

CONTROVERSIAL ASPECTS OF THE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN POSTMODERNISM. SEARCHING FOR A MULTICULTURAL EGO

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Abstract: The present paper propose o reevaluation of major paradigms in a cultural context focused on globalism and identity. A necessary debate must take into account the need for a model of reception and of interpretation of the world that passes beyond the limits of any type of Rationalism, wanting to defend its notion of “sublime” and – finally – rediscovering the “divine”.

Keywords: critique of paradigms, postmodernism, cultural identity, ego

1. The Postmodernist Legacy

The current poetics has given birth to a true “banquet” of ideas. The Postmodernist paradigm, from which we start this Hermeneutic discourse, is placed under the anamnesis, under the “never forgetting”. It is talked about a hypermnesia, an excessive functionality of the cultural mechanisms. Postmodernism belongs to a cultural siege system, monopolized by the post-structural languages; it is the prisoner (happy most of the times) of hyper-codification. It belongs to pluralism, it looks for the polyphony and an aesthetic of “anything goes” organizes the world of the texts as a symposium of forms, simultaneously, bringing in synchrony the literary ages.

What did Postmodernism leave us? A road that ends in a technological space, populated by “bodies without organs” (Artaud), “negative space” (Rosalind Krauss), “pure implosion” (Lyotard), “a random mechanism” (Serres).

The art seems to be a conglomerate of scrap signs of the shipwreck of some notions in the value and sacrosanct power of which the old generations believed without doubt. The art is an evolution on the edge of fascination and of desperation, pointing out the entrance in an epoch of death of what is social. We are trying to enter and to search for aspects of the identity of the cultural and social ego in this land where there is no

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ideal, nor sorrows but only a “an extended twilight which erases the forms and shapes of all things”¹, twilight very similar to that which is watching over Dionysus’ torment in Nietzsche’s work. Postmodernism is a fantastic implosion of the Western cultural experience, since the Western culture develops under a “passive and suicidal nihilism”².

2. Cultural Aspects in Europe and in North America

In Europe, the fall of Communism added to this problem a new dimension. The former soviet countries truly orientated towards the Community in order for it to help them regain the identity and unity of the European culture.

In the other space, the North American one, through which we are trying to find cultural affinities, we are witnessing the sustained assault against the Greek-Roman, Hebrew and the Christian West literatures. The victims of this attack, as a result of the political reforms of the left party from the `60s, are the American universities dominated by personalities that share profound atheistic and relativist visions based on the positivist idea, according to which faith and intelligence are incompatible. (James T. Burtchaell, *First Things*, chapter 91). The phenomenon of destruction of the liberal arts from the inside is manifested through the compromising of the Western culture and history, in the name of a new multiculturalism.

We have to understand that:

a) this century is, without doubt, an audiovisual century and alphanumeric, which will have enormous consequences for culture, for art, for the individual;

b) the U. S. A. and Europe didn’t have the same starting point, not from the economic point of view and especially not from the tradition and cultural identity point of view.

From the very beginning of their history, European cultures in general, and especially arts, addressed an elite. Decades and centuries needed to pass in order for the artistic works to become accessible for a bigger audience, with great difficulty crossing the boundaries and maintaining their local and national particularities.

Also, one cannot neglect the Christian contribution in Europe.

¹ John Berber, *Way of Seeing*, N. Y., Viking Press, 1972, p. 101.

² Arthur Kroker, David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene, Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*, N. Y., St. Martin’s Press, 1968, chapter I.

3. Which is The Main Feature of the Christian Existence? The Ego in the Christian European and North American Consciousness

The ultimate goal and the purpose of the human existence has been defined in patristic tradition as *theosis*, deification. This term is troubling for the modern human ear; it cannot be exactly translated by any modern language and not even by Latin. But the meaning of this word is simple and clear and it will put its mark on the entire way of life but also on the European culture and civilization. It is enough to quote St. Athanasius “He made Himself human in order to deify ourselves in Him”³; St. Irenaeus essentially adds “That Who, through His immense love made Himself like we are, in order for Him to make us what He is”⁴. *Theosis* involves a personal encounter. Is that personal encounter of man with God through which the whole existence of man is imbued with the Divine Presence⁵.

I would quote only a few words regarding the status of the ego in the Christian consciousness, which marked the European world very deeply and indubitable through a real philokalic revolution: “In the fullness of the Church communion, the universal transfiguration of the personality is complete”⁶. But the rejection and the denial of our self doesn’t also impose the personality to be annihilated, dissolved in the crowd. Universality doesn’t mean physicality or collectivism. But the opposite, our self-denial broadens our personality purpose, in self-denial we possess the crowd in our self; we gather the most of things in our ego. And in this way the similarity with the Divine Unity of the Holy Trinity is being born. How far we are from this goal!

The culture and the arts have a totally different history in the North America. From the very beginning they are addressed to a popular audience, composed out of immigrants arrived from around the world. They took the art and the culture in their wagons towards an “inevitable” destiny: the crossing of the continent. Therefore, completely different conditions from those of Europe. Further more, the immigrants very rapidly became Americans, adopting in a more or less successful way a common dialect, a language spoken and understood by everyone. On this

³ *Contra Arianos*, in *Saint Athanasius the Great. Works*, Romanian edition, 2005, p. 54 (“El s-a făcut om pentru a ne îndumnezei pe noi în El”).

⁴ “Cel care, prin imensa Lui dragoste S- a facut una cum suntem noi, pentru ca tot El să ne poată face ceea ce este El”.

⁵ Georges Florovsky, *Scripture and Tradition: an Orthodox View*, pp. 114–115.

⁶ “În deplinătatea comuniunii Bisericii transfigurarea universală a personalității este desăvârșită”.

ground, the U. S. A. have developed, in over three centuries, a mass culture, unique in the world, addressed to everyone, that is understood by all, its great common number making it accessible to the vast un-American popular strata world wide. A tradition that has succeeded in unifying the numerous currents that are a part of it in an incomparable authenticity, which cannot be imitated. This is the short Hollywood-ian miracle and, increasingly more, of the American television. In the U. S. A. the achievements on the big and small screen have never been conceived as cultural objects, in the narrow sense of the word, they are in essence, an entertainment that speaks to all, that reflects the dreams and the truth to all. An entertainment developed without complexes, with a magnificent professionalism and an extraordinary “handcraft”. And the problem would stop here if we wouldn’t try to look in a little critical way at this multiculturalism that has also led to a leveling of the ego, at a smashing of the subjectivity, at a loss of the identity after which coveted so much the patristic literature of Europe. I’ve taken this idea from the documentary book of Frank Schaeffer⁷. Schaeffer states that America is currently in a state of ideological “war”. This “war” is between those who defy history, religion and the Christian civilization society and those who continue to value our cultural and religious heritage. It is a “war” between those who have taken and developed the Protestant pluralist impulse up to its last consequences and those Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants who try to find and to give life a certain moral direction, to discover and to enjoy the beauty and the mystery of this desecrated, materialistic and immoral world.

From newspapers to justice books, from the world of arts and to the world of humanistic sciences, the followers of the atheistic and rationalist social and political beliefs are in conflict with the Christians and the Jews or with anyone who shares another religion. Those who look to destroy the traditions of our Judeo-Christian heritage have politicized the world around them in order to achieve their goals. Through a great number of social engineering programs they have dramatically flawed the way in which society relates to the meaning of life, to truth, to morality and to religion. Politics has replaced the religious truth at every level of society as the main source of morality⁸.

The sustained assault against Greek-Roman, Hebrew and the Christian Western literature, against the Western art is currently in its

⁷ Frank Schaeffer, *Dancing Alone: the Quest for Orthodox Faith in the Age of False Religion*, Brookline, MA: Holy Cross, 1994.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

glory period. “Cultural relativism succeeds in destroying the West’s universal claims”⁹.

Page Smith states that “the Postmodernist spiritual malaria” which affects not only America, but the whole Western world, extends well beyond the academic environment but in that environment it is more acutely felt¹⁰.

4. What Is the Connection between the Status of These Moods and the Current Culture?

I would synthetically unite them: between the European negativism (see nihilism) and the American positivism a new current of ideas is being born: the Postmodernism that is still looking for its identity in nature, literature, social sciences, etc. Is Postmodernism an idea, a cultural experience, a social condition or maybe all them combined? Without doubt Postmodernism exists as an idea or as a critical form in the mind of the intellectuals and in the mass-media. From the '80s it has given birth to enormous disputes, sometimes violent, sometimes restless, in the middle of various subject matters, from Geography to Theology, from Philosophy to Political Sciences.

A similar controversy related to the “Postmodernism” in art, in architecture, in literary critics and in film critics is even older – see buildings as the wing of the National Gallery in London designed by Venturi, novels like *The Satanic Verses*, movies like *Blade Runner* or serials like *The Real Thing* at BBC (1992) in Great Britain. Therefore Postmodernism had dropped for a long time from its ivory tower, representing for many people a lot of every-day experiences. The idea of post-modernity could also be a figment of the ultra enriched imagination of the scientists, a fashionable parody or the expression of a radical cheated hope.

But it deserves to be analyzed because it attracts the attention towards a series of very important questions related to “the identity of the multi-cultural ego”.

A very important series of Western ideas begin with the notion of “providence” that is transposed in the idea of “progress” and from there it passes in “nihilism”. The notion of “providence” refers to God’s care towards the world after its creation, seeing that the history process goes on in a straight line towards a certain goal. One of its primary followers

⁹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1987, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America*, New York, Viking, 1990.

was the Christian thinker from the 4th Century Augustine of Hippo, whose remarks in *City of God* would have a powerful effect on the crystallization of the Western civilization. Postmodernism denies any cyclic movement in history, expressing a more future orientated hope than resignation of pessimism.

Nevertheless, the accent put on the progress of history was often associated with the certainty that generally all things are thriving, especially under the influence of the early Enlightenment way of thinking. Assigning an important role to reason, unlike the medievalism and the traditional dogma, made many to think that it is in the power of man to develop at an even faster pace. As an irony, even the Christian commentators were encouraging these ideas. But highlighting the role of reason and putting aside the Divine Intervention, the seed of another secular version of the providence is being thrown, the idea of progress. The faith in our senses has replaced the faith in God's laws and has opened the way to the coming into being of the modern scientific concepts about the world. As Anthony Giddins says "the growth of the European power has of course given the material support for the hypothesis that the new vision of the world was built on a solid foundation that offered security and made the emancipation from the dogma of tradition possible". Even though the Enlightenment, and therefore the modern project, was designed to reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity, the independent reason will always have its doubt. Only in this way will it manage to avoid the relapse into dogma. The modern way of thinking was built on the relativity of knowledge. But because in the secular parody of the divine way of thinking there were still searching for universal laws, relativity was considered to be a nuisance. Today, the widespread acceptance of the fact that our observations depend on assumptions and these assumptions are related to the conceptions of the world and to the steps of power make relativity – not to say relativism – look more natural. For those with Nietzsche tendencies it is obvious the futility of the modern dreams towards universalism. The nihilism embryo started to form itself in the modernity womb.

From the height of the Victorian certainty, of the European colonialism and the new establishment of the North American boundaries, the faith in progress dominated everything. In spite of what followed – the First World War and the Economic Depression – the hopes didn't totally disappear. The International Exposition in Chicago in 1933 celebrated "A Century of Progress". The faith in progress was diminished after the Second World War but it also was artificially

revived by a great scientific and technical development as well as by an unprecedented growth in consumption. But the damage had already occurred. The colonialism crashed. The hidden parts of the industrial epoch started threatening to come to light in the environment degradation, in the depletion of the resources and in the degradation of the ozone layer.

5. Between Modernism and Postmodernism. A Cultural Crisis

In short, the result was a reconsideration of the earlier doctrines. In the Western world, an extraordinary cultural revolution weakened or removed the old landmarks. In the '60s appeared political and cultural dares: the traditions and gestures had no limit. New social movements appeared. In the mean time, in Eastern Europe the buds of a new democratic movement arose which, blossoming, would lead to the disintegration of Communism.

The years 1789 and 1989 became the two centuries of modernity, whose political expression is finding a rationalized world, starting with the French Revolution and ending with the fall of the socialist bureaucratic state system. When the dreams of Westernization paid and contrary voices began to be heard, like those of the Islamic summism, the idea of culture or universal knowledge was as well put into question. The progress through technological development and economic growth appeared as a confused blessing. Reason brought with it as many nightmares as beautiful dreams and the irrationalism of the drugs or of some of the new religions promised more. The political legitimacy and the civic motivation seemed to be in decline. The intellectuals started to argue in order to establish if there was a crisis in the catastrophic sense or in the sense of a new chance and to look for new terms.

“Postmodernism” is, for now, the most suitable term that they could find and I propose to maintain it and also what they had named “post – postmodernism” for clarity.

The term “postmodern” therefore refers, before anything, to the exhaustion of the modern world. As a strict analytical process, the distinction between “Postmodernism”, where the stress is on culture, and “Postmodernity”, where the stress is on the social aspect, is advised. Therefore, “Postmodernism” refers to cultural and intellectual phenomenon. One is giving up the “Foundationalism”, the idea that science is constructed on a solid foundation of observable facts in the philosophy of science. Postmodernism puts under question the main ideas of the Enlightenment. The second is the collapse of the hierarchies

of knowledge, of gestures and of opinions and the interest based rather on the local aspect than on the universal one. If science is weakening its authority then it is overthrown. "Let's learn from Las Vegas!" (or from the locals or from nature) becomes a slogan. The third one is the replacement of the printed books with the TV screen or as the artisans of the word prefer, from logo centrism to icon centrism.

Regarding the idea of identity, the precursors of Postmodernism are considered to be Friedrich Nietzsche, with his nihilist concept, and Martin Heidegger, who states in *Being and Time* the fact that the humanism is in crisis precisely because it replaces God with humanity in the centre of the universe. Exactly the same problem is found in the third interpretation of the cultural tragedy, Georg Simmel's interpretation. Georg Simmel (1854 – 1918) is known today on a large scale not only as one of the fathers of sociology but also as the only postmodern thinker of them. I will insist on this research.

Simmel put together the sociological world and the cultural analysis. This tragedy, or cultural crisis, was to him the growing gap between the objective culture, for example seen in technology, and the more and more alienated individual, frustrated in the search of his individual authenticity. The cultural sociology, as it is conceived by Simmel, highlights the apparent loss of meaning in the modern world of industrialism, loss that he associates, among others, with "the decline of Christianity". He sees in the contemporary movements, like socialism in politics or impressionism in art, the answer for the need of a "final goal" in life, on top of all that it is relative, on top of the fragmentary nature of the human existence.

Simmel also commented the autonomy of the cultural sphere. Since the objective culture – the form – increasingly militates against life, Simmel develops a tragic idea in which, for example, marriage becomes simply oppressive and lifeless and religion loses contact with certain distinct beliefs and degenerates into mysticism. And thirdly, the emphasis is put on aestheticism.

For Simmel, art was a way to beat the world's contradictions and he believed that in times of confusion and uncertainty there will be a more general orientation towards aestheticism. Both reasons – the acknowledgement of the distancing from the form and the search for meaning or even for morality in art – reappear in the debates on Postmodernism and in the actual situation.

From what we can acknowledge only from the several ideas presented here, the European thinkers and theoreticians agree with the

North American ones in this observation of the loss of identity, of the search for a new relationship between ego and God, between ego and society, between ego and culture, etc.

The secular self-imposed limits of the cultural debates now-a-days – phenomenon that Professor Richard John Neuhaus calls it “the public square as it is”, where the religious ideas are excluded from the public discourse – shown that the cultural war goes on, on both sides, on secular ground.

To fight for ideals of freedom and justice without any reference to the Ten Commandments, to Judaism, to Jesus Christ, to the Orthodox tradition, to the Holy Parents, to the Seven Sacraments, to the Byzantine Christianity and the Latin Christianity is not possible or it is possible but with the consequences described before. The Christian West cannot be understood or even less restored outside a moral discourse based on the Indeo-Christian religion. Culture and science are searching again and again for solutions to the meaning of man in the universe, with ultrasound advanced technologies which have now become routine procedures, with an ethics based on “the looking for happiness”, with a culture in which the ego is destroyed, annihilated, leveled, globalized, religion has been reduced to a simple subjective opinion which cannot resist the barbarity of an sophisticated Nazi-style eugenics program in terms of the galloping genetic development. Dostoyevsky said that once humans lose their faith in God, they would believe anything.

One of the supporters of Postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard based his work¹¹ on criticism. Therefore, how can this criticism be built? In any case, not on the Marxist or Rationalism concepts. These are obsolete meta-narrations. Now-a-days our situation is one of hyper-reality. Once developed the distinction between the objects and their representations, there remains nothing but the *semblances*. These don't refer at nothing else but themselves. The mass-media messages, like for example the TV commercials, are the best examples. This reference to oneself goes further than Max Weber's fears related to a demystified and dematerialized world. The signs lose their contact with the things that they signify. The end of the 20 Century and the beginning of the 21st Century are the witnesses to an unprecedented destruction of meaning. Searching for a distinction between moral and immoral, between real and unreal is useless.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Society*, 1970.

Can this represent a criticism? It would seem that the term itself “criticism” loses its main meaning when there is no position from which to define, to evaluate, to judge. The opinions are divided. We state Arthur Kroker’s opinion which takes Baudrillard’s “panic” as “the main physical state of the Postmodernist culture”, marked by the swinging of the end of the century from a deep elation to a deep despair. Maybe the truth is that in fact Baudrillard’s search for reality is not over. The pure semblances’ world, of the apocalyptical artificiality is more clearly seen in his study, *America*. The hyper-real background, a road in the desert, seems to resume the American civilization. He states that some things cannot be exported; therefore the nostalgia of many American intellectuals after the European culture and ideas has no point. But Europeans do not lack nostalgia, the nostalgia of the failed revolutions. Maybe, suggests Bryan Turner as well as Frank Schaeffer, here exists “a hidden religious paradigm” that not only makes Baudrillard a Postmodernist but also an Antimodernist.

Our conclusion, without attributing to ourselves the exhaustive rights, is the need for a model of reception and of interpretation of the world that passes beyond the limits of any type of Rationalism, wanting to defend its notion of “sublime” and – finally -rediscovering the “divine”.