

**‘Philosophy’ – After the End of Philosophy:
In a Globalizing and Glocalizing World**

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By

Nader N. Chokr

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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In a Globalizing and Glocalizing World
By Nader N. Chokr

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For Lisa

Without whom life itself would have been a mistake.

Let's face it: Philosophy is arguably the most useless of all human endeavors. But it is also paradoxically a worthwhile and perhaps even necessary undertaking precisely because it is useless...So long as one remains acutely aware of its intrinsic limitations, blind spots, and constitutive tensions. I would also add: only if one is prepared furthermore to unlearn its entrenched and established history, the very coordinates of its assumptions and unquestioned presuppositions. And even to jettison the discipline altogether as merely a ladder which has served its limited purpose—enabling us then to rise to the next level in our understanding of the world, and our place in it.

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PREFACE

This collection of essays is intended to be my “farewell to academic philosophy” as the latter has proved to me over the years and in retrospect to be completely worthless. I am now of the view that philosophy ought to be anything but an academic discipline. By temperament and by conviction, I am now more than ever inclined to view *philosophy* instead as a way of life, whose primary concern is the reduction of the ever-widening and yawning gap between *what is ideal* and *what is real*, between the values and ideals that we preach or claim to uphold and the actions or behaviors that we actually carry out and display. A more sustained and robust illustration or defense of this view would have to wait for another season, when the flowers are once again in bloom.

Except for essays 1, 2, 8, and 9 which have been previously published in shorter and radically different versions in venues that are not always easily accessible, most of these essays are still unpublished. They deal with various questions, problems and issues which have preoccupied me for the best part of the past decade, and which should be of interest and concern to anyone who is similarly even so slightly bothered as well.

Clearly, they are not united by one single thread running through and through. The different strands of various lengths and strengths woven together should reveal instead criss-crossings, cross-cuttings, and overlappings—in short, discontinuities as well as continuities. Though essays # 3 & 4 may at first seem out of place in the present context, I am prepared to argue that they in fact fit in perfectly. Though essays # 6 & 9 are comparatively shorter and less developed, they also constitute in fact crucial strands of the *rope-like structure* of this work.

A number of arguments and more or less complex forms of reasoning and analyses are marshaled and deployed in defense of the views and positions I am inclined to take. For the most part, I am still prepared to uphold them—albeit perhaps in some nuanced and qualified manner, given the benefit of hindsight.

Initially, I had contemplated including a postscript in which I draft some carefully formulated replies to a number of possible objections and

criticisms that could (and probably will) be leveled against the analyses, views and positions defended in the present essays. I subsequently came to believe that such a task is in fact best left to the readers. Besides, these essays are in the final analysis only to be viewed as so many opportunities for me to make some *untimely confessions* about the various contemporary problems and issues which have come to be on my philosophical plate in recent times, and not as attempts to win over some arguments in a contest of wits and analytical prowess. Such endeavors are once again best left to the “academic circles” that are so inclined, and that will surely find here enough fodder for their cannons.

May 2014

Despite our undeniable achievements in science and technology and in terms of *economic development* over the past hundred years or so, our world is still dramatically confronted by a number of serious challenges, grave risks and threats, dismal shortcomings and failures. Furthermore, let us not forget that these achievements have come at a huge, and some might say, exorbitant cost, viz., the sequence of wars and conflicts, mass killings and genocides, barbaric violence, mayhem and horrors that people and nations have unleashed upon each other often in the name of an idea or an ideology throughout the whole of the 20th century, and that they continue to perpetrate upon each other in various parts of the world up to this juncture in the 21st century.

Besides, these achievements are obviously not enjoyed by all, or even by most people around the world. We are nowhere near achieving the minimum kind of *human development and social justice* morally required of us by the very values and ideals we seem to be trumpeting every chance we get. Not to mention *global justice*, which remains idealistic, wishful thinking on the part of academic philosophers eager to uphold, *pace* and *contra* Hegel, that “the Owl of Minerva can and must take its flight at dawn,” rather than wait until dusk.

The current hegemonic system and world order (or rather, disorder) under which people, nations and states are operating today as if it were ineluctable, natural, or a matter of historical necessity, is clearly brutal and utterly destructive. By all estimations, it has turned billions of human beings into “*disposable people*”, with barely the ability to survive, let

alone live a decent and flourishing life. It seems by all sane and persuasive analyses to be heading toward disaster, catastrophe or collapse.

According to Slavoj Žižek, who is *symptomatically* often referred to in the Press, as “the most dangerous philosopher in the West,” global capitalism (in its neo-liberal incarnation) is fast approaching its terminal crisis; there is no longer any doubt about this. We are in effect “*Living in the End Times*” (Verso, 2010). Conjuring up a biblical image, he goes on to identify the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” as (1) the global ecological crisis, (2) imbalances within the economic system, (3) the biogenetic revolution, and (4) the exploding, irrepressible social divisions that have increasingly been rocking our world.

Ever since the 2008 global financial tsunami which originated on Wall Street (almost) caused a total meltdown of the world’s economies, it has become clear to all that, when left to its own devices, unrestrained, unregulated and unmonitored, capitalism is a monster that devours its own children, and only best serves the interests of the 1% at the expense of those of the 99%. Its internal logic is in effect to undermine *the very fabric of democracy*, by the increasingly wider and wider inequalities it generates as a matter of course. The world is now owned and governed by “oligarchs,” whether you look West or East, North or South: their gains and profits are thoroughly privatized, while their losses are socialized. And if the corporations they own or manage are “too big to fail,” then they get their governments to rush to their rescue by pumping unimaginable sums of money into the black holes they have created in their wake. Meanwhile, the rest of us— who are “too small and too insignificant to matter”—scramble happily for slave wages, and struggle under extreme conditions of precarity to *make a living*, rather than *making a life*.

As Thomas Piketty showed compellingly in his recent ground-breaking best-seller, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard University Press, 2014), capitalism was only able to accommodate itself with a lower degree of inequality and a slightly better record in terms of redistribution of wealth and income during the so-called “glorious thirty odds years” of the post-WWII reconstruction and development era, and in otherwise similarly unique and exceptional historical circumstances. In general however, capitalism thrives in times of chaos, war and disaster, and can therefore more readily accommodate a greater degree of redistribution thereafter. But over the course of most of its history, as can be ascertained by the

substantial evidence gathered, capitalism inexorably leads to greater and greater inequality –unless it is duly and properly restrained.

Will the leaders of our respective countries hear and heed the righteous demands and aspirations of the millions of people around the world who have taken part in the Occupy Movement or who consider themselves members of *los indignados*? Or will they just go on, as they seem to be, with *business and politics as usual*? Could they come to see that not only “another world is possible,” but it is urgently needed and desired by most people around the world.

Ironically, rather than contemplating bold, courageous, and radical change, it has become increasingly easier to imagine or even envisage the end of the world or the end of human civilization as we know it, and for advised governments within the North trans-Atlantic Sphere of Influence to commission secret reports and studies for how to best deal and cope with various post-apocalyptic scenarios. What does this say about us, presumably evolved *Homo sapiens* with fairly developed cognitive and affective capabilities, that we can open our minds and become receptive to the idea of “radical change” only and only when we are on the brink, or sadly enough, in retrospect, when it is already too late? I leave it to you to ponder and speculate.

August 2014

Oslo, Norway

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to all the friends and colleagues, who have over the years contributed each in their own way to the shaping and development of my philosophical temperament as well as the articulation and strengthening of my views and positions.

The first essay “Consequences of Cultural Complexity” is based on a lecture prepared for the 12th International Conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies on the theme: “Globalization, Communication, and Identity” held in San Antonio, Texas, USA, August 2-4, 2006. A previous and much shorter version was subsequently published in *China Media Research* (3/2: 62-82). The present essay is based on the latter, as well as the results obtained in an earlier essay titled “A Fundamental Misconception of ‘Culture’: Philosophical and Political Implications” published in a collection edited by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein and Jurgen Hengelbrock, *Re-Ethnicizing the Minds? Revival of Culture in Contemporary Thought*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006, chapter 22 (pp. 401-435). I thank Rodopi Publications for granting me permission to reproduce parts of it herein.

The second essay “Who is (not) afraid of (Cultural) Relativism?” was produced upon request and in response to a call for papers launched by the editors of *Traces* (Ecole Normale Supérieure, Lyon, France) on the problem of relativism. I would like to thank Eric Monnet and Paul Costey, as well as an anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions and encouraging comments throughout the process leading up to the completion of this essay in its double (long and short) versions. A shorter and condensed version of this essay in French is already published in the paper and online edition of the review *Tracés* 12/1.

The third essay “Even Deeper into ‘Bullshit’—A Philosophical Inquiry” is still unpublished. It was produced in response to a private communication with G. A. Cohen on the subject matter here in question during which he graciously agreed to share with me a copy of his paper “Deeper into Bullshit” which he wrote in response to Harry Frankfurt’s essay, in an effort to characterize a particular kind of bullshit, namely, academic or philosophical bullshit (in particular, of the French variety).

The fourth essay “Embodied and Situated Cognition—Significance and Promise of a Paradigm Shift?” was produced in response to the growing interest and attention being devoted across disciplines to the new paradigm and its implications for their respective fields. A different version was previously published in a journal that is no longer active (*Philosophical Frontiers* 3/1, 2008). Since only the abstract is now accessible, its publication herein in a substantially revised form can therefore be considered a first.

The ideas and analyses developed in the fifth essay “On the Capability Approach—Justification and Comparative Advantage” were first articulated during a Seminar on “The Capabilities Approach: Problems and Prospects” taught in the School of Philosophy and Social Development at Shandong University (Jinan, China) during the Fall Semester of 2006. A first draft was later discussed in a more focused manner during a subsequent Seminar dedicated to the work of Thomas Pogge in the spring semester of 2007 in the same context. I wish to thank all the (Chinese and Foreign) students and guest-visitors in attendance during both Seminars for their lively discussions and probing interventions regarding the question of the justification and comparative advantage (if any) of the Capabilities Approach. I also would like to thank Thomas Pogge for his sharp and challenging comments and criticisms of an earlier draft. As it becomes clear in the essay, in some cases, I have had to concede his points. In others, I have tried to dodge the bullet. In yet others, I could only re-iterate and reinforce my counter-objections and variations thereof.

The sixth essay titled “Solidarity, Moral Universalism, and Cosmopolitanism” was originally written for the purpose of a lecture at Shandong University, Jinan, China in May 2004 whose aim was to provoke a critical evaluation of the contributions of two prominent American philosophers, Richard Rorty and John Rawls. It is so far unpublished.

The ancestral, and much shorter version of the seventh essay “Human Rights in the Emerging World—Towards a New Framework” was first written in April 1999 (San Antonio, Texas, US), and submitted in 2003 to an International Conference on Human Rights in Qom, Iran—where it was published in the Proceedings without my knowledge. I subsequently lost it due to a computer crash and inadequate backup, and the sudden closing down of the web site, that of the *Institute for Applied Philosophy and Public Policy*, where an early draft was also published online. Fortunately

I recovered a copy of the original, from a PhD student in South Africa. In view of the interest that this essay seems to have generated—from Bruxelles, Belgium to Iran and South Africa, and from the US to China—I decided to revise and update it in July 2011 (Oslo, Norway). Today, I would be inclined to formulate some of the main points somewhat differently. However, I am still prepared to uphold the main threads of reasoning and thought deployed herein. Though some of the examples and cases discussed (in the appendix) may seem somewhat distant or remote (or even minor), they are far from being outdated or insignificant; in fact, many of them can readily be carried over and serve to illuminate the present situation of human rights in many other parts around the world.

The eighth essay “On Justice in a Globalizing & Glocalizing World: In Defense of Cosmopolitan Pluralism” was previously published (in Konstantine Boudouris (Ed.) *Values and Justice in the Global Era*. Vol. II. Athens, Greece: Iona Verlag Publications, 2007, pp. 20-80). I would like to thank Professor Boudouris for inviting me to the 18th International Conference of Philosophy organized by the International Association of Greek Philosophy (IAGP), held in Kavala, Greece in July 20-27, 2007, during which I articulated and tested out some of the main ideas and analyses discussed herein. I also would like to thank the participants for their lively and critical scrutiny of my main thesis and arguments.

The final and ninth essay “‘Philosophy’—after the End of Philosophy” is based on a lecture delivered at Shandong University (Jinan, China) in November 18, 2004 on the occasion of the UNESCO-sponsored celebration of the 3rd World Philosophy Day. This is a revised and condensed version prepared for the purpose of the XXII World Congress of Philosophy held in Seoul, Korea (July 30-August 5, 2008) on the theme “Rethinking Philosophy Today.”

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The contemporary problems and issues discussed and dealt with in this collection are wide-ranging and diverse, and fall within the area of social, moral, and political philosophy—broadly construed. In order to convey a sense of what it seeks to achieve, I provide below a brief synopsis aiming to describe the main motivation(s) and purpose(s) of each of the essays included herein.

Essay #1: “Culture” has emerged in recent decades as the subject of intense and divisive political controversies at various levels. The intensity and divisiveness of these controversies can be felt in a number of areas. These include: identity politics or the politics of cultural differences and recognition, multiculturalism, cross-cultural communication or incommensurability, or more specifically, with the issue of cultural relativism vs. moral universalism, as it is brought to bear on the theoretical debates and political struggles about *human rights*, *democracy*, *human development* and *social justice*—to mention only a few of the most hotly debated ones.

There is still today a widespread tendency to write or talk about “culture” as if it were a homogenous, coherent, bounded, tightly woven, unified or unitary entity with a distinct nature, whose identity-determining role on individuals and groups is uniform, continuous and stable. Such a view is, I argue, based on a number of faulty assumptions, and amounts to a fundamental misconception with serious philosophical and political implications.

In the present essay, I argue essentially that we are well-advised to draw the consequences of “cultural complexity” in a world that is undergoing both “globalization” and “glocalization” at the same time in an effort to articulate an adequate conception of culture and cultural analysis—from both an empirical and normative point of view. I contend that, if and when we do, we would be able to come up with a compelling account of the complex mechanisms of identity-formation for individuals and communities. We would be able to better understand the complex internal dynamics of cultures as well as the diverse relationships that

obtain (or not) between them at this juncture of our history. Apart from addressing a whole range of issues, we should also be able to move beyond the dead-end debate of cultural relativism vs. moral universalism, particularly as it bears on the problem of human rights, and ultimately articulate a “pluralistic, historically enlightened ethical universalism,” that remains respectful enough of cultural differences.

In **Essay # 2**, I examine the thesis of “cultural relativism” (in both its descriptive and normative version) in an effort to ascertain and impeach more perspicuously the reasons for the strong appeal it continues to exert today in a globalizing/glocalizing world—and this, despite the fact that it has been shown repeatedly to be inconsistent, self-defeating and misguided. Because of its highly objectionable and deeply troublesome consequences, esp., from an ethical and political point of view, it should be clear to anyone who cares to make such an assessment that we have good reasons for fearing relativism, and that such a fear (both as an emotional and intellectual response) is furthermore not only warranted but reasonable. My answer to the *normative* question of whether we *should be* afraid follows obviously from that. However, I believe that we stand to advance the debate further and thereby gain in our understanding of the issue by addressing the following question: “Who is (not) afraid of (cultural) relativism?” Taking my lead from Bernard Williams’ insightful analysis and recommendation, I argue essentially that though cultural relativism conjures up a general moral problem, it is in reality either *too early* or *too late*, and in our case, at this juncture of history, it is rather late. Only a movement away from cultural relativism and towards something like a “pluralistic, historically enlightened ethical universalism” can help us address the moral questions that we all face together in a globalizing/glocalizing world, and in which we now form a new moral and conversational community confronted with urgent problems and new challenges. For this purpose, I consider two possibly viable options, those of Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum. After showing briefly why Williams’ case against ethical theory is far from being convincing or conclusive, and why his proposal of “reflection” as an alternative is ultimately inadequate, I turn to Nussbaum’s bold, substantial, and timely proposal in an effort to ascertain whether it is ultimately a viable and defensible one. I conclude that, though still fraught with various problems and difficulties, it is nevertheless compelling and commendable—despite her critics’ claims to the contrary. In closing, I distinguish several ways to “justify” “ethical universalism” and consider at least two variants of “pluralism” in an effort to show further some of the real philosophical

problems and difficulties confronting Nussbaum's proposal, and more generally, the fundamental challenge we face today.

In **Essay #3**, I undertake a philosophical inquiry into bullshit –“one of the most salient features of our culture” today. Believe it or not, “bullshit” has recently become a serious object of concern and discussion among ordinary people, professionals of different stripes, and even among philosophers. Harry Frankfurt's short essay (1986, 1988, 2005), is a pioneering discussion of this widespread but largely unexamined phenomenon of our times. It is however far from being unobjectionable and fully satisfactory as G. A. Cohen's follow-up critical paper (2002) has shown at least in part. Both have certainly contributed to this renewed attention and interest. In this essay, I attempt to capture their respective insights and shortcomings in an attempt to go even deeper and further into “bullshit”.

In **Essay #4**, I examine the significance and promise of the “paradigm shift” evinced by the emergence and reception of the “embodied and situated cognition” research program (ESC) in the past few decades. Such a program puts in question age-old assumptions, dichotomies and distinctions in the history of Western philosophy stretching back to Plato and onward to Descartes and beyond, up to the so-called “cognitivist framework” (CF), which has come to dominate in both (Anglo-American) philosophy and the cognitive sciences. In order to better understand the main point(s) of contention between these programs, I begin by tracing historically the emergence of CF to the Cartesian legacy—properly understood and interpreted, and proceed to characterize the fundamental contrast between CF and ESC, as I see it, in light of some of the empirical work done in recent years. I then turn to a philosophical discussion of the notions of “embodiment” and “situatedness” in order to delineate the proper and necessary background context for understanding ultimately what is at stake, in an effort to see how they are best “cashed in” both theoretically and empirically. Finally, I re-focus on the situatedness of human cognition in order to make a modest proposal that further emphasizes its importance and significance within a properly conceived ESC research program, in which, I argue, despite claims to the contrary, the distinction between “embodied” and “situated cognition” does not make much sense. The proposal I make has profound implications for future work at the intersection of philosophy, the cognitive sciences, and the social sciences, and possibly for re-conceiving these endeavors and their relationships altogether.

Essay #5: In his well-known paper, “*Can the Capability Approach be justified?*” (2002), Thomas Pogge sets out to examine critically the Capability Approach (CA), and take a critical measure of its comparative advantage relative to the “Rawlsian Resourcist Approach” (RR), arguably its main competitor. He does so in an effort to determine which approach offers a plausible and workable public criterion of social justice. He concludes his lengthy and sustained analysis by claiming that CA is saddled with some serious conceptual, methodological, and practical difficulties, and cannot therefore be justified, let alone be considered superior. While Pogge’s effort to evaluate and critically engage CA is to be commended, the critical punch of his objections and criticisms rests, I believe, upon (1) his way of formulating the problem and setting up the main point of contention between CA and RR, and whether it is as straightforward and unproblematic as he claims it to be, and (2) his subsequent characterization and representation of the capability approach, and whether it is fair and accurate enough. I argue in this essay that (1) is objectionable, and that subsequently, (2) is inaccurate and problematic in some significant respect(s), which I attempt to identify. I conclude that these failures constitute sufficient grounds for brushing aside his objections and criticisms, precisely because they fail to hit their designated target as intended. Notwithstanding the real difficulties and problems still plaguing CA, I attempt in closing to articulate a qualified defense of CA and its conception of human development and social justice by bringing out some of its comparative advantages relative to RR on variations of a simple case-scenario.

Essay #6: At a time when the world is reaching a state of interdependence and interconnectedness sufficient to enable us to talk about global solidarity, concrete universality (*de facto* as opposed to *de jure*), and cosmopolitanism, moral and political philosophy seems to be lacking the proper and necessary concepts and principles to underwrite such talk and properly conceptualize it. In this essay, I critically examine the views of two of the most influential philosophers, namely, Rorty and Rawls. I argue that they both fail, for different reasons, to provide a compelling treatment for dealing with the problem at hand. Apart from articulating briefly the reasons for their respective failure, I contend that a properly conceived notion of “plural universalism,” paradoxical as it may sound, may well serve to underwrite a realistic form of global solidarity and cosmopolitanism at this point in our history.

Essay #7: Few scholarly topics or contemporary issues engender more readily heated controversies and debates than the question of the universality of human rights. It is not surprising therefore that discussion of the cross-cultural applicability of human rights was still characterized up until recently by the opposition between Universalists and Cultural Relativists. In fact, the debate on this question seemed to be never-ending and at an impasse. In recent times however, the *de facto*, albeit contingent, historical emergence of a “globalized human rights culture” coupled with (theoretical and methodological) developments in philosophy and anthropology, put in question the very basis of both universalists' and cultural relativists' arguments about human rights, and undermined the credibility of their (respective and common) assumptions. In some sense, these developments showed that these protagonists are still caught up in what now seems to be a rear-guard battle, which is arguably irrelevant at this point in our history. In the present essay, I argue that these recent developments not only contribute to moving the universalist vs. relativist debate out of the present impasse, but also assist us in the formulation of a new and more promising conceptual framework for comprehending the real and symbolic dimensions of current human rights practices and the flows of human rights values around the world. I submit that we need to develop and adopt an integrated, contextual, dynamic, interdisciplinary methodology of internal and cross-cultural analysis of human rights concepts and conceptions values and practices. In a “post-cultural, global & glocal world,” I contend that this is as good a place to start as any if we are to understand *how*, *when*, and *why* human rights become (or not) invested with meaning and significance in various cultural contexts. Only by expanding our understanding of the contemporary globalized & glocal conditions of “cultural complexity” in which human rights enter as both a defining and defined set of goals and values (always contested), can we hope to perpetuate in an effective manner our steady progress toward a fuller realization of the respect for human rights worldwide.

Essay #8: The question of whether and how to extend liberalism to the international or global realm brings up what seems to be a basic contradiction in how it ought to understand itself. We might characterize it as constituting *the fundamental dilemma of liberalism*. How should (liberal) political philosophers understand the moral status of *states*, *nation-states*, or *national boundaries* when dealing with *international justice*, or should I say indiscriminately, with *global justice*? And how should they conceive of *justice*, if it can be done at all, in the international/global context—as opposed to the national or domestic

context? In this essay, I undertake in short order the critical evaluation of the proposals of nationalists–partialists–particularists–cultural perfectionists, Rawls’ proposal for an international justice based on his (pluralistic) political liberalism as well as those of his cosmopolitan critics for global justice (e.g., Beitz and Pogge). I argue essentially that they all fail (albeit for different kinds of reasons) to provide a satisfactory solution or dissolution of the dilemma. I therefore attempt to sketch out an alternative view that I call “cosmopolitan pluralism,” which, I contend, might better enable us to achieve a more “realistic utopia”—to use Rawls’ expression.

Essay #9: In the past few decades, several of the so-called “postmodern philosophers” have leveled severe and sustained criticisms against “the Tradition.” They have radically put in question and undermined our traditional conceptions of Philosophy, its tasks and goals, claims and pretensions, methods and methodologies, its public image and self-image. In short, everything that Philosophers once held dear, and that some still hold dear today, moved as they are by a quest for Certainty and nostalgia for the Absolute. Many have come to view these radical, postmodern criticisms as having brought on the “End of Philosophy.” If this is so, what is to be done? Where do we go from here? What are our real options? What is there left for Philosophers to do, if anything, that is worthwhile and meaningful? Do we simply accept the postmodern critics’ verdict, and simply take up whatever they have proposed to replace Philosophy? Or do we boldly and imaginatively consider an alternative—albeit one informed by the latter’s positive contributions? This is what I propose to do in this last essay. I sketch out a programmatic ten points-proposal for a reconstructed, renewed, and transformed “philosophy”—after the end of Philosophy—which, I argue, can only be a new kind of Critical Theory. It must be one which enables us to better understand our current predicament—confronted as we are by the brutality and failure of neo-liberal capitalism and the moral bankruptcy of representative democracies and authoritarian regimes, and to diagnose the pathologies of our Modernity. In the final analysis, it must have a clear and compelling emancipatory thrust.

ESSAY # 1

CONSEQUENCES OF “CULTURAL COMPLEXITY”

1. Introduction

“Culture” has emerged in recent decades as the subject of intense and divisive political controversies at both the national and international (or should I say, global) level. The intensity and divisiveness of these controversies can be felt in a number of areas. These include: identity politics or the politics of cultural differences and recognition, multiculturalism, cross-cultural communication or incommensurability, and more specifically, the issue of cultural relativism vs. moral universalism, as it is brought to bear on the theoretical debates and political struggles about *human rights*, *democracy*, *human development* and *social justice*—to mention only a few of the most hotly debated ones.

In the aftermath of the Cold War and the so-called “end of ideologies”, some authors have argued that the single most important conflict confronting the world today and for the foreseeable future will be a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996)—also characterized as a “clash of cultures” (in the broadest sense of the term), which are irremediably incommensurable and condemned to misunderstand one another.

Paradoxically enough, this view is further supported and given credence by so-called “postmodernists” who are typically situated on the other side of the political spectrum. These thinkers (e.g., Lyotard, 1984) take a strong anti-metanarrative stance and recommend that we content ourselves and learn to live with diverging tales and narratives in irreconcilable idioms and languages. They urge that we forgo once and for all any attempt to make comparative evaluations on the basis of a presumably neutral (external, trans-historical, trans-cultural, and universal) set of standards, or to enfold them into synoptic or synthetic visions of any kind.

Besides, the phenomenon of “globalization”¹—apprehended in at least one of its main dimensions—is commonly viewed as something fundamentally new and interpreted as one threatening cultural uniformity or homogenization around the world. It is in one sense taken to represent the new face of “cultural imperialism”. In effect, it is viewed mainly as “a threat to cultural diversity”.

It is widely believed that the predominance and global expansion of uniformizing and homogenizing modes of production, consumption and information risks alienating non-Western and Western people alike from the intellectual and moral resources embedded in their own “distinctive” cultural traditions. In reaction to what is viewed as the erosion of

¹ According to a widespread “consensus” characterization of “globalization,” the phenomenon is assumed to be something fundamentally new. Some authors however question such a characterization by putting forth what they deem to be a more historically informed and nuanced perspective. In their view, it would be more accurate to talk of the n^{th} wave of globalization, where n is determined based on the historical periodization adopted. See, for example, Donnelly (2000: 239n1); Appiah (2006ab); see also Avineri (1970) for an insightful discussion of Marx’s classical analysis of the phase of globalization stretching from the 15th to the 19th century. Whatever historical parallels or antecedents one could bring up to qualify or mitigate the absolute novelty of globalization and that we are well-advised to take into account, one must nevertheless recognize that the accelerated pace of change, as well as the quantitative and qualitative differences in this era of “globalization” (characteristic of the decades on either side of the year 1990) are distinctive features which cannot be diminished or dismissed. Which of these distinctive features one choose to focus on will vary and depend on one’s purposes and objectives. Our analyses might arguably gain in both empirical reality and normative power if we were prepared however to countenance and adopt a not-so-simplistic perspective, in which “globalization” can be viewed as a process or an outcome; as a comprehensive whole or as a contingent clustering of disparate and separable elements or components. In this last respect, we could perhaps further advance and fine-tune our analyses by specifying the domain(s) or “scapes” (to use Appadurai’s term) within which it operates, and the particular modalities according to which it does so, viz., “finanscapes, tradescapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes, mediascapes, etc. Interestingly enough, most authors on the subject prefer to see it as a process rather than as an end-state, as an integrated holistic process characterized typically in a “monochromatic” manner rather than as a clustering of largely independent or semi-independent components. For some other insightful alternative analyses of globalization, see Arjun Appadurai (1996), Peter Berger and Samuel Huntington (2003), Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (1998), see in particular W.I. Robinson (2008) for a detailed and perspicuous review of various theories of globalization.

traditional cultures and civilizations, we seem to be witnessing the re-emergence of a tendency to “re-ethnicize the minds” through renewed and more or less systematic “cultural revivals” worldwide (viz., “hinduization,” “ivoirization,” “sinofication,” “nipponification,” “islamicization,” “indigenization,” “russification,” “gallicization,” etc.). Scholars of various stripes and persuasions are clamoring to understand and assess the significance of this phenomenon, as attested by the proliferation of publications on this subject (see Botz-Bornstein & Hengelbrock, 2006).

In the past few years (2001), the UNESCO had convened a forum in order to hammer out a convention on the “protection and promotion” of cultural diversity. Such a convention was finally approved, I believe, in October 2005. The drafters worried that “the processes of globalization ... represent a challenge for cultural diversity, namely in view of risks of imbalances between rich and poor countries.” The fear was that the values and images of Western mass culture, like some invasive weed, are threatening to choke out the world’s native flora. Subsequently, alarms are sounded and concerns raised about the imminent disappearance of “distinctive cultures”, and calls made to “preserve” all existing cultures—*as if* they each and all deserve to be saved, in each and all their respective components and elements.²

“Political correctness” aside, perhaps we should keep in mind that: “Cultures are not museum pieces, to be preserved intact at all costs” (Nussbaum, 1999: 37). Perhaps we also need to come to grips with the unavoidability and even desirability of “cross-cultural contamination, intermingling and fertilization” (Appiah, 2006a).

More often than not, a problematic conception of “culture” is at work implicitly or explicitly in the views of various protagonists involved in

² Upon closer scrutiny, the UNESCO document reveals contradictions and tensions. For example, it affirms both the necessity of protecting cultural diversity and the importance of the free flow of ideas, freedom of thought and expression, and human rights. But as we know, the latter values will become universal only if we chose to make them so. And it is manifestly unclear how to best arrive at this desirable result. In this context, shouldn’t we ask the difficult question: What is really important --cultures or peoples? Shouldn’t the most pressing question be instead: How can we articulate a viable ethics of globalization—judiciously and properly understood in its complexity? A defensible global ethics is arguably going to be one that tempers the respect for difference with a respect for the freedom of actual human beings to make their own choices.

these debates. They write or talk as if “culture” were a homogenous, coherent, bounded, tightly woven, un-contested, unified or unitary entity with a distinct nature, whose identity-constituting and deterministic role on individuals and groups of people is uniform, continuous and stable. I contend that such a conception of “culture” underlying or underwriting many of the controversies raging today constitutes in fact a *fundamental misconception*, with profound and at times disturbing *philosophical* as well as *political* implications (Chokr, 2006).

Admittedly, the concept of “culture” is “essentially a contested concept—like democracy, religion, simplicity, or social justice”, which is multiply defined, multiply employed, ineradicably imprecise (Geertz, 2000: 11). And a history of its evolution over the past couple of hundred years or so—to take a relatively limited yet arguably sufficient historical perspective—would attest to the vicissitudes it has undergone, the battles over its meaning, its use, and its explanatory worth.

Short of undertaking a full-blown history of the concept, which would undoubtedly be a worthwhile enterprise (see Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963),³ I propose instead to draw together some of the main insights and lessons that we have learned from various such efforts in an attempt to make a case for the notion of “*cultural complexity*”⁴ and defend an

³ In their classic compilation of the various definitions of “culture” that have appeared in the literature since the 19th century, Kroeber and Kluckhohn had found 171 distinct definitions, which could then be sorted out into 13 categories.

⁴ In recent years, ideas from “complexity theory” have had a substantial impact on various disciplines outside the “hard” sciences from which they originated, in particular in *sociology* (e.g., Urry, 2003; Byrne 1998), *organizational sciences* (Stacey et al, 2000, Stacey, 2001; Richardson, 2005), and in *anthropology* (e.g., (Fikentscher, 1998; Hannerz, 1993; Denton, 2004). However, their impact on mainstream *philosophy* has not been as significant as one would expect. This is surprising given that the related domains of cognitive science and evolutionary theory have inspired plenty of philosophical investigations. In a recent paper, titled “Complexity and Philosophy,” Heylighen, Cilliers and Gershenson (2006) give at least three reasons for this, and they go on to show how (postmodern) philosophy could benefit from taking complexity seriously on a number of issues, including the structure of complex (social) systems or systems of meaning, the distinction between boundaries and limits, the problem of difference, the idea of the subject in political philosophy, ethics, relativism, life, mind, consciousness, and in turn how complexity theory could be further enriched by philosophy. They write: “Complexity is perhaps the most essential characteristic of our present society. As technological and economic advances make production, transport and communication

alternative, more appropriate, conception according to which “culture” is always already ineradicably plural, compound, inconstant, and always already multiply contested both from within and without. Such a conception constitutes, I believe, a direct challenge to the “cookie-cutter conception of culture” with its focus on consensus, type and commonality. In the face of the kind and degree of fragmentation, dispersion, intermingling, cross-fertilization and contamination characteristic of the (globalizing and “glocalizing”) world today, I submit that the view of culture, *a* culture, *this* culture, as a consensus on fundamentals—shared beliefs, feelings, values and practices—is hardly tenable except for the so-called “guardians of cultural integrity and ethnic purity” who would like us to believe otherwise. Against such guardians, we must be prepared to countenance instead the compositeness and heterogeneity of cultures.

In the present essay, I argue essentially that we are well-advised to draw the consequences of “cultural complexity” in a world that is undergoing both “globalization” and “glocalization”⁵ at the same time in

ever more efficient, we interact with ever more people, organizations, systems and objects. And as this network of interactions grows and spreads around the globe, the different economic, social technological and ecological systems that we are part of become ever more interdependent. The result is an ever more complex “system of systems” where a change in any component may affect virtually any other component and that in a mostly unpredictable manner. The traditional scientific method, which is based on analysis, isolation, and the gathering of *complete* information about such a phenomenon, is incapable of dealing with such complex interdependencies. The emerging science of complexity (Waldrop, 1992; Cilliers, 1998, Heylighen, 1997) offers the promise of an alternative methodology that would be able to tackle such problems. However, such an approach needs solid foundations, that is, a clear understanding and definition of the underlying concepts and principles (Heylighen, 2000).” Despite the fact that concepts from complexity have not yet gone very deeply into philosophy, the process is already under way. Apart from the works of Derrida (1988) and Deleuze (1987) which are often mentioned in this regard, it is also worth noting those of Morin (1992), Cilliers (1998, 2004, and 2005), Rescher (1998), and Taylor (2003).

⁵ See the very insightful essay by Drori *et al* (2014) “Unpacking the glocalization of organization: from term, to theory, to analysis” in which the authors attempt to specify the dimensions of complexity and multidimensionality inherent in the notion of glocalization. For this purpose, they propose three sets of analytic conceptualizations: three axes of glocalization (vertical, horizontal, and temporal); three core themes (what, who, and how); and finally, several sequenced components (abstraction, construction of equivalency, adoption and adaptation). In their view, the notion of glocalization came to stand over the past two decades for more than what the term literally encompasses. Not only does it refer to the

an effort to articulate an adequate conception of culture and cultural analysis—from both an empirical and normative point of view. I contend that, if and when we do, we would for example be able to come up with an account of the complex *mechanisms of identity-formation for individuals and communities* that is far more compelling empirically and normatively. We would also be able to better understand *the complex internal dynamics of cultures as well as the diverse relationships that obtain (or not) between them* at this juncture of our history. Finally, I will also argue that it would enable us to better address the issue of *human rights* for example, beyond the dead-end debate of (radical) cultural relativism vs. (traditional Western-centric) moral universalism, and thereby clear the ground for the articulation of “a pluralistic, historically enlightened ethical universalism”, that is nevertheless respectful enough of cultural differences.

2. A Brief History of the Concept of “Culture”

Before taking up these tasks however, it behooves us to take stock briefly of the contemporary concept of “culture”, i.e., how “culture” came to be conceived today on the basis of (1) the Modern View and (2) the Received View. My account here will be woven primarily on the basis of those provided by Clifford Geertz (2000) and Seyla Benhabib (2002), among others.

2.1 The Modern View of Culture

The modern view is perhaps best characterized by two sets of binary oppositions: (a) “culture” vs. “nature” and (b) “culture” vs. “civilization”. If by virtue of its Latin etymology “*colare*”, “culture” was originally associated with activities of preservation, tending to, and caring for, and if “agriculture” was once considered to be the quintessential cultural activity, such a meaning was radically transformed by Western modernity, and the emergence of its key concomitant features: rationalized scientific worldview, capitalist commodity economy, and bureaucratic administrative control (Benhabib, 2002: 2).

mutually constitutive character of the global and the glocal, it also spearheads the challenge to the numerous dichotomies that have dominated previous discussions of globalization, and points to the dualities of similarity and variation as well as universalism and particularism. In the end, they argue that the conceptualizations proposed can best serve, taken together, as the basis for the description and analysis of glocalization, and that the important principle of such an analytic approach to the multidimensionality of glocalization is the intersection, or conjuncture, among the three sets of conceptualizations proposed.

Subsequently, “culture” was first contrasted, in a typically Modern manner, with “nature”, and similarly sorted out into “kinds” on the basis of the distance any of its components moved away from nature. As we might guess or expect, the ethnocentric criteria used for this “measurement” and “sorting out” included, among others, the following considerations: monotheism, individualism, monogamy, and property protection. It came to be viewed in a generic sense as “a universal property of human social life, the techniques, customs, traditions, and technologies—religion and kinship, fire and language—that set it off from animal existence” (Geertz 2000: 248). This “generic conception of culture” held sway during most of the 19th century and well into the early part of the 20th.

As for the contrast between “culture” and “civilization”, it was meant to bring out the fact that the latter did not encourage “tending to”, or “caring for”, while the former did by virtue of its original, etymological meaning. Furthermore, it reflected “the challenge posed by (emerging) commodity capitalism poised to yoke science and industry for ever more rapid expansion” (Benhabib 2002: 2). Such a contrast was most clearly and forcefully articulated by the German Romantic, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), for whom “culture” (*Kultur*) consisted of “shared values, meanings, linguistic signs and symbols of a people—itsself considered a unified and homogeneous entity”. It consisted of the diverse forms and modalities through which the “spirit” or “genius” of a people as distinct from another is expressed. Under this idealistic, Romantic view, an individual’s acquisition of “culture” involved a soul’s immersion and shaping through education and socialization in the ways and values of “a people”. It was viewed in other words as a process of intellectual and spiritual formation (or *Bildung*), *i.e.*, a forming and shaping of the soul (see Ryle and Soper 2002). In this sense, Herder’s definition of culture kept something of its original meaning. In contrast, “civilization” was said to refer to the material values and practices that are shared with other peoples and that don’t reflect particularity or individuality.

2.2 The Received View of Culture

Concerning the Received View, it has unquestionably been influenced and shaped by British social anthropology, French structuralism, and American anthropology as well. In the aftermath of WWI, because of the increased number of anthropological field research projects, especially among “social isolates” and “encapsulated peoples” (such as jungle people, island people, desert people, arctic people, etc.), a growing skepticism about the usefulness of “the generic conception of culture” led to the adoption of what has been called

the “configurational conception of culture” (see Fleischacker 1994, chapter 5 for details on the history of such a conception). As a result, we now had “cultures” instead of just culture as such; there were bounded, coherent, cohesive, and self-standing cultures. However, after WWII, when even putative social isolates and encapsulated peoples grew fewer in number and anthropologists turned their attention to more mixed-up, culturally complex regions of the world, the configurational model became in turn hard to sustain in the face of accumulating evidence. Its anthropological reality was increasingly put in question.

Anthropologists became increasingly critical of Eurocentric presumptions and sought to democratize the concept of “culture” by deconstructing further the binary opposition which served to demarcate its meaning, and in which it was taken as a term of critique of that of “civilization”. As a result, the modern, value-laden distinction between “culture” (*Kultur*) and “civilization” could no longer be sustained and became increasingly irrelevant. Thus “an egalitarian understanding of culture” progressively emerged and lo and behold came to be dominant (Benhabib 2002: 3).

As Geertz points out quite pertinently, the vicissitudes of “culture” (the *mot*, not the *chose*—there is no *chose*), which began in the 50’s have continued ever since. And “[i]n its ups and downs, its drift toward and away from clarity and popularity [...] we can see anthropology’s lumbering, arrhythmic line of March...” (Geertz: 12). Thus, he writes:

By the 1950s, the eloquence, energy, breadth of interest, and sheer brilliance of such writers as Kroeber and Kluckhohn, Ruth Benedict, Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, Geoffrey Gorer, Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Edward Sapir, and most spectacularly, Margaret Mead [...] made the anthropological idea of culture at once available to, well, the culture, and so diffuse and all-embracing as to seem like an all-seasons explanation for anything human beings might contrive to do, imagine, say, be or believe (Geertz, 2000: 12).

In such a context, many young anthropologists felt condemned to work with an inflationary logic and a language in which concept, cause, form, and outcome had the same name. Dissatisfied with such a state of affairs, they took it upon themselves “to cut the idea of culture down to size, and to turn it into a less expansive affair”. For them, as Geertz puts it, “it seemed urgent, (and it still seems urgent) to make “culture” into a delimited notion, one with a determinate application, a definite sense, and a specified use—the *at least* focused subject of an *at least* somewhat focused science” (Geertz 2000: 13, my italics).