

## Cultures in Conflict? Who are We? Who are the Others?<sup>1</sup>

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### *ABSTRACT*

This essay is an attempt to dissect the multiple universalisms and the multiple particularisms with which we are faced in trying to analyze our work and especially when we attempt to speak of culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Culture, universalism, particularism, modern world-system, we and others

Recognizing the power of raciology, which is used here as a shorthand term for a variety of essentializing and reductionist ways of thinking that are both biological and cultural in character, is an essential part of confronting the continuing power of “race” to orchestrate our social, economic, cultural, and historical experiences.

Paul Gilroy (2000: 72)

Not so long ago, there was a Cold War. Everyone talked of it as an ideological battle. For some this was the battle between the free world and the evil empire of Communism; for others it was the battle between the exploiting capitalist class and the workers of the world. But everyone purported to believe that this was a life and death struggle over fundamental political values.

One day, the cold war ended. It was in fact rather sudden, and most unexpected. The European regimes that purported to be Marxist-Leninist almost all ceased to exist. The Asian countries with Communist parties in power and Cuba continued to wear the same ideological

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clothing, it is true, but in general, the world seemed to accept that there was no more “cold war,” and by and large this was regarded with some relief.

This new situation was greeted spectacularly by some as “the end of history,” although most people seemed to think that history was continuing its ceaseless path. A new word, globalization, did become common currency to describe the marvelous new world about to begin or that had presumably already begun, and to which (in Mrs. Thatcher’s unforgettable prose) TINA – there is no alternative. The very same moment of history saw the maturing of a strong new academic emphasis, one that had begun in the 1970s but seemed to reach an acme in the 1990s. It came to be known generically as cultural studies. Indeed, I am here today under this very aegis.

Culture was once a benign word. High culture was something of which to boast. No one cared to be described as uncultured. Culture meant restraint, cultivation, taste. But the new field of cultural studies harbored a more feisty mood. It was an academic upstart and announced in no uncertain terms that it was remedying a deep neglect in the structures of knowledge. Cultural studies was often associated with, allied with, the pursuit of something called multiculturalism. And multiculturalism was a political demand, a demand of groups that felt they were downtrodden, or ignored, or repressed. Meanwhile, in a different camp and from within the world Establishment, there were voices using the concept of culture in quite a different way. They were telling us that the twenty-first century was going to be the century of a “clash of civilizations,” and that we had to gird ourselves, politically (and implicitly militarily), to meet the challenge. What the proponents of multiculturalism took as a liberating prospect, the successful reassertion of non-Western cultures, the proponents of the clash of civilizations considered to be the prime menace.

What is going on here? And first of all, in what capacity do I speak of it? Am I speaking as an American in China – a citizen of the currently strongest state in the world-system speaking to an audience of the most ancient civilization in the world? Or am I a pan-European addressing an audience of the non-Western world – a White among non-Whites? Or am I a modern worlder addressing an audience at a university whose very name bespeaks modernity – a university of science and technology? Or am I simply an academic scholar among his peers – peers who happen to be working or studying in Hong Kong? Or am I a social scientist trying to cope with a concept whose primary locus is in the humanities – the concept of culture?

To be honest, I’m not sure which of these roles describes me, or describes me best, if any of them do. Nor am I sure which of these roles I wish to affect. We are far less in control of our biographies than we like to think, and we can find it extraordinarily difficult to be “objective” in our analyses, if that means that we are required to shed our biographies

in our scholarly work. Nor are any of us so easy to classify. Biographies are complex mixtures, and the weights of different locations in which we find ourselves are not necessarily easy to discern, by others or by ourselves. Nor do these weights remain constant over time. What I am today is not necessarily identical to what I was yesterday.

I think I am coming to you now as a social scientist who is attempting to understand the world in which we live, one who is deeply concerned about the trajectory of this world and who believes he has a moral duty to act within it and upon it. I think I am coming as a modern worlder who has nonetheless deep reservations about what the modern world has been and who is no longer sure at all that it has represented progress over earlier world-systems. I probably cannot escape being an American and a pan-European, and I see no good reason to try to do so. And, at my age, I certainly bear the sins as well as the virtues of a life as a scholar.

I am going to talk to you about time, about universalism, and about particularism, and I am then going to use this discussion to talk to you about who are the “we” and who are the “others” in our thoughts and in our politics. But I should immediately amend that because I shall be talking of time, universalism, and particularism only in the plural number since I do not believe those words have any meaning otherwise. There are multiple temporalities, multiple universalisms, and multiple particularisms. And a good deal of our confusion in discussing culture comes from suppressing this multiplicity in the analysis.

Let us start with temporalities. I opened my remarks by referring to the Cold War. The Cold War is usually dated as going from 1945 to 1989. Actually André Fontaine (1983) insisted a long time ago that it began in 1917. And starting it in 1917 changes the analysis considerably. But no matter. It is supposed to be over. Yet, when one listens to some voices in the United States, and some in China or Russia, it does not seem to be over for everyone. Such voices seem to take the ideological rhetoric of the Cold War as a continuing marker of how they define the current world reality. Perhaps we should not take them too seriously. Proponents of *Realpolitik* have always argued that ideology was merely rhetoric that was meant to mask the *raison d'état* of the states, and that the ruling strata never paid too much attention to the ideology they officially espoused. Charles DeGaulle seemed to have little doubt that the Soviet Union was first and foremost the Russian empire and the U.S. the American empire, and he made his analyses and calculations on this basis. Was he wrong? When Richard Nixon went to China to meet Mao Zedong, was each subordinating ideology to *raison d'état*, or was each simply pursuing more long-range ideological objectives? Historians will no doubt continue to argue over this for centuries to come.

Today, the United States and China seem to share a common commitment to encouraging production for the world market. Yet each defines the roots of this commitment differently. American politicians

and pundits persist in describing the U.S. as a country committed to free enterprise capitalism, while Chinese politicians and pundits persist in describing China as a country committed to socialism, now sometimes called market socialism. Are we as social scientists to take such self-descriptions at face value? And if not, how should we really describe the structures of each country?

Of course, one factor in these self-descriptions is the *chronosophy*<sup>2</sup> common to each country, or at least to its leaders and to most of its citizens. Each country is committed to a long-range optimism based on the assumption of linear progress. Each seems to be sure it is on the path to the more perfect society. These self-descriptions are, however, in some sense as much statements of the teleological objective towards which they are heading as analyses of the present. But there are other *chronosophies* which would give us different temporalities. And even within any *chronosophy*, there are other periodizations, which again give us different temporalities.

What is most important to remember is that we live in many of these social temporalities simultaneously. We can, for example, analyze the world in terms of the modern world-system as an historical system, which would lead us to take as temporal boundaries the long sixteenth century to the present. And one of the many ways in which we could describe this system is the periodic shift of centrality, seeing it as having a succession of hegemonic powers, whose hegemony is always temporary. If we did this, we could talk of the rise of American hegemony burgeoning in the 1870's, reaching a peak in the period 1945–1970, and now in the early stages of its decline. And we could of course ask the question, one indeed frequently asked, as to who might the successor hegemonic power be. Some argue the case for Japan, and a few for China, and there are others who think that U.S. hegemony is still too much with us to think clearly about such an issue.

Or, still within the time boundaries of the modern world-system, we could see it as a pan-European project of world domination (the “expansion of Europe”) and debate when this expansion peaked – in 1900, in 1945, in 1989? – and when the pushback began – with the Japanese defeat of Russia in 1905, with the entry of the Chinese Communists into Shanghai in 1949, with the Bandung conference in 1955, with the U.S. defeat in Vietnam in 1973? And then we could discuss the question whether this pushback is the signal of a structural crisis in the modern world-system, or (as some would have it) nothing but the end of a phase in a far longer historical process in which Asian global centrality had been temporarily displaced by a brief Western or European moment.

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<sup>2</sup> On the concept of *chronosophy*, see Pomian (1979). He uses the term in contrast to *chronometry* and *chronology*, saying “it speaks of time; it makes time the object of a discourse or rather of discourse in general” (pp. 568–9).

The multiple temporalities in which we live may cause us some analytic confusion, but they are far easier to think about and to handle than multiple universalisms. "Multiple universalisms" is of course an oxymoron. Universalism is supposed to mean the view that there exist laws or truths that apply to all persons, all groups, all historical social systems *at all points in time and space*. Hence it is unitary, unique, and unified. How can there be multiple versions of that which is one? Well, I could refer to some versions of Christian theology, which have long argued that there is a trinity in which God is both one and three, or to the Hindu idea that the gods have many avatars. These are theological, not scientific, ideas, but they do indicate a wisdom, the kind of wisdom science has often, to its peril, ignored, and often found validated at a later point in its own evolution.

But I do not wish to appeal to theological insights. It is quite clear that there are multiple universalisms both at the level of popular, community-based claims and also at the level of scholarly assertions. We can of course, speaking from within the framework of one of these claims, reject the others as patently false or at least badly worded, and this is regularly done. All nomothetic social science is based on precisely this procedure. There are many who would insist that the term "science" is reserved for those who, in any domain of knowledge, are working to build a unique universalism. I want to argue that not only does no unique universalism exist, nor could ever exist, but that science is the search for how multiple universalisms can best be navigated in a universe that is intrinsically uncertain, and therefore hopefully creative.<sup>3</sup>

The modern world has been for most of its history a prisoner of Aristotle's doctrine of the excluded middle. Something is either A or not-A. There is no third possibility. But of course, quantum mechanics has gotten us used to the idea that things can be two different things at the same time, or at least can be measured in two quite different ways or can satisfy two different equations. Light is a swarm of particles and a continuous wave as well. We do not have to choose, or rather we cannot.

We face the same problem in social science. In the arena of public policy, groups regularly contend on the basis of different so-called basic values, or different priorities in values. We are in fact constantly faced with such issues in our personal lives. I read in the newspapers of the tragic situation of two European infants who are Siamese twins. The doctors say that, since the twins have only one heart and one lung, they can only be separated in such a way that one twin lives and the other dies. The doctors also say that, if they do not separate the twins, both will die within months. The parents say that they cannot allow one

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<sup>3</sup> See Prigogine (1997). It should be noted that the original title in French, *La fin des certitudes*, uses the plural for certainty.

child to be killed in order that the other live. And the British courts are being asked to resolve juridically this moral dilemma, this difference in moral priorities.

Not all such choices are tragic. Not all of them require that we choose between competing rights to life. But the underlying issues are omnipresent, and we are all collectively being constantly asked to make historical choices. All the debates about outside intervention in the "internal affairs" of any country invoke on the one side claims about universal human rights and on the other side the right of countries not to be subordinate to the imperial and imperious imposition of the values of others on them. And it is this last debate which has been central to the modern world-system since its outset and which has come to the fore again in the last decade.

The reality of the modern world-system, the capitalist world-economy, is that it is a hierarchical, unequal, polarizing system, whose political structure is that of an interstate system in which some states are manifestly stronger than others. In furtherance of the process of the endless accumulation of capital, stronger states are constantly imposing on weaker states their will, to the degree that they can. This is called imperialism, and is inherent in the structure of the world-system. Imperialism has always had, however, its moral defense. It has been justified on the basis of the "civilizing mission," the presumed moral necessity to force others to conform to the norms prescribed by universal values. It seems a curious coincidence that the values that are said to be universal are always those primarily observed by the imperial power. Resistance by the victims to such specious morality seems a self-evident virtue.

Yet, on the other hand, local despotisms have always thrived on their ability to maintain closed frontiers and to reject any and all "outside interference" with their nefarious doings. And we have become increasingly sensitive to the evils of non-intervention, given the enormity of the crimes that are sometimes committed under the cover of sovereignty. In this current era when so many governments and churches are apologizing for past misdeeds, we are constantly adjured to remember those, especially those who are seemingly powerful, who failed to protest (and perhaps thereby to prevent) the misdeeds of still others. From the Holocaust to Rwanda, the albatross of guilt is laid around our necks. But of course the guilt of non-intervention didn't start with the Holocaust. Before the Holocaust there was the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade, and the countless slaughters of indigenous peoples, not to speak of the child labor which to this day pervades this globe.

So, we cannot fail to confront these evaluations of the past and the present by pretending that this is an exercise of the political and not of the scientific world. It is after all a discussion of multiple universalisms, which we have all been sedulously avoiding. Since, however, there are

many, many universalisms, should we give them all equal weight and place? This is another way of asking whether we should be totally relativistic. And the answer is surely not. Because if there are formulas of accommodation between many universalisms, it is also true that there are some universalisms which are truly incompatible with others. And we are thereby forced into a meta-debate: Is there a singular hierarchy of universalisms, some of which are reasonable and acceptable and others of which are deeply repugnant? And if the answer is yes, and I suspect it is, is this not simply another way of returning to the unique universalism we are trying to escape? In any case, to say there is a hierarchy of universalisms solves nothing since we still must decide on what basis we can judge which are the claims that we should firmly exclude.

There is no easy or immediate answer to such a question. The attempt to draw fuzzy lines instead is the only real alternative. It is our continuing quest for unifying the true and the good. The journey, rather than reaching some utopian arrival point, is the positive action. It is a moral action, but it is an intellectual one as well, one furthermore that can only be conducted plausibly by a truly worldwide collectivity of participants in the quest. Each will bring to the quest a different biography, a different experience with priorities, a different insight into the possible consequences of alternative paths. Each may restrain the worst impulses or the weakest judgment of the other.

In practice, there are three major varieties of universalisms that have a hold on the modern mind. There are those which derive from the world religions (and of course there are many religions). There are those that derive from the secular Enlightenment ideals that have been central to modernity. And there are those which express the sense of the powerful that the basis of their power has been their righteous actions and that therefore imperial stretch is a virtue, not a vice.

We have learned once again in the last two decades not to underestimate the hold of religions on the minds of people and therefore on the politics of the world-system. Religions are universalist almost by definition. Even when they originate in very local situations, they almost always lay claim to being universal truth, applicable to all persons. Often, however, religious universalisms are thought to be more than merely applicable to all; they are seen as mandated for all. And even when the rhetoric is less compulsory in tone, almost all religions teach the uniqueness of their path to truth or to salvation. Some religions are more exclusionary than others, but all insist on the virtue of their particular path of doctrines and practices. The three most widespread religions in the world – Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism – are all proselytizing, the first two aggressively so. This is no doubt why they are the most widespread, or at least that might be the view of a non-committed observer.

So what do the religions of the world tell us? To love each other, to love everyone, and to love particularly those who share the faith or the practice. One cannot say that this is an unambiguous message. And the results of course have been highly ambiguous. For while it is clear that religious authorities have regularly been a force for peace and tolerance, it is equally clear that they have regularly been a force for violence and intolerance. No doubt God moves in mysterious ways, but we simple humans may feel impelled to try to make sense of these ways and, dare I suggest it, to draw more coherent conclusions from our faiths and our sciences than mere fatalism.

It was of course in revolt against the dominance of religions that Enlightenment humanism-scientism staked its claim to a truly universal universalism, one to which all persons had equal access via their rational insight and understanding of eternal verities, via their verification of these truths in ways that all could replicate. The problem here, as we know, is that when all persons exercised their insight and understanding they came up with different lists of truths. Of course one could (and did) argue that this situation was temporary, to be resolved by rational debate. But in practice, this solution did not seem to eliminate the problem. And Enlightenment humanism-scientism was thereby forced to create a hierarchy of human beings, according to their degree of rationality. Some were clearly more rational than others, whether because of their education, their experience, or their natural intellectual gifts. These persons were specialists in knowledge. And it did seem to follow that a more rational world required the imposition by more rational persons of the practical implications of the eternal verities they had perceived. So Enlightenment humanism-scientism entered the same ambiguous path as the world's religions. On the one hand, we were adjured to regard all humans as rational, and on the other hand we were adjured to respect the preeminence and political priority of those who were more rational. We were adjured to respect each other, to respect everyone, and to respect particularly those who shared our meritocratic skills and merited positions of advantage. Once again, a not unambiguous message.

Those who based their universalisms on the imperative of might makes right were at least more straightforward. Essentially, they told us that whatever is had to be and that polarizing hierarchies are and must be the result of unequal skills, wisdom, and moral virtue. This was theorized in the nineteenth century as somehow biological in origin. Biologically-based explanations have come into disfavor, ever since the Nazis took these theories to their logical conclusion. But never fear! It has been easy to replace these biological explanations with cultural ones. Those who have power and privilege are said to have it because they are heirs to a culture which provided them with skills, wisdom, and virtue. Do note the coming to the fore in this context too of the concept of culture.



What none of the three varieties of universalisms – the religious, the humanist-scientific, or the imperialist – have offered us however is a theory of multiple universalisms, or even a theory of a hierarchy of universalisms. For each it has seemed to be a competitive race to the top. This may explain why the twentieth century, the most universalizing century in the history of humanity, was also the most brutal and the most destructive of human beings.

When universalisms destroy or oppress, people take refuge in particularisms. It is an obvious defense, and most of the time a very necessary one. And it works, up to a point. Particularisms by definition deny universalisms. They say in effect, we are different and difference is a virtue. Your rules do not apply to us, or have negative effects on us, or are designed specifically to do us harm. We therefore amend them, or reject them outright, and our rejection has a status of at least moral equality with your assertion of the universalistic rules. It turns out however that there are multiple stances from which one can assert particularisms, and the cultural claims made in the name of the multiple particularisms can have quite different political meanings.

There are first of all the particularisms asserted by the current losers in the universalism races. The current losers are generically those to whom we refer as “minorities.” A minority is not primarily a quantitative concept but one of social rank; it is those who are defined as different (in some specified way) from the group that is dominant – dominant in the world-system, dominant in any institutional structure within the world-system such as the state-system, or the class structure, or the meritocracy scales, or the constructed race-ethnic hierarchies we find everywhere. Minorities do not necessarily begin by proclaiming particularisms. They often try first to appeal to the universalistic criteria of the winners, demanding equal rights. But they quite frequently find that these criteria are then applied in such a way that they lose anyway. And so they turn to particularisms with which to confront the so-called majority.

The mechanism of these confrontational particularisms is quite familiar. It is to assert that the losers had in fact been ahead of the winners on the universalistic criteria over the long term, but that they had been pushed temporarily behind by some act of illegitimate force, and that the rank order is destined to be reversed once again. Or it is to assert that the universalistic criteria are in reality particularistic criteria, no better (indeed worse) than the particularistic criteria of the minority, and therefore the rank order is destined to be reversed. Or it is to deny that any truly universalistic criteria can possibly exist, that the rank order is always a matter of force, and that since the minorities are a quantitative majority, the rank order is destined to be reversed. Or it is to proclaim all these theses simultaneously. The emphasis in this variety of particularism is always on “catching-up” to, and quite often on “exceeding,” the presently dominant group. It is seldom the search for a

new universalism, except one that may be achieved by the total elimination of the currently dominant group.

There are then the particularisms of the declining middles. Social science has written much about this. These groups may define themselves in any way – class, race, ethnicity, language, religion. In the ceaselessly polarizing pressures of the capitalist world-economy, there are always clusters of people whose status in the prestige hierarchy and whose standard of living is declining with reference to a recent past. And such people are naturally anxious, resentful, and combative. Sometimes they may focus their angers on those responsible for this decline, who will defend themselves on the basis of the inevitability of the changes in terms of maximizing overall economic efficiency of production. But quite often, it is not easy to perceive what actions of the powerful have led to the decline. And thus it is that those who are suffering such declines come to scapegoat groups that seem even weaker than they (but who are perceived, often incorrectly, to be improving their status and income levels).

This is such a familiar story around the world over the past centuries that it is scarcely worth spending time elaborating it. But it should be noted that in such situations we see fierce particularisms, often of a particularly nasty nature. And it follows that the groups who are then the target of these angers, these hatreds, respond by forging their own strong particularisms. Thus we enter into a cycle of senseless violence, which can last a very long time, until the groups are exhausted, and the rest of the world too, and some kind of truce is imposed on the contending groups. In the process, scapegoating becomes the game of the third parties as well. They define the conflict as the result of eternal enmities. Frequently such claims are patently false assertions, but they do have the consequence of blaming both sets of victims – the original group that is declining because of the imperatives of capital accumulation and the still weaker group they are blaming for it – and minimize our ability to analyze the relevant causes of the fierce internecine combats. The cultural particularisms invoked in such situations are in no way a positive action, even if we can understand how they arose. In the end, we can only emerge from this vicious cycle by an appeal to relevant universalisms.

There is a third variety of particularism, that of the persistently bottom groups, again however defined. That they are thought of and think of themselves as particular is of course basic to social definitions of identity. They are the pariahs of our system – Blacks, Roma, Harijan, Burakumin, Indios, Aborigines, Pygmies. The assertion of their particular identities has been in the twentieth century, particularly the late twentieth century, an essential element in their political mobilization to achieve minimal political, economic, and social rights. That they have overstated their arguments in some cases, that they have from time to time indulged in a counter-racism seems less relevant than

the fact that, despite all their efforts, they have at best been only very moderately successful in emerging from the pariah category. The fact is that the social dice are still loaded against all these groups. And one of the major weapons used to keep them down is to assert the primacy of universalistic norms every time they demand compensatory intervention or assistance in overcoming the cumulative negative effect of centuries (if not more) of discriminatory treatment, what in the United States is called affirmative action. Over all, however much the particularisms of the declining middles may have devastating social consequences, the particularisms of the persistently bottom groups tends to have positive consequences for all social strata, and not only for them. The greatest beneficiaries of affirmative action over the long run will be the so-called majorities.

There is a fourth variety of particularism with which we are all familiar. It is the particularism of the effete snobs, those who pride themselves on their high culture (that word again) and denounce the vulgarity of the masses. Not that the masses are not vulgar. The word vulgar after all comes from the Latin term for the “common people.” In days of yore, the aristocracy defined their own behavior as high culture, and forbade the common people to engage in practices of high culture. For example, there were dress codes. But the modern world-system has created a superficial democratization of culture. We are all permitted to engage in these practices. And more and more people everywhere do.

The effete snobs are really that segment of the upper strata, sometimes especially found among those declining in wealth, who are determined to hold on to their cultural separation from the masses. This creates a curious game. As each cultural practice and artifact that is defined as “high” is copied and/or indulged in by the common people, it becomes redefined as vulgar. And the effete snobs rush to find new artifacts and practices. One of the places they find such practices is precisely in the protesting, antisystemic practices of the persistently bottom groups. This creates a constant strain, as everyone constantly reevaluates such artifacts and practices, amidst much confusion, frequent relabeling, and much struggle to appropriate the rights to them.

A fifth kind of particularism is that of dominant elites. This is not quite the same as that of the effete snobs. For it does not garb itself as high culture but as basic cultural presuppositions, what I have called the geoculture, “the underside of geopolitics.”<sup>4</sup> This form of particularism hides itself behind the screen of universalism – in today’s world, as the universalism of rationality. This form of particularism uses the denunciation of particularism as the most effective means of asserting its own primacy. The debates that result we have come to call in the United States the “culture wars” – again that word!

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<sup>4</sup> This is the title of Part II of Wallerstein (1991).

These multiple varieties of particularisms of course are no more governed by the law of the excluded middle than are the multiple varieties of universalisms. We all move back and forth through all these varieties constantly, and espouse several of them at any given time and space. Nor are the political implications of each etched in stone. Their role is a function of the total social situation in which they occur and in which they are perceived. But we can of course evaluate these roles and we can support, ignore, or oppose them in terms of our own priorities in values.

If we look at the long historical evolution of the modern world-system we see that the choices among temporalities, universalisms, and particularisms has been a central locus of our political struggles. One of the weapons the powerful have had has been to misdefine these debates, and thus to obscure them, in an imagery that argues that time and space are simply contexts within which we live rather than constructs that shape our lives. And universalism and particularism are defined as a critical antinomy which we can use to analyze all social action and between whose priority we all have to choose, and once and for all. This has been helpful to the winners and not at all to the losers, which is the most urgent reason why we must unthink this antinomy and make far more complex our appreciation of the options that are available to all of us.

Culture, too, is not just there. Its very definition is a battlefield, as I have previously argued. The uses of the concept of culture are furthermore manifold, as I have tried to show in this discussion. One of the most urgent tasks of cultural studies today is to take more emotional distance from culture, to regard the concept of culture itself, as well as the students of the concept, as an object of study. Equally, we need to deepen our understanding of the politics and the economics of culture. The sacred trinity of liberal ideology – the political, the economic, and the socio-cultural – is one of the most oppressive weapons of the particularism of the dominant strata. It is probably the one that is most difficult and most necessary to unthink. I would, if I could, abolish all three adjectives from our vocabulary. But I do not think I can, yet, for one thing because I am not sure with what to replace them.

So, are cultures in conflict? Undoubtedly, but saying that does not tell us very much. We need to be aware that the historical system within which we live thrives by the effort to commodify everything. High culture has been commodified for at least two centuries, and the last half-century has seen a spectacular rise in the degree to which high culture is a profitable enterprise for all concerned – the manufacturers of cultural products and the artists whose products are packaged.

In the last twenty years, we have seen how the culture of protest can be commodified as well. One doesn't assert one's identity, one pays to

assert it, and one pays to observe others asserting it, and some people even sell us our identity.<sup>5</sup> One copyrights culture. These days, there is a struggle going on between the producers of music in the form of CDs who seek to sell these CDs and those who operate web sites on the internet that enable consumers to download these CDs at no cost. But of course, the internet web site expects to make its money from the advertisements that will be placed on its web site. Virtually no one in this dispute speaks in favor of the true decommodification of cultural products.

Is the culture we pay to display the expression of our heritage or our souls or even our political demands or is it the internalization of values imposed on us for the profit of those who gain rent from the transmission of these displays? Or can we even distinguish the two? Not even folklore, traditionally defined as a non-commodity, escapes this deep involvement in the endless accumulation of capital.

Who then are we? Who are the others? It depends of course on which battle we are fighting. And is it local, national, or global? It also depends on our assessment of what is happening within our historical system. I have been arguing for some time now that our historical system, the capitalist world-economy, is in structural crisis. I have said that we are in the middle of a chaotic period, that a bifurcation is occurring, and that over the next fifty years, not only will our current system cease to exist but a new one will come into existence. Finally, I have argued that the nature of this new system is intrinsically unknowable in advance, but that nonetheless its nature will be fundamentally shaped by our actions in this era of transition in which “free will” seems to be at its optimal point. Finally, I have argued that the uncertain outcome may result in a historical system that is better, worse, or about the same morally as the present one, but that it is our moral and political duty to seek to make it better.

I will not rehearse here the case I have made for the existence of such a structural crisis, nor for the chronosophy I am employing.<sup>6</sup> Rather I want to outline the possible “we’s” and the corresponding “others” in this crucial period of a struggle that is simultaneously political, economic, and cultural.

Let me start by rejecting some possible “we’s”. I do not believe we are really living through, or should be living through a clash of civilizations, in which the Western world, the Islamic world, and an East Asian world find themselves arrayed against each other. Some people would like us to believe this, in order to weaken our hands in the real battles. But I see little real evidence of such a clash, outside the rhetoric of politicians and

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<sup>5</sup> See an excellent discussion of this phenomenon in Gilroy (2000, ch. 7 and *passim*).

<sup>6</sup> I outline the arguments in Wallerstein (1998). See also, for supporting data, Hopkins & Wallerstein (1996).

commentators. The multiple universalisms and particularisms that I have outlined exist within each of these presumed civilizational arenas, and in not significantly different proportions.

Of course, the clash of civilizations is one formula for defining North-South conflicts. While I believe that North-South conflicts are a fundamental political reality of the contemporary world – how could they not be in a constantly polarizing world-system? – I do not draw the conclusion that virtue derives from geography, or that the spokespersons for each side at any moment reflect necessarily the interests of the larger group they purport to represent. There are too many cross-cutting interests at play, and too many tactical follies, for anyone to commit himself or herself unreservedly to one side or the other in the endless skirmishes. However, on the basic issue that there must be an end to the polarization and a drastic move towards equalizing the uses of the world's resources, I feel there cannot be any equivocation. It is for me a moral and political priority.

Is then the “we” those delineated in the class struggle? Well, of course, but what exactly does that mean? We can draw a line between those who are living off the surplus value produced by others and those who are not retaining all of the surplus value they are producing, and we can call this line that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, or some similar language. But in fact, of course, within each of these categories, there exists a complex, overlapping internal hierarchy. The existing system has not created two homogenized classes (much less one homogenized humanity), but a subtle skein of privilege and exploitation. That is why we have so many varieties of particularisms. Reducing this picture to two camps is no simple task, as none other than Karl Marx demonstrated in his classic political analysis, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. If even Mao Zedong insisted that the class struggle continued within a socialist society, we are made aware of how prudently we have to be in assigning “we-ness” on the basis of class.

Then there is the “we-ness” of nationhood. Nationalism has proved to be an extremely powerful appeal to solidarity in the last two centuries, and there is little sign that this appeal has disappeared from the horizon. We are all aware of the conflicts nationalism has bred between states. But I wish to remind us of the conflicts that nationalism has bred within states. For nationalism is not a cost-free good.

Look at Japan. In the post-Meiji period, nationalism became a strong weapon of constructing a modern state, one that was powerful, one that achieved its objectives in terms of advancing the relative status of Japan in the world-system. It led ultimately to the seizure of Korea, the invasion of China, the conquest of Southeast Asia, and the attack on Pearl Harbor. Japan lost the Second World War, and suffered the atrocious price of Hiroshima. After the war, nationalism became itself an element of internal conflict within Japan. There are those who fear that any resuscitation of nationalist symbols might trigger a restoration

of a militarist, aggressive, internally repressive regime. And there are those who feel that Japan alone is being denied its national(ist) identity, to the detriment of so-called traditional values.

Japan is not alone in this conflict about the utility of national(ist) identity. Both China and the United States are afflicted by the same latent (and not so latent) conflict. But so are a long list of states around the world. I draw from this the conclusion that invoking national identity is akin to risky surgical intervention. It may be essential for survival (or merely for improved health) in some situations, but beware the surgeon (political leader) whose hand slips or the side effects that no surgeon (political leader) could have prevented.

If I thus reject civilization, class, and nation as easy, straightforward criteria of “we-ness” (not to speak of race, a totally malicious and invented criterion), with what are we left to navigate the difficult waters of a chaotic transition over the next fifty years from the historical system in which we live to some alternative system in which our descendants shall live? Nothing easy to define.

Let us begin by asserting moral/political objectives. When a historical system is in crisis, one can move, it seems to me, in one of two basic directions. One can try to preserve the hierarchical structure of the existing world-system, albeit in new forms and perhaps on new bases. Or one can try to reduce, if not altogether eliminate, the inequalities to the extent possible. And it will follow that most of us (but not all of us) will opt for one of the two alternatives in consequence of the degree of privilege we enjoy in the present system. It will follow that there could emerge two broad camps of persons, and that such camps could not be identified either by civilization, by nation, or even by current definitions of class status.

The politics of the two camps is not hard to predict. The camp favoring hierarchies will enjoy the benefits of its current wealth, its power therefore to command intelligence and sophistication, not to speak of weaponry. Nonetheless, its strength, though manifest, is subject to one constraint, that of visibility. Since, by definition, this camp represents the numerical minority of the world’s populations, it must attract others to support it by appealing to themes other than hierarchy. It must make its priorities less visible. This is not always easy, and to the extent it is achieved it can cause confusion and reduce solidarity among its core members. So it is not guaranteed victory.

Arrayed against it would be the camp of the numerical majority. But this is a highly divided camp, divided by the multiple particularisms and even by the multiple universalisms. The formula that can overcome this disunity has already been proclaimed. It is the formula of the rainbow coalition. But this is far easier said than done. Advantage of each participant in such a formula is middle-run, and short-run considerations force themselves upon all of us with great regularity. We

seldom have the discipline, or even the resources, with which to ignore short-run advantage. We live after all in the short run as individuals. It is only collectively that we live in the middle run, and can place such an alternate temporality into our schema of priorities. And when one thinks of creating not a national rainbow coalition but a global one, we realize what a formidable political task this is, and how little time there is to forge such a coalition.

How then does one go about trying to do this? In part, this is a political task that has to be pursued simultaneously at the local, the national, the regional, and the global levels. It is one in which one has to concentrate, if one is to succeed in pulling together a meaningful coalition, on the middle-run question of the kind of replacement system we wish to construct while not ignoring the short-run problem of alleviating the miseries under the existing system. I feel it is not my function to go further in outlining a political strategy. Rather I wish to concentrate on the intellectual contributions that social science can make in this era of transition.

I think the first thing we can do is to unthink the social science categories bequeathed to us by the existing world-system and that have so hobbled us in our analyses not only of current reality but of the possible alternatives to it we might construct. Recognizing the existence of multiple temporalities, multiple universalisms, multiple particularisms is a first step. But of course we need to do far more than simply acknowledging their existence. We have to begin to figure out how they fit together, and what is the optimal mix, and in what situations. This is an agenda for major reconstruction of our knowledge systems.

I have not spoken up to now of the “two cultures” – that presumed fundamental epistemological split between the humanities and the sciences. This split, reproduced within social science as the *Methodenstreit* between idiographic and nomothetic methodologies, is in fact a recent invention. It is no more than 200–250 years old, and is itself a prime creation of the modern world-system. It is also deeply irrational, since science is a cultural phenomenon, a prisoner of its cultural context, while the humanities have no language that is not scientific, or they could not communicate coherently their message to anyone.<sup>7</sup>

One thing we all need to do is to read far more widely. Reading is a part of the process of theoretical discovery, of uncovering the clues and the links that lay buried in the mass of deposited knowledge products. We need to point our students towards reflection on fundamental epistemological issues. We must cease fearing either philosophy or science, since in the end they are the same thing, and we can only do

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<sup>7</sup> My arguments to elaborate this thesis are to be found in Part II, “The World of Knowledge,” of Wallerstein (1999).



either by doing both, or by recognizing that they are a single enterprise. In the process, we shall become fully aware of the multiple universalisms that govern our universe, and begin for the first time to be substantively rational, that is to reach a consensus, however interim, on the priorities of values and of truths in a universe where we must constantly make choices, and therefore be creative.

If social scientists, no if all scholars of whatever field, can succeed in thus reconstructing their enterprise, and that is a very big if, we shall have contributed massively to the historical choices that all of us are necessarily making in this era of transition. This will not be the end of history, either. But it will allow us to proceed on a better foot.

There is said to be a Qing dynasty saying: People fear the rulers; the rulers fear the foreign devils; the foreign devils fear the people. Of course, the Qing already had experience with the modern world-system. But we, the people, are also the foreign devils. In the end there are no others, or at least no others that we cannot control if collectively we set our minds to it, discuss it, weigh alternatives, and choose, creatively. In a socially-constructed world, it is we who construct the world.

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