

Cultural Globalization and Smaller Eastern European Societies: Reflections Based on Québec and Canadian Perspectives

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The theme of this colloquium, “The Handing Down of Culture, Smaller Societies and Globalization,” reveals profound changes which have occurred throughout the world, and provides an occasion for reflecting on the unprecedented character of the new globalized regime and its relationship with smaller societies. The purpose of this paper is to present an Eastern European perspective on the theme of this colloquium. I have structured my presentation in two parts. The first will deal with conceptual definitions. The second is intended to grasp the cultural aspects of globalization, as seen from Eastern Europe. Drawing on thoughts expressed by researchers during the colloquium, I want to present some considerations that allow us to see how different or similar are the positions of smaller Eastern European societies and Canadian or Québec society.

1. DEFINITIONS OF OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS

On the subject of globalization, culture and smaller societies, one is tempted to paraphrase what Paul

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Valéry wrote about freedom: those words are more loaded with value than with meaning. But first, it seems appropriate to examine the operational concepts at the core of this colloquium.¹

What I mean by globalization² is the expansion of economic and cultural exchanges to take in the whole world, and at the same time, the development of systemic structures that negatively affect ways of living. Globalization in the first sense can be distinguished then from globalization in the second, which is the emergence of a world system, that is “greater than the sum of its parts” (Crochet, 1996: 34). Within this domain of overall definitions, *cultural globalization* is the process through which a local cultural system succeeds in extending its influence to other geographical areas and, in so doing, acquires the capacity of describing other cultural systems as local. In its concrete manifestations, cultural globalization takes two forms. The first one consists of a system of knowledge used to develop information and communication technologies. The second one, which is of more interest to us, especially in its sociological aspect, refers to a mass culture, as defined by Fernand Harvey, that is a culture which gave birth to the mass media, the publication of popular books, magazines and newspapers, cinema, the record industry, and radio and television. It offers *cultural products* (books, films, records, etc.), but also *cultural values* as beliefs and ideological norms, which shape conduct and individuals’ attitudes within the cultural sphere. This culture today is mainly American. It represents the greatest factor in the cultural unification of the present world. This cultural globalization can be called *globalized localism*, a concept put forward by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, meaning that the local American cultural phenomenon has succeeded in becoming globalized. For smaller societies, this aspect of cultural globalization shows up as *localized globalism*, that is “a process of arrangement or of appropriation, by local cultures, of objects, codes or signals disseminated throughout the world by modal centres producing material or virtual symbols” (Létourneau, 1998: 420).

That globalized localism can be seen more especially in newer cultural manifestations, the result of the impact of American transnational practices on smaller societies, which restructure and adapt themselves to those practices. In the international cultural sphere, larger societies create globalized cultural localisms, whereas smaller societies have to do with localized cultural globalisms. American society is the

¹ The conceptual considerations that are to be found here take their inspiration from the reflections of Guy Rocher and of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, at the 16th Congress of the AISLF, held in Québec, July 3-7, 2000. See bibliographical references.

² Translator’s note: In French, there is a clear difference between “mondialisation” and “globalisation.” The author gives both definitions immediately underneath. But there is just one term in English: “globalization.”

primary example of a hegemonic larger society, but every other type of society that has a strong cultural influence on others imposes itself by the very same mechanisms.

2. THE INTERFERENCE OF CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

Among the numerous questions raised by this colloquium, I hold back some which seem congruent with smaller Eastern European societies. I shall privilege some thematic axes of this colloquium, the one evoking interference lines of questions approached with the Eastern European area.

2.1 NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND INFORMATION MEDIAS

As mentioned by Michael Cross, through media and information technologies, globalization generates localism and allows smaller societies be in the forefront of larger ones. One could say that this is a positive influence. Corresponding to the above mentioned definition of cultural globalization, when we deal with globalized localisms, we can see that such a situation makes elements of local culture acquire, at any given moment, international exposure. Globalization is not only a factor in the homogenization of culture, but it can also favour the emergence of extra-American and extra-Western cultural models which, up to now, were not worth mentioning in terms of a Hegelian conception of the cultural history of the world. A good example of this is what Carole Lévesque mentioned about the visibility gained by aboriginal knowledge in the new globalized order.

The planetary interconnection of information technologies also incites the discovery of other cultures. It is through cultural globalization that the smaller societies of Eastern Europe have come to know and overcome so-called cultural incompatibilities, which in fact are the consequence of mutual ignorance. This is a factor of extreme importance, in a context where the experience of the Balkans shows us how individuals raised in different cultures can behave without respect or compassion for others. Without planetary cultural policies, which could bring smaller societies and nations closer together, it is cultural globalization which today favours reciprocal knowledge. Through it, respect for the cultures of others can become socially useful and a basic condition for a new social contract.

2.2 LINGUISTIC UNIFICATION

In Eastern Europe, the fear of linguistic Americanization and the domination of the English language does not exist as a serious concern. The process of the spreading of the English language is not working to the detriment of other languages of regional or global cultures here, as is the case with the French language. The French language has known popularity in this region since the intensification of cultural exchanges in the actual global world. The French language is well rooted there, and is moving toward an even stronger position. The cultural phenomenon of the French language succeeding is linked to the process of globalization, which resulted in the policies of Francophony not being defensive and inward, but more and more open to cultural riches and diversity.

On the other hand, we can see that the logic of the dissemination of languages is not the same as that of commodities. The way one appropriates a given language is different from the consumption of material goods or of economic integration. The weakening of borders is, for the new Eastern European generations, an incitement to discover and assimilate other languages, out of passion or necessity. Speaking more than one language and moving around in other cultures is now a valuable professional asset. Léon Bernier, in his paper about youth and art, has pinpointed how this encounter arises through free expression, not as the result of a policy of cultural reproduction. I would like to know how many young people today learn French, German, Russian and even the languages of smaller societies like Romanian freely, because of globalization. It is certain that they are numerous; this is a positive development. Globalization, inasmuch as it is spreading cultures and languages all over the world, is the best means of preserving them.

2.3 CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

Regarding cultural industries, there is a tension in Eastern Europe between the supporters of institutional help for culture and the promoters of *laissez-faire* applied to cultural production. Mistrusting everything that comes from the State, Eastern European cultural producers have turned to the private sector for financing because it seems more likely than State institutions to encourage the expression of individual freedom for artistic creation. This situation is such that the prevailing opinion is that the success or failure of a cultural product depends on the market. This, of course, favours American cultural productions.

In that context we can ask the following question: what are the mechanisms which impose elements of the American culture today on the world, especially in Eastern Europe, in a situation, as Robin Higham has observed, in which the USA has no national diplomatic cultural policy, but only a private one, which is not enclosed in pre-established norms? One of the reasons of course is the fascination of Eastern Europe with America. Apart from that, there is certainly a link between the characteristics of American cultural production and its dissemination. If, during the forty-five years of Soviet domination of Eastern countries, artistic expression was judged through the lens of communist ideology, today judgement is through the market. In a market situation, individual choice prevails. From that point of view, the force of the American cultural production rules world culture. The strength of American culture is based on the fact that it is centered on *promoting not the modes of expression of a given community or a nation, but on the modes of expression of the individual*. American culture represents the unceasing production and destruction of the meaning of life by individuals, not by a collectivity. One can say that America can be found in all the cultures of the world, since the whole world recognizes itself in good measure through its cultural production.

2.4 CULTURAL POLICIES AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN THE BUILDING UP OF IDENTITY

More than one author has underlined the fact that smaller societies resist homogenization by promoting identity through cultural policies. What one finds in the views of a number of researchers is that the governments of smaller societies like Canada and Québec have been successful in developing policies for preserving and asserting an identity threatened by the superpower that is the United States. These smaller societies fear becoming a caricature of the American cultural model, which will impose its language, and its ways of thinking and creating. The fact is that today identity is dependent more and more on the State, which has replaced the traditional structures of social regulation.

But in Eastern Europe, cultural policies intended to promoting identity by the State are rejected since they had been largely used by communist regimes to legitimate their power. In smaller Eastern European societies, in order to legitimate its actions, the State has manipulated the feeling of identity. Individuals and social groups were not in a position to define themselves freely. The structures of State power assigned identities to individuals, in conformity with a unifying idea of social organization that was able to impose the logic of domination. Eastern Europeans have lived the terror of *legitimizing identity*, instilled by the controlling institutions of the collectivist hegemonic society, in order to extend their domination over individuals.

Under those conditions, American cultural hegemony is seen by the smaller Eastern European societies as an element of de-communicization and the result of modernization. The protection of the collective identity is not seen as a positive phenomenon, but as a means of delaying modernity at the price of economic, political and cultural stagnation. The discourse against globalization because of the protection of cultural identity is thought of as lying on a *congealed idea of culture*, based on the principle that no society can remain identical throughout time. When facing a possible institutional offensive to promote identity, Eastern European societies argue that this strategy can crush the individual who stresses his own originality in favour of belonging to a collectivity.

I think it is pertinent to question the intervention of the State to promote cultural identity, in that it ascribes a certain identity to members of a given society. This questioning does not consider the pertinence of State intervention inasmuch as it respects identity elements emerging from the overall social body, as well as, as Diane Saint-Pierre pointed out in her paper, the role and the impact of institutional actors involved in the construction of identity and also the values and the beliefs they convey. I see that wherever we are, the State tends to place special value on some cultural and identity elements but, in so doing, it decontextualizes those elements and places them outside history. However, from a cultural point of view, value is an historical concept; it is subject to a temporal setting. This is why one should re-interpret the meaning of cultural participation and lay new foundations for the relationship of the State to culture based on the recognition of more universal identities and of cultural norms adapted to the context of globalization. One should have a non-paternalistic eye on cultural participation, where individual autonomy is more important, and where the subject is defined more by individual projects rather than by the fact of belonging to a given nation or a particular society. Under those conditions, intellectual discourse about the dislocation of collective cultural values and the condemnation of triumphant individualism, which cultivates the narcissism of the resister, is not relevant any more. Resistance to change is not in itself a moral value, and there is no evidence that some forms of de-setting the relationship to values is the end of any relationships to values. It is only in forsaking the positions of strategists or narcissistic resisters that those responsible for culture in smaller societies can open up space for new settings of culture that the process of globalization has allowed to emerge.

I would say here that the cultures of smaller societies, Canadian, Québécois or Eastern European, are increasingly becoming *cultures of interference* in the context of globalization. They are ruled by the princi-

ple of the search for identity and the integration of contradictory cultural elements. Obsessed by the lack of the possibility of cultural dissemination, and referring to a core they despise or value, those societies see their local creativity stimulated and, as a result, develop a culture that integrates different perspectives that become a shield against homogenization. *Thus margins become as interesting as the core.* Under these conditions, as underscored by John Meisel, a scenario that forces a choice between the folding back of an identity or the hegemony of a globalized culture of the American type becomes totally irrelevant.

3. CONCLUSION

The new cultural order which is emerging from the context of globalization is a real project of civilization where cultures are completing each other without excluding themselves, where they reinforce each other without weakening themselves, where they get together without becoming similar. In a world where cultural diversity is becoming, as Fernand Harvey put it, “the only true way for maintaining humanism at the core of culture,” the universal will be implemented through the recognition of particularities. This recognition is also a preliminary condition for setting up a real dialogue among people. From that perspective, globalization can be seen by smaller societies as a political, economic and cultural opening. The citizens of those societies should not be discouraged by that challenge; rather it should prompt them to overcome it with enthusiasm.

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