

Intercultural Dialogue as a Way Out of the Present Crisis

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Abstract

We live in a technical age. That is to say, modern societies have adopted technological innovation as a guide-principle. But technique is a perfection without an aim. It can only control its internal operations. It is the eternal return of the identical. Hence, a general feeling of social disorientation and anxiety. Moreover, in a nuclear age such as ours, there is no guarantee of survival for mankind. From a diachronic historical process, we are in a synchronic one. All cultures are to be considered at the same level. The only way out is dialogue, intercultural relations, based on a concept of «cultural co-tradition».

Keywords: technique; mass anxiety; intercultural dialogue; tradition; survival.

The Counter Position between Man as a Theoretical Being and Man as a Total Being.

Alexander's deepest motivations have not been completely clarified, and perhaps never will be. For the young son of Philip of Macedonia to throw himself into a daring and unprecedented gamble was a new departure in Greek history, a deeply mysterious event. Ernst Bloch has speculated that behind Alexander's great adventure lay a utopian drive towards the East, a search for new sources of political and religious legitimacy as Europe became an increasingly barren culture. «Compared to the East and the fertile chaos of all great religions – Bloch writes – Europe has often become a peninsula whose fate is to make contact with others so that it never quite succumbs to the barrenness of pure intellectualism or religious anaemia»¹.

To make contact with others; to save itself from religious anaemia. It is true that the destiny of Europe seems to involve a constant tendency towards historical regression, a sort of perverse attraction to a process of decline into spiritual poverty, whereby its people are capable of assimilating every value while at the same time emasculating them in a purely formal process of quantification according to the cold logic of commercial calculation. In Alexander's mad venture it is perhaps possible to perceive a dissatisfaction that had been brewing for a long time: the rejection of the pure, Socratic *logos* and the need for a deeper truth that would involve both the cognitive faculties and the passionate emotions, the enthusiasm, and the rules. The great sinner in this regard is Socrates, who gave us so many ideas and yet wrote nothing;

¹ Cf. E. Bloch, *Spirito dell'utopia*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1980, p. 189.

Socrates, who still belonged to the tradition of the sage or wise man, content to live out his philosophy instead of writing it down and teaching it for a fee. Nietzsche has already remarked on this in the most definitive terms in his *Birth of Tragedy*:

The whole modern world [...] finds its ideal in the concept of *man as a theoretical being* who is endowed with great powers of knowing and works in the service of science. Socrates is the prototype and fountainhead of this ideal. All our teaching methodologies originally kept this ideal before their eyes: any other mode of existence must fight laboriously to establish itself beside this one as a mode of being that is even tolerated, let alone desired. In an almost frightening way, we have for a long time recognized a cultured man only to the extent that he is erudite².

The contrast between man as a theoretical being and man as a total being is a recurrent motif in our society that is in danger of becoming an empty cliché. For example, in Nietzsche himself we find the «Apollonian» principle being contrasted with the «Dionysian» principle, and in Spengler too we find *Kultur* opposed to *Zivilisation*. Indeed, for Spengler, the inevitable «civilizing» process [that takes man away from Nature] ultimately results in decadence. But it is once again in Nietzsche that we have the clearest and most angst-ridden premonition of modern nihilism and of that mortal crisis which inevitably waits upon a lifestyle that is solely based on scientific knowledge and technology as a form of applied knowledge:

An evil reckoning lies sleeping in the belly of our theoretical culture and it is gradually beginning to worry modern man. Concerned, he tries to select from the treasury of his experience the means with which to exorcise the danger, without really believing in these means. But as he begins to be aware of these consequences, great minds with universal talents have realized with incredible astuteness that they can use the very mechanisms of science to show *the limits of knowledge and how it has been conditioned* in order to decisively prevent Science from claiming universal validity and in order to deny Science's universal aims.³

Nietzsche refers to Kant and Schopenhauer, who in his view are the two sober mentors of modern man, the theoreticians of the limits of reason, of its inability to solve the «mysteries of the world». To Nietzsche, they are the most subtle exponents of what he calls «tragic» culture, that is to say, they are aware that not all problems are in fact soluble by strict adherence to a sort of «user's manual». Had he lived later, Nietzsche could have placed Freud alongside Kant and Schopenhauer to demonstrate conclusively that human rationality is a relative concept, dominated by the obscure

² Cf. Nietzsche, *La nascita della tragedia*, Milan, Adelphi, 1972, p. 119 (my italics). Nevertheless, it is true that the role of Hellenism in the spread of Christianity was probably crucial; cf. inter alia L. Fernet – A. Boulanger, *Le Génie grec dans la religion*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1070, p. 426: «La constitution du Christianisme plutôt que religion universelle est historiquement un phénomène hellénique, puisque c'est en pays grec ou hellénisé qu'il a recruté la plupart de ses fidèles et que la langue grecque a servi à la propagande et à la rédaction de ses livres sacrés. C'est bien en effet pour un public hellénique que le Christianisme a été défini par le premier et le plus grand de ses docteurs : Saint Paul».

³ Cf. Nietzsche, *La nascita della tragedia* op. cit., p. 121 (my italics).

pulsations of the *id*, and that real human problems are not something that can be resolved once and for all; rather, they are recurrent issues, difficult situations that one can only learn to live with, or survive through, as one arrives at the certainty that we are all finite beings who must every day struggle to find our precarious balance in life.

Now, let us depart somewhat from our Nietzschean meditation [and at this point consider whether] it is possible to bring to bear the *principle of relativity* which hangs over all cultures. For every nation is necessarily conditioned by historical mutability. The principle of relativity thus precludes any culture from positing itself as a hegemonic culture, exchanging a technical primacy or scientific supremacy for a privileged title that is beyond dispute and is valid for ever.

It may well be that Ernst Bloch was merely speculating when he suggested that Alexander was searching for new certainties, if not a new path to salvation, for his over-intellectualized Athenian civilization. But it is a fact that the Greeks never close in on themselves and on the contrary, are open to contacts with and measure themselves against, at least four other great civilizations: the Greeks of Macedonia, the Romans, the Jews and the Celts, to which we may also add the Iranians with their mysterious Zoroastrian religion. Alexander's conquests were intellectual adventure of extraordinary interest, as many scholars have correctly noted⁴.

What should be emphasized here is that, in contrast to the current European fears about allowing contacts or communication with non-citizens of the European Union, Greek civilization remained proudly Greek and Athenian even in the most aggressive and widespread phase of Hellenistic expansion when the dangers of «cultural bastardization» seemed clear and present. The tool that allowed Greek civilization to broaden its horizons and slake its thirst for other cultures without losing its own identity or sense of self was probably its language. This is analogous to what is happening in our own day with the English language in its North American variant; the Greeks communicated with other cultures, but always and only in Greek. It was the Barbarians who had to be bilingual; the latter naturally spoke their own language, but they also knew Greek, at least sufficiently well to allow bilateral communication.

Even the Romans, after they had conquered Greece, faced the problem of learning Greek since their new subjects only spoke the one language and for the Romans who didn't understand it, there was no choice but to resort to an interpreter. Language thus becomes at one and the same time an instrument of communication, but also of intellectual domination. Greek intellectuals exiled to Rome, like Polybius at the court of the Scipio family, were sometimes forced to submit in silence to a certain level of contempt, and they put up with being called «little Greeks», but their function there

⁴ See in particular A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1976, *passim*; S. Mazzarino, *La fine del mondo antico*, op. cit., especially Chapter 3, «Nemici esterni e nemici interni»; Chapter 4, «I giudizi di Dio come categoria storica».

was not merely ancillary. They had a political role too, which was to convince the Romans that it was in their own interest to reach a compromise with local intellectuals in order not to antagonize unnecessarily the ruling classes of the provinces that they conquered.

The Greek example may perhaps be sufficient to soothe any recurrent fears about openness towards other cultures and excessive trust in inter-cultural dialogue. It is often feared that such a dialogue will result in the masochistic destruction of one's own culture. And one's own culture is unnecessarily viewed as being entirely negative and something to be resisted in favour of regenerating the self via contact with primitive cultures. For these are held to be «closer to nature» and more respectful of her underlying rhythms; [in other words, they are] alien to the «smokestack society» or the technologically advanced condition of the West.⁵ The repulsion is natural for Europe certainly bears a grave, historic responsibility for crimes that no technical or economic exploit can ever wipe away.⁶ The intense and predatory exploitation of raw materials from the Third and Fourth Worlds has compromised the ecological balance of many countries and the relationship between man and the environment. This is undeniable and has been widely documented.

Nevertheless, it is also true that denying this vision of progress and protesting against a technocratic mentality can become a pure and simple attempt to deny historical reality. In protesting against ethnocentricity and its arrogant closed-mindedness or its delusions of self-sufficiency, we should not give in to an uncritical celebration of all forms of primitivism. Historiological definitions of enlightenment and of pre-positivism are no longer acceptable. The development of mankind is not necessarily a one-track process, nor can it be posited as a rationally predictable trajectory. Progress is never an inescapable fate. No logical artifice will ever be able to liberate human history from the weight of uncertainty, anxiety, and tragedy. But that does not mean that no order or design can be perceived in it.

The equal dignity of cultures in as much as they are historical «productions» of living, breathing human beings located in a society should not be confused for a crude or simplistic equivalence between cultures. Nor is it a matter of celebrating Enlightenment «Reason» as a supreme achievement or historical *nec plus ultra*, a kind of mythical «pillars of Hercules» beyond which one opens the Pandora's box of chaos and pure irrationality. It is perfectly plausible to consider a third way, over and above the dichotomies and ingenuous binary logic that pretends to include all human experience, including the «possible consciousness» that Gyorgy Lukács⁷ described in

⁵ Here I am borrowing a title from Robert Jaulin, *Les chemins du vide*, which is part of a tradition of anthropological thinking that is so concerned about seeming Eurocentric that it seems even willing to give up on the values which historically constituted it.

⁶ On this point I will refer the reader to my own *La tentazione dell'oblio*, op. cit., especially pp. 45-75.

⁷ On this point, I refer the reader to my *Colloquio con Lukács. La ricerca sociologica e il marxismo*; Milan, F. Angeli, 1975.

his somewhat murky formula. Things do not unfold quite so nicely, nor do they divide themselves evenly between the rational and the irrational. For beside this binarism we find a level of a-rationality where multiple, unreflexive behaviours are located and where we find what I have referred to elsewhere as «day-time sleepwalking»⁸. The equivalence of cultures, uncritically conceived, at most leads to the impossibility of rationally evaluating emerging forms of culture and thus falling into a situation of complete cultural relativism, a sort of marketplace of ideas. Under the banner of irresponsibility, this leads naturally to the most egregious irrationality and gratuitous self-congratulation.

Recognizing the equal dignity of *all* cultures does not mean giving up the notion of exploring, clarifying and in the most fortunate instances, explaining specific human experiences, motivations and goals, more or less knowingly articulated and instrumentalized. For any meeting of minds to take place, for any meaningful communication, for any exchange of ideas and working methodologies to become possible, and thus for any potential transformation of various cultures, one must recognize the equal dignity of cultures as a fundamental premise, both from a theoretical-systematic point of view as well as from the point of view of specific historical content. Contrary to Eurocentrist thinking, which sees Western European culture alone as the only true culture, the so-called «primitive» cultures are not necessarily static or immobile, nor can they legitimately be considered a black hole of cultural determinism. Thus, it is not true that people who happen to be born in primitive cultures are unable to see any way out of them, for they do possess the possibility of self-improvement, evolution, transformation or reaction against the cultural environment where they were born.

In short, there is no such thing as an absolutely static culture, just as there is no such thing as a dynamic culture; or, to put it another way, no culture can create itself at will out of the surrounding environment. But by the same token, one cannot concede that absolute cultural determinism could arrest the development of individuals who are active within a given culture, nor can one speculate that there could exist a hero or demiurge who might embody in his personal destiny the fate of an entire people, no matter what the level of technical progress or literacy of that culture. The individual within any kind of cultural system is neither absolutely free. He appears to be *relatively conditioned* both from the point of view of the various artefacts and instruments in daily use or in the working life of his culture, and also from the point of view of his values, beliefs, customs and manners that are handed down to him by tradition from generation to generation. Thus, there is neither a mechanical equivalence between cultures, nor an absolute primacy of one over the other, but rather *the recognition of their equal dignity*. There is neither determinism nor absolute cultural relativism

⁸ See F. Ferrarotti et alii, *Forme del sacro in un'epoca di crisi*, Naples, Liguori, 1975.

but rather a *relative conditioning* of the individual within each cultural form. And that individual has a margin of indeterminacy in his search for new values which only historians and sociologists can gradually probe by empirical research.

The crisis of culture as a normative model

Although the term «culture» has come into common parlance, its acceptance has not helped fix its critical meaning. The same word may indicate concepts that are qualitatively different and even contradictory. Without attempting to provide a full treatment of the complex issues around all the possible meanings of the word «culture», I will pause at this point to outline two fundamental meanings of the word: that is, first, the concept of *culture as a normative model* and second, *culture as a descriptive tool*. In the first case, the concept of culture refers directly to a process of «self-cultivation», the refining of the individual according to the classical canons of Athenian education⁹, which promote the notion of the *kalòs kai agathòs* as the gold standard of cultural education, or more broadly, the civic instruction of the perfect citizen. A cultured man is thus typically a man of means, a member of what a later American sociologist has called the *leisured classes*¹⁰; the same figure who was known in Victorian England as the *country gentleman*.

The refining of the self naturally implies a detachment from the «cares of the world», a lack of interest in those cheap and vulgar, practical issues, which ordinary mortals have to deal with. To use the terms which most people are familiar with, culture as a normative model refers to *otium* as opposed to *negotium*. Recently we have dusted off an essentially aristocratic theory according to which «leisure» should be «the basis of all culture»¹¹; of course, this merely reinforces anti-mechanical, bourgeois ideology, the typical fears of those who have no practical experience of machinery. This theory implies an important and controversial warning about not reducing culture to its instrumental aspects, thus pointing to a radical distrust of any kind of «workers' alliance» or of the «workplace in general».

Most critical attention is focused on specialist or technical work since this is what enables the rhythms of human life to be subordinated to machines. Indeed, the conservative character of this theory is fully apparent from the remark that today, «special sciences cease wondering» or in the comment that true philosophy is always preceded and nurtured by a traditional interpretation of the world. Traditionalism is thereby refurbished rather than being rejected as a whole as the champions of Enlightenment rationalism did, and in the same way we are also rediscovering

⁹ Cfr. W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, 2 voll., Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1950.

¹⁰ Cf. Th. Veblen, *La teoria della classe agiata*, Turin, Einaudi, 1948; on the same point, let me refer the reader to my essays «La sociologia di Thorstein Veblen» in *Rivista di Filosofia* 1950 and «Un critico americano di Marx», *ibid.*, 1951, p. 42.

¹¹ Cf. J. Pieper, *Leisure. The Basis of Culture*, with an introduction by T. S. Eliot, London, Faber and Faber, 1952.

the joy that comes from not understanding everything, at least not completely or immediately. In the introduction to a little book by Joseph Pieper, T. S. Eliot remarks that by adopting this strategy, philosophers avoid two of the biggest dangers to the process of reasoning:

One is the conscious or unconscious imitation of exact science, the assumption that philosophers should be organized as teams of workers, like scientists in their laboratories [...] The opposite error is that of an older and more romantic attitude which produced what I may call the «one-man» philosophy: that is to say, a world view which was a projection of its author, a disguised imposition of his own temperament with all its emotional bias, upon the reader.¹²

It is hardly necessary to note that the Euro-centric perspective in Eliot's position is already obvious and fully worked out in the iron link which he sees between culture as «an organization of values» and «the idea of a Christian society», the only thing which, in his judgment, can effectively guarantee and bring about the historical realization of an authentic culture¹³. The concern that seems to me to link Eliot and Pieper, and indeed all elitist thinkers who seek to draw a distinction between manual labour (which they consider demeaning) and spiritual creativity, is the need to distance themselves from the proletariat, the desperate desire to avoid what Max Weber called the «proletarianization» of the soul. This is an especially urgent effort for anyone who recalls that in modern society, organized according to the division of labour and by a growing interdependence on each other, there is no way of avoiding the gradual spread of salaried work and shrinking of the number of «idle rich» or people who live off unearned income instead of by their labour.

It is the old Ciceronian idea of culture as «leisure» that emerges here, the «beautiful souls» are making their last, historic stand. But we should ask ourselves whether their anxiety is in fact justified. I do not believe, as I have already observed elsewhere, that the twin classical concepts of *otium* and *negotium* can be adequately translated by the notion of the *contemplative* life and the *active* life. There are certainly cultured and subtle analyses of «intellectual labour» and studies on the distinction between *reason* and *intellect* that elaborate a concept of «intellectual labour» as an important function in society:

In antiquity – it has been observed – the place of the liberal arts, or rather of humanist studies, was recognized; in human affairs, even things that were not directly useful had rights. The knowledge of a civil servant was not the only form of knowledge; there also existed a kind of «gentleman's knowledge» (to use Newman's felicitous phrase in his *Idea for a University*, in order to indicate the *liberal arts*). There is no need to waste any

¹² T. S. Eliot, *Introduction to Pieper, Leisure*, op. cit., p. 16.

¹³ See especially the two works «The Idea of a Christian Society» and «Notes Towards the Definition of Culture», which have now been published in T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*, New York, Harcourt, 1968.

further ink on showing that not everything should be considered pointless just because they don't fulfil a «useful» function. And it is extremely important for a nation and for the achievement of a true «common weal» that space should be reserved for activities that are not «useful» work in a utilitarian sense of that word. In 1830, Goethe said to Friedrich Schlegel: «I have never worried nor asked how I might be useful to society; I have been content simply to express what I thought was good and true. That has certainly been useful for many people; but that wasn't my aim, rather it was the inevitable result».

In the Middle Ages – Pieper assures us once more - the exact same opinion was also prevalent: «It is necessary for the perfection of human society – wrote St. Thomas Aquinas – that there should be men who dedicate their lives to contemplation. Note that well, necessary not only for the good of the individual himself but for the good of human society. No one who thought in terms of an “intellectual labourer” could have made such a statement».¹⁴

Nevertheless, the radical opposition between contemplation and action seems to me to be untenable. Contemplation implies meditation, which is an inner operation that differs from, although it does not exclude, the kind of thinking done by cultural men. To meditate means to deepen, in the solitude of one's mind, some sort of principle which, by fixating on it assiduously, comes to seem self-evident. Indeed, Martin Heidegger has said of this operation in his *Was Heisst Denken* (Tübingen, 1954) that the thinker comes to believe that in actual fact he himself is merely a product of his own thoughts. By contrast, current philosophy maintains that thinking means exploring concepts, it suggests a dialectical flow of different ideas that are logically interrelated in some whole, whether this is in the formal sense of Aristotelian-Thomist logic, or in the concrete sense of Hegelian logic. From the point of view of sociological analysis, I believe this so-called «freedom» of a man of culture that is his distinctive incompetence, in reality amounts to little more than disinterest towards the practical problems of a given community and towards life in general. In sum, it is translated into a sort of existential irresponsibility, devoid of any dynamic relations or any hope of development («*Del diman non v'è certezza*» as Lorenzo de' Medici puts it.).

I will say quickly, in order to forestall a widespread, even vulgar objection that it is not the lack of control over one's thoughts or the unnecessary quality of them that is at stake here. More bluntly, what is at stake is the hedonism of the sceptics, a lifestyle that presupposes the existence and labour of a population of slaves. These were defined by Aristotle as «human machines» while Plato used an even more effective metaphor to describe them: «the feet of man» or *andràpoda*. In Rome, slaves had a historically crucial role for the denial of their humanity that actually ruined the ancient world. In his 1896 study, *The Social Origins of the Decline of Ancient Culture*, Max Weber gives

¹⁴ Cf. Pieper, *Leisure*, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

a magisterial portrait of the condition of slaves and discerns in it the main causes of Roman decadence, despite the negative or indeed dismissive judgment of Mikhail Rostovzev in his own studies on the same themes (*The Agrarian History of Rome*, 1891; *Agrarian Relationships in Antiquity*, 1909).

Weber's essay throws vivid light onto the crisis of the Roman Empire. Paradoxically, the end of that Empire is attributed not to the disappearance of «superior men» (*virorum penuria* – the Ciceronian explanation given by Petrarch) but to the slaves who had no rights at all, who could not have a family, who were forced to live in barracks, cut off from the rest of human society, who were men only from a zoological point of view. It was no accident they were known as «talking machines» and their existence confined to the dormitory, the poor house in old age (*valetudinarium*) and the workplace (in Greek the *ergasterion* which gave the Romans their word for prison, *ergastulum*).

Slaves' lives were noticeably close to the life of cattle; they ate and slept together under the surveillance of the *villicus*; they worked under strict, almost military discipline; they had no property, they did not even have a family, nothing which could tie them down or allow them to put down roots. Weber comments:

But man may prosper only in the bosom of his family. The *ergasterion* for slaves was thus devoid of indentured families, slaves might not reproduce. Thus, it is continually necessary to obtain fresh supplies of slaves. The ancient system of servitude was thus a sort of blast furnace that devoured men instead of coal. It is no wonder that the slave marked depended on an uninterrupted supply to keep the system going¹⁵. Later writers about agricultural affairs seem to think that at first the scarcity then the increasing expense of human resources may have brought about an improvement in productive techniques via specialization of workers. By the end of the later wars of aggression in the second century – wars which were really slave hunts – the crisis of the great plantations was evident, for they depended on slaves to whom marriage and property were forbidden. To make a precise comparison between ancient times and the Middle Ages, we find a radical difference: Roman slaves lived in the *ergastulum* or in a barracks in a sort of «slave commune»; while by contrast, the *servus* of the Carolingian era lived in the *mansus servilis*, which is to say, the land granted to him by his lord in return for personal service. Thus, the serf has been restored to his family and with this family he develops landholding. In the late Roman era, with the decline of the cities and of communication routes and the consequent renewed dependence on the agricultural economy, the possibility of raising monetary taxation in the countryside diminished. Five hundred years later, Charlemagne became the somewhat tardy executor of Diocletian's will and gave a new impetus to the political unity of the West, but he was forced to do on the basis of a purely agricultural economy. The city had disappeared, the Carolingian economy did not even recognize it as an administrative possibility. The bearers of culture were thus the great feudal lordships; culture had become a rural phenomenon.

¹⁵ Cf. Ateneo, *Schiavi e servi*, edited by A. Paradiso, Palermo, Sellerio, 1990, from which one clearly sees that the trade in slaves was an important phenomenon in the Mediterranean world under the Roman Empire.

Then, the monogamous nuclear family and private property are given back to the great mass of enslaved people and these, from being a mere *instrumentum vocale* or «talking machine» were gradually raised up to being recognized as fully human; their family life was even morally protected by Christianity. The spiritual life of the West fell into a sort of dark night, but it is a dusk, which reminds us of that mythical giant who gathered new strength when he rested on the bosom of Mother Earth.

This reminder of the myth of Anteus, regaining his strength by the mere contact with the Earth is not purely a rhetorical device on Weber's part. In his research into living conditions for those who emigrated East of the River Elbe, Weber once again refuses to limit himself to economic motivations but broadens his horizons to include complex psychological motivations and the purely spiritual needs for freedom and a richer life. Thus, he concludes in a tone, which is movingly self-deprecating: «Rarely, however, does the breath of freedom come to visit us, academic historians, in the discreet shadows and heavy silence of our studies». There is no doubt that a cultured man, where culture is understood as a normative model, is a «great man» and can be called such inasmuch as he distinguishes himself in opposition to the rest of us mere mortals, that is to say from the shapeless mass of the *οἱ πολλοὶ*. He must do and conceive of everything in strictly individualistic terms.

This is the distinctive brand of a Eurocentric, elitist culture. In its view, first prize goes to innate «talent», special personal qualities. One is not free to become anything; one can be only what one was born, what one already is from the moment of birth. Culture operates like a «grace», something that is mysteriously bestowed upon some of us, but not all of us. Jesus himself never led a movement, never organized a group. His earliest disciples were all called individually, one by one, and not as members of a group. The church, the group, the hierarchy, all these come after. They were the brainchild of a former officer of the Roman army, Paul of Tarsus, rather than Peter of Jesus. The «gift» of culture, like the «grace» of salvation, are individual attributes, essentially elitist and problematic, because «many are called, but few are chosen».

At this point, it should not be surprised if elitist, Eurocentric culture is one that forbids us to understand others and tends to block (two-way) inter-cultural communication. Indeed, European culture has historically demonstrated a perverse vocation to communicate only in one direction, projecting itself onto others and confronting them with a simple, crude dilemma: either accept to be dominated or be destroyed.

In the present situation of humanity, it seems quite clear that a different form of collective awareness and a different type of culture are necessary as a way out of our difficulties. The closed concept of culture favoured by the elite is gradually giving way amidst serious disruption and crippling uncertainty to a concept of culture as a *composite of lived experiences and shared values*, which are often more experienced on the practical level than rationally shared. Rather than a traditional inheritance of

knowledge and customs, which a select group of individuals manages to master, thus raising themselves proudly above the anonymous masses of the great unwashed like lonely palms in the desert, this second concept of culture is a composite of techniques of adaptation to the environment, of ways of organizing and developing a common life – that nexus of ties that has been historically produced by any human group. According to the now classic formulation offered by a famous anthropologist, there is no qualitative leap from a technically backward society to a technically advanced society in the rules which govern, for example, the family and its function in society. In this respect, «our customs and those of New Guinea are only two possible social models to resolve a common problem».¹⁶ Culture loses its classic, marmoreal majesty and dissolves into a flux of *relational pluralities*, based on the principles of *exchange and reciprocity*: it is no longer found in the sacral, vertical stories of the type *Historia Rerum Gestarum*; rather, it is found in a history which rises from the bottom upwards, steeped in daily routines in which adjoining cultures spread out horizontally, meet or clash in a continuous process of collaboration or struggle, but without any recognition of the absolute superiority of one culture over another.

The Recognition of the «Other» as a Constitutive Element of the «Self»

One sophisticated argument against inter-cultural communication is based on an ostentatious respect for all forms of culture, provided that each one of these knows its place and doesn't presume to open a dialogue with any of the others. It is almost as if they feared a sort of contagion. This is the fear, widespread among racists, of contamination by contact. There are studies worthy of serious attention about this subject – recent studies that cut across different academic disciplines¹⁷.

The broad, complex research of Vincent Crapanzano, a Professor of Anthropology and Comparative Literature at the City University of New York, deserves consideration in the first place for the use it makes of a multi-disciplinary methodology. As a rule, this methodology has provided an excuse for many studies that are little better than guesswork. In these cases, research does not attain to the level of a real critique, nor the hoped for «reciprocal stimulus» between disciplines but instead becomes bogged down in series of mumbled commonplaces. Crapanzano has also authored an excellent analysis of the socio-psychological state of white South-Africans during the great changes of the De Klerk government (see V. Crapanzano, *Waiting*, New York, Random House, 1985) in which he usefully marries the traditional approaches of political science, anthropology and psychoanalysis. But in his present study he is interested in the transmission of messages and of a fundamental paradox: at the moment, when the messenger gets ready to deliver his message, he is «co-opted» and is transformed from messenger to a

¹⁶ Cf. R. Benedict, *Modelli di cultura*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1960, p. 7.

¹⁷ Cf. V. Crapanzano, *Hermes' Dilemma and Hamlet's Deste*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992; C. Sini, *Etica della scrittura*, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1992.

source of information about himself. *The messenger betrays his message by becoming it himself*. A question arises from this phenomenon that is relevant to all the «human sciences»: who is communicating and who is being communicated? More precisely, is inter-cultural communication possible and if so, under what circumstances?

In various places, I have pondered at length the mysterious link between identity and alterity. In *Homo sentiens* it seemed to me correct to argue that a sense of belonging and participation in the life of a group were not guaranteed by custom in technically advanced or dynamic societies, they were not insured by that nexus of unwritten rules – tradition – that moves with seismic slowness, impervious to all attempts to historicize it. The arena where society is played out today is the communicative pulse that flows between groups and individuals, countries and cultures on a global scale. For this very reason, communication becomes especially relevant as the means of social integration¹⁸. But communication is never neutral. Even the barest of messages, while it seems to be morally neutral, always relies on a foundation of implicit values.

The experience that I lived through in the 1950s in America, which sometimes reminds me of the «dream of Scipio» (I allude here to that wonderful fragment of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*) has convinced me both logically and emotionally that any place where «facts» and «values» seem to coincide very closely, to the extent that some people might even think that their values are indisputable facts that can be quantitatively measured, that is the place where we will find an all-pervasive pragmatism, where «what works» is held up as true and valued.

At this point however, we must consider the human being, who unlike other living beings, talks and develops through grammar and syntax, an articulated language. In other words, we are forced to take note of *homo confabulans*, the direct heir of *homo faber*, of *homo viator* and of *homo sapiens*. This latter needs dialogue in order to grow. The very process of individualization is an eminently social one. The individual is, in reality, a multiplicity of individuals, like a typewritten letter that has behind it the whole history of a culture. The self needs the other. It can recognize itself only in the other, like the pupil of one's eye can only see itself reflected and recognize itself in the pupil of one's friend's eye.

It is quite easy to summarize human discourse under three basic headings: a) mythical-religious discourse that is proudly dogmatic and a-historical which cannot change or evolve except at the cost of dramatic ruptures and schisms that sometimes result in bloodshed; b) artistic-poetic discourse, the result of which is enjoyable but cannot be learned or taught academically except at the risk of falling into clichéd mannerisms; and finally, c) scientific discourse which is characterized by

¹⁸ Cf. my *Homo sentiens. La rinascita della comunità dallo spirito della nuova musica*, Naples, Liguori, 1995, especially par. 28, «Identità e alterità: nessuno si salva da solo», pp. 115-131.

an internal self-correcting mechanism, that is to say, by the rigorous control of its own workings but which cannot indicate to us what goals we should strive for: in short, it is perfection without purpose¹⁹. In the view of Carlo Sini, there is another fourth type of discourse, which is the philosophical or «original» mode, a sort of meta-discourse. But is «philosophical» discourse ever really possible without first positing a familiarity with the *logos*, for example with the *logos* that presides over any definition? Perhaps this «philosophical» discourse is nothing more than *the practice* of philosophical discourse, something that we do because – Sini plausibly concludes - «we are defined by what we practice»²⁰. This leaves us with a position that cannot be ignored: it is probably impossible to turn completely in on one's thoughts. There is no inner life that does not also presuppose inter-personal dialogue, inter-subjective truth, in order to constitute itself.

One must not therefore think of the individual as a monad after the fashion of Leibnitz, without doors or windows on the outside. It is not by chance that neo-idealistic «panlogism» always ends in solipsism. Even political activity cannot be conducted solely on the basis of the exclusive interests of a group or nation, as Hans J. Morgenthau used to theorize at the University of Chicago years ago. It is true that the «Athenian stranger», as the platonic *Laws* tell us, brought serious disruptive potential with him upon his arrival in Crete, reasons for antagonism and confrontation that could not always be resolved peacefully; suspicions and fears. But to reduce our social life and all the multiple relations that constitute it to the dichotomy between friend and foe, citizen and foreigner, indigenous populations and immigrant populations is an unacceptable simplification, even though it may be useful to seem who wish to block access to non-European Union, that is extra-community immigrants as they knock at the doors of an opulent society.

The theoretical justification, from the point of view of the philosophy of law, is often found in a sort of half-baked Nazist, like Carl Schmitt, in whom one can hear echoes of Machiavelli. Schmitt believes that the relationship between friend and foe and the consequent actions of reward and punishment that flow from it, are the most basic concept in human thought and political reality, and that they stand outside all ethical considerations or are exempt from formal, procedural regulation. We might almost think of Schmitt as a sort of second-rate Thomas Hobbes. In this sense, Leo Strauss has pointed out that Schmitt's book *Der Begriff des Politischen* (The concept of politics) criticizes liberalism «from within a liberal universe» and that it is precisely this limited purview that prevents his «illiberal tendencies» from becoming too marked. However, his anti-Semitism has resisted and overcome all barriers. It has been usefully pointed out that Schmitt has not only never renounced Nazism, neither earlier nor later, but

¹⁹ Cf. *my Libri, lettori, società*, Naples, Liguori, 1999, especially Chapter 1, «I tre discorsi».

²⁰ Cf. C. Sini, *Etica della scrittura*, op. cit., p. 143.

when he is forced to cite authors who are Jewish for scientific reasons, he believes it appropriate to add the label «Jewish» to their names, because from the very word «Jew» a salutary exorcism would arise²¹.

Cultures Develop through the Exchange of Information and of Meaningful Values.

Whether we like it or not, an exchange between cultures is an inescapable reality today, in a world that is constantly on the move and is assisted by progress in technology, electronics and telecommunications whereby data can be processed and transmitted great distances in real time. Nor is this phenomenon limited to the cultural elite, after the pattern that is familiar to us from traditional historiography, which restricted itself to considering the upper echelons of society in the belief that generals, kings and emperors are the rightful protagonists of «great events». The extraordinary is in fact the controlling paradigm for any *historia rerum gestarum*, as for example, this passage from Polybius about the Battle of Zama clearly illustrates: «After having discussed it in this way, Hannibal and Scipio separated without having reached any conclusion. The following day at first light, they each led out their troops and prepared to fight, the Carthaginians for their lives and for the possession of Africa, the Romans for world mastery. *Who wouldn't be moved by the story of such important events?*»²² A very similar narrative, although more open to the broad social context, can be found in Tolstoy's description of the Battle of Borodino in *War and Peace* or in Stendhal who was a diligent reporter of the Battle of Waterloo. Both the conception of history and its field of operation are today much broader. History has become the narrative of «ordinary lives» and multiculturalism is no longer an abstract concept for academic discussion only. This kind of reality can be seen outside our own windows. It expects all of its various facets to be understood. Socio-historical eye-witness accounts can help to establish a frame of reference for the problem. It seems to be accepted now that «many cities have found the reason for their prosperity in a diverse population»²³.

Obviously, the reciprocal proposition is true. It is precisely the lack of an open society, the «suspicious fear of the foreigner»²⁴ that leads to decadence and the ruin of many cities. Gobineau feared the mixing, or *mélange* of different ethnic groups above all else; one might say on the contrary that it is a lack of *mélange* that weakens and eventually leads to the disappearance of whole civilizations:

²¹ See the powerful research of Alberto Predieri, *Carl Schmitt, un nazista senza coraggio*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1998, 2 Voll. I also refer the reader to my «Introduction to George Schwab», *Carl Schmitt. La sfida dell'eccezione*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1986, pp. V-XX.

²² Cf. Polybius, *Storie*, «Frammenti del Libro XV», par. IX (my italics).

²³ Cf. M. F. Baslez, *L'étranger dans la Grèce antique*, Paris, Editions Les Belles Lettres, 1984, p. 75. But for a truly penetrating analysis of togetherness, cf. *inter alia* H. Pirenne, *Les villes et les institutions urbaines*, Paris, Alcan, 1939.

²⁴ Cf. M. Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus*, Paris, Méridiens-Klincksieck, 1988, p. 135.

In the cultural soup of our great, modern day megalopolis – it has been aptly noted – it is no longer possible to exclude the foreigner or disallow his role [...] The values of *aufklärung* once exported, have come to be the model for the who world and they are now everywhere. In their place, as at many other times in history, one can see a sort of societal effervescence that favours contact and miscibility, the blurring of East and West. In short, there is a new polytheism of values; it takes no definite shape but we must pay attention to it for it will give birth the future.²⁵

We should not be surprised if historians of religions also deal with this important phenomenon that is, at least tendentially, syncretistic. Writes Brelich:

We must immediately say that if history could be written exclusively within the domain of a single, concrete and well documented civilization, any history of religion would be a contradiction in terms. Religion as a composite of institutions is found outside the continuous evolution of any one civilization that it penetrates but it would be truly anti-historical to forego the study of it for this reason and simply accept it as a given, rather than examining its origins, the process which led to its formation and these things cannot be traced back except by the method of comparison. For it is true indeed, that all historical formations are unique and unrepeatable, but it is also true and it would be wilful blindness to ignore it, that there are great types of formation, situation, civilization, religion. A careful analysis of them allows us to consider them as a specific products of *types of historical process*. The history of religion is not a narrative that can be followed year by year, day by day, it is found in centuries and millennia. The Ariane's thread which links us back to it is historical comparison. That to say, to a horizontal comparison that is devoid of events but a comparison of historical processes from which we can perceive unique, concrete, creative solutions as well as underlying themes in common.²⁶

The comparison of one religion against another as Max Weber has taught us in sociology, is thus essential. But one cannot compare without communicating. In order to understand the mutual borrowings between religions in the sphere of different, historically distant cultures, intercultural communication assumes a decisive importance.

And yet, this type of communication, which necessarily involves different systems of meaning, cannot be based on abstract comparisons. Everybody knows that lately Western social analysts have tended to produce studies and comparisons of different civilizations. These studies do not investigate, however, the values that have been formulated by those civilizations and do not give any answer to their members by offering them some degree of awareness. Rather, they are limited to an exchange of technical information about specific trade sectors and products which are devoid of

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁶ Cf. A. Brelich, *Storia delle religioni: perché?*, Naples, Liguori, 1979 (original italics).

existential meaning to those who produce them. This merely reassures Westerners that they have an acceptable level of knowledge about what goes on in the world.

Intercultural communication would lose at least part of its value if it was understood simply as being up date with the latest trends. Instead, it should be understood as an act of awareness by means of which an individual can transcend his own particularity and attain some kind of universality. That kind of awareness is thus all about the problematic nature of human presence in the world and it is at least potentially a common issue for all people. In this sense, it can be posited as the locus of human communication in the fullest sense of the word; or, to put it in another way, people communicate and understand only when they are ready to recognize another individual or another civilization as a modification or form of awareness of which they themselves and their civilization are also a form of expression.

To illustrate with a news item, take from the realm of recent politics and economics, it seems plausible to argue that, the inability which the US has often demonstrated of communicating effectively with other civilizations, despite its generosity and goodwill, is the result of its famous *problem solving approach*, or what I called in one of my earlier books (cf. *Il dilemma dei sindacati americani*, Milan, Comunità, 1954) the «organizational myth». By this I mean the tendency to reduce problems about values to issues that are purely technical or organizational, readily solved by the application of know-how, or the correct usage of the instruction manual. This type of inability stems from the fact that we do not quite realize that our restlessness and daily struggles are not so much due to certain economic and social conditions as they are to a new awareness and a new attitude. The hunger and endemic disease which characterize large swaths of the world today are not very different from what has existed since time immemorial. But what is different is that our moral conscience has undergone a profound change, we interpret these conditions differently.

Intercultural communication has the responsibility to help us understand this new awareness and also face up the limits of our technical/organizational strategies. In order to be complete and productive, intercultural communication must therefore take place on the level of meta-technical awareness. In other words, we must make it our objective to «let go of the particularity of the individual but not the universal value of the person». Cultures are instruments of awareness for people. The human relevance of intercultural communication is directly proportional to the objectiveness of our scientific detachment, our critical distance. At the same time, this objectiveness must be linked to and complemented by our impartial commitment to people, based on the common experience, which we all share of our problematic human nature.

Intercultural communication thus presupposes interaction between cultures, the end of the asymmetrical relationships between one culture and another, and between

individuals who belong to various cultures. We must replace the logic of command with the logic of understanding.

On an historical level, the basis for this kind of undeniable progress will be found in cultural borrowings and exchanges – in all fields, from philosophy to agricultural science. Such progress is cumulative and involves all of mankind, since the diffusion of such knowledge does not obey a rational map nor can it be hastened by detailed advance planning. Intercultural exchanges are not a zero-sum game. One person may be the winner without the other being the loser. Everybody can be the winner! For example, even Western European civilization, the historical bastion of ethnocentrism, derives some of its most fundamental technologies, such as paper and the printing press, from distant China which had mastered them centuries before Europe. The numerical systems which are in use today all over the world were discovered and used in India and found their way to Europe through Arabic culture.

It makes one's head spin to think that the essential contributions to what has come to be known as «Western» civilization came from outside that culture, from Asian and middle Eastern countries²⁷.

In the field of religion too, in which wars and massacres have been most fierce at one time or another in history, it is possible to speculate about a transcendental unity of all positive religions, beginning with the five universal religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism). The first three of these – monotheistic and more or less strongly hierarchical – the routes to ecumenical understanding are perhaps most difficult but the direction of this path towards greater unity on a world scale seems pretty much fixed so that even a return to the more fiery dogmas of exclusive salvation (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) would not be enough to make the churches turn back. Contrary to what the scholars of universal history believed in the 1950s – for example, Arnold J. Toynbee in his *Civilization on Trial* (London, 1947) – our age cannot be compared to that of the fall of the Roman Empire: communism has not become the «new religion», destined to supplant the individualistic culture of the West in the same way that Christianity gave the *coup de grace* to the dying paganism of the Roman Empire in its death throes. As intercultural communication has asserted itself, both in the technical field and also with profound implications for the moral and political order, we are on the threshold of an era of historical cohabitation in which perhaps the common humanity of all human beings will be genuinely affirmed and coherently practiced.

One of the essential preconditions for setting up a genuine intercultural dialogue will be for Western Europe to recognize without reservation the intellectual debt it has accumulated over the course of centuries. It is a recognition that those who have

²⁷ Cf. inter alia F. Braudel, *Écrits sur l'histoire*, Paris, Flammarion, 1969, p. 294: «La civilisation d'Occident a gagné la planète, elle est devenue la civilisation 'sans rivages' [...] Cependant, jadis, elle avait emprunté sans compter autour d'elle ou loin de chez, à l'Islam, ou à la Chine. voire à l'Inde».

cultivated European supremacy find particularly difficult to accept, accustomed as they are to see classical Greece as the origin of everything, as if that world had been born out of nothing, as if Athena had indeed emerged from the head of Zeus fully armed. This necessary recognition would not detract from the Greco-Roman format of European civilization. It would simply amount to re-establishing an historical truth, which those who have studied the history of science have been laboriously discovering for years now. And that is, the traditional periodization of scientific progress, which is usually divided into four stages – early Greek (also called the «Greek miracle»), the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and lastly the modern era – appears to be reductive and fundamentally untenable.

Classical mathematicians did not simply fall out of the sky. As Herodotus and Plato admit in several passages, albeit often implicitly, Greek scientific thought owed much to the scientists of ancient Egypt and to the Babylonians, to the extent that the method of calculating fractions devised by the Egyptians was still in use by the Greeks until the 8th century A.D. just as the tablets discovered in Mesopotamia in the twentieth century prove that there was a notable wealth of mathematical data available as early as four thousand years B.C.. Moreover, Arabic cultural borrowings are well known and permeate the philosophical and scientific thought of the whole Middle Ages, especially as regards algebra, and Chinese borrowings, which Joseph Needham was the first to recognize in his research, are beyond question though this area remains a vast unexplored continent even today. Thus, once again Europe stands out as an important crossroads for different intellectual cultures, which here more than anywhere else enjoy an extraordinary acceleration in development and practical application – though these developments should never allow us to forget the stimulus, the precursors, and the contributions provided by other cultures, Egyptian and Babylonian, Arab and Chinese.

From this standpoint, it is perhaps possible to clarify Alexander's dual task: to open up Hellenistic culture to the East and at the same time to propel the Greek *logos* and its peculiar dynamism into the static world of the Orient. In the words of the young Nietzsche: «The Hellenization of the world, and the Orientalization of Hellenism which made this possible, still remains the last great event; though the modern era struggles to resolve the old question as to whether a foreign civilization can be transplanted. It is the rhythmic interplay of these two factors that has hitherto determined the course of history. In this light, Christianity seems like a fragment of Oriental antiquity, which has been thought through and enacted by men in an amazingly systematic way. Once its influence had subsided, the force of Hellenic civilization has increased once again»²⁸.

Perhaps, however, despite his own admirable insight, Nietzsche did not realize that it was wrong to see an orientalising era as being followed by a new epoch dominated by a Hellenistic spirit. Rather, it was a question of conjoining, reconnecting and fusing

²⁸ Cf. F. Nietzsche, *Considerazioni inattuali*, Italian translation by S. Giametta and M. Montanari, Turin, Einaudi, 1981, pp. 262-263.

into one vital unity the East and the West in some way which remains at least for now mysterious, enigmatic and defies all logic. The Gordian knot cannot be cut; rather, as Nietzsche explicitly notes, it can be retied in a way which does not strangle but allow us to recover and articulate the unity of history and the human spirit. For this is always a combination of logical-abstract thought and existential experience, mind and body, technological application and involuntary contemplation, non-pragmatic and purposeless. In this sense, identity and alterity are conjoined and strengthen each other: that is why intercultural communication and intellectual borrowings from one culture to another are historical results that are essential for the progress of civilization.

There are several preliminary points that we should consider:

1. Every human being is constituted as such to the extent that he or she recognizes himself or herself as a self-identical, coherent individual with multiple and various experiences;
2. In as much as identity linked to the variety of experiences, it is not a fixed point; it is not an archetype. Rather, it is a process that opens itself up, changes, adapts itself and encounters extra-subjective experiences;
3. In as much as it is a process, identity is an historical «product» and thus open to becoming and to things that are different from itself;
4. Identity is a process that tends to construct the Self as:
 - a) a chronological sequence or development over time;
 - b) it is dominated by the need for subjective coherence as an effect of mastering the ups and downs of life;
 - c) these are relived and «overcome» in order to form the *personality* of the individual person through memory;
4. This formation involves a process of socialization which is essentially meta-individual, or rather a relationship with something other than the self. Identity thus presupposes alterity (the classical Greeks were aware of themselves and their identity only by contact with non-Greeks, *oi Barbaroi*);
5. When confronted with alterity and the inevitable comparisons with it, it is possible to deny other in the name of a «purity» of identity, but this approach inevitably denies one's own identity;
6. The dramatic character of man's situation in the world today is that he can choose encounter as the fruit of dialogue among different ethnicities, identities and cultures, or an irrational encounter that results in violent clashes and annihilation;
7. The alternative to a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society cannot be indifference nor closure of the Self with respect to the other, but only annihilation of the self since alterity is necessary for the construction of identity.

The simple, unvarnished truth is that living on earth means *cohabiting* the planet. Among groups of humans and individuals, the fundamental question will never be resolved by conquering others, but by convincing the others. We are neither absolutely free nor absolutely dependent on others; we are interdependent on one another. We act on our own initiatives that correspond to our interests, but what motivates us is never simply economics or politics or psychology. It is an interest, that is *interesse*, or a *coming together*. It is this «togetherness» that defines social relations. The «naturalization» of identity tends to fix it, to estrange it and exclude it from history and participation in the lives of others. It becomes a fixed point. But in this way, its dynamic evolutionary capacity is attacked at its root and petrified. In a very real sense, it kills it.

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