

Note on Society/Réflexion sur la société

Equality and/or Difference: Real Problems, False Dilemmas¹

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The opposition between these two terms is so frequently repeated and, above all, so frequently serves as the ideological expression of conflicts of interests or of civilization that we must begin by clarifying it and defining the real content of the discussion; if the terms are confused, the discussion may well remain unresolved. The real choice which confronts us can be reformulated as follows: either equality between individuals and groups is an equality of rights, as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen states perfectly, and not a de facto equality, and it applies to a specifically political and legal order which is above social and cultural realities, or this equality of rights implies a right to difference, which may apply to a specific social category as well as to a culture. If we consider equality from this second point of view, we must recognize the tension between the two terms — equality and difference —, a tension which can lead to opposition and rupture.

Let me try to explain it by referring directly to the main historical form which this discussion has taken within the global process of economic and social modernization known as industrialization. As from the mid-nineteenth century, and in the first instance in Europe, the universalist conception of citizenship entered into conflict with what can be called social demands, that is to say the recognition of the specific rights of certain social and professional

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categories which can be defined in broad terms like "working class" or the "peasantry." Many of those who defend specific interests accept the idea that there is a fundamental social conflict and therefore give a priority to the liberation of dominated categories against the universalism of citizenship that they consider as an instrument of domination of wage-earners and colonized peoples. The Twentieth century has to a large extent been dominated by the ideologies which can be referred to as Leninist-Maoist, which fought "bourgeois democracy" in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is the only real liberation. It was much more difficult for the advocates of the contrary thesis, that of the extension of citizenship to the realities of the world of labor and all economic activity, to formulate their position. Great Britain is the country of origin of the idea of *industrial democracy* that then broadened into *social democracy* and further still into the *Welfare State*. Today we tend to think that this democratic socialism won the day deservedly and through world-wide conflicts over dictatorial forms of socialism; but that could lead us to forget that this democratic socialism recognized, as did its Bolshevik opponent, the key importance of relationships of domination. Its fundamental assertion, and the one which finally won the day at least to some extent is that democratic political institutions are the essential means of defense of dominated categories, and are therefore the tools of a genuine equality of rights.

It is easy to move from this evocation of an ideological and political conflict that, for a century, tore all the continents apart, to the formulation of problems of a similar nature which dominate our times. The demand for equality of social rights depended on the recognition of the central importance of social relations of domination; today we live, as a new stage of democratic thought, the assertion of cultural rights, which are not only rights to difference but, in the first instance and primarily, the defense of ways of living or thinking which are threatened or destroyed by the dominant forces. These forces are endeavoring to destroy what they call specificities in the name of what they declare to be universalism but which, in reality, is only the generalization of the ways of life and thought which correspond to their acquired interests and to their power. Today, as yesterday, the real discussion is not between "differentialists" and "universalists" or between "communitarians" and "liberals," to use the categories which divided our intellectual world as deeply as the conflict between the social democrats and the revolutionaries divided the industrial society. The discussion is between those who defend "cultural democracy," the advocates of a "cultural revolution" which attempts to destroy what they consider to be the cultural foundations of a domination and, as an important third position, those who believe in a cultural "one best way." Today these are the oppositions which underly all the main cultural conflicts, whether it be the women's movements, the political ecologists or the actions carried out in the name of multiculturalism and in defense of minorities.

This has to be re-stated as clearly as possible: it is not a question of choosing between universalism and cultural pluralism, because the two terms are never completely distinct and because at the same time they belong to different levels of analysis and action. The real question is whether there should be a maximal separation between rights and forms of social organization or, on the contrary, an extension of the concept of rights to all aspects of social and cultural reality. Those who reject this second position declare that to speak of the right to difference destroys any principle of universalism and therefore of citizenship and democracy. The opponents of the other position denounce a universalism which is so restricted to a narrow political sphere that it is reduced to the issue of rivalry between competing factions within a dominant world, as is still the case in some Latin-American countries, where the struggle between conservatives and liberals is confined uniquely to political coalitions within the hegemony of a dominant class.

The complete defense of difference is easily marginalized or self-destructive and ignores the real problems. Even if it is true that recourse to so-called alternative forms of medical treatment has persisted and is even spreading, these attitudes reject completely medical treatment based on scientific knowledge. In other cases, what is defined as a difference conceals the expression of a concrete social domination. Can one defend the excision of young girls in some regions without seeing a repression of feminine pleasure in these practices? So, let's come back to the real problem: that of the extension, which some consider possible and necessary and others impossible, of the idea of "rights" to the vast field of cultural behavior. In still more precise terms, is it possible to maintain a universalist definition of rights, that is in individual terms, or should we defend all communitarian cultural practices? In more political terms: is the defense of democracy, which is a primarily political concept, an essential condition for the recognition of cultural rights or is it in fact an obstacle to cultural pluralism?

Before trying to answer this question, let us eliminate a possible confusion between the sphere of rights and the generalization of economic and technological methods of production and trade based on rational understanding. Even if these can be considered as rational, they can in no way be considered as the expression of rights.

Instead of acting as if we had to choose between equality and difference, let's admit that we are trying to combine a concrete participation in an increasingly widespread economic and technical organization and the defense or construction of cultural orientations which are always rooted in traditions or teachings, but which also have an aspect of innovation and, by way of consequence, a personal or collective involvement. There is no actual right to choose one goal as opposed to the other — economic participation or cultural identity —, but we must have the right to combine the two. This cannot be

impossible, because cultural demand deals with value and economic participation with "means." All, or almost all of us, are seeking to belong to the same economic world, to fulfill a function for which we receive some sort of payment and, at the same time, to develop individually and collectively the construction of value-oriented cultural activities. It is therefore neither a question of the right to difference or of the right to work and to receive equal economic opportunities but of the right, for each individual and each social group, to combine instrumental activities within cultural modes of thinking, acting and believing. This formulation is only possible today because the separation of instrumental reason and cultural systems has taken place, through the generalization of a world of techniques. The forms of production have almost always been linked in the past with forms of social organization, political power and religious or traditional beliefs. In industrial society, what we called the organization of labor was still primarily an instrument by means of which the owners of capital broke the resistance of craftsmen identities and skills to ensure their acquisition of higher profits. Contrary to what is sometimes stated, our entry into an information society has not imposed a rigid technological determinism on us. On the contrary, these modern technologies are a *primum movens*, and do not manifest a specific social domination; this is why they exclude any form of technological determinism and are of a flexibility hitherto unknown. This has enabled our search for different ways of involving ourselves culturally in the technical and economic activities in which we all participate. This separation of the economic world and the cultural worlds can be rightly interpreted as a dangerous disassociation between two worlds whose links made social life possible. It is true that we live under the threat of the disintegration (rupture) of both our society and our personality, that we are capable of living simultaneously in a world dominated by instrumental rationality and in universes which are dominated by religious beliefs or by the search for pleasure. But it is this very separation, this constant threat of a rupture which makes possible the formation of new demands, obtaining the right for everyone to combine participation in an increasingly global economic world and the defence of old and new cultural orientations. The idea of a cultural right, which has foundations as solid as those of social rights and, still further back in time, of civic and political rights, cannot be reduced to a right to difference; what is demanded is the right to combine cultural difference and economic participation. This can be stated even more clearly as the right to be a subject because the subject, by definition, is the search for liberty and responsibility which persists or gains momentum despite the depth of the contradictions and the strength of the tensions between what can be called the objective world and the worlds of subjectivity. The combination of economic participation and cultural identity is made possible not by a choice between equality and difference, but by the desire to construct

or reconstruct a personal or collective experience which combines both universes and a desire to be a social actor. The most concrete and constant expression of this desire is effectively the search for a life project, a mode of thinking and acting which enables us to recognize both what we have in common with others and what we have the right to defend, as opposed to others, who are both similar and different to us.

As in industrial society, this effort to reconstruct experience is based on the defense of rights, because such a defense of rights enables us to avoid a choice, which is always destructive, between cultural identity and the increasingly dependent participation in a globalized economic structure. If we abandon this idea of cultural rights — considered as an extension of political and social rights —, we are confronted with the dramatic choice between two solutions which are equally destructive : either the obsession of identity, or the ideology of the mass society which is as ubiquitous in consumption and communication as it is in production. It is our active resistance to this type of destructive choice that constitutes the democratic and juridical basis of our cultural rights. The latter cannot therefore be conceived of as the defense of a cultural identity, but as the right to combine cultural orientations and economic activities. Cultural rights are less and less rights to identity and, truth to say, the very idea of right to identity is tending to weaken because the obsession with identity is making less of a call on the idea of right. Not only do those who speak of *ethnic cleansing*, purity or the homogeneity of a society not speak in terms of rights, but even refuse any reference to the idea of rights as their main preoccupation is the absolute subordination of individuals to a collective existence, an imagined community.

If an obsession with identity is the most visible destructive force, because it leads to massive destructions of population, the opposite, and partly complementary, deviation which can be called the ideology of mass society has equally destructive effects. We often have the impression, at least in the most affluent countries, of living in a universe that is reduced to a set of markets, which determine our behavior, thoughts and increasingly varied forms of advertising. That creates in us the desire to get rid of identities that are experienced as obstacles to a universe entirely redefined in terms of consumption. Because we are well aware of the constraints which beliefs and cultural systems have always imposed upon us, we are attracted by the freedom of markets, their flexibility and the ever rising satisfaction that we get from our access to goods and services of which the number and complexity are increasingly very rapidly.

If we attempt to choose between these two opposite sides of our experience, we strengthen the mechanisms of domination. Market behavior seems to be directed by individual choice — possibly arbitrary; the truth is quite the contrary, as we learn from marketing studies which can forecast consumption

patterns fairly accurately. Similarly, we easily have the impression of defending our liberty of belief and behavior in the face of the forces of integration. But in both cases, we subject ourselves to a logic of domination which is imposed on us and denies our existence as free beings. What is most intolerable is to see the rich accepting the liberty and the limits of the market and the poor, the warmth and authoritarian integration of collective identities.

The analyses which have just been outlined are sufficient to define the nature of the conflicts and the oppositions which dominate the economic and political history at the beginning of this century. They demonstrate, in any case, that it is in no way a question of choosing between equality and difference or between market liberalism and communitarian voluntarism.

Many people are against globalization because they try to protect regional or national production. When this defensive attitude is found, which is quite often the case in Western Europe, it is easy to criticize this protectionism, the victims of which are the developing countries and the emerging economies. Anti-globalization movements should fight not against the internationalization of trade but against an extreme form of capitalism that aims at imposing its own logic by destroying all institutional and other forms of control of economic life. We must give a priority to campaigns which aim at democratizing the economy, that is to say, for the creation of new forms of control and regulation of the economy in the name of political, cultural and national objectives. It is true that the protests which have increased from the demonstrations in Seattle to the one in Geneva are usually incapable of mobilizing the intervention of concrete decision-makers to block or limit a system which claims to impose on the whole world the implacable logic of the market. But this is a real issue for concern, and the very special interest of the forums in Porto Alegre is to enable the meeting of very numerous Latin-American social movements (and in particular that of the landless peasants in Brazil) with the most global and the most ideological forms of rejection of a globalization which appears to be closely linked to a hegemony which is altogether political, economic and military, imposed by the United States.

This slow reappearance of specifically political themes and this search for new social actors has been considerably strengthened by the resistance, at long last, of the economists to declarations which were a caricature of their knowledge. Of course, nobody is going to assert that growth is primarily due to free trade. No economist has ever denied the important — and even increasingly important — role, played by the level of education the type of state intervention and the strength of national or regional consciousness as factors in economic growth. But it was many years after the diffusion of the Washington Consensus that international economic circles recognized the urgent need for non-economic factors in the development of economic growth. The already very visible outcome of this type of development is that the central

theme of the protest movements no longer targets difference, but the condemnation of a form of domination which results in the majority of social groups losing all control over their conditions of existence. This is very important as long as we make it clear that it is not a question of defending an identity once and for all but, on the contrary, of being capable of working out a policy, a mode of action of society on itself which can only be efficient if it mobilizes the forces who wish to define choices, like a form of submission or, on the contrary, a rejection of domination. When this type of reversal in perspectives becomes visible, we can no longer be content with an opposition of the equality/identity type; we have to bring into play at least three terms. Instead of claiming equality, we should speak of the right to accede to economic activities and to the salaries which they produce, and the reference to rights intervenes at a higher level, that of the combination between this economic openness, and freedom and cultural responsibilities.

This is very far from the defensive remarks repeated in recent years by those who referred to themselves in France as republicans, what used to be known as Jacobins. The anti-Maastricht republican movements, and, a fortiori, the anti-American movements, are primarily movements in defense of national States considered as the locus of creation of both political liberties and national cultural identity. It is not a question of being attracted by those who announce the decline and disappearance of the national States with no concern as to whether their declarations correspond to any observable reality or not; but before redefining the more positive functions of the State and more generally of the political system, it is appropriate to recognize the forms of domination which have continued to develop, in all sectors of society and especially in the sectors of culture. The defence of the national State can no longer be a central goal ; it does not depend on any national State that the planet is threatened by all sorts of pollution. Already in the past century, it was not in the name of the national State that so many protests against the condition of the proletariat or working classes were carried out. Instead of concentrating the defense of liberties at a strictly political, State-centered, level, we must, with more confidence and imagination, extend to the whole of life experience the joint search for equality of opportunities and the defense of cultural rights.

Does this not, to a large extent, define the role of sociology today? For a decade or two, it did seem to be becoming marginal and useless. In many countries we even saw universities being transformed into business schools or technological institutes. Perhaps for a few years there was no point in reacting against the disintegrated forms of post-war state interventionism; but today it is urgent to reconstruct a vision of society which is at once social, cultural and economic and consequently to define the political sphere once again. Here we return to what was the permanent debate which divided the Latin-American intellectuals. Part of them, probably the most numerous, wanted first of all to

concentrate on the break with the bonds of external dependence, while at the same time, many others had confidence in the integration of Latin America in a pan-American space. But others, whose influence continuously increased, defended the idea that the main point was to reconstruct the political sphere in which could be discovered forms of combination between the struggle against external domination and the construction of new political and social actors. Today, sociologists must have greater ambitions for themselves. Is it not obvious, when one reads the most influential studies of the best contemporary economists, that sociological themes occupy a vast, and almost dominant, terrain? Even if one believes that it is the more economic, rather than the more sociological representations of the actor that must play an important role in the analysis, it is obvious that it is in sociological terms that the deepest conflicts and changes must be understood. This means that sociology does not have to choose between liberal openness and communitarian identity but that it definitely has to take a stand against all the forms of domination by countering them all with the central unity of the right of each individual to exist and to be treated as an actor in all the spheres of individual or collective experience. It is high time that sociology ceases to watch the sun going down on the former ideologies and the former representations of society and that it plays the leading role in which it is cast — the understanding of the new forms of domination which are developing and especially the various forms of opposition to these new forms of economic and political power.

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