SESSION IV

MULTICULTURALISM AS ONE WAY TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD
INDIVIDUALIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION: NEW FRONTIERS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

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I. Points of View

Contemporary scientific debates on multiculturalism are a good example and a metaphor of the world situation today. Students discussing multi-culturalism are themselves already experiencing a multi-cultural situation. They come from different backgrounds, different countries, different professional and cultural communities. It is therefore extremely important to realize that the way the discourse is constructed, the forms in which people communicate their ideas are already ways of experiencing the possibilities and the predicaments of multiculturalism. We should also be aware of the fact that we are always situated speakers, writers, observers. We are always located somewhere in a social and cultural field and we should be able to account for our specific location in this field and for the partiality of our point of view.

At the beginning of a text on multiculturalism it is therefore necessary for me to take a self-reflexive attitude and to make clear which is my own point of view. I am not proposing a general truth, I am instead writing from a specific personal and professional perspective. I am a sociologist and a clinical psychologist. For the last twenty years I have been working on collective action, trying to understand how people act together and get to form a common ‘we’, their collective identity. But on a parallel way, as a psychotherapist I have been working with individual pain and suffering, with the problems that individuals face when they are confronted with the dramatic changes of our society in their everyday life: changes in time and space dimensions, in affective relationships, passages in the course of life, stress, psychosomatic illnesses. These are social phenomena which affect, to a great scale, individual life. Their roots are deeply found in our social situation and in the texture of people’s everyday practices. In fact, in my clinical work I currently deal with social problems as they are actually experienced by individuals, who not only think and calculate, but feel emotions, suffer, love and hate, are passioned or scared, when confronted with global changes that reach them in their everyday activities and relationships. In my practice I deal with the answers and the failures in answering to the fundamental question that individuals today increasingly address to themselves and to the society: ”Who am I?”; a question that cannot be avoided when one’s identity is exposed to so many challenges and so many risks.

The fact of being located at the border of two scientific and professional territories gives me some advantages and disadvantages. A border is simultaneously a frontier which separates, but also a line which sets the limits. Being at the border put me sometimes in the
uncomfortable position of not exactly knowing to which side I belong. But when you are at
the border you can sometimes see things that are invisible within one territory. When you
walk at the border you also realise which are the limits of a given territory, the shortcomings
and the partiality of each language. I do not know which balance sheet I can draw between
advantages and disadvantages, but I know that by trying to work at the border of two
different fields I have been able to ask myself questions that I could not have addressed within
a single perspective: in my scientific work I have tried to understand how macro-structural
changes of our society affect individual lives and, conversely, how individual action and every-
day experiences intervene in social processes, shape cultural change and influence public
life. I will bring this perspective in the present text.

A self-reflexive attitude should be also applied from the beginning to multiculturalism it-
self, as a notion that has recently entered the scientific and political discussion: why multi-
culturalism has become such an important issue and why scientists and ordinary people get
interested in it? There are many possible answers to such a question, but in terms of a sociol-
ogy of knowledge we should try to connect the growing interest in multi-culturalism to the
characteristics of a society constructed and shaped by information. In fact, we do not exactly
know how to name this society. We use a variety of different names such as post-industrial,
post-modern, complex, late-capitalist, and so on. This panoply of prefixes and adjectives is a
very interesting symptom of our theoretical impasse. We are presently unable to conceptualize
in a proper way the kind of society in which we live, but we know that the traditional frame-
works inherited from modernity, that of industrial society and that of capitalism, do not pro-
vide any more a satisfactory understanding of present society. We need different names be-
cause the old ones are losing their conceptual strength and because we lack appropriate new
concepts to substitute them. We are hiding this conceptual weakness behind an allusive lan-
guage. To call this society complex, post-material, post-modern or post-industrial does not
make much difference. To me is more important to acknowledge the theoretical impasse and
to stress the fact that we are using new names because we live in a society which is increas-
ingly different from that which was conceptualized by the modern age.

The issue of multi-culturalism is such a controversial issue because, in fact, it is not an
unified conceptual object but a field of cultural and political debates which reflects the deep
changes which our society is undergoing at the world-scale. The discussion of multi-
culturalism is in fact addressing critical issues of present society and tries to make sense of the
many differences that we are confronted with, in a world that has become a single arena for
cultural, political and economic debates. The conflicting definitions of this notion are all
symptoms of the fact that we are living in a society which is increasingly shaped by informa-
tion and defined by its cultural dimensions, so that the differences in cultures and the
definition of cultures themselves become critical social and political issues. The notion of multiculturalism is not yet a concept, analytically clear and distinctively appliable. It is not
good or bad in itself. It is more of a stake in cultural and political debates: it can be a goal and
a political objective for very innovative cultural movements, but also the banner for a new
rhetoric manipulated by elites who seek to impose their ideology and their control over an in-
creasing differentiated social environment.

With all these cautions in mind, I can now address some distinctive features of contem-
porary society and list what I consider its main qualitative differences from previous societies
and cultures. As I said, the various allusive definitions we use are mostly interchangeable and
what really matters is the conceptual effort to acknowledge the legacy of modernity and to advance beyond it.

II. Information Societies

i) For the first time in human history society has acquired a capacity to intervene on itself and on its environment, which was never reached before. Nuclear power is the material and the symbolic sign of such a power. A society which can destroy itself, dramatically declares that it depends entirely on its capacity to manage its internal relations and its equilibrium with the environment. The power of intervening on biology through genetic engineering is transforming even human nature in a social product.

Material goods are produced by information systems and symbolic universes controlled by huge organizations. They incorporate information and become signs circulating through markets of worldwide proportions. Social conflicts move from the economic-industrial system to the cultural sphere. They focus on personal identity, the time and space of life, the motivation and codes of daily behaviour. Conflicts reveal the logic governing highly differentiated systems. These systems allocate increasing amounts of resources to individuals, who use them to become autonomous subjects of action; but the systems also exact increasing integration. In order to maintain themselves, they must extend their control by regulating the deep-lying sources of action and by interfering with the construction of its meaning. Contemporary conflicts reveal the contradictions in this process and bring to the fore actors and forms of action which cannot be fitted into the conventional categories of industrial conflict or political competition among interest groups. The production and reappropriation of meaning seem to lie at the core of contemporary conflicts; and this entails a redefinition of collective actors and forms of action expressing social conflicts.

ii) The revolution in information and communication technologies have accentuated the reflexive, artificial and constructed character of social life. Most experiences of life take place in contexts which are produced by social action, broadcast by the media, interiorized and enacted in a sort of a spiral which turns ‘reality’ into images and signs. Most of the trivial activities of daily life are already marked, and depend on the impact of information. New technologies incorporate an increasing quantity of information and contribute in turn to the massive expansion of information output. We live in an artificial environment because it is completely produced through our social relations; even nature is increasingly a product of society, because it is preserved or destroyed by our decisions and policies.

iii) Another feature which seems to indicate a qualitative leap is what is usually addressed as globalization, but what I prefer to call the planeterization of the world system. 'Planetarization' reminds us the relation with the planet as the physical basis for social life and stresses the fact that we do not have another place to stay, for the moment at least.

The planeterization of the system means that the social and cultural environment produced by human action has reached its limits, both in space and time. There is no other space outside the social system because the entire space available is socialised through human action. There is no time outside the system, there is no future conceivable as a passage to a ‘new world’, to a final society freed from the chains and the constraints of the present one. There will not be ‘another time’, not because we cannot think of change, but because all the
foresseeable changes will take place within the limits of this planet and this system.

The circulation of information ties the world system together and raises new transnational problems over the control, circulation and exchange of information. At the same time it inflates the issues and arenas of conflict into worldwide proportions. The geographical localization of a problem becomes of secondary importance compared with its symbolic impact on the planetary system. The processes of globalization reactivate ethnic and local conflicts that seek to give a stable and recognizable basis to identity in a space that has lost its traditional boundaries.

iv) Information is a reflexive resource, that is to say that in order to be recognized and used as a resource, it implies a capacity for symbolization and decodification. Information is not a thing, but a good which to be produced and exchanged presupposes a high cultural capacity. It is, then, a resource which becomes such for the society as a whole only when other needs have been satisfied and when the capacity for symbolic production has been sufficiently freed from the constraints of reproduction. The notion of 'post-material society' captures, at least in part, these transformations in progress. That is to say, systems that increasingly rely on information resources presume the acquisition of a material base and the ability to build symbolic universes endowed with autonomy (which, in turn, become conditions for the reproduction or the broadening of the material base itself). An information society implies a high degree of autonomy of cultural life from material constraints.

v) Information does not exist independently of the human capacity to perceive it. Being able to use a reflexive resource of this kind depends on the biological and motivational structure of human beings, as transmitters and receivers of information. The massive investments that complex societies make in biological research, in research into the brain and the motivational and relational mechanisms of behaviour, demonstrate that information as a decisive resource entails greater human intervention in 'inner nature', an increased capacity for self-reflection, which reaches the point of the 'production of reproduction', the point where the deep biological structure of the species is interfered with. Information is then necessarily tied to what in the past was considered the 'subjective' dimensions of human life. This same dualistic notion of 'subjective' dimensions as opposed to 'objective' structures has to be rejected, when material resources increasingly depend on human capacity to produce, process, decode symbolic languages.

vi) In a society based on information, the possibility of exerting power shifts from the contents of communication and social exchanges to the formal structures, to the codes that organise the flow of information. If information is characterized by the speed of its circulation and its rapid obsolescence, it becomes of crucial importance to control the codes by which mutable information is organized and interpreted. Knowledge is therefore less a knowledge of contents and increasingly an ability to codify and to decode messages. Information is linear and cumulative; it constitutes the quantitative base of the cognitive process. Knowledge structures, it establishes relations, links and hierarchies. There is a widening gap between these levels of experience and what used to be called wisdom, which has to do with the perception of meaning and its integration into individual existence.

Control over the production, accumulation and circulation of information depends on control over codes. This control is not equally distributed, however, and access to knowledge therefore becomes the terrain where new forms of power, discrimination and conflict come into being. Simultaneously, the meaning of individual experience-i.e. the ability to incorporate
the increasing quantity of information transmitted and received into an interior principle of unity-becomes increasingly fragile. A split opens up between the realm of instrumental knowledge, which efficiently manipulates the symbolic codes that select, order and direct information, and wisdom as the integration of meaning into personal experience. Hence the quest for self that reaches down into the nethermost regions of human action: the body, the emotions, the spiritual dimensions of experience irreducible to instrumental rationality. This search may easily take the form of a return to organized religion or of a resurgence of sects and fundamentalisms, but it may also open the way for a 'desacralized' experience of the sacred and a renewal of spiritual values.

vii) Power is increasingly based on the control over the codes and languages that master the flow of information. This dramatic picture of a power hidden and incorporated in everyday relations and languages, has always another face. Power based on information is fragile because for the very fact of being diffused and communicated, information is a resource difficult to control. It spreads through many different channels: language or interpersonal communication, the objects that incorporate information, or a more elaborate corpus of symbolic kind. Moreover, unlike other physical goods, information can be divided without losing its quality. It can be multiplied and divided among various actors without its specific content being affected. The simple acquisition of a code puts the actors in a communicative relation on the same level. If the world system tends towards the concentration of informational powers, these powers are also easily challenged because of their own nature.

III. Dilemmas of Complexity

To be effective, power must then continuously shift its basis and take control of new codes. Wisdom fades away and the inquiry on meaning seems senseless. Its place is taken by self-justifying, operational expertise. The codes on which the new forms of power build and develop themselves are invisible, and the possibility itself of the word is already organized within them. There is no discourse other than that which privileged areas and groups in the system control through their power of naming and the monopoly that they seek to impose on language. Thus information is no longer a resource circulating among all actors, which they can exchange and with which they can cumulatively build their potential for knowledge. It becomes instead a system of empty signs, the key to which has been hidden. Those consuming these signs need no longer concern themselves as to their meaning.

Simultaneously, however, the potentially limitless extension of information also increases the margins of uncertainty for the entire system. Uncertainty derives first of all from the difficulty of establishing links in the enormous mass of information transmitted and received. The disproportionate growth of information increases the options but also makes the decision difficult. Hence the increasing requirement for complex systems to produce decisions in order to reduce uncertainty. An information system expands its decision-making capacity to keep pace with this requirement to cope with uncertainty, and increasingly assumes the features of a decisional, contractual system: decisional because reducing uncertainty means assuming the risk of the decision; contractual because, in order to decide, agreement must be reached over the rules of the game.

Uncertainty cannot be reduced except by making decisions and by agreeing on the
framework within which these decisions are to be reached. The level of uncertainty constantly renews itself and expands (also because of decisions themselves, which resolve problems but create new ones). The decisional and contractual dimensions become central to the social life of complex systems. In other words, contemporary societies must continually establish and renew the pacts that bind them together and guide their action.

In systems of this kind, can we still talk of a dominant logic? Certainly the spatial metaphors that characterized industrial culture (base vs. superstructure, centrality vs. marginality) are increasingly inadequate to describe the workings of centre-less, and by now head-less, complex societies. The decentralization of the loci of power and conflict makes it more and more difficult to identify 'central' processes and actors. Does this statement actually mean that we must renounce any attempt to identify dominant logic? That in complexity everything becomes the same as everything else, in the interchangeable circularity so dear to theories of exchange?

A logic of dominance is not in contradiction with the idea of complexity. Contemporary societies have a dominant logic, but the site of this logic constantly changes. The areas and levels of a system which ensure its continuity may change in time, just as the loci of conflict vary. Power does not inhere once and for all in certain 'structures', and its concrete manifestations in the form of actors and relations are not definitive. Conflicts, too, may involve different actors and different sectors of the system. Although lying within a circumscribed area, they often bring to the surface the crucial dilemmas of complexity and the power forms that such complexity produces, and render them visible to society as a whole.

These dilemmas reveal the basic constraints of social life and cannot be overcome; they can only be managed in different ways through political decision-making, but they cannot be cancelled as such. We cannot choose between the two poles, we can only find some arrangement between them.

There is a dilemma between autonomy and control, between the capacity of defining autonomously one's own identity and the fact of being defined by external powers, regulations, languages.

Another dilemma is that between omnipotence and responsibility. We could apparently expand our power on society and environment without limits thank to the progress of science and technology. On the other hand, we have to put some boundaries and recognize some limits.

We meet the same impossible choice with the fact that the knowledge we have reached cannot be erased (unless in the hypothesis of a final catastrophe). This irreversible knowledge which provides us with the power of self-destruction depends nevertheless on the reversibility of political choices and decisions. We cannot get rid of our power, we can only decide how to use it.

There is finally a dilemma between differentiation and integration. The more the system is differentiated, the more it expands the possibility of autonomous definition of identities (ethnic, group, gender, but also cultural self-defined identities). On the other hand, the problem of ensuring the integration of a highly differentiated system increases the pressures exerted at the world scale by apparatuses which operate mainly through the media, the market, the generalization of consumption patterns. The alternative exclusion vs. assimilation expresses in a dramatic way this dilemma: marginal cultures struggle for their survival against increasing homogenelization and the trans-nationalization of business, science, media,
consumption.

IV. Conflicts and Collective Action

Social conflicts make visible the dilemmas mentioned above. Conflicts tend to arise in those areas of the system most directly involved in the production of information and communicative resources but at the same time subjected to intense pressures for integration. The crucial dimensions of daily life (time and space, interpersonal relations, birth and death), the satisfying of individual needs within welfare systems, the shaping of personal and social identity in educational systems—these today are constructed through the production and processing of information. Individuals and groups are allocated increasing amounts of information resources with which to define themselves and to construct their life spaces. At the same time, however, these same processes are regulated by a diffuse social control which passes beyond the public sphere to invade the very domain where the sense of individual action takes shape. Dimensions that were traditionally regarded as 'private' (the body, sexuality, affective relations), or 'subjective' (cognitive and emotional processes, motives, desires), or even 'biological' (the structure of the brain, the genetic code, reproductive capacity) now undergo social control and manipulation. Over these domains the technico-scientific apparatus, the agencies of information and communication, the decision-making centres which determine 'policies', wield their power. But these are precisely the areas where individuals and groups lay claim to their autonomy, where they conduct their search for identity by transforming them into a space where they reappropriate, self-realize and themselves construct the meaning of what they are and what they do.

Social conflicts are therefore carried forward by temporary actors who bring to light the crucial dilemmas mentioned above. The conflicts I describe here (which do not exhaust the range of social conflicts) concern the production and the appropriation of resources which are crucial for a global society based on information. These same processes generate both new forms of power and new forms of opposition: conflict only emerges insofar as actors fight for control and the allocation of socially produced potential for action. This potential is no longer exclusively based on material resources or on forms of social organization, but to an increasing extent on the ability to produce information.

Conflicts do not chiefly express themselves through action designed to achieve outcomes in the political system. Rather, they raise a challenge which recasts the language and cultural codes which organize information. The ceaseless flow of messages only acquires meaning through the codes that order the flux and allow its meanings to be read. The forms of power now emerging in contemporary societies are grounded in an ability to 'inform' (give form). The recent forms of collective action occupies the same terrain and are in themselves a message broadcast to society conveying symbolic forms and relational patterns which cast light on 'the dark side of the moon'—a system of meanings which runs counter to the sense that the apparatuses seek to impose on individual and collective events. This type of action affects institutions because it selects new elites, it modernizes organizational forms, it creates new goals and new languages. At the same time, however, it challenges the apparatuses that govern the production of information, and prevents the channels of representation and decision-making in pluralist societies from adopting instrumental rationality as the only logic with
which to govern complexity. Such rationality applies solely to procedures, and imposes the
criterion of efficiency and effectiveness as the only measure of sense. The recent forms of col-
lective action reveal that the neutral rationality of means masks interests and forms of power;
that it is impossible to confront the massive challenge of living together on a planet by now
become a global society without openly discussing the ‘ends’ and ‘values’ that make such co-
habitation possible. They highlight the insuperable dilemmas facing complex societies, and by
doing so force them openly to assume responsibility for their choices, their conflicts and their
limitations.

By drawing on forms of action that relate to daily life and individual identity, contempo-
rary movements detach themselves from the traditional model of political organization, and
they increasingly distance themselves from political systems. They move in to occupy an in-
termediate space of social life where individual needs and the pressures of political innovation
mesh together. Because of the particular features of movements, social conflicts can only be-
come effective through the mediation of political actors, even though they will never restrict
themselves to only this. The innovative thrust of movements, therefore, does not exhaust itself
in changes to the political system brought about by institutional actors: they always raise
challenges to the cultural level. Nevertheless, the ability of collective demands to expand and
to find expression depends on the way in which political actors are able to translate them into
democratic guarantees.

V. Individual Identity in a Complex World

I turn now to the side of individual experience to draw a phenomenology of everyday life
and to see how individual identities are affected by the general processes described above. The
multiplication of social relationships creates a space for individual choice. People migrate
from one social membership to another, not only through geographic regions but through so-
cial and symbolic territories. This means also a multiplication of times, a differentiation of
languages through which we define ourselves in our everyday experiences. How to keep all
these different levels together is the new problem faced by the inhabitants of complexity.
Identity, more than a given, inherited substance, becomes a process of continual construction,
selection, adaptation.

But individuals need also boundaries, they try to delimit and to stabilize the definition of
themselves. The struggle between this conflicting tendencies is a deep, internalized conflict
which cannot be considered just a psychological problem. It is instead a social conflict which
is internalized by individuals but it is also expressed in social life through forms of collective
action.

Individuals find themselves enmeshed by multiple bonds of belonging created by the pro-
liferation of social positions, associative networks, and reference groups. They enter and leave
these systems much more often and much more rapidly than they used to in the past. They
become migrant animals in the labyrinths of the metropolis, travellers of the planet, nomads
of the present. In reality or in the imagination, they participate in an infinity of worlds. And
each of these worlds has a culture, a language and a set of roles and rules that one must adapt
to whenever she migrate from one to another. Thus individuals are subjected to mounting
pressure to change, to transfer, to translate what they were just a moment ago into new codes
and new forms of relation.

They transform themselves into sensitive terminals, transmitting and receiving a quantity of information which far exceeds that of any previous culture. The means of communication, the work environment, interpersonal relationships, even leisure time, generate information addressed to individuals who must receive, analyse and store it in memory and almost always respond with further information.

The rhythm of change accelerates at an extraordinary pace. The multiplication of social memberships, the constant surge of possibilities and messages floods the field of human experience. The traditional coordinates of personal identity (family, church, party, race, class) weaken. It becomes difficult to state with certainty that 'I am X or Y': the question 'Who am I?' constantly presses for an answer. Individuals are harassed by the fragility of a presentness which urgently needs a firm foundation, they search for permanent anchors, and they question their own life-stories. Are we still who we were? Can we still stay the same as we respond to what will be asked of us even tomorrow? They scan their pasts and their futures through different lenses as they shift among the regions of experience. In the age of speed, they no longer have a home. They constantly have to build one, like the three little pigs in the fairy tale, or they have to carry it on our backs like snails.

Everyday time is multiple and discontinuous because it entails the passage from one universe of experience to another: from one membership network to another, from the language and codes of one social sphere to those of another semantically and affectively very different from it. Time loses its uniformity and follows a variable rhythm imposed by the flow and quality of the information that they receive and transmit. Human perception expands and shrinks, slows and accelerates, as people set off on their erratic migrations or as they are dragged along by them. They can longer rely on the certainty of the end-directedness of time, the notion that modernity fed with its myths of progress and revolution. Today, the bewildered witnesses of the demise of the great stories of salvation are haunted by the destiny of choice. To cope with the possible which seduces and threatens, they are compelled to take the risk of decision making (of which catastrophe is the extreme image and metaphor).

The identity of a self becomes more of a field than an essence: not a metaphysical reality but a dynamic system defined by recognizable opportunities and constraints. Identity is both a system and a process, because the field is defined by a set of relations and is simultaneously able to intervene on itself and to restructure itself. There arise two crucial and perplexing problems here: the continuity of the self, and the boundaries of the self. Synchronically, the problem is one of deciding where the subject of action begins and where it ends; diachronically, one must establish how this subject persists through time.

This perspective leads directly to the topic of responsibility. If identity is a process of construction, and if the individual coincides with his or her action of self-identification, the problem becomes that of defining who chooses how the field is to be organized: synchronically (who am I at this moment?) and in time (who am I compared with yesterday or tomorrow, compared with memory or projection?). The topic of responsibility becomes a crucial one, and the term 'responsibility' itself should be taken in its most literal and profound sense as capacity to respond.

If identity is no longer an essential nucleus or a metaphysical continuity, definition of its borders and maintenance of its continuity are entrusted to our capacity to respond - that is, to our ability to recognize and choose among the opportunities and constraints present in the
field of relations that constitute us at any given moment. The definition itself of the capacity to respond has a dual meaning: there is responding for and responding to, recognizing who we are and locating ourselves in our relations.

My responsibility towards that field of opportunities and constraints which constitutes 'I myself', is on the one hand a capacity to respond for, by assuming limitation, memory, biological structure and personal history; on the other, it is the capacity to respond to, by choosing among opportunities and grasping them, by positioning myself in my relations with others and by taking my place in the world.

Metamorphosis is a response to a world which compels us to multiply our faces, languages and relations. It is a warm response, one not lacking in fear and anxiety but likewise never lacking in love. Without compassion for oneself and for others, without hope or humility, it is impossible to change form. One can only change masks, relying (but for how long?) on the vacuous game of self-representation.

Standing at the point where numerous circuits of information intersect, at the junction of complex relational networks, individuals are in danger of being overwhelmed by noise, of being lacerated by too many exchanges and too many desires. They can only preserve their unity by learning to open up and to close down, to move into and withdraw from the flow of messages. It therefore becomes vital for each individual to find a rhythm which governs his/her entry to and exit from the relations that enable him/her to give and receive information, without losing its meaning.

What I have described at the individual level is part of collective changes which are spreading all over the world. But individual identity is also built through specific processes and there is an increasing autonomy of individuals in their definition of themselves. This autonomy and the capacity to differentiate oneself as an individual will vary according to the resources distributed at the systemic level. Therefore the process of identity building is already an arena for new inequalities and a potential field for conflicts. The degree to which individuals are allowed to define themselves as autonomous individuals is not distributed equally and to this new capacity could be applied the traditional analysis of inequality, in terms of structural disadvantages and unequal distribution of power.

But a 'structural' analysis of the new inequalities should take into account that the embodiment of personal identity within the broad 'structural' processes has changed the status of individual experience. The individual level is over-socialized, but at the same time becomes the locus of resistance and the potential arena for conflict. Individual identity is subjected to social pressures and to new forms of power, which require a 'structural', systemic level of analysis. But the embodiment of individual identity into the systemic processes needs also a new kind of analysis and a specific consideration of what used to be labeled as 'subjective' experience.

VI. Ethnic and Cultural Conflicts

In a global society ethnic and cultural conflicts are important signs of the changing role of identity. This is not their only meaning and many different levels coexist within the same empirical phenomena. Therefore analysis should make analytical differences and never consider them as unified realities.
In terms of orientations of action, ethnicity or cultural difference can provide a criterion along which to organize the defense of material interests of a group against discrimination, marginalization, exploitation. In other cases, ethnicity can be a channel through which people express their demands for new rights and try to define a political space for excluded social groups. Besides material or political goals, ethnic and cultural identification can also play the role of a symbolic and selective resource to answer to the challenges of identity in a complex society. The legacy of ethnic and cultural traditions provides a ready answer to the critical question of identity. It offers, particularly to the young generations, the opportunity to reinterpret in a selective way the cultural material of the tradition, in order to answer new questions, or to resist to the pressures imposed by a global society.

Other analytical distinctions among different forms of ethnic and cultural conflicts concern their social and political contexts. At least four different dimensions should be separated. Ethnic problems can be related to the global migration processes, the interdependence and the unbalances of the world labor market and the reactions of the host societies. Secondly, ethnic problems can be related to the pluralism of groups of relatively equal size within the borders of a nation-state. A third dimension has to do with inter-state conflicts when the same ethnic or cultural group lives on the two borders. And finally, ethnic claims for autonomy or independence can be addressed by minority groups to a relatively homogeneous nation-state in order to achieve the political control over a given territory.

A third level of analysis concerns the meaning of ethnic and cultural action, which can vary from defense and resistance against modernization processes, to demands for political rights, to a challenge to the international system, which is in fact an inter-state system: conflicts that mobilize ethnic and cultural identities make visible the crisis of the nation-state and bring to the fore the need for a new trans-national world system capable of recognizing and integrating differences. The nation-states are losing their authority as, towards the top of the system, planetary interdependence and the emergence of transnational political and economic forces shift the locus of real decision-making elsewhere, while, towards the bottom, the proliferation of autonomous decision-making centres endows ‘civil societies’ with a specific power.

An articulated set of conceptual tools can help to differentiate the many levels of ethnic and cultural conflicts which too often are treated as homogeneous. Such an analysis makes it easier to understand that these conflicts, together with the old problems of economic discrimination and marginalization and with the claims to political autonomy and recognition, bring to the surface new problems. They address the redefinition of a world system based on international relations; a system formally organized on the relations among sovereign states, but in fact governed by the north-south imbalances, by central and regional powers, by the lack of a global responsibility. These conflicts make clear the necessity of a different global organisation of political issues.

But they also raise another important challenge, the right to name the world in a specific way. Every ethnic or traditional culture speaks its own language and tries to have this right recognized. But besides the political aspect of recognition, there is a deeper importance of this issue. Culture is increasingly shaped by anonymous apparatuses imposing the names and the languages through which people should understand and relate to reality. Naming the world in a different way challenges this homogenization and the imposition of standardised codes. In this respect ethnic and cultural conflicts join other recent forms of collective action.
challenging the new powers, which tell people how to name reality (personal and gender relations, relation to nature, health, sexuality, freedom).

VII. Towards Global Answers

These critical issues ask for a new moral attitude. A word that I have already introduced summarizes the ethical implications of the analysis presented here. ‘Metamorphosis’ comes from Greek and literally means to change form or to overcome one's form. The expression of differences goes together with the need for communication and solidarity. But in order to meet otherness, one needs to change form. We cannot communicate or relate to differences by simply staying ourselves. In the issue of multi-culturalism, which implies some capacity and will to meet the 'other', there is a profound moral implication: the necessity to keep and to lose, to cope with fears and resistances, but also with the ability of going beyond our given identities.

There is therefore a necessity to deal with ambivalence, because neither the dominant nor the dominated are free from ambivalent feeling towards the 'other'. The possibility of meeting each other needs a deep leap in consciousness, which allows people to accept that they exist as separate individuals and social groups, but also that they can co-exist and communicate. To take responsibility for one's own identity means also to accept one's limits and to open up to the other through a negotiated, ongoing partnership.

Misunderstandings are part of the present situation in political, scientific and everyday exchanges. We have to take responsibility for our misunderstandings, whose permanent sources are differences of languages, of frameworks, of values. We have first to acknowledge and not just to condemn them, in order to start communicating about them. Trying to make our starting point as clear as possible and trying to listen to the other person or group as much as possible, are ways to overcome the simple expression of differences. I do not believe that difference in itself and difference alone could be a value. Difference is just one side of human relations. Community, solidarity, communication are the other side. When difference alone becomes a banner, the results can be pradoxical and, more often, violent. To put it in the form of a joke, what about the rights of handicapped dogs belonging to black, gay women? Unfortunately the extreme stress on differences is much more serious and it can bring to dramatic forms of fundamentalism and violence. The problem is never just difference, but the parallel necessity to overcome it, to make the constant effort of listening and understanding each other.

Far from prefiguring a harmonious, pacified, transparent society, the view I am proposing here is one in which the ambivalent quality of human action is accentuated, both on an individual and a collective scale. It sets us down squarely in the middle of the paradox of social action and it stresses the role of tensions and conflicts, the fact that the singular cannot be reduced to the plural, uniqueness to communication; at the same time, it points out our radical need to co-exist.

We need new ethics which do not exempt us from the risk of choice and that will enable us to meta-communicate about the goals and criteria behind the choices themselves. Our salvation is no longer guaranteed by historical destiny and Western rationalism is questioned, together with its claims to absolute truth and its will to supremacy. But we still hold to the
hope for meaningful human existence, reasonable in coexistence and in the experience of our
limits. If values no longer bear the seal of the absolute, their only foundation lies in the hu-
man capacity for agreement. Social movements, which have emerged in the last decades, have
been the first announcement of this enormous cultural change which is already taking place.
To reduce them only to their political outcomes is like believing that our shadow could exist
without our person. The politics emerging from recent collective action are eminently per-
sonal politics, rooted in a profound need to exist as autonomous subjects, capable of respect
and communication.

Contemporary social movements remind us by their forms of action that we can work
more on processes than on contents to face the challenges and the dilemmas of a complex
world. They are important signs of the critical issues of our time because they point out,
through their action, where the fundamental dilemmas of social life emerge and they allow
society to openly address them through political action, social mobilization, cultural change.

Today, information is a crucial resource, and contemporary systems increasingly depend
upon it for their survival and development. The capacity to gather, process, and transmit in-
formation has grown to a level unprecedented in human history and this increases the ‘sociali-
zation’ of social life as a collective construct. Society produce a ‘cultural surplus’ which in-
creases the range of available options far beyond the current capacity for action of individuals
and groups. Power transforms itself and comes to coincide with operational languages, with
the formal rules that organize and construe the flow of messages.

Behind the questions raised by ethnic and cultural conflicts, behind the legacy of unre-
solved tensions left as the aftermath of the development and decline of the modern state, and
even behind the resistance by minority cultures against modernization, which might appear
anachronistic, there emerges today an entirely new perspective: the plea for society to be given
the power to decide its own existence and to control its own development, framed by new re-
lations among the components constituting planetary reality (groups, interests, cultures,
‘nations’). A new model of intersocietal relations is one of the greatest of contemporary aspi-
rations. Humankind must make an enormous effort to give political shape to its co-living; a
political arrangement able to govern the plurality, the autonomy and the richness of
difference—however, one that also expresses humanity’s shared responsibility for the fate of the
species and the planet.

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