A Critical Thinking Approach to Globalisation and Culture

Associate professor Steluta STAN
"Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati

Abstract: *The diverse and complex cultural consequences of the present time have been subject to various studies. The new non-material digital forms of communication make the global cultural flows to move easier and more freely around the globe, a phenomenon that has been associated with many cultural consequences. Major theses, such as homogenization (standardization around a Western or American pattern), polarization (resistance to cultural conformity or standardization and emergence of cultural alternatives), and hybridization have been used as relevant analysis criteria. Having in mind the final objective (respectful contact with other cultures and successful intercultural communication), the present study, as part of a larger enterprise, is an introduction to a critical thinking approach to cultural awareness and the need for a cultural paradigm shift.*

Keywords: *critical thinking, Socratic questioning, cultural awareness, globalisation, cultural intelligence*

An introduction to critical thinking

Among the many and different definitions of *critical thinking*[1], the simplest seems to be that *critical thinking is the awakening of the intellect to the study of itself*[2]. 2,500 years ago, Socrates' method of disciplined, systematic questioning, meant to probe into thinking and ultimately assess the truth or the plausible character of things before accepting ideas as worthy of belief and beyond empty rhetoric, established that most claims to knowledge and

---

[1] see, among others, John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910); W.H. Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* (1940); Edward Glaser, *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking* (1941); Robert Ennis, "A Taxonomy of Critical Thinking Dispositions and Abilities" (in Baron and Sternberg 1987); Peter Facione, *Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction* (1990); Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools* (2001); Michael Scriven and Richard Paul, *Defining Critical Thinking* (2003); Martin Davies and Roland Barnett (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Thinking in Higher Education* (2015), etc.

[2] available at http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/766, accessed on November 5, 2016.

stereotypes could not be rationally justified even if the claiming and stereotyping were made by persons in power or of authority.

Consequently, the intellectual and philosophical roots of critical thinking go as back as ancient Socratic questioning, both involving the seeking of evidence, the close examination and testing of hypotheses and reasoning, the analysis of basic concepts and the tracing out of implications of what is said, and of what is done as well, the latter setting the agenda for the former, with, along the ages, the significant follow-ups of: Thomas Aquinas (focus on the need for systematic cultivation and cross-examination of reasoning), Erasmus of Rotterdam and Thomas More (focus on radical analysis and critique of established social systems – religion, art, society, human nature, law, and freedom), Francis Bacon (focus on the misuse of the mind in seeking knowledge), René Descartes (focus on the need for systematic disciplining of the mind, for clarity and precision), Machiavelli (focus on the foundation for modern critical political thought, alongside with Hobbes and Locke in England), the thinkers of the French Enlightenment (Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot focusing on the human mind disciplined by reason, better able to figure out the nature of the social and political world), John Stuart Mill (the 19th century Utilitarian who feared mass conformism, "sheep-like uniformity", was concerned to help create a critical society entailing freedom of thought and granting of fundamental human rights).

At a faster speed, we mention critical thought extended even further and applied by Karl Marx to problems of capitalism, by Charles Darwin to the history of human culture and the basis of biological life, by Sigmund Freud to the unconscious mind, and, in the 20th century, by William Graham Sumner to the tendency of the human mind to think sociocentrically (exploited by education systems that have served the function of social indoctrination, by producing an orthodoxy regarding all main doctrines of life and creating popular opinions full of fallacies, half-truths, and generalizations, or, as Noam Chomsky put it, "Democratic societies can't force people. Therefore they have to control what they think"), by Ludwig Wittgenstein to importance of concepts in human thought, by Jean Piaget to the egocentric and sociocentric tendencies of human thought, and the need to cultivate critical thinking in order to reason within multiple standpoints, etc.

To sum up, by virtue of the rich history of critical thought resulting in a massive collective contribution, our awareness of the importance of gathering information with great care and precision and enhanced

sensitivity to its potential inaccuracy, distortion and misuse has increased significantly. Now we know how easily the human mind can deceive itself, or, as the quantum physicist Richard Feynman said, "You must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest person to fool."

In 1995, UNESCO adopted the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance which states that "education for tolerance could aim at countering factors that lead to fear and exclusion of others, and could help young people to develop capacities for independent judgment, critical thinking and ethical reasoning."

Critical thinking (also named "lateral thinking" by the Maltese physician, psychologist, inventor, and author Edward de Bono, or "reflective thinking" by the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey, or "divergent thinking by the American psychologist J.P. Guilford) is not necessarily negative, destructive or "criticizing"; most often than not, it is a necessary positive activity producing genuine knowledge and satisfying feeling of justified confidence in that knowledge. Also, it does not oppose or is hostile to creativity, or, as de Bono usefully suggested: "thinking of critical and creative thinking as a car's left and right front wheels; the car goes nowhere unless both are present and doing their job"[1].

Critical thinking and critical societies

The process of thinking takes place within a particular cognitive pattern, not necessarily applying across all ethnic and cultural groups, that shapes people's seeking and processing information, the assumptions they make, and the guiding principles they apply to consider and solve problems.

Human beings are not critical thinkers by nature. It is the nature/nurture debate. Thinking critically can be acquired (although not very easily or without long and hard practice), it is a highly contrived activity. The same as piano or tennis playing. Climbing trees and running are natural; dancing comes natural enough; but playing tennis or the piano is something that some people can only do well with many years of painful, expensive, and dedicated training. Whatever Aristotle might have said, we were not designed to be all that critical. Evolution is primarily about the survival of the species, about Homo sapiens being logical enough to outlive

---

[1] Tim van Gelder (2004). *Teaching Critical Thinking: Lessons from Cognitive Science.* Retrieved from https://app.box.com/shared/2a768c853e6e8fbe7ff5 (accessed on November 5, 2016).

mammoths and mastodons, not about making things better than they need to be.

Then the question arises: what kind of thinkers are we naturally?

American science writer, science historian, and cultural anthropologist, Michael Shermer, author of books in which he attempts to explain the ubiquity of irrational or poorly substantiated beliefs, out of which *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition and Other Confusions of Our Time* (1997) describes humans as pattern-seeking, story-telling animals[1], fond of things that "make sense" and "seem right", of simple and familiar patterns and narratives. So, this, in the analogy above, would be running or climbing trees. Critical thinking, on the other hand, or what cognitive scientists call "a high-order skill", would be playing tennis or the piano, a complex activity built up on other, simpler and easier to acquire skills, combined in the right way. For example, if playing tennis presupposes a masterful combination of running, hitting a forehand or a backhand, and watching the opponent simultaneously, critical thinking involves skillfully exercising various lower-level cognitive capacities in integrated wholes.

From another, not so different perspective, society and culture shape the way we think, telling us what makes sense. Our cultural and historical circumstances influence our mind habits; therefore our decision-making strategies reflect our own culture[2]. A critical society is one that cultivates systematically (on a day-to-day basis) critical thinking and rewards, as systematically, reflective questioning and intellectual independence.

William Graham Sumner, a distinguished American social scientist and anthropologist, gave the definition of the ideal critical society:

> *The critical habit of thought, if usual in a society, will pervade all its mores, because it is a way of taking up the problems of life. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded by stump orators and are never deceived by dithyrambic oratory. They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence, uninfluenced by the*

---

[1] idem

[2] Douglas Brenner and Sandra Parks, "Cultural Influences on Critical Thinking and Problem Solving" in *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*, 3rd edition, Arthur L. Costa (ed.) (2001), Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia, USA.

emphasis or confidence with which assertions are made on one side or the other. They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices and all kinds of cajolery. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens.[1]

Despite the fact that Sumner was dreaming of such a society continually improving in the '40s, the idea represents still an ideal to be achieved in the 21st century. There is no country on earth where critical thought is characteristic of everyday life, personal or social. Quite the contrary, in every country and culture in the world, superficiality, deception, empty rhetoric, manipulation, short-sightedness, close-mindedness and the like are easily identifiable, resulting in anxiety, fear, lack of self-confidence and hope, suffering, injustice, etc.

Yet, human beings have a huge capacity for rationality and reasonability, the history of humankind being so rich in documented accomplishments and achievements. What is as undeniable is that, as is the case with tennis or piano playing, this capacity must be developed actively and continually by the mind because it is our second nature, not our first, which is, as stated before, a tendency towards self-interest and self-protection that are so necessary for survival.

"Imagine", since the famous song of the Beatles, remains an exercise humanity should take more often: imagine a world full of reasonable and reasoning people who solve problems with open-mindedness and mutual respect, who protect freedoms and liberties (both theirs and the others), who work to understand each other's point of view, who are taught and encouraged to think independently rather than conform mindlessly.

Critical thinking on a societal level has never been more important to accomplish with all the monumental problems humanity faces. Everything depends on the kind of thinking we do. The most important thinkers throughout history have contributed to the idea of the critical society, laying emphasis on the educated mind, freedom of thought, the cultivation of the intellect:

---

[1] William Graham Sumner (1940). original work *Folkways: a Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals*) in Linda Elder, Richard Paul, "Critical Thinking, the Educated Mind, and the Creation of Critical Societies... Thoughts from the Past). Retrieved from http://www.criticalthinking. org/pages/critical-societies-thoughts-from-the-past/762 (accessed on November 8, 2016).

The highest possible stage in moral culture is when we recognize that we ought to control our thoughts. (Charles Darwin)

To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle requires creative imagination and marks real advances in science. (Albert Einstein)

Intellect annuls fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Irrationally held truths may be more harmful than reasoned errors. (Thomas Henry Huxley)

A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices. (William James)

Major theses of globalisation

Globalisation is a process of interaction and integration among the people, companies, and governments of different nations, a process driven by international trade and investment and aided by information technology. This process has effects on the environment, on culture, on political systems, on economic development and prosperity, and on human physical well-being in societies around the world.[1]

At the end of the 1970s, the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede proposed a model of national culture consisting of six dimensions representing independent preferences of one group's symbols, rituals, values, and heroes, and how these elements evolve when they interact with other cultures.

Homogenization, polarization, and hybridization are considered the major stands in the discussion about globalisation, which is both about sharing a global culture and designing new cultural borders. It is also about cross-cultural awareness as a new skill, a differentiated form of collective intelligence that has to be learnt.

The homogenization thesis is based on the affirmation that globalisation tends to standardize the cultures of the world, leading to an increased sameness on the American or Western pattern. Of course, this theory does not go as far as to claim that local cultures disappear altogether, even if overwhelmed by the effects of the worldwide spread of market economy and the global strategies of multinational companies. The picture of homogeneity has been clear since the 1950s and has been further

---

[1] Retrieved from http://www.globalization101.org/what-is-globalization/ (accessed on October 26, 2016).

enhanced with the recent development of information technology and global communications. Notwithstanding this development, the more interactive Internet culture indicates that global consumer culture is itself changing very rapidly and that patterns of homogeneity, insofar as they exist, are far from static and secure.

The disparities between cultures and the resistance to Western norms made room for a more recent theory that attracted growing attention, polarization, which focuses on cultural differences. Political scientist Samuel Huntington extended one of his earlier articles (in response to his former student's book, Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man) and published The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order in 1996. Civilization was for Huntington the broadest level of culture and cultural identity, and human history was the history of seven or eight types of civilization. Fukuyama, on the other hand, rejects the view that globalisation leads to cultural homogeneity: "Many people think that because we have advanced communications technology, and are able to project global television culture worldwide, this will lead to homogenization on a deeper cultural level. I think that, in a way, it's done just the opposite."[1] In this context, polarization is seen as the resistance to cultural conformity or standardization, and the emergence of cultural alternatives.

Emphasizing the weaving of cultures as a consequence of globalisation, cultural hybridization produces new hybrid cultures that are neither local nor global. This positive view of cultural globalisation connects with global heterogenization and the emerging of new cultural realities. This is the concept of glocalization, which expresses the process of interpenetration of the global and the local resulting in unique mixtures in different geographic areas (examples are plenty in the arts, languages, etc.). With the world growing more pluralistic, individual and local groups have greater power to adapt and innovate in a glocalized world, to produce new ideas and communication. Therefore, in opposition to the tendency towards uniformity often associated with globalisation, hybridization underlines the diversity associated with cultural hybrids effected by the mixing of the global with the local.

As American professor Robert Holton claims, homogenization gives an interesting and important perspective, but it is far from being the dominant trend. The polarization thesis instead deals with the first level of

---

[1] Retrieved from http://www.stateofnature.org/?p=6292 (accessed on November 10, 2016).

complexity, that of countertrends, but at the expense of ruling out interculturalism and hybridization. The hybridization perspective is a corrective to the other two approaches because it can include a second level of complexity, the one of interaction.[1]

For John Tomlinson, the relationship between globalisation and culture is not uniliniar, as both influence each other, and a real cosmopolitan culture will not emerge without the respect of cultural differences and a common sense commitment about the world: "Globalisation lies at the heart of modern culture; culture practices lie at the heart of globalisation. This is the reciprocal relationship."[2]

Critical thinking and one of the myths of globalisation

What does all this have to do with critical thinking?

The Global village, not in the sense Marshall McLuhan so brilliantly described it in the 1960s, when he predicted the Internet as an "extension of consciousness" (*The Guttenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, 1962), but as an expression that we use so often today.

The fact that "people are different" is much more profound than its utterance *ad nauseam* shows: how we perceive and understand the world inside but also outside our own selves is different, what we choose and how we choose to communicate are different, what triggers and the manner in which we display our different emotions are different, even the quality of our silence differs, etc.

Consequently, the global village is far from being global, let alone one single village. Global warming, global economy and its global crisis, global communication might make sense in the way they have an impact on large areas and populations. But village life and village culture still rule, now maybe more than ever. Critical thinking in this regard is about not believing in the quasi-mythical powers of globalisation and start remembering how easy it is to misunderstand each other although (an interesting paradox) English has become a global *lingua franca*. If we add to this that our reliance on digital communication is unrelenting and total, we find ourselves facing a cross-cultural dilemma: English is spoken so much and so almost everywhere that, as a matter of logical consequence, we ought to understand each other quite easily. And yet, our communication is

---

[1]Robert Holton, "Globalization's Cultural Consequences" in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2000), vol. 570, pp. 140-152.
[2] John Tomlinson (1999). *Globalization and Culture*, University of Chicago Press, p. 1.

not as effective and harmonious as we would like it to be because our interpretation is subjective, because we look at the world through eyes and lenses designed to correct our vision, not the person's we stereotype, because we think and react very quickly (a 21st century essential requirement), because we communicate so much but do not take time to think about the different cultural spaces our words travel through (the addresser's and the addressee's). It is like we speak and write (emails, obviously) in a cultural vacuum, unaware of the existing contextual and cultural variables.

Culture cannot be global because it is entirely about context (individual, societal, national). What should be global is our willingness to become culturally intelligent, to understand different cultures and learn techniques to adapt in order to improve, which does not mean losing our own cultural identity (quite on the contrary) but realising that we think (conscious or unconscious thought production) and reason (conscious production of mental thought with the use of logic) differently.

To conclude, critical thinking and cultural intelligence (both concepts to be furthered in future studies) are essential to an effective and enriching understanding of globalisation. And finally, of the world we live in.