

Globalization as a Metonymy for the Universal

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Abstract

The notions, concepts and terms implied by “humanitarian,” “human” and “humanity” are frequently posited as fundamental and predicated on universal values. However, they also imply their construction through cultural, historical and religious frameworks, as well as agreed norms taken as constituting the universal. Attempts to relativize such concepts in a pre-cosmopolitan ordering through diverse interpretations clash with the koinê of human sciences, the ideological consensuses and the mythical background of contemporary globalization. Proceeding beyond the cultural mores, religious traditions and historical roots of universal/universalizable concepts requires a renewed, transcultural examination of their foundation and a fresh look at humanitarian praxis.

Introduction

Being human, experiencing a feeling of belonging to humanity, conceiving of humanitarian purposes and referring to human rights undoubtedly have common semantic roots in our languages. However, the meanings of these phrases actually pertain to different cognitive spheres and different histories. They do not refer to given data, but are conceived and interpreted through the prisms of mythical, biological, psychological, political or legal assumptions, and situated into distinct cultural contexts. They can be related to the current or past trends of globalization, or integrated into a comprehensive view of current trends. In this respect, their interrelations can be considered as metonymies, i.e. as rhetorical devices using the name of a concept (such as globalization) for that of another (such as universal) to which it is related, of which it is a component or a dimension, or which it somehow represents or suggests.

In the academic field, the various settings or historical periods can be interpreted through the filter of theories of international relations (IR), and either be related to a single dimension in a reductionist enterprise with scientific claims or articulated into a complex whole to suggest a composite or cosmopolitan picture of the global scene. Examples abound of both reductionist and holistic attempts, with the variety of intermediate designs, whatever the discipline concerned—international relations, economics, international law, human genetics, religious sciences, cultural studies and

others. Finally and more importantly, this paper addresses the questions raised when the chosen set of concepts is transplanted partially or totally from their original Western context into other cultural settings: Confucian, Islamic, Hindu, African, and others.

A confusion in terms

Globalization, which has become a basic concept of IR discourse, but also a most ambiguous one, is commonly conceived as a process or set of processes which embody a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions, generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction and power. The defining criteria can thus be thought of by David Held and other internationalists as the widening, intensifying, speeding up and growing impact of world-wide interconnectedness (Held and McGrew, 1999)²⁶.

A first remark is that this definition is not limited to particular categories of actors, so that it leaves the analyst free to emphasize the role of states or non-state actors (defined as nonprofits or for-profit), mixed actors or the impact of factors and processes such as climate change or epidemics, none of which is disconnected from humanitarian issues. From this perspective, it appears to be equally scientifically legitimate to either select one variable as central to a conventional understanding of the globalization concept or, spanning the whole spectrum, to embrace a trans-disciplinary concept that encompasses all the social sciences and some natural sciences. Its institutional expression is commonly associated with international law and specifically the United Nations (UN), which, although it legally remains an association of sovereign states, “practically becomes a ‘global’ organization,” based on the understanding that the UN is or is to become a truly “universal organization” whose actions may be extended to include unofficial actors in new forms of “global governance” (Muldoon *et al.*, 2004, 8).

In the first case, globalization can be reduced to disciplinary practices and be equated with IR or global history; with processes such as the spread of technologies and scientific knowledge, international migration, epidemics or environmental change, or with specific categories of actors such as states and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), individuals, communities, non-state actors with nonprofit or for-profit aims with a cultural, religious, techno-scientific or ideological content. Each of these reductions, or metonymical substitutes for globalization, can generate empirical patterns of world-wide links and relations across a key domain of human activity.

²⁶ The journal *Globalizations* explicitly addresses the plural interpretations of globalization, away from the paradigm that dominated the first phase of the globalization debate, as commented by James N. Rosenau (2004).

In the second case, one may think that an all-embracing and polysemous concept covering all spheres of life and all historical periods from antiquity to present may lose some of its scientific relevance and usefulness, but also acknowledge that it has the advantage of pointing to actual or potential universality. Additionally, it can be argued that its very semantic and pragmatic complexity can be seen as a positive break with conventional theories insofar as the onset of globalization has led to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and exposes the conceptual deadlocks of strict disciplinary definitions and descriptions, suggesting the need for a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary inquiry (Ghils, 2007).

Overall, we are confronted with a dual epistemological treatment implying that the globalization concept can be either simplified with reference to positive parameters, such as the descriptive criteria of geopolitics, or complicated by extending it over to various dimensions such as historical forces, symbolic representations, cultural values or ethical constructions, whether religious or secular. A general remark applicable to all scientific or practical uses of the concept is that in all cases the global and the universal overlap, which may suggest the implicit desire that global realities pre-empt the accomplishment of the universal.

The reductionist attitude can be conspicuously observed in the economic field, where it was increasingly agreed that globalization is a corporate-led process, until it came under justifiable criticism as a consequence of the current financial and economic turmoil (Ralston Saul, 2005; Khan, 2008; Wolf, 2009). However, this process is not limited to objective phenomena and appears to be subordinated to ideological formulations and quasi-religious beliefs in market forces guided by the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith, whose disastrous results need no demonstration. A striking illustration of this stereotype is given by the World Business Academy, which is “not just another association of business people to exchange information and foster collegiality,” but understands that business is the dominant institution in society today and the one most capable of responding to rapid change and to disseminate business into the world to rekindle the human spirit in business: “Business has become, in this last half of century, the most powerful institution on the planet. The dominant institution in any society needs to take responsibility for the whole, as the church did in the days of the Holy Roman Empire. But business has not had such tradition. This is a new role, not yet well understood or accepted” (Harmann, 2005).

Other forms of what is both a reduction and an over-extension of the term are enshrined in the idea of global civil society associated with the politics of rights, the idea of common good and democratic institutions. This loose concept includes all of the often exclusive and conflicting components mentioned above, presented or imposed as universal aims despite particularistic views with political, economic or cultural content. The resulting paradoxes are particularly striking for systems whose universal aims are

derived from traditions which in one way or another amount to “imported” forms of universalism, in the way the Western state has been “imported”²⁷ to other regions of the world through colonization. In its received usages, civil society is often a reduction or even a distortion of its liberal origin insofar as it includes, among other components, conflicting orientations, exacerbated by their transnational dimensions: some communitarian theories glorify the absence of choice involved in the discovery of one’s real identity as a pre-determined reality, defining individuals—who can no longer in this case be properly and literally called “individuals”—as being constituted by their community, without any possibility of choice or free affiliation. This view of civil society is in sharp contrast with the associational tradition, in which fellow citizens are free to either become members of an association or leave it as they like, actually creating relationships they choose on a voluntary basis with the resulting fabric of plural “identities”—here again an improper term which conceals the changing and labile fabric of overlapping social spheres.

Whatever the content of civil society (CS)—companies and corporations, communities, voluntary associations, indigenous groups or religions—and its variable ethical legitimacy, which some activists have stretched to the point of considering it as the “conscience of the world” (Willetts, 1996), the very idea of CS as a political concept remains a byproduct of Western culture. Although it is often claimed that all cultures and religions are open to various interpretations and evolutions, antagonistic views regularly appear between universal human rights and cultural identities. To take a first example, the failure to adapt the concept of civil society within certain Arab countries is well illustrated by the statement Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim prepared but was not allowed to present on his final day in court, 29 July 2002, before he was sentenced and taken away to jail for his defense of human rights through the advocacy of civil society: “I believe that the members of this honourable Court who are over forty-five will remember that fifteen years ago they never heard the phrase ‘civil society.’ This was not an expression used in spoken Egyptian or the Arabic language before the establishment of Ibn Khaldoun Centre,” he said.²⁸

²⁷ I am taking here the term used by Bertrand Badie in *L’Etat importé. L’occidentalisation de l’ordre politique* (Paris, 1999, Eng. Transl.: *The Imported State. The Westernization of the Political Order*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), in which the author traces the rise of the modern state—a mode of organizing political power within a closed territory—in post-Enlightenment Europe and its spread to the remainder of the world, especially colonial and postcolonial societies.

²⁸ English translation of the statement Saad El-Din Ibrahim prepared but was not allowed to present on the final day in court, 29 July 2002, before he was sentenced and taken away to jail. Dr. Ibrahim had been arrested on 30 June under the State Emergency Law, accused, among other allegations, to have received foreign funding without permission of the authorities and to disseminate false information that damages

Arguably, the idea of civil society is rejected in parts of the Arab and Islamic world as a concept rooted in Western culture, closely associated with secularism and the Westernization of Muslim societies. Various forms of an extreme application of Islamic law can be found in regions ruled or controlled by the Taliban, in Saudi Arabia, or even in Iran today, where the Shari'ah (Qu'ranic law) has been referred to by the government to justify the suppression of all forms of civil opposition and implied rights and support a theory of legitimate violence. The source of legitimacy was restated by Ayatollah Mohammad Mesbah Yazdi, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's spiritual advisor and the author of *War and Jihad in Islam*, arguing that violence is intrinsic to and necessary for human beings. In violation of Iran's republican constitution, which states that the authority of the supreme leader, the president, and the parliament should emanate from the people's vote and not from God, Yazdi claimed that as the supreme leader is appointed by God, his use of violence through state authorities is legitimate.

However, counterarguments can easily be found, from breakaway currents like the Mutazilite, who held that reason alone is sufficient to understand the nature of God and existence, to contemporary Muslim philosophers or religious authorities who claim that Islam is a religion as well as a culture, and so translates into diverse, specific expressions, as opposed to the more universal concept of *akhlak* (ethics) in addition to Shari'ah, following Khalid Duran's and other thinkers' suggestions (Masud 2007, 101-102). Some religious authorities also support confidence in scholars to rule the community in the political sphere, such as Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, whose defense of the Iraqi constitution in his 2003 fatwa was based on democratic political principles, making no reference to the religious law, although he questioned civil liberties in other respects.²⁹ Even if scholars like Riffat Hassan and others claim that secularism and humanism are unacceptable to Islam, many Muslim "free thinkers" will claim, in line with a long philosophical tradition going back to al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd, in which secularism and humanism based on the autonomy of science and reason need not clash with the Revelation and are entitled to found the political dimension of al-

Egypt's national interest. At least eight other staff members of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Civil Society were also arrested and files confiscated. On 25 May 2009, Saad Eddin Ibrahim was proved unguilty in the case of spying filed against him by Lawyer Abul Naga Elmehrezy. He can now enter Egypt safely.

²⁹ However, the same ayatollah legitimized another kind of civil violence when he issued a fatwa in 2006 in which, to the question "What is the legal standard about men's and women's homosexuality?", he answered "It is illegitimate (haram) and the person who behaves this way is punished, the one who commits masculine homosexuality will be put to death" (question 5). Rights groups were concerned that, inspired by this ruling, the Sadr and Badr militias, both Shia, were stepping up attacks on homosexuals and calling for their eradication. Under the pressure of international protest, Ali al-Sistani finally renounced the fatwa (*The Independent*, 12 May 2006).

Farabi's "Virtuous City," remembering his ambition to naturalize Western philosophy and science of late antiquity in the Islamic world (Mahdi 2000). From its earliest period, Islamic political theory has consequently devised mechanisms and institutions for limiting the power of both political and religious authorities over what can be considered as equivalent to the forms of civil rights more recently projected from Western culture onto Islamic societies. In a similar way, Sufi currents are often seen as forms of Islamic humanism proceeding beyond the ritualistic side of religious practice into social values expressing a sense of responsibility and solidarity, a duty to sharing and sympathy with the others, as well as a freedom of expression often perceived as a threat to the established dogma (Chebel 2006).

Even if "Islam views all human beings to be ontologically members of the same family, the same umma," it posits "the moral primacy of membership in the single community of Muslim believers," even if it otherwise "acknowledges that human identities are never monolithic." The ideal universal nation so defined remains within the boundaries of a specific community, whose law is immediately positive and rational insofar as it derived from the final, closed message received from God and entirely transmitted by Mohammed. Its strength is not easily undermined by oppositional tensions "because in Islam there are no kings or popes, no kingdoms and no churches" (Hanafi 2002, 173). Rulers are consequently jurists more often than theologians, as Muslim law covers all aspects of life, from birth to death, including relations among individuals and between these and the state. Legal norms also apply to inter-state relations in times of peace and war. But the very absence of distinction between the institutional pole and the spiritual pole, between the visible and the invisible dimensions of the community raises the fundamental issue of recognizing secular government as the *sine qua non* of democracy, and theocracy as its natural opponent (Aldeeb Abu Salieh 2006).

This contrasts with Indian theories, starting with Kautilya who as soon as the 4th century B.C.E. explicitly separates political thinking from theology in his *Arthashastra*, and in the various Indian *darshanas* ("viewpoints" or "theories"), which consistently make room for a dialectical approach to arguments and counter-arguments. This explains why Sanskrit "not only has a bigger body of religious literature than exists in any other classical language," but also "a larger volume of agnostic or atheistic writings than in any other classical language" (Sen 2005).

Other examples referring to various cultural settings raise the same question about the adequacy of the concept of civil society or about its implicitly positive nature, concealing the frequent negative and destructive forces underlying forces coming under such labels as "non-state," "civil" or "transnational," (Ghils 1985, 1992, 1995, 2007) as illustrated by mafia networks, terrorist groups or anarchical movements in failed states. A second contradiction appears, as mentioned above, when it includes the

communitarian dimension in a global public sphere, which comes up against the universalist claims of a civil society based on the liberal conception of individual rights. The inclusion of the two poles of civil society—communities and individuals, inherited moralities and constructed ethics—which can in turn be subdivided into the sub-poles constituting a tension between constructive and destructive forces within them, finally undermines the assumption that civil society can be the desired locus of a possible synthesis in the public sphere.

A specific case is the intermingling of traditional and modern forms of associations in Africa. On the continent, the strengthening of civil society (in the Western sense) is still considered today as correlative to the reinforcement of pluralistic democratic institutions. NGO networks, cooperatives and “tontines”³⁰ serve both as counterweights to political power and dynamic forces affecting the whole of society: “Civil society embodies the people in its diverse and plural character, when the people has become aware of the role it is called to play” (Cotonou Meetings, 1991).

From the perspective of political anthropology, civil society can include religious (Christian, Islamic and others) and professional organizations, unions in the private manufacturing sector, as well as small and medium-size businesses, small farmers, etc. It appears that civil society is more likely to blossom within a free market society, but also if state power is effective, insofar as it creates the favorable conditions for a healthy civil society. (Bratton 1989, 407-430) As can be seen, we are confronted here again with an “imported” concept as far as the weakness of civil society is ascribed to the very weakness or “failure” of the state: “On the basis of available evidence, a *prima facie* case can be made that institutions of civil society exist in some African countries, if only in fledgling form.” Furthermore, this institution has been colliding, merging or overlapping with the distinctive African settings based on traditional elements of political culture in African countries, with Africans identities commonly drawn from collective social units like family, clan and ethnic group.

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes how influenced he was, as a young boy, by the democratic nature of the local meetings that were held in the regent’s house in Mqhekezweni: “Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance

³⁰ A *tontine* is a cooperative fund whose benefits ultimately accrue to the last survivor or survivors after a specified time. First issued by the British government in 1693 to fund a war against France, tontines became associated with life-insurance in the United States in the 19th century. As a type of rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA), tontines are well established as a savings instrument in Western and central Africa.

among the speakers, but everyone was heard....” (Sen 2005, 30-31; Smyke 2005). Today, the challenge is still to reconcile the concept of solidarity, which typically translates in two distinct traditions, between the modern forms of civil society and the older associational structures constructed upon group or age solidarity.

Conflictive views in the UN system

In the field of international law, a similar contradiction exposes the failure of cultural relativism. For example, most states belonging to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) involved in the Islamic Human Rights movement have in fact endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the covenants, together referred to as an “International Bill of Rights.” In doing so, “these states have undertaken obligations to guarantee to their citizens the rights stipulated in the International Bill of Rights. The permissible derivations from these obligations are governed by international law, which presently provides for no general limitations on the basis of religious legal systems,” despite efforts by OIC to penetrate the UN Human Rights Council (HRC).³¹ Which means, as argued by Muslim associations that question this position, that countries backing the IHR movement must either withdraw entirely from the International Bill of Rights or be prepared to acknowledge the universality of those rights.

This conflict is epitomized by the adoption of the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam at the Nineteenth Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers in Cairo on 5 August 1990. At the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Iran, supported by several other Islamic States, pressed for the acceptance of the Cairo Declaration as an alternative to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This objective was partly achieved in 1997 when the Cairo Declaration was included by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights as the last document in *Human Rights: A Compilation of International Instruments: Volume II: Regional Instruments, (New York and Geneva, 1997, OHCHR, Geneva)*. The legal contradiction is illustrated in the phrasing of the Cairo Declaration itself, which states that “(a) Everyone shall have the right to express his opinion freely in such manner as would not be contrary to the principles of the Sharī’ah; (b) Everyone shall have the right to advocate what is right, and propagate what is good, and warn against what is wrong and evil according to the norms of Islamic Sharī’ah; (c) Everyone shall have the right to participate, directly or indirectly in the administration of his country's public affairs. He shall also have the

³¹ “Islam & human rights. Defending Universality at the United Nations”, statement by the Centre of Inquiry (which holds special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council), where it focuses on issues of freedom of expression and scientific inquiry in the international community.

right to assume public office in accordance with the provisions of Shari'ah" (Article 22). And also: "All the rights and freedoms stipulated in this Declaration are subject to the Islamic Shari'ah" (Article 24); and, in "The Islamic Shari'ah is the only source of reference for the explanation or clarification to any of the articles of this Declaration" (Article 25). In its Charter, the OIC and its 57 signatories openly violate their own principles, as it recognizes in Article 2 that "The Member States undertake that in order to realize the objectives in Article 1, they shall be guided and inspired by the noble Islamic teachings and values and act in accordance with the following principles: 1. All Member States commit themselves to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter ..."

The conflict between the two interpretations of human rights and, more generally, international law, has occupied the UN Human Rights Council (former Commission) for the past eleven years. On 28 March 2008, during the 7th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC), with the support of China, Russia and Cuba among other countries, the Islamic States succeeded in forcing through an amendment to a resolution on Freedom of Expression and against the "abuse" of it.³² In agreeing to restrict the exercise of allegedly universal human rights for the first time in the 60-year history of UN Human Rights bodies, the HRC has confirmed the concern that "the tendency within some parts of the international community to roll back the principle of universality in order to make the enjoyment of fundamental rights dependent on factors such as tradition, culture, religion or the level of development," expressed in a statement to the Human Rights Council by the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany on 10 December 2007.

True, the politicization of the HRC does not necessarily coincide with opinions voiced by 40 civil society organizations, most of them from member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which call on the Human Rights Council to protect the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and to reject the amendment to the mandate proposed by the OIC. During the 7th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC), the OIC formally successfully introduced an amendment to the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression which required him to "report on instances where the abuse of the right of freedom of expression constitutes an act of racial or religious discrimination, taking into account Articles 19(3) and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and General Comment 15 of the Committee on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination which stipulates that the prohibition

³² Which includes speaking out against Shari'ah laws that require women to be stoned to death for adultery or young men to be hanged for being gay, or against the marriage of girls as young as nine, as in Iran.

of the dissemination of all ideas based upon racial superiority or hatred is compatible with the freedom of opinion and expression.” This amendment requires silencing any criticism of Sharī’ah Law and its association with certain abuses of human rights, such as the stoning of women, forced marriage, and the hanging of gay men. However, in what was probably a first for the United Nations, delegates to the HRC heard two Muslims describe religious literalism as “racism” and tell their listeners that the OIC does not speak for the majority of the world’s Muslims. Danish MP and leader of the Liberal Alliance Naser Khader, and Tarek Fatah, founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress were eloquent in their denunciation of the OIC, its Saudi paymasters, Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The West and the rest?

Is it then relevant to ask whether it is appropriate to apply such a historically specific and essentially Western concept outside its original sphere, assuming once again that it is actually or potentially universal, or at least a space for a cross-cultural dialogue? A radical view against this claim has been articulated by the American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein (1996),³³ who has equated universalism and imperialism in his recent works. He suggests that such ideas as civilization, progress, freedom, democracy, human rights and Western intervention to promote these ideas around the world, whether decided by states or performed by NGOs, are forms of universalism predicated on natural law and used as a smokescreen for Western dominance ever since the Enlightenment. This attitude, he says, is similar to that of the Spanish theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who justified the conquest of America in the 16th century against Bartolomé de Las Casas’s objections. As early as 1492, Las Casas (1971) said, people were living in a closed world, a small world that constituted the whole of which the Spaniards were only a part. The victory of the *Conquistadores* could therefore be considered as reaching the universal, extending the medieval *Republica Christiana* over the whole world. Columbus’s obsession with what was to be a new and last crusade expressed not so much a “discovery” as the accomplishment of God’s will and ancient prophecies, in conformity with what a common conviction prior to the voyage itself and affirmed by Ferdinand and Isabella in a letter that follows the discovery: “That which

³³ Wallerstein challenges the divorce between philosophy and science, between the knowledge about the good and the true: “The good is the same as the true in the long run, for the true is the choice of the optimally rational, substantively rational, alternatives that present themselves to us. The idea that there are “two cultures,” a fortiori that these two cultures are in contradiction to each other, is a gigantic mystification.” <http://fbc.binghamton.edu/iwstanfo.htm>) He is in favor of a unified epistemology which he sees coming by the converging trend of the “complexity studies” and the “cultural studies.” They show a stronger concern for historicity, constructivity, contextuality.

you had announced to us has come true as if you had seen it before having spoken of it to us,” (letter of 16/8/1494).

To return to the case of civil society, Gary Wickham (1994, 509) has argued that “efforts to locate civil society... reveal more about the preoccupations of Western scholars than they do about new social configurations in the Middle East today.” However, “a categorical rejection of the idea of civil society in the Middle East is unwarranted, not least because the idea of civil society is fast becoming part of the indigenous intellectual and policy dialogues,” (Gilbraith 2009). The extent to which the idea has gained currency in the region is also described by Eva Bellin: “State officials in the Middle East use the term “civil society” to promote their projects of mobilization and “modernization”; Islamists use it to angle for a greater legal share of public space; and independent activists and intellectuals use it to expand the boundaries of individual liberty,” (Bellin 1994, 509). These authors conclude that, by focusing on its essential characteristics and role rather than its particular institutional manifestations, civil society remains a valid tool of analysis for the Arab world.

In other cultural or epistemological perspectives, the concepts of the universal, the common good, globalization and the implied concepts associated with democracy have been revisited in several noteworthy comparative studies of science, literature, religion and philosophy. Most of these studies avoid attempts at comprehensive contrasts and evaluations, aiming instead to show how bringing texts from the two traditions into conversation with one other can enrich and enliven our understanding of each, while avoiding undue confusions between science and culture, culture and religion, religion and philosophy. Such thinkers as Amartya Sen (2007) in his essays on Indian political thought, François Jullien (2004) about Greek and Chinese strategies of meaning, Muhsin Mahdi (1995) about Islamic political philosophy, Dariush Shayegan (2001) on the Persian and Western traditions, or Michael Bratton (1991, 1994) on African civil society illustrate relevant attempts at opening new avenues to potentially universal values and rights. These works resemble studies which differ in their respective approaches but try to make sense of the many phyla that may lead to new universal, or potentially universal paradigms, although they admit that situating universal concepts such as democracy or the state as a continuation of actual spaces, whether politically, ideologically or culturally defined, introduces a contextual flavor into notions which philosophical thinking has made artificially universal and abstract. However, they also question the assumption that such concepts are precisely abstract notions disconnected from actual achievements or aspirations and, for that matter, reduced to a regulatory reference.

Asian responses

As Amartya Sen (2004, 2005, 2006) has shown, political liberty and tolerance in their full contemporary form is absent from ancient traditions. Plato and Augustine were no less authoritarian in thinking than were Confucius and Kautilya.³⁴ There were, of course, champions of tolerance in classical European thought, but there are plenty of similar examples in other cultures as well. Among the earliest political defenses of tolerance anywhere, Sen often mentions the case of Emperor Ashoka's dedicated championing of religious and other kinds of tolerance in India in the third century BCE, who argued that "the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another"). In a later period, when, at the turn of the 16th century, the heretic Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in Campo dei Fiori in Rome, the Great Mughal emperor Akbar (who was born a Muslim and died a Muslim) had just finished, in Agra, his large project of legally codifying minority rights, including religious freedom for all, along with championing regular discussions between followers of Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and other beliefs, including atheism.

In his broad inquiry into values directly related to democratic rights, intercultural and inter-religious toleration, Sen shows that open discussion has been present in the argumentative tradition of India for over two millennia. This traditional practice can be found not only in the public expression of values, but also in philosophical debates and hence in the formation of various forms of secularism opposed to the more religious currents of classical Indian schools (*darśanas*). The early uniqueness of Indian philosophies in making room for opposite arguments is also linked with the propensity of all Indian philosophical systems to discuss the use of reason. The claim that the use of reason must be purposeful or goal-directed is illustrated by Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (*Treatise on Gains*), a classical book on government, politics and economics which dates from around 300 BC. Kautilya's study applies a method of "critical inquiry" (*anviksiki*) distinct from theological studies. The practice of contradictory argumentation, which is present all philosophical systems, may explain the Indian interest for what they had heard about Greece in that respect, at a time of intimate and extended contact between the two cultures following Alexander's campaign in India. As reported by Jonardon Ganieri (2001, 8), "The ancient Greek chronicler Megasthenes frequently visited the court of Candragupta and in his *Indica* he presented to the Greeks a vivid account of the Indian society of those times. Fragments of this lost work quoted by later writers reveal Megasthenes to have been greatly impressed by similarities between Greek and Indian ideas, especially about space, time and the soul. He is also said to have carried messages

³⁴ Kautilya was the chief minister in the court of Candragupta (reigned c. 321–c. 297 BC), a Mauryan ruler who came to power at about the time of Alexander the Great's death. As founder of the Maurya Dynasty, Candragupta was the first emperor to unite most of India under one administration. He lived at the same time as did Alexander and may have met him when he invaded India.

between Candragupta's son Bindusara, the father of Asoka, and Antiochus I. Bindusara indeed asked Antiochus to send him Greek wine, raisins, and a Sophist to teach him how to argue. Antiochus replied by sending the wine and raisins, but regretted that it was not considered good form among the Greeks to trade in Sophists!"

In the same vein, philosophical speculation and the practice of religious expositions associated with debates and controversies will generate a kind of pluralism that "ensures that these issues will be continually debated, as against being permanently settled," which is why "one may, in order to understand Hinduism, move on from the concept of a textual community to that of a contextual community" (Daya 1996, 201).

Indeed, the very idea of democracy, in the form of participatory public reasoning, appeared in different civilizations at different periods in world history. Sen also mentions early seventh century Japan, when the Buddhist Prince Shotoku, regent to his mother Empress Suiko, introduced a relatively liberal constitution or *kempo* (known as "the constitution of 17 articles") in 604 CE. In the spirit of the Magna Carta (signed six centuries later, in 1215 CE), the *kempo* insisted: "Decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. They should be discussed with many." On the subject of tolerance, it says: "Nor let us be resentful when others differ from us. For all men have hearts, and each heart has its own leanings. Their right is our wrong, and our right is their wrong." However, the preeminence of uniformity has consistently reappeared in the opposite image of a "Japanese spirit" (*yamato damashii*), somehow echoing the idea that the Chinese culture, being unique, is incommunicable (Jullien 2008, 256). Examples of championing public discussion and seeking different—and conflicting—points of view have figured in the history of many histories in the world, both in the West and outside it. They continue to be of contemporary relevance in thinking about the potential universality of pluralist democracy and fundamental rights. As Sen also recalls, when India became independent in 1947, the committee that drafted its constitution, led by B.R. Ambedkar, had to consider India's own traditions (including those of political tolerance and local democracy), in addition to learning from the gradual emergence of Western democracies over the previous two centuries.

In a distinct attempt to seize the links between the common, the universal and the uniform, philosopher François Jullien has engaged in a dialogic rediscovery of Greek philosophy and Chinese studies in the early 1970s in the hope that Chinese philosophy would throw into question all the "great universals" of European thinking. China was chosen because, for Jullien (2008), it is the only historic culture to constitute Europe's "great other": the Arabic and Hebraic worlds are "closely connected to our own history, and India is linked with European culture linguistically, with only a few divisions between Greek and Sanskrit." Revisiting Western thought with ideas from the East, Jullien points out that this approach is intellectually and politically imperative at present. Against the self-help industry, which pursues an opportunistic simulacrum of

this type of intellectual exchange, Jullien seeks to create a space of mutual inquiry that maintains the integrity of both Eastern and Western thinking. The mechanism of “enlightenment through difference” is precisely what Jullien, in his extensive and fascinating studies of Chinese culture and history, has identified as a “constitutive interdependence” or “correlation,” which he identifies as one of the main characteristics of the Chinese knowledge structure. Such an aesthetic of correlation could challenge the one of “*tabula rasa*,” the philosophy of the new and of progress at any price that has dominated the history of the twentieth-century avant-garde in the West. In this matter, China appears in Huang’s practice as a “symbolic form,” in the same way that Erwin Panofsky understood the role of perspective during the Renaissance. According to him, Chinese tradition distrusts the universality of logical concepts. Thus the hexagram operates not as a predetermined, abstract, and codified intellectual representation or construct, but as a pure transformational structure to be used as a perceptual diagram. The I Ching’s aim is to clarify the way events unfold. For Jullien, the hexagrammatic structure is the only one that is capable of expressing the ongoing mutations of the universe, which he calls “process,” through a concrete system of representation, or “concrete figuration.”

Another difference appearing in Jullien’s studies is an idea that appears to be crucial to understanding some aspects of a distinctively Chinese thought process, which is that in China history as a discipline concentrates not so much on events, facts, and dates, but rather on change. History is traditionally not understood and studied as a linear, continuous narrative. Facts and events are milestones within an evolving process that gives priority to relationships. In comparison, Western history is from beginning to end an epic narrative. China is, again according to Jullien (1989, 2004a, 2004b, 2008), the only great civilization that has produced neither a cosmography nor an epic. The West is dependent on Hegel’s idea that the study of universal history itself has to be perceived as a progression with a rational cause, a means and an end. In China the course of the world is an uninterrupted succession of opposed but complementary phases; history is channeled through divination practices, and civilization is less concerned with “being” than with “becoming,” which is never orderly and definitive. Jullien’s account (1989, 2004, 2008) of the worldview unifying the Chinese tradition shows that, unlike Western essentialists, the main line of Chinese reflection and discourse aims at indicating the richness of a non-dualistic heaven/nature, at hinting at the immanent structure of being, rather than at revealing the unitary truth concealed within the phenomena. The central contrast is between two sorts of universality that define two cultures, “Socratic generality” versus “Confucian globality.” The West seeks to discover the God’s-eye view directly; China hints obliquely, rejecting the idea of transcendence, at the immense variety of points of view and of the world itself.

Conclusion

The quest for universal values has been associated with concepts such as democracy, human rights and humanitarianism. However, these appear to be questionable. There linger unquestioned claims about the accomplished forms of the universal and an abstract notion disconnected from actual achievements or aspirations.

Ascribing a place to such concepts as human, humanity and humanitarian on a possible continuum between the global and the universal amounts to the possibility of a general, constructed ethic based on an ontological conception of the world which includes or excludes such concepts as truth, phenomena, situations, identities, harmony, which are either intangible or moving and evolving. It results from the emerging conversation between various cultural or philosophical conceptions that plural ethics should be considered first as a provisional horizon before considering the possibility of the universal. Still, rather than deploring this mobile, uncertain, non-institutional side of the phenomena in question, can we not see in it the expression of an authentic, full humanism, a conception of the human that is dynamic, explosive, precarious but intense? In short, from a qualitative viewpoint global, processes generate constructive but also destructive developments, whereas its temporal evolution can be more easily conceived as a fuzzy, porous concept (in the logical sense). A contextualized ethic—but globality is also a context—is more humanely, and so more modestly, a juxtaposition of daily rituals, creating a collective state of mind. It depends on a place or on various places, whether real or symbolic, and it is tormented by *concern* for belonging to those places. And so, in successive and overlapping circles, this ground, this earth, this world become important. As Michel Maffesoli suggests,³⁵ they “are of interest” because we are in them (*interesse*), quoting Merleau-Ponty, who says that it is “because I live in it” that I can take this world seriously. In that sense, in the global public sphere that could possibly be emerging, we are far from the atemporal and universal, but definitely at the very threshold of a renewed modernity and a new humanism.

We are thus confronted with a paradoxical situation. The universal can be accused of being reductionist, cancelling the stated purpose of complexification and diversity, imposing a postulated or partial complexity presented as the inheritance of one particular historical and cultural context. Conversely, it can be rejected for being overdetermined by a concept hastily inherited from an unachieved modernity or proclaimed by a religious faith. Whether implicit or explicit, the latter postulate may be

³⁵ These comments are inspired by Michel Maffesoli (From universal to particular. *Diogenes* 2007; 54, 81).

felt as ethically legitimate, following the example of feminist proponents who present their views as “clearly closer to the universal than the particular” and “inherently cosmopolitan in that they do not take the boundaries of particular tradition, whether national, cultural or religious, as having any intrinsic moral value separately from what it means to be a man or a woman within that tradition.” (Hutchings 2007, 187) In both cases, a portion of human societies is left with no other global justice than, to quote Kant’s fundamental principle of morality in an unusual sense, “to make their ends our own.”

Whereas complexity increases with the variety of geopolitical contexts, it decreases when focusing on space to the detriment of time, in the same way as the proposed “chronopolitics” tends to overemphasize time to the detriment of space. Whatever the importance ascribed to cultural memories, cultural traditions and references to history, and despite the universal claims of religions and other symbolic systems rooted in a form of permanence and continuity appealing to zenith and nadir, space divisions based on cardinal points cannot be put aside. Either way, a universal or a “world” philosophy impervious to regional or cultural specifications or to diverging historical tempi—re-territorialized or re-spatialized—is doomed to self-destruction. Needless to say, falling back to a uniform cyberspace – where space is shrinking in proportion to the speeding up of communication and the blurring of geographical and cultural boundaries, and where any “travail de mémoire” à la Ricoeur is losing sense under the pressure of “presentism,” – is doubly irrelevant, whatever significance information and communication may have in their own right.

A problem consequently arises whenever one is tempted to simplify an irreducible complexity by reducing global processes to any of their components considered as potentially universal. In the theory of IR, this view has tended to be taken for granted, from Raymond Aron (1969, 25) who, referring to the realist perspective, wrote that the division of mankind into sovereign states was a historically transitory situation and that it will come to an end when a universal polity is established,³⁶ to international lawyers who consider that international organizations and jurisdictions are by necessity an embryonic form of a universal ordering beyond national legislations. In a similar way, a common, superficial view of inter-faith dialogue will tend to refer to what is considered most positive or likely to gain general acceptance in various traditions, ignoring what is most negative, the causes of conflicts and tensions possibly

³⁶ “There will be an essential difference between domestic policy and foreign policy ... until mankind has achieved its unification in a universal state”. A similar, official view was presented about the unquestionably “universal” aim of the UN in the 1985 report of the Joint Inspectors Unit of the Organization.

originating in cultural or historical differences, more than in different core teachings. Such assumptions do not depart from Kant's view over 200 years ago in perpetual peace as the aim of man's path through history. These views have been reinforced by 9/11 and the current financial/economic crisis, in both cases as a consequence of non-state transnational actors, whether secular or religious, with strong universalist ambitions. David Held's warning (2003) about a Hobbesian return to the state, or even to a pre-Hobbesian return to the state of nature, where even the security guaranteed by Hobbes's sovereign state to its people is no longer delivered, reminds us that international affairs remain polarized and international institutions threatened with de-globalization and a retreat to cultural and religious identities. In a similar way, John A. Hall (2002) recalled Raymond Aron's monograph on Clausewitz, justifying the return of the state (Plender 2008) with the argument that peace is most likely to come about by increasing the rationality of states.

Presupposing that earlier political thinkers, from Plato, Confucius and Kautilya to Alfarabi, Guo Xiang and Avicenna inform most of current political and philosophical thinking is probably misleading. On the contrary, this is precisely where the problem arises, not only because of the scarce interaction among thinkers in the various periods and spaces considered, and more generally because an inquiry into the various non-Western traditions (and vice versa) of political and ethical thinking has not been completed, therefrom the cautious assumption of the "relative universality of human rights." (Donnelly 2007, An intersubjective dialogue à la Habermas or Apel, bringing together the metonymic ingredients of what is intended to be a universalistic vision, is one of the possible ways to address this issue anew. But are states and cultures "subjects"? This would presuppose, echoing "intuition" in Indian philosophy, Husserl's reference in 1917 to a "universal" ethics taken as "....a supra-individual and supranational form that can be compared to logic" in a letter to his Polish friend Ingarden, which can be "consequently opposed to any particular community and can be related only to the infinity of collective life, with mankind as such." (Dastur 1995, 120) ³⁷

³⁷ The translation is mine.

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