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FOR A CULTURE OF PEACE: RE-THINKING OUR IDEA OF CULTURE

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It may be interesting for the purposes of our colloquium to speak not only about what we conceive as a *cultural heritage*, but also to speak about what people think about their cultural heritage. If our subject is «non-material cultural heritage», our contribution is meant to avoid the fetishization of that concept. This is much more necessary today given the pluricultural character of our society and the criticism we have to undertake of the current multicultural debate. In doing so, we have to take into consideration ideas, values and attitudes; and all this – anthropologically speaking – belongs, anyway, to the non-material cultural heritage as well.

Currently, my main field of research is music, but as an anthropologist, for one of my professional interests lies in the issue of ethnicity: within my research approaches I understand music, above all, as a cultural and social phenomenon; it is not so difficult to see the close relationship which we can establish between music and ethnicity. I had to undertake work about the traditional musical heritage. But my experience in this area shew me that very often the results of our research activity say much more of researchers ideas on a supposed past reality which are used to give meaning to our present society, rather than on a past reality as it actually was. All this, of course, concerns very directly our idea of culture, especially regarding its important ethnicist component. And this issue brought me to see the

interest in speaking about that argument in our colloquium. Given our experiences as anthropologists and given also the needs of our society, I will focus my speech on the interest of rethinking our idea of culture in order to build a more solid culture of peace.

We already know that there are many reasons for violence among groups. Very often injustice, material needs, unbalanced power relations, or economical factors of diverse nature are the origins of the struggle. But very often, culture is also an important motive for violence. In these cases, the reason of the struggle lies in what we, perhaps in a comfortable manner, design as «reasons of a cultural nature»: values conflict, different worldviews, the desire to adhere to old traditions which do not have too much meaning in the modern world, etc. Sometimes people even speak of an incompatibility among certain cultures: all this constitutes what we could identify as a «culture» problem. Wolfgang Kaschuba, playing with that idea which defines «culture» as the whole way of life, even wrote: «Kultur als das 'ganze Leben, 'the whole way of life', aber auch 'the whole way of conflict'» (KASCHUBA: 29)

Then, if the idea of culture has a certain role in many of such cases in which peace is shattered, it would be worthy to think a bit about our idea of culture: culture not only as an explanation for some manifestations of violence but also as a justification for them.

It must be clear that we are not speaking now of «culture» in a humanistic sense, in the sense, for instance, in which we say that someone has or doesn't have culture, but in an anthropological sense. Within the anthropological field, we will not find a unique definition of culture. Nevertheless from the classical and well known definition formulated by Edward Tylor in 1871, or the understanding of culture as «*the whole way of life*», even the «culture» definition given by the ethnomethodologists who limit it to the ideational sphere or the definition offered by Clifford Geertz as «webs of significance» (GEERTZ: 5), what seems quite clear is the totalizing sense which is always included by the idea of culture. Under the name of culture we understand the big creations of the human spirit as well as the little things of our daily life. The language, the great artistic manifestations, the philosophical thought belonging to culture as well as – anthropologically speaking – the manner in which we prepare our coffee every morning, our hygienic habits or the way we say hello to our neighbour

when we meet him. In the anthropological sense, culture is the result of the faculty of exteriorizing and the need for interaction among the human beings with all that surrounds them. On the analytical level this manifests itself through ideas, actions and products. It is clear that a person would be unexplainable without the culture concept: he or she nourishes, reproduces, entertains, exterminates or transcendentizes himself or herself through the cultural resources which he or she produces and has within reach. And in fact, we should consider that we are what we are in a great measure thanks to culture. With culture we build ourselves as persons, as group, as society.

The problem is that the concept of «culture» is not only an analytical category of the social and human sciences but it also has a wide social relevance. Outside of the academic milieu, we speak of «the culture of the people (as *Volk*)», of «the interest in preserving determined cultural practices» or of «the integration difficulty which immigrants may have because of their culture». But in this kind of perception of the idea of culture it is not difficult to see some traits which, in spite of coming from the old anthropology, can no longer be shared by anthropologists. According to this point of view, «culture» is perceived rather as a supra-subjective entity, which has attributes like persistence, homogeneity, continuity and territoriality (WICKER: 20). The concept of culture experiences a clearly reification process, as if culture could exist on the margin of their bearers or social agents.

This idea of culture is the reason why, if necessary, the term «culture» can be used as a synonym for «nation», «state», «people» (in the sense of *Volk*) or even «race». That is why we can speak of Italian, Catalan or German culture, for instance. Here we can see that, actually, the use of the term «culture» sometimes is not so far away from the use we gave to the term «race» some decades ago, a term that today has lost all credibility as an analytical tool for anthropology. And it is also clear that through this use, we contribute mystical and unreal components to the culture, unreal components which nevertheless are easily used in power struggles, in part also because of its great vagueness: «Symbols are effective because they are imprecise» (COHEN: 21).

This manner of understanding culture is evidently a consequence of the marked ethnocentric conception we have from our societies, a conception which had a notable impulse through romanticism and

which today still has a great force. No doubt there have been anthropologists who, expressing a certain feeling or social will, made possible that the concept of culture could be understood in such manner. Herder's idea, which attributed to each «Volk» their own «ethnic spirit», basically represented through their own language and traditions, was a progressive idea for that time. Since then, each ethnic group is considered to have its own personality and its own intrinsic values. Moreover, the invention of this «ethnic spirit» justified the *raison d'être* of ethnocratic states as soon as monarchs lost divine justification. According to this view, in the same manner that an ethnic spirit corresponded to every nation, an ethnic culture corresponded as well. And the early folklorists were charged of «proving» it. The gathering of songs, fairy tales or traditions began. Evidently, not all what was sung, counted or belonged to daily life fulfilled all the requirements of what was understood as «ethnic spirit». Then, European ethnology, which believed in a certain «Volk» idealized by romanticism and in a «spirit» which had not yet been seen, built their selective criteria. The scholars took care of cleansing the works on folklore of all things which weren't «ethnic» enough. In this way, people began to speak of «one nation, one culture».

We are used to dividing the earth in discrete unities concerning nations or states; and we do the same with culture, as if culture, in general, could be fragmented according to these categories and show different organic, systemic and discrete unities. On the base of our ethnocratic comprehension of the world, we speak very easily of Italian, Catalan or German culture, for instance, without knowing very well what these labels truly signify. But there are also other articulated fields of cultural elements centered on other focal points which can be so much or even more important for people. There exists culture of poverty, a musical culture, a culture of money, a culture of personal relations, a culture of work, etc. There are fields which go beyond the territorial boundaries and which only an anthropology drenched in ethnocratic ideology pretends to obviate or minimalize. That is why it is so often said, for instance, that a poor man from New York and another from Paris might well have more things in common than a poor and a very rich man from the same town.

Anthropology has much responsibility in the social reception of the

idea of culture. If before it was the anthropologist who magnified culture most – so that very soon it became a kind of social fetish – it is now the time for anthropology to demythicize, to deconstruct that concept. Culture isn't an absolute good which has an independent life apart from the people, something which has to be necessarily kept, imposed or destroyed in spite of its bearers.

There exists a marked «culture of culture» through which culture is not only a set of purely pragmatical resources but also a set of highly symbolic values, so that in the end, we have to do with a «petrified forest of symbols» as Jonathan M. Schwartz said while speaking of the essentialist constructions of identity in the Balkans (quoted by GREVERUS: 132). But what we still don't know, is whether or not the social use we are giving to this system of symbols is the best possibility in order to face the important challenge for our society within the current globalization process; i.e., whether or not it is the best available possibility in order to realize the living together of different members of the population which, in fact, are less and less determined physically and also culturally by the political boundaries which are marked by the current states. Today we can't understand culture in the same manner as anthropologists did in the last century: something static, immutable, a supra-subjective entity. We should see it as something always variant, which is continually adapting to new circumstances. That is, culture as a continuous negotiation, as something which isn't given by nature but built every day by persons. This fact has two implications of interest regarding our wished culture of peace:

1. the need of abandoning an idea of culture bounded too much to the ethnicist ideologies and which has been a further cause for struggle and intransigent attitudes.
2. The need of recognizing the high versatility of culture, as Bruner once said:

If we believe that culture is heavy, ponderous and static, if it's a slowly changing beast, if there is nothing new under the sun, if culture is a burden, even oppressive, a weight to bear, then: it takes a giant to move the world even a little. But: if we see culture as always in production, as constituted and reconstituted in every act, ...if we see culture as alive, in constant movement,... Then: one does not have to be Napoleon to change a culture. The little guy has a chance. It's not easy to change culture, but we do it all the time. (E.M. BRUNER quoted by WICKER: 11).

Evidently, it is not too easy to change culture. We can't change cultural traits in the way we can change our shirt or necktie; but we also need don't to carry the burden of cultural traits which are clearly negative for current society. Since culture was not given by nature, we can also try to modify very consciously the cultural elements which are causes of struggle. As Hans-Rudolf Wicker wrote, we must see culture within the vectors of processuality, reflexivity and flexibility (Wicker:19). It can be very important in order to encourage new cultural keys which allow us a better common living in a world which, in its diverse pluricultural societies, has already become clearly transcultural.

3. There is the need to be always very conscious of what kinds of ideas or what ideology we are actually serving when we speak about researching and preserving our «immaterial culture».

«*Culture* is one of those sense generating metaphors which help to integrate the social world into a system of symbols» (WICKER: 7), but after all, we are the ones who have to decide in which system of symbols we want to live. It would undoubtedly signify progress were we to see everything we consider «cultural legacy» *not* as a legacy which we have to keep at all costs as it is, as something non-negotiable, immutable and always of a superior level. «Culture» gives us reference models; that is why it can be comfortable to act within its structures for our daily behaviour, because we don't need to invent continuously new manners of acting in our relations with outer world. But it will be necessary to renew or to break those models of reference when they conflict with values which we consider fundamental today, such as those values which concern the culture of peace. So as Reebee Garofalo said:

But I can't help feeling that there is often a thin line between 'preservation' and 'reification', the crossing of which can serve ends which are antithetical to the intended purpose (GAROFALO, 1993: 24)

The anthropologist Trudy Griffin-Pierce reports that working on Navajo's culture in order to document and preserve some ceremonies of this group, one of the ritual specialists declined to participate explaining, «If a thing must be written down in order to be saved for those who come after us, it has already lost its meaning, the spirit behind it. It is not worth saving then because its spirit is dead» (Cfr.

PAREDES, 1999). Something similar happens with the traditions we want to preserve through our work. The question is then which kind of new «spirit» justifies the preservation.

As the Basque politician Iñaki Anasagasti said, at the announced end of violence in Spain made by the separatist groupe E.T.A. in 1998, it is not enough to disarm the weapons. We must also disarm mentalities (JUAN: 14). And here the possible contribution of anthropologists can be surely very important.

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