



The Multicultural Planet

*by Rodolfo Stavenhagen**

If we admit the fact that the contemporary world is comprised of a limited number of countries considered as nation-States, which have marked world history over the last two centuries in an indelible manner, then we can focus on the topic of multiculturalism on three different levels.

The first refers to a planetary scale. The population of our small planet – small in cosmic terms – is divided into a great number of peoples, nations, ethnic groups, cultures and civilisations, depending on the defining criteria used and the preferences of who does the classifying. I am inclined to the use of the term “peoples” because it is my understanding that it poses less theoretical issues and because – and this is very important – the two, international pacts on Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966 establish, in a convincing manner, “the right of peoples to self-determination”.

We could also use the term “nation” frequently used by nationalist politicians and “armchair” professors in illustrated republics, but keeping in mind that nation is naught more than an “imaginary community” (Benedict, 1993). This has lost a bit of its lustre transforming it into more of a scrap in the times of globalisation. We mustn’t forget, however, that if peoples have rights, nations also have voice and vote at the United Nations, and, what is most important, they have states and armies, which are frequently used to combat other nations.

There are also issues with the term “ethnic” which is often bundled to the term “minority”. So, we speak of ethnic minorities, ethnic groups, and ethnic identities, or ethnicity, as an attribute of people, or of ethnic conflicts as something that occurs within national borders. Sometimes, this appears to us as a bit of folklore. There are copious volumes, profusely illustrated with “ethnic” art that our friends gift to us for Christmas when they don’t know what else to give. According to some estimates, there are thousands of ethnic groups throughout the world, while there only exist some two hundred nation-States. By the way, according to the UN, ethnic minorities also have rights, but to a lesser extent than those of peoples and nations.

We have the noble designation of “culture”, a concept that entails a great deal and is practically impossible to define. We know that peoples, nations and ethnic groups are carriers of different cultures, but in the intellectual tradition, culture tends to become abstracted by real human beings and acquires its own existence regardless of social groups that live within a particular time and space. So, we can speak, for example, of universal culture, or business culture, or that of youth, and so forth. UNESCO (1996) is the United Nations organisation that is in charge of promoting culture throughout the world and establishes that “culture is the world’s last frontier of development”.

Finally, it’s worth mentioning that the also venerable concept of “civilisation” which constitutes a useful tool to distinguish large conglomerates of cultures identified by shared elements and



values, which, according to some authors, have competed historically for hegemony, or world dominance. Inspired by O. Spengler and A. Toynbee, among others, periods in world history and large geopolitical spaces can be characterised as civilising forces. There are those who predict (and, in fact, promote) a bloody, world war among civilisations (Huntington). So, we are left with media, global markets, new internationalised production processes, homogenisation of consumption and the ubiquitous relationship networks that cross borders and challenge the very concept of Nation-States. Furthermore, the most dramatic phenomenon of globalisation, undoubtedly, is mass migration of great masses of human groups (mainly, but not limited from East to West and from South to North), which have substantially modified the demographic, cultural, social and political make up of numerous countries.

Does globalisation tend to homogenise culture, or better yet, fragment it? The debate is open. There are those state – and regret – that globalisation imposes, every day more, one, sole cultural model, forced upon by the Empire on the rest of the world. (The Empire, incidentally, is more than the old imperialist notion of just one country dominating the rest; the Empire, according to Hardt and Negri, is the global system of domination in which we are all currently involved). Others affirm that global multiculturalism is naught more than a strategy for domination that benefits said empire by creating cultural market niches built in this manner so that the capacity for resistance and protest can be broken up.

Anyway, decades ago, there have been strides toward an intercultural dialogue. The respect for erstwhile cultures oppressed by international racism and colonialism has turned toward an imperative for global coexistence. Would it be that if there were more dialogue among people – cultures, civilisations – there were would fewer wars? UNESCO has assumed that dialogue among cultures as one of its priorities since its inception in 1946. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted in November of 2001, establishes that:

"... Cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity."

"...Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life."

"...The defence of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity."

If cultural diversity is a fact in our world, then cultural pluralism is the political response within the framework of respect for Human Rights.

* **Rodolfo Stavenhagen** was a professor and researcher at the Colegio of Mexico and Universidad Nacional Autónoma of México. He was also President of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) and a member of the Directive Committee of the Latin American Council for Social Sciences (CLACSO). He passed away in Mexico in November 2016.



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