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**Culture at a Crossroad:  
Diversity in Culture - Unity in Rights ?**

*The Question*

The main heading for this conference is "Culture at a Crossroad" - indicating that by entering the new century our culture has to find another track: The challenges ahead are of such a character that we cannot just continue to support the values and patterns of orientation typical for the previous years.

Within this broader frame, I am supposed to say something about the diversity in modern culture and how this diversity may, or may not, have implications for our notions of Human Rights.

This is a big subject within a broad frame of reference, and I should say something about it in xx minutes. The first task for me would be to define what I, as a sociologist, mean by "culture". Then say something about the challenges that we, on a global scale, can expect to face in the years to come. Then see if an acceptable response to these challenges will require another collective orientation, another track for our culture. And finally ask if such an orientation has to influence our attitudes to Human Rights.

This means that I will see declarations of rights, as well as other aspects of collective cultural ideals, in a social or civilizational perspective. First of all I should delimit the concept of culture to a sociological perspective. A common definition within the social sciences is the following, formulated by Edward B. Tylor in 1871: "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"1).

This is a relatively broad definition of culture, much broader than just values or *bon artes*; but not as broad as the term used in the natural science - nature versus culture - indicating that everything formed by men is culture. We are talking about a pattern of orientation which regulates, but not determines, human behaviour. We focus on patterns for acceptable behaviour, not on social behaviour as such.

*The Challenge of Modernity*

Even if this is the turn of a Millennium, we should not regard all challenges ahead of us as new ones, or presume that old challenges concerning modernity are gone, and that we are now

facing some sort of post-modern times. Contemporary challenges are to a great degree an intensified version of challenges that enlightened people have been concerned about for a long time.

By "Modernity" a sociologist will think about the changing conditions for societal formation following the technological-economic English Revolution and the political-cultural French Revolution, not so much about the Philosophy of the Renaissance, even if this philosophy was a prerequisite for the changes leading to the English and French revolutions.

The industrial revolution was a challenge for traditional solidarity; not only because of the changes it brought to our physical environment, but because it led to a form of diversity in human work and orientation which made it difficult to restore an old solidarity based upon identification and similarity.

The French revolution not only brought an end to the ascribed authority of the kings and priests, by proclaiming human inherited liberty and requiring rationality as the basis for authority, it also made it more difficult to find reasons for supra-individual morality that everybody had to accept.

After these revolutions, political life in modern societies has been dominated by ideologies, trying to find solutions to the challenge of combining morality with rationality and diversity.

### *The Fall of the Inadequate Ideologies*

Ideologies - etymologically from *idea* and *logos* - have played a central place in Western culture and politics during the last two hundred years. Karl Marx understood "ideology" as deceiving notions about society, used by an upper class to pacify and suppress an under class. Later, at least since Karl Mannheim wrote his book *Ideology and Utopia* in the 1920s, ideologies have been understood as various ideas about society, used by different groups in such a way that the ideologies legitimated their particular interests as the common one.

Liberalism was the first ideology to be fully formulated after the French and English revolutions. Liberalism is characterized not only by its priority to the value of freedom. More characteristic is the notion of the individual and society as two entities in, philosophically speaking; "external relations": Both individual and society could be defined independently of each other, the individual became gradually understood by categories of nature and of a common reason. This notion could lead to the idea that society was just a set of rules and regulations limiting the freedom of the individual; and consequently: The less power for society the more freedom for the individual.

Before long, this ideology was opposed by conservative thinkers. Both the safety of the individual and the civilizing character of society depended upon supra-individual rules, regulations and, in the end, religion. Abstract theory could not replace tradition, and every society would need an elite for representing reason.

However, neither liberalism nor conservatism led to an adequate control of class power or secured equal chances for all. Socialism is the third of the great ideologies fighting for power

and influence from the second half of the nineteenth century. But, even socialism could become an ideology based upon particular party interests.

From the beginning of the twentieth century a fourth ideology won foothold. Various forms of fascism and national socialism was supposed to restore unity and order by emphasising national solidarity as a prime value compared to as well bourgeois liberalism as proletarian socialism, both considered to be backed up by jews without any particular national loyalty.

As I said, by the middle of the 1920<sup>th</sup> all these four ideologies - supposed to give the central answer to the challenge of modernity - could compete on the same political market. Thereafter they fell, or lost creditability, one by one.

The old *laizzes faire* liberalism lost its reputation and public support after the crack in 1929. National Socialism lost its war in 1945. For the elite conservatism, based upon traditional authority, 1968 is a year of defeat. 1989 became the year for the dissolution of Marxist socialism.

All these ideologies have had different ideas about the challenge of modernity. The concrete processes leading to their fall have also been different. Even so, we can find similarities which invite to generalisations.

They all appealed to a particular section of society, giving these people an assumption of representing common solutions for the best of society. They all gave comprehensive ideas about what was wrong with modern society. The simplicity of these notions led to miscalculations and to maladjustments. Apparent abilities to neutralise all fundamental critique led to a self-immunisation that prevented a necessary correction of orientation.

So, what is then left by the turn of the century? Some writes believe that all ideologies are dead and that we are now facing modernity in its naked reality. Others believe that a marked oriented American way of life, idealising the consumer's choice, as a highest value and the final ideology for modernity. The European version of this orientation has, to a somewhat greater extent, emphasised law-regulated rights for the individual. The New Liberalism is not antagonistic toward welfare and governments as were the old liberalism.

### *The Limits of New Liberalism*

There are all reasons to regard New Liberalism as an ideology, understood according to five hallmarks: A system of thoughts about society. A dependence upon particular interest presented as common interests. A simplified view leading to a distortion of common reality-orientation. Negative consequences for a victimized part. Self-immunization against fundamental critique and correction.

Even if the philosophy of New Liberalism is implicit, while it publicly is presented in terms of Modernity or the politics of the Free World, it still entails some very disputable premises. For instance, if we go back to what sociologists would regard as typical for modernity - the differensiation of work and institutions, meaning that an economic institution and the institution of family cannot be rules by the same set of norms - New Liberalism is built upon

notions of the individual's choice in a market as an universal model for modernity and freedom.

This notion of economic norms as a universal response to the challenge of modernity, is as one-sided as were the simplistic views in previous ideologies, whether these wanted to use the norms of religion, of family relations or of political authority as a model for all sectors of society. Even if the New Liberalism also include a sector for a legally regulated bureaucracy and social welfare programs, to balance the dominance of the market, it will still represent a simplified system for thinking about differentiated societies.

There are several groups who might have particular interests in presenting these notions as a final response to the challenge of modernity. These groups, whether in business or bureaucracy, can have considerable power, not least in the field of ideological production. The consequences of this orientation will nevertheless be series of inadequate solutions to the challenge of an inadequate moral motivation and societal cohesion, to the challenge of failing family formation and an adequate reproduction - the average reproductive level among the young generation within the EU countries is estimated to be 1,5 children per woman. Contemporary forms of adjustment to the ecological limits of our living conditions might in the long term prove disastrous. Even if we today know a great deal about limited resources, pollution and changes in climate conditions, it is very difficult to change a dysfunctional form of development. At least as long as those who have particular interests in ongoing processes, can legitimate these by referring to liberal principles of the free market and to the declarations of human rights, defending individual needs as a superior value to ecological systems.

New Liberalism is a new particularistic ideology and not a universal answer to the challenge of modernity. Central ideas within New Liberal thinking do fit the criteria of an ideology. If we are not able to see and to overcome the self immunization of this ideology, we are likely to be deceived by it and be lead into various crisis.

My first conclusion is that contemporary culture leads us to a cross road, where we have to choose between blind production and consumption, combined with a cult of ego-realization and a culture of entertainment, or - to "live within limits" and create a culture for responsible reality orientation.

### *The Liberal Dilemma*

There are more to be said about contemporary culture and its dependence upon the premises of liberalism.

Even if the New Liberalism does not idealize the minimum state as did the Old Liberalism, it still entails basic liberal categories and models for thinking. Among these are the assumptions of merely *external relations* between the individual and society - a premise for the particular liberal concepts of *freedom*, and for the notion of "*rights*" which every individual is supposed to possess in the same way, "as human beings", independent of cultural belonging.

The social sciences could give several explanations to the development of individuals to personalities and social beings<sup>2</sup>). There can be given empirical evidence for the conclusion that human beings are socialized differently in different cultures, and that a responsible

freedom of choice depends upon thinking, a language system and culturally developed frames of meaning.

As infants, we are born dependent and unfree. It is only through culture, in a social setting, that we can have a chance to realize our potentialities as persons. ? The proclamation of Rousseau, about man being born free and later laid in chain by society, may fit a liberal myth, but it is very misleading as premise for a deeper understanding of freedom.

The liberal notion of freedom can also be criticized as logically contradictory, and therefore not valid. The philosopher Hegel criticized, in his philosophy of rights, the liberal ideal of a future political order without substantial commands over the individual. Such an idea can never be realized, even if substantial commands can be disguised. Hegel analyzed the liberal program for religious neutrality on behalf of the state. He saw that this assumed neutrality had to lead to a conclusion that religion should be considered as a solely private matter. But, this *principle of privatization* could not be considered a matter for considerations and choice. The privatization principle had to become a substantial state command, not only in contrast to the understanding of religion among believers as well as among religious researchers, but also in contrast to the original liberal program for a state based upon formal freedom alone.

Later this was termed *the liberal dilemma*; in Norway elaborated by Hans Skjervheim What Hegel wrote about the liberal understanding of religion, others have analyzed as a general problem imbedded in liberal understanding of culture 3).

### *Liberal concepts of Culture*

Liberal spokesmen can talk about "culture" in several ways. Culture can be seen as art, cultivation, way of life, identity symbols or as stimuli for entertainment or excitement. Apparently, liberal thinking shows tolerance for a variety of cultural concepts.

To see the substantial command in these various notions, and the limits of the liberal perspectives, we should consider what concepts of culture is *not* compatible with liberal thinking. We can then go back to Edward Tylors definition from 1871. The complex whole of knowledge and belief, seen in a societal context, is not compatible with this thinking. If we see culture as a constituting prerequisite for as well personality formation as for the formation of collective communities, we have said that there is an *internal relation* between the individual and society, the one cannot be fully understood except in relation to the other. If we accept this, we also have to accepted that the liberal understanding of human freedom, as a loosening of social ties, is a misleading track.

An acceptance of internal relations between a culture and society, will also have implications for our understanding of society and its requisites 4). Society is not just rules and regulations, and people with different customs - constructed laws and arbitrary conventions. Such a perspective, presupposing only external relations between individual and society, can potentially lead to fatal consequences; as was also the case in former Yugoslavia, where liberal lawyers and politicians believed they could form viable states merely by deciding new borders and new laws, assuming that the inhabitants would loyally obey and treat each other as equals, independent of cultural orientation and feeling of "we-ness".

In other Western countries the same type of liberal thinking has led to an idealization of what is called "multicultural societies". - If we, on the other hand, had seen that community and loyalty is partly constituted by a common culture, different cultures within a state can be expected to lead to different communities within that state, which indeed also have happened, and quite often leading to rather hostile relations between culturally different communities.

Seen from a sociological point of view, it seems obvious that moral development within a society depends upon certain cultural conditions. According to Emile Durkheim, known for his studies of *anomie*, morality depends upon autonomy, a disciplined spirit and a loyalty to a social community 5). There are several reasons to expect that these conditions will be hard to realize within a society governed by solely liberal principles. In societies governed by ideals of individuality, freedom of choice and social tolerance, without a supra-individual culture with other qualities, moral development can become quite critical.

For some time the consequences of a weak morale can be defined as problems for the agencies of the welfare state. But these solutions will not last, as the liberal state simultaneously generate more clients for national welfare programs and a culture undermining as well religious orientation as national identity and loyalty.

### *Understanding of culture at a civilizational level*

A critique of contemporary ideas of individual freedom of choice and of society as a multicultural market is repeatedly responded by a certain set of arguments. Sometimes it is said that these ideas represent a moral bullwall against dictatorship and coercion. At other times it is said that these are an inevitable part of globalization, and that we have no choice but to accept an order for the future.

To many people both these types of arguments may sound credible, as they both fit into a New Liberal ideology. They are nevertheless deceiving. Democracy - rules of the people - presuppose that people within a political entity are culturally constituted as "a people". Globalization can never become a functional alternative to local and national units, at best a new circle for orientation and identification outside the circles of the family, the local community, the nation and a civilization.

There are many reasons for saying that we live in a world where national borders cannot be seen as the final ones. But, this does not mean that neither "globalization" nor "the world system" are the only answer to supranational challenges 6). As the nation state become relatively less important than before, the civilizational border become more important 7). These are partly religious, linguistic, ethnic, historical and geographic units.

With regard to Western Civilization, this is characterized by seven recognizable criteria, according to Samuel Huntington. These are: the classical heritage, Catholicism and Protestantism, the division between spiritual and political authority, European languages, government by law, representative bodies, and individualism 8).

A civilization is not just characterized by a set of "values", which we are free to choose otherwise, if we feel for it. For instance, the Western value of "freedom" cannot be seen

independent of a certain "individualism". When Western civilization has been able to value individualism without falling apart or being demoralized by egotism, this is because Western individualism has been closely connected to a relatively strong moral of conscience. This in turn has presupposed a cultivated feeling strong of guilt and of sin. Strong guilt is not tolerable without a possibility for forgiveness. It is no coincidence that this type of moral individualism has developed within a Christian civilization.

No previous civilization has survived its religious premises. It is even dubious whether Western Civilization has responded to the challenge of modernity in such a way that it will be the first.

If we move to oriental civilizations, we will find other frames of meaning for moral development. Here, the family is usually regarded as the moral agent. Shame is the measure of moral sanctions. To restore honor, negotiations or a justified revenge can come into considerations.

People growing up in a civilization based upon a moral of guilt and a civilization of shame will not become persons in the same way 9).

This has implications for the claim of universality, on behalf of central values in one civilization of another. It must also have implications for our understanding of the universality of rights.

### *Rights and cultural variations*

Among spokesmen who orient themselves in relation to popularity and political correctness, it is often heard that cultural variation is a sign of richness and that we should just enjoy the variation we are facing. It is then usually added that, after all, we belong to the same "human race" and that we therefore all have the same human rights.

A deeper understanding of culture, with its implications for human development, makes such statements somewhat dubious: They fit better a liberal ideology, based upon an external understanding of the relations between individual and society, than a body of knowledge about cultural requisites for connecting rights to the individual.

If we are dealing with relatively small cultural differences, as might be the case between various European nations, the cultural requisites for rights does not necessarily have any direct implication for our considerations of the universality of these rights. However, this does not mean that the idea of human rights can be considered an unproblematic one, when this idea is connected to a Western civilization. The universality of the UN Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 is problematic for a number of reasons 10).

When we talk about equal human rights for people growing up in different civilizational settings, the problems related to the universality of these rights become greater. Not only for practical purposes, it is more difficult to ensure the implications of these rights in, say, an African country than in an European state. The problems are related to dubious assumptions about the external status of a culture. As long as we could consider culture, and human rights, as something external to human essence, the universality of the same rights could perhaps be

defended. If the contemporary notions of human rights are depending upon certain cultural conditions, such as Western individualism, the reasons for claiming universality for this notions become quite problematic.

The philosophy of Natural Rights could possibly have given an answer to the question of supra-cultural universality. Such natural rights are usually deduced as necessary conditions for what we have to take for granted. This has also been the premise for contemporary German philosophers when they consider communication to be a prerequisite for rationality (11). From this philosophy it is possible to say that no one can claim a rationally superior position if they try to treat other person as mere objects. Since rationality is communicative, we have to consider other people as subject and not only as objects. From this we can argue that a natural law makes it impossible to justify slavery or even torture for the purpose of private goals.

But even if it is possible to argue for some negative rights valid for all human beings, it is hard to find supra-historical reasons for justifying the moral superiority of all the thirty Articles in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. This has implications not only for what rights could be justified as functional for non-western civilizations. It also concerns the validity of rights connected to contemporary Western culture.

### *The shortcoming of a liberal ideology*

I started by saying that the challenge of modernity requires a culture that could combine dealing with a diverse reality and at the same time pass a rational test. Spokesmen for various ideologies have tried, and they have all failed, including the spokesmen for New Liberalism.

The shortcoming of New Liberalism is not only caused by particular interest of unworthy spokesmen. Liberalism, both in its old and new version, represents a way of thinking with immanent shortcomings. One such shortcoming is the limitation of cultural understanding, when this should be compatible with liberal frames. A politics for a renewal has to be a politics taking culture seriously. A policy one-sidedly focused upon the freedom and rights of the individual, combined with offers for social support, cannot in the long run become an adequate response to the challenge facing our civilization.

Liberal elites can certainly present several forms of ideological explanations to justify a culture for production and entertainment, but this does not solve the contradictions of this culture (12). Nor does it restore a weak moral authority.

Even weak moral can be ideologically justified, when only seen in the perspective of liberal premises. It can be seen as the price for individual freedom and social tolerance or as an inevitable result of evolution itself. But such answers do not lead to a functionally adequate response to series of morally related challenges. If we look at the development of criminality and social deviance, this is certainly a morally related challenge. The transmission of moral values is a problem in modern media-dominated societies. This cannot be solved by solely playing with the cards of the market.

Contemporary politicians have a rather weak grip on cultural challenges. Dominant ideologies focus on the relations between market and bureaucracy, not upon the cultural conditions for moral communities.

Among other things, this has implications for the development of ideals around family formations and family relations. Weak family structures have consequences that are inadequate for family functions. Contemporary societies in the West have a reproductive pattern far below the replacement level. In big European countries - like Germany, Italy and Spain - younger women are, in average, expected to give birth to between 1,2 and 1,3 children each. If a population should sustain, the birth rate for women living through their fertile years has to be 2,1 children per woman. Even Sweden, with a relatively strong welfare apparatus, had last year to register a lack of 29 000 children compared to what was required for the replacement or zero-growth level. - A sociologist would say that economic regulations are not sufficient to solve morally related problems<sup>13</sup>).

Several European populations are expected to become minorities in their own country before the end of this century. A liberal family policy, combined with series of rights for as well service seeking inhabitants as for individuals from other countries, easily leads to a considerable immigration<sup>14</sup>). To the extent the immigrants stick to their original identity and cultural orientation, we will face a challenge of civilizational proportions<sup>15</sup>).

In order to find sustainable solutions to the moral challenges to our societies, we have to overcome the limits of Neo Liberal ideology as a frame for public debate. This is probably also a necessity for overcoming the most threatening challenge to our civilisation as we know it: our anthropocentric and anti-environmental technical and economic adjustment. No liberal humanism can overcome the ecological limits on this earth<sup>16</sup>).

Even if a cultural reorientation does not solve everything; it is a necessary condition for bringing politics and practical life into a more future-oriented track.

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