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The Confrontation of Cultural Values Following Globalization

For the past few years, the world has confronted the sudden emergence of Asia. This reality, introduced through Globalization, first considered as merely an economic movement, accelerated the meeting of different cultures and eventually brought to light a number of confrontations between occidental and oriental values. This text summarily presents a number of ideas on this subject.

1- An Examination of a historical conception of the Occident

In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel, in defining three great « stages of history », namely, the Oriental, Greek and Ancient Roman, and the Occidental, proposes a certain conception of human history: it is a movement with “no return.” At each stage, he writes, there has been only one emerging civilization. Each of the civilizations he considers is distinctive. At the time of its emergence, a civilization imposes itself as the *only world power* (Hegel, 1967). It follows from this tenet that there is no way for the domination of the world to be *shared*, that power is not the result of the common work of various nations. In applying this idea to recent history, Hegel claims that the advent of the Germanic period, which began the “New Times” era in the European Occident, was synonymous with the definite end of other civilizations. Thus the Hegelian conception of history does not allow for any sort of *return*.

This idea, however, which has been used to describe the *ends* of all other civilizations in human history, cannot be applied to the Modern period. Here we begin to see the complexity of Hegel’s philosophy of history. If the Modern era had appeared to Hegel as a less discrete period, eternally continuing, he would have represented other civilizations as forever ended, as if a transcendental historical force had suddenly precipitated their end.

But why is it so important to refer to Hegel?

Because it is he, in fact, who defines for the first time, in a systematic way and in philosophical terms, the foundations of Occidental modernity. The entire history of colonization is in itself a testament to this philosophy.

However, three successive events at the end of the Twentieth Century lead us to question some of the fundamental ideas behind Hegel's thesis.

1) The first is the crisis of the foundations of modernity (see notes), which arose in the Occident shortly after the end of the Second World War. The crisis of that time invites a critique of the Occidental construction of the "Subject", the concept of "progress", and the evolutionist conception of "history", the fundamental ideas of modernity.

2) The second event that challenges modern thought is Globalization (see notes), a movement that at first glance seems to be economic in nature. Beginning with colonization and increasing more rapidly during the 1970's and 1980's, with the collapse of Communism, Globalization has introduced a new world organization that is quite distinct from that found in earlier periods. Globalization has caused the world's active zones to work together within a "single system".

3) We must consider the surprising success of certain Southeast Asian countries in the economic sphere as a third event, related to the second event which calls into question Hegel's thesis. Suddenly the West world has turned its attention toward Asia. By 1980, the remarkable economic research completed by French Jean-Claude Chesnais had already opened up a provocative debate on this subject. In his chapter on "*The Revenge of the Orient*," Chesnais describes in detail the continual progress of Asian countries (1987).

2- An Identity Crisis

In the thesis according to which modernity, by means of Globalization, imposes "on the rest of the world" (a Weberian term) a "*situation of historical no-return*", it seems that Hegel has overlooked the fact that the foundation poles of the rest of the world are not and will not be inactive in the face of modernity.

As a matter of fact, modernity is of Occidental origin (J. Habermas, 1989). Its emergence has implications for the entire world, and in consequence this Globalization constitutes what Hegel would call a movement of "exteriorization" (Hegel, 1967). Its universal presence became conflictual, since it creates a contact between the central poles and certain cultures of essentially different origins. *L'Infini*, the founding notion of modernity,

leads all non-western countries toward a historical condition never before seen and leaves [people] to struggle in a world caught between tradition and change. The countries of Northern Africa, the Middle East, and Asia exemplify this phenomenon (J.F. Couet and R. Lignières, 1978).

In reality, the omnipresence of the modern Occident has produced extremely rich confrontations between the cultures of certain countries that were, in an historical sense, not modern. In this sense, Globalization seems to be irreducible to an economic movement. Marked by a Faustian spirit, it involves the “exteriorization” of modernity in the broadest sense of the term. We call it the “*Globalization of Modernity*,” which means the penetration of the western values into the cultural, political, and economic space of “the world historically non-modern,” (see notes) causing these countries to experience the “identity crisis” (Hoodashtian, 1993).

This conflict manifests itself in the forms of **resistance**, presented both consciously and unconsciously by the non-westerns countries to Occidental modernity. This identity crisis demonstrates that the cultures of the countries in question are not ready to easily submit to the changes. These changes are perceived to have arisen **outside** their own **historical contexts**, outside of their own traditional culture.

But, however, can this resistance contribute to a new version of oriental culture ? Does it indicate a need for changes ?

3- Asia

For Occidentalists such as Jean Chardin (1643-1713), the agent of the English Company of India, who visited Persia and India, Henri Corbin (1912-1975), or the Earl Joseph Arthur Gobineau (1816-1882) and René Guénon (1886-1951), Asia has always been a subject of fascination. There are two explanations for this fascination:

A) Initially, modernists such as Goth claimed that Faustian culture produced a “principal of life,” or a continuous **revolt** against external constraints on man. This principle is directly linked to the idea of modernity. More specifically, this principle concerns Lukacs’s remarks about modernity, in the concept he called “**unachievability**”, the unachievable will to leave one’s own geographical and cultural space and to go and discover the world (G. Lukacs, 1979). Here again we see the idea of the Subject (Sujet) (R. Descartes, 1990) belonging to an “*infinite universe*” (A. Koyré, 1978)-- a founding concept in western modernity. In describing colonization, Adam Smith, among others, speaks about the

“multiplication of pleasures” which induced the Occidental world to discover America (A. Smith, 1994).

B) The next event was the discovery of “Difference”, and of a cultural space constructed of fundamentally different values from those of modernity. This second reason for Occidental interest in the Orient is somewhat related to the first, but it belongs to a different category because it relates to an internal crisis, and because it questions modern values. It therefore manifests itself in the confrontation of western elements and those of the historically non-modern world. In other words, according to some Occidentalist viewpoints, the East offers a perspective that could offer an exit from the crisis of modernity, an escape from modern life and the permanent uncertainty experienced by the “modern” man in facing the world.

At a basic level, modernity represents disquiet and unrest and doubt (A. Nuss, 1995, J. Baudrillard, 1989, A. Tourin, 1992) (because the criticism is synonym of modernity). The Occidentalist in the Orient, in Asia, finds a kind of certainty that he could never have experienced in his own land. The “modern human being” never becomes totally Oriental, but rather exposes himself to the Orient, finding momentary rest there. The Orient provides a non-occidental moment for the occidentalist.

But how can we explain this certainty, this experience of “spiritual tranquillity” in the Orient? This phenomenon may in part be explained by certain definitions of life, conceptions of nature, and the relationship established between man and nature. It would require too much space to address all of these conceptions in this paper. Instead, we will discuss only the experience of “spiritual tranquillity” in relation to a culture’s definition of nature. The following sections summarily present a possible direction for research on this subject. First, let us establish how the modern world conceives of nature.

4- The Occidental Conception of Nature

One of the basic differences between Occidental and Oriental cultures is found in the relationship that each constructs between man and nature. We know that in the Occident, the modern definition of totality is one of “homogeneous unity” (F. Châtelet, 1977, O. Spingler, 1917-48, K. Shayegan, 1989). The idea of the Occident as a relative unity, in spite of its internal diversity, is based on one of the most fundamental concepts of modernism.

In the same way, Hegel considers the Orient as a continent completely different from the Occident. The idea of relative unity in the Orient seems to be more important than the

diversity within this part of the world : As some writers have determined it, “the Orient is a whole” (R. Guénon, 1956, K. Shayegan, 1989, H. Nasr, 1978, F. Schun, 1968).

These two continental “unites” present us then with two kinds of human beings. They show us two conceptions of the world as well as two definitions of nature.

The works of Bacon and Descartes demonstrate the western concept of the Subject, proposing a process of understanding, a science, which has for an end “control over nature.” For the founder of modernity, this control seemed to be essential to the advance of modern science. In fact, the modern *épistémé* promotes the “objectification of nature” (Adorno, 1944, Heidegger, 1986).

5- The Oriental Conception of Nature

The idea of a subjective unity in the Orient can be described with a triad having three historical columns that represent Persia (including Islam), India, and China. In all three of these ancient cultural spaces, nature never became the object of human domination. In fact, the “disenchantment of the world,” which was at the base of modernity in the west, was never felt in the East, as the latter has never experienced the rupture between philosophy and religion which brought about modernity. This lack of rupture became a general characteristic of Asia.

- As far as *China* is considered, F. Schuon (1968, in: Nasr 1978) insists on the fact that the dominant culture in East-Asia, that is to say, the “Chinese culture with its various branches of Taoism and Confucian doctrine” embraces a religion of nature. The Orientalist philosopher H. Nasr (1978) notes that in Taoism as well as in Neo-Confucianism we find “an attitude of devotion toward nature” and an understanding of its metaphysical significance. The Oriental man lives in harmony with nature and for that, every man “must live in harmony with the sky.” The objective of this man, Nasr underlines, is to “contemplate nature” and “to merge in it in order to become ‘natural.’” Nasr claims that Chinese thought encourages people to accept the norms of nature and “its rhythms rather than to try to dominate it and conquer it, [as] nature must not be judged in terms of its usefulness to men.” According to this idea, man must accept and follow the nature of things rather than try to distort nature by artificial means. Nasr emphasize that in Taoism, there is a refusal to apply “sciences of nature to the purely material well-being of man” (Nasr, 1979).

- With respect to *India*, we can note the existence of a metaphysical doctrine pertaining to nature. The Indian psychologist, Suddhi Kakar, asserts that Hindu wisdom

does not require a Subject in the modern sense of the term (Shayegan, 1989). Unlike a world that would recommend the « instrumentalization of nature », Indu describes nature as being so beautiful that it is called *mâyâ*, or “magic.” Darush Shayegan, a specialist on India, underlines that “for an Hindu haunted by the irresistible seduction of omnipresent divinities, the “myth” has more reality than everyday life, while for a Mahayanist Buddhist, the life of the Bodhisattva is more luminous, more instructive than... the historical life, considering that it is only one of the many aspects of the Samsara (‘the flow of the rebirth’)” (Ibid).

The Chinese are “fascinated by nature,” they let themselves be led by it with an open spirit which allows them to exist in harmony with it. Shayegan mentions that this “harmony” corresponds to a principle known as “non-action” in the Chinese culture. This “non-action,” also present in Indian culture, takes the form of “action without intention,” (or non-intentional action) (Shayegan, 1975).

- Turning to *Islam*, we can refer to the work of the Islamologist, N. Pourjavadi (1989), who insists on the irrefutable existence in the Islamic tradition of the “intellect” as a concept marked by Cartesian thought. Pourjavadi continues, however, that this concept never became absolute; some aspect of its “deep Islamic and Koranic meaning” is always preserved. But, in Cartesian rationalism, the particular sense of the intellect “loses its place, and Reason replaces it.” In this way, modern Occidental thought, Pourjavadi writes, is philosophical at its foundation, and this fundamental philosophy only pertains to Reason. In the history of Islamic civilization, on the other hand, philosophers represent only one group of thinkers, and the others, such as *mystics* and *sufis*, never allow philosophical thought to become absolute.

In his remarkable research on the most prominent figures of the Islamic world, H. Nasr studies Avicenne (ibn Sinâ) and Al Bîrûnî: in its relation to nature, the Avicenne method (980-1037) greatly resembles the “method of experiment” found in modern science, although Muslim philosophy does not try to control nature. Nature for the Muslim has a mysterious and intimate aspect and is never an “object of domination.” Al Bîrûnî (973-1048) does not try to substitute man’s understanding of nature for nature itself, an attitude which, at least according to Heidegger and Adorno, was the result of the work of Descartes and Galilée. For Bîrûnî, the Persian philosopher, nature is more important than all of God’s work. Man’s representation of nature could never correspond to nature as it truly exists.

In this way we can understand several « fundamental differences » between the Occident and the Orient. In all of the great Asian civilizations, the eastern man has never

thought about, nor wished to understand nature by means of his own intellectual subjectivity. For him, the modernist split between man and nature does not exist.

6- Towards a Synthesis?

Let us again formulate that Oriental thought constructs a harmonious relationship between man and nature and that this harmony allows for certainty in the Oriental spirit.. Evidently, the penetration of Modern Occidental thought into a historically non-modern world has produced an “identity crisis” at the Central poles of oriental civilizations, shaking the conceptual harmony between Oriental man and nature. However, this crisis has not definitively dissolved Oriental harmony with nature. Shayegan shows that modernity, as an exterior phenomenon, does not have the power to overcome the Orient. In addition, the identity crisis seems to be shaped by the cultural resistance of Oriental civilization.

How can this resistance, however, would be able to contribute to a new kind of *synthesis*, a new version of Oriental culture which is more acceptable to the Modern Occidental world ? This new reality is larger and more important than the power of any political decision-makers, since it has been, according to our belief an *inevitable* movement in human history. Because modernity is inevitable.

The penetration of Modernity throughout the rest of the world goes beyond zones of *direct influence of Occident* and reactivates the confrontation of values and cultures. And yet the modern condition *goes beyond* the Occident: this is the ultimate sign and finally the only result of Globalization, the natural spread of Occidental practices to the rest of the planet. How can we explain that the crisis of identity, instead of being the sign of the “cultural fragility” of “Third World” countries, would indicate a need for a *union of “modern” and “traditional” thought and values* ? What is this « union »?

The philosophy that represents history as a movement with no return is at the basis of modern western thought. Can we say that the identity crisis of non-historically modern countries inevitably leads us to consider a new *system of mixed modern and traditional values* ?. We say that *the world can no longer ignore modernity. Globalization abandons the world in a situation of historical no-return*. How can we understand that no major or continual return to tradition, at the level of civilization, would not be possible or even thinkable ?

What point of departure can we find for such a Composition of Values ? If we consider how difficult it is in oriental civilization to establish democracy, tolerance and

mutual respect between individuals, then we must ask ourselves: what measures can be taken to avoid the abuse of social and political power?

NOTES

1) **Globalization** refers to "an acceleration and a deepening of internationalization, by means of easier mobility of resources across nations and therefore increased competition among them. From "Internationalization to Globalization," in *Global Economy, French Notebooks, French Documentation*, N° 269, January-February, 1995. (L'Economie Mondiale, Cahiers Français, La Documentation Française.)

2) The "**world historically non-modern**" describes countries that did not experience modernity as a "historical stage," but which are under its influence in the context of their own external, historical sphere. This conception is crucial for understanding the differences that are fundamental, and therefore historical, between the Orient and the Occident, eastern and western countries.

3) We know that the notions of **crisis** and **criticism** are synonyms for modernity, as confirmed by Alexandre Koyre's description of the Modern era as a "time of crisis" (Conversation about Descartes, in *Readings of Plato*, Gallimard, Paris, 1962, p. 178). Additionally, Alexis Nouss, in his text, *Modernity*, refers to the same notion as an inherent quality of Modern Times (*Modernity*, PUF, 1997). However, we simply consider of our era as one of the stages of the crisis of modernity.

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