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Identity and globalization: The world at a crossroad

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Globalization: Positive and negative aspects

There are obviously both positive and negative aspects that characterize globalization:

- **Positive ones** are, for example the possibility of mutual exchange of knowledge between different cultures of the world in order to share the solutions of common problems or to enlarge the spiritual dimension of the conscience;
- In the **negative** aspects one would classify the imposition of patterns on the part of the most powerful, the adoption of excessive consumption habits, but also the inefficiency, racism and discrimination, and undervaluation of local values. Destructive effects of tourism, "extraclimatic" practices in food, clothing, architecture and urban patterns.

Contradictory opinions exist about the development of a sustainable future, because there are world tendencies to copy Western models that are not in any way sustainable. Globalization implies, for example, the copying of construction models from developed countries (fig. 1) which have nothing to do with local conditions in countries borrowing these models (fig. 2). It also implies an increasing possibility to acquire junk food instead of healthy food – even local food, as everywhere one can eat Italian or Chinese food.

At a crossroad

The world is at a crossroad. Let us therefore draw our attention to some dimensions of human life and some phenomena that need more careful consideration in order to reach an under-

standing of present conditions and future prospects. After all, directly or indirectly, all these are also relevant to human settlements of the present and of the future.

Patents, heritage and property

The globalized capitalist system imposes the merchandise approach on everything. Traditional cultural values, natural reservoirs, natural capital, and resources are considered as merchandise, real estate, or private property.

Artistic manifestations become tourist products; traditional recipes and dishes characteristic of a region are patented and their use forbidden to those who have prepared and consumed them. Chemical substances and valuable species are extracted genetically from the jungle or tropical forests and once patented have the same destiny.

The robbery of brains, on the other hand, means subtraction of cultural values since people significant for the development of the local culture abandon their territory to work not for humanity but for the sake of transnational corporations.

The Earth does not belong to us; we belong to the Earth. We develop a culture that destroys the planet, increases its temperature and emanates pollution. We behave like an illness and not as a blessing of the world. The way we keep on acting on Earth will create a demographic "explosion," a term about which we were worried in the 1960s but we have let it double since we began talking about it.

The property of finite goods in an increasingly crowded world warns us of three of possibly more contradictory solutions:

- one in which, following the current way, all properties will be in the hands of a few people;
- a second where the concept of property will not exist but collective responsibility will prevail; and,
- a third one whose pattern will be a state property centralized to planetary scale with all the consequences that this implies.

Heritage implies property of values; and culture implies the conservation of traditions and historical places.

Time

Time is managed in a linear way, with constantly increasing exploitations toward the exhaustion of all resources based on concepts of development, progress and earning, paying no attention to the finite character of the world and to its recurrent behavior that makes it sustainable independent of human society.

The careers of human beings in terms of time are characterized by linearity, searching for the exhaustion of resources for the sake of earnings, created and enjoyed by an economy only interested in scarce things because of their "negotiability."

But another aspect of time is its cyclicity – the possibility of



Fig. 1: Globalization implies the copying of construction models from developed countries – A typical case.

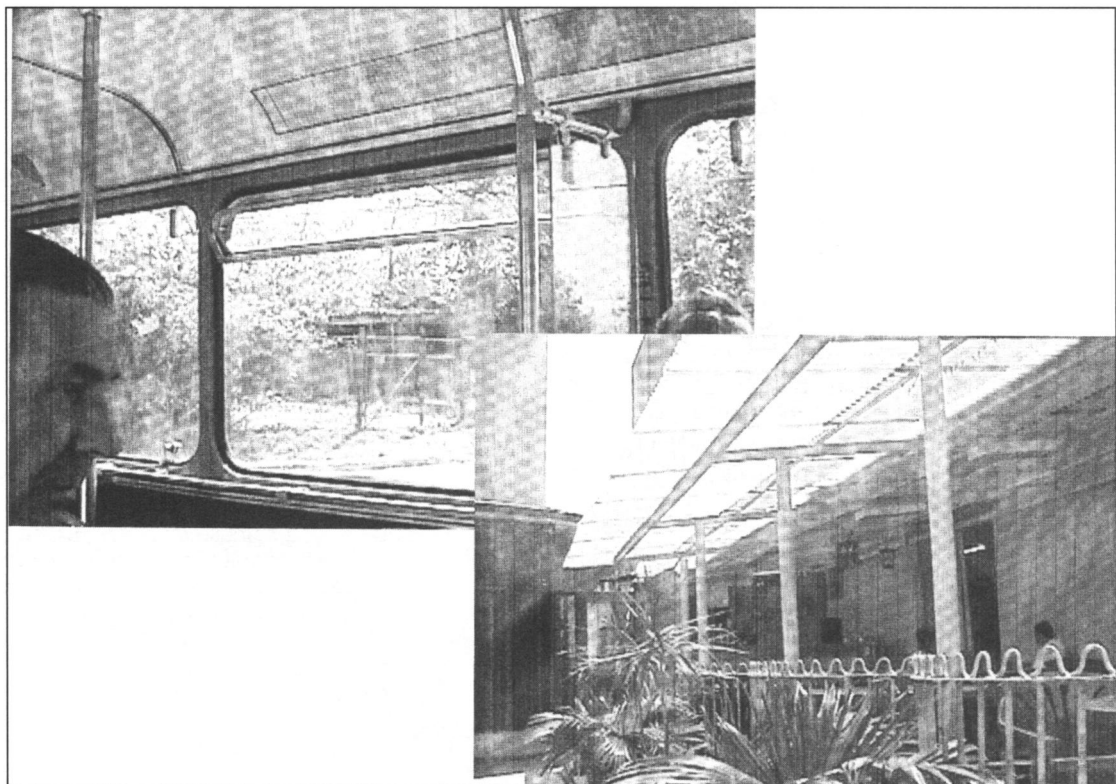


Fig. 2: Local conditions in countries borrowing models from developed countries – A typical case.

repetition and recurrence – i.e. the continuous recycling present in every aspect of life and nature. Why not add this cyclic dimension to society, approaching its recycling systems and looking for harmony between natural and social processes, looking for sustainability?

Here emerge the following questions:

- Are we to return to the conservation of identity and return to the roots as a setback action in the linear sense of time, or is it an act of feedback from the origins in order to redefine identity in the globalized present and future conditions?
- What can professionals do in this respect?

Should identity and traditional aspects of culture disappear or evolve before the new manifestations of social complexity maintain the aspects of the roots or should they be allowed to be substituted for strange cultures imposed mainly by commercial rather than cultural approaches?

Traditions

Cultural values are considered today as merchandise; artistic manifestations become tourist products; foreign manifestations are promoted for general use and are imposed as part of local cultures. Thus a new identity develops making people feel that they belong to a globalized and complex reality, or part of a whole which is constantly becoming more and more complex and globalized.

The source of the global is local, but the conscience is the reflection of who we are: The man universe and the man in the universe.

Identity is not restricted to the particular *Homo sapiens* but to the social *Homo* and the globalized *Homo* in the multiple dimensions that compose it or in those where it is projected.

In the process of interaction with the world, human identity is redefined. Man as a social being is superimposed as the creator-destructive man, agent of change and the implicit energy man who dominates any energy able to create important changes affected by his origin and his relationship with the environment.

Myth and promises of sustainability

Copying Western patterns is irrational: it involves a double world – rich exploiter countries and helpless victim countries who are robbed of their raw materials and resources as loot by the former. The richest countries propose their own model as a good model, but for that each country should have other countries to exploit. The ecological print cannot be bigger than the planet, as this draining is taking place at a time that does not allow for the natural recovery of resources

The proposed relationship is not based on conditions of exchange, equivalence and solidarity. The so-called free trade gives an advantage to those more developed over the underdeveloped – those euphemistically called developing – thus making it clear that the concept of development is unidirectional.

Foreign debt, unjust measures resulting from economic practices based on usury, leads many countries of the Third World to desperate solutions and a growing debt in which the whole revenue of their produce is used for re-paying the debt and thus does not allow for development; the euphemism thus calling these countries “developing” ones and not “developed” (PICHIS, 2002).

Institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank recommend and – in many ways – force the countries in debt to take internal measures towards a reduction of investments, privatization and copying strange models that directly threaten their survival and the integrity of their identity.

Development and progress

The “development and progress” approach refers mainly to the models of the so-called First World countries with consumption patterns and rates of growth that have affected the conditions supporting life on our planet. The sustainability of human settlements depends on the environment from which food, energy and other natural resources are derived.

● The food production and **consumption habits**, for example, of meat production (or hamburgers and other products of the so-called “junk food”) demand a high energy consumption and change in the use of extended territory that affect the evaporation rate and humidity retention, which presupposes a high consumption of water, transport, refrigeration and elaboration of foods. Furthermore, the “waste culture” creates oversized products not recommended for continuous human consumption and generates a great quantity of non-recyclable or not well recycled waste (remember the mad cow disease).

● **The ecological print** is one of the indexes created to measure the impact on the biosphere and correspond in some way to the equivalent in area of arable or exploitable land to maintain the level of or pattern of life. This indicator points out the area of the ecosfera used to maintain the level of a given population's consumption. It is the area of productive territory or necessary ecosystem to produce the usable resources and to assimilate the residuals produced.

So we come to the question: how large a surface of productive soil is necessary to maintain a given population, with the conditions of current consumption during an indefinite time?

If our planet is a finite world, the ecological print cannot grow indefinitely without affecting our life and our future.

Peak oil is another result of the inefficiency of the globalized system. This imposes a crisis. If it continues in the same way as before there will be no energy for the rate of consumption of First World countries unless they take it from the Third World like they have done traditionally not only with oil but also with other wealth and resources.

Why is not another approach allowed to be followed for development?

The Eastern European socialism when copying the Western consumption models did not give a solution to the internal ecological, economic and energy crises that ended in political failure. But today other alternatives exist in the world as in Latin America's recent economic and political changes.

Is the claim to protect the identity a setback act? What do we understand as progress?

Heritage and cultural values of conservation exist in examples such as Guanajuato or Hikone. The conservation of aspects of the culture of local traditions and customs faces globalization in the form of clothing, cooking and architecture that in turn globalize local solutions coming from economically and culturally dominant countries, which do not represent true solutions to local situations that are presented in each place.

War

Places considered as precious human heritage have been destroyed sometimes in war, or through legally approved projects with catastrophic negative impacts.

War is one of mankind's principal activities: it usually results in the expansion of some cultures, and destruction of others, destruction of local wealth, cultural heritage and tradition. One of the causes of war is oil and – as we all know – oil is needed for the energy patterns of a modern globalized society.

War is a source of the destruction of identity. The conservation and evolution of the identity of human settlements are affected by war. War produces death and destruction. People emigrate with their culture, but their customs and traditions deteriorate in this way and get lost; some of them remain, but

not those that could remain in the Ekistic Grid characteristic of a culture.

The environment is disturbed; the population, networks, and buildings are destroyed; the identity and customs of the society become lost.

Traditional constructions are substituted by refugee camps with provisional tents that – like all temporary things in our underdeveloped countries – become permanent fixtures.

For the sake of establishing sustainable human settlements allowing the evolution of cultural identity, war should be avoided.

Palliatives are sought to alleviate the aftereffects of war, people talk about sustainable human settlements under conditions of crisis, about temporary housing for refugees to try to avoid emigration, the acquisition of cheap manpower, trafficking of persons, the loss of humane conditions, and retrogression of persons and their so-called quality of life.

There are social movements calling for the provision of help to refugees, immigrants and victims of the war. But this call is made at the wrong time, usually after the war has taken place, whereas the main interest for the maintenance of the cultural aspects of identity and sustainability should be shown before a war takes place. And as we have seen in recent years, mainly in all the wars of this newly born century, the causes are fundamentally for natural resources, specifically energy in the form of petroleum and energy markets.

In most cases, studies for the development of human settlements do not include subjects like war or illicit trade.

According to Isaac Asimov (2000), "Violence is the last resource of the incompetent one."

Catastrophes and future

Every day the effects of natural disasters are more marked because of increase in population, non-adaptation of the protection of the environment in development models, lack of forecasting, priority of other goals, priority of real estate and capital instead of population which is considered as a negligible item.

"The conference of Berlin on climate, which took place in April 1995, ratified the idea that the market is unable to fight against the global threats on the environment. To avoid the black tides and spills of hydrocarbons in the sea, to protect the biodiversity and the diversity of life by means of sustainable development has become imperative: development is considered sustainable if it allows future generations to inherit an environment of a quality at least similar to the one we have inherited" (RAMONET, 1995).

The non-acceptance of the results which demonstrates that a climatic change is taking place because of the anthropic effect (because of human intervention) is like being blindfolded and pretending that everything remains the same.

The declaration of the end of the history – like ideology – for the permanency of economic and social relationships of the world fall for their own weight in the acceleration of the social changes of the world after the disappearance of the cold war and the beginning of the era of the energy war masked with antiterrorist measures.

Climatic Changes and Desertification are the results of the excessive exploitation and use of oil and other fossil fuels to produce electricity and transportation by the so-called Western civilization.

Catastrophes – artificial and natural – are increasing and becoming more dangerous than floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis affecting crowded zones. Epidemics are becoming out of control. On top of all this exist also meteorological and geophysical wars.

Proposals for thought

The development of human settlements and the necessary tasks to make their existence sustainable, with the necessary welfare conditions, does not depend only on economic factors but rather on ethical values that imply the integration of human achievements into culture, conditions and identity of each locality, ethnos or nationality and the effects its activities have on the environment.

A relationship is exposed which does not concern exchange and equivalent solidarity conditions but the so-called free trade that gives more advantage to more developed countries rather than to the underdeveloped (euphemistically called developing countries). Therefore the development concept is unidirectional.

What can we do as concerned professionals?

Here are at least four proposals:

- Follow some of the examples of nature recycling and surviving together, avoiding the model of losers and winners;
- Stop thinking about nature as externality and economy as the only rule to measure the world; no more externalities;
- Avoid war; and,
- Expand the methodological value of ekistics: understanding helps actions.

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