FACING GLOBALIZATION: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Pilar Damião de Medeiros, Ph.D. Freiburg University, Germany
University of the Azores, Portugal

Abstract. The social fragmentation and the growing cultural fissures in our global society have prompted an intense debate over the growing perplexities linked to globalization. Thus, the configuration of a res publica mundialis, based on universal values and a global imaginary (M. Steger, 2009) on the one hand, and the multifarious groups that struggle for cultural and political recognition on the other hand, feature the ambivalent framework of our current spectrum. Meanwhile, the role of the (post) modern intellectual as an interpreter (Z. Bauman, 1987) seems to be particularly relevant to enhance a healthy dialogue that simultaneously 1) regards the dynamics of the pluralistic and even contradicting social imaginaries (C. Taylor, 1994) and 2) is able to create some kind of consensus between the discursive validity claims (J. Habermas, 1981). In other words, the intellectual of the 21st century has the social responsibility (E. Said, 1993) to understand and mediate the complex cultural discourses that flourish in the public sphere(s). His/her hermeneutic flexibility provides him/her the capacity to translate the multifarious Weltanschauungen and makes him/her able to incite what H. G. Gadamer (1960) understands as the “fusion of horizons”. Such cultural dialogue is crucial for the construction of a deliberative democracy (S. Benhabib, 2002) supported by cosmopolitan citizens. In a nutshell, to avoid the current cultural-religious purisms (S. Rushdie) and national parochialisms in our contemporary global society, the current intellectual is almost indispensable in the accomplishment of a civilized and democratic co-existence.

The contemporary global paradigm has developed a panacea of contradictions. While it struggles towards an open world market, unfixed boundaries and a homogeneous society, it faces, at the same time, the arising dilemma concerning the fragmentation of the political and public sphere, now constrained by the multiplicity of contradictory cultural and political discourses. The novel disparities between the “we” and the “others” and the diverse struggles for recognition (Benhabib, 2002; Taylor, 1994) in regional, national, but also transnational public spheres, have incited one of the greatest paradoxes our global era has to face. Culture has, therefore, become the main concern and quandary in this paradigmatic change. Notwithstanding, it is important to point out - and in accordance with R. Robertson, A. Appadurai, among others – that cultural globalization is not synonymous with cultural homogeneity, but it should be rather built on a process of “glocalization”, which is dialectical and contradictory. This “glocal” political and cultural model has, one the one hand, encouraged citizens to enjoy multiple citizenships, but, on the other hand, forced them to cope with the dangerous revival of extremist traditional and sectarian movements.

Thus, more than by the economic and political outcomes of globalization, our contemporary era is essentially marked by the cultural conflicts, as “[g]lobalization lies at the heart of modern culture; cultural practices lie at the heart of globalization” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 1). It is then a common and shared argument, that the global paradigm not only weakened the Westphalian, state-based political order and encouraged the transnationalization of economies, but mostly, it generated a labyrinth of widely diffused cultures. According to some well-known social scientists (A. Touraine, A. Giddens, C. Taylor, W. Kymlicka, S. Benhabib, among others), Globalization gave birth to novel cultural shifts, hybrid configurations and even cultural exclusion mechanisms. Along with Z. Bauman,

[a]n integral part of the globalizing processes is progressive spatial segregation and exclusion. Neo-tribal and fundamentalist tendencies, which reflect and articulate the experience of people on the receiving end of globalization, are as
much legitimate offspring of globalization as the widely acclaimed ‘hybridization’ of top culture – the culture at the globalized top (1998, p. 3).

Z. Bauman alerts here the consequences of the juxtaposition and even dominance of some cultural narratives over others. There is, namely, a visible vulnerability of some cultures that are deeply embedding Western culture’s webs of significance and imaginaries without a critical standpoint. Meanwhile, the legitimacy of western cultural framework has been put in check by local and regional resistance movements. In this way, the multidimensionality of cultural claims in a multicultural global society have prompted contradictory political strategies and even conflicting public policies. The ever-growing distinction between fundamental rights (right to life, liberty, free speech etc), privileges and immunities in today’s society appears to be fostering ethnic separatism, pernicious national parochialisms and cultural (even civilizational) clashes (Huntington, [1993] 2000).

Although every cultural group has the freedom to claim their particular rights in an inclusive, deliberative, and pluralistic democracy, it is also important to acknowledge they should have the faculty to adjust their arguments, agenda, as well as values, with the ones from other groups portrayed in the public sphere. If there is no sense of rhetorical understanding and moral respect, of a healthy intersubjective communicative action between all groups (J. Habermas, [1981] 1987), i.e., of a strong democratic commitment, then a greater threshold between self-fulfilling and particularistic sovereign claims may set off incoherent reactions and dramatic cultural misunderstandings. In a sense, one may agree with S. Benhabib, when she argues that such “identity politics draws the state into culture wars” (2002, p. 1) or with J. Habermas, when he observes that democratic universalism has flipped over into “generalized particularism” (Habermas in Calhoun, 1992, p. 445). For her, the excessive attachment with restricted group agendas weakens democratic dialogue and leads to cultural purisms and constrained forms of citizenship.

Furthermore, this communitarism in extremo that disturbs us today is, according with A. Touraine, “indeed the one which places itself above citizenship – that is, recognizes cultural affiliation as superior to national identity” ([2005] 2007, p. 174). Subsequently, adverts W. Kymlicka, citizenship should not be conceived as something limited, rather it “should be a forum where people transcend their differences and think about the common good of all citizens” (1998, p. 168). In other words, while all citizens – in a multiethnic kaleidoscope - should respect the differences from each other, they should, as well, develop some kind of a consensus about the common good.

Following C. Taylor’s work (1994), contemporary democracy seems to be compelled to engender some kind of synergy between what he calls two alternative politics: the politics of universalism or the politics of universal dignity and the politics of difference. Hence, while every struggle for cultural recognition should be appreciated in our democratic public spheres, it is important to point out that democracy also challenges all cultures to abandon intellectual and moral values that are inconsistent with the universal principles of equality, liberty and fraternity (S. Rockefeller in Taylor, 1994). For instance, in J. Habermas’s case, affirms Charles Taylor, “the boundary between questions of ethics, which have to do with interpersonal justice, and those of the good life is supremely important, because it is the boundary between the demands of truly universal validity and goods which will differ from culture to culture” ([1989] 2010, p. 88).

In line with J. Habermas’ approach, S. Benhabib stresses that

- norms of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity already undergird practices of discursive argumentation: they must presupposed in some form for practical discourses. This reflects not a vicious circle but a virtuous one: Moral and political dialogues begin with the presumption of respect, equality, and reciprocity between the participants (2002, p. 11).

Focusing on the dilemmas of multiculturalism, S. Benhabib also reveals “that as long as these pluralist structures do not violate three normative conditions, they can be quite compatible with a universalist deliberative democratic model. I call these conditions of egalitarian reciprocity,

Moreover, the ability to transcend restricted traditional community boundaries and to coexist with various cultures, communities through the exchange of worlds of meaning and experiences surely requires a cosmopolitan project of citizenship. For David Held,

Citizenship in a democratic polity of the future, it is argued is likely to involve a growing mediating role: a role which encompasses dialogue with the traditions and discourses of others with the aim of expanding the horizons of one’s own framework of meaning and increasing the scope of mutual understanding. Political agents who can ‘reason from the point of view of others’ will be better equipped to resolve, and resolve fairly, the new and challenging transboundary issues and processes that create overlapping communities of fate (1999, p. 449).

In this way, a cosmopolitan citizenship should be an open and dramatic effect: it should be constantly creating and recreating itself as a result of the encounter and relationship with the cultural narratives and imaginaries of the “Other(s)”. This intercultural contact intensifies what the Nobel Prize winner S. Rushdie calls a hybrid identity and subsequently hybrid society:

Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with different cultures will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. The Satanic Verses is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves (1991, p. 394).

Thus, modern deliberative democracy must be, therefore, not only receptive to change, but it should, as well, recognize the multiple cultural contexts and provide a framework of citizenship that simultaneously addresses individual affiliations and commitment with the collective common good. For W. Kymlicka, modern democracy depends essentially on the qualities of citizens:

their sense of identity and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic, or religious identities; their ability to tolerate and work together with others who are different from themselves; their desire to participate in the political process in order to promote the public good and hold political authorities accountable; their willingness to show self-restrain and exercise personal responsibility in their economic demands, and in personal choices which affect their health and the environment; and their sense of justice and commitment to fair distribution (1998, p. 168).

In a way, W. Kymlicka appeals the existence of politically active and reflexive critical social agents capable to engage a respectful relationship with the “Other(s)”. Such definition of a civic-minded citizen seems to be, nevertheless, quasi-utopian in the era of consumerism. Along with J. Habermas (among others, e.g. J. Baudrillard, C. Castoriadis, Z. Bauman), citizens have suffered a frightened metamorphosis: From citizens, they have been transformed into mere consumers. As a consequence, due to the imperatives of the economic system and the laws of market that are dominating the spheres of the Lebenswelt (“Lifeworld”, Habermas, [1981] 1987) and subtly forcing citizens – with the help of mass culture’ mechanisms – to, not only, “a kind of experience which is not cumulative but regressive” (Habermas, [1962] 1989, p. 166), but, as well, to a sort of “(…) retreat into conformism” (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 36), the so-called “postmodern” public sphere is now emptied of rational-critical and reflexive social agents. In addition, and following J. Habermas’ position, “[t]he public sphere assumes advertising functions. The more it can be deployed as a vehicle for political and economic propaganda, the more it becomes unpolitical as a whole and pseudo-privatized” ([1962] 1989, p. 175). De facto, “[w]hat ties individuals to society
today is their activity as consumers, their life [is not only] organized around consumption” (Bauman, 1987, p. 168), plus they show a widespread disaffection and disenchantment for politics. The lack of resistance towards political instrumental rationality and towards market consumer strategies reveals the ever-growing incapacity of social actors to participate and intervene in the public and political arenas. For the great majority of citizens, it no longer appears feasible to believe in the legitimacy of national governments and politicians, since their interests are primarily influenced by economic principles. In this regard, and bearing in mind that even “[t]he idea of opposition has disappeared from the scene of formal politics” (Said, 2003, p. 190), J. Habermas appeals citizens – as potential conversation partners – not only to refine their creative imagination and critical reasoning in the multiple civil, cultural, religious, artistic and political associations of the “lifeworld”, but also encourages them to actively intervene in the elaboration of political goals and contribute to healthy political democracy.

In addition, one may assume globalization has given birth to two major socio-cultural and political problems: 1) the reduction of individual freedom foisted by economic forces of consumer society and symbolic domination of mass media’s pathos of happiness (H. Marcuse) - already criticized by the thinkers of the School of Frankfurt, namely T. W. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, H. Marcuse; and 2) the cultural condition of deterritorialization.

With reference to these great socio-political and cultural consequences of globalization, both E. Said and Z. Bauman (nevertheless with different standpoints about the role of the intellectual) call our attention to the critical and interpretative intervention of modern intellectuals. Concerning the effects of neoliberal market economy, where “[e]verything is packaged and up for sale […] leaving very little room for individual challenge and questioning” and “causing widespread environmental destruction, widespread genetic destruction, and the possibility for powerful groups to pursue profit without responsibility” he E. Said suggests that “[i]n such a context, the role of the intellectual is to oppose (…) by oppositional I mean to be able to sift, to judge, to criticize, to choose so that choice and agency returns to the individual” (2003, p. 99). Alongside Said’s view, P. Bourdieu acknowledges that “[a]rtists, writers and researchers (especially sociologists) have the capacity, and the duty, to combat the most malign of the threats that this global production implies for culture and democracy” (1998, p. 77). In relation to the increasing cultural fragmentation, complexity, and conflicts, Z. Bauman states that – and since intellectuals have lost their charismatic role as a public legislators⁴ - the intellectuals’ role now “is to interpret such [cultural] meanings for the benefit of those who are not of the community which stands behind the meanings; to mediate the communication between ‘finite provinces’ of ‘communities of meaning’” (1987, p. 197). In other words, although they no longer incorporate the role of public and political legislators, the serve now as privileged interpreters of the multiplicity of cultural codes, repertoires, worldviews and beliefs represented in the public sphere(s).

Moreover, he assumes that

[the idea of interpretation assumes the meaning-constituting authority reside elsewhere – in the author, or in the text; the role of the interpreter boils down to reading out the meaning. The good interpreter is one who reads the meaning properly – and there is a need (or so one may hope) for somebody to vouch for the rules which guided the reading of the meaning and thus made the interpretation valid or authoritative; somebody who would sieve good interpretations from bad ones (Bauman, 1987, p. 197).

So, and still in line with Z. Bauman, the intellectual – by virtue of his/her multiple Verstehensrollen – possesses not only courage and creativity (Misztal, 2007) - but, as well, the adequate hermeneutical tools to, on the one hand, unfold a respectful dialogue between different cultural traditions, narratives, discourses and Weltanschauungen and, on the other hand, to dialectically unveil the images of the self and the other, i.e., he/she has the skills to […] talk to people rather than fight them; to understand them rather than dismiss or annihilate them as mutants; to enhance one’s own tradition by drawing freely
on experience from other pools, rather than shutting it off from the traffic of ideas; that is what the intellectuals’ own tradition, constituted by ongoing discussions, prepares people to do well. And the art of civilized conversation is something the pluralist world needs badly. It may neglect such art only at its peril. Converse or perish (Bauman, 1987, p. 143).

Surely, through an unbiased exchange between worlds of meaning and commitment with non-stereotyped messages, the intellectual of the 21st century lays essentially in providing “a counterpoint, by storytelling, by reminders of the graphic nature of suffering, and by reminding everyone that [they]’re talking about people. [They]’re not talking about abstractions” (Said, 2003, p. 187). To speak truth to society (Melzer, 2003, p. 11) continues, therefore, to be, the fundamental task of contemporary intellectuals. B. Misztal goes even further, when she stresses that such commitment with “transparency and justice […] requires the active public participation of public intellectuals in expanding the democratic imagination and civic sensitivity of citizens and their leaders alike” (Misztal, 2007, p. 4). Yet, E. Said reminds us that a distinctive definition between what he calls the “intellectual professional” from the “intellectual amateur” should be delineated, and insists on the significance of the latter:

The intellectual amateur is someone who considers that to be a thinking and concerned member of a society one is entitled to raise moral issues at the heart of even the most technical and professionalized activity as it involves one’s country, its power, its mode of interacting with its citizens as well as with other societies (Said, 1996, p. 82).

In other words, instead of being driven by an instrumental rationality (M. Weber’s notion of Zweckrationalität) and by a professionalized logic, he highlights the critical action and the ethical-moral contribution of the intellectual amateur.

In effect, the intellectuals’ respect for the “otherness of the Other”, their struggle against “attempts in normative political theory that reify cultural groups and their struggles for recognition” (Benhabib, 2002, p. 5), their faith in dignity and commitment to fight injustice are definitely strong motives why intellectuals - even when some perceive them as an endangered species (e.g. S. Fuller, 2004) and others defend their betrayal (J. Benda, 1927, Chomsky, 1969, Jacoby, 1987 and Grass, 2000) – preserve a crucial role in our complex multicultural society.

In short, intellectuals should encourage a new cultural and political imaginary (Castoriadis, 2005), through which a cosmopolitan society, along with its intrinsic universal values - justice, freedom and equality, ought to unfold. In other words, and following the thesis of S. Benhabib:

A global civilization that is to be shared by world citizens will need to be nourished by local attachments; rich cultural debate; contestations about the identity of the ‘we’; and a sense of democratic experimentation with institutional design and redesign. As long as future collectivities reconstitute themselves through the democratic resignification of their cultural legacies in which all those affected can participate, new territorial boundaries and national frontiers can be drawn, and new institutions of power sharing, representation, and governance can be reimagined. This is the future challenge of synthesizing democratic equality and cultural diversity (2002, p. 184).

To overcome the increasing signs of cultural conflicts, it seems modern intellectuals must recover their role of “democracy helpers” (Misztal, 2007). They should be able to rethink and revitalize our res publica mundialis, so a cosmopolitan solidarity between the “peoples of the world” can be able to be attained. Notwithstanding, they should not fight for an unfeasible and roughly utopian cosmopolitan model, rather they should provide for an alternative, unpretentious form of cosmopolitanism as the one advocated by J. Tomlinson:

Nothing guarantees the building of cosmopolitan solidarity in the uncertainties of global modernity. But its possibility at least derives from some powerful modern
cultural resources: a combination of the deterritorialization of mundane experience that increasingly opens the world to us, along with the drive to self-realization in life-styles which are themselves ‘open’ to an expanded mutuality. Seen thus, the cultural condition of deterritorialization is not something, which has to be reckoned as separate from or antagonistic towards an essential human moral condition, but something, which develops in tandem with it. This rather low-key, modest cosmopolitanism may be a far cry from a heroic ideal of global citizenship, but it does at least seem a disposition to be built upon that is plausibly within our grasp (1999, p. 207).

In a nutshell, this paper tried to understand the implications of “deterritorialization of politics, rule and governance” (Held, 1999) in the social and cultural spheres, and aimed to dissect the role of intellectuals in the construction of an egalitarian reciprocity and democratic dialogue between cultural viewpoints as an indispensable vehicle to reach an enlightened humanity, a global and cosmopolitan reality inhabited by men and women “[…] capable of living equally in various places and among diverse peoples” (Novalis in Kristeva, 1991, p. 181).

NOTES

2 Compare with S. Benhabib’s, “Yet it is clear that the greatest challenge for contemporary democracies will be to retain their dearly won civil liberties, political freedoms, and representative deliberative institutions, while defusing the fundamentalists’ dream of purity and of a world without moral ambivalence ad compromise. The negotiation of complex cultural dialogues in a global civilization is now our lot” (2002, p. 186).
3 Compare A. Touraine’s critique on the lack of concern for society as a whole: “[…] The principal object of analysis is no longer society, but actors who are already more than social, since they are defined not only by their social affiliations and relations, but also by cultural rights, so that they are indeed complete individuals and not abstractions, as the citizen or even the worker remained. Awareness of this switch also enables us to understand the exhaustion of the political forms of thinking and action we have inherited from the past” ([2005] 2007, p. 183).
4 View S. Benhabib’s definition of deliberative democracy: “The deliberative democratic model is a two-track one: it accepts both legal regulation and intervention through direct and indirect state methods in multicultural disputes, and it views normative dialogue and contestation in the civil public sphere as essential for a multicultural democratic polity” (2002, p. 115).
6 See Z. Bauman: “It is obvious that within the context of consumer culture no room has been left for the intellectual as legislator” (1987, p. 167).

REFERENCES