FROM THE WORLD-ECONOMY TO THE WORLD-CULTURE

Today, before our very eyes, a certain process is coming to fruition under the name of "globalisation". No one foresaw either its amplitude or its consequences in the 15th and 16th centuries, when it was getting under way, and yet it was entirely prefigured in the scientific, technical and ideological principles that inspired those who ignited the first flickerings of modernity.

Five and a half centuries later, we can, and even must, look back at this development - which was not necessarily a step forward, as many hoped - and engage in a discussion anew cycle whose principle, this time, will not only be the world-economy but also the world-culture.

The globalisation process, by reducing space and time to the dimensions of the "global village", has imposed the co-presence of all those who are active on the planet in a practical contemporaneity that is being taken in hand, technically speaking, by the communications networks. This simultaneity, which the Gutenberg era could not even dream of, has profoundly modified the categories through which we think about our relations with others, and their cultural productions. Books introduced us to intellectual debate and controversy, but this took place in the context of thought organised as discourse, in forms hammered out in rhetoric, and between people belonging to more or less the same erudite culture. What future is in store for these conditions of discourse, and these shared skills? Ideas as apparently obvious, in the discursive framework, as "here" and "there", "endogenous" and "exogenous", "same" and "other", have seen their meaning turned upside down. The proliferation of protagonists, the dissolution of academic culture, and the required reaction time which precludes any work on forms in which the cultural underpinning,
having gradually taken shape from the Renaissance onward, could make a reappearance) have all contributed to modifying the contemporary dialogical space; and this includes the progress of democracy, whether one sees in it an effect or a cause of these transformations. Far from being limited to an economic market effect, the globalisation that is exercising minds at the present time also constitutes an epistemological revolution.

In order to understand the cultural aspects of this revolution, it seems to me that one needs to know something about its history, which in fact was spread out over a longer period than one might imagine.

A history of the Other

This history starts with the great discoveries, at the time when, with Marco Polo, the European cultural space was finding out about the existence of China and the Orient, and then, with Christopher Columbus, that of the American continent. It was at the same time that Montaigne set in motion a novel way of thinking about the same and the other, implying a decentring of the European consciousness of self, and one whose full effects are only now making themselves felt.

The "discovery", in the 16th century, of America and its autochthonous cultures, which were termed "savage", or "Indian", allowed curiosity to come through as a founding motif. The fact is that this mode of knowledge was limited to the acknowledgement of the mere existence of the Other. But even in such limited form, it encouraged Western culture to give a name to this Other, arbitrary as it may have been, as was of course the case with the "Indians", and to give it a place in the Western nomenclature of human beings. Curiosity, as a mode of knowledge, takes account of the fact that there exist in the world beings other than those who have been identified by tradition and habit. In this case, it was a mode of knowledge that also created a specific space in the Western imagination and in the concrete experience of private residences and chateaux: the cabinet de curiosités. Here, amazing phenomena were piled up in no particular order: all sorts of things that man did not know about yet, but whose relevance he was starting to perceive, in the category of the unknown. These unheard-of objects - birds, stones and crystals, men and finery and other phenomena that had previously evaded descriptive attention - enlarged the field of what was conceived of as divine creation, and were delivered up to human curiosity for unfettered exploration. There is something of an analogy between our mode of discovery of the Other on the web and this ancient "curiosity".

It was a quite different mode of knowledge of the Other that characterised the societies of the 17th and 18th centuries, engaged as they were in the development of colonial economies. In this context, one sees the construction of a double-sided practice. In the American continent itself, it was the most primary forms of relationship to the Other that were dominant with regard to the Indian populations and the African slaves who were imported en masse to provide labour for the development of agriculture. In this framework, which doubtless presented different facets according to the location and traditions of this or that particular colonial culture, the relationship to the Other was most often reduced to pure instrumentalisation, which Ted Tiebout termsthe slave, quite simply, as a raw form of labour power, and thus a sort of useful animal, and to exploit him as such. This did not however stand in the way of equally brutal attempts at acculturation, aimed notably at imposing a work ethic which was characteristic of the West, and which was clearly repugnant to the populations who were subjected to its control.

In the distant "mother country", on the other hand, far from the hard realities of sugar production, then that of cotton, there sprang up a mode of acknowledgement of the Other that was marked by the evolutionist model. The exotic peoples were still in the childhood of humanity, it was said, but they were destined to grow up. This mode of perception made possible the start of a moral interrogation of the justification for the exploitation of slaves, and forced conversion to Christianity. Consequently, it fuelled a desire to know and understand the Other better, around which crystallised the universalist theme that came into being during this period: all men are God's creatures, and,
as such, equally deserving of knowledge and evangelisation. The solemn inscription of the equality of all humans in the Preamble to the Declaration of the Rights of Man, at the end of the 18th century, set the seal on the acknowledgement of the "Other" by giving it a political foundation, and made possible an awareness of its cultural specificity. Only then did Montesquieu's ironical question "How can one be Persian?" take on its full meaning. The question of the sharing of exoticisms was posed, but was still far from bringing about a cultural movement commensurate with its importance. Here and there, nonetheless, a certain analogy was perceived between our contemporary mode of knowledge of the Other and this acknowledgement.

A further stage in the process of planetarisation was necessary for political and cultural progress to take full effect in our Western system of knowledge. It was during the 19th century, while the colonial imperialism of industrial modernity was forging Europe's African and Asian empires, that the invention of ethnology opened up the possibility of recording cultural differences and giving them a status within a planetary development. Industrial, capitalist Europe acquired many more methods for gaining knowledge of Others. In the territories of the empire, where it was necessary to regulate the conflicts that arose out of the forced extension of salaried work to cultures which had different forms of organisation of the production and distribution of wealth, and the imposition of a foreign aesthetic and political culture, Europe invented ethnology, a science of the Other such as it could be conceived of in the framework of imperialist exploitation. This limiting framework did not prevent the identity of the Other from becoming, for the first time, the object of a search that was systematic and, sometimes, generous.

The ethnographic museum gradually replaced the cabinet de curiosités as a repository for objects produced by "exotic" cultures. Western culture, through the "discovery" of aesthetic forms elaborated by the peoples under its domination, took an important step by recognising their universal value, or, better still, their exemplary character (as was the case with the cubist painters' borrowings), and also through the development of the concept of a universal imaginary museum. Shortly before these developments took place, the dominant European culture had "discovered" within itself two new forms of otherness: one, which was of a psychological order, had to do with the internal fracture of the self, which became the province, notably, of the new psychoanalytic discourse; the other, which was of a sociological order, favoured the conceptualisation of an Other that was internal to the nation itself, the "people". The appearance of the latter led to the upsurge of the "social question", which was a direct consequence of the violence engendered by the industrialisation process.

People or proletariat: this social Other, having suddenly become more visible, favoured the emergence of a new type of discourse, sociology, whose task was to produce instruments of representation of social otherness within the European nations, which from now on were concerned with building up national collectivities on the ruins of ancient "states" that had been built up according to the logic of feudal structuring. Folklore preserved the distinctive traits of local and professional cultures that were heading for extinction, and found itself a place in the museums. In France, this later gave rise to the Musee des Arts et Traditions Populaires. There are also some analogies between our way of encountering the Others who appear on television and this ethnographic knowledge.

A new anthropological outlook

At the start of this new millennium, we are just beginning to emerge from the aforementioned epistemological framework, to the extent that the secular phenomenon of globalisation has fully deployed its effects. The way in which the question of the Other is stated has thereby been modified once more. Rather than setting out in search of exotic entities whose status has to be defined in terms of a system of differences relating to a norm based on what we are, knowledge began to find itself faced with a question which was infinitely more encompassing, but which had previously been little explored: that of the identity of a group, a people, a tribe. The question of otherness, in this context, became
inseparable from that of "my" own identity. Henceforth, it was impossible to
overlook the fact - which was a result of cultural globalisation - that one's own
identity appeared to the other as a form of difference. Henceforth, from the
viewpoint of the culture that became determinant, all the "centres" were
"peripheral", and vice versa.
The question of identity is a major issue for the field of knowledge that we term
anthropology. With this new object, the type of questioning that takes shape is
directly related to the cultural dimensions of our world: what becomes of the set
of certainties and truths on which our knowledge of the world and our tastes
repose, when truths and worlds are plural? The death of God, or, what comes
down to the same thing, the proliferation of Gods, gives rise to a relativism of
values that throws our conceptions into crisis. How is one to understand, in this
epistemic context, what I would call the second identity revolution?

The crisis in the social sciences that was triggered by globalisation bears on the
topic of ethnic-membership as closed systems. On the basis of sex, language or belief, all sorts of human groups
come together to claim their own identities and demand that other people
accord them a form of recognition focussed on those identities.

It might be regretted that this process has ended up in an overinflated valuation
of a single characteristic (sex, language, belief) of the human beings in question.
It means that they themselves deliberately reduce their Being to just one of their
particularities, forgetting their universality as human beings, which is of course
made up of a complex of appearances. But while one may deplore a movement
characterised by truncated identity assertion, one cannot overlook the strength
of its appeal, or its symptomatic, even tragic, character. These are among the
reactions that have been generated by globalisation.

Such exaggerated claims, which contribute to different forms of irredentism,
fundamentalism, racism and sexism, and the correlated movements which
oppose them, no doubt originated in the weakening of the collective identities
of globalisation and the identities of nations, classes and even personal identities has left the social and
psychological field disorientated. The question of globalisation thus appears,
against a background of identities in ruins.

It has been possible, for some time now, to discern a possible approach to
cultural reformulation. It is a question of accepting a representation of Man that
does not close him up in his immediate identity, and which goes beyond even
the fantasy of such an identity. Thinkers and poets have always known that the
concept of identity is just an illusion, perhaps no more than a strategy to protect
us against the fear that assails us each time we venture into unknown territory,
each time we go beyond this fantastic carapace which declares: "I = I".

It was perhaps the most self-absorbed of philosophers who, having dwelt on his
ego as none other had done before him, defined, for the open, globalised world
that is ours, the true way of arriving at a knowledge of Man. In his essay on the
"Man," Jean-Jacques Rousseau clearly stated that his project was not likely to provide a reply to the question of man's Being, caught
between nature and society. But if he did not put forward a metaphysics, this was
less a result of prudent modesty than because, in his view, knowledge of this "identity" of Man, insofar as the notion was to be accepted on a provisional basis, could not but refer to a founding, if paradoxical, methodological principle: man could not know himself as such, but approached his own self through that of others. Man's identity was seen as elaborating its truth through the identity of its Other, whether animal or human. Man's identity was the identity of the Other. And Rousseau went on: "Will we never see a revival of the happy times when the peoples did not occupy themselves with philosophising, but when such as Plato, Thales and Pythagoras, infused with an ardent desire for knowledge, undertook the greatest voyages for the sole reason of informing themselves, and set about shaking the yoke of national prejudices to learn how to know men in their conformities and their differences, and to acquire universal knowledge which was not that of a century or a country alone, but which, being of all times and places, was, so to speak, the common science of the sages."

This programme traces out a line that is infinitely narrow, and a road that is difficult to follow. To give up particularisms and open oneself to alterity, and to understand that this suffuses who we however read to-uniformisation, which is the fate of the imperialist universalisms that we have already known. Uniformisation - the repeated production and reproduction of the identical, in a process that spontaneously accompanies globalisation, and particularly in the field of culture - is no doubt, on account of its mimetic effects, the most serious threat to the vigour of a culture. But how is one to assert, or indeed claim, the right to construct one's own cultural destiny without falling into the traps of identity?

The second identity revolution gives us an opportunity to enrich the registers of our perception. It also forces us to do so; because if cultural diversity is not a means for a wider opening of our eyes and our minds, this must mean that we have opted for withdrawal into ourselves, and self-chosen blindness. If this is the case, then history, which is bringing to a close the cycle of simple identity, and beginning the search for new, planetary complexity, will leave us isolated in our obstinate insularity.

Let us ask ourselves this question: what would be the value of a work of art, or a thought, made up of codes that were alien to us? Upon what condition can we appreciate that which we do not know, and which we therefore do not recognise? In what conditions is the cultural ubiquity that is offered by the web an enrichment and not a stultification?

For such openings to be hypothetically possible, the cultural relativism that is burgeoning today must not simply signify a loss of confidence in oneself, or indifference; it must rather be based on an awareness of the fact that we still have something to learn from the Other, and that there is more wealth in the world than we know of, or are capable of seeing or thinking about, within the framework of our different traditions. In a word, man must acquire an infinite vision of himself; and his particular culture must, without his having to turn his back on it, come to seem to him local and limited, an integral part of a wider whole.

If the bottom line of absolute permeability is now to make the multiplicity of identity-based cultures into one culture, then the only choice that exists is between, on the one hand, homogenisation, with the reduction of differences to the same thing and the imitated representation of the identical at the level of history; and on the other hand, the fecundation of first-generation core identities by others, which implies this second identity revolution that I discussed above, featuring openness and not closure, complementarity rather than self-sufficiency.

In the long run, there is no other outcome for cultural globalisation. But whereas cultural ecology, like natural ecology, can lay claim to a model of reciprocal enrichment and cooperation, cultural economics, and the cultural industries that the market has created, are orientated towards a form of cultural homogenisation analogous to the homogenisation that we have seen in the agricultural industry's goods and commodities.

I would not wish to conclude these remarks either on an apocalyptic tone or with a starry-eyed statement of belief in the future of world cooperation. In fact, the two alternatives, spanning two opposite extremes, embrace a huge field of forces within which we are called upon to act, and which constitutes very precisely the field of culture and art.
The homogeneity-cooperation antithesis remains abstract, like any alternative that is written on paper rather than embodied in life, like the good and evil that are emblazoned on religions. Thinking needs these polarities, but it cannot be content with them alone.