

The role of culture

Nature and the human condition

From very early on in human history the places of culture, which are after all both physical and mental, emotional and material, symbolical and practical, metaphoric and sapiential, articulate themselves with politics, religion and economy. This articulation is the starting point for the considerations proposed in my text.

Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher, stated in 1930: (...) *if the place I intend to get to could only be reached by means of a ladder, I would give up trying to get there, because, in fact, the place I must get to is a place where I should already find myself in now* (...)¹.

We don't need a ladder to reach the place of culture and its intertwinings. We are already there, because wherever there is one human being, there is also a manifestation of culture.

Paradoxically, though, this confluence is simultaneously the most immediate and the most durable of all in the human experience, the easiest and the most difficult, the simplest and the most complex of all.

We live hard times in Europe and the world – times of great complexity.

¹ WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *Cultura e Valor*. Edições 70, Lisboa 1996, p. 21.

Times in which certain world powers' military interventions undermine whole countries and regions of the world. Times in which religious or political fanaticism based on totalitarian ideas led, and still do, to the killing of innocent people in so many countries and regions in all continents.

There can be economic, political and religious causes for these situations. But none of those causes, by itself, can explain any of them.

We can agree, whatever our idiom, education or territory, that certain fish can swim or certain birds can fly; that trees have roots and big cats are ferocious; but we hardly may come to agree on the concept of justice², the best way to implement equity, the value of freedom, the sense of equality or the definition of reason. We also find it very hard to accept our Judaeo-Christian roots and articulate them with a convenient reaction to Islamic culture. We experience a good deal of difficulty in articulating these parameters with individual freedom and national and European common identities. Why should we, then, consider as being definitive those parameters of political and economic decision of the last fifty years that are incapable even to explain the Present and were not effective for millennia?

The various attempts to institute universal value-based norms supposedly arising from evidence failed successively in the course of History, in spite of those moments in which they apparently prevailed.

² SEN, Amartya. *The idea of justice*. Penguin Books, London, 2010.

It is readily apparent, at the same time, that there is a very close correlation in each historical moment between the dominant values and the dominant powers, even if we refrain from adopting as a standard of social reading the Marxist theory or the neo-Marxist theories.

The same goes for the idea of culture. No matter how much we wish to see culture as a substance co-natural to the human existence or, if you will, to the human nature, anthropology shows us the difficulty involved in trying to find a parameter of cultural identification between all humans in distinct territories and historical moments.

In other words, being culture co-natural to human beings and therein lying its universalism, it manifests itself in a plural way.

Within that plurality, though, all is also cultural, since it is through a cultural point of view that we contemplate everything. For example: do the concepts “man”, “woman”, “child” arise from Nature, or are they cultural constructs?

From womb to birth we are set in a *cultural condition*. Our cultural condition stems from our education, our social background, the community we belong to, the people we grew up with, our receptivity to information, the political, economical and religious rules we assimilate, and the degree of culture fruition that we manage³.

³ Many 19th, 20th and 21st centuries authors from the fields of anthropology, philosophy, history, sociology, economy, theory of culture, cultural studies, political theory, among other approaches, analysed these matters.

The *cultural condition* manifests itself as a place of identity, of cohesion and difference, of personal and social distinction. The *cultural condition* is simultaneously the place of peace and the place of conflict.

This condition, as I describe it, counters the idea of the existence of universal values in a context of enlightened reasons, even if we believed at some point that we could all access and belong to a common global civilization.

The idea of universalism, of which French Illuminism is a significant example, even led some politicians, economists and social reality theorists to believe in the end of history, through the universalisation of democracy and market economy⁴.

This conviction would lose momentum with the outcry echoed worldwide in September 11, 2001, when the collapse of New York's Twin Towers toppled a certain idea of Humanity.

Let us go back a bit:

The Soviet regime that emerged from the 1917 Revolution, as well as the Nazi movement in Germany and the Fascist movements in Italy, Spain and Portugal, all appropriated themselves of culture as a control mechanism on the part of political power. Meanwhile, the United States, realising this in the Thirties, started promoting culture as an agent of American power in Europe. Evidently, culture was present in the European history of the 20th Century as more than a mere active element of

⁴ FUKUYAMA, Francis. *O fim da história e o último homem*. Gradiva, Lisboa, 1999. In June 2014, interviewed by Gero Schliess, Fukuyama reaffirmed his theory, claiming that the end of history was not signalled by the publication of its article in 1989, which later originated the book, but by a process leading to the globalisation of liberal democracy and market economy that the author believes is bound to occur.

totalitarian regimes or instrument of American affirmation. In the second half of the century, post WW2 Europe was divided by the so-called Iron Curtain⁵, which would cast its shadow over contemporary history for more than five decades.

Let us now consider the present time, this time that is ours, in order to try and understand what is the role of culture in it.

A time in which economy is often confused with rampant capitalism. Religion with fanaticisms. Politics with political parties. Sensations with values. Ethics with interests. Culture with entertainment.

We live times in which I believe is still applicable, in part, what Michel Foucault designated, in the late Seventies, *governmentality*⁶, an idea that defines the concept of government in Europe since the 16th century, as an original figure of power, articulating specific techniques of knowledge, control and coercion, and not just the simple instrumentalisation of the force of an increasingly compact State⁷.

A possible articulation, according to Foucault, can be based on the idea of *political economy*, based on the existence of a power no longer organised over a territory but over a population, no longer stemming from an idea of citizenship but from the concept of *homo economicus*, a statute built upon the correlated ideas of rulers and ruled, of justice and usefulness, intertwined and *resolved* in the idea of *civil society*, the place where we are more easily organisable and controllable – in short, the

⁵ CHURCHILL, Winston S. *The Second World War, Triumph and Tragedy*,. Book 2, Chapter 15, Bantam, 1962.

⁶ From the French term *gouvernementalité*.

⁷ SENELLART, Michel. *A crítica da razão governamental em Michel Foucault*. *Tempo Social*. S. Paulo: Rev. Sociol. USP, 7(1-2), 1995.

systemic location of *governmentality*. In this place, where we all are agents and receivers of the economic process, economic development presents itself as a central element of society .

One of the most central debates nowadays taking place in Europe tries to figure out whether economic growth is best attained through austerity or expenditure models. Political forces from the right, centre and left fight each other over this matter.

In this almost exclusive discursive centrality the sense of discourse and the sense of human are both reduced.

If our time continues to be the *space of the State*, it is no longer, however, just that, in the systemic terms enunciated by Foucault. If our time continues to be that of the population controlled by a certain mechanism of organisation of power, it is already something else.

Digital networks transformed the ideas of control, of community, of universalism. Community becomes crowd⁸, communication rumour⁹. What is enunciated as the bond between all men and women in the world is no longer its statute of enlightened reason or the ideal of a set of common values, but the possibility of access to internet's universal network, as well as to the various forms of globalisation and cosmopolitanism.

⁸ NEGRI, Antonio and Hardt, Michael. *Empire*. Harvard University Press. 2000, e NEGRI, Antonio and HARDT, Michael. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. Penguin Books. 2009

⁹ SUSTEIN, Cass R. *On rumours*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

We live in a framework of ambivalence, in a misleading matrix of organisation of the legitimate public powers within an institutional system; of private powers more or less legitimate; and of simple enunciations and discursive interchanges that don't put themselves in the place of power but correspond to its practical exercise.

We live between the *totalitarianism of the hybrid*, that neoliberal reconfiguration as it was enunciated with irony and critical sense by Homi Bhabha, who calls it *ubiquitous form of cultural universalism*, and the possibility of *cultural hibrydism* as a manifestation *emerging from the interstices of blocks of power, from the margins of political society (...)*¹⁰.

This ambivalence and misinterpretation concur to the objective of an idea of cultural hegemony¹¹, substituting it for *tribal discourses* anchored in a virtual universalism, as opposed to an ideal of native communities discovered, rediscovered or reconstructed. The contemporary tribalism operates acknowledging signals, images, sounds and multiple identities in contexts of discursive adhesion or of discursive contamination, transient and fleeting most of the time.

The *new tribes* do not correspond to any specific territory, but to an idea of nomadism and itinerancy, within both national communities and larger or smaller communities; at the same time outside them and beside them, overlapping and moving with variable geometry, with no allegiance to any algorithm; without the possibility of a staunch identification; finding in the digital social media its main

¹⁰ BHABHA, Homi, Foreword to Second Edition of *Debating Cultural Hybridity*. Edited by Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, Zed Books 2015, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

¹¹ GRAMSCI, Antonio, in BUTTIGIEG, Joseph A., ed.. *Prison notebooks*. Columbia University Press, NY, 1992.

mode of aggregation and creating local cultures, unfocused and frequently shallow, anchored in gurus that substitute the gods, priests, politicians and artists. The new gurus, the new priests, are often so imperceptible that they occupy the place of the unpronounceable name of God – they have no name, affirming themselves through the propagation of an idea, as in the case of movements like *Anonymous*.

In fact, viral phenomena are nowadays a central element of the identity dynamics and do not stem from any hegemonic discourse, but often only from movements that are spontaneous, anarchic, multitudinal, inorganic or similar, far from an idea of dominant class or mercantile imposition and assimilating frequently new forms of romanticism.

We live the end of the political sovereignty of States¹², enunciated in the 16th century in France by Bodin and advocated till today as a central element to the concept of State – sovereignty as *power to make laws and revoke them; the right to declare war and sign peace; the attribution of punishments and rewards (Bodin 2, p. 25-6 (...)) attributes of the summum imperium, eg, the rights of sovereignty (IO), which give its holder the necessary conditions to rule the political community*¹³.

Nowadays, anything that acts as a norm in relation to the typical social and cultural behaviours goes well beyond the State's regulatory system; the right to declare war

¹² It is interesting in this respect to read the speech addressed by Jurgen Habermas to members of Germany's SPD in February 2014: <http://www.ippr.org/juncture/in-favour-of-a-strong-europe-what-does-this-mean>

¹³ BARROS, Alberto Ribeiro de. *O Conceito de Soberania no Methodus de Jean Bodin*, in discurso (27), 1996: 139-155, USP.

and make peace is a conditioned right; the attribution of punishments and rewards goes far beyond the State's incumbencies.

We live in a time when the enunciation, the representation of those things that matter to us, the way to accommodate History, of living the Present and designing the Future needs new vocables, new words, new ways of thinking and operating .

But can this conscience signify renouncing or undermining the value of words painstakingly conquered by Europe, such as *justice and equality, self-respect and respect for the other, solidarity and freedom?*

The increasing atomisation of State communities in regard to their legitimacy acknowledged by the population was not replaced by any kind of ideal city, by any Athens or divine city, by any materialised utopia. The post-modern renunciation to hierarchies of values and the declarations of the primacy of cultural relativism and secularism as dominant parameters of culture, however much they make the delights of some intellectual circles and some republican political circles, do not replace Europe's cultural reality, where there are still hierarchies of values based on the ideals of democracy and freedom, and Christianity is the prevalent religion, with 76% Europeans declaring themselves Christian in 2010¹⁴.

In the 28-member European Union live nearly 500 million people. Of those, approximately 25 million are unemployed¹⁵. There are approximately 100 million

¹⁴ Data from Pew Research Center.

¹⁵ Eurostat, November 2014.

people aged more than 65¹⁶ and approximately 300 million people between 15 and 64 years of age. In other words, in Europe-28, there are approximately 200 million people unemployed or aged below 15 and above 65. For a wide range of reasons, in short, two fifths of Europeans do not work.

We have built the paradigm of our post-19th century Industrial Revolution way of life around the idea of *worker*, who we designate nowadays *employee*.

Most of us are educated in the family and at school in the expectation of one day having a job, working and then retiring. Our life cycle is dominated by the economic exploration of human life¹⁷: we prepare for working, we work and then retire. According to Hannah Arendt, through the idea of work there is an absolute victory of *vita activa* over *vita contemplativa*, and all non-working activity is viewed as leisure, reducing to a hobby everything that does not represent the so-called productive activity¹⁸. In this model, culture is either a hobby or should necessarily be considered a commodity. For this reason, many societies to this day tend to belittle the social statute of those working in the culture sector. These will not somehow be regarded as real workers unless they generate material value. Thus, an artist, for example, would be a kind of mime, an entertainer, and the artistic activity would be reduced to a mere amusement during leisure time.

What I advocate is a model in which culture's place is beyond the market and also beyond the idea of leisure time, operating as part of a social model that can no longer

¹⁶ From Eurostat data, 2012.

¹⁷ On this subject, naturally, it is recommended revisiting Marxist thought and neo-Marxist thinkers.

¹⁸ ARENDT, Hannah. *Condition de l'homme moderne*, chap. 3, Ed. Calmann-Levy, 1983, in JUNG, Joel. *Le travail*. Ed. GF Flammarion, Paris, 2000.

divide the members of a society between candidates to the labour market, workers, pensioners and unemployed .

Culture is a statutory response aimed at a better living standard for all Europeans, namely the 200 million who are not working nowadays. We cannot say that these 200 million fellow citizens live exclusively or essentially in the expectation of working or dying for prevalent horizons in their lives. Nor that their lives are suspended from hobbies. Nor that their statute is merely occupational.

A statutory valorisation of these Portuguese and Europeans depends on the alteration of our way of seeing society and integrating its different parts.

I do not dismiss the importance of the concept and value of work as an organising element of society. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that it is no longer possible to ignore the urgent need to find a statutory concept that is different from the concepts of *student*, *unemployed* or *pensioner* for 200 million Europeans.

It is quite clear that this circumstance is not exclusively European, but I allocate it to this continent due to our experience as Portuguese and Europeans.

What is at stake today is the way we look to our social organisation, to the way we represent life in society. It is no longer possible to proceed with the model of political economy, that model that in the last three centuries placed the economic system in the centre of life in society, as a power parameter.

Culture must be placed in the centre of the model of development for Europe. Political economy must be replaced by cultural policy¹⁹, aiming the concentration of all personal and social efforts in the fulfilment of all community members through the reunion of all the topics available: political, economic, social, religious, cultural. All of them are cultural goods and should concur in the same degree to human fulfilment.

To favour one of the elements of human nature – be it politics, economy, religion or culture – against the others unbalances the sense of individual and collective. It is this imbalance, fuelled by absolute relativism and a digital universalism with no name or project that takes us to the desert of the Present and the anguish of the Future, leading us to refuse our history and the fear of intimacy with ourselves and with those who share their existence with us.

Only a new Humanism can save humans as a whole. Only a new positive conscience of our plural existence as peoples and nations, as men and women and communities, can lead us once again to Peace.

Because truth must be told – we do not live in Peace today. We live between “rotten peace” and war. For that reason, the path of a common order in the new networked society has to be built on cultural policy, more than in in political economy. As we know it, political economy, from the 18th century to this day, brought us more prosperity, technology and science. But the construction of a truly just society has yet to happen, in spite of the reduction in inequality and the general increase in the living

¹⁹ Although in a distinct sense than that advocated by Rorty – RORTY, Richard. *Filosofia como política cultural*. Martins Fontes, SP, 2009 – as it is readily evident.

standards of a significant part of the world. Nevertheless²⁰, in European countries, the gap between rich and poor keeps on increasing since the Sixties, as well as the concentration of wealth in an increasingly shorter number of people, which I would designate *faceless capitalists* – according to Oxfam, the wealth of 1% of Humanity will surpass the other 99% in 2016.

It is perfectly clear that *political economy* no longer suits us. As it is, it only serves a very small percentage of human beings against the others. In today's world, the politics of interests continues to overwhelm the politics of values.

In 1997, when I decided to create a new centre of artistic experimentation in Portugal, I called the project “Lugar Comum” [Common Place] – and it was with that same name that January 2000 saw the inauguration of the centre of artistic experimentation in Fábrica da Pólvora de Barcarena.

At the time, I chose to emphasize the following paradox: the things that bind us together, the common places, that which we all know, which we all have in common, is what we despise. What binds us beyond the distinction between theory and practice²¹, between knowledge and opinion²². The expression “common place” has already been used as an equivalent to topic²³, in other words the territory, the place of the sense that can be shared. Topics are essential elements to the discourse, the text. Every form of reality is some form of text – because reality only is reality through a

²⁰ See Piketty, quoted work, to acknowledge how, in spite of the concentration of a wealth in an increasingly smaller number of individuals, it was possible to increase the general level of wealth.

²¹ See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Episteme and Techne*.

²² See ARISTÓTELES. *Ética a Nicómaco*, livro VI. Edições Universitárias Lusófonas, Lisboa, 2012.

²³ See Topos, in GRAFTON, , Anthony; MOST, Glenn W.; SETTIS, Salvatore. *The Classical Tradition*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge M., 2013.

creation, an interpretation and a critique. The *common place* is, therefore, the location of the shared reality.

How was it possible that throughout the centuries what was called upon as the space of reunion became degrading? How did we come to despise the common places? This evolution of sense is a signal of progressive detachment between word and community, between discourse and value.

In the process of advocating the common place, I also vowed to advocate the importance of the physicality of the place against the idea of global village²⁴, aligning myself with those who do not forget that globalisation only works for some, meaning that frequently a part of Humanity distances itself from those who increase their competences through easy access to information and knowledge. There are places in the world, places in Humanity out of the present, out of the accelerated time of the Present. Places that are far away, that have to be considered distant, for the idea of eliminating the distance through the easiness of the voyage does not correspond to the true nature of things.

These were my thoughts in 1997, and I find them even truer today, when there are places, territories, inaccessible geographies, due to war, radicalism, violence and disease.

The common places, the common place is therefore an essential political demand.

What are our common places?

²⁴ GORDON, W. Terrence. *Marshall McLuhan: Escape Into Understanding — A Biography*. Basic Books; NY, 1997.

The common place is the place of culture.

I pay tribute to the theorists of post-colonial studies in this day that we have among us Homi Bhabha, one of their greatest representatives. I invoke his book “The location of culture”²⁵, and all those who helped us through the second half of the 20th century to reorganise the way we think the presence of culture in contemporary societies. If today we can reconstruct the centrality of an European cultural discourse, simultaneously claiming the need for a cultural discourse in Europe, we owe that not only to the contemporary European political model, but also to the school of post-colonial studies.

Today, contrary to what many think, neither science nor technology will change the world. Today, we must change the hearts of men and keep on advocating the full development of citizenship, as well as the access to artistic creation and cultural fruition by everyone. The correlation between living standards and access to culture is manifest²⁶. Culture’s place is therefore Humanity’s place. Culture can be a fundamental reading key and organiser of thought and action in the complex contemporary societies.

The humanism of the 21th century must have *cultural policy* in its centre. A plural policy that is inclusive but does not deny nor forget, in every territory, in every place, the history of the common identity – everything that binds us together, as we cannot be close to the others if we don’t recognise ourselves inside of us.

²⁵ BHABHA, Homi. *The location of culture*. Routledge, London, 1994.

²⁶ Vide *European cultural values*, Eurobarometer, Eurostat, 2007.

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15.04.15