

## Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism, Gift Paradigm: a necessary dialogue

By Francesco Fistetti

### 1. *Decentering the West*

In recent years, multiculturalism has been a topic which has provoked a heated intellectual and political debate because of the variety of its philosophical, sociological and ethical implications. The stake of this debate is an epistemological revolution of western universalism and a radical reconsideration of requirements that Max Weber collected under the expression “western rationalism”. My assumption is that it’s necessary to intersect theory of recognition, gift paradigm and postcolonialism in order to deconstruct the monological dogmatic universalism which has dominated the western culture, but also in order to reconstruct a universalism open to difference and otherness. The outcome of this work of deconstruction and reconstruction is *pluriversalism*, i.e. the conception of the world outlined in *The Convivialist Manifesto*. In a world become post-western, the biggest challenge that the West is forced to face is of engaging in a courageous unprecedented “Cultural Turn”, without which the risk of the “clash of civilizations” (S. Huntington) will grow out enormously. The challenge concerns the capacity of the western conscience to achieve an attitude of comparing its categories and valuation methods with those of other cultures, and to put its rationality in a historical perspective. This capacity of looking at oneself through the eyes of the others involves a relativisation of our culture and our forms of life, and promotes the blame of any ethnocentric exclusivism.

Relativisation, of course, doesn’t mean a process whereby the categories of western universalism (human rights, freedom, equality, solidarity, etc.) are diluted or effaced by the forces of the globalization. All the more so as the rejection of globalization can take the forms of a theocratic fundamentalism as in the case of the jihad terrorists. Relativisation must mean to free oneself from the negative images of difference/otherness imposed to peoples which have suffered the colonial domination. You only have to think of the book by Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* became a classic, and to the copious literature of *Postcolonial Studies* (Said 1977; Mellino 2009). Orientalism is a “formidable scholarly corpus” (Said, p. 4), an encyclopedia of knowledge and at the same time a set of cultural/political institutions (academic Departments, branches of human sciences as anthropology, sociology, psychology, politology, literary criticism, etc.). Said’s thesis is that “Orient is not an inert fact of nature”

(ibid.), but a historically definite intellectual construction. It is the result of a cultural hegemony in the sense of Gramsci. “Therefore, Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious “Western” imperialist plot to hold down the “Oriental” world. It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of “interests” *which*, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains” (p. 12). On the other hand, Arnold Toynbee understood that non-Western countries, in order to not fall under western rule, conformed to technological revolutions of their antagonist, as shows the example of Peter the Great, prototype of an occidentalizing autocratic reformer (Toynbee 1953). It is not by chance that one of major texts of postcolonial literature is entitled *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002), whose main sense is that the colonized, after centuries of domination, begin to speak. The duty of the West is to listen to them without regarding them as its extension, or even worse as enemies. Here the concept of “alliance” elaborated by Marcel Mauss in the *Essay on the Gift* (1925) becomes an extraordinary topical subject. As Jean-Claude Guillebaud stressed, Europe should take seriously this irreversible decentering of the world and accept the idea that the geopolitical and geocultural representation of a center and a periphery is misleading (Guillebaud 2009). The decentering of the West is an historical fact, the result of the postcolonial condition brought about by both the collapse of the colonial empires and of the real socialism. In *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* Paul Gilroy describes the mood of the countries such as the Great Britain which in postwar period lost the colonial power and therefore fell into a “postimperial melancholia”, resulting from the vanishing of the dream of civilizing the world. For Gilroy, Britain is more than England, which comprises its metropolitan center and all territories of the former colonies. The point is that Great Britain is actually multicultural, but Gilroy maintains that the ideal of a multicultural society was abandoned “at birth”. An interesting fact is the unintentional convergence of Gilroy with the *Convivialist Manifesto*, because he speaks about *conviviality* or cosmopolitan “convivial culture”, an expression which refers to “processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multicultural an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere” (Gilroy 2005, p. XV). Likewise, Homi K. Bhabha in *The*

*Location of Culture* has remarked that in the postcolonial age, everyday in the world, millions of the people move from one place to another, and in these ‘in-between’ spaces – providing the terrain for the translation and the syncretism of the languages – hybrid identities grow up. Here, in the Third Space, distinction of the colonizer and colonized breaks down and new subjectivities arise. An active “cultural turn” came maturing within the postcolonial condition of the national States, because the “political body of the sovereign” gradually was contaminated by the “infra-human body of immigrant”, i.e. by various peoples and cultures (Gilroy 2004). All religious fundamentalisms pursue the aim of stopping the processes of society’s multicultural transformations, and in the case of jihadist movement they defend a neo-totalitarian version of the traditional theocratic Islamism. The religious fundamentalisms proclaim a Manichaeian civilisationism symmetrically reversed in comparison with civilisationism dominant in liberal and neoliberal global discourse denoting, according to Gilroy, the demarcation of an “us” versus “them”. Nevertheless, the liberal democracies should promote the vernacular multiculturalism of the everyday life, i.e. the “Third Space”, the in-between space, whereby the western culture can rethink its founding categories and the differences are actively negotiate. Beginning with the category of citizenship, which should be freed from the Benthamian “axiom of the greatest happiness of the greatest number”, and returned to the everyday practice of a multiculturalism interwoven with “hospitality, conviviality, toleration, justice and mutual aid” (Gilroy 2004). In this way, the postcolonial world discloses the conflictual complexity of modernity where it is an illusion to imagine a single historical time articulated by homogeneous and triumphalist universals such as the State, the Market, the Citizenship Rights, etc., without scrutinizing the actual and contingent situations (Chatterjee 2004).

## 2. *Beyond the Postcolonial Studies*

It would take too long to develop here a critical discourse of Postcolonial Studies, which are a most varied and branched intellectual constellation. They did make productive use of the precious philosophical work carried out in the twentieth century against the traditional metaphysic by authors such as Heidegger, Horkheimer, Adorno, Arendt, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Althusser, Lévinas, Gadamer, Lacan, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, Ricoeur, Rorty, Habermas. The best-known representatives of the Postcolonial Studies – P. Gilroy, H. Bhabha, A. Appadurai, A. Mbembe, D. Chakrabarty, G. C. Spivak, R. Guha, P. Chatterjee – rethought the critical theory as the tools of a toolbox by means of which they deconstructed

the “naturalistic fallacy” (Said) of western culture, i.e. the mistaken claim that the categories of western rationalism are natural and objective. They attacked also the universalism’s mainstream version, including economic determinism of Marxism, which hypostatized a single framework of modernity and its stages of growth. But postcolonial scholars remain imprisoned in the negative dialectics of the poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking. They celebrate the process of fragmentation of modernity, praise “the end of great narratives” (Lyotard), describe the disintegration of modern subject (Stuart Hall). They put under effacement (*sous rature*) the rationalism’s core concepts: State, Market, Nation, Democracy, Civil Rights, etc. (Derrida). In spite of these philosophical virtues, the postcolonial scholars fail to go beyond the critical dismantling of western rationality and to outline a reconstructive post-metaphysical thinking and a positive vision of the “good life”.

At this point, the dialogue of postcolonial thinking with the Maussian gift paradigm is the necessary step for crossing the line of poststructuralism’s and postmodernism’s negative dialectics. It’s not by chance that Mary Douglas stressed, in her *Foreword*, Mauss’s original approach to modernity: “*The Essay on the Gift* was a part of a organized onslaught on contemporary political theory, a plank in the platform against utilitarianism” (Douglas 2002, p. X). Mauss’s discovery, in short, is that the gift is a “total social phenomenon” and the cycling gift system – giving/ receiving/ reciprocating - is society itself. The primary epistemological effect of Maussian paradigm is that the logic of the gift is the basis of all forms of society, including the capitalist societies, where the citizen “must act by taking into account his own interest, and those of society and its subgroups” (Mauss 2002, p. 89). Therein Mauss talks of “eternal morality”, which is “common to the most advanced societies, to those of immediate future, and to lowest imaginable forms of society. We touch upon fundamentals” (ibid.). Also in advanced capitalist societies the subject in its professional services wants to be considered more as *homo donator* than *homo oeconomicus*. “The producer who carries on exchange feels once more – he has always felt it, but this time he does so acutely – that he is exchanging more than a product of hours of working time, but that he is giving something of himself – his time, his life. Thus he wishes to be rewarded, even if only moderately, for this gift” (ibid., p. 99). This claim sounds a powerful criticism to the imperialism of economic science on thought, and to the hegemony of the market on society with the utilitarian anthropology underlying them (Caillé 2002).

From this point of view, Mauss pioneered the theory of recognition of Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth showing that the recognition is a ‘vital human need’ and the individuals, lacking the interlocking experiences of mutual recognition, cannot achieve full ‘self-

realization'. Gift-paradigm situates the Hegelian concept of mutual recognition in the horizon of the society understood as cycling gift system: the subjects – individuals and human groups – are gift-givers, i.e. subjects giving their peculiar way-of-being to others (Caillé, Lazzeri 2009; Fistetti 2009). Therefore, it extends this philosophical postulate to all nations, races, peoples, i.e. to all inhabitants of the planet and to planet itself understood as ecosystem exposed to ravages of the myth of the unlimited growth (the duty of recognizing and respecting the nature and its gifts is an asymmetric relation, a categorical imperative of mankind). It is precisely the cosmopolitanism proposed by the *Convivialist Manifesto*, whose four principles outline the perspective of a “convivence” (in French *convivance*, in Spanish *convivencia*) between states, nations and cultures : 1) principle of common humanity; 2) principle of common sociality; 3) individuation principle ; 4) mastered and creative confrontation principle. The latter principle assert: “Given that each of us has the power to express our distinctive individuality, it is natural that human beings should sometimes oppose one another. But it is only legitimate for them to do so as long as this does not jeopardize the framework of common sociality that ensures this rivalry is productive and non-destructive. Good politics is therefore politics that allows human beings to be individuals by accepting and managing conflict” (*The Convivialist Manifesto*, p. 31). What is here stated about the “distinctive individuality” of human beings also applies to all cultures and civilizations, because just so “the clan, the tribe, and peoples have learnt how to oppose without slaughtering and to give to one another without sacrificing themselves to one another” (Mauss 2002, p. 106). Therein Mauss us offers the basic elements of how to reduce conflicts between states/ peoples/ cultures and construct “a cosmopolitan *Sittlichkeit*”, as Frédéric Vandenberghe in Hegelian terms says (Vandenberghe 2015). For Mauss states, peoples, cultures may convert the “war” in “alliance” only on the condition that they mutually recognize themselves as gift-givers, as equal subjects endowed with peculiar capabilities worthy to be appreciated within the great family of humanity. From this point of view, the core issue is working on a theory of the relations among states/ cultures/ nations as a cycling gift system, i.e. on a general social theory able of nourish conviviality understood as a “affectively connoted symbol”, connected with a “positive image of the future” (Adloff 2015, p. 72, p. 82). Perhaps is this the most urgent task that convivialists should now face.

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