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Contemporary World Issues in Cultural Diversity

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0. Introduction

It is well known that trends towards globalisation can be accompanied by tendencies towards homogeneity. Barber¹ and others have warned of dangers of McDonaldization and a McWorld effect. In countries which strive towards a melting pot, such tendencies may well have the air of the inevitable or even a sense of manifest destiny. But as Alice's rabbit once noted wisely, the path is determined by where we want to go, and if our goal is a unity of diversities (Ruffolo)², then there are very different possibilities.

Indeed, if we look back at the past centuries from a viewpoint that transcends the turmoil of financial quarters, it quickly becomes evident that in a short hundred years the 20th century has achieved a fundamental shift in approach from centralised to distributed systems. Closely related and partly consequences of this shift are further shifts from a focus on centres to an approach that acknowledges the in-dependent and inter-dependent roles of regional and local. There are shifts from mono- to multi-lingual; from mono- to multi-cultural and multi-political; shifts from a fixation on objects to an awareness of routes and finally shifts from static to dynamic knowledge. While there are always shifts from an historical viewpoint, these six shifts are of particular interest because they bring into play fundamental contemporary issues in cultural diversity. Admittedly, if this were a classical French essay there could only be three issues. At an international level it is hoped that such high numbers will be less dizzying than the consequences of their content.

1. From Centralized to Distributed

The history of Europe from the 9th to the 18th centuries saw a gradual shift of power from individual places to the idea of a centralised power, which was re-awakened seriously by the crowning of Charlemagne on Christmas day, 800 and culminated with the excesses of the Sun King at Versailles. After the revolution, the 19th century shifted the focus of this absolutism to a slightly broader base of national governments but kept intact the centralist ideal. Most of the 20th century followed the consequences of this decision only to discover that the implications were anything but ideal.

In the meantime, most centralist governments (fascism, communism) have “fallen.” The quest, introduced by the Library of Alexandria, and revived by Panizzi’s British Museum, to unite the collective memory of mankind in a single enormous has revealed itself as impractical. The new British Library and its sister the TGB (*très grande bibliothèque*) in Paris were too small before they were even finished. The vision of creating a super-computer that could handle all the necessary calculations has proved equally illusory. In a world where the hype about ever larger hard-disks and capacities continues apace, scientists at CERN have concluded that no single computer today could possibly meet their needs. Radio astronomers remind us that the limitations of today’s computers and connectivities means that they are only able to use 1% of their available data.

Paradoxically, the capacity of ordinary desktop computers of volunteers for the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence)³ project is now equal to half the combined capacity of the 500 top computers⁴ in the world. Hence one of the great discoveries of the late 20th and the dawn of the 21st centuries has been that distributed systems offer a path superior to centralised efforts. Remarkably, in parallel with this trend towards parallelism, there has been a growing awareness that the need to create a single standard that one needs to impose on everyone may well have been a consequence of this newly abandoned ideal of centralism rather than a necessity as such.

2. From Centres to National, Regional and Local

The now fading centralist ideal assumed that regional (in the sense of provincial) and local histories were allocated to a lesser level. All significant things happened in centres, capitals of countries and especially capitals of (colonial) empires. Accordingly history was re-written to focus on and to imprint only that viewpoint. Regional and local views, variants, were suppressed or even better, forgotten.

One of the few exceptions was Germany, which has continually insisted that culture was a regional (*Länder*) matter. Significantly, it is Germany that has introduced the idea of Digital Autonomous Cultural Objects (DACOs),⁵ which allow one to access the uniqueness of culture at the granularity of individual images, pages and even paragraphs, without requiring a fundamental re-writing of databases and data-structures. As such it provides a methodological approach to meet the challenges of local, regional and national versions.

Generally, we have discovered only too slowly that the regional and local are not simply embarrassing variants: that it is there that we find the essential richness and diversity of culture. The *Annunciation* as such is a simple theme of messenger boy angel meets surprised Virgin: Florentine, Tuscan, Umbrian, Venetian, Nurnbergian, Rhinelandian, Flemish, Catalunyan, Andalusian variants make this one of the richest stories of the Western tradition.

A practical consequence of the centralist approach was the rise of authority files, whereby one standardised version of a person's name and or a place name was imposed. In the new distributed approach a preferred (authority file-like) name remains, but so too do all the variants. All roads, local, regional and national lead to a name and not only those from the centre. In its most radical version, this would potentially mean that individual users could have and continue to use their personal ways of spelling or "misspelling" names and still arrive at the "standard" name which they intend.

Similarly in the case of meanings of names, words and terms. The centralist approach assumed that a national definition was good and that an international definition was best. Accordingly, the International Standards Organisation (ISO) introduced a section for terminology (TC37).⁶ In the case of science and technology this quest for a standardised approach has brought many advances. Gradually, however, there has been recognition that disciplines and specialists have their own vocabularies for the same things and processes. When these groups need to talk about things in common for which they have no common language, should they be forced to learn a third term for the same thing or are there alternatives?

In culture these challenges are much more fundamental. It is easy to define the concept of the *Annunciation* in terms of messenger angels and unsuspecting Virgins, but as noted above this captures nothing of the myriad expressions which make this one of the richest themes of art. To take another example from a very different corner of culture: It is easy to define the formula for brewing beer. But this will do precious little to convey the near infinite richness of regional and local beers around the world.

In light of this, the quest for a single centralised, dictionary that would replace all others has revealed itself as another of those illusory centralist notions. The naïve user assumes synonyms all mean the same and are interchangeable: the experienced linguist knows that although words may seem to be synonymous, if they were completely so there would be one term and not two. To the outsider the Inuit have over 100 synonyms for snow. For the Inuit themselves there are over 100 subtle distinctions between kinds of snow.

In light of this, a single, centralised dictionary, or encyclopaedia is clearly not enough. Worse, such a naïvely noble quest would eliminate the very diversity of meanings that interests us and propel us towards the real dangers of McWorld. Fortunately, the countervailing, distributed trend is towards meta-data walkthroughs, which are 50 cent words for mapping between meanings, bridging differences while keeping the original differences intact, which are being championed by groups such *Accès Multilingue au Patrimoine (AMP)*.⁷ In this approach, all the old national and the older regional and local

dictionaries remain. They are “simply” connected in new ways through distributed models.

Similarly with versions of pictures, stories and histories. The challenge is not to find or construct a McAnnunciation, but rather to give access to as many *Annunciations* as possible. It is not a simple a question of rejecting the old centralised stories and histories: the challenge is to give access to alternative witnesses to the same events from all levels. In terms of contemporary history the same choices are evident. A centralist view would have the reporting on a war occur solely from one media company. A distributed approach insists that very different kinds of reporting help to provide a richer view of what seems to be one course of events. In the past, history was written solely from the standpoint of the victors. In future, we need access also to the viewpoints of the so-called losers and the victims.

3. From Uni- to Multi-lingual

In the centralist view there was always a single language which dominated. However, already in the Renaissance, the notion of humanism became linked with multiple languages: one had some notion of Greek, one had Latin as a *lingua franca* plus one’s “native” language. In the 19th century, French became a language of international diplomacy, which one simply had in addition to one’s own language(s).

In the 20th century, it seemed for a brief moment as if English might become the only language of the Internet and indeed generally. In 1995, the Internet was 98% English. In March, 2003, it is 35.2% and Chinese is the second language at 11.9%.⁸ Within three years Chinese is due to become the most widely used language of the Internet. In a distributed context the need for multi-lingual solutions becomes paramount and there are challenges of mapping between meanings which again respect national, regional and local variants.

4. From Mono- to Multi-Cultural and Multi-Political

The centralist approach often attempted to impose their monolithic definitions of culture on a population. For instance, in the old USSR, persons in Poland, Czechoslovakia and other satellite states had to learn about Russian language and culture often (at least in theory) to the exclusion of their own. Maps of the country were always the maps of the dominant force.

In a distributed approach a wider view emerges. First Poland’s maps change enormously over time. Poland was one of the smallest European countries in 1000 AD and one of the largest in 1470. Poland’s maps of its boundaries are different than Russia or Germany’s maps of Poland. We need more than a single, static atlas of the world. We need dynamic atlases, which change with time and show us alternative, sometimes directly conflicting maps of the same geographical area: cf. India and Pakistan qua Kashmir or Russia and China qua Mongolia. If there is truly to be greater understanding we need access to the multi-cultural and multi-political alternatives and not just the single view of the ruling power.

Atlases are but one example of a much larger phenomenon, which has to do with recognising that there are historical, cultural and political dimensions even in seemingly objective things such as maps. The same case can be made for archaeological ruins. A century ago a typical Italian would have assumed that their interpretation was the only one. The new distributed approach makes us aware that we need access also to French, German, British, American and other interpretations. Not only do these alternatives provide unexpected ways of visualising world-views (*Weltanschauungen*), they are another of the surprising sources for cultural diversity, which looks differently and more richly at the past, present and future.

The advent of new technologies such as augmented reality offer us new methods for comparing these alternatives. Standing in front of a single ruin, we can view the same stones through the eyes of different schools of archaeology. Looking up at the night sky we can impose not only the Greco-Roman constellations, but also those of the Arabs, the Chinese, the Indians, the Mayans and other cultures. Hence the same gadgets and innovations that some have assumed can impose their world-view, can be used to help us understand alternative world-views.

5. From Objects to Routes

In the early 20th century, the German philosopher, Ernst Cassirer⁹, outlined a fundamental shift in Western philosophy and science from substance to function: from a focus on the quiddity of objects to a study of their functions, processes and relations. In the cultural field, the repercussions of this shift are only gradually coming into focus. A century ago the quest was to study individual objects often without their context. In the past decades there has been a shift from studying the objects in isolation, towards a study of their contexts, of their present and past locations and how they got there. The quest for a virtual museum (a simple surrogate of the physical space) has shifted towards imaginary museums (in the sense of André Malraux)¹⁰, towards reconstructions of sites, towns, cities, cultural landscapes and even cultural routes. The quest for context has moved from simple study of the cultural object in isolation to the routes by which it and the ideas shaping it travelled. UNESCO's digital silk roads project is the most impressive example of this global trend.¹¹

6. From Static to Dynamic Knowledge

In the past, art historians were typically guided by the ideal of a *catalogue raisonné*, the quest for a static list of all the paintings and works of a given artist. Once we take into account the cultural and historical dimensions of knowledge, we recognize that lists of paintings by Rembrandt in 1700, 1800, 1900 and after the Rembrandt Commission in the 1970s are different. What we once thought of as static lists are potentially dynamic and while the print medium limited us to such static still images of a changing process, electronic media open new ways of tracing and presenting the dynamic dimensions of these and effectively all such lists.

Computers thus open new possibilities for dynamic access to knowledge, not just through distributed databases, but also to knowledge distributed over time, with variants that may be cultural (including different schools of thought), geographical (national, regional, local), or political (including different parties or ideologies). A possible vision for how this might be developed has been outlined elsewhere through the concept of MEMECS (*Meta-données Et Mémoire Collective Systématique*),¹² which can be seen as a European alternative to Vannevar Bush's vision of a MEMEX machine.¹³

7. Conclusions

In the 1960's, visionaries were working on the concept of United World Colleges. Among them¹⁴ was Lester B Pearson, who was also the Prime Minister of Canada, who made the simple point: How can we expect people to understand each other if they do not even know about each other? The convergence of media such as telecommunications, television confront us with an important choice: We could perpetuate the centralist myth of the 19th century and attempt to colonize the world with a single ideology or we can acknowledge the often painful lessons of the 20th century. We can recognise how much richer is Europe and our world if only we acknowledge and nurture the cultural and historical dimensions of knowledge.

From an historical viewpoint that covers millennia, those with a philosophical inclination will note that these contemporary global trends are of fundamental importance because they take us back to the debates between universals (Plato) and particulars (Aristotle). Plato argued that once one understood the universal principles one did not need the boring details of the particulars and thus launched a deductive approach to science and epistemology. Aristotle insisted that the particulars contained essential details which should not be overlooked and thus presaged the inductive sciences. In late Antiquity it seemed as if the Platonists had one the day eternally. The Middle Ages renewed the debate and gave to particulars and individuals a new dignity, which set them on an equal footing. As a result combinations of deductive and inductive methods led to the breakthroughs of Kepler, Galileo, Newton and Lavoisier.

The new trends continue this shift that was first articulated seriously in the 13th century. Both universals and particulars are important. The twist made possible by the advent of the new technologies is that the range of the sample is increased enormously. When Aristotle wanted more examples he had to rely on the souvenirs his student Alexander the Great brought back from his voyages to the East. Those in the Middle Ages had the silk routes made popular by Marco Polo's family. Today there are trends to collect universals from many different cultures. At the same time we potentially have access to knowledge of particulars from every corner of the earth, that is being added at a rate of seven million pages a day to the Internet. A new synthesis is possible. The 19th century called for a return to sources. Today, finally we have the means to return to the whole range of sources. Good claims are based on evidence: today we have a chance to consider the whole range of evidence and not just the bit that is fashionable today. Scholars warn us rightly that there is interpretation plays a role in all our work. In print media, the limitations of space often meant that persons chose only to focus on their own

interpretations. In the new media, there is room for linking every claim with the source on which it is based and room for all the interpretations arising from a source.

In isolation, any one of the trends outlined above will take us further in this quest. Combined, these six trends will take us towards an integration, which is not homogenisation, whereby diversity will increase: which offers a new key to tolerance for and comprehension of the differences of others.

Zagreb 19 May 2003.

¹ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, New York: Times Books, 1995. George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society, New Century Edition: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*, Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Pine Forge Press, 2000.

² Giorgio Ruffolo, *A Unity of Diversities*, Florence: Angelo Pontecorboli, 2001.

³ <http://setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu/>

⁴ <http://www.top500.org/>

⁵ This is a development of Professor Manfred Thaller (Cologne). Cf. <http://www.mmi.unimaas.nl/eculturenet/publicPDF/managementreport2.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.iso.ch/iso/en/stdsdevelopment/tc/tclist/TechnicalCommitteeDetailPage.TechnicalCommitteeDetail?COMMID=1459>

⁷ http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/mrt/numerisation/fr/f_01.htm

⁸ <http://www.gleach.com/globstats/>

⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity*. Authorized translation by William Curtis Swabey...and Marie Collins Swabey, Chicago: Open Court, 1923.

¹⁰ <http://art-contemporain.eu.org/base/chronologie/22.html>

Cf. <http://www.malraux2001.culture.fr/culture/malraux/index.html#>

¹¹ <http://www.nii.ac.jp/dsrtokyo/gaiyou2-e.html>

¹² "Cultural and Historical Meta-data: MEMECS (Metadonnées et Mémoire Collective Systématique)," WWW9, Amsterdam, 2000, pp. 1-13. Published electronically as: "Cultural and Historical Metadata, MEMECS (Metadonnées et Mémoire Collective Systématique)," *Cultivate Interactive*, Issue 1, July 2000. See: <http://www.cultivate-int.org/issue1/memecs/>.

¹³ Vannevar Bush, "As we may think," *Atlantic Monthly*, New York, July 1945. <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/flashbks/computer/bushf.htm>

¹⁴ These included the Earl Mountbatten, General Sir Ian Gourlay, and Kurt Hahn, the founder of Salem and Gordonstoun.