



Ales Debeljak

In praise of hybridity

Globalization and the modern western paradigm

The division of the world into "the West and the rest" is a misrepresentation, writes Ales Debeljak. Cultural globalization is not the transplantation of western ideas and technologies across the planet, but the adaptation of these according to local requirements. Hybridity, the product of a *longue durée*, is at the heart of the contemporary western paradigm.

It seems almost obscene to speak about culture during a time of global economic and political crisis. But I will persist in my intention. I offer two justifications for doing so.

The first is my conviction that the exchange of products of cultural creativity sustains the life of a human community and gives temporary meaning to our pursuit of a better, more sophisticated and more complete experience of reality. Each and every individual needs to pursue meaning within overlapping cultural frameworks, ones that sparkle — even if deceptively — with the thrilling beauty of our living present, the better to resist the grip of banality.

The second reason is that culture is not just a more or less convenient tool for increasing the gross national or municipal income: it is much more than that. Culture is an open space of play and criticism, imagination and meditation. It is precisely within this open space that particular experiences and collective visions cross-fertilize and permeate one another, come into contact and engage with one another, thus producing specific ideas about human existence and personal fulfilment, old age and death. Culture is in fact a grand laboratory of meaning.

As I do not intend to split academic hairs, I'll be straightforward. What I have in mind when I say "culture" are those specificities that characterize a certain group at a certain time in a certain place, while "civilization" refers to ideas and technologies that are not restricted to one group alone but are transferable in time and space. Culture rejuvenates itself by feeding on locally binding principles of thought and action, while civilization propels itself forwards by improving inventions and testing their general applicability.

Each and every culture is based on a selection from a large, although not arbitrary, catalogue of narrative possibilities and stocks of meaning. In a culture thus understood, the products of intellectual creativity as well as material achievements and religious ceremonies, dining habits and lyrical monologues, find their legitimate place. Something else should be kept in mind, too: people's ability to successfully occupy the most varied niches of a living space is inseparable from their ability to recognize differences and

attribute meaning to them.

It is precisely difference that is crucial for individual or collective self-awareness, if not self-confidence. Every shaping of identity depends on a difference — difference between me and the others, my family and another family, my neighbourhood and the one on the other side of the city, peoples and nations. A difference established by setting a limit, *finis*, turns into a definition of meaning.

The basic principle of affiliation can be given social truth only by inventing, maintaining and shifting differences. The latter repeatedly establish borders between *us* and *them*, be they regional, national, linguistic or religious communities, or contemporary "urban tribes". From this vantage point, it becomes clear that cultures, understood as systems of lived collective experiences, do not automatically become uniform when the economic circumstances of diverse life-worlds become similar. After all, even modern information and communication technologies, which represent a supreme realization of universal and global applicability, are included in particular life-worlds and local communities in different ways and adjusted to local circumstances.

The modern technologies and ideas that, for better or worse, are used today by all communities around the globe, stem from the modern western paradigm. Let me be more specific: the contemporary package of narratives and tools with which we manage human experience that governs the contemporary world was indeed born in western Europe, but it is no longer the exclusive possession of its peoples. Today, literally all peoples of the planet reach into this package, in ways that frequently clash.

The package of modern ideas

The global expansion of the package of western modernity was set in motion when Europe first established a link with the Americas. The globalization process began in earnest in sixteenth century, after the Genoan sailor in the service of the Spanish king "discovered the new world" on his trans-Atlantic voyage to India. Globalization and modernity therefore wear the same shoes and made the big leap into the unknown together.

Western modernity, or the mindset of the era that was born through the midwifery of the Renaissance and humanism, Protestantism and capitalism, was actually marked by a revolutionary event: human authority replaced divine authority and human reason replaced collective faith, while the power of better argument gradually prevailed over hereditary privileges.

Medieval Europe exacted the unconditional observance of Christian dogma and the rules of the Church as the sole road to truth. Different approaches to the pursuit of meaning gained ground under the umbrella of modernity — relativist approaches that were grounded in the rational logic of trial and error, empirical observation and mathematical calculation.

The sceptical individual mind is clearly observable in, say, seventeenth century Dutch culture. There, the defining feature of the dominant value system was anti-clericalism and anti-feudalism. No wonder: it was based on Protestant resistance to Papal theology and politics of the then recently departed Spanish occupying forces. It also drew on the self-confidence gained by reclaiming valuable land from the Atlantic Ocean through the design and application of

dams. One of the local sayings captures this defiance well: "God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands." Amsterdam and other Dutch ports rapidly integrated into the exchange of military, economic, cultural and political products between the old and the "new world," and — in stark contrast to feudally rigid Spain — equally rapidly developed the capitalist principles of operation.

What does this mean? Simply though not incorrectly put: instead of asking whether this or that thing was the will of God, Dutch merchants and sailors wanted to know whether this or that thing "worked". Such a functional perception of the world could not but give birth to recognitions that are the backbone of modern social practices: instead of suppressing opinions differing from yours, it is more profitable to adopt a tolerant attitude.

To illustrate the traditional, monolithic "world view" that dominated Europe in the Middle Ages, let it suffice to draw attention to the fact that artists of that time were not seen as being much different from skilful and mainly anonymous craftsmen. Understandably, they did not "create from nothing", as modern (particularly Romantic) tradition would have us believe. In medieval times, the ability for *creatio ex nihilo* was reserved for the absolute source of authority: God.

Christianity began to lose the status of absolute norm as early as the Renaissance and humanism. The educational curriculum, based on a new interest in Greek and Roman authors, sprang from the belief that ancient (pagan) writers rather than medieval Christian scholars represented the peak of human achievement. Although Petrarch and Boccaccio, the pioneers of humanism, had neither read many ancient Greek texts nor spoke fluent classical Latin, their enthusiasm for ancient writers spread across the old continent like wildfire.

When the fall of Constantinople in 1453 brought an end to the eastern Christian or Byzantine empire, many Greek-speaking Constantinopolites found refuge in Italian city-states. Not only were they skilled speakers of ancient Greek, but they also brought with them many ancient manuscripts. The ancient Greek and Latin curriculum received new impetus and was formalized in such a way that in the sixteenth century, classical Latin rather than medieval Latin became the language of spoken and written communication among educated Europeans.

The study of classical works, *respublica litteraria*, consisted of prescribed subjects that were uniform across Europe, thus contributing greatly to the emergence of a kind of solidarity among educated elites. Able to turn to classical sources for inspiration, their descriptions and criticism of the world were no longer dependent on *respublica Christiana* alone.

The emerging rejection of the absolute Christian norm came to light in Boccaccio's and Petrarch's works that — written in the Italian vernacular — dealt with the popular topics of everyday life, love and eroticism, adventures on the open road and carnal insights in kitchens. In other words, the medieval world was reshaped into the modern world through the symbolical adoption of diverse experiences and the stylization of lived experience.

By the end of the fifteenth century, the new invention, Guttenberg's movable printing press, made possible the publication of ancient Greek and Latin texts previously available only as manuscripts. European printers' hunger for new

and popular products increased their interest in authors writing in the vernaculars and dealing with popular subjects. In the early sixteenth century, around two thousand printing presses across Europe encouraged and enabled the dizzying diffusion of ideas, including revolutionary ones. By that time, works by Francois Rabelais, Geoffrey Chaucer and other authors writing in the vernacular already accounted for the majority of all published works.

One trait shared by the best among these texts was that, although religious in tone and perhaps even in intention, they nevertheless placed man at the centre of attention. Man, not God, became the main subject of description, doubt and criticism.

The lure of freedom to which modern man responded, and not without a shudder of excitement, was perhaps most lucidly explored by Machiavelli and Luther. Each, in his unique way, came to the far-reaching realization that the site of moral life was no longer a community but an individual. The fragile balance of power in national affairs and the fragile balance of soul in human relations; both describe the developmental trends of western modernity, Machiavelli in the name of national interests and Luther in the name of personal liberation.

The first condition for such a perception of the world was the separation of Church and State. In modern states, it is a constitution and legislation, not the doctrines of one religious community or another, that determine the basic frameworks of co-existence. Christians of various denominations across post-Renaissance Europe came to recognize a new principle: that of relative autonomy enjoyed by various spheres (science, arts, ethics). In other words, in modernity scientific rules cannot be applied to the religious sphere without inflicting serious cognitive harm; and by the same token, the sphere of art cannot be required to observe religious principles.

While the Renaissance, humanism, Protestantism and capitalism destroyed the metaphysical unity of the Christian world, the *compleat mapa mundi*, the twins of Enlightenment and the French Revolution provided the legal framework for the modern paradigm. Finding encouragement in the fresh examples of successful and total change, namely the liberation of thirteen American colonies from the British crown, France set the new rules of game with the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. Both documents would have been unimaginable during the feudal ancien régime. The missionaries of the Enlightenment no longer saw the world as being based on privileges arising from blue blood and Church traditions, but on the equality of all before the law of the state. Instead of the God-blessed monarchy, the secular state and its representative government became the main organizers of communal life.

Civilization and barbarism

Modern western civilization, born as it was from the pains of revolution, is far from monolithic. This holds true, too, when it is compared to other civilizations. The late American professor, Samuel Huntington, famously viewed the world as the "clash of civilizations", with the clash between the West and Islam in the foreground.

Yet such a perception of the world is based on a false assumption: that civilizations behave like countries. Civilizations, however, do not have material power or control over a territory, and they do not behave like singular "players". A much more appropriate representation of a civilization is to

imagine it as a cognitive framework or a package of ideas. And ideas have always travelled among civilizations.

Think of the ancient Greek and Roman ideas of law and art, philosophy and politics! Their enormous influence on modern western imaginaries is well evidenced. Moreover, their impact can be observed far beyond the time and space of the community that first integrated them successfully into its symbolic economy. Armenians, Jews, Persians, Egyptians and other peoples eagerly utilized these ideas for centuries, long after their originators had disappeared under the ruins of collapsed empires.

Borders between civilizations are neither clear-cut nor impenetrable. Rather, they are shifting and permeable demarcation lines traversed by the processes of cross-fertilization and cross-stimulation, acceptance and rejection. Civilizations are invariably in contact, communication and conflict with one another. For this reason, all civilizations are "impure" and "hybrid".

In principle, all civilizations are reluctant to accept ideas that are in conflict with dominant opinion and manner of behaviour; but most absorb the inventions that promise to reinforce power, wealth and prestige. They differ precisely in their ability to recognize the promises of freedom that emerge from the communication between "local" and "foreign" inventions.

Sceptics are particularly numerous among the ranks of those who would like to place an equation mark between Christianity and modern Europe, making Europe a Christian realm. The test of the authenticity of this theory is quick and painless: try calculating your monthly salary using Roman numerals! Everyone will agree that this would be an awkward and time-consuming task. The expedient elegance of Arabic numerals is much better. Along with the decimal system, it is an indispensable component of modern western literacy.

Medieval Muslims, whose reign stretched from the African and European Mediterranean in the West to Iran, India and China in the East, took these symbols from Indian mathematicians. They brought them to Moorish Europe in the tenth century. Western languages pay tribute by gratefully naming them "Arabic numerals", although the Arabs themselves do not conceal their origin either and call them "Hindu numerals". Here, hybridity comes to light in a most graphic way.

As the modern West detached itself from its moorings by colonizing South and North America, a process was set in motion. While the colonists indeed arrived to the new coasts under the flag of belligerent Christianity, they were already the children of revolutionary times. No wonder, then, that the processes of globalization were driven by both the warrior's sword and the writer's pen. Hernan Cortes and other conquistadores no doubt committed genocide against native peoples in the name of Christian superiority. But other Christians who disembarked in the new world bravely rejected crime, and meticulously catalogued atrocities in the name of equality of all people, whether "civilized" Europeans and "barbarian" natives.

Bartolome de las Casas, a contemporary of Colombo and later the first bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, arrived in Cuba as a young dandy eager for a quick profit. Horrified at the torture of locals, he joined the monastic order of Dominicans and later meticulously documented and condemned colonialism in the *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), a bestseller that was eagerly read across Europe. It is Hernan Cortes and Bartolome de las Casas *together*

that represent the true face of modern western civilization — its Janus face.

This also means that the power of the modern West lies precisely in sceptical reflection and reasoned critique. This gave birth to a recognition that has been repeatedly confirmed by history and, in a particularly painful manner, by the totalitarian twentieth century: "There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism", concluded Walter Benjamin, the melancholic voice of the homeless Weimar Left, writing in exile in Paris. Benjamin's analysis of the staggering coincidence of German artistic mastery and political catastrophe actually illuminates the structural frame of the modern West.

The global framework of the modern West

The ideas and technologies conceived by the modern West have today become global. The processes of the first globalization during the imperial sixteenth century, the second globalization during the colonial nineteenth century, and the third globalization in the corporate twenty-first century, changed the world dramatically. All national groups and cultural traditions on the planet have become interdependent through the exchange of ideas and information, people and capital, goods and services.

In the course of these processes, the ideas of the modern West turned into a general framework that today governs the reasoning and operation of the contemporary world. Modernization and westernization are Siamese twins. Those societies that rejected important elements of the package sooner or later encountered great obstacles, for example, the Soviet Union yesterday or North Korea today.

What does this package include? For starters, the basic notions of time and space. Consider this: years and longer time units are measured by the Gregorian calendar that western (Latin) Christianity designed in the sixteenth century. Hours and smaller units of time are measured by a clock, a mechanical device based on the use of weights and transfer of force discovered by Muslim engineers in Moorish Europe and adapted to public use by the Latin Christian monks in the late Middle Ages. Gerard Mercator, a Renaissance cartographer from the Netherlands, substantially improved the spatial representation of the world through the invention of a globe. After initial resistance, which lasted a good hundred years, Mercator's theory was accepted within the Ottoman Empire, then the most formidable non-European power, and later elsewhere across the Islamic Middle East. Today, such understanding of time and space is on evidence across the globe.

The package also includes political geography. Borders between countries should and can be drawn in a way that influences the sense of group belonging. Such an organization of life naturally requires symbolical narratives that can be used by people in their collective search for the common good.

The modern West invented a number of such narratives. Among them are representative government and the rule of law; the separation of church and state; freedom of speech, media and association; nationalism and liberalism; individualism and human rights; but also clericalism and communism, Nazism and Fascism. During the colonial era, the package was transplanted, virtually wholesale, to the two Americas and Australia. Elsewhere in the world, even the most stubborn local elites were compelled to accept it in order to be able to participate in administrative affairs or gain independence.

After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism in the late twentieth century, modern western capitalism indisputably became the global system. We have no grounds for doubting its worldwide presence. However, we have good grounds for doubting its alleged responsibility for the division of the planet into the "West and the Rest".

The idea about the two opposing camps containing all humankind is certainly appealing. Politically progressive advocates of a different, supposedly more just world find this simple division attractive because it creates room for accusatory moralization. The reactionary advocates of the clash of civilizations, on the other hand, find it hard to resist open arrogance and contempt for all non-western peoples, nations and cultures.

Westernistic civilization

Instead of subscribing to the ideology that views the world through the "hard" lens of conflict between "the West and the Rest", let us try a theory that looks at the world through the "soft" lens of "westernistic" civilization.

An analogy between Hellenistic and westernistic civilization is helpful. In much the same way as classical Greece cannot be equated with Hellenic civilization, the modern West is not the same as westernistic civilization. Until 4 BC and the twilight of city-states, classical Greek civilization remained within the territorial borders of the southern Balkans. Similarly, the civilization of Latin Christianity or the traditional West was firmly rooted in the western countries of Europe until the advent of modernity.

The Hellenistic civilization of Alexander the Great emanated from classical Greek heritage, but territorially it stretched across the entire world then known to man, reaching to Egypt and India, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. In the same way, the westernistic civilization that has arisen from modern western heritage comprises the entire known world today.

A special fusion of Middle Eastern and Indo-Iranian cultural traditions on the one hand, and ancient Greek tradition on the other, gave rise to forms of collective life in which classical Greek ideas represented only the backbone rather than the entire social body. Alexander the Great systematically expanded both the borders of his multi-national empire and the minds of his multi-cultural subjects. He encouraged "mixed marriages" between Greek colonists and locals with the same fervour that he supported merging of Greek and local ideas and technologies.

Westernistic civilization, too, has a hybrid nature. The backbone of the basic package of ideas arises from the heritage of the modern West, but its many ribs extend to all ends of the planet. Various communities in various parts of the world adopt and adapt these ideas in their singular ways as they take into account local specificities. Elections provide an example: this form of representative democracy is today practiced in virtually all countries of the world, although we will readily agree that this process is not equally free and honest across the board.

In ancient Greece, individual identity was determined by the politics of a city-state. It embodied the centre of the world. For this reason, the ancient Greeks engaging in trading and military expeditions, and especially those in overseas colonies, always invoked their homeland, their home city or *metropolis*. In Hellenistic civilization, the origins of a person was not an issue

worthy of much attention. After all, ancient Greek ideas were carried to the outside world by an army under the command of a Macedonian.

Within this empire that stretched across three continents, in which the journeys between regional capitals could take several years, the need for just one centre gradually diminished. The idea of a metropolis was replaced by the idea about a world city or *cosmopolis*. It transcended local citizenship and offered an answer to the new need for diverse identities, obligations and loyalties. Instead of exclusive patriotic feelings incorporated in the ancient Greek differentiation between "the home and the world", the inclusive Hellenistic cosmopolitanism expresses the paradox of global awareness: "The world is the home."

Diverse identities of peoples and locales in westernistic civilization are perhaps best expressed in cosmopolises such as Marseille and Milano, London and Lisbon, Berlin and Barcelona. All of these cities are historically and geographically rooted in the countries and the cultures of the traditional West, but they have included in their symbolic and actual economy many non-western elements. From fast food to intoxicating music, from fashions to exciting social customs, "local" and "foreign" elements merge on the street corner and in the office, producing new synthetic products and hybrid ideas.

A similar process is unfolding beyond the traditional West: megalopolises such as Sydney and Saigon, Cairo and Kuala Lumpur, Mexico City and Manila are the laboratories of diverse identities. While transport and trade, science and industry, communication and arms are unerringly of modern western provenance, every local environment uses them in keeping with their own prejudices and needs, capacities and resources.

Ancient Greek, the lingua franca of the Hellenized world, has acquired many local accents and underwent (not only subtle) adaptations through the babble of tribes and peoples, soldiers and diplomats, merchants and pilgrims. This process is not unlike the spread of the English language in modern westernistic civilization, as various groups and individuals make use of it in their (not only subtle) exchange of ideas, goods and services.

Westernistic civilization therefore does not imply a western model that is uniformly imposed all over the planet in the same manner. This is the assumption of those who advocate the division of the world into the "West and the Rest", explaining the processes of cultural exchange as a blind alley at the end of which the victorious robber (the West) empties the purses of all the rest.

The notion of westernistic civilization carries a cognitively different, even if politically unpromising content. It is a two-way street accommodating a lively trade in ideologies and technologies that the modern West invented, but (no longer) holds in sole possession. To use another illustration: the ideas and technologies of the modern West are like sewing patterns that define the basic rules of tailoring but do not dictate the thickness of the garment or the colour of seams.

Perhaps the best illustration of westernistic civilization is Japan. The Land of the Rising Sun began to absorb western ideas more than a century ago. Having assimilated administrative, military and industrial procedures of the modern western type, Japan avoided the fate of a western colony and itself became a regional colonial force. Japan uses the package of modern western ideas in its own unique way, adapting these to local cultural traditions.

Japan turned the fruits of such hybridization into profitable export items. For experts, these are anime and manga, for ordinary people karaoke and karate, for business elites industrial miniaturization, just-in-time delivery and the mass production of low-price high-quality electronic gadgets. The secret of Japan's global success lies precisely in its ability to creatively combine western and local ideas.

However, it is not possible to overlook the fact that many people in many corners of the planet seriously fear globalization. Unfortunately, the one-sided exposure of the destructive consequences of global trade in services, products and goods is frequently grist to the mill of popular fears and mass paranoia. A terrified mind cannot help but perceive globalization as a flood threatening to sweep away diverse and special cultural traditions, and to seek scapegoats in response.

A closer look will show that many critics of globalization point their moralist finger and turn up their refined noses at one or another internationally popular style, be it teenage hip hop or Madonna's indulgent raving, Hollywood kitsch or hard-boiled detective movies. To be more precise: the critics of globalization frequently use cultural diversity and defence of collective (national) identities as a kind of smoke screen. It usually conceals some other agenda: in most cases, it is romantic anti-capitalism that is close to leftist zeal, or modern anti-Americanism nourishing rightwing litanies.

The actual processes of globalization are controversial and complex, but the international exchange of ideas and technologies, symbols and methods of operation increases and broadens cultural diversity. If culture is understood as a laboratory of meaning, on which individual communities feed, then we have to accept the flexible process of adaptation and resistance, transformations and hybridity, where the border between the "domestic" and the "foreign" evaporates like cheap petrol.

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