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From cultural pluralism to otherness

Thanks to the wide range of experiences and analyses related by the contributors, the Delphi seminar highlighted a variety of issues focusing on the relationship between culture and the social bond. How can we pursue collective and comparative reflection on this subject? I should like to offer a few preliminary points for study in order to support my proposal.

During our discussions, we once again observed that we are living in a globalised and yet divided world, unified by different processes and, perhaps, more culturally segmented than it has been in previous times, those of the 20th century empires. These worlds of the recent past, from which we directly descend, were ruled by cultural models that claimed to be universal, either symmetrical or competing, and intended to reduce respective internal differences or deny their value.

After politically breaking with this phase in our history, we are now leaving it on a cultural level and entering the post-colonial era, even, according to Thomas McEvelley's theory¹, the post-historical era, that is to say a period beyond an end of a determinist view of history. This context encourages us to come to terms with the disappearance of a unitary, dogmatic and universalist conception of art and literature.

What positive approach to art and culture does this new phase beckon? In this field, can one bring out the common principles that are compatible with the variety of historical, national and local contexts and the multiplicity of artistic and cultural universes that make up our immediate or more remote environment? The question, phrased in this paradoxical way, leads us to *seek a philosophy of diversity in which Europe is one testing ground among others*. This is what we are basing our reflection on.

We see this philosophy revolve around a new paradigm, which takes the opposite position to former universalist references: pluralism. However, the political and theoretical challenge that pluralism forces us to take up consists in avoiding making fetishes of differences. Although we see pluralism as the antithesis of universalism, it also seems to open up a path towards the universal, the crosspiece of all artistic or cultural singularity, even the most inward looking. In other words, *we perceive in pluralism an outline of the surest pathway to otherness, and therefore to the social bond.* But this pathway does not appear as

¹ Thomas McEvelley, *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity*, McPherson & Company, Kingston NY, 1992.

if by magic. It is built by willpower, education and the degree of openness to others that each culture is likely to encourage.

We are entering a time of artistic and cultural pluralism. What does that mean? Artistic pluralism means the recognition that artistic scope is widening, that the frontiers between “organic art” and “inorganic art”² have moved closer to the latter, that forms of artistic expression emerging here and there are legitimate. Cultural pluralism points towards recognition of the legitimacy of cultures in which the populations’ diversity is embodied, whether they live in different territories or share the same territory.

These two currents lead to the introduction of relativist judgment criteria into the cultural and aesthetic spheres (nevertheless, this necessary relativism does not lead to a general equivalence of values in art. It does not abolish the critics’ role, but it does make it more complex).

However, we must not be content to endorse these trends without asking what lies beyond their immediate meaning. The point which, it seems to me, should be developed is the following: how do artistic pluralism and cultural pluralism inter-react with the social field? How do they participate in reconstructing cultural universes and social imagination?

What is pertinent in the pluralist phenomenon is not the exasperation of singularities, but the co-recognition of the differences onto which it opens. Taking this approach as a starting point, we must try to understand the symbolic dimension of the linking process among social groups, the manner in which the social worlds, cultural worlds and communities of sensitivity establish intercultural, intercommunicating and inter-subjective relationships beyond their own circles.

But the intercultural issue is a very broad one. As seen from the discussions at the Delphi seminar, it can apply to the fields of education and the economy, the social sphere, culture, and so on. *In the field of cultural action or policies, we still lack the information we need to reach a deeper understanding of the interferences between interculturality and specifically artistic or cultural currents.*

How do art and culture ‘interculturalise’ the world? How does the multicultural and intercultural issue find expression in cultural policies and artistic and cultural projects, and how does that help images of oneself and others to evolve? What are the social effects of these images? Reflection in this area, which I advocate at European level, does not, as I see it, indicate some sort of hierarchy of importance of the various intercultural issues referred to. But it does seem to me to be advisable, from a strictly methodological point of view, to make

² Cf Paul Ardenne, “*Art organique, art inorganique*”, in *L’art contemporain. Champs artistiques, critères, réception*, Jean-Pierre Saez (ed), Paris, L’Harmattan, 2000.

choices that will enable comparisons to be made which will be of use to the players involved. Incidentally, if the same sort of approach is taken in the educational, social and economic fields, it will be possible to envisage, in the long term, a highly fruitful encounter with a view to observing the various intercultural dynamics in play.

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