Cultural Exclusion and Civil Society

Ana Marta González

The general aim of this meeting, as stated in the introductory booklet, is to “deepen our understanding and explanation of the reasons for social exclusion and... to suggest practicable steps for promoting a thorough-going social and cultural integration”.

The same booklet recommends that we approach this task by outlining “the characteristics of a participatory society capable of promoting the dignity of the human person in a context oriented to the common good and based on the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity”, and therefore, to “highlight the structural elements that would enable any given social system to develop into a more participatory community”.

In order to do so, the programme distributes the topics by distinguishing between social and cultural exclusion. This analytical approach, however, should not prevent us from recognising ways in which both levels are interrelated in practice. Indeed, what should we understand by “cultural exclusion”? In ordinary speech, this expression is usually interpreted in at least two different ways.

1) For some, cultural exclusion designates the situation of “large populations with difficult access to the educational resources necessary to enter ordinary social circuits” who are, therefore, likely to live on the margins of society. Taken in this sense, cultural exclusion can be equated to, or at least initially compared to, “educational exclusion”, which, in turn, tends to reinforce other forms of socio-economic exclusion.

2) Yet, in other instances, the expression “cultural exclusion” refers to a specific form of social exclusion, namely that which takes place every time “people are discriminated against because of their perceived cultural differences with the culturally dominant group”. What we should consider as the “culturally dominant group” is of course open to discussion, especially in a late-modern and global context, which tends to favour cultural hybridity. Nonetheless, speaking of cultural exclusion immediately brings to mind the situation that immigrants, various diaspora communities (Roma, Jews, Africans, Armenians, Palestinians…), or indigenous populations often face: because of their cultural differences, their social progress has very often depended upon assimilation (i.e., hiding their own cultural background). Thus, ghettos should not be viewed only as “the result of racial segregation, poverty and social relegation”, rather they also have a cultural side: they concentrate “a population that has been developing and creating its own way of life, a counter-culture, to protect itself from the outside world” (Lapeyronnie, 2008, pp. 11-12).[1]

Both types of exclusion – educational and cultural exclusion – often come together in practice. To illustrate this point there is no need to resort to sociological imagination because in contemporary life it is, to a large extent, a matter of experience; it is actually a single story told from two different angles.

From one angle, we have people facing situations of deprivation or violence in their own countries who decide to migrate to a foreign land, only to find that, along with the hardships associated with migration, they have to confront an inhospitable, culturally prejudiced, social context. Understandably, they come together in their own cultural communities – in a move which possibly makes their socio-economic integration more difficult; poor socio-economic integration, in turn, can foster cultural estrangement and, in some cases, lead to illegal activity, which then projects social stigma upon the entire community, ultimately reinforcing cultural prejudice. While personal stories prove that this vicious circle can be broken at different stages, the social logic sketched so far suggests the existence of a persistent structural reality, which should be approached both at the local and the supranational levels given its transnational roots and global derivations.

Yet, this story can be told also from the local angle, from the perspective of people living in their own land and lacking the skills and education needed for employment in a global context, which has made knowledge instrumental to the economy. These people also feel excluded from ordinary social circuits and their own socio-economic exclusion is often channelled into a form of cultural exclusion towards foreigners. Thus, the upsurge of xenophobia and the confrontational attitudes we now witness in many Western countries cannot merely be explained by cultural reasons; at their bottom there is also a situation of economic hardship, which cannot be handled at the national level alone.

In the meantime, what all this indicates is the existence of deep divisive forces within Western civil societies, which are not properly articulated through inherited political institutions, or at least through established political
practice. Something else is needed in order to foster truly participatory societies, in a position to overcome the feeling of alienation that nowadays invades so many relevant segments of the population, confronting political and cultural elites with a great number of people, who, for different reasons, feel underrepresented. Something else is needed, too, in order to permeate civil society with the religious and ethical insights that lead many people to overcome political boundaries and show humanity towards the others.

Both the introductory booklet and the letter from President Margaret Archer emphasise the need to explore the dimensions of a truly participatory society, from a bottom-up perspective. In practice, this indication amounts to focusing on the nature of social bonds, i.e., how we create and develop bonds with one another. Within this framework, however, we should be ready to ascribe a more relevant role to culture than is usually the case. Indeed, a bottom-up approach to participation cannot be coerced, but instead “can only grow” as a living thing “from an appropriate anthropological background”. And culture, rightly understood, is primarily an endowment of living human beings. Hence, quoting Pope Francis, the booklet recalls that, “culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory part of contemporary reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and society”.

Indeed, as I would like to argue below, human beings do not merely enact or reproduce existing cultural norms, but rather interpret them, negotiate with them, and recreate them whenever confronted with different situations. The ability to inspire spontaneous cultural change from within shows the vitality of any given culture, which is to say: the vitality of the people sharing in that culture and their ability to make sense of the world at hand. By contrast, cultural sclerosis is a sign of decadence. Hence, real preservation of any culture entails something more than artificially protecting an idealised image of our past, of our own selves, which can easily lead to the construction of barriers against the other. It entails the spirit and a kind of human conviviality that is capable of overcoming the dialectic between “us” and “them”.

In what follows, however, I will start by addressing the first meaning of “cultural exclusion” indicated above. To this end, I will briefly sketch the global distribution of “educational exclusion”, according to the data released by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics[2] and the Global Report on Education in 2016. This mainly descriptive account of those findings will prepare the second, more reflective part of my text, where I will focus on cultural exclusion in a more specific way.

1. **Global distribution and etiology of educational exclusion**

If we take the adult literacy rate[3] as a significant indicator[4] of educational exclusion, we should note that according to data released in 2016,

“The global adult literacy rate was 85%, which means 758 million adults lacked any literacy skills. There were 91 literate women for every 100 literate men – and as few as 74 literate women for every 100 literate men in low income countries. The youth literacy rate was 91%, meaning 114 million youth lacked any literacy skills. The youth literacy rate was as low as 71% in sub-Saharan Africa” (Global Report, pages 278-280).

Illiteracy represents a very basic indicator of cultural exclusion, yet it is an important one, as it hinders all access to the ordinary paths of social progress. Now, its causes are complex, both of a structural and cultural nature. Legal guarantees of compulsory and free education are very different among countries. According to the Global Report, 12 countries with low literacy rates provide no data about compulsory education;[5] seven of these are considered low-income countries (Cambodia, Burundi, Nepal, Ethiopia, Gambia, Malawi, Somalia), while other three are low-middle income (Bhutan, Ivory Coast, Zambia).[6] Yet, on top of this economic situation, education systems can also be subject to a number of contingencies,[7] such as natural disasters or armed conflict,[8] that have a negative impact on education.

**a) Political instability and underdevelopment**

Many countries in the regions with the lowest literacy rates – South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa – have suffered armed conflicts in the recent past.[9] The overall impact of such conflicts on the educational system is huge,[10] not only because they provoke a significant number of internally displaced people,[11] who cannot pursue usual educational paths, but also because it may take years to rebuild schools and re-establish educational practices. In order to tackle this problem, we should analyse the etiology of these conflicts and examine the reasons of their persistence over time. Indeed, from a global perspective, it makes sense to question the responsibility of first world countries, which are the biggest suppliers of weapons,[12] if not directly to the countries at war, then to neighbouring countries.[13] Couldn’t this be considered an essential form of material cooperation with war? Clarifying the structure of this cooperation might lead us to consider the idea of first world countries’ “moral debt” to the people who ultimately suffer the consequences of local conflicts, a debt that increases as the arms trade contributes more and more to significant percentages of the GDP.
and economic growth in the countries in question. According to the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, “world military expenditure is estimated to have been $1676 billion in 2015, representing 2.3% of global GDP or $228 per person. Total global expenditure in 2015 was about 1% higher in real terms than in 2014”.[14] The SIPRI Report also observes that, “Sustainable Development Goal 4 for 2030, on education, could be comfortably achieved at a cost of well under 10 per cent of annual global military spending, while eliminating extreme poverty and hunger (SDGs 1 and 2) would cost just over 10 per cent. A little less than half the world’s annual military spending would be sufficient to meet the majority of those SDGs for which additional economic resources are a central requirement”. [15] Of course, this is easier said than done, as changing those figures means changing the way the economy actually works; after all, there is an arms trade because there is a demand for weapons, and recent political developments do not suggest that said demand will decrease any time soon. Yet, not long ago, Jeffrey Sachs suggested the possibility of creating a Global Fund for Education,[16] transferring money from the weapons trade to this fund would be a significant step, as long as it not perceived as a legitimization of the trade.

### b) Living in a slum

More generally, cultural exclusion may be seen as a by-product of other forms of socioeconomic exclusion, which often find reflection in the organisation of rural and urban space. This is certainly the case when it comes to people living in the slums of the so-called “megacities” or “hypercities” of the developing world, as well as in some ghettos of Western nations.[17] We are talking about no less than 860 million people worldwide, and there are estimations that “the number of slum dwellers grew by six million each year from 2000 to 2010 (UN-Habitat 2012a). In sub-Saharan Africa, slum populations are growing at 4.5% per annum, a rate at which populations are set to double every 15 years”. [18]

In his 2006 book, *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis provided an impressive account of the transformation of human space generated by this massive growth which has led to merge urban and rural spaces, giving place to what some have come to call “in-between cities”, “with neither traditional cores nor recognizable peripheries”. [19]

“According to UN-HABITAT, the world’s highest percentages of slum-dwellers are in Ethiopia (an astonishing 99.4% of the urban population), Chad (also 99.4%), Afghanistan (98.5%), and Nepal (92%). Bombay, with 10 to 12 million squatters and tenement-dwellers, is the global capital of slum-dwelling, followed by Mexico City and Dhaka (9 to 10 million each), and then Lagos, Cairo, Karachi, Kinshasa-Brazzaville, Sao Paulo, Shanghai, and Delhi (6 to 8 million each)”. [20]

We can appreciate that these figures – especially in the case of Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Chad or Nepal – correlate to a great extent with the ones for illiteracy. Indeed, although there are socioeconomic differences between slums,[21] as well as within each slum, it is generally assumed that the quality of educational resources for people living in slums is considerably lower. We lack clear data on this topic,[22] but the fact is that most initiatives to improve life in slums are still focused on basic services, such as housing, water and sanitation, even if, as the UNESCO Report observes, education remains a priority for communities.[23]

More generally, in order to prevent social exclusion,[24] sound urban policies should be implemented because, as Landy *et alia* point out: “living in a slum is a factor, not only a sign, of exclusion”. [25] While speaking of slums nowadays no longer carries the moral stigma that Victorian society projected on 19th century industrial slums, it often carries the stigma of insecurity that is associated with high crime rates in those areas.

In a fascinating book, which describes her research in Rio’s *favelas* during the 60s and then again in the 90s, anthropologist Janice Perlman reveals crucial changes in this regard:[26]

“When I lived in the favelas in 1968-1969 I felt safe and protected, while everyone from elites to taxi drivers to leftist students foolishly perceived these settlements as dangerous. The community was poor, but people mobilized to demand improved urban services, worked hard, had fun, and had hope. They watched out for each other, and daily life had a calm convivial rhythm. When I returned in 1999, the physical infrastructure and household amenities were greatly improved. But where there had been hope, now there were fear and uncertainty. People were afraid of getting killed in the crossfire during a drug war between competing gangs, afraid that their children would not return alive after school, or that a stray bullet would kill their toddlers playing on their verandas. They felt more marginalized than ever – further from gaining the respect others assume (or are granted) as a birthright”. [27]

Trying to make sense of the data, she “could not find convincing linkages between macro-level changes – such as the transformation from dictatorship to democracy, the progression from economic boom to inflation, (...) or the changeover from punitive to pro-poor public policies – and the ups and downs in the lives of the *favelados*”. [28]
What she found was a more complex situation: while some grandchildren of the people she had met in her first visit had successfully moved through the divide and had established themselves in the city,[29] this was far from being the rule. After two generations, people who come from the favelas still struggle to be recognised as equals by other citizens. Apart from this, other social developments have resulted in a generalised atmosphere of fear, basically developed after “the entrance of drug and arms traffic into the favelas, beginning in the mid-1980s”.[30] Thus, while improving education for slum dwellers is critical in their attaining of full social inclusion and development, there are other elements beyond educational and sound urban policies that need to be holistically targeted in order to clear the path for their social integration. Transnational crime is one of them.

c) Inclusion of indigenous cultures

Yet, in addition to the structural and socio-economic factors mentioned above, which have an obvious impact on the resources devoted to education, in order to avoid educational exclusion specifically cultural factors need to be taken into account. The UNESCO Report refers to some research sustaining the view that,

“The strong Western focus of education systems and institutions around the world impedes meaningful inclusion of indigenous populations and their knowledge and practices within the formal schooling system. Factors involved include curricula that lack local relevance and devalue indigenous knowledge; use of the dominant language for instruction instead of the home language (Batibo, 2009); standardized assessment strategies (Barnhardt and Kawagley, 2005); and faculty attitudes about curricula (Radoll, 2015). These factors often clash with traditional teachings (Nakashima et al., 2012)”.[31]

By introducing this element, the focus of educational exclusion shifts from mere enrolment in the educational system to the improvement of this system such that, along with providing the education necessary to be competitive in the global market, other measures are taken that bolster indigenous traditions and culture. How to do this is to a large extent, a matter of research and of imagination that can be tackled only through relevant participation by those directly concerned. It is not easy to see, for instance, how inclusive education can meet the needs of nomadic and pastoralist groups whose lifestyle “conflict with typical schooling formats”[32] or how traditional knowledge can be incorporated in the educational system.[33] This represents a challenge not only for underdeveloped countries, but also for developed ones that serve as host nations to indigenous populations, and are committed to multicultural policies, such as Australia or Canada.[34] To the extent that inclusive education contributes to social integration,[35] exploring the possibilities of more participatory approaches should be welcome.

In this context, the UNESCO Report also warns us that,

“Disputes over curricular contents have sometimes directly spilled over into violent conflict. In 2000, when overtly Sunni textbooks were introduced in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Northern Areas, the local Shia population began to agitate for equal representation in textbook discussions of Islam. The conflict became acute in 2004-2005 as violent confrontations took place between Shia and Sunni communities, with the resulting curfews closing down schools for almost a year (Ali, 2008)”.[36]

Cultural and ideological disputes on a variety of aspects related to curricular content, parents’ rights in educational issues, or language policies in education, are also highly contested matters in Western countries, especially when policies are perceived, or framed, as ways of reinforcing social inequality.[37] Even if these disputes do not result in violent conflict, they point toward significant differences in how to approach social equality and its relationship with freedom. Always a difficult balance, promoting equality while respecting freedom becomes a particularly intractable problem within certain educational systems that de facto impose a monolithic, if not imperialistic, approach to social equality and cultural issues, creating cultural exclusion as a collateral effect. Thus, reflection on the limitations of current approaches to education invites reflection on cultural diversity and cultural prejudice.

2. Cultural exclusion and cultural prejudice

“Cultural exclusion” in the second sense advanced above – as discrimination based on cultural differences – needs not be explicitly articulated; it may be simply ingrained in social practices that explicitly or implicitly affirm the superiority of one’s own culture above others.[38] This kind of cultural exclusion very often finds support in persistent historical narratives constructed around the distinction between “us and them”, which prejudice the way in which we approach people from other cultural backgrounds. Insofar as these narrative constructs become a factor of social exclusion, they are a matter of concern.

Cultural prejudice can operate both at the level of small social interactions and at more structural levels. Both levels are relevant in the context of contemporary migratory movements, which, especially in the West, are turning cultural differences into a matter of public debate, although the problems are by no means of just a
cultural nature. By “cultural differences” I mean the variety of representations, habits, techniques, practices, customs, rituals, etc. developed by different human groups throughout time in response to various needs. Accordingly, cultural differences include both theoretical and practical elements, which, while unequally shared by the individual members of a given group, account for the different ways in which we make sense of and come to inhabit the world.

a) Culture as a work in progress

Starting with Franz Boas, cultural anthropology began distinguishing between cultural and racial differences, making it clear that race is a biological concept, whereas culture is not. Indeed, the word “culture” does not designate a biological reality, but rather it is a symbolic mediation of meaning and value. Thus, culture is created and preserved by human beings interacting with each other, in ways that do not exclude internal debate and critique. While this latter fact eventually leads to dissent and internal cultural change, individuals in a particular social group usually take for granted many elements of the culture inherited from their group as the “normal” way of interacting with the world. Precisely, such “normality” is spontaneously challenged and reflectively questioned whenever individuals confront other peoples and cultures or, more generally, when they confront problems that cannot be solved in their usual way. From this perspective, every instance of cultural change demands the interplay of habit and reason by the relevant social agents, who are in charge of developing innovative responses out of the material available to them.

To the extent that these responses are indebted to an inherited world of cultural resources and meanings, we can say that culture is socially created and has an objective existence. Yet, insofar as cultural change and creativity require personal appropriation and elaboration of existing materials, culture constitutes an individual endowment, or a sort of second nature, mediating between natural human needs and the rational realm of meaning and value. Hence, culture is always a work in progress, permeable to the work of reason, both theoretical and practical, and in this way it becomes a vehicle for the expression of human subjectivity. All this means that individuals are not just passive carriers of socially created culture, but are also creative agents of culture themselves, both individually and by cooperating with others.

b) Cultural prejudice and public discourses

Against this conceptual background, the advance of “cultural exclusion” might indicate social agents’ inability to reflectively elaborate their own culture, so as to make room for cultural difference. Yet cultural exclusion is also an attitude that manifests itself in a variety of social acts, which can be viewed both from the side of those who exclude as well as from the side of those who feel excluded on the basis of legitimate and/or reasonable social expectations.[39] At this point, attention should be paid to the social context because, in each historical instance, it is debatable that the reasons either for social exclusion or inclusion can be solely traced back to cultural differences. Thus, speaking of cultural exclusion in Europe nowadays immediately brings to mind migratory movements taking place in a complex social scenario due to the combination of three different factors: economic crisis, the European refugee crisis, and security concerns – especially those associated with terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists.[40] The combination of these factors can prompt people to cast suspicion on the cultural other. If we replace terrorism with other forms of organised crime, a similar damaging association is also in play in the migratory movements of Latinos towards the United States through the Mexican border. In such complex scenarios, cultural prejudice, diversely articulated in a variety of public discourses, often operates as a catalyst for social fear and a factor of cultural exclusion.

History shows that cultural minorities have often been used as scapegoats in times of great conflict, no matter how long they have been dwelling in a given place. The Gypsy community, who are sometimes characterised as the “eternal immigrants”,[41] are a paradigmatic example in the European context. It has been argued that a similar narrative is being constructed in the United States when it comes to the Latinos.[42] Almost every nation has cultural minorities, whose presence has always been conceived of as “the other”, ingrained in the dialectical construction of a “dominant” narrative. Yet, when cultural prejudice is used to construct a systematic association of criminal activity with certain cultural groups, we run the risk of bypassing the most elementary considerations of individual human rights. In this context, the increase of xenophobia in Western societies’ public arenas[43] justifying social exclusion in the name of cultural identity – almost as if cultures were immortal essences instead of human, living realities –, is a matter of concern: a sort of moral myopia, which masks the fear and inability of our societies to face social and cultural change in the age of globalisation, starting with a revision or our inherited notions of citizenship.[44]

Ultimately, there is something reactionary in framing the debate about migration in terms of preserving one’s cultural identity, when our societies are marked both by so many forms of social fragmentation and exhibit so many identity narratives. It is obvious that the magnitude of current migratory movements requires appropriately coordinated policies and institutional measures at the regional and global levels that confront existing abuses[45] and tackle the complexity of contemporary migration. At the same time, it is also clear
that such institutional measures should be sustained by a social ethics that vigorously takes into account the human factor, and the relevance of culture for human flourishing, deconstructing the idea that the cultural other necessarily constitutes a threat to social security[46] and “cultural integrity”.

c) Cultural integrity?

After all, has any culture ever constituted a completely coherent whole? People prone to think that way very likely harbour an approach to culture which is too theoretical and bypasses its deeply practical origins and its intrinsic openness to change over time for a variety of reasons. Even in the case of small and geographically isolated ethnic communities we should be prepared to find internal contradiction and dissent; yet, cultural homogeneity is simply not to be found in larger social units, such as modern nation-states.[47] much less in this stage of late modernity: our societies are deeply marked by internal differentiation, discussion, critique, and competing ways of approaching a variety of issues; forcing all this diversity into a single cultural form can only be done in the context of comparative analysis, and at the price of oversimplification.

Modern philosophers were fond of such simplifications. Reading what Hume,[48] Smith,[49] or Kant[50] had to say about national character is an entertaining exercise that only risks perpetuating pride and prejudice and, perhaps, prevents social change. A recent survey conducted to find out European attitudes towards “national identity” tried to break down this concept into features such as language, customs, being born in the country, or religion.[51] Yet, important as these features may be, they do not constitute national identity; they only bear further witness to the complexity of that concept. Indeed, although based on certain historical facts, national “identities” have been constructed through a historically reflective process, which may or may not be equally shared by all its members throughout time. In particular, this is the case when national narratives are dialectically and tragically structured around conflicts with the other, as recent European history tragically showed in the Balkan Wars.[52] In such cases, civil society is broken and inclusion of the other becomes impossible, unless a collective effort is made to develop a different attitude that projects a new light onto history, both contrite and reconciliatory, and that helps the population move forward, and write a new, more nuanced chapter of social life.

Many cultural myths need to be dismantled or relativized. In a book devoted to analysing the question of integration, immigration and exclusion in Denmark, Karen Fog Olwig and Karsten Paerregard argue that the perception of Danish society as a culturally homogeneous reality that is only now threatened by migration is actually a result of some historical amnesia, which forgets a long history of cultural blending.[53] Nevertheless, it is a powerful idea because it is linked to a welfare state constructed by the middle class. Seen from a distance, one could argue that Hungary’s historical role as Europe’s frontier against the Ottoman Empire can perhaps explain its resistance to hosting immigrants from the East. Or, perhaps, that Germany’s persistent will to repair its past is part of the reason why it initially exhibited the most welcoming reaction to an influx in immigrants. Or, similarly, that France’s colonial past, as well as its secularist conception of republican government, explains its opposition to the Islamic veil...

Other examples could be given and argued.[54] From a practical perspective, however, the important thing is that ideas about who we are can be revised in the light of who we want to be, when confronted with a new social reality. In the emerging new social scenarios, more nuanced approaches to who “we” are should examined both at the national and at the global level. Breaking through such simplifying and dialectical narratives is important in order to avoid the fantasy of cultural purity.[55] It is also important to construct societies that are hospitable to cultural differences. This is perhaps particularly necessary in countries comprised of different cultures going through a deep political transformation.[56] A more nuanced and practical view of culture should bring us to share in the intellectual and ethical elements that, ingrained in our own cultural traditions, can foster community instead of promoting division. This is what I like to call “topic-universalism”, to differentiate it from the kind of “abstract universalism” imposed upon human agents from above, with no regard for the work of their own practical reason.

Indeed, if, as pointed out above, culture is an endowment of individual human beings who do not merely enact existing cultural norms, but rather interpret them, negotiate with them and recreate them in light of new challenges, then it entails understanding the meanings and values transmitted in one’s culture and finding ways to reproduce them in new circumstances. From this perspective, adopting a practical approach to culture invites everyone to contribute with his or her own cultural resources to the social conversation[57] and to creatively expand the modern ideal of civil society beyond its original European context, showing its potential to articulate cultural complexity in a global scenario.

3. Expanding civil society

While art symbolically provides beautiful examples of the richness that results from creative exchange between individuals coming from different traditions and cultural backgrounds, fostering cultural synthesis at the level of
civil society requires something more than making room for artistic hybridity. It involves allowing everyone to bring his or her own cultural resources to the construction of a common social world.[58] What I mean by more participatory societies amounts to societies that evolve out of human relationships, and recognise the human being behind his or her culture, not just at the political level, but rather at all levels of social interaction.

From this perspective, then, fostering participatory societies is more than securing abstract “cultural rights”. [59] It requires recognising the value of culture in human life, without thereby compromising the centrality of the human person through her subordination to communal ties and cultural stereotypes. Indeed, while there is something unsatisfactory about speaking of culture merely in terms of individual rights, excessive stress on the role of communal ties can lead to assuming a much too homogeneous and rigid account of culture, which bypasses the complex way in which individuals ponder cultural values in the decisions they face. This complexity is present every time people decide to migrate: confronted with a difficult situation, individuals often subordinate cultural values to other, more pressing considerations.

And yet, in contrast to the assimilationist approach that was taken for granted during the 1950s until the 1970s, [60] we observe that contemporary migrants want to preserve their cultural background, and try to keep in touch with their communities of origin. Living in “transnational communities”[61] they use communication technologies to develop and articulate “multiple belongings”.[62] In other words, they negotiate their way of life, generating a particular cultural synthesis of their own.

On the other hand, however, people in host societies have at least the same legitimate desire to preserve their own way of life, and a right to design the policies they deem more appropriate to do so. This is why, traditionally, states have not only a duty of hospitality that is narrowly linked to the duty of humanity, but also a right to determine the conditions of residence. Kant spoke of a right to visit, not to be confused with a right to settlement because the latter requires a specific contract.[63]

Now, while political coexistence is built upon compromises of this sort, social life requires more than mere juridical coexistence: it requires engaging everyone in the construction of a common world. Indeed, the cultivation of multiple belongings by individuals living in the same country points at a transformation of the modern nation-state, with its somewhat problematic fusion of political culture and overarching national identity. Social reality is calling for a reformation of political institutions and political life, to be up to the task. This, however, means that the real challenge is at the level of civil society, as a space of dynamic social interaction, in which everyone, regardless of their cultural background, can find his or her own place, actively contributing to social life. Rather than hiding cultural differences, the idea is to capitalize on those differences to foster the progress of marginalized people, and the development of new social and cultural synthesis.

Addressing this challenge is not just a matter of remembering the virtues of democracy. While democracy is a political regime or procedure particularly adjusted to the equal dignity of all human beings, its substantive value is decided in each case by the values actually exchanged in civil society. This suggests that, in order to tackle the issue of cultural exclusion, we need to think beyond the formal, political level, and address informal culture and everyday life, shaped by public discourses and media representations. In this regard, too, education and ordinary social interaction have a critical role to play.

At any rate, talk of “cultural rights” can be useful insofar as it serves the purpose of making clear both the role of culture in personal development, as well as the role of people in the creation of culture. The realization of cultural rights depends on securing the participation of everyone in the construction of society. By contrast, disengagement from society, not being willing or able to participate in its construction, leads inevitably to (self-)exclusion of society[64] and/or construction of parallel societies, living under the same political umbrella, perhaps inserted in different global circuits, in which cultural diversity is no longer a potential source of richness, but rather a sign of alienation and confrontation. We can think of the Maras, but also of young people recruited by ISIS in western countries.[65] The fact that many of these come from relatively well positioned families suggests that, at least in some cases, marginal sub-cultures should not be viewed merely as a by-product of economic and social exclusion, but also as the negative expression of identitarian concerns, concealing a nihilistic experience: no roots, no future. Insofar as individuals often search and find in those marginal groups the sense of belonging and purpose that is denied to them in the larger society, said groups also become a symbol of a fractured society: along with “normal” society, a marginal world emerges, which, in certain cases, is not marginal at all.

This kind of social exclusion comes into play whenever culture, itself a human mediation, no longer provides meaningful mediations. In this context, there is a need to remind that culture is not a closed and static reality existing above individual human beings; it is, rather, an open and dynamic reality that only emerges in and through the interactions and relationships that human beings establish with one another; a reality, therefore, shaped by the intellectual and ethical values that human beings manifest in their mutual interactions.
Marcel Mauss once designated as “civilisation” the cultural elements especially “apt to travel” from one group to another.\[66\] Of course, the implicit idea is that not every cultural element is equally “civilisatory”. Instead, many cultural elements are deeply rooted in the specific history of a particular people, inscribed in their social interactions, and hence difficult to transplant to other social settings. This is why self-uprooting from one culture and relocation in a new society, with its own cultural practices and expectations, is never an easy task. Even in cases in which there is a will to assimilate, migrants experience the difficulty of developing a genuine sense of belonging. Gillian Creese, in her study of African migrants in Canada mentions small details, such as accent, as permanent reminders of an alien origin.\[67\] Very often it is not until the second generation that migrants develop a sense of belonging to the host society. This suggests that developing a sense of belonging is largely a matter of practice and mutual adjustment.

To achieve this goal, efforts need to be made on both sides – on the side of migrants and on the side of host societies – because, even when grounded on different ideas, conflicts usually arise at the level of practice. Nowadays, those practices very often focus on the status of women. The participation of women as full subjects in all spheres of social life is perhaps the biggest challenge, but also a singular opportunity to create participatory societies that overcome cultural boundaries, paying tribute to our common humanity.

Love for one’s cultural roots is something other than nostalgic love for a past that can no longer be expected to animate the present. Cultures are truly alive and reveal their vitality when they actually inspire valuable intellectual endeavours and responsible ethical actions. If talk of “cultural integrity” is to make any sense at all, it should be understood as an invitation to develop one’s cultural resources in the quest for social inclusion and human conviviality.

End notes


[3] Number of literate persons aged 15 and above, expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age group. “Literacy” is understood not only as the acquisition of certain cognitive skills, but also as using those skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development. See Global Report, p. 276.

[4] In the Report, this indicator is broken down in more specific indicators about school enrollment, years of compulsory education, whether it is paid or free education, number of students who access secondary education...


[6] The fact that Oman provides no compulsory education may have other reasons, perhaps of a religious nature.

[7] According to the same Report, “Politics, economics, health, water, sanitation, energy, migration, conflict and climate have direct effects on education systems. Poor air quality or extreme weather can destroy schools, force them to close or make learning nearly impossible. Groups such as people displaced by climate change or conflict, economic migrants and poor slum dwellers can place enormous pressure on education systems. Education is much affected by the context in which it operates”. Unesco Report, p. 162.


[9] The Report notes that “Two decades of conflict in Afghanistan up to 2001 resulted in a loss of 5.5 years on the total average years of national schooling; Burundi’s civil war cost the country over 3 years (UIS, 2010). Similarly, the 1992-1998 civil conflict in Tajikistan resulted in a decrease in school attainment for girls. Girls exposed to conflict were 12% less likely to complete compulsory schooling than older cohorts who completed their schooling before the conflict (Shemyakina, 2011)” (Unesco Report, p. 104).

[10] By way of example, the Report notes that, “Most of Timor-Leste’s education infrastructure was destroyed in the 1998-1999 war, and 95% of schools required rehabilitation. In Iraq, 85% of schools were damaged or destroyed by fighting during the conflict of 2003-2004 (Buckland, 2005). Between 2009 and 2015, attacks in
north-eastern Nigeria destroyed more than 910 schools and forced at least 1,500 to close. By early 2016, an estimated 952,029 school-age children had fled the violence (HRW, 2016). By 2016, the Syrian Arab Republic had lost more than one-quarter of its schools – more than 6,000 damaged by the violence, forced to close, or used for fighting or sheltering hundreds of displaced families (UNICEF, 2016). During the Rwandan genocide, more than two-thirds of the teaching force in primary and secondary schools was killed or fled (Buckland, 2005). In Colombia, 140 teachers were killed over 2009-2013, around 1,100 received death threats and 305 were forced to leave their homes because their lives were at risk (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2015). As of 2015, in Nigeria, where Boko Haram has targeted education workers and students, at least 611 teachers had been deliberately killed and 19,000 forced to flee since 2009 (HRW, 2016). The forced recruitment of children into armed forces, often through abduction, is widespread... (although) Reliable and recent data on the global number of child soldiers are not available". (Unesco Report, p. 104-105).

[11] “In Iraq, conflict between armed groups and government forces has escalated rapidly, resulting in around 3.3 million IDPs as of end of 2014 (IDMC, 2015b). In July 2015, out of 78,000 IDP children and adolescents aged 6 to 17 living in camps, only 45% were enrolled in schools, and only 30% of the 730,000 IDP children and adolescents not in camps had access to education (OCHA, 2015a)”. (Unesco Report, p. 272).


[17] “Residents of slums, while only 6% of the city population of the developed countries, constitute a staggering 78.2% of urbanites in the least-developed countries; this equals fully a third of the global urban population”. Davis, M., Planet of Slums, Verso, 2006, p. 23.


[21] “In most of the developing world... city growth lacks the powerful manufacturing export engines of China, Korea, and Taiwan, as well as China’s vast inflow of foreign capital (currently equal to half of total foreign investment in the entire developing world). Since the mid-1980s, the great industrial cities of the South – Bombay, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, Belo Horizonte, and Sao Paulo – have all suffered massive plant closures and tendential deindustrialization. Elsewhere, urbanization has been radically decoupled from industrialization, even from development per se and, in sub-Saharan Africa, from that supposed sine qua non of urbanization, rising agricultural productivity. The size of a city’s economy, as a result, often bears surprisingly little relationship to its population size, and vice-versa” (Davis, M., Planet of Slums, p. 13). Later on, he reflects: “From Karl Marx to Max Weber, classical social theory believed that the great cities of the future would follow in the industrializing footsteps of Manchester, Berlin, and Chicago – and indeed Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, Pusan, and today, Ciudad Juarez, Bangalore, and Guangzhou have roughly approximated this canonical trajectory. Most cities of the South, however, more closely resemble Victorian Dublin, which, as historian Emmet Larkin has stressed, was unique amongst “all the slumdoms produced in the western world in the nineteenth century... [because] its slums were not a product of the industrial revolution. Dublin, in fact, suffered more from the problems of de-industrialization than industrialization between 1800 and 1850. Likewise, Kinshasa, Luanda, Khartoum, Dar-es-Salaam, Guayaquil, and Lima continue to grow prodigiously despite ruined import substitution industries, shrunken public sectors, and downwardly mobile middle classes”. Davis, M., Planet of Slums, p. 16.

[22] Statistics are difficult to get. See Davis, M. Planet of Slums, p. 26.

[23] “For instance, new data compiled for the GEM Report 2016 collected from 130 slum settlement profiles in 12 cities and towns of Uganda to identify community needs indicated that, while most settlement respondents
agreed that students had access to pre-primary, primary and secondary schooling, in their qualitative responses they still highlighted the need to increase the number of schools, especially public schools (Shack/Slum Dwellers International et al., 2016)” (Unesco Global Report, p. 118). “More than one-third of all urban residents in many developing countries live in slums or shanty towns in city centers or urban peripheries. Slums’ condition vary greatly within and between countries, but many are characterized by poor and crowded housing conditions, insecurity of land and housing, and poor access to basic services, including education (UN Habitat, 2009a). There has been increased recognition of the need to improve their livability since the Millennium Development Goals, culminating in a strong focus on the issue in SDG 11” (Unesco Report, p. 118).

[24] Indeed, “Various spatial and social patterns in most major cities – gentrification, slums, urban sprawl, housing discrimination, immigrant enclaves – separate residents in terms of wealth, access and privilege (UN Habitat, 2009a). These types of inequality are linked to income levels, the location of employers, transport options and spending policies (Kilroy, 2007), as well as current and historical legislation that institutionalizes ethnic and racial discrimination and segregation (Rothstein and Santow, 2012). Pockets of poverty in cities can evolve into persistent disadvantage as their populations become isolated from job opportunities, experience crime and violence more frequently and are physically separated from other income groups” (Unesco Report, p. 122).


[26] Although she dislikes using the words favelas and slums interchangeably, for the purpose of this presentation, we can refer indistinctly to both.


[28] Perlman, Janice E., Favela, p. 22.

[29] Perlman, Janice E., Favela, p. 5.


[31] (Unesco Report, p. 29).


[33] In this regard, the Report refers the experience of an educational program in Botswana, which “provides teacher trainees with a system of nature based educational tools incorporating the traditional knowledge of the San, a major indigenous group in the region. The curriculum of Bokamoso Teacher Training Centre was developed collaboratively over two years by a team of parents, community members, curriculum experts and members of non-government organizations (NGOs). The project provides trainees with the tools they need to teach pre-school in the San language (Batibo, 2013). Using the mother tongue as the language of instruction has a positive impact on learning across the curriculum, not only in languages (UNESCO, 2016)” (Unesco Report, pp. 28-29).

[34] The Report quotes research carried out in countries such as Australia, Canada or the United States, which “show an unquantifiable loss of indigenous knowledge from the beginning of the 20th century, when indigenous children were sent to residential schools or put up for forced adoption in an attempt to assimilate them into the dominant society (Reyhner and Eder, 2015). Separating them from their families and consequently from their cultural roots caused ‘irreparable harm to the survival of indigenous cultures and societies’ (Stavenhagen, 2015, p. 255)” (Unesco Report, p. 29).


[37] “Violent conflict has often followed group-based inequality exacerbated by language policies in education. In Nepal, the imposition of Nepali as the language of instruction fed into broader grievances among non-Nepali-speaking groups that drove the civil war (Murshed and Gates, 2005). Guatemala’s imposition of Spanish in schools was seen by indigenous people as part of a broader pattern of social discrimination. Armed groups representing indigenous people demanded bilingual and intercultural education during negotiations on a peace agreement, leading to a constitutional commitment (Marques and Bannon, 2003)” (Unesco Report, p. 104).

[39] Indeed, we would not talk of exclusion, were there no expectation of social interaction. Yet social interaction takes many different forms, governed by different sets of norms and expectations. At the same time, there is reason to say that the mere fact of human coexistence under the same law, in the same neighborhood, etc. brings with it certain social expectations. Even the relative “indifference” which signals modern urban life, gives way to reasonable concern for the other in certain cases, for instance when someone asks for directions in the street. Thus, refusing to give directions to someone, because of cultural difference, would be a form of social exclusion.

[40] “As a new Pew Research Center survey illustrates, the refugee crisis and the threat of terrorism are very much related to one another in the minds of many Europeans. In eight of the ten European nations surveyed, half or more believe incoming refugees increase the likelihood of terrorism in their country”. http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/07/11/europeans-fear-wave-of-refugees-will-mean-more-terrorism-fewer-jobs/

[41] “The Roma represent, in the words of James Goldston, Europe’s “quintessential minority” (2002:147; see also Tileaga 2006a). Without a “mother state” to represent them, historically marginalized and vilified, the Roma are the largest minority in Europe. “Their renown as musicians, dancers, and palm-readers” Goldston argues, “is surpassed only by the near-universal belief among the Gadze – or non-Roma – that Gypsies are also liars, thieves and cheats” (2002:146). In sociological terms, the Roma are Europe’s strangers. Simmel described the stranger as a social category of those who are simultaneously a part of society and marginalized (Simmel 1971; see also Foddy, Platow, and Yamagishi 2009; Schuetz 1944). The narrative of the Roma as eternal immigrants makes them strangers across Europe, if not, as Sigona argues, “inner enemies” (2005:747; see also Stewart 2012; Tong 1998). Traditional stereotypes of the Roma cast them as violators of basic values like honesty, hard work, and ownership (e.g., Culic et al. 2000; Hockenos 1993; Mac Laughlin 1998; Petrova 2003; Stewart 2011, 2012). Given this history, the degree to which Roma are accepted or “othered” (Woodcock 2007; see also Crowe 1996; Pons 1999) in contemporary European society reveals the degree to which traditional divisions continue to hold sway”. Matthew T. Loveland and Delia Popescu, “The Gypsy Threat Narrative: Explaining Anti-Roma Attitudes in the European Union”, in Humanity & Society 2016, Vol. 40(3) 329-352, p. 330. DOI: 10.1177/0160597615601715.

[42] “The Latino Threat Narrative consists of a number of taken-for-granted and often-repeated assumptions about Latinos, such as that Latinos do not want to speak English; that Latinos do not want to integrate socially and culturally into the larger U.S. society; that the Mexican-origin population, in particular, is part of a grand conspiracy to take over the U.S. Southwest (the reconquista); and that Latin women are unable to control their reproductive capacities, that is, their fertility is out of control, which fuels both demographic changes and the alleged reconquista” (Chavez, Leo, The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation. 2nd ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. ix). As he notes, “The contemporary Latino Threat Narrative has its antecedents in U.S. history: the German language threat, the Catholic threat, the Chinese and Japanese immigration threats, and the southern and eastern European threat. In their day, each discourse of threat targeted particular immigrant groups and their children. Each was pervasive and defined “truths” about the threats posed by immigrants that, in hindsight, were unjustified or never materialized in the long run of history. And each of these discourses generated actions, such as alarmist newspaper stories (the media of the day), anti-immigrant riots, restrictive immigration laws, forced internments, and acrimonious public debates over government policies” (Chavez, o.c., p. 3).

[43] For instance, the National Front in France, Trump’s nationalism in the US or “Identitäre Bewegung” in Germany or Austria: “Es geht nicht um ethische und kulturelle Reinheit, sondern erstens um die für jede Demokratie unverzichtbare relative Homogenität, zweitens um den Erhalt der kulturelle Unverwechselbarkeit in jedem Volk und drittens um ein generelles Nein zur Entwurzelung, egal wo sie stattfindet. Es geht darum, im eigenen Land als Staatsvolk das Sagen und die Mehrheit zu behalten. Ausländer sollen in diesem Weltbild folglich keine Menschen von geringerem Wert sein. Sie sollen nur nicht nach Deutschland komme”. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, August 28. Along these lines, it has been argued that much of contemporary Islamophobia is based on fears about the future of European civilization. Bunzl, Matti, Anti-semitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds Old and New in Europe, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007.

[44] Leo Chavez suggests the need of revision of the inherited concepts of citizenship: “What citizenship means in this changing landscape is not clear. But what is certain is that a legalistic definition of citizenship is not enough. Other meanings of citizenship – economic, social, cultural, and even emotional – are being presented in debates, marches, and public discourse focused on immigrants, their children, and the nation” (Chavez, L., The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation. 2nd ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 5).

While social perceptions usually have some basis in reality, they are easily distorted and magnified both by the media and our own fears. As a result they often result in unfair behaviors towards individual human beings, who happen to share some cultural traits with potential terrorists.


Cultural Exclusion through Participation in Cultural Life”, in the sense of responsibility towards the community itself”. Annamari Laaksonen, “Measuring Cultural Exclusion community action facilitates and fosters the sense of inclusion and enjoyment of rights, and at the same time cultural freedom. But more importantly, an enabling and proactive environment for access, participation and inclusion. Strengthening legal instruments and policies is an important necessary step in the recognition of sector to look for concrete implications in the relation between cultural practices and social cohesion and education and development, and different freedoms in relation to the right to take part in cultural life. The ambit of cultural rights is larger than themes related to artistic expression and creativity, and therefore illustrates the necessity of finding defining mechanisms to uphold and promote social responsibility, and ways of assuring participation, access to culture, the right to express and interpret culture, and preservation and education as principles in policy-making. Furthermore, cultural policies based on cultural rights enable the art and culture sector to look for concrete implications in the relation between cultural practices and social cohesion and inclusion. Strengthening legal instruments and policies is an important necessary step in the recognition of cultural freedom. But more importantly, an enabling and proactive environment for access, participation and community action facilitates and fosters the sense of inclusion and enjoyment of rights, and at the same time the sense of responsibility towards the community itself”. Annamari Laaksonen, “Measuring Cultural Exclusion through Participation in Cultural Life”, in Third Global Forum on Human Development: Defining and Measuring Cultural Exclusion, 17-19 January 2005 Paris http://www.culturalrights.net/descargas/drets_culturals135.pdf

Cultural rights, and the ‘Right to Take Part in Cultural Life’ in particular, first formulated in the Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
[64] Referring to “The Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in today’s diverse world” Annamari Laaksonen notes that “cultural participation has a direct relation with what may be termed cultural exclusion”.
[65] https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/this-sudanese-schools-students-are-rapidly-joining-isis/