# Cultural imaginaries and the dialectics of modern public sphere(s)*

Pilar Damião de Medeiros**

**Abstract**: In order to analyze the numerous perplexities of modern public sphere(s), one needs to understand not only the profound transformations symptomatic of the new global paradigm, but also the increasing proliferation of cultural imaginaries (C. Castoriadis) in the public arena. The polyphony of voices and claims of recognition, the absence of a common project and the disintegration of a universal, enlightened and emancipated thought (J-F. Lyotard) seems to illustrate the sterility and fragmentation of modern public sphere(s). This paper tries, therefore, to scrutinize how the emergence of cultural relativism and particularization not only nourished local identity myopias but also affected the social-political legitimacy of the "lifeworld" as a whole vis-à-vis the economic imperatives and the instrumental rationality of the political system (J. Habermas). To overcome such social fissures, to revitalize and redesign our public (global) sphere, it will be brought to discussion S. Benhabib's emphasis on the negotiation of complex cultural dialogues and J. Habermas conception of a deliberative and cosmopolitan democratic model – inhabited by critical, rational and reflexive citizens – that stimulate a certain consensus out of all socio-cultural divergences.
**Keywords**: Globalization; cultural fragmentation; cosmopolitanism; cultural imaginaries, public sphere(s)

## I. Introduction

This paper tries to understand the cultural perplexities of the novel global paradigm: Globalization has, on the one side, accentuated the social, political, economic and technological transnational interconnections, but, on the other side, it also has prompted national particularization, local identity myopias and cultural (or according to S. Huntington civilization) clashes. Although contemporary political and techno-economic worldwide architecture seems to be feasible, the cultural terrain is more fragile than ever. This paper tries, therefore, to evaluate the debate over the possibility of overcoming the disintegration between highly complex cultural imaginaries, value clusters and political objectives in the public arena. The challenges of modern democracies and respective public sphere(s) have been deeply studied by S. Benhabib and J. Habermas, who both seek for the emergence of a cosmopolitan and deliberative democracy model sustained by a dynamic social constructivism.

## II. Culture and global transformations

The shift towards a different paradigm and the perception of a new global order has brought up to discussion a range of controversial academic perspectives. According to David Held *et al*, there are three main positions in this debate: 1) the hyperglobalist thesis (e.g. Ohmae, Wriston, Guéhenno), which privileges economic logic and "share the conviction that

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** Ph.D. in German Studies and Sociology [Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany]. Assistant Professor [History, Philosophy and Social Sciences Department] at Azores University, Portugal and Member of NICPRI: *Research Unit in Political Science and International*. Research Unit financed by FEDER/POCI 2010. E-mail: pilarmedeiros@uac.pt

economic globalization is constructing new forms of social organization that are supplanting, or that will eventually supplant, traditional nation-states as the primary economic and political units of world society" (HELD *et al*, 1999: 3); 2) the skeptical thesis (e.g. Hirst ad Thompson, 1996), which stresses that globalization is nothing but a myth. In other words, they tend "to discount the presumption that internationalization prefigures the emergence of a new, less state-centric world order" (HELD *et al*, 1999:5) and 3) the transformationalist or the intermediate thesis (e.g. Giddens, Rosenau) that defend that globalization must be understood as a multidimensional process. For the latter, "globalization is associated not only with a new 'sovereignty regime' but also with the emergence of powerful new non-territorial forms of economic and political organization in the global domain, such as multinational corporations, transnational social movements, international regulatory agencies." (HELD *et al*, 1999:9).

Moreover, globalization has triggered different conceptualizations, ambivalent feelings and perspectives. The bankruptcy of conventional Westphalian state sovereignty, the world-wide interdependence, the predominance of economic imperatives, the opening of national boundaries (e.g. Schengen deal in the European Union) and consequent deterritorialization[1], the massive technological development and the dialectic articulation between local and global have certainly had a great impact on the reconfiguration of social structures, economic choices, political institutions and intercultural perceptions. In a sense, and in accordance with David Held *et al*: "A satisfactory definition of globalization must capture each of these elements: extensity (stretching), intensity, velocity and impact" (HELD et al 1999: 15). Another interesting definition of Globalization is given to us by Ulrich Beck, who highlights - like R. Robertson, A. Appadurai, J. Urry and Featherstone - the relevance of a "glocalized" framework: "Globalization lays the stress upon a transnational process […] 1) it refers to intensification of transnational spaces, events, problems, conflicts and biographies. 2) This tendency – contrary to everything the word 'global' suggests – should not be understood either as linear or as 'total' or all-encompassing'. Rather, it should be thought of as only contingent and dialectical – as glocal. This will become clearer if the conceptual figure of 'inclusive distinction or opposition' is employed as the underlying principle of biography, identity and organization. 3) It then becomes necessary to consider the degree, density and extent of globalization/localization in the various dimensions." (BECK [1997] 2000: 87)

In fact, to understand the high complexity of our contemporary era, "world citizens" must be aware of the new challenges and responsibilities they now face collectively. After Ulrich Beck, social actors have to acknowledge that they live in a risk and vulnerable society. Nevertheless, he underlines that the critical reflexivity about such risks, and in particularly - about the intensification of ecological risks, seems to mobilize a kind of cosmopolitan solidarity around worldwide communities[2]. For him "[d]efinitions of risk, successfully asserted, are a magic political wand through which a smugly settled society learns to fear itself and, against its will, is compelled to become politically active in its core areas. The vivid symbolic staging of risks is, in this sense, an antidote to a narrow 'carry on as before' mentality. A society that sees itself as a risk society is in a state rather like that of a (Catholic) sinner who confesses his or her sins, so as to at least philosophize about the possibility and desirability of a 'better' life in harmony with nature and the conscience of the world" (BECK, 2000: 101). Furthermore, Beck tries to encourage, within this idea of an inclusive

[1] See Held *et al*: "The contemporary era is marked by a deterritorialization of politics, rule and governance, although new forms of territorialization, such as regionalism, are evident as well." (1999:32) And compare with Tony Judt: "'Globalization, "isn't primarily about trade or communications, economic monopolies or even empire […] [it] is about the disappearance of boundaries – cultural and economic boundaries, physical boundaries, linguistic boundaries – and the challenge of organizing our world in their absence (JUDT, 2009: 407).

[2] Compare U. Beck: "Threats create society, and global threats create global society" (BECK, 2000: 38)

cosmopolitanism, not only the creation of associational networks and institutional articulation beyond borders, but, as well, the opportunity to develop a cosmopolitan *Realpolitik* based on multilayered global governance.

**III. Cosmopolitanism or civilizational clash?**

The awareness of a world-wide peace and the tolerance for the other was already being developed in the political thoughts of the 18th century. Kant, Hume, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Leibniz, Goethe, Herder and Schlegel were some of the great advocates of cosmopolitanism, because they recognized, in an era of ethnocentric viewpoints, the value of other cultures. Kant, in particular, in his *Perpetual Peace* (1795) appealed to the emergence of a cosmopolitan law based on a universal set of principles and directed to the "citizens of the world".

Insofar, the consolidation of the cosmopolitan project has been regarded by many (e.g. J. Habermas, J. Rawls and D. Held) as a healthy alternative to resist and fight against the resurgence of nationalisms and the widespread of parochial cultural claims. The ultimate challenge of the cosmopolitan paradigm in the 21st century is the construction of a *res publica mundialis* inhabited by critical, reflexive, rational and solidarity human beings that aspires for the democratic cosmopolitanism of culture and justice. In accordance with David Held *et al*, "Democracy for the new millennium must allow cosmopolitan citizens to gain access to, mediate between and render accountable the social, economic and political processes and flows that cut across and transform their traditional community boundaries" (HELD *et al:* 1999: 450). In addition, cosmopolitan citizenship implies *de facto* a genuine allegiance with the heterogeneous socio-cultural and political social structures, with the worldwide community of human beings (M. Nussbaum) and, simultaneously, a commitment with local communities.

The responsibility of the cosmopolitan man towards the other and the commitment to the values of Enlightenment require not only tolerance and intelligence but also creativity in order to set forward a new package of well-articulated interpersonal perceptions and relations. Following A. Giddens, "[t]he cosmopolitan is not someone who renounces commitments – in the manner, say, of the dilettante – but someone who is able to articulate the nature of those commitments, and assess their implications for those whose values are different" (GIDDENS, 1994: 130). With the access to diverse political communities social actors have now the possibility of enjoying not only multiple citizenships, but have also the "ethical glocalized"[3] responsibility to mobilize specific policy choices that respect the kaleidoscope of cultural specificities and galvanize some kind of consensus out of all divergences. In other words, "[…] the cosmopolitan must have a grasp of the legitimate pluralism of cultures and an openness to cultural difference. And this awareness must be reflexive – it must make people open to questioning their own cultural assumptions, myths and so on (…). So the point is that the two parts of the disposition should not be seen as antithetical and antagonistic, but as mutually tempering and this disposing us towards an *ongoing dialogue* both within ourselves and with distanciated cultural others" (TOMLINSON, 1999: 94-195).

The cosmopolitan democratic project seems almost perfect for a century marked by ethnical-religious and cultural wars. Samuel Huntington in his well-known essay "The clash of civilizations?" stresses that the primarily source of conflict of our era is and will continue to be cultural. For Huntington, the differences between cultures, and civilizations in particular, will dominate global politics and "[t]he fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future" (HUNTINGTON, in 2000: 100). The civilizations he points out include Western, Confucian, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox and Latin American and the reasons why will these will clash is announced by him as follows: 1) the "differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic"; 2) "the world is becoming a smaller place"; 3) "the processes of economic modernization and social change throughout the world are separating people from longstanding local identities"; 4) the growth of civilization-

[3] See Tomlison, 1999.

consciousness is enhanced by the dual role of the West"; 5) cultural characteristics and differences are less mutable and hence less easily compromised and resolved than political and economic ones" and 6) economic regionalism is increasing" (HUNTINGTON, in 2000: 102-103).

Huntington's recognition of the multiple civilizational dilemmas resulting from: 1) provincial identity politics[4] and cultural myopias; 2) nationalistic exclusion measures[5]; 3) mistreatment of cultural and political dialogue[6] and 4) the "west versus the rest"[7] vision - is an extremely important document because it alerts and makes the "citizens of the world" conscious of the cultural menaces we are facing and have the social and moral responsibility to overcome.

Notwithstanding, the emergence of an emancipated society would require a valid and respectful interpretation of antagonistic *Weltanschauungen*, lifestyles and cultural beliefs. The "realization of universality" would, subsequently, be achieved "in the reconciliation of differences" (ADORNO, [1951] 2005: 103). The intermingling between a variety of cultures and the harmony between diverse forms of action is defended by the controversial Nobel Prize writer Salman Rushdie in his *Satanic Verses* as follows: "*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world.* It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves. (RUSHDIE, 1991: 394). Thus, this interpenetration of cultures and "fusion of horizons"[8] opens new possibilities of intercultural interpretation, understanding and dialogue.

Fundamentally, the sophisticated formulation of a cosmopolitan and deliberative "glocal" democracy not only understands the complex inner dynamics of modern cultural fragmentation, but also highlights the overarching capability to embrace the multiple public spheres and find some consensual synthesis out of all antithetical, but extraordinary lifestyles, languages games and cultural significations. The deepening of attachments in both local and global publics spheres revitalizes the intercultural multifarious relationships. Accordingly, Seyla Benhabib "[a] global civilization that is to be shared by world citizens will need to be nourished by local attachments; rich cultural debate; contestations about the identity of the 'we'; and a sense of democratic experimentation with institutional design and redesign" (BENHABIB, 2002: 184).

In short, cosmopolitanism necessarily involves an institutional commitment nurtured by responsible and moral social communities. The duty of the new "citizens of the world" is to defeat the explicit and implicit cultural cleavages, religious fears and regional parochialisms. As a result, these must secure a truly inclusive regime, where all human rights are respected regardless of their differences. In other words, the civically political actor must struggle towards a fraternal political framework.

## IV. Culture and the paradoxes of modern public sphere(s)

Modern public spheres face in our contemporary era multiple challenges. While dealing with the collapse of traditional conceptions of state sovereignty and representative politics, they now have to comprehend the dynamics between local and global domains, deal with the triumph of the liberal-capitalist imaginary (CASTORIADIS, 2005), recognize the consequences of the colonization of the *Lifeworld* by the *System*[9] (HABERMAS, 1981) and

[4] Compare S. Benhabib: "Identity politics draws the state into culture wars" (2002:1)

[5] Compare France's new policy to expel the gypsies (Summer 2010)

[6] Compare long lasting conflict in the Middle-East between Israel-Palestine.

[7] Compare war in Iraq and conflict between U.S.A. and Al Qaeda

[8] See H. G. Gadamer's notion of "*Horizontverschmelzung*"

[9] The lifeworld contributes to the maintenance of individual and social identity by organizing action

finally, consider the fragmentation of cultural practices and the multiplicity of political behaviors.

According to some theorists, our modern public sphere(s) are suffering the widespread of political disaffection. For many people, argues Opello et al, "it no longer appears feasible and effective to use the electoral system to further and protect their interests because the state appears more responsive to the forces of global capitalism, by presenting itself to the people as having no choice but to make sacrifices to the global reality." (OPELLO *et al*, 2004: 273). In other words, the growing instrumental approach to rationality, the social submission to the market and the postmodern individualistic and hedonistic ideals have led to a metamorphosis of the citizens into consumers now emptied of reflexive and critical thinking (J. Baudrillard). According to J. Habermas in the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, "[t]he public sphere in the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public of sham-private world of culture consumption" (HABERMAS, [1962] 1989: 160). In a sense, the modern public sphere assumes now "advertising functions. The more it can be deployed as a vehicle for political and economical propaganda the more it becomes apolitical as a whole and pseudo-privatized" (HABERMAS, [1962] 1989:175). Moreover, continues Habermas: "When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode" (HABERMAS, [1962] 1989: 161).

Thus, to overcome 1) the dominance of the economic imperatives in the Lifeworld, 2) the prevalence of bureaucratic and geometric reasoning, 3) the individuals' lack of political commitment and incapacity to be engaged with the public cause, 4) the eclectic sterility and excessive relativism of postmodernism 5) "the retreat into conformism" (CASTORIADIS, 1997: 36) and 6) the discredit on modern polity – social politics must undergo a total reconfiguration and strive towards a universal and deliberative democracy.[10]

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around shared values, so as to reach agreement over criticizable validity claims (Ingram, 115). The reproduction of the lifeworld is also the reproduction of, what Habermas calls, the structural components of the lifeworld: 1) culture (cultural reproduction relates to the transmission of interpretation schemes consensually shared by the members of lifeworld); 2) society (social integration refers to the legitimate ordering of interpersonal relations through the coordination of actions via intersubjectively shared norms); and 3) personality (socialization processes seek to ensure that personalities with interactive capabilities are formed) (Deflem, 2). These lifeworld structures are sustained by the "continuation of valid knowledge," "stabilization of group solidarity," and "socialization of responsible actors" (Habermas, 137). Culture, society and personality are, therefore, the fundamental mechanisms that perpetuate the rationality of the world, i.e. the communicative interconnection amid these three components leads to the validation of the lifeworld. Nevertheless, actions within society do not persist solely by sustaining the common understandings of its participants; they must also fulfill certain objective functional requirements of society (which are obtained through system). According to George Ritzer, the system has its source within the lifeworld, but it comes to develop its own distinctive structures, such as the legal system, the state and the economy. As these structures develop, they grow increasingly distant and separate from the lifeworld. Like the lifeworld the system and its structures also undergo progressive rationalization"(133). The system is internally divided into two major self-regulating subsystems: economy and administration, which are equally dependent on each other. These are not coordinated by reaching understanding through communicative action; rather they are steered by, respectively, the "media" of money and power. In other words, the system integrates diverse activities in accordance with the adaptive goals of economic and political survival by regulating the unintended consequences of strategic action through market or bureaucratic mechanisms that constrain the scope of voluntary decision. In the course of time there has been an increased differentiation of system areas from the lifeworld, and purposive rational actions have become even more detached from ethical regulations. As a consequence of this "uncoupling" (separation) process between these two areas, Habermas's has developed a critical theory based on the "internal colonization" of the lifeworld by external imperatives of the system. In his view, this problem does not arise until the purposive rational attitude starts to penetrate the area of the lifeworld and to dominate relations there as well.

[10] Compare T. McCarthy, "[a]s a rule of argumentation Habermas's universalization principle is meant

For J. Habermas the "friendly" coexistence between different cultural groups and the stimulus for a rational communicative action (based on argumentation and counter-argumentation, on consensus, on validity and intersubjectivity) will contribute to an authentic and vivid public sphere. S. Benhabib follows Habermas position and acknowledges that a "[d]eliberative democracy focuses on social movements, and on the civil, cultural, religious, artistic, and political associations of the unofficial public sphere, as well. The public sphere is composed of the anonymous and interlocking conversation and contestation resulting from the activities of these various groups." (BENHABIB, 2002:21) For J. Habermas, as for S. Benhabib, to revitalize the civic public sphere(s) it is vital to achieve some kind of consensus out of the proliferation of cultural communities and political claims. The variety of interest groups must find a way to be attuned with the core social questions. Thus, this interactive political dialogue between social (and moral) actors in the public sphere(s) is fueled by the respect for the other's viewpoints.

To understand the multiplicity of validity claims in our public sphere(s), one may recur to the role of the modern intellectual and his greater capacity to understand, translate and contextualize the different cultural narratives and respective "language games" (L Wittgenstein). Moreover, and according with Zygmunt Bauman, this "[v]ariety and coexistence have become 'cultural values' – ones the intellectuals are most zealously committed to defending" (BAUMAN, 1992: 18). Intellectuals, in short, must have in our controversial global era the social responsibility to inspire an alternative political culture, which recognizes and respects the healthy dialectics between the cultural imaginaries of the "we" and the "other(s)".[11]

**V. Conclusive remarks**

The edification of a world-wide public sphere seems to be a remarkable aim of the advocates of cosmopolitanism. The shift towards a global society implies also a shift towards a global deliberative democracy founded on the basis human rights and justice. According with S. Benhabib and J. Habermas, the "citizens of the earth" must struggle - within a "glocalized" approach - towards human equality, cultural liberty and political emancipation. The overlapping structures of cultural interaction and complex webs of political discourses have, in fact, stimulated a significant social change. Whereas, for some, we are assisting to the "clash of civilizations", for others, the negotiation and renegotiation of antagonistic cultural dialogues emphasizes our capacity, as critically reflexive and moral social actors,[12] to, in spite of all the differences, create an emancipated and enlightened global society.

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precisely to bridge the gap between different individual and group wants and feelings, and norms whose validity everyone accepts on the grounds that they are in the general or common interest – the gap, that is, between the many particular wills and the general will" (1992: 59)

[11] Compare P. Damião de Medeiros, "Intellectuals and the quest for a new political culture", 2009.

[12] Compare Habermas: "Moral consciousness signifies the ability to make use of interactive competence for consciously processing morally relevant conflicts of action" (HABERMAS; 1979: 88)

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