

CULTURAL CLONING OR HYBRID CULTURES?

► Eduardo Portella



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To raise the issue of culture today is to position oneself at the crossroads of two forces, globalization and the persistence of national identity, that are both contradictory and intertwined. Culture can no longer be developed without a basic, existential, vital tension between the universal, the regional, the national and the local.

Although cultures remain anchored in their national contexts, it is increasingly hard to believe that the traditional concepts of identity, people and nation are inviolable. Our societies have never experienced such a widespread break with traditions that have grown up over centuries.

But we must ask ourselves whether modern trends usually presented as possible threats to these traditions, including that of the nation-state, might not turn out to be fertile soil for culture, i.e. favourable to the coexistence of diversity. They might help to avoid the two pitfalls of ordered cohesion and artificial uniformity.

The first arises from the hegemonic identity model being based on a single, total, dominant, integrating culture. It was seen as something fixed and immutable. It was brandished as a weapon, and we are only now beginning to measure its impact. The twentieth century saw the most sophisticated cultures give in to barbarism. It took us a long time to realize that racism flourishes where cultural identity is regarded as an absolute. Cultures based on exclusion inevitably lead to the exclusion of all culture. That is why the concept of cultural identity as we have known it since the beginning of globalization is out of date.

But culture must not free itself from national identity by surrendering to the might of globalization and privatization. Emerging post-national identities have not yet shown their capacity to withstand inequality, injustice, exclusion and violence. To subordinate culture to criteria developed in the laboratories of the dominant ideology, which make a cult of the ups and downs of the stock market, the uncertainties of supply and demand, the snares of functionality and urgency, is to cut off its vital supply of social oxygen and to replace creative tension with the stress of the marketplace.

Two big dangers loom ahead. The first is the current tendency to relegate culture to the status of a superfluous product, whereas cultural perception could well become for information societies what scientific knowledge has been for industrial societies. It is too often forgotten that repairing social divisions means having to pay a cultural cost. Investing in culture is also investing in society. The second danger is that of "electronic fundamentalism". Cultural factories and supermarkets spread a culture that is so technology-oriented that it could be described as dehumanized.

But how can culture be "technologized" to the point where it is just a collection of cultural clones, and still claim to be culture? A cloned culture is an aborted culture, because when a culture ceases to be interdependent, it ceases to be a culture. Interaction is the hallmark of culture. And interaction leads to hybridity, not cloning. With cloning, the one is an exact copy of the other. With hybridity, the one and the other give birth to a new entity which is different but also naturally retains the identity of its origins. Wherever it has occurred, cultural hybridity has sustained roots and forged new solidarities, which may be an antidote to exclusion.

To paraphrase André Malraux, I would say that the third millennium will be one of hybridity or it will not be. ■