

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE CREATION OF NEW VALUES

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The above actions [previous heading] that affect our socio-political body are the visible result of NGOs operating within a new emerging canon. The U.S. counts, according to estimates, more than one million NGOs (including all organizations, whether they are involved or not on the globalization issue). National Wildlife Federation in the U.S. lists three million members. Consumers International claimed five million members worldwide. The network of Friends of the Earth reaches a million people in 60 countries.

In 1998 eight major nonprofit organizations counted \$4 billion worth of resources: CARE, World Vision International, Oxfam Federation, Médecins Sans Frontières, Save the Children Federation, Eurostep, CIDSE, APDOVE. Socially responsible funds in the U.S. reached \$1 trillion by the year 2000. The above is one of the indicators of the strength of an emerging Civil Society that has in many ways become a worldwide reality.

Let us look more closely at the movements and organizations of Civil Society and the type of action we have explored. Most of the NGOs do not engage in the production or distribution or consumption of goods. When they take advocacy of political rights as their goal they do not aim at taking over any of the functions of government. Rather they tend to encourage government to better accomplish its role.

The political sector ensures our social needs, chief of all the idea of equality and fairness through the instrument of the law, besides promoting the conditions under which businesses, organizations, churches, schools, colleges and other social entities operate. Economic activity ensures the production and circulation of goods and satisfies our basic daily needs. Spiritual needs that create values originate from an area that we are calling culture, in order to differentiate it from government or the economy.

Culture deals with worldviews, knowledge, meaning, values, symbols, identity, ethics, art, and spirituality. Places of worship, places of entertainment, schools, sports venues, museums, art galleries are its gathering points. Identity and meaning are inseparable. They give human beings a cognitive, esthetic and moral orientation in the world. Culture is the source that determines our behavior and action in the world. The

prime mover behind culture is the realm of the spirit, intended as its source. It's in the area of culture that we learn to commit ourselves to ideals such as freedom, justice, individual responsibility and civic responsibility. Later we can employ this knowledge in the economic and political arenas. If the cultural arena is usurped by the state or the market, it is ultimately the human quest for meaning that is impoverished, mutilated or delayed.

The idea of the promotion of human dignity through culture is diametrically opposed to the purported idea of "market democracy." According to this view, if a country wants to look like America politically, it has to follow its example economically. Actually, the reverse is much more likely. First you need a vibrant cultural life before you can also achieve a certain degree of integrated economic development. Such was the case for America in the 150 years preceding the Revolution. That development of civic life led to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, all of them crowning a vibrant life of ideas. Economic development came only after political independence. The latter followed the development of a specifically American culture.

To develop a free society we need to start with culture. We have to start with the choices and the setting of values that can only come from Civil Society. When Civil Society is underrepresented, the results are similar no matter which ideological doctrines are chosen. Benjamin Barber argues with irony: "You can look at countries like Singapore, that are quasi-authoritarian, China that remains deeply totalitarian in its politics, both of which nonetheless have capitalist economies. China is probably the most capitalist, or becoming the most capitalist, of any nation in Asia. They are very good at capitalism. They've also proven rather good at communism, and they also proved you can do both at the same time." China did not develop an independent and vibrant life of culture. It is this independent culture that is most feared at present; witness the fierce control exerted over Tibet and over all other religious traditions, last of all Falun Gong. Chinese authorities perceive that their one-party system needs to continue to exist in a cultural vacuum because it would not survive the challenge of freedom in the cultural arena. This also explains their obsessive fear of tools of communication such as the worldwide web. The same is true in the dictatorial regime of Myanmar (ex-Burma) where owning or operating a computer with access to the internet is a serious crime. These

examples prove in reverse the role of information, education and all that befalls the role of culture. As is the case in China with the cultural monopoly of the party so it is elsewhere. In our country too, control of the media is vital to the interests of the trans-national corporations and their political allies.

Another kind of globalization is possible if we turn the assumptions of elite globalization upside down. TNCs cannot drive a new world paradigm because their prevalent value is the bottom line. Elite globalization makes this paralyzing predicament a worldwide reality by driving values down to the lowest common denominator. The economy cannot be the source of values, but rather the source of that spiritual emptiness that is spreading all around us. An alternative idea of globalization looks first and foremost at the creation of a new global culture along the lines that we have been following so far, values stemming from new revelations, and new practical consciousness-tools. The new spiritual experiences that reach the surface of human consciousness reveal that there is a vibrant source of renewal we have barely begun to tap. A new source of spiritual knowledge can lead us to an acknowledgment and understanding of all that cries to be heard at present. Experiential spirituality offers us another set of tools to accompany this awareness, encouraging a personal transformation that will contribute to that critical shift of consciousness that can reverse worldwide destructive trends. From the cultural realm, benefits can really trickle down to the political and the economic.

Ammunition for this way of thinking comes, surprisingly, even from a recent *Economist* article.³ The results of political changes that occur in nonviolent fashion, it suggests, are not long lasting if they are not sustained by the presence of strong and cohesive nonviolent civic coalitions. Political changes may only bring further disillusion. Such has been the case most recently in Ukraine or in Myanmar, despite successful political campaigns. The *Economist* article concludes: “Countries with few local NGOs, civic groups, trade unions, churches, student organizations or other independent sources of influence are unlikely to produce the necessary leaders. And if they do, the sensible autocrat will squelch them as soon as possible. That is what happens in Iran, where opponents of the regime, especially students, are given no chance to organize, and where television is always censored and newspapers often closed.”

Action addressing the cultural arena can lead to two basically different orientations in the world. It can either be life-sustaining and life-affirming because it addresses the real and deeper needs of human beings, leading us to the affirmation of compassion, community-mindedness, beauty and truth; or life-destructive because it embraces substitute values that cannot reconcile an individual's needs with those of others. Elite globalization replaces our true needs with artificial needs with which advertising continuously bombards us. These create destructive, dysfunctional and ultimately pathological individual and social behaviors. Discovering the spiritual source from which our deeper values and desires can be recognized leads to the possibility to satisfy the needs of all.

When values are lost, the cultural vacuum is filled by the reality of the economy and political utopias or agendas. This has been the tragic reality of the twentieth century. Where culture failed to renew itself, two great temptations took over; fascism's alliance of the state with big business with a prevalent economic drive, and communism's enshrinement of the primacy of state ideology over individual rights. After WWII the ideological battle continued between the West and capitalism and the East and socialism; the unbridled power of the economy or the sovereignty of the state. The third voice, belonging to culture proper, was too weak to emerge over the ideological battles that stormed over the century. Now that the cold war is over and that the two world adversaries – capitalism and socialism – have melted into a murky alliance, we could argue with Michael Lerner that we stand at the edge of the “globalization of selfishness,” a perverted mirror image of what culture is about. Where spiritually motivated values fail to emerge and take hold of the imagination we will find ourselves more and more exposed to the aberrations of materialistic selfishness that defy understanding. Corporate executives, not otherwise famous than for profiting from the most colossal failures of the century, go to unprecedented efforts to display wealth. Kenneth Lay of Enron had a \$13.5 million waterfront estate of 15,000 square feet in Boca Raton, Florida. The no-less infamous Bernie Ebbers of World.Com owned a 13-room apartment, worth \$18 million on Fifth Avenue, in New York; the furnishings alone were valued at \$11 million. In the cultural vacuum of our times, billionaires are seeking their next million with the same

energy and apparent necessity with which hungry people in the third world seek to survive.

The perversion of culture also appears in the present mega-media permeated and dominated by economic interests of advertising, often transforming information into entertainment and sensationalism, and turning their sight away from the places in which spirit manifests itself in real cultural renewal. Political and economic powers know the values that these media yield and their effect on public opinion to which they are very sensitive. That is partly the reason for U.S. spending to be more than \$400 billion per year in advertising.

The global culture works in tandem with the personal spiritual experiences we have outlined. Individual consciousness mirrors global consciousness. The personal experience of spiritual abundance is preceded by a personal encounter with the shadow, the personal abyss, everything that wants to define a world of scarcity and fear and deny the existence of hope, compassion and love. It is a stage that takes time, tolerance and dedication to overcome, that leads us to believe that there will be no light at the end of the tunnel. The encounter with the Light of love or the Christ is the experience to which humanity can aspire in its future. As described most typically in the near death-like experience we know that more and more individuals come refreshed from the experience knowing the reality of love and of an abundance that can fill all dimensions of our lives. But we don't need to have experienced it firsthand to embrace its message and walk in its footsteps. We all stand before this epoch-making choice in our lives.

Civilization is going through this worldwide set of choices – a culture of fear accompanied by scarcity of resources, mounting terrorism and insecurity or a gradual shift towards the embodiment of a sustainable economic development that supports personal growth, compassion and all the highest human aspirations. The choice lies between a culture of exclusion, antagonism and competition and a new way of looking at “the other” as the indispensable complement that allows us to overcome isolation, separateness and loss of meaning. Instead of the old dualism of good and evil, right or wrong, good or bad, we can make room for a new philosophy – one of reconciliation in

which what today works as evil is not fought and overcome but rather understood, integrated and transformed, whether at the personal or the collective level.

More and more voices of individuals and organizations who are looking beyond the dualism that has permeated the twentieth century are finding an echo in the popular soul. Jim Wallis looks at the right/left divide in his recent bestseller, *The Politics of God*, from a politically independent but spiritually committed stance. The sub-title of his book indicates this very same concern for balance: *Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. Looking at the major issues at play in national politics he sees the divide between right and left corresponding primarily to the emphasis of one on individual responsibility and of the other on social responsibility. The two values, he reasons, are not at all incompatible but are most often presented as such. When we look at smaller initiatives, typically at social work with an underprivileged population, it is implicitly accepted that social responsibility will not be fostered at the expense of individual responsibility.

To return to an already familiar place these values correspond to what the practice of Nonviolent Communication professes as universal human needs. My desire for individual responsibility will not be prejudiced by anybody else's need for individual responsibility; quite the contrary. Nor will a concern for individual responsibility be harmed by others exerting their idea of social responsibility. The two complement and strengthen each other quite naturally.

The above view, when applied to one of the hottest issues in the national arena, is fertile ground for analysis. Wallis reasons that the issue of abortion sets the two above sets of values against each other. On one hand is the very true and justified issue of human freedom and social responsibility; on the other, the no less true sacredness of life and individual responsibility. The reader may remember how both sides of the issue were treated in Hellinger's family constellations. In the family representation the soul of the newborn is just as real as the soul of the mother, albeit from a perspective that goes beyond conventional morality. When the issue is examined under the lens of national politics, Wallis determines that all choices we are presented with are polarized perspectives that avoid looking at all the issue's needs. On one hand the life of the newborn is sacred and the mother's freedom is sacrificed; on the other hand the choice of

abortion is trivialized, as if disposing of a human life were at the same level of any other personal choice. When all needs are considered, we could ask a third question that political slogans comfortably avoid: “How can we help parents in their choices and give them the means to avoid being pushed into the socially and humanly costly choice of abortion?” Abortion will then be available as the means of last resort, when all other alternatives have failed.

To return to Hellinger, even though the necessity for abortion can be understood, the soul will pay a heavy price no matter the convenience of the choice. Yet, when that choice is unavoidable help can be offered to relieve the suffering. Here again, from the realm of experiential spirituality, we can devise the nature of a choice that stems from a purely cultural matrix rather than from a political one, moreover a solution that transcends the trap of conventional morality bound to particular religious or political views, or socio-economic factors. In the clamor of political extremes all desire for reconciliation is lost and voters will often face equally unsatisfying choices.

In the above examples we have indirectly shown how a complex situation can be adequately encompassed and understood with two techniques of experiential spirituality. Nonviolent Communication and family constellations (Hellinger) have helped us focus on an issue from a purely cultural perspective, because they clearly transcend the limitations of intellectual thinking of the either/or that reigns in common political or economic choices but is out of place in large societal issues.