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Dialogue among Civilizations: the endless quest for the “other”

“We can’t turn history back. Yet I do not wish to abandon the belief that a world which is a peaceful coat of many colors, each portion of which develops its own distinct cultural identity and is tolerant of others, is not a Utopian dream.”

Isaiah Berlin¹

“Nos buscábamos a nosotros mismos y encontramos a los otros”

Octavia Paz²

Pluralism is a given fact, an undeniable and permanent feature of all social organizations. Ever since human beings appeared on earth, different has been a reigning principle. However, the prevalent diversities among peoples have been accentuated with the passing of time. Today, more than ever, pluralism has become an immediate source of conflict among civilizations.³ This is due to the presence of two main disrupting factors: ignorance and prejudice. The former results in a fear of the “other”, the unknown, whilst the latter refers to the arrogant presumption or belief that one’s particular vision is the “right” one or closely attached to *the* truth. Both of these factors, which clearly derive from a lack of understanding of the “other’s” nature and a misinterpretation of one another, have rendered intercultural communication more difficult. Nonetheless, this “modern yet ancient” problem of dealing with the “other” (a rather abstract yet frightful notion) may be solved through the recovery of the classic communication device: dialogue.

This essay will seek to describe the *ideal* type of dialogue in which contemporary peoples should engage in order to better comprehend the complexity and specificity of civilizations. Moreover, it will suggest that such an inter- and intra-cultural conversation may become a reality through the authentic commitment of the world community to liberty and egalitarianism, the two basic principles of peaceful co-existence. Finally, we will argue that such an activity will contribute to the enrichment of all civilizations whilst simultaneously prepare them to face the challenges of tomorrow.

Dialogue is the simplest form of social communication. Fundamental for creating a framework for peoples’ interactions, it has performed many roles throughout history, from a tool of ideological hegemony, to the most important dispute settlement mechanism. However, a true “Dialogue among Civilizations” must never become an end in itself but rather be circumscribed to an intracultural communication instrument. Such a conversation would thus become the most propitious opportunity to construct a bond between *different* civilizations which voluntarily look for an intersubjective (and sometimes even complementary) appreciation of the world that surrounds them.⁴

Two underlying values constitute the theoretical basis for this dialogue: liberty and egalitarianism.⁵ The former is necessary to maintain each civilization's essential differences and its specificity within the pluralistic world, whilst the latter exists to establish a common ground within which all peoples recognize the "other's" inherent right of self-expression. These two main preconditions must be fully accepted and granted by and for all participants. But who is to become and interlocutor in this particular type of conversation? Since inclusion is one of the objectives that this dialogue pursues, all those potential yet possible "others", that is, any human being in possession of a distinctive voice, willing to recognize and reinforce the values of liberty and egalitarianism, may become a "relevant party".⁶

However, in order for these heterogeneous social entities to engage in a genuinely respectful exchange of ideas, a basic protocol for communication is required. This protocol consists of three main rules: rationality, consistency and neutrality.⁷ The first two conditions concern the logic, stability and congruence of the arguments purported by each participant, whilst the neutrality requirement formalizes the inexistence of a hierarchy both within the plurality of arguments but also in between the diverse interlocutors. Each of these rules serves as a filter for impositive arguments that would only corrupt the nature of the conversation.⁸ A dialogue among civilizations based on such premises calls for the existence of a community of peoples, which recognize one another as legitimate participants of a multilateral conversation. This particular exchange of ideas would clearly be aimed at increasing their mutual knowledge and understanding in order to achieve a shared goal: peaceful and respectful coexistence in a pluralistic world community.⁹

Nonetheless, this *ideal* dialogue may become a practical reality only if all members of the international system fully commit to the promotion of an "integral education" strategy. Such a project would be based on the principle that all peoples should learn about the traditions, cultures, religions and ideas of the many distinct civilizations that compose the world community. This learning process would have to be incorporated through educational programs at all levels, that is within the international system, the state and national societies. This "integral education" strategy calls for an increase in cultural exchanges, academic seminars, debates and fora in which not only the elites, but representatives of all social groups would periodically meet to establish direct communication with their counterparts from other civilizations. One year devoted to Dialogue is of course a contribution but it does not constitute enough time to learn about the "others". All international organizations, especially the UN and its agencies, should seek to create the conditions for a permanent dialogue to take place.

A real, iterated Dialogue among peoples would contribute to the enrichment of all civilizations by persuading them to question deeply rooted paradigms and examine preconceived ideas. Such an intercultural-multilateral conversation would reduce the likelihood of direct conflict between participants (though by no means "erase" the diversity of perspectives) by providing them with reciprocal knowledge and information to avoid future misunderstandings. Indeed, human fulfillment and progress will only be found through our interactions with the "others".¹⁰ Nonetheless, there cannot be greater

gain than the true commitment of all peoples to the principles of liberty and egalitarianism especially since pluralism will not, and must not disappear.¹¹ Due to globalization, human existence grows more complex every day, with a myriad of new problems arising, both within and between states. The 21st Century will bring unprecedented transformations in the level and quality of social interaction and this will require the development of new and better forms of multilateral discourse.

Thus, any dialogue among civilizations, which aims to transcend the political problem of pluralism, must create the opportunity for an open, infinite, educational conversation to take place. Such a discourse will be based on a voluntary, non-exclusive participation of all “relevant parties” which explicitly agree to the acceptance of liberty and egalitarianism in a joint effort to ensure that the principles of tolerance and inclusion are respected.

It is imperative that the young peoples of the world learn that life without the “others” is inconceivable, that diversity must not be feared but celebrated and that is only through plurality that all human beings reaffirm both their distinctiveness and their humanity.¹² Only an authentic “Dialogue among Civilizations” can teach us that international society, without the diversity of multilateral communication and without a concrete program for its preservation, will never be a truly civilized society.

Bibliography

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¹ Quoted in John Gray, *False Dawn: the delusions of global capitalism*, (New Press, 2000), p. 35.

² “We were searching for ourselves but found the others”. Octavio Paz, in *Obras Completas*, (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1995), p. 125. This is a free and personal translation.

³ It should be noted that the notion of civilization is pluralistic (and thus problematic) in itself. There is no single, all-encompassing definition of what constitutes a civilization. This is due to the fact that civilizations (like many other notions such as nations, states and peoples) are but public spaces (or political arenas) in which a multiplicity of voices concurs. Every member (or component) of a civilization has a particular definition of the word itself and it is each of those interpretations which give the concept its plurality. Any “Dialogue among Civilizations” has to acknowledge this diversity and thus become a multilateral conversation between different versions, definitions and interpretations of a collective entity named civilization. However, during the course of this essay and for purely methodological reasons, we will use the aggregate term.

⁴ This would of course mean that such civilizations would comprehend the fact that since they do not possess *the* truth, this multilateral conversation would grant them the opportunity to learn about other perspectives which refer to the same realities that they themselves are experiencing. Thus, such civilizations would understand other traditions, cultures and arguments as being complementary to their own. This is a point that has been put forward by certain communitarian theories when analyzing the problems amongst competing traditions. C.f. Alisdair McIntyre, “L racionalidad de las Tradiciones”, in Ambrosio Velasco (ed.), *Resurgimiento de le teoria politica en el siglo XX: filosofia, historia y tradicion*, (Mexico: UNAM, 1999). However, the same intersubjective communication argument may be made from Kari Otto Apel’s communication theory.

⁵ These two principles, which are embodied in the Charter of the United Nations, have constituted the basis for one of the most important philosophical works of recent times: John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*. Even through the commitment with these two principles is not exclusive to the liberal school of thought, their "lexicographic" preference of liberty over egalitarianism has been severely criticized. For the purpose of this essay, no such preference exists: both principles need to be present and at the same level of importance, in order for an authentic "dialogue among civilizations" to take place.

⁶ According to Apel's theory, an interlocutor becomes such a thing when he or she fully commits to the fulfillment of the main preconditions of any rational dialogue: the recognition of the other's right to exist and of his or her distinctiveness. In other words, no one may appeal to any gender, race or cultural criteria in an effort to undermine the presence of an individual or group of people. C.f. Adela Cortina, *Razon Comunicativa y Responsabilidad Solidaria: etica y politica en K.O. Apel*, (Salamanca: Ediciones Coyoacan, 2000).

⁷ This particular protocol for establishing an authentic communication amongst the relevant parties is based upon Bruce Ackerman's liberal perspective. See "Bruce Ackerman o la naturaleza y los limites del liberalismo politico", in Eric Herran, *Fragmentos de teoria politica*, (Mexico: Ediciones Coyoacan, 2000).

⁸ It is important to state that this particular protocol, unlike the two basic values, is not a permanent or fixed feature of our "open dialogue" rather, it makes room for criticisms and transformations to constantly appear. Due to the fact that these rules define the tone in which the "relevant parties" must interact and since all civilizations (as any other social entity) are constantly evolving, no particular protocol of communication will be suitable for all times. Nonetheless, it is the responsibility of the actual participants of the conversation to modify these rules according to their particular time and needs, so long as the new rules do not antagonize with the values of liberty and egalitarianism.

⁹ We are thus referring to the notion of an "ideal communication community", which is particularly well exposed in K.O. Apel's theory. According to this author (a view which I share) such a community is an abstraction, a thought experiment, which like all ideal-types needs to exist in order for human beings to move forward in the development of their social interactions.

¹⁰ As many classical philosophers have argued, the "greater good" can only be attained through the development of an authentic international community of peoples. According to one of the greatest philosophers of all times, Immanuel Kant, the human race may attain its complete realization as a species only through the development of practical rationality. This development, as well as that of all other natural human dispositions, will take place through dissent. Moreover, the best possible manner to express dissent is through the resource of dialogue. This very same dialogue would become the practical basis for the creation of "cosmopolitan citizenship" through which all peoples of the world would be untied. See, Immanuel Kant, *Filosofia de la Historia*, (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1997).

¹¹ No one understands the dual character of human plurality better than Hannah Arendt. She states in *The Human Condition* that it is the twofold character of human plurality which helps us understand the vital importance of discourse. Cf. Hannah Arendt, *La Condicion Humana*, (Barcelona: Paidos, 1993), p. 200.

¹² Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 201.