

CULTURAL COEXISTENCE

*Homo simplex in animalitate
duplex in humanitate*

Culture is a pillow-word; it shapes itself according to the head resting upon it. In 1968, a group of experts convened by UNESCO defined it as the means by which all goals are articulated, or as the sum of the means created by man to ensure his existence or communicate with his fellows. Another meeting in 1970 took up this definition again, and posited culture as the sum total of knowledge and modes of thought and action which allow man to order his own behavior, his relationships with other men and nature.

These formulations are so global that they stand a good chance of being correct; they prove that culture is like happiness: an idea new to Europe. Without doubt our age is the first to consider this notion and be aware of it as a problem: it is at the moment when, according to Lévi Strauss, certain values are instinctively perceived as threatened so that they become subjects for discussion.

The vocabulary must be more closely examined. Normally, the word culture is tied to the elements of an ethnic or human group, geographically placed, in order to indicate the sum of the heritage, the frames of reference and values of the group, whose destiny is historically completed or is still in the process of completion. This (society)-culture itself takes on many forms, so that certain social groups each assume their own cultural

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behavior: bourgeois culture, popular culture, elite culture, etc...

Yet at the same time, the knowledge-culture is divided according to epistemological content or creative techniques: it fragments into the literary, the economic, the musical, the judicial, etc.; and more recently splits into two domains: the scientific and the artistic. Here, the individual finds himself qualified by his knowledge-culture, his degree of achievement or maturity, his level of specialization, and according to a quantitative evaluation in the intellectual sphere only: worker or peasant culture have not yet made their appearance in the language.

A constant historical evolution has confounded or altered these various meanings, and diverted the idea of culture from its universality to confine it to certain possessors or witnesses.

The most obviously sophisticated forms or products of a (society)-culture have often been created by, or in the interests of, a social class whose economic status, political influence and physical condition ensure its supremacy. Furthermore, whatever their degree of development may have been, the more that societies have been hierarchical, the more they have considered cultural products assimilated into the culture as a whole to be the apanage of one particular class commanding techniques or resources, knowledge or wealth. And again, these forms and attitudes, this culture, could appear as a sort of secret holding the key to these powers, and become the object of envy and conquest.

Within this evolution, an analogous departure has brought about the art-culture of Western societies; when creative force or expression have lost sight of their religious origin, if not their religious purpose, they nevertheless do not cease to transform the real through the imagination, but with a seeming gratuitousness. What we call art is thus defined and isolated. Most often destined for the propertied classes and patrons of the arts, confused with objects of luxury and ornaments of wealth because of the absence of any visible necessity for them, works of art have also become the exclusive possession of one class, and, at times, its symbol. The art-culture, assimilated into the realm of the superfluous, debased by envious imitation, has even suffered a decline instantly reflected in the language: the arts have become entertainment.

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Whether associated with society, knowledge, behavior, art, whether inherited or conquered, confined to patrimony or gained from life, we each understand culture as an identical process whose instinctive motivations are indeed those towards which the UNESCO experts are extending their definitions. This process certainly tends to “ensure our existence” thanks to techniques, attitudes, modes of thought learned amid the group to which we belong—right up to its highest manifestations which demand that life include and call upon the entire spiritual realm. Each cultural exchange thus supposes between the individual and his group a fundamental “need for communication” through which culture continues to develop; in appropriating them, each rediscovers the creations of his group and, if it is within his power, he enriches the group in turn by his own creations; each is inheritor and artisan.

With a strength that varies according to historical circumstances, social situation, or simply with the nature of the individual, there is thus perpetuated a continual cultural movement—an expression that seems to me to be more accurate than cultural development—based upon two essential individual reactions: the dynamic appropriation of assets and values already amassed, and creative invention. These two basic functions determine for each the relationship between his own individual destiny and some general conception of the world, which is to say: his access to a civilization.

Thus the civilization-culture appears as the final product of the vocabulary, and the major phenomenon of our age is without doubt that the various cultures, long considered as dominators or dominated (at least throughout the 19th century), separated even in their alliances and most often remaining unknown to one another, have been forced to face each other, compare themselves, and become acquainted. This situation poses a problem that we have hardly begun to measure: that of cultural coexistence.

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A Chinese plenipotentiary wrote at the court of Peking, after the signing of the Treaty of Whampoa in 1844: “The English bar-

barians having been allured, the French and American barbarians have also arrived this year... Born and raised in foreign countries, these barbarians are incapable of understanding the Middle Empire... they are most affectionate towards their women... When I went to their homes, these women appeared to greet me; I was very ill at ease whereas they were enchanted. From this one can see that it is impossible to demand anything from these barbarians with regard to ceremony, and that it is useless to try and enlighten their stupidity”¹ Such mistrusts often pass unrecognized, although they bear resemblances to one another: it is not so long ago that at Shanghai, near the Union Jack waving from its mast, one could read on a placard in the middle of a lawn: “No entry to dogs and Chinese.”

One is always someone else’s barbarian. Nothing has been more mistrustful in history than the acknowledgements and contacts between the various cultures, nothing has been more stubborn than their mutual hostility. Behind the great discoverers or philosophers such as Marco Polo or Montaigne there reigned the deep night of cultural isolationism, nourishing in their circle the profound belief in keeping culture this side of the Pyrenees, and justifying the hunting down of the anticulture beyond: political expansionisms have found here the most terrible alibis.

In no wars of conquest—save those of Alexander—has the conqueror ever resisted the arrogance of imposing something more than his law: his way of life, his religion, his world-picture, his culture. Thus cultures have long collided with one another through the mediating agency of their most uncouth and harsh men: the conquerors and merchants, after which came the missionaries. Steeped in the superiority of the vanquishers, these men, whether by reason or inclination, were to take every difference for savagery, everything strange for error, and down to the present implanted the idea that there exists between cultures a Manichaeian separation and an irreversible hierarchy, often accompanied by inequalities in economic development.

This hierarchical arrangement of societies, generally sanctifying the royalty of the West, has been profoundly and rapidly ruptured by the arrival of the mechanical culture. Alien to any concept of group, inheritance, historical continuity, or geographical character,

¹ Quoted by René Grousset in *Histoire de la Chine*.

objectively rather than subjectively oriented, mechanical culture has destroyed the ancient psychological notions of time and space, in preference of a sociological one negating space and time, whose effect has already radically modified the means of communication between cultures. With stupefaction, cultures see their ramparts fall, their isolating frontiers disappear, while occasionally the frontiers of incomprehension contract. Henceforth, immediately revealed to one another, cultures observe and assess each other, each suddenly less arrogant in its certitudes, less stubbornly addicted to them. This revelation of otherness, and its consequent newfound modesty, leads them to take note of their own particularity, and to discern confusedly that they are part of a larger and vaguer whole, whose future the more ambitious reckon themselves to be capable of influencing. Ineluctably condemned to simultaneous coexistence, cultures from now on have the relationships of individuals.

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Logic would lead one to think that cultures, like individuals, will react to one another by adaptive assimilation and creative contribution, resulting from a new and higher conception that would resemble a universal culture based on values accepted by all men, even if they did not subscribe to them in the same degree: a kind of inheritance of the species, enriched by the contribution of each particular culture and respecting the individuality of each, the outcome of a reassuring cultural ecumenism.

A global culture: so much is quickly said. Before worshipping it, this dream needs clarifying.

The feeling of a cultural universality is a direct consequence of modern media of communication. Engendered and spread by machines, its revelations are significant even as regards economic power and the state of society. But, according to their economic condition, the hierarchical societies are separated by a frightening gap. The cultures of plenty, within which wealth creates a process of abuse whereby they first consume, and then use up completely, essential resources, coexist with others which are still subject to poverty and hunger. These inequalities between dearth and plenty, which henceforth are known and, above all, seen by the whole world, turn into drama, envy or remorse, according to whoever

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suffers or contemplates them. It would be ridiculous to think that the cultures of millions of men living in conditions of economic precariousness or distress can be profoundly influenced by the widespread dissemination of the products of art or the spirit. For these undernourished masses, culture is primarily the means of acquiring the techniques that permit a guaranteed survival, and avert hunger and thirst. To this fact are linked the most simple modes of assimilation: alphabetization, and education. Furthermore, cultural progress would doubtless foster among the needy a hope of mutual aid, to which the feasting societies do not seem ready to respond with food. Any cultural universality presupposes that the preliminary precariousness of existence may have been removed. A culture of over-consumption and one of survival communicate badly with one another.

Certain cultured societies with a very low economic development are, however, founded upon very active spiritual, moral and social values. Here tradition is strong enough to perpetuate them, inventiveness active enough to spread them or to adapt them to events. These cultures are rarely exclusively confined to one dominant social class; most often, owing to their religious aspect, they are the common, everyday bond and possession of the groups that have elaborated them.

On the other hand, the cultures tied to the machine may experience a decline of certain original values whose springs have dried up, notably when modes of life are very cleanly separated from the natural conditions which previously conditioned them. Thus it may be also with the old "spiritual civilizations," henceforth ruled by a scientific mentality that catalogues and exploits the laws of mechanics and matter, and which forgets their previous inclination towards deepening an understanding of life.

However, the strength or precariousness of two meeting cultures certainly seem to be those of the methods by which they are conveyed. In this confrontation power or weakness almost always depend upon the supports of each culture, notably the economic supports, but are rarely linked to its content or specific values. In fact, the immediate effect of the exchange bears upon knowledge before beliefs, upon technics before the arts. The methods and goods exported by the societies with a high level of technology are obviously the vanquishers—and, with their accompanying retinue—all the more easily accepted since they appear

to be tied up with the lifestyle of abundance.

Yet these methods and goods, which are not values in themselves, convey that which allowed their invention or production—even though their application has sometimes become distorted or altered. In other words, the economically weak cultures, at the same time that they welcome the means and tools of their growth, which are needful to them, welcome also a framework of reference based on ways of life which are very far removed from those to which they are accustomed, and whose essential values are alloyed with false and degenerate ones. Whatever there may be that is universal within these frameworks of reference, is recognized by the receiving culture as its mark of identity, which then justifies and permits the adoption of all the rest. The values which in their original culture were based upon the perennality of the social group, or upon the depth of its reflections, become the values of another group by virtue of their mere novelty, and their possible adulteration is not even perceived. Even the machines themselves sometimes become values.

Thus the invasion of a specific culture by another that is willing or able to impose itself, is spontaneously accompanied by the circulation of technologies, and, above all, technologies of abundance. Within the societies of abundance, by corollary, the same cultural strength attaches itself to the various supremacies, and particularly to economic ones. The old disputes about cultural colonialism, the old discussions about the rights of culture as opposed to the rights of cultures, forget one simple reality: the genius of a group travels with its tools.

The two instinctive reflexes of the assaulted culture against the evils or seductions of an assaulting one, themselves breed the seeds of death.

The first is turning to face the past. The defensive refusal of any modification of custom, blind obedience to tradition, these lead to so narrow an imitation of ancient ways of life that they discard the phenomenon upon which culture and life rely: that of adaptation.

Conversely, but with the same vigor, certain cultures are bewildered by novelty. The old cultural forms are judged, in times of changing economic conditions, as being incapable of transformation, suspect, and are abandoned. The very springs

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from which the forms drew their content disappear. The alien cultural forms, whose often extremely varied origins are quickly forgotten, spread and gain sway at the same time as the new objects.

At the same time, we know that the attacking cultures are slowly transformed by the weight of the objects they have been able to create, whose usage obscures very varied but always levelling boomerang-type laws, in face of which the characteristic traits of the old mother-culture are obliterated. Rendered commonplace, undifferentiated, a hodge-podge of everywhere that looks like nowhere, they first suffer from, and then export, the lowest common denominators of a malignant mediocrity before which the assailed cultures, however, feel a sense of shame at their own oddity. Furthermore, the local culture becomes a mere local color, and turns into a folklore in which the picturesque replaces what was lately profundity; the traces of a congealed heritage are slowly transformed into something exotic, and the cultural forms are restricted to a succession of peculiarities of diet, costume and behavior. Confronted with the invasion of an internationalized rubber culture, the specific culture folds up, becomes convinced of its own inferiority, and hides away to die. This is the case, for example, of the popular culture of Western societies: often enfeebled because of the economic state of the possessors of that culture, because of the uprooting of their populations, because of the erosion undergone at the hands of the mass-media, the popular culture feels itself to be the victim of a contempt for the whole group, and finishes up in the form of country-dances in casinos.

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The old dream of a global culture dissolves before it can seize the opportunity that the machine seemed to offer of simultaneous and universal distribution. It is this which has universally and simultaneously distributed the machines, which rule, and which do not dream. With it have perished, or been hidden, the cultural forms that have found no replacement. But an ever clearer movement is taking shape, in which specific cultures that have not been totally alienated are repossessing their identity, or

what is left of it, affirming their particularity, and in some way isolating themselves once more.

For their part, the confused and constraining conditions and the resulting void have favored the birth of a highly individualistic counterculture, no longer tied to an ethnic group, nor to geography, but to a generally felt need, and often to an age-group—in the same way that the narrowness of corporations gives birth to comradeship. These counter-cultures, of which the hippy-movement is an example, have in common not a language, a land, or a history, but a refusal which immediately produced its own ethics and values. These cultural structures obviously only exist in the atmosphere of high-level technology, against which they rise, but they are the only ones that tend to universality. Through them, certain movements take on a form which, in so vague a manner as to render its effects imperceptible, might make one believe in the existence of, either side by side with or above the specific cultures, generation cultures. This phenomenon, promoted by the styles of taste and manners of the age-group, doubtless stems from the development in Western societies of a “culture-consciousness,” in the same sense that one speaks of “class-consciousness.” It certainly seems that in every case the para-cultures are the sole opponents of renascent cultural nationalisms.

Cultural coexistence has ended the era of discoveries, but not that of aggressions. Refusing to abdicate before a techno-culture from nowhere, which they now know to be a means and not an end, and dreading any resemblances that might be taken for imitations, cultures are bent to the point of isolation on proving their individuality and resistance to contamination. The age of political nationalism is giving way to the age of cultural nationalism which, like the former, are expansionist. “Culture-consciousness” leads to cultural conflict, and cultural colonialism having refined its weapons is perhaps only in its beginnings. Cultural coexistence has only, it seems, precipitated the onset of the age of cultures, not the age of gold.