

Knowledge society: Cultural and post-cultural questions and implications for an ekistics approach

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Preliminary indications

It is not only crucial to recognize the signs of future events, but the only way to be both proactive and vigilant. What about the cultural evolution of our societies? Are not there any signs for new situations? One archeologist claims that we are a "species in transition" (LEWIS-WILLIAMS, 2004). If it were not for the occurrence of major, dramatic changes in our neuro-physiological existence, it would be possible to observe events in different countries as indicators of future cultural changes.

Authors of a recent book on contemporary international trade and business (HAGEL and SEELY BROWN, 2005) describe the Li and Fung Company, based in Hong Kong, as a "process orchestrator." It produces goods for Western companies by coordinating a network of 7,500 other companies/partners, getting yarn from Korea, having it dyed in Thailand, woven in Taiwan, cut in Bangladesh, and assembled in Mexico with a zipper from Japan. This is an excellent example of what could be nearly the most perfect and rapid circulation of goods in the history of trade. In this process, products and materials meet no barriers while they enjoy speed and adaptability to international markets.

- A recent study concluded that the mobility patterns of non-Europeans living in Europe (e.g. immigrants) are greater than that of Europeans (THALASSOCHORI et al., 2004). This implies that a theory of in-mobility of Europeans is needed rather than one about mobility. This also indicates that while capital and goods circulate quite fast, it is not the case with human beings, at least in Europe – in the U.S., human mobility is greater than that in Europe.

- The Danish press reported that in the spring of 2005, in front of a night-club, the security guard killed a young man of Arab descent during a conflict with a group of young clients and while under the psychological pressure of the moment.

It was an accident with tragic results. The victim's parents asked the security guard to pay them a sum of money to compensate them for their pain but stated that they did not want to address the problem before a Danish tribunal. Is it possible to have double standards within one judicial system? Two different sets of cultural norms for justice within the same country? This dilemma reigns in Denmark: to what degree can the institution of justice be modified under the influence of immigrants?

- During the short debate on the European Treaty held prior to the recent referendum in Holland regarding the weighty issue of immigration, some Dutch – second and third generation citizens of non-Dutch origin – expressed negative feelings for newcomers to their "new" country. They demonstrated that they were clearly ready to defend their "identity" against the invasion of their ex-compatriots. So they, as well as some citizens of Jewish origin, voted "no" under the fear of the threat of "other" populations.

- In the spirit of "Science, Technology, Society" relations of China, an exercise was conducted regarding its recent material history (AGRAFOTIS, 2004). The exercise identified the top three technical objects most desired by the Chinese over the years:

- bicycle, watch, sewing machine (1970s-1980s);
- telephone, electrical refrigerator, washing-machine (1980s-1990s); and,
- mobile telephone, computer, Internet access (2000s-2010s).

Does this mean that the world has become "flat"? Where is the Chinese cultural tradition of "philosophy and porcelain" according to Will Durant? Is it an inevitable cultural process for Chinese society to adopt cultural patterns of consumption? What will be the cultural impact of this mega-adoption? The risk of entering into "cultural moralism" here is obvious. The challenge is to observe modern China's cultural interaction in the international arena without posing a cultural *a priori*.

- Over the past three years, a foresight exercise was conducted in Greece with the purpose of understanding the impact of research, innovation, and technology on the transformation of Greek society into a "knowledge-based society." Is this type of organization of social life a common horizon for all societies? What will be the cultural specificity of future societies? In this spirit, one can understand the need for the new European Foresight exercise underway which treats Europe as a whole with a knowledge-based economy and society as its destiny.

- In the name of diversity of analysis of the contemporary

world, and more specifically of the Asian era, Pelletier (2003, p. 8) asks how the Japanese by themselves formulate their question about Japanese modernity (*kindai*). He tries to understand which part of Japanese modernity depends on Japanese pre-modernity (1600-1687) and which part on the process of "occidentalization." In reality, Japanese society is not a post-industrial but a neo-industrial society – which has been achieved by following its own pathway through the introduction of basic socio-cultural patterns (e.g. science, technology, political system, political ideas, etc.) rather than a classical European trajectory. This unique evolution has brought Japan different aspects, one of which is the "re-Asialization" or the creation of new cultural references for Japan in a "fluid world." What will be the new international cultural "paradigm" and what will be Japan's contribution?

The above-mentioned situations, events, questions, and *apories*, lead us to ask at least two questions:

- What is the nature of cultural becoming in our "global" world? Is the concept of culture still pertinent or do we live in a post-cultural era?
- What type of consequences can we assume for everyday life in relation to urban and/or rural ekistical infrastructures? Therefore what type of changes can we envisage on the level of an Ekistic theoretical framework (AGRAFIOTIS, 2002)?

Towards an adventure of "culture"

During the meetings of the 2003 World Society of Ekistics (WSE) in Tinos/Delos, an exercise was organized by the participants in order to demonstrate the variety of approaches to the concept of "culture." With the assistance of members from non-Western societies, it was understood that different languages have different meanings (e.g. Arabic) while in some languages there is no word to describe culture (e.g. some languages in India). Of course speaking in scientific terms, this may mean that with the assumption of the universality of science, we tend to underestimate the relative "arbitrary" nature of English and of cultural norms behind the Western consciousness and cognition practices.

The adoption of the concept of "culture" clearly facilitates communication between scholars, engineers, and scientists in a world with increasingly more intense exchange of not only products but also symbols, patterns, forms, and meanings. But, it is legitimate to ask: What degree of adoption of a common concept of "culture" would prevent us from seeing new phenomena in the global socio-cultural arena?

It is also clear that it would be very difficult to resume the complicated debate over the traditions and attempts to define "culture" and the consequences of each definition at scientific, ideological, and political levels. What is necessary to mention here is the fact that there is no room for naïveté when one approaches the fundamental concept of social science – that is to say, the concept of "culture."

For the purpose of the present work, three basic assumptions can serve as points of departure in an attempt to grasp some of the future changes of our planetary life:

- First, we assume that "culture" refers to patterns of acting and giving meaning to worldviews that permit human beings to sustain an open dialogue about their societies and the relations between societies *et nature*. In other terms, we avoid a "normative" definition and insist on a "performance" type of definition of culture (AGRAFIOTIS 1999; PEARSON 2002) while in reality our approach places emphasis on the sense attributed to socio-technological changes (e.g. the status of progress), on the forms of action (e.g. collective vs. individual, public vs. private initiatives), and the character of

social interactions (e.g. numbers of actors, modes of exchange, networks, communications).

- Second, we assume also different levels of elaboration of the "cultural:" local, urban, rural, national, international, and global. This implies that a new typology of influences and resistances, obstacles and conflicts, and achievements and losses emerge and can be identified as such in different parts of our planet.

- Third, we assume that societies of industrialized or neo-industrialized parts of the earth tend to become "knowledge-based societies." This term gets added to a long catalogue of expressions to describe technologically advanced societies (AGRAFIOTIS 2002, p. 15) while a controversy has developed over the meaning of the term and, more concretely, the specificity of this new mode of organization of social life. With a metaphor, one may accept that the "fuel" of the social machine will no longer be materials (e.g. crude oil, electricity) but rather the advanced form of scientific knowledge. Of course, in all societies there is a social process for the elaboration of knowledge, but in "knowledge-based societies" this process is reorganized, systemic, general, and critical for the function of any other subsystem of society.

Taking into consideration the above three assumptions, the following questions might be formulated: What will be the cultural specificity of future societies? Is a typology of cultural characteristics conceivable? Will the concept of "culture" remain useful or has it already become obsolete?

A (probable) typology of the "cultural"

Already the variety of situations in nations, regions, and continents makes any attempt of classification or taxonomy an "uncertain enterprise." In spite of any epistemological reserves that one might formulate for this kind of attempt, the following typology is proposed based on Delvainquiere's (2002) ideas.

From a cultural perspective, present and future societal situations could be classified in three groups:

- *multicultural* societies, characterized by separated and hierarchical coexistence of groups and cultural patterns;
- *intercultural* societies, characterized by exchanges between cultural models, while each culture continues to receive strong influences and achieve a clear impact, or in other words, the process of acculturation clearly occurs; and,
- *transcultural* societies, characterized by "no portioning" in which cultural patterns or cultural models intermingle and merge, and hybrid identities are not based on individuals' or the collective origin, which represents great cultural plasticity.

It is problematic for the term "multicultural" to be considered pertinent from a scientific point of view while public discussion ensues in many countries regarding the socio-political implications of the adoption of such a term – as in France (MATTELART and NEVEU, 2003). One could also imagine the difficulties and reservations behind the use of the other two terms; is it wise to imagine a society being "intercultural" or "transcultural?" Further, is it wise to examine the question using "society" for the level of analysis? Would "regional or "intersocietal" levels be more appropriate – considering the speed of change and the immensity of interactions on a planetary dimension?

Here, an hypothesis can be formulated: *Because societies tend to be based on knowledge and due to situations of generalized exchange and interaction between them, and as personal and collective lives are organized at different levels*

(neighborhood, city, region, country, continent) and with varied degrees of systemness, one might distinguish in each case – in concrete issue articulations of “cultural,” “multicultural,” “intercultural,” “transcultural” patterns – a situation that could even be named “post-cultural.” In other words, cultural difference, diversity, and hybridization will cultivate a vast field of discontinuities.

Undoubtedly, this is a possible – perhaps the most optimistic – scenario for the future. As for the other extreme but pessimistic scenario, one might imagine a return to the “monocultural” society as a result of military conflicts, disasters, or demographic explosions or epidemics. But, in this work, we have insisted on the first scenario.

Obviously, it is not possible to foresee the cultural trajectories of all societies. The foresight exercise conducted in Greece yielded some images for Greece in 2021 (AGRAFIOTIS, 2003). According to this approach, a multicultural character will be most clearly present on the horizon of Greece over the next 20 years, while the other two characters will also be present, but in very limited degrees (see <http://www.gsrt-foresight.gr>). Similar exercises have given scenarios for other countries’ futures as well; for example, a strong Japanese tradition of science and technology oriented foresight by NISTEP Tokyo and the works of the Chinese Institute of Modernization for 2050 and 2080. The above-mentioned typology (multi-inter-transcultural) could serve as a guideline for the cultural aspects of future changes and/or “turbulences.” However, further research is needed to establish its relevance for the different cases of city, country, and continent.

“Cloture-Ouverture”

Should this diagnosis for the future of cultural foundations of societal life be reasonable and coherent, what could the impact be on space planning, and more specifically, for the Ekistics approach? There are two possible areas of re-examining the *all model of Doxiadis* – under the pressure of a new cultural geography (which is extremely complex because of the “post cultural” condition), the emergence of a globally determined causality of the rapid transformation of cyberspace (of crucial importance to ICT-Information and Communication Technologies), and of course the construction of a new soft power (the creation of a planetary power game based on the manipulation of ways of thinking, acting, and feeling assisted by new forms of cognition and knowledge).

- First, it is urgent to assess the conceptual framework under the condition of the dominance of knowledge and the premise of a knowledge-based society; what can be expected is a modification of variables and their rearrangement in light of the crucial role of knowledge.

- The second is more complicated and demanding because it concerns the hybridization of the Doxiadis model according to new articulations of the monocultural-multicultural – multi – inter – transcultural. What can be expected in this case is an adaptation of the Doxiadis model to new cultural forms. In other words, it will be a challenge to give a more performative character to the functional-structural approach of the Doxiadis heritage. Of course, changes to such theses presuppose tremendous work, both theoretical and practical, but this cultural evolution should be viewed not only as a new constraint but also as an opportunity.

In which concrete terms can this type of evolution of the model be achieved? From a socio-cultural point of view, we would like to ask the following questions: If we take as an

example city-level metropolitan areas (megalopolis, Ecu-menopolis), to what degree would a city’s structural networks and infrastructure promote a specific articulation of mono-multi-inter cultural patterns? How would it be possible to translate convergences and contradictions of hybrid situations? To what extent does the “plasticity” of space condition – and is conditioned by – its cultural plasticity? Which part of Doxiadis’ framework will play a catalytic role for the eventual evolution of the model? Can this type of demand in reality actually ask for the transformation of the city from a machine to a generalized “museum” and “open-air library?”

Transformation

Departing from the point of view that in the coming decades a significant part of the world will enter the era of the “knowledge society,” this paper has tried to demonstrate that the discussion on “global/local” could be transformed into an approach based on the post-cultural condition-articulation of mono-multi-trans-inter cultural patterns. Such an exploration, if accepted as legitimate and fertile, can lead to eventual modifications of ekistics philosophy and practice. It is relevant to point out that this analysis is proposed by a non-practitioner of the model and so the spirit of interdisciplinary work may serve to justify this proposal. Is it sufficient? Or will the real conditions of space planning and building of human settlements require new approaches? If this is the case, the following question seeks a reply: By which mechanisms – economic, intellectual, scientific, or sociopolitical – will Doxiadis’ heritage and legacy be adapted to new necessities and desires?

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