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MULTICULTURALITY AND THE MANAGEMENT OF DIFFERENCES

Review
Article

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Abstract

The post-Babylonian world became multicultural as consequence of the Divine punishment. The post-modern world celebrates and cultivates differences as opportunities for creativity and freedom. But what kind of differences are desirable and to what extent? A "confused language" cannot help us to choose for instance between a pluralist society and a multiculturalist one. This article aims to demonstrate that, as in the case of conflict, if not managed responsibly, the difference could become just a sterile divisive factor and a simple instrument of power. "Rationality" is a key concept in this context and could be both part of the problem and part of the solution.

We have created a more and more complicated world which we can less and less understand and control with our minds!
Giovanni Sartori

INTRODUCTION

In the Book of Genesis is written that Babylon was the city of King Nimrod, the first city built after the Flood, where mankind was united and all men spoke the same language. But one day people have decided to build a tower so high that its top would have reached heaven. Then, as punishment for their pride, God confused their language and scattered people throughout the Earth. It was the starting point of "multiculturalism". This strategy of the Divine power is known as " Babylonian strategy" or *divide et impera.*

The term "multiculturalism" is, in its narrow sense, an ascertaining one: it tells us that in the world and within states live groups with different cultures. Then why is this word used today to satiety? Because the scope of the concept expanded: "multiculturalism" becomes *a new project*. It becomes "multiculturalism". Ideologically colored, has now unclear relations both with concepts from the same family (i.e. *interculturality, acculturation, cosmopolitanism*, etc.) and scientific concepts such as *integration, identity, community* etc.

Often "multiculturalism" is associated with" inter-culturally" whose meaning is "communication between cultures". This designates an undeniable historical fact: from the religious beliefs and practices to scientific concepts and practices, cultures borrowed from each other because they were "in touch". But something has changed to this concept, too: interculturality has also become *a project*. As a project, it requires first "affirmation of diversity" and "mutual recognition". After that we can have exchanges of ideas, products, interpretations of the world etc. The meaning and use of the two concepts at issue should be unproblematic but it is not so: any type of critical interrogation about them can be fast labeled as xenophobic or racist, transforming these very useful concepts in ideological weapons.

The stranger, xenophobia and reciprocity of perspectives

Our world is multicultural in at least two senses: it is made up of states that have their own culture or, in any case, a dominant culture; within states minority groups exist (ethnic or otherwise) that have their own cultural aspirations. So, with the separation of languages and the development of cultures there have also emerged the cultural identities, meaning "people entrenched" in a world already constructed and interpreted, in a network of social relations (Berger & Luckmann, 2008). The villager is not only the man of the place but he also perceives the place as „his", in a milieu of well-known meanings. Therefore, the Stranger is not only an unknown person but is the Unknown, with its entire most mysterious and threatening possibilities. No matter if he shares with us the same cultural code or how predictable or unpredictable his behavior is, the mystery of his origins is the most unsettling: "In the case of the person who is the stranger to the country, the city, the race, etc., however, this non-common element is once more nothing individual, but merely the strangeness of origin, which is or could be common to many strangers."(Simmel, 1908/1950: 408). Anthropology suggests that in human history there have been only two ways to manage an encounter with the Different Other, namely:

Anthropophagic strategy: literally means ingesting another man, assimilating foreign substances, devouring foreign bodies concretely or symbolically, "from cannibalism to cultural crusades". As in the digestion process, the goal is the annihilation of differences, the transformation of non-similar in similar, of the unknown in something known. This strategy is put in practice by natural or forced acculturation. The latter can take extreme forms of physical and/or physical violence.

Anthropoemic strategy: literally means the spitting, vomiting of dangerous substances, of those perceived as strange, foreign, and therefore dangerous. The aim of this strategy is to keep the health and safety of community, isolating "foreign bodies", preventing physical contact, dialogue and interaction. There are many forms of this strategy, more obvious or subtler, but among the most common are: incarceration, deportation, crime, spatial segregation, urban ghettos, and selective access in different spaces (C. Levi - Strauss apud Bauman, 2000: 96)

Fear of *Stranger,* natural and reasonable, operate a defense mechanism through which the unknown and therefore potential dangerous is converted in something known (by ingestion, assimilation) or isolated. Thus it is satisfied the need for order and security. When this mechanism goes away, fear becomes exacerbated, irrational and enters the field of mental pathology: *phobia*. A more diffuse social anxiety, directed against possible disruptive changes is called *neophobia* and it is part of what V. Pareto called *sociability residues*. It expresses itself by imposing the common rules to groups or individuals who enter the community. (apud Ungureanu, 1990: 31) Different theories or *derivatives,* as Pareto called them, are attached to these psychosocial complexes, to justify them. The atavistic mechanism of "scapegoat" relies also on the same idea that the "difference" is dangerous to social uniformity and therefore to the safety of the group. In serious crisis situations this mechanism helps community to recover its unity. Physical, psychological or cultural difference is commonly used in the designation of "the guilt", of the sacrificial victim that will save the functionality of the whole. Besides those with various physical infirmities, the "madman", "the witch" and "the

stranger" are ideal candidates for the position of "scapegoats". (Girard, 1972/2000)

When "reasonable fears" are ideologically confiscated they turn into "existential fears" racism, chauvinism and nationalism are ideological derivatives, handling such fears to justify aggression.

But let me change the perspective and look now through the eyes of those "who come to stay" as Simmel wrote. After an "initiation journey" – in which the traveler must face the perils and traps of the road, often paying with his live for his courage - the one who runs from poverty, persecution or war, hurries to shelter. But there he will find a world with an unknown language and behavioral codes, a strange and potentially dangerous world. It is one of the reasons for which he will seek "the similarities": co-religionists, co-ethnic, co-nationals etc. Among them he feels safer, can decipher the language and conduct codes, can anticipate reactions and can appropriately respond. Extra-European community immigrants for instance, integrate especially in ethnic and closed networks, seeking "assistance and mutual defense." When they accumulate a critical mass, they begin to formulate claims and to "assault the natives". (Sartori, 2000/2007:96) This anxiety shared by both parties is the main segregation and ghettoization factor while government's wrong decisions are less important for this situation. Being in the double role of "applicant" and "member of a minority" their own *phagic* strategies are blocked and the *emic* ones encounter those of the hosts, intensifying isolation. In an optimistic outlook, the stranger could become a member "*in* the group" but not one "*of* the group". (Wood, 1934)

Xeno-philia: a strategy for cultural opening or self - depreciation?

In the excellent book *The crisis of European consciousness 1680 - 1715*, Paul Hazard describes the fascination for "strangers", "novelties", "exoticisms", born after the wave of travels to the far corners of the world. So, some new examples appeared on the intellectual map of Europe:

The Good Savage: to the Gospel he "triumphantly opposes the natural religion"; to European laws opposes natural morality and to society opposes "a primitive communism, ensuring justice and happiness at the same time." He is touched by "the fate of poor civilized man, lacking courage, energy, unable to provide food and housing; rude and morally degenerate (...)."

The Egyptian Wise: "Egypt had the role of presenting the image of a perfect civilization. It was a grave and serious nation whose solid and firm spirit hated novelties. (...) Not only created laws, but also respected them, a less common virtue." In Egypt "you can learn the secret of

prolonging life elixirs. You can learn especially the True philosophy that has nothing Christian in it."

The Chinese Philosopher: "The Chinese are atheists, their atheism is not negative as that of the savages of America, but a positive atheism, deliberately, willingly: and this does not make them less wise and less virtuous. They are devout - and Spinoza's followers. (...) More than the Good Savage, than the Egyptian Wise, than the Arab Muslim, than the Sardonic Turkish and Persian, the Chinese Philosopher delights those waiting for and hastening the arrival of a new system."(Hazard, 1961/1973: 15-24)

Another good illustration of the xenophilic fascination we can find in the article of Ash Amin, *Multi-Ethnicity and the Idea of Europe* (2004). This is reinforced by the sharp criticism of "European fixations" that the author makes:

- Christianity, Roman law and the rationality of the Enlightenment shell no longer be claimed as foundational values of Europe, being only simple romantic narratives, reactionary myths, which can only separate: "the idea is seen as embodying the cultural practices of Whites, Christians, reasoning in European style".(The founding idea of *difference* itself is attacked this way. Amin abolishes and celebrates *difference* at the same time.)

- The construction of "new Europe" cannot start from "Europeanness of Europeans" but needs another imaginary of belonging to this space. We must rely in this attempt on two principles: 1. *The principle of mutuality* presupposes the abandonment of nativist conceptions: we are not born European but we do become European; 2. *The principle of hospitality* implies a total openness to foreigners because "we will all be strangers one day" as we move from one cultural space to another: „We are migrant animals. . . Thus we are subjected to mounting pressure to change, to transfer, to translate what we were just a moment ago into new codes and new forms of relation." (Melucci, 1997 apud Amin, 2004: 8)

- These two principles will be the foundation of a space marked by mobility and transience, of a "happy hybridization" obtained by "juxtaposing heterogeneities". The space will be populated by cosmopolitan individuals with "cold loyalties" to the state and "thin patterns of solidarity" among them.

- This great enterprise will succeed only if "homeland cultural identities " will be deconstructed in order to "destabilize" the nationalist imaginary in whose name Europe "is demonizing and persecuting foreigners". The racist and xenophobic spirit is trans-European.

This harsh indictment of "whites, Christians, reasoning European style" tends to transform some markers of identity in stigmata of shame. Who meets the three characteristics would do well to feel

guilty for all the sins of civilization. "Degenerate and morally brutal" Europeans cannot be saved unless they abandon their history and culture for a total and unconditional opening. Paradoxically, they just have to give up the "difference that makes the difference"! Such accents go far beyond the good intentions of recovery moral health and health in general. Xenophilia is seeking a response for this crisis, aggravating it.

CONCLUSIONS

Between 1680 - 1725, wrote Hazard, European consciousness entered in a crisis situation: *the aggressive* rationality wanted "to make tabula rasa of all past errors and to take life from the beginning"; *the unleashed rationality* did not recognize any tradition or valid authority; *intransigent rationality* was similar to "the most intransigent defenders of religion" which, incidentally, hated: it "confuse authentic prejudices and indubitable superstitions with legitimate and necessary beliefs". (idem:154)

Three hundred years later, in a new crisis, the reason is judging itself and does not like what it sees. It proves that it removed the old errors only to replace them with new ones. Paraphrasing Hazard, I can describe the new situation as follows: *the aggressive* rationality makes "tabula rasa" of its old certainties; *the unleashed rationality* deconstructs everything: traditions, beliefs, theories, returning to a kind of "chaos" considered more fertile; finally, *the intransigent rationality* does not allow any legitimate belief except "the belief in difference" and, hating himself, hates coherence.

What are then the ways out of the crisis? It seems that we have only two options: a pluralist society or a multicultural one. Giovanni Sartori (idem, passim) describes them as follows:

Pluralist society: it is an open society (but not without frontiers) and a tolerant one (but free to promote their own values and options). It is naturally born in the course of history, not the result of ideological engineering. It appreciates diversity without searching it or artificially creating it. It also appreciates freedom and therefore the voluntary association of individuals. Pluralism incorporates diversity primarily through political acculturation and this common background provides integration. Each individual will be a center of some cross-cutting cleavages: ethnic, religious, professional etc.

Multiculturalist society: is an ideological project that aims to create differences and separations in closed, homogenous, and mutually exclusive monads. It's a "diversity machine" that recognizes the equality of all cultures, excluding this way the

idea of value. According to Sartori, multiculturalism "fabricates" cultures (in the sense of making them visible and relevant) and then uses them for purposes of riot or segregation. An example of the effects of this strategy in the US is the transformation of minorities in political "clients" claiming their language and culture. So, multiculturalism in its ideological version produces tribalization and ghettoization.

This is an unproblematic choice: pluralism has only advantages! Unfortunately, Amin's article demonstrates that there are "pluralisms" and among them, humiliating and aggressive variants. But this means that there may be "multiculturalism" too, with some benign variants! The choice becomes more difficult considering the number of offers, but not impossible: we can choose either the "good" pluralism or the "good" multiculturalism!

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