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It's good to be different The scientific method, democratic politics, the concept of universal values - these are palpably better concepts than those that existed previously. Not because Europeans as hosts and sponsors to these are a superior people, but because many of the ideas and philosophies that came out of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment are superior. To argue this today is, of course, to invite the charge of Eurocentrism. **By Mike Hardy**



Discussions about what we call modernity can create a context in which we review crisis, change and tensions in our contemporary space. Modernity is the sense or the idea that the present is discontinuous with the past; that through a process of social and cultural change life in the present is fundamentally different from life in the past. We experience modernity as a proliferation of alternatives in lifestyle, of relationships or of historical possibilities. This is a very different worldview, then, from tradition, that portrays the pre-

sent as a continuous development from the past. In a traditional worldview, the present in some way repeats the forms, behaviours and events of the past. Traditional cultures see themselves as repeating a finite number of alternatives in the present; in modern cultures, the future opens up a vast field of historical and lifestyle choices.

The proliferation of alternatives is a source of stress and tension for some and hence great anxiety and often results in cultural attempts to restrict alternatives in the face of this anxiety. The 'crisis of modernity' is the sense that modernity is a problem; that traditional ways of life have been replaced with uncontrollable change and unmanageable alternatives. The crisis implies that the present is a transitional point not focussed on a clear goal in the future, but that change happens through forces outside our control. Could the Arab uprisings, protests and rioting in Greece and the UK, the anti-capitalist movements be interpreted as an expression of this crisis?

In contemporary Europe, we experience change as either progress or tran-

sition. We view our historical situation and our lives teleologically, deriving meaning and value in some unrealised future. Modernity has created a worldview in which we experience the world as composed of discrete, fragmented, and separable units. In addition, we form social groups that are largely based on abstractions, such as corporations, nations, religious or sexual preferences, race (which really is an abstract rather than a physical or biological category). As a result, membership in social groups tends to be unstable and transitory, as one can easily move between social groups. Our identities transit to complex multiples or 'cocktails', mixtures of a bit of this and a bit of that. Abstraction is the idea that areas of existence and culture can be separated from other areas of existence and culture.

An inherited "world house"

Finally, although seeing ourselves as having lost tradition, we repeat tradition in unrecognisable forms. Modern cultures still perform traditional rituals, such as sports (which are originally religious rituals) or shaming rituals,

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yet the origin and original meaning of these rituals have passed out of the culture. Modern cultures still repeat ways of thinking in the past—in fact, the bulk of modern culture is based on traditional ways of thinking repeated relatively unchanged—yet modern cultures tend to view these ways of thinking as innovations.

Although we base our social groups on abstract categories, the structure and content of these social groups are quite repetitive of the structure and content of kinship groups, in other words, we base our abstract social groups on principles derived from real, biological relationships; we do not, however, experience these social groups as real, biological relationships. So, this leads us to reflect on the view that modernity—the sense that the present is discontinuous with the past, is an illusion—and this illusion creates modernity itself.

What has changed is social memory; we have disconnected many of our behaviours, relationships and ideas from our collective memory of their origins and meaning. Take Martin Luther King Jr., for example. Though best remembered for his concern for colour, King showed that race was only one part of his broader concern with human relations at large. His ethos applies not only to the question of race, but to faith as well.

"This is the great new problem of

mankind. We have inherited [...] a great 'world house' in which we have to live together — black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu ... Because we can never again live apart, we must learn somehow to live with each other in peace."

In the same way as the headlines of the 20th century read of conflict between races, headlines in our times are full of violence between people of difference generally – including faith. So, for example, what the colour line was to the 20th century, the faith line might be to the 21st. We live at a time of conflict abroad and tension at home often in the name of religion. During King's time, extremist views ranging from white supremacy to black militancy believed that the races were better apart. Today, the same is said of division along the lines of faith. King insisted that we are always better together.

Belief in pluralism

In a future 2020 European context, a mono-layered European identity is less likely (and maybe even less desirable); socio-economic and political crises, along with a deteriorating climate, will provoke increasing protectionism – essentially stronger boundaries and potential exclu-

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sion. So, 'It's good to be different' might be the motto of our times. Comfort with difference, respect for pluralism, avowal of identity politics – these are regarded the hallmarks of a progressive, antiracist outlook. Belief in pluralism and the multicultural society is so much woven into the fabric of our lives that we rarely stand back to question some of its assumptions.

The British-Russian philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote about 'value pluralism' saying, "Life may be seen through many windows none of them necessarily clear or opaque, less or more distorting than any of the others". However, for Berlin, there was no universal truth, only a variety of conflicting versions of a story: different peoples and cultures have different values, beliefs and truths, each of which may be regarded as valid. Many of these values and truths are incompatible and incomparable, lacking a common language as the basis for comparison. In this line, value pluralism could be seen as the best defence against tyranny and against ideologies, such as racism, which treated some human beings as less equal than others. This argument for pluralism is, as many have pointed out, logically flawed. A pluralist can never claim that a plural society is better, since, according to his own argument, there is no impar-

tial or universal viewpoint from which the claims of all particular cultures can be rationally assessed. Once you dispense with the idea of universal norms, then no argument can possess anything more than, at best, local validity.

Many multiculturalists argue not simply that cultural values are incommensurate, but also that different cultures should be treated with equal respect. So, different and individual experiences, culture and social contributions require public affirmation and recognition so that they can be considered socially equal.

And we at times struggle when we try, and worry about the encouragements of separatism and parallel lives when we do. To treat different cultures with equal respect we have to be able to compare one with the other. If values are incommensurate, such comparisons are simply not possible. The principle of difference cannot provide any standards that oblige us to respect the 'difference' of others. At best, it invites our indifference to the fate of the Other. At worst it licenses us to hate and abuse those who are different.

The idea of the equality of cultures (as opposed to the equality of human beings)

“The idea of the equality of cultures (as opposed to the equality of human beings) denies one of the critical features of human life and human history: our capacity for social, moral and technological progress.”

denies one of the critical features of human life and human history: our capacity for social, moral and technological progress. What distinguishes humans from other creatures is capacity for innovation and transformation, for making ideas and artefacts that are not simply different but also often better, than those of a previous generation or another culture. It is no coincidence that much in the modern world has been shaped by the ideas and technologies that have emerged from the Renaissance and Enlightenment.

Capacity for innovation and transformation

The scientific method, democratic politics, the concept of universal values – these are palpably better concepts than those that existed previously. Not because Europeans as hosts and sponsors to these are a superior people, but because many of the ideas and philosophies that came out of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment are superior. To argue this today is, of course, to invite the charge of 'Eurocentrism'. And to argue these without proper reference to the many other steps forward sponsored by other cultural traditions is a serious mistake.

We live in an age in which there is con-

siderable disillusionment with politics as an agency of change, and in which possibilities of social transformation seem to have receded. What is important about human beings, many have come to believe, is not their political capacity but their cultural attachments. Does the biological reality of a particular ancestry somehow make a human being incapable of living well except as a participant of that culture.

Clearly no human can live outside of culture. But to say this is not to say they have to live inside a particular one. To view humans as culture-bearing is to view them as social beings, and hence as transformative beings. It suggests that humans have the capacity for change, for progress, and for the creation of universal moral and political forms through reason and dialogue.

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the left, the defeat of most liberation movements in the third world, the demise of social movements in the West and the powerful rumblings in the Arab world have all transformed political consciousness. Campaigning for equality means challenging accepted practices, being willing to march against the grain and believing in the possibility of social transformation. Conversely, becoming very comfortable with differences between peoples allows us to accept society as it is - it says little more than 'We live in a diverse world, enjoy it'. Consider, for

instance, the distinction made by British sociologist Tariq Modood between what he calls the 'equality of individualism' and the 'equality encompassing public ethnicity: equality as not having to hide or apologise for one's origins, family or community, but requiring others to show respect for them, and adapt public attitudes and arrangements so that the heritage they represent is encouraged rather than contemptuously expect them to wither away.'

A truly plural society

A truly plural society would be one in which citizens have full freedom to pursue their different values or practices in private, while in the public sphere all citizens would be treated as political equals whatever the differences in their private lives. Today, however, pluralism has come to mean the very opposite. The right to practice a particular religion, speak a particular language, follow a particular cultural practice is seen as a public good rather than a private freedom. Different interest groups demand to have their 'differences' institutionalised in the public sphere.

Culture, faith, lifestyle, feelings - these are all aspects of our private lives and

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should be of no concern to the state or other public authorities. A potential and powerful irony of so-called multiculturalist policies is that, as a political process, they undermine what is valuable about cultural diversity. Diversity is important, not in and of itself, but because it allows us to expand our horizons, to compare and contrast different values, beliefs and lifestyles, and make judgements upon them. In other words, because it allows us to engage in political dialogue and debate that can help create more universal values and beliefs, and a collective language of citizenship.

Convergence: a recipe for partnerships

With difference and with this complex array of ideas, living together in the public domain is a challenge; it is all the more so when we reflect on the stability of our public domains.

Globalisation has lost some of its shine. Our world in 2011 appears almost out

of control; wherever we look we confront global challenges – in energy, food, finance, climate, demographics. Whose responsibility is it to solve these problems? In a developed country context, citizens look to governments to take the lead on global problem-solving, lobbied into action and held to account by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society. Talk of a developed and a developing world is being replaced by the notion of a multi-polar world, where the battleground for resources, customers, talent and technology is heating up.

The so-called multi-polar world is characterized by increasing interdependence across both geographies and the sectors, as society faces an increasing number of global challenges: climate change and debt do not recognise arbitrary borders between countries, and their impacts are indiscriminate between businesses, governments and charities. The challenges of water access and its responsible management are as strategic to beverage companies and food producers as they are to the desperately poor in India. The scourge of HIV/AIDS destroys the livelihood of a community in the same way as it destroys the productive capacity of a workforce. If no single or separable domain, be it a nation, a region or a local community, is immune to these challenges or indeed can solve them, and if the challenges themselves recognise no single

sector, the present and future is 'convergence' – a convergence of challenges, of approaches and of solutions.

So to the confusions of difference, the co-existence of cultures in public domains, we add the inability to avoid or isolate from global impacts. This feels more and more like a world where convergence on now has become most important of all.

So what exactly is convergence? In very practical terms, convergence is characterised by where the motivations and objectives of each sector align with the needs of society as a whole - the joining together of private enterprise with positive social, economic or environmental impacts on development. It may take many forms, sometimes driven and initiated by business or, in other instances, by civil society or government.

Such convergence is characterised by contemporary drivers: markets, outputs, scalability, sustainability. The 'difference' between sectors in terms of interests (profit versus benefit etc.) has become less important and less a source of anxiety.

At the same time, international NGOs are coming to terms with the notion that thinking and behaving like private enterprises may be part of the solution, as opposed to part of the problem. And governments and multi-lateral institutions are waking up to the increasing

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importance of markets and enterprise approaches to poverty reduction and to community cohesion. And when it comes to trust, businesses can learn a lot from NGOs as they look to re-build battered reputations.

New hybrid organisations

Social enterprise and entrepreneurship has captured a lot of media attention in recent years. Profit maximisation of traditional business is replaced by profit optimisation, in conjunction with social or environmental outcomes. It is likely that over the coming years, convergence will drive the formation of more new hybrid organisations or corporate social enterprises whose missions will reflect a stronger commitment to creating shared values, than creating value per se (and then sharing!). Hopefully these new hybrids will take the opportunity of building on and exemplifying the best practices in all sectors.

We live in very interesting and engaging times. Living together in diverse communities facing common and globalised challenges is creating real pres-

sure on policymakers. Scarce resources may well begin to flow toward those who can demonstrate and articulate a positive socio-economic impact on a global stage and away from those whose stories are ambiguous or whose journeys are exclusive. All traditional sectors must change in this modernity. It's likely that in a converging world, global businesses will have far greater roles to play in positively impacting social outcomes than they've had to date. Harnessing and re-directing the power of the private sector for positive socio-economic impact is going to be one of the major challenges of development in the 21st century.

Leaders in all sectors – public, private and civil society, for both whole regions and local communities – will need to recognise and embrace the convergence trend and understand the important role their organisations can play in driving change. This is a challenge which cultural relations organisations are beginning to recognise and gearing up to address. This is the backcloth for the transformation of our discourse on difference.

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