

GLOCALIZATION AND HYBRIDITY

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Harald Welzer might have been on the right track when discussing the present-day quandary of effective, consequential action aimed at arresting and folding the trends threatening the future of the planet, our shared home (*Climate Wars*, Polity Press, 2012). Having argued that the problems our planet currently confronts call for little less than a sort of a cultural revolution – a radical change in our mode of life, he added that as the “individualist strategies have a mainly sedative function (whereas) the level of international politics offers the prospect of change only in a distant future”, “cultural action is left with the *middle* level, the level of one’s own society, and the democratic issue of how people want to live in the future”. He suggested as well that the popular awareness that this is the case is on the rise, even if in many, perhaps most cases it remains rather subliminal or poorly articulated. I believe that the phenomenon of “glocalization” – that peculiar combination of localities gaining in importance synchronically (and in close connection) with spatial distance losing its significance – can be traced down to the condition correctly diagnosed by Welzer.

In fact, the most acute and menacing problems haunting our contemporaries are as a rule globally produced by essentially *extraterritorial* forces located in the “space of flows” (Manuel Castells’ term) staying well beyond the reach of the essentially local, territorially fixed political instruments of control; the forces generating them tend however to wash their hands of tackling social consequences of their deeds all too often devastating and necessitating urgent and exceedingly costly repairs. That latter task falls therefore on the “localities” on the receiving side of their activities. “Localities” – and big cities first and foremost among them – serve nowadays as dumping grounds for problems generated globally not by their ini-

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tiative and without their consultation, let alone agreement.

Immigration for instance, an un-detachable correlate of progressive “diasporization” of the planet, is a phenomenon caused by the steadily growing production of redundant people in far-away lands – but it is up to the people in the places of the migrants' arrival to provide them with jobs, accommodation, education facilities and medical care, as well as to mitigate the tensions which the influx of strangers is likely to awake; pollution of water supplies or air might be also a summary of global consequences of the adverse mode of governance practiced in distant countries, but it is ultimately the duty of city authorities to clean the air breathed and the water drunk by the city residents; fast rising costs of medical service might be results of the marketing policies of extraterritorial pharmaceutical companies, but it falls to the local urban authorities to assure an unbroken and adequate provision of hospital and surgery services.

All in all, cities all over the world turn into local laboratories in which the ways of resolving such and numerous other globally generated problems are improvised or purposefully designed and then put to test and either rejected or incorporated in daily practice. They are also, again by an externally created and imposed necessity rather than by a deliberate choice of their residents, cast in the position of research establishments and schools of civic responsibility and the difficult art of human cohabitation under novel conditions of irreducible cultural diversity and persistent existential uncertainty. This is what has stripped to-day “localities”, and big cities more drastically than any other among them, of a considerable part of their past autonomy and their earlier capacity of composing and running their own agenda – but simultaneously invested them with an unprecedented importance through assigning to them a crucial role in the job of sustaining the present-day global order and correcting its malfunctions and blunders, as well as repairing the collateral damages they are bound to perpetrate. “Glocalization” means local repair workshops servicing and recycling the output of global factories of problems.



There is however one more tremendously important role which the “localities”, and again big cities in particular, are called to perform under conditions of glocalization. The two overlapping spaces distinguished by Manuel Castells, the “space of flows” and the “space of places”, differ radically in the character of inter-human relations which they prompt, favour, promote and encourage. In the first space, humans confront each other primarily as members of “imagined totalities” (like nation-states, churches or supra-national business interests) – entities a priori separate and self-enclosed as well as holding antagonistic and principally irreconcilable interests locked in reciprocal competition and inclined to beget mutual hostility and suspicion. Having analysed that state of affairs on its own, without reference to the altogether different realities characteristic of the “space of places”, Samuel P. Huntington memorably predicted an imminent “clash of civilizations” (in 2002, in a book under the same title) pregnant with apocalyptic consequences. One of the prominent effects of glocalization is however a human condition suspended between two universes, each of the two subject to sharply distinct set of norms and rules. Unlike in the “space of flows”, inside the “space of places” humans have the opportunity of confronting each other as persons – neighbours, workmates or schoolmates, bus drivers, postmen, shopkeepers, craftsmen, waiters, doctors, dentists, nurses, receptionists, teachers, policemen, municipal officers, security guards and so on and on: some of them are confronted as friends, some others as enemies, but *personal* friends or enemies rather than anonymous and interchangeable, stereotyped specimens of an abstract category.

Of course in our densely populated, heavily diasporised urban environment population most encounters among city dwellers are shallow and perfunctory, seldom reaching deeper than a hasty and superficial, in-passing categorial ascription; stereotyping and an a priori reserve underpinned with watchfulness and suspicion tend to be therefore fairly common expedients resorted to for the sake of self-orientation in the complex, volatile and variegated townscape. Sufficiently many individual specimens of diasporas sharing the city space tend however to be



drawn out of their anonymity and transferred to the realm of personal, face-to-face acquaintances, for the mental walls separating abstract categories to be pierced and for the outcomes of habitual wholesale stereotyping to be gradually, yet steadily undermined. If that happens, the customary badges of “aliens” (as skin colour or shade, face features, fashions of dressing and behaving in public, pronunciation and intonation of speech etc.) become less visible and in the course of time tend to be left out of focus – specimens of an alien category being subjected instead to the familiar, personality-related criteria of evaluation of the “friendly vs. unfriendly workmate or schoolmate”, “helpful vs. uncooperative neighbour”, or simply “likeable vs. nasty person” kind. As contacts turn in consequence more frequent and meetings less perfunctory, criteria of personal evaluation become indistinguishable from those routinely applied in selecting or deselecting friends. What counts in the end is the attractiveness of a person and the quality of her or his character, degree of reliability, loyalty or trustworthiness. Features originally registered in order to draw borderlines and dig trenches between “us” and “them”, are for all practical intents and purposes rendered irrelevant to the selection of bonds to be tied – if at all they continue to be noticed.

And so one more condition of peaceful and mutually beneficial human cohabitation, grossly neglected and even recklessly trampled on and reduced to a pulp by the forces floating in the “space of flows”, might be (imperceptibly rather than in full glare, spontaneously more than following preconceived plans, prompted by the very logic of urban life and all too often used to be noticed only retrospectively, with the benefit of a hindsight) pulled together and firmed up day in, day out on the city streets and in public buildings and squares. Also in this respect Welzer’s “middle level”, the “level of one’s own society”, may be viewed as a laboratory inside which future modes of human cohabitation, made indispensable by globalization and enabled to emerge by the “glocalization” form it took, are designed and tested; and as a school in which urban dwellers learn how to apply those modes in the practice of shared life.



It is as difficult as it is inadvisable to play down the global role which “localities”, and they only, might perform in constructing and putting into operation badly and urgently needed cultural precepts able to match the challenges posited by the “global interdependence” of the human residents of the planet, and to rise to the task of preventing the planet, together with humanity, from self-destruction. After all, one of the main reason of Huntington’s dark premonitions having reverberated so widely and strongly in public opinion was the author’s and his readers’ overlooking or willingly yet mistakenly leaving out of picture that “middle level” that holds thus far our glocalised world together, while serving as a workshop in which the ways and means able to render its future secure are sought and stand a chance of being found or invented.

