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The Man of Confluences : a Model of Education for the XXIst Century Gentleman ?

We live in a pivotal period of profound change, a period which cannot be fully understood unless we question some of the concepts we have grown used to taking for granted without always realizing that —as the Polish writer Mrozek expressed so well— when words no longer stick to the things they stand for, reality is under threat. This is the case for notions that have become problematic not only because of their polysemic complexity but also because they are a source of disagreement in the European debate, something which is not always openly voiced. This is true of such words as : “identity”, “alterity” or “cultural diversity” (along with similar concepts which are often used instead like *métissage* (“cultural hybridity”), “multiculturalism”, “cultural cohabitation”, “living-togetherness”, “polycitizenship”). It is easy to see that the traditional framework that has been used to analyse the issue of national identity so far no longer fits the present situation, which offers other types of experiences to a great many people who have no proper words to describe them.

Western countries (they have shown a particular interest in studying and describing foreign cultures, which explains why most anthropological works were probably published in the West) have completely changed their outlook on cultures since colonial policies came under critical fire and the emergence of Colonial Studies —now called Post Colonial Studies— as a research field in its own right.

The exploration of the New World has been completed to the point that some even think that travel has become impossible (and they sadly conclude that the only option left is tourism) and so has the encounter with radical alterity, for the Other has been reduced to an *alter ego*¹. Immigration, too, has changed its face, because the countries that used to supply unskilled labour are today in a position to export their highly-skilled workers, whose grey matter is sold on the same conditions as the West’s, something which considerably modifies the relationships between the people involved. More often than not, this corresponds to what is called expatriation, that is, living in a country different from the one where we were born but not in order to leave an emigrating country for traditional economic reasons. It cannot be equated to exile either, because the people under consideration may return to their native countries because they

¹ Jean Baudrillard, Marc Guillaume, « Figures de l’altérité » (Figures of Alterity), Descartes & Cie, 1994 ; Marc Augé, « L’impossible voyage » (The Impossible Journey), éd. Payot, Paris, 1997.

were not sentenced to banishment, another factor which changes their perception of those whom circumstances have brought them to live with.

If we bear in mind all these geopolitical, sociological and human upheavals, the time has probably come when it is legitimate to envisage another kind of **intercultural anthropology** which would be built on a new interdisciplinary approach, borrowing from the human and social sciences their most valid tools to enable us to assess the importance of the image, of discourse and representation, be it cultural or political, whose downside is the emergence of stereotypes which can never be done away with and which sometimes are dangerous insofar as they oversimplify issues and are easily instrumentalized by the ideologues of violent conflicts.

When you find yourself in Europe, there is no urgent need to look for examples of interculturality in remote, exotic lands. In point of fact, the issue of cultural cohabitation, which lies at the very heart of democratic debate today must be totally reassessed in the light of the recent reuniting of the European continent and the disappearance of the two-bloc confrontation which was, as it were, the dominant political analysis grid obliterating all the rest and obscuring the far greater complexity of the real relationships between cultures.

Being born in Poland and living in France for quite a while, It was natural for me to take a particular interest in the Central European area because I was aware of its almost obsessional taste for inquiring into the right *paideia* to adopt in spite of all the external constraints which have weighed upon it for centuries, sometimes forcing that part of the world to crumble under the weight. That *Other Europe* (the term chosen by the publisher of Milosz's masterly work which its author had entitled *Familiar Europe* — a telling difference about the way both Europes look at each other) first took care to give itself that name² before embarking on a dialogue with both Western and Eastern Europe. So that political and cultural area seemed to me a particularly relevant field of inquiry, because it lay on the edge of close yet different civilisations, a topic which will naturally make anyone raise questions about the nature of identity.

When you start wondering about what is at stake behind the enlargement of the European Union, one of the key issues in the talks with the candidate countries of Central Europe was that of **minorities** and of their place within the majority culture, as a token and symbol of practices in keeping with the State of Law, with its demand for tolerance and respect of cultural diversity. But it does not take long to find out that what people call "minorities" in that part of Europe corresponds only partially to the socio-political reality of Western Europe,

² I have particularly in mind Milan Kundera's text "Un occident kidnappé" ("The West that was Kidnapped", Débat 1983), Jeno Szucs's book "Les trois Europes" ("The Three Europes", L'Harmattan, 1985), Czeslaw Milosz's "Une Autre Europe" ("Another Europe" — actually "A Familiar Europe" in the original) or Jan Patočka's "L'idée de l'Europe en Bohême" ("The Notion of Europe in Bohemia"), which prepared the ground for considering Central Europe as a cultural area distinct from both Western and Eastern Europe.

because cultural reality there is rather the result of shifting borders than of migratory or post-colonial processes.

The reconstruction of Europe presents us with a unique opportunity to confront different cultural paradigms in order to gather people together around the same values but with different experiences which they often know little about. Cultural cohabitation in most countries of “the Younger Europe”³ is a case in point because it did neither follow the French model of secular citizenship (“laïcité citoyenne”) nor the Anglo-Saxon model of multiculturalism, nor the German model of ethnic identity and yet, in spite of what is generally believed, it has been able to work over long periods without necessarily leading to Balkan-type conflicts.

These other models invite us to reconsider the relationship to the other according the dominant West European tradition and in the long run they may have an impact on the final common construction, if it ever gets completed. But what is it about?

It is about a way of dealing with what could be called **plural identity**, which is endorsed and claimed as a norm compatible with the feeling of national identity and citizenship, and which I suggest should be called that of **the Man of Confluences**, and to consider him as the emblematic figure of the way we feel to be a part of human culture in today’s Europe. If such a term had to be coined, it was because the underlying reality, yet unnamed, kept recurring in the works I would read on cultural cohabitation in Central Europe, a region where people have always shown a keen interest in that kind of multiple, ambivalent, dialogical membership because its cultural, ethnic and political frontiers never actually coincided. More generally, I suggest to use it as a metaphor enabling us to understand our sense of belonging to European culture.

Who is the Man of Confluences? Unlike the mixed-raced man, he is not a blend of several cultural and natural components so that he neither resembles his mother nor his father; on the contrary, he resembles them both and he adds to this initial fact his own specific identity which is the result of his personal experience and choices. Within himself, he actively and simultaneously experiences the encounter of several elements he must reconcile into a relatively coherent whole, if only for sanity’s sake. In his personal identity framework, Cohen-Emerique rightly insists on the necessity to possess a certain degree of coherence to maintain a feeling of personal balance and security⁴. Indeed, if the elements which make up someone’s identity are too contradictory or too

³ We borrow that phrase from the Polish historian Jerzy Kloczowski who used it as a title for his book on the history of Central Europe within Western Christendom (“Młodsza Europa”, PIW, Warsaw, 1998, in Polish).

⁴ We are referring to the presentation made by Cohen-Emerique in the 1991 ARIC Congress on personal identity.

radically different to allow for a certain time continuity, without which there can be no self-awareness, the personal integrity of that person is threatened.

The Man of Confluences is not an exile because he lives in his own country, sharing his home, as it were, with the people next door, who do not necessarily resemble him. He is forced by his fate into dialoguing with his fellow compatriots if he does not want to wage war on them. But since he is as entitled to feel at home where he is as his immediate neighbour who does not resemble him, he has no particular reason for waging war on him either — unless, of course, he lets an ideologue convince him to the contrary.

The Man of Confluences is not a man who has been assimilated because even if he belongs to a minority in relation to the majority culture of the country where he lives, he is intent on preserving his own singularity and convincing the representatives of the majority culture that they need not force him to belong to their own model lock, stock and barrel and in each and every circumstance of everyday life to obtain from him the trustworthiness required for living together.

The Man of Confluences is a man of the borderlands but who lives in specific places, which endow him with a specific mentality. By “borderlands” we do not mean only the territories located on the borders of national states in the traditional geographical sense of the term. We are not dealing with what is usually called cross-border cultures either — what often characterizes people living in borderlands is the feeling of being away from the centre, relegated to the periphery, stranded in the provinces. But you can be a provincial and yet live in the centre or be just the opposite while living in the periphery. It is matter of mentality rather than of where you live⁵. That said, even when you feel you are at the centre without actually being the centre but rather a crossroads (and more often than not a province and sometimes a forsaken periphery), you do not have the same mentality as when you live in a place which takes itself for —or which actually is— the place where the action is, where momentous decisions are made and people go if they want to be kept abreast of important events. You may curse fate for it, you may blame the centre for its contempt, but you may also see the silver lining and turn the situation to your own advantage; this is what several intellectuals of Central Europe do when they talk of **borderland towns** and give them fairly valuable virtues, or, to put it in the words of Milosz:

⁵ “Great cultures (in other words great nations speaking ‘great’ languages) only too often fall into the collective illusion that they can be self-sufficient. They believe they are endowed by divine right with the mission to enrich the world and enlighten the others. And inasmuch as they are willing to receive something from these others, it is only in dribs and drabs, as some exotic spices which they may use to season their own dishes, something they do not *really* need, something they could easily do without but, since it gets some talk in polite society and you find it served in good restaurants, well, why not have a taste at it?“, Antoine Liehm, “Du provincialisme” (On Provincialism), in « Lettres internationales », 18, Autumn 1988 (our translation).

In a way, I can consider myself as the perfect specimen of East European man. It seems that his *differencia specifica* could be reduced to an absence of form, be it external or internal. His qualities (intellectual eagerness, passion for debate, sense of irony, freshness of feelings, geographical or spatial imagination) stem from a fundamental flaw: he is doomed to remain at the rough sketch stage, carried along by the swift ebb and flow of his inner chaos. Only in stabilized societies can one be endowed with a form. My own case is evidence enough to show the extent of the efforts people must make to assimilate so many different norms or traditions and impressions that are much too vivid to be sorted out in a more or less orderly way. [...] Shaping a form requires a certain number of basic premises shared by all, a certain background of conformity against which one may indeed rebel, but which creates frameworks that are more powerful than those of conscience. In my social background there were not even uniform attitudes, no social code, no well-defined table manners. Almost every man I met had a different style that set him apart from the others, not because of his personal originality, but as the representative of a different group, class or nationality. This one lived in the XXth Century; that one in the XIXth; another in the XIVth [...]. People claim that contemporary civilization breeds a boring kind of uniformity and destroys individualness in each and every one of us— but I never had reason to complain about it.⁶

To Milosz mature cultures are those that were able to structure their values, beliefs and customs into a relatively rigid code that can be passed on systematically thanks to the conformism on which the implicit assent that legitimizes the process itself is based. **Borderland cultures**, on the contrary, allow for a greater degree of spontaneity in establishing norms and their diffusion and tolerate a certain amount of non-conformity in individual behaviour. Hence **the subsequent feeling of freshness, of freedom but also of unpredictability**, disorder and sometimes danger when all communicability conditions have not been gathered⁷.

For the Polish philosopher Barbara Skarga that openness to the others is often linked to **openness to what is new**, to theories, to an unceasing dialogue with those who think otherwise, which generates the passion for debate. But questioning long-lasting and ingrained beliefs is not easy. To take up such a

⁶ Czesław Miłosz, « Une autre Europe » (Another Europe), Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 70 (Our translation).

⁷ By « communicability » we mean here the operation which brings together contents that are not common to those involved in the process.

challenge, we need to have clear-sightedness and to be daring. Some places and some circumstances probably incite human beings to be bolder.

Daring to confront cultural paradigms different from one's own while striving to develop a deeper knowledge of oneself, such is the challenge the man of confluences must rise up to because he has no choice but to face that double demand and because he is forced by his fate to accept a **permanent tension between identity and the resulting alterity**, turning it into a source of dialogue (which by definition requires disinterestedness) and not into a reason for negotiating his rights, which would entail a power struggle and a clash of interests. Dialogue, in the demanding sense of the word, is incompatible with violence. To be violent is to act as if we were alone; the man of confluences cannot do so because unlike those who live among "their own", he is faced with alterity on a permanent basis and must find a way to make it familiar.

That is why the man of confluences must live in a multiplicity of sign systems and be able to switch from one reference system to another, get accustomed to deciphering several codes at all times and using them simultaneously, which allows him to discover an unexpected side of reality. The lovers of Central European literatures know full well that their appeal lies precisely in their **intentional dilettantism** where anecdote is blended with history, where comedy and tragedy can be found side by side in the same text, giving rise to the highly sophisticated forms of **the grotesque or the theatre of the absurd** that contain a philosophy of existence as well as an aesthetics of its own.

The **man of confluences is often plurilingual** out of necessity and this linguistic wealth will open his ear and perhaps his mind to diversity but will also pose a problem because language is one of the defining traits of cultural identity. In Central Europe, it may sometimes turn out to be a central stake of identity conflicts. Czechs, for instance, who are very attached to their language, have nonetheless learned to appreciate the wealth of foreign influences that have shaped their own culture:

It is the national character as it grew over many centuries out of the crucible of historical events and cultures none of which is manifest there in its entirety, none became the fundamental ideology, because each culture was immediately relativized, and along with it the history of its interpretations. That is why Czechs do not hesitate to consider Kafka as a national writer. And we could go farther —into the fields of plastic arts, of music, wherever you wish. Everywhere we would notice that what mostly characterizes Czech art is its variety, its

diversity and the way it is deeply rooted in several traditions at once, none of which can consequently become a dominant one.⁸

The history of European cultures generally shows the complexity of the linguistic issue. Not everybody shares the opinion of Tzvetan Todorov, the Frenchified Bulgarian advocating transculturality as an escape from the dilemma of interculturality, which to him is a likely dead-end. For the author of “L’homme dépaysé” (“estranged man”) what constitutes humanity is not acculturation to one language in particular, but to any language whatsoever. Yet to most Central European intellectuals forgetting one’s mother language is akin to treason while its practice is almost considered a duty.

How can we escape from this contradiction between **de facto plurilingualism and passionate attachment to the national language** which some peoples call their “mother tongue”? It is a wider issue which concerns a whole vision of the cultural legacy when it is felt as fragile or endangered. In such a context the linguistic issue may indeed become the cause of an identity neurosis, because what is at stake is not a simple competence or a convenient device of social intercourse. Being able to talk a particular language becomes a test of belonging. For centuries, the man of confluences has been able to express himself in a local language which may also be the national language and learn at a very early age an international language without opposing them or considering them antinomical (It used to be Latin, Italian, French, German; today it is Anglo-American and perhaps tomorrow Chinese). That is why, as we saw, Kafka is considered by Czechs as a Czech writer and Konrad Korzeniowski — **whose penname was Joseph Konrad** — can indeed be found in the handbooks of Polish literature while Adam Mickiewicz belongs both to the Lithuanian and Polish heritages.

The fact is sufficiently well-known, so we need not develop any further: in the Central European cultural area there has been almost continuously a real tension between **two models of cultural identity**, which are reactivated according to the geopolitical situation of the day: the romantic model with its emphasis on national genius, the particular, the incommunicable, defining the nation mostly through its culture, and the model of the Enlightenment — with its emphasis on a humanism which transcends particularisms and on its universal dimension. However, it would be a gross oversimplification to proceed to a radical confrontation of these two sensibilities because in Central Europe reality is much more complex than the simple opposition of the French and German models regarding the relationships between State and Nation.

⁸ Liehm Antonin, « Particularités de la culture tchèque » (the particularities of Czech culture) in « L’humour européen », Lublin-Sèvres, Centre International d’Etudes Pédagogiques, 1993, p. 255-260 (our translation).

Some have tried to conceptualize a kind of middle road between the universalism of the Enlightenment and national ideology, precisely in the guise of “true” cosmopolitanism. **The man of confluences is often cosmopolitan**, by his own nature, but he does not feel obliged to make a doctrine out of it. He does have cosmopolitan ways but it does not prevent him from feeling close to his “small fatherland”: “to be the ardent citizen of a budding nation is also to be a friend of mankind, a European. **True cosmopolitanism accepts the national soul**”

The intuition of thinking identity as an open reality can clearly be observed among Central European intellectuals: the reference to a larger culture (notably a European one) allowed them not to be confined to an untranslatable, hermetic, complex-ridden, stifling, peripheral specificity. But they knew only too well that it was the reference to their specificity that gave a meaning to their struggle for the survival of their culture threatened with extinction because of the engulfing logic of empires which often set their sights on it. This is what some call “**the search for differences in resemblances**”.

The man of confluences may often be cosmopolitan but it does not mean that he is stateless. On the contrary, he has double or triple roots instead of having no ties, and it is from these multiple roots that he tries to reach for the universal. That is why to describe him we need to start from a well-known particular to show its universal dimension, and should call upon universals first and come up with particularisms afterwards. When you are a Central European you are a European because you are a Pole, a Czech or a Hungarian and not a European in the abstract first and after only a Czech, a Pole or a Hungarian as a particular case of Europeanity. Such a situation fosters curiosity, adaptability, a very high degree of awareness of oneself and of differences, a keen sense of observation, a taste for confrontation but at the same time a form of caution, because he knows that the encounter with alterity is always a risky process. He is a figure that reflects all the questionings of what some have called late modernity.

Among the various threats looming over contemporary man people usually mention, according to their sensibilities: the tyranny of nationalism, the effect of growing individualism on the dissolution of social ties, the homogenization of cultures under the weight of globalization, communitarianism as opposed to the ideal of individual freedom, the clash of cultures, religious fundamentalisms, excessive relativism, and we could go on and on. What stands out in current debates is how to reconcile the aspiration to singularity and establishing ties with the others: both warm, emotional ties (traditionally linked to national

feelings) and rational ties, of a colder nature (traditionally linked to citizenship)⁹. The solution lies perhaps in providing education of excellence with a new vision, which would help to take off some of the burden of the national model still weighing too heavily on our respective traditions and of which we are all the unwitting products in Europe. This should be achieved without falling in the pitfalls of a soulless international education, which ignores any form of tradition-based approach and instrumentalizes knowledge in the guise of utilitarian modules that look dangerously like intellectual eclectism at its worst, which a young budding mind will find hard to digest.

The middle way should be both daring and respectful of the European tradition; it could be that emblematic figure of how best we can relate to the culture we belong to in the Europe of tomorrow, namely “the man of confluences” —someone who is plurilingual, cosmopolitan-patriot, a cultural go-between liberated by laughter from nationalistic ideologies, aware of his own singularity and open to the universal, simultaneously endorsing several identities without homesickness nor personal tragedy. Such a figure is no doubt hard to live up to for most of us, but it certainly can represent an ideal mobilizing the energy and imagination of many Europeans and notably schools and universities.

Translated by Michaël Oustinoff

⁹ In this respect Chantal Delsol’s book “L’*éloge de la singularité*” (In Praise of Singularity), Paris, Table ronde, 2000 bears witness to the importance of that issue.