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Education in the world of diasporas

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Cities, and particularly mega-cities like London or Barcelona, are nowadays dustbins into which problems produced by globalization are dumped. They are also laboratories in which the art of living with those problems (though not of resolving them) is experimented with, put to the test, and (hopefully, hopefully...) developed. Most seminal impacts of globalization (above all, the divorce of power from politics, and the shifting of functions once undertaken by political authorities sideways, to the markets, and downward, to individual life-politics) have been by now thoroughly investigated and described in great detail. I will confine myself therefore to one aspect of the globalization process – too seldom considered in connection with the paradigmatic change in the study and theory of culture: namely, the changing patterns of global migration.

There were three different phases in the history of modern-era migration.

The first wave of migration followed the logic of the tri-partite syndrome: territoriality of sovereignty, 'rooted' identity, gardening posture (subsequently referred to, for the sake of brevity, as TRG). That was the emigration from the 'modernized' centre (read: the site of order-building and economic-progress – the two main industries turning out, and off, the growing numbers of 'wasted humans'), partly exportation and partly eviction of up to 60 million people, a huge amount by nineteenth century standards, to 'empty lands' (read: lands whose native population could be struck off the 'modernized' calculations; be literally uncouncted and unaccounted for, presumed either non-existent or irrelevant). Native residues still alive after massive slaughters and massive epidemics, have been proclaimed by the settlers the objects of 'white man's civilizing mission'.

The second wave of migration could be best modeled as an ‘Empire emigrates back’ case. With dismantling of colonial empires, a number of indigenous people in various stages of their ‘cultural advancement’ followed their colonial superiors to the metropolis. Upon arrival, they were cast in the only worldview–strategic mould available: one constructed and practiced earlier in the nation–building era to deal with the categories earmarked for ‘assimilation’ – a process aimed at the annihilation of cultural difference, casting the ‘minorities’ at the receiving end of crusades, *Kulturkämpfe* and proselytizing missions (currently renamed, in the name of ‘political correctness’, as ‘citizenship education’ aimed at ‘integration’). This story is not yet finished: time and again, its echoes reverberate in the declarations of intent of the politicians who notoriously tend to follow the habits of Minerva’s Owl known to spread its wings by the end of the day. As the first phase of migration, the drama of the ‘empire migrating back’ is tried, though in vain, to be squeezed into the frame of the now outdated TRG syndrome.

The third wave of modern migration, now in full force and still gathering momentum, leads into the age of *diasporas*: a world–wide archipelago of ethnic/ religious/ linguistic settlements – oblivious to the trails blazed and paved by the imperialist–colonial episode and following instead the globalization–induced logic of the planetary redistribution of life resources. Diasporas are scattered, diffused, extend over many nominally sovereign territories, ignore territorial claims to the supremacy of local demands and obligation, are locked in the double (or multiple) bind of ‘dual (or multiple) nationality’ and dual (or multiple) loyalty. The present–day migration differs from the two previous phases by moving both ways (virtually all countries, including Britain, are nowadays both ‘immigrant’ or ‘emigrant’), and privileging no routes (routes are no longer determined by the imperial/colonial links of the past). It differs also in exploding the old TRG syndrome and replacing it with a EAH one (extraterritoriality, ‘anchors’ displacing the ‘roots’ as primary tools of identification, hunting strategy).

The new migration casts a question mark upon the bond between identity and citizenship, individual and place, neighbourhood and belonging. Jonathan Rutherford, acute and insightful observer of the fast changing frames of human togetherness, notes¹ that the residents of the London street on which he lives form a neighborhood of different communities, some with networks extending only to the next street, others which stretch across the world. It is a neighborhood of porous boundaries in which it is difficult to identify who belongs and who is an outsider. What is it we belong to in this locality? What is it that each of us calls home and, when we think back and remember how we arrived here, what stories do we share?

Living like the rest of us (or most of that rest) in a diaspora (how far stretching, and in what direction(s)?) among diasporas (how far stretching and in what direction(s)?) has for the first time forced on the agenda the issue of 'art of living with a difference' – which may appear on the agenda only once the difference is no longer seen as a merely temporary irritant, and so unlike in the past urgently requiring arts, skills, teaching and learning. The idea of 'human rights', promoted in the EAH setting to replace/complement the TRG institution of territorially determined citizenship, translates today as the 'right to remain different'. By fits and starts, that new rendition of the human–rights idea sediments, at best, *tolerance*; it has as yet to start in earnest to sediment *solidarity*. And it is a moot question whether it is fit to conceive group solidarity in any other form than that of the fickle and fray, predominantly virtual 'networks', galvanized and continually re–modeled by the interplay of individual connecting and disconnecting, making calls and declining to reply them.

The new rendition of the human–rights idea disassembles hierarchies and tears apart the imagery of upward ('progressive') 'cultural evolution'. Forms of life float, meet, clash, crash, catch hold of each other, merge and hive off with (to paraphrase Georg Simmel) equal specific gravity. Steady and stolid hierarchies and evolutionary lines are replaced with interminable and endemically inconclusive battles of recognition; at the utmost, with eminently re–negotiable pecking orders. Imitating Archimedes, reputed to insist (probably with a kind of desperation which only an utter nebulousness

of the project might cause) that he would turn the world upside down if only given a solid enough support for the lever, we may say that we would be able to tell who is to assimilate to whom, whose dissimilarity/idiosyncrasy is destined for a chop and whose is to emerge on top, if we only were given a hierarchy of cultures. Well, we are not given it, and unlikely to be given soon.

Culture in the diasporic setting

We may say that culture is in its liquid-modern phase made to the measure of (willingly pursued, or endured as obligatory) *individual* freedom of choice. And that it is *meant* to service such freedom. And that it is meant to see to it that the choice remains *unavoidable*: a life necessity, and a *duty*. And that responsibility, the inalienable companion of free choice, stays where liquid-modern condition forced it: on the shoulders of the *individual*, now appointed the sole manager of 'life politics'.

Today's culture consists of *offerings*, not *norms*. As already noted by Pierre Bourdieu, culture lives by seduction, not normative regulation; PR, not policing; creating new needs/desires/wants, not coercion. This society of ours is a society of consumers, and just as the rest of the world as-seen-and-lived by consumers, culture turns into a warehouse of meant-for-consumption products – each vying for the shifting/drifted attention of prospective consumers in the hope to attract it and hold for a bit longer than a fleeting moment. Abandoning stiff standards, indulging indiscrimination, serving all tastes while privileging none, encouraging fitfulness and 'flexibility' (politically correct name of spinelessness) and romanticizing unsteadiness and inconsistency is therefore the 'right' (the only reasonable?) strategy to follow; fastidiousness, raising brows, stiffening upper lips are not recommended. The TV reviewer/critic of a pattern-and-style setting daily praised the New Year's Eve 2007/8 broadcast for promising 'to provide an array of musical entertainment guaranteed to sate everyone's appetite'. 'The good thing' about it, he explained, 'is that its universal appeal means you can dip in and

out of the show depending on your preferences'.² A commendable and indeed a seemly quality in a society in which networks replace structures, whereas the attachment/detachment game and an unending procession of connections and disconnections replace 'determining' and 'fixing'.

The current phase of the graduated transformation of the idea of 'culture' from its original Enlightenment-inspired form to its liquid-modern reincarnation is prompted and operated by the same forces that promote emancipation of the markets from the remaining constraints of non-economic nature – the social, political, and ethical constraints among them. In pursuing its own emancipation, liquid-modern consumer-focused economy relies on the excess of offers, their accelerated ageing, and quick dissipation of their seductive power – which, by the way, makes it an economy of profligacy and waste. Since there is no knowing in advance which of the offers may prove tempting enough to stimulate consuming desire, the only way to find out leads through trials and costly errors. Continuous supply of new offers, and a constantly growing volume of goods on offer, are also necessary to keep circulation of goods rapid and the desire to replace them with 'new and improved' goods constantly refreshed – as well as to prevent the consumer dissatisfaction with individual products from condensing into the general disaffection with consumerist mode of life as such.

Culture is turning now into one of the departments in the 'all you need and might dream off' department store in which the world inhabited by consumers has turned. Like in other departments of that store, the shelves are tightly packed with daily restocked commodities, while the counters are adorned with the commercials of latest offers destined to disappear soon together with the attractions they advertise. Commodities and commercials alike are calculated to arouse desires and trigger wishes (as George Steiner famously put it – 'for maximum impact and instant obsolescence'). Their merchants and copywriters count on the wedding of the seductive power of offers with the ingrained 'oneupmanship' and 'getting an edge' urges of their prospective customers.

Liquid-modern culture, unlike the culture of the nation-building era, has no 'people' to 'cultivate'. It has instead the clients to seduce. And unlike its 'solid modern' predecessor, it no longer wishes to work itself, eventually but the sooner the better, out of job. Its job is now to render its own survival permanent – through temporalizing all aspects of life of its former wards, now reborn as its clients.

The solid-modern policy of dealing with difference, the policy of assimilation to the dominant culture and stripping the strangers of other strangeness, is no longer feasible, even if considered by some as desirable. But neither the old strategies of resisting the interaction and merger of cultures is likely to be effective, even if considered preferable for people fond of strict separation and isolation of 'communities of belonging' (more precisely, communities-of-belonging-by-birth).

'Belonging', as Jean-Claude Kaufmann suggests³, is today 'used primarily as a resource of the ego'. He warns against thinking of 'collectivities of belonging' as necessarily 'integrating communities'. They are better conceived of, he suggests, as a necessary accompaniment of the progress of individualization; we may say – as a series of stations or road inns marking the trajectory of the self-forming and self-reforming ego.

François de Singly rightly suggest⁴ that in theorizing the present-day identities the metaphors of 'roots' and 'uprooting' (or, let me add, the related trope of 'disembedding'), all implying one-off nature of the individual's emancipation from the tutelage of the community of birth as well as the finality and irrevocability of the act, are better abandoned and replaced by the tropes of casting and drawing of anchors.

Indeed, unlike in the case of 'uprooting' and 'disembedding', there is nothing irrevocable, let alone ultimate, in drawing the anchor. If having been torn out of the soil in which they grew, roots are likely to desiccate and die out so that their (very unlikely) reviving will be verging on miraculous – anchors are drawn hoping to be safely cast again elsewhere; and they can be cast with similar ease at many different and distant ports of calling. Besides, the roots design and determine in advance the shape

which the plants growing out of them will assume, while excluding the possibility of any other shape; but anchors are only auxiliary facilities of the mobile vessel that do not define the ship's qualities and resourcefulness. The time-stretches separating the casting of anchor from drawing it again are but episodes in the ship's trajectory. The choice of haven in which the anchor will be cast next is most probably determined by the kind of load which the ship is currently carrying; a haven good for one kind of cargo may be entirely inappropriate for another.

All in all, the metaphor of anchors captures what the metaphor of 'uprooting' misses or keeps silent about: the intertwining of *continuity* and *discontinuity* in the history of all or at least a growing number of contemporary identities. Just like ships anchoring successively or intermittently in various ports of call, so the selves in the 'communities of reference' to which they seek admission during their life-long search of recognition and confirmation have their credentials checked and approved at every successive stop; each 'community of reference' sets its own requirements for the kind of papers to be submitted. The ship's record and/or the captain's log are more often than not among the documents on which the approval depends, and with every next stop, the past (constantly swelled by the records of preceding stops) is re-examined and re-valued.

An insight into possible future

Just to make it somewhat clearer what the postulated re-shaping of our commonly used cognitive frames would need to involve and what obstacles it is likely to face on its way, let's have a closer look at the recent intellectual adventure of a group of researchers from the Zoological Society of London who went to Panama to investigate social life of local wasps. The group was equipped with the cutting-edge technology, which it used over 6000 hours to track and monitor the movements of 422 wasps

coming from 33 nests⁵. What the researchers found out, has turned upside down their and ours centuries-old stereotypes of the social insect's habits.

Indeed, ever since the concept of 'social insects' (embracing bees, termites, ants and wasps) was coined and popularized, a firm and hardly ever questioned belief was shared by the learned zoologists and the lay public: that the 'sociability' of insects is confined to the nest to which they belong – the place in which they have been hatched and to which they return every day of their life, bringing the spoils of their foraging ventures to be shared with the rest of the hive's natives. The possibility that some working bees or wasps would cross the boundaries between nests, abandon the hive of *birth* and join another one, a hive of *choice*, was seen (if it was ever contemplated) as an incongruous idea. It was axiomatically assumed instead that the 'natives', the born and therefore 'legitimate' members of the nest, would promptly chase the maverick newcomers away and destroy them in case they refuse to run.

As all axioms, that belief was neither questioned nor tested. The thought of tracing the traffic between nests or hives did not occur either to ordinary folks or to the learned experts. For the scholars, the assumption that the socializing instincts are limited to the kith and kin, in other words to the community of birth and *therefore* of belonging, 'stood to reason'. For the ordinary folks, 'it made sense'. Admittedly, the technical means to answer the question of inter-nest migration (electronic tagging of individual wasps) were not available – but they were not sought either since the question as such was not considered worthy of being asked. Instead, a lot of research energy and funds were dedicated to the question how social insects spot a stranger in their midst: do they distinguish it by sight? By sound? By smell? By subtle nuances of conduct? The intriguing question was how the insects manage what we, the humans, with all our smart and sophisticated technology, only half succeed to achieve. That is, how they succeed in keeping the borders of 'community' watertight and to protect the separation of 'natives' from 'aliens' – that is, of 'us' from 'them'.

What passes for 'reason', as much as what is taken to make 'good sense', tends however to change over time. It changes together with the human condition and with the challenges it posits. It tends to be *praxeomorphic*. What is seen as 'standing to reason' or 'making sense' takes shape from the realities 'out there' seen through the prism of human practices – of what humans currently do, know how to do, are trained, groomed and inclined to be doing. Scholarly agendas are derivatives of mundane human practices. Problems encountered in daily human cohabitation decide the 'topical relevance' of issues and suggests the hypotheses which the research projects seek subsequently to confirm or disprove. If no effort is made to test the received popular wisdom, it is not as much for the lack of research tools, as for the fact that common sense of the time does not suggest that such a test is needed. The research escapade of the London Zoological Society team hints, if such a hint is needed, that this may not be a case any longer. Something happened to common human experience that cast doubt on the 'naturalness' and universality of the 'inborn' limitations to sociality...

Contrary to everything known (or rather believed to be known) for centuries, the London team found in Panama an impressive majority, 56% of 'working wasps', to change their nests in their life time; and not just move to other nests as temporary, unwelcome, discriminated against and marginalized visitors, sometimes actively persecuted but always suspected and resented – but as full and 'rightful' (one is almost tempted to say 'ID card carrying') members of the adoptive 'community', collecting food and like them feeding and grooming the native brood just like the 'native' workers did. The inevitable conclusion was that the nests they researched were *as a rule* 'mixed populations', inside which the native-born and the immigrant wasps lived and worked cheek-to-cheek and shoulder-to-shoulder – becoming, at least for the human outsiders, indistinguishable from each other except with the help of electronic tags...

What the news brought from Panama reveal is above anything else the astonishing reversal of perspective: beliefs that not so long ago were imagined to be

reflections of the 'state of nature', have been revealed now, retrospectively, to have been but a projection upon the insects of the scholars' own human, all-too-human preoccupations and practices (though the kind of practices that are now dwindling and receding into past). Once the somewhat younger generation of scholars brought to the forest of Panama their own (and ours own) experience of the emergent life practices acquired and absorbed in the now cosmopolitan London, that 'multi-cultured' home of interlocked diasporas, they have duly 'discovered' the fluidity of membership and perpetual mixing of populations to be the *norm* also among social insects: and a norm apparently implemented in 'natural' ways, with no help of royal commissions, hastily introduced bills of law, high courts and asylum-seekers' camps... In this case, like in so many others, the praxeomorphic nature of human perception prompted them to find 'out there, in the world' what they have learned to do and are doing 'here, at home', and what we all carry in our heads or in our subconscious as an image of 'how things truly are'...

How could that be?! – asked the Londoners baffled by what they found, hardly believing at first the facts so different from what their teachers told them to expect. When they sought a convincing explanation of the wasps' of Panama bizarre ways and means, they found it expectedly in the warehouse of tested and familiar notions. Wishing to accommodate the unfamiliar in the familiar worldview, they decided that the newcomers allowed to settle 'could not be truly aliens' – strangers no doubt they were, but not as strange as the other, *genuine* strangers: 'they joined the nests of closely related wasps – cousins, maybe...' Such explanation put anxiety to rest: after all, the right of 'close relatives' to visit and to settle in the family home was always a birthright. But how do you know that the alien wasps were 'close relatives' of the native? Well, they must have been, mustn't they, otherwise the insiders would've forced them to leave or killed them on the spot – QED.

What the London researchers clearly forgot or failed to mention, is that it took a century or more of hard work, sometimes sword-brandishing and some other

times brain-washing, to convince the Prussians, the Bavarians, Badenians, Württembergians or Saxons (just as it takes now to convince the 'Ossis' and 'Wessis' or Calabrians and Lombardians...) that they were all close relatives of each other, cousins or even brothers, descendants of the same ancient German stock animated by the same German spirit, and that for those reasons they should behave like close relatives do: be hospitable to each other and cooperate in protecting and increasing shared welfare... Or that on the way to the modern centralized nation-state and to the identification of nationhood with citizenship, the revolutionary France had to include the slogan of *fraternité* in its call addressed to all sorts of 'locals' now appointed *les citoyens* – to people who seldom looked (let alone moved) heretofore beyond the frontiers of Languedoc, Poitou, Limousin, Burgundy, Brittany, Guyenne or Franche-Comte... *Fraternité*, brotherhood: all Frenchmen are brothers, so please behave as brothers do, love each other, help each other, make the whole of France your common home, and the land of France your shared homeland... Or that since the time of French revolution all movements bend on proselytizing, recruiting, expanding and integrating the populations of heretofore separate and mutually suspicious kingdoms and princedoms, have the habit of addressing their current and prospective converts 'brothers and sisters'...

But to cut a long story short: the difference between 'cognitive maps' carried in their heads by the older generations of entomologists, and that acquired/ adopted by the youngest, reflects the passage from the 'nation-building' stage in the history of modern states to the 'multicultural' phase in their history; more generally, from 'solid' modernity, bent on entrenching and fortifying the principle of territorial, exclusive and indivisible sovereignty, and on surrounding the sovereign territories with impermeable borders – to 'liquid' modernity, with its fuzzy and eminently permeable borderlines, the unstoppable (even if bewailed, resented and resisted) devaluation of spatial distances and the defensive capacity of the territory, and an intense human traffic across all and any frontiers.

Indeed, human traffic... It goes both ways, frontiers are crossed from both sides. Britain, for instance, is today a country of *immigration* (even if the successive home secretaries go out of their way to be seen as trying hard to erect new barriers and stem the influx of foreigners); but also, according to the latest calculations, almost million and a half born Britons are currently settled in Australia, almost a million in Spain, several hundred thousand in Nigeria, even a dozen in the North Korea. The same applies to France, Germany, Poland, Ireland, Italy, Spain; in one measure or another, it applies to any bordered-off territory of the planet except a few remaining totalitarian enclaves that still deploy the anachronistic Panopticon-style techniques designed more to hold the inmates (state subjects) *inside* the walls (state borders) than to keep the aliens *outside*.

Population of almost *every* country is nowadays a collection of diasporas. Population of almost every sizeable city is nowadays an aggregate of ethnic, religious, lifestyle enclaves in which the line dividing 'insiders' and 'outsiders' is a hotly contested issue; while the right to draw that line, to keep it intact and make it unassailable, is the prime stake in the skirmishes for influence and battles for recognition that follow. Most of the *states* have passed by now and left behind their nation-building stage and so are no longer interested in 'assimilating' the incoming strangers (that is, forcing them to shake off and forfeit their separate identities and to 'dissolve' in the uniform mass of 'the natives'); and so the settings of contemporary lives and the yarn of which life experience is woven are likely to remain protean, variegated and kaleidoscopic for a long time to come. For all that matters and all we know, they may keep as well changing forever.

We are all now, or fast become, like the wasps of Panama. But more exactly, it has been by chance the lot of the wasps of Panama to 'make history', as the first 'social entity' to which the emergent, precocious and waiting-to-be-recognized-and-endorsed cognitive frame was applied; a frame derived from our novel experience of increasingly (and probably permanently) variegated setting of human cohabitation,

the fuzziness of the line separating the ‘inside’ from the ‘outside’, and the daily practice of mixing and elbow-rubbing with difference. What had been predicted more than two centuries ago by Immanuel Kant (that designing, elaborating and putting in operation rules of mutual hospitality must at some point become a necessity for the human species since we all inhabit the surface of a *spherical* planet) now turns into reality. Or it becomes rather the most seminal challenge of our time, one that calls for the most urgent and most thoroughly considered response.

The composition of the over two hundred ‘sovereign units’ on the political map of the planet is increasingly reminiscent of that of the thirty-three wasps’ nests investigated by the research expedition of the London Zoological Society. When trying to make sense of the present state of our planetary human cohabitation, we could do worse than borrowing the models and the categories that the researchers in Panama were obliged to deploy in order to make sense of their findings. Indeed, none of the nests they explored had the means to keep their borders watertight, and each had to accept the perpetual exchange of its population. On the other hand, each seemed to manage quite well under the circumstances: to absorb the newcomers without friction and suffer no malfunction because of the departure of some older residents. Furthermore, there was nothing in sight remotely reminiscent of an ‘insect centre’ able to regulate the insect traffic – or, for that matter, anything else amenable to regulating. Each nest had to cope with the life-tasks more or less on its own, though the high rate of ‘personnel turnover’ probably assured that the know-how gained by any one nest could and did travel freely and contributed to the survival success of all other nests.

Moreover, London researchers seem, firstly, not to have found much evidence of inter-nest wars. Secondly, they found that the inter-nest flow of ‘cadres’ appeared to compensate for the locally produced excesses or deficits of nest populations. Thirdly, they realized that the coordination and indirect cooperation among social insects of Panama have been, it seems, sustained without either coercion or propaganda; without commanding officers and headquarters in sight; indeed, without

centre... And whether we admit it or not, and whether we relish it or fear – we, the humans scattered among more than two hundred ‘sovereign units’ known under the name of ‘the states’, also manage for some time now to live *without a centre* – even if the absence of a clear, all-powerful, unquestionably authoritative and uncontested global centre is a constant temptations for the mighty and the arrogant to fill that void or at least to try to fill it.

‘Centrality’ of the ‘centre’ has been decomposed and the link between previously intimately connected and coordinated spheres of authority has been (perhaps irreparably) broken. Local condensations of economic, military, intellectual or artistic powers and influences are no longer (if they ever were) coinciding. Maps of the world on which colors of political entities mark their relative share and importance in – respectively – global industry, trade, investment, military power, scientific achievements or artistic creation, would not overlap. And to make such maps serviceable for any length of time, the paints we use would need be applied sparingly and easy to wash off, since the current rank of any land in the pecking order of influence and impact is by no means assured to last.

And so in our desperate effort to grasp the dynamics of planetary affairs, the old and hard dying habit of organizing the mental image of global power balance with the help of such conceptual tools as centre and periphery, hierarchy, superiority and inferiority, looks ever more as a handicap rather than, as before, an asset; as blinders rather than search lights. The tools developed and applied in the research of Panama wasps may well prove much more suitable for this task.

Teacher–student relation in the liquid–modern setting

On the origins of one of his remarkable short stories, ‘Averroes’ Search’, the great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges said that in it he has tried “to narrate the process of failure”, of “defeat” – like those of a theologian seeking the final proof of God’s existence, an alchemist seeking philosophical stone, a technology buff seeking a

perpetuum mobile or a mathematicians seeking the way to square the circle... But then he decided that “a more poetic case” would be one “of a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to others, but is to him”. That was the case of Averroes, the great Muslim philosopher, who set to translate Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but “bounded within the circle of Islam, could never know the meaning of the words *tragedy* and *comedy*”. Indeed, “without ever having suspected what theatre is”, Averroes would have to fail when trying “to imagine what a play is”.

As a topic for a wonderful story told by great writer, the case finally selected by Borges proves indeed “more poetic”. But looked from the less inspired, mundane and humdrum sociological perspective, it also looks more prosaic. Only few intrepid souls try to construct a perpetuum mobile or find a philosophical stone; but trying in vain to understand what others have no difficulty of understanding is an experience we all know only too well from autopsy, and learn daily anew. Now, in the 21st century, more than our ancestors did in the times past... Look at just one example: communicating with your children if you are a parent. Or with your parents, if you still can...

Mutual incomprehension between generations, “old” and “young”, and the suspicion that follows it, have a long history. One can easily trace symptoms of suspicion in quite ancient times. But inter-generational suspicion has become much more salient in the *modern* era, marked by the permanent, rapid and profound changes of life conditions. The radical acceleration of the pace of change characteristic of modern times allowed the fact of ‘things changing’ and ‘being no longer as they used to be’ to be noted in the course of a single human life: the fact that implied an association (or even a causal link) between the changes in human condition and the departure and arrival of generations.

Since the beginning of modernity and through its duration, age cohorts entering the world at different stages of continuous transformation tend to *differ* sharply in the evaluation of life conditions they *share*. Children as a rule enter a world drastically different from the one which their parents were trained and learned to take as

a standard of 'normality'; and they will never visit that other, now vanished world of their parents' youth. What by some age-cohorts may be seen as 'natural', as 'the way things *are*', 'the way things are *normally done*' or '*ought* be done', can be viewed by other as an aberration: as a departure from the norm, bizarre and perhaps also illegitimate and unreasonable state of affairs, unfair and abominable. What to some age cohorts may seem a comfortable and cozy condition, allowing to deploy the learned and mastered skills and routines, might appear odd and off-putting to some others; whereas some people might feel like fish in the water in situations which made others feel ill at ease, baffled and at a loss.

The differences of perception have by now become so multidimensional that unlike in the pre-modern times the younger people no longer are cast by the older generations as 'miniature adults' or 'would be adults' – not as the 'beings-not-yet-fully-mature-but-bound-to-mature' ('mature into being like us'). The youngsters are not hoped or supposed to be 'on the way to becoming adult *like us*', but viewed as a rather *different* kind of people, bound to *remain* different 'from us' throughout their lives. The differences between 'us' (the older) and 'them' (the younger) no longer feel as temporary irritants destined to dissolve and evaporate as the youngsters (inevitably) wise up to realities of life.

In the result, the older and the younger age cohorts tend to eye each other with a mixture of miscomprehension and misapprehension. The older would fear that the newcomers to the world are about to spoil and destroy that cozy, comfortable, decent 'normality' which they, their elders, have laboriously build and preserved with loving care; the younger, on the contrary, would feel an acute urge to put right what the ageing veterans have botched and made a mess of. Both would be unsatisfied (or at least not-fully-satisfied) with the current state of affairs and the direction in which their world seems to be moving – and blame the other side for their discomfort. In two consecutive issues of a widely respected British weekly two jarringly different charges were made public: a columnist accused 'the young people' to be 'bovine, lazy-arsed,

chlamydia stuffed and good for nothing’, to which a reader angrily responded that the allegedly slothful and uncaring youngsters are in fact ‘academically high-achieving’ and ‘concerned about the mess that adults have created’⁶. Here, as in uncountable other similar disagreements, the difference was clearly between *evaluations* and subjectively-coloured *viewpoints*. In cases like this, the resulting controversy can hardly be ‘objectively’ resolved.

Ann-Sophie, a 20-years old student of the Copenhagen Business School, said in response to the questions set by Flemming Wisler⁷: ‘I don’t want my life to control me too much. I don’t want to sacrifice everything to my career...The most important thing is to be comfortable...Nobody wants to be stuck in the same job for long’. In other words: keep your options wide open. Don’t swear loyalty of a ‘till death do us part’ kind – to anything or anybody. The world is full of wondrous, seductive and promising chances; it would be a folly to miss any of them by tying your feet and hands with irrevocable commitments...

No wonder that on the list of basic life skills which the young are prompted and eager to master, *surfing* towers high above the increasingly old-fashioned ‘sounding’ and ‘fathoming’. As Katie Baldo, guidance counsellor of the Cooperstown Middle School in the New York state⁸ has noted, ‘teens are missing some major social cues because they are too engrossed in their iPods, cell phones, or video games. I see it all the time in the halls when they can’t voice a hello or make eye contact’. Making an eye contact and acknowledging the physical proximity of another human spells waste: dedication of precious and scarce time to ‘going in depth’ – a decision that would interrupt or pre-empt surfing of so many other inviting surfaces. In the life of continuous emergency, *virtual* relations beat easily the ‘*real*’ stuff’. The off-line world prompts young men and women to be constantly on the move; such pressures would be however to no avail were it not for the electronically based capacity of multiplying inter-individual encounters by making them brief, shallow and disposable. Virtual relations are equipped with ‘delete’ and ‘spam’ keys that protect

against cumbersome (above all, time-consuming) consequences of in-depth interactions. One can't help recalling Chance (a character played by Peter Sellers in 1979 Hal Ashby's film *Being there*), who having emerged into the busy town street from his protracted *tête à tête* with the world-as-seen-on-TV, tries in vain to remove a discomfiting bevy of nuns from his vision with the help of his hand-held pilot...

For the young, the main attraction of the virtual world derives from the absence of contradictions and cross-purposes that haunt the off-line life. Unlike its off-line alternative, the on-line world renders the infinite multiplication of contacts conceivable – both plausible and feasible. It does it through the *weakening* of bonds – in a stark opposition to its off-line counterpart, known to find its bearings in the continuous effort to *strengthen* the bonds by severely limiting the number of contacts while deepening each one of them. This is a genuine advantage to men and women whom a thought that a step taken might (just might) have been a mistake, and that it might (just might) be too late to cut the losses it caused would never stop tormenting. Hence the resentment towards everything 'long term' – be it planning of one's life, or commitments to other living beings. Evidently appealing to the young generation's values, a recent commercial announced the arrival of a new mascara that 'vows to stay pretty for 24 hours', and commented: 'Talk about a committed relationship. One stroke and these pretty lashes last through rain, sweat, humidity, tears. Yet the formula removes easily with warm water': 24 hours feels as already a 'committed relationship', but even such 'commitment' won't be an attractive choice if not for its traces being easy to remove...

Whatever choice will eventually be made, shall be reminiscent of Max Weber's, one of the founders of modern sociology, 'light cloak' which one could shake off one's shoulder at will and without notice, rather than of Max Weber's 'steel casing', offering effective and lasting protection against turbulence but also cramping the movements of the protected and severely tapering the space of free will. What matters most for the young is the retention of the ability to *re-shape* 'identity' and the 'network'

whenever a need to reshape arrives or is suspected to have arrived. The ancestors' worry about *identification* is increasingly elbowed out by the worry of *re-identification*. Identities must be *disposable*; an unsatisfying or not-sufficiently-satisfying identity, or an identity betraying its advanced age, needs to be *easy to abandon*; perhaps bio-degradability would be the ideal attribute of the identity most strongly desired.

Interactive capacity of the internet is made to the measure of this new need. It is the quantity of connections rather than their quality that makes the difference between chances of success or failure. It helps to stay *au courant* of the latest talk of the town – the hits currently most listened to, the latest T-shirt designs, the most recent and most hotly talked about parties, festivals, celebrity events. Simultaneously, it helps updating the contents and redistribute the emphases in the portrayal of one's self; it also helps to efface promptly the traces of the past, now shamefully outdated contents and emphases. All in all, it greatly facilitates, prompts and even necessitates the perpetual labours of *re-invention* – to the extent unachievable in the off-line life. This is arguably one of the most important reason for the time spent by the 'electronic generation' in the virtual universe: time steadily growing at the expense of the time lived in the 'real world'.

The referents of main concepts known to frame and map the *Lebenswelt*, the lived and lived-through, the personally experienced world of the young, are gradually, yet steadily transplanted from the off-line to the online world. Concepts like 'contacts', 'dates', 'meeting', 'communicating', 'community' or 'friendship' – all referring to inter-personal relations and social bonds – are most prominent among them. One of the foremost effects of the new location of referents is the perception of current social bonds and commitments as momentary snapshots in the on-going process of renegotiation, rather than as steady states bound to last indefinitely. But let me note that 'momentary snapshot' is not a wholly felicitous metaphor: though 'momentary', snapshots may still imply more durability than the electronically mediated bonds and commitments possess. The word 'snapshots' belongs to the vocabulary of

photographic prints and photographic paper, which can accept but one image – whereas in the case of electronic ties *effacing* and *re-writing* or *over-writing*, inconceivable in the case of celluloid negatives and photographic papers, are most important and most resorted to options; indeed, the only indelible attribute of electronically-mediated ties...

But let's also remember that the bulk of the presently young generation never experienced real hardship, long and prospect-less economic depression and mass unemployment. They were born and grew in the world in which there could shelter under socially produced and serviced water- and wind-proof umbrella that seemed to be there forever to protect them against inclement whether, cold rains and freezing winds – and in a world in which every next morning promised a day sunnier than the last and more lavishly sprinkled with pleasant adventures. When I write these words, clouds gather however over that world. The happy, sanguine and full of promises condition, which the young came to believe to be the 'natural' state of the world, may not last much longer. An economic depression (threatening, as some observers insinuate, to be as deep if not deeper than the crises experienced in their own youth by the parents' generation) may linger just after the next corner. So it is too early to decide how the ingrained worldviews and attitudes of the present-day young will eventually fit the world to come, and how that world would fit their ingrained expectations.

¹ Jonathan Rutherford, *After Identity*, Laurence & Wishart 2007, pp. 59-60.

² See Philip French, 'A Hootenanny New Year to All', *The Observer Television 30 December 2007 -5 January 2008*, p.6.

³ See Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L'invention de soi: Une théorie d'identité*, Hachette 2004, p.214.

⁴ *Les uns avec les autres*, p.108.

⁵ As reported on 25 January 2007 by Richard Jones, in 'Why insects get such a buzz out of socializing', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,1997821,00.htm/>

⁶ See *The Guardian Weekend* of 4 and 11 August 2007.

⁷ See 'The Thoughtful', in *fo*, January 2008, p.11.

⁸ <http://www.wxii12.com/health/16172076/detail.html>