

ON THE ISSUE OF FUNDAMENTALISM

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All the religious wars that have caused blood to be shed for centuries arise from passionate feelings and facile counter-positions, such as Us and Them, good and bad, white and black. If western culture is shown to be rich it is because, even before the Enlightenment, it has tried to "dissolve" harmful simplifications through inquiry and the critical mind. Of course it did not always do this. Hitler, who burned books, condemned degenerate art and killed those belonging to "inferior" races; and the fascism which taught me at school to recite "May God Curse the English" because they were "the people who eat five meals a day" and were therefore greedy and inferior to thrifty Italians, are also part of the history of western culture.

It is sometimes hard to grasp the difference between identifying with one's own roots, understanding people with other roots, and judging what is good or bad. Should I prefer to live in Limoges rather than, say, Moscow? Moscow is certainly a beautiful city. But in Limoges I would understand the language. Everyone identifies with the culture in which he grew up and the cases of root transplants, while they do occur, are in the minority: Lawrence of Arabia dressed as an Arab, but he ended up back home in England.

The west, often for reasons of economic expansion, has been curious about other civilisations. The Greeks referred to those who did not speak their language as barbarians, that is stammerers, as if they did not speak at all. But a few more mature Greeks, like the Stoics, noticed that although the barbarians used different words, they referred to the same thoughts.

From the second half of the 19th century, cultural anthropology developed as an attempt to assuage the guilt of the west towards others, and particularly those others who had been defined as savages; societies without a history, primitive peoples. The task of the cultural anthropologist was to demonstrate that beliefs which differed from western ones existed, a repressed. In order to say *no* as Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi did, controversially, this month—whether any one culture is superior to another, parameters have to be established.

A culture can be described objectively—these people behave like this; believe in spirits or in a single divine being that pervades the whole of nature; meet in family clans according to these rules; consider it beautiful to pierce their noses with rings (this could be a description of western youth culture); consider pork to be impure; circumcise themselves; raise dogs for the pot on public holidays or, as the English and Americans still say of the French, eat frogs.

Obviously, the anthropologist knows that objectivity is always limited by many factors. The criteria of judgment depend on our own roots, preferences, habits, passions, our system of values. For

example: do we consider that the prolonging of the average life span from 40 to 80 years is worthwhile? I personally believe so, but many mystics could tell me that, between a glutton who lives for 80 years and Saint Luigi Gonzaga, who only survived for 23, it was the latter who had the fuller life.

Do we believe that technological development, the expansion of trade, and faster transport is worthwhile? Many think so, and judge our technological civilisation as superior. But, within the western world itself, there are those who primarily wish to live in harmony with an uncorrupted environment, and are willing to relinquish air travel, cars and refrigerators, to weave baskets and travel on foot from one village to another, as long as the ozone hole isn't there.

So in order to define one culture as better than another, it is not enough to describe it (as the anthropologist does), but it is advisable to have recourse to a system of values which we do not feel we can relinquish. Only at this point can we say that our culture is better, for us.

How absolute is the parameter of technological development? Pakistan has the atom bomb, not Italy. So is Italy an inferior? We respect the Islamic world by being reminded that it has given us men like Avicenna (who was actually born in Buchara, not far from Afghanistan) and Averroes, as well as Al-Kindi, Avenpace, Avicbron, Ibn Tufayl, or that great historian of the 14th century Ibn Khaldoun, whom the west considers as the father of the social sciences. The Arabs of Spain cultivated geography, astronomy, mathematics or medicine when the Christian world was lagging far behind in those subjects.

We might recall that those Arabs of Spain were fairly tolerant of Christians and Jews, while we gave rise to the ghettos, and that Saladin, when he reconquered Jerusalem, was more merciful to the Christians than the Christians had been to the Saracens when they took over Jerusalem. All very true, but in the Islamic world there are fundamentalist and theocratic regimes today which the Christians do not tolerate, and Bin Laden was not merciful to New York. The Taliban destroyed the great stone Buddhas with their cannon: conversely, the French carried out the St Bartholomew's day massacre, but this gives no one the right to say they are barbarians today.

History is a two-edged sword. The Turks were impalers (and that is bad) but the orthodox Byzantines put out the eyes of their dangerous relatives and the Catholics burned Giordano Bruno; Saracen pirates did many wicked things, but the buccaneers of his British majesty set fire to the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean; Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are ferocious enemies of western civilisation, but within western civilisation there were men like Hitler and Stalin.

No, the problem of parameters is not set within history, but in our times. One of the praiseworthy aspects of western culture (free and pluralistic, and these are values which we consider basic and essential) is that it has been long held that the same person can employ different parameters which may be mutually contradictory on different matters. For example, the prolonging of life is considered good, and atmospheric pollution bad, that maybe in big laboratories where they study how to prolong life, there might be power systems which themselves produce pollution.

Western culture has developed the capacity to freely lay bare its own contradictions. Maybe they remain unresolved, but they are well known and admitted: how can we manage some positive globalisation while avoiding the risks and injustices that follow: how can we prolong life for the millions of Africans dying of Aids (while at the same time prolonging our own lives) without accepting a planetary economy which causes people to die of hunger and Aids, and makes us eat polluted food?

But it is just this criticism of parameters, pursued and encouraged by the west, that makes us understand how delicate the matter is. Is it just and proper to protect bank secrets? Many people think so. But if this secrecy allows terrorists to keep their accounts in the City of London then is this defence of so-called privacy a positive value or a doubtful one? We are always calling our parameters into question. The western world does so to such an extent as to allow its own citizens to turn down technological development and become Buddhists, or go and live in communities where no tyres are used, not even for horse-drawn carts.

The west has decided to channel money and effort into studying other customs and practices, but no one has really given other people the chance to study western customs and practices, except at schools maintained by white expatriates, or by allowing the rich from other cultures to study in Oxford or Paris. What happens then is that they return home to organize fundamentalist movements, because they feel solidarity with those of their compatriots who lack the opportunity for such education.

An international organisation called Transcultura has been campaigning for an 'alternative anthropology' for some years. It has taken African researchers, who have never been to the west before, to describe provincial France and society in Bologna. Both sides started to take a good look at each other, and some interesting discussions took place. At present, three Chinese—a philosopher, an anthropologist and an artist—are completing a Marco Polo voyage in reverse, culminating in a conference in Brussels in November. Imagine Muslim fundamentalists being invited to research Christian fundamentalism (not the Catholics this time, but American Protestants, more fanatical than ayatollahs, who try to expunge all reference to Darwin from schools). In my opinion the anthropological study of other people's fundamentalism leads to a better understanding of one's own. Let them come and study our concept

of holy war (I could commend many interesting texts to them, including some quite recent ones). They might then take a more critical view of the idea of holy war back home.

We are a pluralist civilisation because we allow mosques to be built in our countries, and we are not going to stop simply because Christian missionaries are thrown into prison in Kabul. If we did so, we too would become Taliban. The parameter of tolerating diversity is certainly one of the strongest and least open to argument. We consider our culture mature because it can tolerate diversity, and those who share our culture, while rejecting diversity to be uncivilised, period. We hope that, if we allow mosques in our countries, one day there will be Christian churches in their countries, or at least Buddhas won't get blown up there. If we believe we have got our parameters right, that is.

But there is a great deal of confusion. Funny things happen these days. It seems that defending western values has become a rightwing prerogative, while the Left, as ever, is pro-Islamic. Now, apart from the pro-third world, pro-Arab stance of some rightwing and Catholic activist circles, and so on, this ignores a historical phenomenon which is there for all to see.

The defence of scientific values, of technological development and modern western culture in general, has always been characteristic of secular and progressive political circles. Communist regimes have relied on an ideology of technological and scientific progress. The 1848 *Communist Manifesto* opens with a dispassionate eulogy on the expansion of the bourgeoisie. Marx does not say it is necessary to change direction and go over to Asian means of production. He merely says that the proletariat must learn to master these values and successes.

Conversely it has always been reactionary thought (in the best sense of the word), at least starting from the rejection of the French revolution, which has opposed the secular ideology of progress and propounded a return to traditional values. Only a few neo-Nazi groups have a mythical notion of the west and would be ready to slit the throats of all Muslims at Stonehenge. The more serious traditionalist thinkers have always looked to Islam as a source of alternative spirituality, in addition to the rites and myths of primitive peoples and the teachings of Buddhism. They have always made a point of reminding us that we are not superior, but impoverished by our ideology of progress, and that we must seek the truth among the Sufi mystics or the whirling dervishes. Thus a strange dichotomy is now opening on the right. But perhaps it is only a sign that, at times of great bewilderment (such as the present), no one knows quite where they stand any more.

But it is at times of bewilderment that the weapon of analysis and criticism comes into its own, to be applied to our own superstitions and those of others. ■

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