance depending on the point of observation we consider. To be born yoruba or haussa in Nigeria confers a decisive social importance, while in the United States the same differences are absorbed by a community sharing a common colour of the skin, which counters the white community. Inside the latter, however, remote, politically relevant identity distinctions emerge: English, Italians, Irish, Jews…

Questions regarding cultural identities are hard-to-overcome problems.

Reactions, contrary or in favour, to recent transformations of globalisation phenomena gather together common hopes and fears. On one side, potentialities of universal perspectives, bearers of values of progress, capable to lead to a hypothetical, but extraordinary melting, which will enrich everybody is emerging. On the other side, the threat of a uniformed and impoverished culture, which has to be fought in order to preserve our particular identities, is perceivable. In those who feel threatened by the above mentioned process a fear of changes, which goes back in the history of humanity, is identifiable. However, actual and real fears, which are not simply definable as unjustified persist. This new context forces us towards a confrontation with a series of explosive aphorisms definitely challenging our ideas. It is no more enough to speak about a private and local acquisition of values or about local mediations of universal meta-narration. We are all forced to confront ourselves with absolute issues and radical alternatives, with morality, ethics and social justice projected in new dimensions.

We know too little about these aspects yet. The controversial paths indicated by the globalisation appear often intricate, confused and difficult to separate. The necessity for a reflection over the concept of and dynamics governing power emerges, once again, vigorously. The threatening perception of the mounting phenomenon of globalisation is actual. If increasingly growing human groups feel threatened by globalisation, it is necessary to pay more attention to the analysis of this phenomenon. Paradoxically, this same phenomenon offers unprecedented means of defence to minorities whose fundamental rights are violated. Nowadays, these cultures, instead of vanishing as happened in the past, have the possibility to struggle for their survival. Why shouldn’t they?

On the other hand, the identification and definition of power is neither immediate nor granted for free. If we observe power from South, the world can seem to be still dominated by the West. If the place of observation changes, becomes Paris or Rome, the United States can seem to be the major source of power projection and influence. If we observe the situation from the United States, we will be forced to count the minorities, which reflect all the diversities of the world and feel the need to affirm their belonging and origins. Once all these claims are heard, it can happen to remain astonished in front of a terrorist act carried out by a sect led by white men. It’s the case of the bombing of Oklahoma City of a few years ago, when the members of a white sect, were persuaded that their identity was threatened and that they were in a process of extinction.

The signs of discontent persist and display a world which is still too far from being appeased and is plenty of new forms of militancy. From the second half of the last century, structural renewal and expansion of the capitalist model have been accompanied also by an evolution of the so-called proletarian struggles. In the process of globalisation, losers are, may be, those who supply us with the most precious indications for the advancement of transformations. The last decades of the twentieth century are plenty of local, specific, isolated episodes of resistance which are hard to translate and communicate in other contexts: Tienanmen Square in 1989, the Palestinian Intifada of the beginning of the ‘90, the revolt in Los-Angeles in 1992, the popular uprising in Chiapas begun in 1994, the series of strikes which paralysed France in 1995, the clashes which inflamed Southern Korea in 1996…

This paradox of non-communicability of the above-cited struggles makes difficult the task of understanding and defining the core entity of their destabilising function. If on one hand,
these episodes were lacking in terms of duration, extension and communicability and will hardly find a common enemy to fight against, on the other hand, they no more necessitate external public aid and recognition to be legitimised and are set up to be immediately subversive, intense and expressively directed against the junctures of the global order. We are assisting to a process in which the progressive diffusion of the capitalist model turns every single point of revolts more powerful and relevant, with its virtual centre becoming increasingly vulnerable from threats generated anywhere.

This new global asset no more confers priority to any geographical region, instead it requires a new effort from those dealing with geography. Differently from the modern one, the contemporary sovereignty does not gravitate around a central conflict, but organises itself through a network of micro-conflicts, which suggest us that the contradictions of the global society are elusive, proliferate everywhere and are not always localisable.

If these are the terms of the contemporary international arena, globalisation is not only the tool for a new world order used by a few in order to reign over the world. We are rather in front of an immense arena with uncertain borders, where thousands of representations and battles are underway, characterised by different rules and discursive modalities and open to other actors with their specific claims. As never before in the history, it seems that the world no more belong to any particular ethnic group or nation, rather it belongs to all those who try to comprehend the new rules of the game in order to use them for the interests.

It is not the case of isolated events, the world is full of wounded communities. It is difficult to maintain the necessary scientific objectivity in front of cases of humanitarian disasters. On the contrary, for those studying other cultures, participating to the sufferings of peoples claiming rights in order to safeguard their own languages, traditions and territories becomes an inevitable duty.

Cultural identity, however, is an old and ambiguous concept. The passage from claims for legitimate right to means of war is subtle. Often, trough an act of solidarity or denunciation, researchers can unwillingly transform themselves into accomplices of genocides. To these forms of amenability, others can be added. For instance, the scepticism of those who state that history has always been accompanied by crimes perpetrated by men against men, that massacres are huge passional crimes, which are inevitable because they are inherent to the human nature and that it would be naïf to try to change these dynamics, is unacceptable.

The realism of those who adopt this kind of explanations seems to be usurped. Even if tribal dimension of identity, and not only the fanatic one, tends to prevail world wide, during centuries a lot of conceptions like natural supremacy of men aver women, hierarchy among races, slavery or apartheid have prevailed, but are no more acceptable. In the meantime, new ideas have came out which contemplate common goals for all human beings, protection of environment, and a core of human rights extendible at any latitude. The meeting between different cultures is not accidental, any longer it can be described as an invasion of miserable human beings who threaten living space or the fundamental values of a civilisation. The way in which sometimes clichés of fanatics, perpetrators of massacres, uncivil individuals and criminals are attributed to people with a different cultural background is a direct consequence of a visual perspective deriving from a tribal identity, which has still to be overcome and points out a lack of imagination and a sense of forbearance.

The ideas, which have prevailed during the history, not necessarily will re-emerge in the future. When new behaviours appear, we are forced to reconsider our own behaviours and habits. This is true mostly in the era of globalisation, which together with its accelerated melting is questing for a new conception of identity. If our contemporaries are not stimulated to be aware of their multiple belongings, to conciliate their need of identity with openness, without complexes towards other cultures, the inevitable choice will reside between integralism and the disintegration with all their destructive consequences.

However, cultural enrichment and contamination do not occur neither in an immediate nor spontaneous way. The cultural effort, mutation of perspectives, intellectual and political engagement are fundamental. For example, if we ask a migrant to learn our language without respecting his one, we are no more in front of a gesture of mutual cultural exchange, we are rather perpetuating the rules of vassalage and submission. If exclusion, lack of appreciation and hostility are practised, a minimal critique can be perceived as a threat. Contrarily, if the
presence of foreigners as an integral part is accepted, the right to criticise habits, which are incompatible with our institutions and our way of living can be practised. Probably, it’s not the case of a confrontation between the notions of progress and archaism, as it happened for a long time, but of properly asking ourselves why in the history of peoples, from time to time, modernity is refused and is not always considered as a positive evolution.

The fundamental condition for the development of both basic and applied research is represented by the need society has of cultural conquests. Science becomes strong only when society necessitates it. A cultural turning point has been achieved and is waiting to be understood. We have to definitely get rid of the research of an exteriority, a point of view which imagines a kind of pureness for our political vision. It would be more opportune, both in practical and theoretical terms, to penetrate inside de fluxes of the global world and to confront ourselves with the complexity of processes homogenisation an heterogeneity, by rooting our analysis in the requests emanated by new cultural identities.

REFERENCES