

CULTURAL DIVERSITY, DEMOCRACY, AND PARTICIPATION

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Summary

The debate over the possibility of democracy within cultural diversity, as it appears in the globalized world, has been considered crucial in social science and in political activism. Here, we aim to draw contributions from the theoretical debate, as well from the realpolitik, from the practices and utopian dreams of social actors, institutionalized collective organizations and social movements. We will examine how movements of diverse social identities are meeting and networking around activities of advocacy and empowerment of civil society from the local to the transnational public sphere. And, particularly, we will consider how ecological movements are networking with organizations and other social movements in order to participate in policy-making and the construction of a more democratic and culturally responsible public sphere in general.

1. Introduction

We live in a world of increasing connectivity, not only *through* and *of* technological resources and means, but also from new and complex forms of social and cultural proximity. These forms can be sources of conflicts and rejections of outsiders, but they also can create conditions for new types of solidarity and co-operation in which networks of social movements are important actors.

The debate on cultural diversity in relation to democracy has been receiving the attention of contemporary social science thinkers. We might ask if it is a new subject, expression of the social relation in the global age, or if it is a new approach to old social

problems. It is both. On one hand, globalization diminishes the temporal-spatial distances between people and their cultures, confronting them with differences and possibly generating social conflicts. On the other hand, ethnic, religious and national conflicts are part of the world's history, and were the subject of classical social thought. What is different is the way that we experience distance, through the modern meanings of technological communication and transportation, connecting people, societies and cultures in real time. But what matters overall in the contemporary debate is the attempt to understand in what way this real and virtual proximity of the cultures produces conflicts or solidarities, cultural hybridization, or social ghettos. And, more specifically, in what way social movements are relevant actors for cultural transformation and how through organizations of diverse types they are networking in several situations, from joint protest and contention to the construction of policy making, as in the local Agenda 21.

The networking and joining of different social movements is a relatively new phenomenon, and is a source of empowerment for all groups involved and for civil society in a broader sense. For instance, environmentalists are acting with women's advocates and other social militants against neoliberalization trends, and Zapatistas are supporting environmentalists. What is driving these new alliances is the understanding that development must include quality of life, ecological conservation, and human rights. Thus, a new perspective for sustainable development must be as receptive to the ideals and goals of social liberation movements as it is to environmental activist groups. In other words, it needs to be developed through the participatory processes of democracy.

The main question, therefore, will be how to create participatory democracy with respect for, and inclusion of, cultural diversities and identities, while coordinating effective sustainable development strategies. Respect for cultural diversity leads to a re-thinking of democracy. We need to go beyond the political and civic meaning of democracy, to the social and cultural feature of democratic construction, to begin to understand this situation. In fact, social movements have already gone beyond the restricted political and civic meaning of democracy, and are redefining it in the process, as we shall see later.

The fact that cultures have been historically constructed must also be taken into consideration. In order to understand cultures nowadays, and their possibilities for hybridization or for evolved democratic relations within the different cultures and social groups, we will need to recreate the historical roots of different civilizations. We may start by reviewing some approaches to this question. Following this, we will examine the dilemmas and paradoxes between inclusion-exclusion of social groups in modernity, the dialectic between universalism-diversity, and the formation of identities (individual and collective) in multicultural contexts. Finally, we will discuss how social movements are networking from the local to the global sphere and, more specifically, how environmentalists are contributing to participatory democracy.

2. Roots and frontiers

To search the roots of cultures at the present time implies the deconstruction of the past using categories of thought from the present. It is an attempt to deconstruct the

phenomena while searching for new answers about origins and causalities so that history can be re-interpreted and re-written. Fanon was a pioneer in this direction when he explained the colonial process from the viewpoint (or the unlocated in terms of cultural recognition) of the colonized people. He showed how the colonized unconsciously adopt colonialism, through cultural alienation and negative identity, constructing the image of the colonizer within himself.

The question here is how to reconstruct native cultural traditions without being restricted to the constructions of fundamentalist identities that may be questionable in the current global scenario of the world. How might one become re-located in this world with its frequently mutable frontiers? How should one establish democratic intercultural relations without losing original cultural identities? Before answering these questions, we may explain the meaning of "frontier" as an interpretive category of the post-colonial world. The temporal-spatial compression of the world brought to social science a new view of social change and the constitution of territoriality. The categorical notion of frontier became relevant to these interpretations. "Frontier" refers to a locus of social relations, where the reference to diverse territories and historical times intersect, producing new arrangements of social differences and identities.

The social constitution of the present is central to this analysis of historical roots. It is useful to recover the roots of social behavior from the past to better project future actions. But with the end of historicism (that is, history as "Grand Narrative") of the theorist of modernity and the disbelief in utopias of large structural transformations, the projection of social behavior towards the future is more ethical than teleological. Social action is evaluated in terms of authentic behavior, tolerance, social recognition, solidarity, and so on instead of its capacity for promoting changes in social structures. Consequently, the notion of frontier as limiting historical temporality refers itself to a present without intending to change radically the past, recognizing that the future cannot be known. For these reasons, scientists and other social actors may prefer to use the notions of post-modernity, post-colonialism, and many other "posts", indicating that we live in a fast changing world, leaving behind many characteristics of the past while keeping others, but being very uncertain about the future. But, also, it may be a reminder that it is at the frontiers where the differences and the conflicts can be better negotiated and where spaces can be generated for creative interventions.

The category of frontier also is useful for explaining social relations and interactions in the global order. The connectivity of localities with transnational environments redefines territories of social actions. So, frontiers constantly change. Thus, working with the notions of roots and frontiers means to search for the dialectic between the past and the present to better project future social behavior; and between the local and the global to understand what many call "*glocalization*", the insertion of global values and traits in local communities, or the planetarization of local symbols. According to this way of looking at reality, many classical questions are reintroduced into the understanding of the convergence or the divergence of cultures, such as the nexus between equality and the respect for difference, the universal and the particular, inclusion and exclusion, multiculturalism and interculturalism. And the relation of these pairs with the democratization of social relations and society as a whole has also become central to analysis.

3. Inclusion—Exclusion

The shrinking of distances and the potential connection of places and peoples in the global order, followed by the new phenomena of individual or collective migrations, has brought new subjectivities for cultural proximities. The world that brings people and cultures closest also contains its paradox: it excludes many of them from economic and political markets and cultural recognition. Some of these paradoxes can be synthesized as follows:

Modernization—de-modernization: The modernization project of liberal globalization, in the measure that it does not include all equally in its new economy, may generate a disruption between the economic order and the fragmented cultures. This phenomenon has been called "de-modernization", because it may generate social identities based on religious, ethnic or communitarian segregation, transforming particular cultures into political fundamentalist mobilization.

Integration—atomization: Another aspect of precarious inclusion in the global economy is the integration of individuals in the hedonist and consumer society, creating a systemic process of atomization and narcissist individuation.

Information—disinformation: In times of reflexive modernization, either integration or exclusion in the informational or communicational structures of society is crucial to our understanding of the citizen's participation. Studies have demonstrated the relationship between the capacity of obtaining or developing informational resources and the political and cultural empowerment of civil society.

In a very broad view, we may conclude that the process of economic and technological globalization has generated contradictions between systemic integration-disintegration of cultures and of civilization processes.

4. Universalism—Diversity

The classical philosophical debate about the relation of the universal and the particular has been enriched by the recent analysis of the *diversity* within this paradox. In fact, what have frequently been taken as universal values are nothing more than the hegemonic values of a dominant or imperialist culture. For this reason, to recognize cultural diversity it is essential to delve into the historical roots and frontiers of non-hegemonic civilizations. In addition, it is necessary to establish an appropriate relation between the universal value of egalitarianism and the creation of possibilities for the expression and recognition of cultural diversities. This is a central issue in theoretical reflexivity as well in the ideological orientations of social movements and for the construction of democracy. The affirmation that people have the right to be equal when their differences lead to inferiority and that they have the right to be different when equality leads to de-characterization is an important contribution to the overcoming of the discord between egalitarianism and respect for cultural diversity. But implementation of such ethical principles may encourage many types of resistance to actual social practices: it supposes a strong relation of ethics and politics along the lines of a dialogical democracy.

5. The Self and the Collective

To conceive the possibility of a dialogical democracy that contemplates the participation of diverse cultures, we must consider the place of the subject in the collective. Three alternatives are possible:

Diffusion of social identities: Refers to the fragmentation of life in society, with the increasing individuation and, on the negative side, the individualism in social life that makes actions based on collective values (as in social movements) increasingly rare. This is an image explored by some of the so-called "post-modern" thinkers. The organization of post-modern societies, isolating individuals and stimulating rivalry, contributes to the construction of subjectivities around the fragmented social roles of the person, decreasing the power of collective social identities.

Multiple social identifications: The subjectivities are constructed within multiple social relations in which the individuals participate in political mobilizations and in their respective identity formation discourses. Because of this, the plural social identities of collective actors, for example, environmentalist, feminist, trade unionist, and so on, are contingent and changeable as a result of discursive articulations in social networks and in the process of social movement formation.

Identity recognition: Subjectivity is never an individual isolated process. It occurs in the relation of the self with its groups of references. In times of globalization, it may imply the interaction with an increasing number of social actors, networks of organizations, and diverse cultural codes. In this context, the collective identities (environmentalist, feminist, etc.) are first formed through the ideological identification of the pairs and then they cross symbolic references in the public sphere where they may conquer social recognition in a broader sense and become subjects in the process of social movement formation.

In conclusion, what we call *social movements* in the present scenario may be defined as diversified social networks that connect subjects, social actors, and movement organizations while allowing the expression of some cultural diversity but realizing a stronger identification around universal values that are politically recognized within the civil society.

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Biographical Sketch

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