

# HERITAGE AND THE PARADOX OF CULTURE\*

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## **Abstract**

*We are accustomed to see culture relative to identity. This has been the strategy of modernity which leads us to see globalization as a crisis. This paper proposes to demonstrate that it is more promising to see a culture as a process of transformation through a creative dialogue with its Other.*

Today, global interactions have compelled us to rethink the role of our local cultures, along with the significance of its heritage, in our present life. As never before, culture is now situated in a tug of war between centripetal and centrifugal forces. The centripetal would treat culture as a sanctuary or panacea for the troubled identity, whereas the centrifugal would take culture as a strategy for the transformation of self in new contexts and wider possibilities. While the former oftentimes shows not so much a realistic solution to the problem as a disguised helplessness in facing the global power, the latter seems to promise a more realistic response. How we are to see the problem of cultural heritage will depend on how we conceive culture and tradition today.

## **Culture**

Given the inevitability of cultural interaction today and the fact that so many elements of our culture do change substantively, it would be more relevant to see culture as a process, instead of a system or a formal pattern. Culture is an historic process of plural influences and exchanges. It is a provisional imaginative picture of the junctions of various streams. What is primary is the flow, not the picture. Culture is a dynamic living flow. And as such it has its own internal principle of change. Culture consists

of loosely connected elements that can be ordered and reordered in accordance with changing circumstances, such as when beliefs and values become incompatible with each other, politics is in tension between opposing visions and factions, new meaning subverts the old, and so on and so forth. Hence culture has its own indeterminacies, internal strains, conflicts and improvisations. It is a process of requests and counter-requests, of changing one's responses, and of innovating new expressions. It is also a struggle of power over meaning-giving to important aspects of life, such as problems of gender, private property, human rights, etc. Culture is a creative reordering and renewing capacity, processes of transmission and transformation, based on the existing condition and the possible.<sup>1</sup> Although a culture can be envisaged somehow as a certain whole, it is an internally fissured whole, a whole containing internal differences, including its own alternatives (“Otherness”) and conceiving internal contestations.

The connection between culture and social community is not necessarily one to one. Culture may transgress geopolitical boundaries. In terms of culture, some countries may be overlapping. In history the conflation of culture and social unit was oftentimes political: it served to legitimize the construction of a nation-state. And these days, especially when the survival of a certain community is under the threat of global political power, the need to overemphasize cultural uniqueness arises more strongly. In this respect, when according to Samuel Huntington what is political is basically cultural or civilizational, it would be better to see it the other way round that, what is cultural is basically political.<sup>2</sup> In such context culture plays the role only as a temporary common focus for political engagement, a common reference binding various participants to struggle together for a common cause, not necessarily with common understanding of it. Further, culture does not always serve as the principle of social order, since social order can be buttressed by technique of surveillance, systematic use of terror, effective economic system, educational institution or media of communication.<sup>3</sup>

## **Tradition**

If culture is a creative reordering and renewing capacity, then, the capacity does not come out of the blue. It owes a great deal of its energy and intelligence from the collective past experience, namely, from the so called tradition. Tradition is a peculiar rationality, that is, a systematic effort to make the *Lebenswelt* - the flows of events or the multiformity of experience - intelligible. It is the inner struggle of human effort to give meaning to life experience in particular time and space, which eventually forms particular pattern of inner logic and inner feelings about life.

Tradition is an essential part of our spiritual biography, the collective unconsciousness that has shaped our inner perception, the tacit knowledge that has secretly helped us go through the changes. It serves as the inner-setting, the hidden spiritual alphabet of our dealing with the deep mystery and the paradox of life : the perpetual motion and change.

There is no culture without tradition. Even modernity has its own tradition. The problem, however, is that modernity is characterized by the primacy of the Subject over tradition: personal reflection controls tradition. Whereas in the pre-modern condition it is tradition that controls personal reflection. Modernity is an ongoing process of transvaluation of any cultural traditions, and of its own. But the Subject or self is never a disengaged agent. In Heideggerian terms, the self finds itself and is able to define itself only in terms of a life shared with others, as being-together.<sup>4</sup> And, following Merleau-Ponty, the most part of its perception is basically pre-conscious and pre-personal, materialized by a bodily ego which is also pre-conscious.<sup>5</sup> It is precisely this archaic unity between the self and the world that manifests itself in the so called tradition. But it manifests itself not so much in its overt systems and artifacts as in the covert desires, emotion, imagination, evaluation and behavior behind them. As such, tradition is the natural field for all our modern thoughts and explicit perceptions.

However, when tradition is put *vis-à-vis* modernity, and “traditional” means “pre-modern”, then, we can see traditional culture, with its peculiar characters, as a significant antidote to contemporary modern life. In general, the traditional antiques set up for us the context of our history. Heritage is some sort of transubstantiation of our past. But when they are exhibited in museums they becomes art objects and, like all masterpieces, are made idols, to be appreciated in contemplation, with disinterestedness and distance. And idols soon are transformed into ideas in discourse. Unlike modern art objects, however, traditional artifacts

originally do not belong to the realm of spectacle, in the sense that they are meant neither to be appreciated through watching, nor for contemplation of the sublime. They, instead, belong to the realm of event. It is not the object in itself, but rather, the event or the collective happening that counts. In such context, beauty, usefulness, pleasure, reflection and psycho-physical effects are all fused.<sup>6</sup> Therein the significance of an object lies in its physical presence, which presents the unrepresentable, the absent, the godhead. The power does not lie in its conceptual meaning or virtuosity, but rather, in its emanation of being, in the collective spiritual-cognitive resonance it incites. It does not *mean*, it simply *is*. And to appreciate

In the modern world the value of objects can be framed in two main categories: instrumentality and contemplation. Instrumental perspective prevailing in modernity has created peculiar fabricated environment filled with mass-produced things, the world of “the They” (*das Man*). The modern perspective of contemplation, on the other hand, has created esoteric art with its high formalism trying to articulate the sublime. The former is characterized by its usefulness and transparency, the latter by its virtuosity and opacity. Traditional artifacts can be viewed as an antidote to the insipidity of functional modern industrial environment as well as to the anomic and idiosyncratic world of art. In traditional art maximum utility is continually violated in favor of imagination and sheer caprice, whereas beauty and contemplation are subordinated to usefulness and supernatural power. The energy of its creation is derived from the desire to take delight in every thing we see and touch, a celebration of divinity working in and through banality. It is a *fiesta* of the object which transforms everyday utensils into a sign of communal participation. This explains the predominant penchant for decoration, while in modernity decoration is almost a crime. The imprint on the object is not personal signature, but rather, a faded scar commemorating the original brotherhood of man, the fact that the object is made by and for human collectivity, where soul searches for other soul and body for other body, in a mutually shared physical life.<sup>7</sup>

By suppressing local traditions and heritage modernity has impoverished the world, has become an agent of cultural entropy. And as a utopia it has created uniformity without unity, has failed to eradicate rivalry and hatred between peoples and states. Great civilization is always

a rich synthesis of various cultures, an ongoing growth through the elaboration of otherness.

### **Global Cultural Interaction and Authenticity**

Global modernization has enhanced cultural interactions which, in turn, have also elicited the instability of culture. In the interaction self-interrogation and mutual self-criticism take place, in which the participating cultures are put into question. In this way, cultures would weave and reweave their conceptual networks continually. Through a process of translation, appropriation, resistance, subversion and compromise, thoughts, emotions, symbols and self-awareness are time and again decomposed and recomposed. It is a process of continuous translation of the Other into our own horizon, biography and collective consciousness, and the reverse, our own into the Other's. Thereby we are exposed to the possibility of interpreting anew our own cultural tradition as well as our personal narratives, hence a new possibility to give sense to life.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed the logic of negation or the logic of the "new" inherent in modernism would always compel cultural traditions to reformulate and translate their worldviews in terms of new frameworks of meaning, new demands and new opportunities. But the outcome of such process is not necessarily alienating, since in this way the long hidden potentiality and the unknown significance of a culture may also be rendered manifest to their most abundant flowering. Neither is it to be perceived simply as leading to the re-integration of the core values of the respective cultures, as once envisaged by Samuel Huntington. It is, instead, a process of Deleuzian deterritorialization of meanings and values, a subtle and unpredictable process of ramification, which in turn might even change the very core value of the culture itself.<sup>9</sup>

Cultural interaction is a process of self-enlargement. Vis-à-vis the other, or the Thou, we realize ourselves, we realize the imaginative variations of the ego, the playful metamorphosis of the ego.<sup>10</sup> It is a process of recognizing the complexity, ambiguity and subtlety of each other's "world". What emerges in the interaction is the truth that tells about both. And the truth becomes perceptible only through letting oneself "be told" by the

other, being exposed to that otherness. This is an infinite relation. For the condition of the dialogue keeps changing, motivated by different interests, questions and prejudices.<sup>11</sup>

We are all the potentialities that we have. What we call “human nature” is something we interpret and construct through relationship, by way of metaphors, figures, discourses, organizations and various forms of self-externalization. Identity is in fact a transitory product of ongoing critical dialogical exchange with others. History, tradition and heritage of the past are all the data and interpretation that have constituted our way of living, that we have made use of, and that we are exposed to as an alternative among many others. History, tradition and heritage are not always objective representations of the past, but rather, possible interpretations of it, which are to be re-interpreted so as to transform us, to keep us on the move and to enable us to evolve to higher level.<sup>12</sup> More than simply a matter of transmission, tradition is a process of transformation.

In global cultural interaction what we can expect is the disclosure of possibilities for being and acting that emerge in and by means of playful encounters with the others. It is self-enrichment and greater self-realization as a result of the play of meaning. Authenticity, then, is to be conceived as “being in the truth”. We are in the truth when we are true to ourselves, when in the process of self-transformation we are able to incorporate our specific tradition and personal histories, that is, when our narratives are such as to contain a significant amount of *ongoing* coherence ; when in our rewriting and retelling we are able to preserve and take up the significance of the past with greater subtlety and complexity of narrative. We are authentic also when we are able to overcome the distortions – systematic or otherwise- that constantly menace conversation; when we can maintain the openness of the conversation and keep it going. For it seems that what we most truly are, in our deepest inner self, is a conversation.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) p 8.

<sup>2</sup> Huntington basically sees political problems of the global world today as merely problems of identity rooted in the differences of civilizations. See Samuel P.Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations, remaking the world order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997) pp 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. J.G. Merquior, *The Veil and the Mask: Essays on culture and ideology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) pp 63-65.

<sup>4</sup> see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans John Macquarrie et al. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) pp 61-62.

<sup>5</sup> cfr. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith ( New York: The Humanities Press, 1962) pp viii-xi.

<sup>6</sup> cfr. Leon Rosenstein, “The Aesthetic of the Antique” in Philip Alperson (ed) *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) pp 404-405.

<sup>7</sup> Octavio Paz writes beautifully on craftwork, comparing it with modern objects. This part is inspired very much by the article. See Octavio Paz, “Use and Contemplation”, *ibid.* pp 402-408.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975) pp 345-6.

<sup>9</sup> In Deleuzian perspective meaning and values as inscription of desire and produced by various “desiring machine” are deterritorialized along with the Capitalist formation. The deterritorialization happens in such an unprecedented way that the previous social inscriptions is no longer needed. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology”, in J.B.Thompson (ed), *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> see Gadamer, “Forward to the second German edition of truth and method”, in I.K.Baynes et al (ed), *After Philosophy* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991) p 347.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault proposes an interesting notion that by way of re-interpreting our history, self can also re-create her/himself. This “Aesthetics of Existence” is in line with Nietzschean notion of self as a “work of art”. See H.Dreyfus et al, *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).