CHALLENGES OF INTERCULTURALITY

Diana ILIŞOI

"Henri Coandă" Air Force Academy, Braşov, Romania

Abstract: *The alert pace of changes in the contemporary society defies a human being's capacity of adjustment. Uncertainties, the unpredictable, alienation from one's self, loss of meaningfulness and of the self, all of these have become defining characteristics of the human condition. A new undefined, uniform socio-cultural space has sprung up under the globalization tug, lacking axiological landmarks or sense, and bearing strong effects on the experience of human identity and human existence, in general. This phenomenon, associated with pluralism and value relativism, brings about the problem of the rapport between identity and culture, identity and alterity, but, most of all, the problem of requirements to be met, in order to assure the "openness" of interculturality and the mutual understanding of people.*

Keywords: *interculturality, individualism, ethnocentrism, humanity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

From the psychological perspective, cultural identity (individual and group) represents a major component of the self-perception and of self-awareness. Together with the need for belonging somewhere, it is one of the fundamental needs of a human being, nurtured by and through culture. We are what we are through the language we talk, the language being a key component of culture, through our traditions and customs, rites and values that we spread and in the light of which we became a people. Based on our "cultural heredity", on our soul structure, we can only have a thorough understanding of our own culture, whose creations we are. In this context, avoidance of ethno-centrism, as a judgment of other cultures by comparison with ours, is almost impossible. In the light of this relationship, "a culture needs to be studied based on its own meanings and values" (Giddens, 2000:33). This is the supposition that has to constitute the foundation of any sociologic or psycho-sociologic study, according to the English sociologist Anthony Giddens, an exigency that is not at all easy to fulfill.

The idea of an existing relationship between culture and identity is generally accepted and it becomes the source of all intercultural approaches challenges. "Cultures are, by definition, exclusivist and highlight the difference. They long for the feeling of identity (…) They are the main resource of identity (Malița, 2000:14). Culture is the one that tells us who we are and what meaning we can give our lives. The Romanian philosopher, Lucian Blaga, in his works "Trilogy of Culture" underlined the intimate connection between culture and the ontological status of an individual: "Culture is an individual's accomplishment, to such an extent, that the individual cannot deny culture, just as well as he cannot deny his own appearance" (Blaga, 1968:212).

2. FROM INDIVIDUALISM AND ETHNOCENTRISM TO INTERCULTURALITY

Initially, the term *individualism* belonged to Physics: individual is synonymous with atom, considered initially an indivisible particle. In Biology, it signifies a characteristic specific to any organism – the unit that cannot be segmented without having its life threatened. The term derives from the Latin "individuum", which stands for the liberal translation of the Greek „a-tomon" (indivisible), and at the beginning it stood for separate being (especially in the physical world), indivisible in itself and different from any other being. At the end of the eighteenth century, the term enters the political discourse and soon its derivate – individualism – appears, in French. If for the Ancient Greece the individual represented the intrinsic part of the Citadel (community), outside it the term he loses its reality, modernity launches the concept named "individualist" in relation with the human being and society within which the individual represents the supreme value. The power of seduction of this theory consists of the modern idea of man's rights and liberties. Yet, this is only one of the facets of this doctrine. Numerous thinkers have warned against the threats to which individualist societies are exposed. Anomie, social fragmentation, exacerbation of selfishness, excesses of liberty - are only a few of the effects that erode the social corpus. The famous historian and theoretician of politics, A. De Tocqueville, uses the term in one of his referential books "Democracy in America" (1835-1840) in order to characterize the preponderant attitude of Americans, as a form of moderate selfishness. Individualism is the actual form of selfishness, "it is of democratic origin and threats to develop once conditions get equal" (Tocqueville, 1995:109). If in aristocratic societies people are "almost always tightly bonded to something that is placed outside them, and are always ready to forget themselves", then, with democratic communities "new families show up out of the blue, others keep disappearing, and all the one that stay in place change their appearance; the canvas of time is torn apart every second and the trace of generation vanishes (…). Each class, coming closer to the others and all of them getting mixed, their members become indifferent and alienated toward one another" (Ibidem: 110). The individualist character of the modern society nowadays has been sensed, analyzed and criticized by numerous thinkers of the nineteenth century. From this perspective, the first diagnostician was the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who, in his "Phenomenology of Spirit" (1807) and in "Principles of Law Philosophy"(1821), labels it as a the disease of the modern European society, caused by the disappearance of social connection, of the relationships between individual and community, fostered, within the previous societies, by values, common beliefs and shared experiences. This net of connections has gradually been diminished throughout modernity and post-modernity, a phenomenon that nurtures forms of individualism and ultra-individualism specific to these epochs.

Postmodernity perceived as late modernity or a radicalized one, is based on specific driving forces. Contingency, risk, rapidity of changes, fragmentation, relativization of values etc. are characteristic for this world. Lack of models, the dilution of "us" and the exacerbated development of "I" confer a problematic character, generally, to the human condition, and, particularly, to its experience, identity and recognition.

"… the pressure of being an individual, of creating one's own identity and experience, is the product of modern era. Postmodern era changes rules, again. Artificiality of fiction is no longer denied" (Anderson, *apud* Maliţa, 2001:97). A man's ambition to make choices connects with the generous offer of postmodernism. Under these circumstances, each individual builds its own reality on the reality market that offers ideas to people for their public consumption: "We all become consumers of reality and a larger number of us also become creators and sellers of reality (…). Mass media facilitate the creation and dissemination of new reality structures" (Ibidem). Self-identity occupies a central place among the postmodernist interests. In the context of the contemporary epoch's fluidity, cultural identity is not given, and the individual is subjected to the peril of being taken apart from its cultural group. In a cultural environment of the mosaic, collage, collection type, the individual needs to make up his identity by himself, out of a diverse, heterogeneous and fragmented offer.

Just like in case of a defense system, people cluster around their systems of beliefs that offer them stability and the safety of their identity within the group. We live a time when the question of how it is like to feel a human comes forward strongly. The Italian philosopher Remo Bodei has discovered that the evolution of individuality and the identity construction occur in a manner that is totally different in our society nowadays from previous ones: "Evolution of individuality does no longer occur through the Other's assimilation or defeat, nor through an engagement in the collective process of building macro-topics, but through the exploitation of connection energies that are set free at the same time with the deconstruction of being. There is, of course, a relationship between the reformulation of identity and the transformations of former "ethical forces": family, class, state, church. They made possible for the individual to be freer, but, equally, they made the process of building the self-identity sound like a burden, because the individual is overwhelmed with responsibilities and obliged to meet standards in broad areas, which are publicly regulated. In a polycentric world, the reference points and the loyalty duties are multiplied and become more diverse, forcing the individual to continuously divide and modify the map of own identity. (…) No one lives in a unique world, but in a plurality of "life's worlds", of "finite sense provinces", as Alfred Schutz named it. Changing identity similarly with a worn out coat or getting accustomed only partially, remaining immune to conflicts is not very easy to do, just as well as it is not easy to get isolated from a larger context of events and epochs, while remaining anchored in the "new" and the "future": the past holds an almost dense tenacity, whereas the future a load of restlessness, which ends up by throwing out of one's shelter anyone who takes refuge in the near present" (Bodei, *apud* Enciclopedie, 2004:485).

The spirit of economy, specific to the classical period of capitalism is replaced by selfishness, through the individual's concentration on own needs and interests. On the other side, the consumption society nurtures a hedonistic mentality. Mass culture lacks the aspiration to universal validity and, being characterized by value accessibility, looks for its social function very seriously: entertainment production. Masses become soon consumers of entertainment. The industrialized entertainment alters the human personality, its critical thinking, through symbolical violence, stimulation of antisocial impulses and conducts.

At the same time, another effect of this type of culture is the phenomenon through which the cultural power increasingly and secretly converts into political power, given the omnipresent and more and more refined manipulation. Analyzing the civilized mankind's "diseases", from a ethological perspective, Konrad Lorenz warns against mankind's manipulation and indoctrination with a false code of values, corresponding only to the manipulators' interests.

The western cultural being, pretended free, is , in reality, manipulated through the commercial decisions of the great manufacturers (Lorenz, 2006:99-100). Among the methods used, the most efficient proves to be fashion, which, besides the uniformization of needs, answers a generally human necessity of making his belonging to a group visible, which strengthens the idea of need of identity, in a fluid and insecure world.

In the old dichotomy sensibility-sensitivity, the latter is exclusively proclaimed. If Leibnitz advised people to be calculated, postmodernism urges them to find pleasure. This is how the vision of the world as a spectacle was born. Through excessive cultivation of sensitivity, of emotions, we witness the augmentation of the esthetical dimension – the estheticization of existence – to the detriment of the cognitive and ethical ones. Through postmodernity we are placed at the antipode of sensibility and abstractionism of the enlightening modernity.

Moreover, the world complexification process leaves its print on human condition. This situation generates the task of "helping humanity adapt to the complex means of *feeling, understanding, and doing, all of which exceed everything it possesses*" (Lyotard, 1997:78).

People increasingly feel the need for clarity, restoration of clear values, in a world in which models have vanished and chaos replaced order. In order to meet this need for clarification and understanding, numerous thinkers have attempted to reveal the world and look for solutions.

Jacques Delors, the former president of the European Commission and president of the International Board for Education in the Twenty-First Century, has asserted that one of the major challenges of the current century consists of correlating internal progress with the external one. The excessive focuses on the economic development and the increase in material heritage have led to neglecting those aspects connected with people's adjustment to the requirements of the "planetary village": respect for nature and human condition, cultural adaptation, modernization of mentalities. The contemporary human condition is marked by a continuous oscillation, tearing apart, between the globalization challenges and search for models, roots, or feeling of belonging: "The artificial world culture brings about implicit value systems and can determine the appearance of a feeling of lost identity" (Delors, 2000 31) In this context we witness an accentuated claim of *ethnocentrism*, as an escape from an insecure and unpredictable space, taking the shape of armor, a defensive shield when facing the avalanche of requirements from the living environment. From an ethnological and anthropological perspective, ethnocentrism represent a concept that " take for reference the cultural models of a human group where people belong, considering them "natural", "universal", "original" and "true" (Enciclopedie, 2004:309).

This acceptance of the term, which we are going to call the "weak" (inoffensive) sense of it, leads us to the field of psychology. The process of every human's becoming, takes place in a certain cultural space that confers it a specific and unique internal architecture, in which, and through which, it builds the entire existence. We cannot get rid of it, as if we discarded a no longer used coat. If this gesture were possible, then things would be far easier, and the very topic of interculturality would be just useless. The man would become a chameleonic being, turning instantly into the "colors of the environment", for a perfect adjustment and assurance of survival. Cultural identity though, represents the very core of our mankind, and we cannot discard it. The human being is the only one to possess two legacies: the biological legacy is doubled by the "cultural legacy", and both of them will define and configure his life. In other words, we can fully understand only our own culture, which corresponds to our structure, and the judgment of others is achieved by comparison with the culture where we belong, filtering the new one through its set of values. Any form of openness toward and affiliation to another culture presupposes considering the existent "given reality". A key-supposition of sociology, but equally, of psychology, is the fact that a "culture need to be studied in terms of its own meanings and values", which implies both an intellectual effort and an emotional one as well (Giddens, 2000:33). Cultural diversity is responsible for the frequency at which people coming from a specific culture hardly understand, if they do, ideas or behaviors generated by it.

Ethnocentrism, though, also holds a meaning which we are going to characterize as "strong", due its negative effects and which consists of "pronouncement of own identity and of the negation of other ethnical groups' identity, quite often leaving room to some forms of conflict, intolerance and exploitation" (Enciclopedie, 2004:309). This ethnocentrism must be overcome, and its superseding has led to the promotion of cultural relativism, supported by the American school of "culture and personality", which claims the universality of culture and the value of all cultural behavior models.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The etymology of the term *ethnocentrism* (*ethnos*, from Greek – race, *centrum*, from Latin - center) suggests us the privileged positioning of own culture, ethnicity or community. Starting from this relation, there are two different approaches to it, holding two various values. The use of own culture as a model of reference in decoding other cultures represents a natural process which we cannot ignore. Our own culture defines us as human beings and it offers us the register, the code by means of which we *read* and understand the diversity of the cultural world. What needs to be excluded represents the underestimation or rejection attitude toward everything that is alien in rapport with ourselves, as being non-culture or as lacking value. The acceptance of diversity and the effort of understanding it, even if it is limited by one's own belonging to a space and by cultural identity, the openness and happiness manifested in front of the cultural polychromy of the world, is the only acceptable manner for the settlement of harmony among people, whereas the way to cultivate it is and will be the education.

REFERENCES

[1]. Blaga L., *Trilogia culturii,* Editura Academiei R.S.R., București, 1968;

[2]. Delors, J., *Comoara lăuntrică*. Raportul către UNESCO al Comisiei Internaționale pentru Educație în secolul XXI, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2000;

[3]. Giddens,A., *Sociologie*, București, Editura BIC All, 2000;

[4]. Hegel,G.W.F., *Principiile filosofiei dreptului sau Elemente de drept natural și de știință a statului,* București, Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1969;

[5]. Hegel,G.W.F. *Fenomenologia spiritului*, București, Editura Cartea de buzunar;

[6]. Lorenz,K., *Cele opt păcate capitale ale omenirii civilizate*, București, Editura Humanitas 2006;

[7]. Lyotard J.F., *Postmodernul pe înțelesul copiilor .Corespondență* 1982-1985,Cluj, Editura Apostrof, 1997;

[8]. Malița,M., *Zece mii de culturi,o singură civilizație. Spre geomodernitatea secolului* XXI, București, Editura Nemira, 2001;

[9]. Peters,F.E., *Termenii filosofiei grecești*, București, Editura Humanitas, 1993;

[10]. Tocqueville,A., *Despre democrație în America,vol.2*, București, Editura Humanitas, 1995;

[11]. ***,*Enciclopedie de filosofie și științe umane*, București, Editura All Educational, 2004.