Individualism, Human Rights And Identity

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Abstract

The author argues that human rights are primarily based on individualism and defined as a 'struggle for recognition' of the equal dignity of each individual. Individualism proceeds from a particular historical genealogy of Western origin. Identity is an ideological construction which reduces culture to a necessarily incomplete identity expression. Human rights, including cultural rights, can here trace the elements of a compromise between the expression of culture and the possibility for the individual to express his or her difference. If human rights can be an 'imported' element, as the basis of a political compromise between various groups ('democracies without democrats'), the promotion of the individual and his or her intrinsic value is a painful long-term process for human groups which tend not to accept divergent expressions in their midst. For this long-term project to have any chance to succeed, the expression of dissenting voices must be protected.

1. Introduction

I will argue in this paper that human rights are closely linked to individualism and proceed from an historical process that has originated in the West to become a universal phenomenon. The dynamics of individualism have far reaching effects beyond the political or social sphere, driving the expression of cultural identities. The foundation of individualism is the 'struggle for recognition' that has led to the renewed assertion of cultures world-wide. As a result, an in-built contradiction lies at the heart of individualism which leads both to the recognition of the individual's rights and to the rise of local cultural identities.

French anthropologist Louis Dumont has provided a wider definition of individualism as the modern anthropological phenomenon, in contrast to the traditional hierarchical and holistic society.[1] The concept of individualism, often devalued at the theoretical level in social sciences, will be examined here to demonstrate how this concept can be an explanatory factor of the contemporary construction of identity and of the 'crisis in culture' (in reference to the term used by Hannah Arendt).[2] Individualism has to be approached not as a purely political and economic ideology, but as an

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[1] See Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); and, Dumont, *Essai sur l'individualisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

[2] See Arendt, 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance', in Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1968) 197.

anthropological phenomenon, which is part of an historical process covering all aspects of human life.

The emergence of individualism is part of a universal historical process, driven by the emancipation of the individual and his struggle for recognition, to use Hegelian terminology. The 'struggle for recognition' is at the heart of individualism which gives the highest value to the promotion and protection of the individual. The 'struggle for recognition' is a social phenomenon: this aspiration to equality and to autonomy necessarily leads to the social recognition of the particular place of each individual in the world. The struggle for recognition is a social phenomenon as de Tocqueville clearly saw when he described the social transformations brought about by the '*passion égalitaire*' (passion for equality).

The 'struggle for recognition', at the heart of the individual's aspirations, goes beyond the public sphere and the political and economic order, to affect what connects all aspects of life: culture. Charles Taylor, in particular, has shown that the 'struggle for recognition' is as much political as it is cultural.[3]

But if individualism influences the relation to culture, it does not define in itself a culture. Individualism is more of a process, rather than the aim: individualism is based on its ability to transform the framework of human life without reference to a particular worldview. Individualism can constitute the horizon of a political, or even economic and social order, but it cannot say what culture is about. From this point of view, culture in an individualistic context remains a largely autonomous factor and identity is the way the individual can connect himself or herself to a culture.

2. The Historical and Cultural Dimension of Human Rights

The concept of human rights cannot be examined independently of its link with a particular history. Precisely because of their universality, human rights, in their concrete expression, are linked to a defined cultural context. As a result, human rights are 'impure', because they are inserted into a broader context which goes beyond the 'pure' implementation of human rights as an expression of an individualistic ideology.

In the Western world, liberal democracy has been established only at the end of a long historical process through which individualism has been incorporated as part of the local culture: this has been a difficult and troubled process, easier in the American or French cases, far more troubled in Germany, or in new democracies such as Spain, Greece or Portugal. Only in a few societies has individualism been a purely internal factor of political and cultural transformation.

The historical extension of individualism has been for most societies an external political, social and economic shock (including in Europe, and *a fortiori* out of Europe). This hypothesis is fundamental to understanding the historical universal rise of individualism: the extension of individualism is a common phenomenon to both Western and non-Western cultures. Even if Western thinking has been dominant in the formation of individualism, it is no longer possible to assign individualism to a precise area or culture.

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[3] In Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

A. Individualism and Autonomy

Individualism has become an autonomous historical trend which has moved away from its Western intellectual origins. The religious origins of individualism, in Christianity, as well as its secular origins in Enlightenment, if they still mark today the concept of individualism, are no longer sufficient to explain its influence.

Religious references to the concept of the individual are not exclusive to the Christian religion. The '*individu-hors-du-monde*' ('out-of-the-world individual') of Louis Dumont is a characteristic of the Hindu traditional civilisation, which acknowledges the concept of the individual (though as an exceptional phenomenon), not as part of a technological rational context, but, on the contrary, as part of a sacred order. Islam is also based on the direct relation between God and man: Islam is not in itself alien to individualism, it is rather particular interpretations of Islam and the role of the community ('*Umma*') which prevent the individual from asserting him or herself. In general, religious belief is not incompatible with individualism and the figure of the mystic is the typical example of a traditional religious vision of the individual.

Enlightenment saw the individual as a rational being and the public sphere as the place of rational discussion, based on the ancient Greek idea of the public deliberation: this has resulted in a mechanical link established between all these concepts, as if none of these could exist independently of the others. The rise of individualism and the emergence of an autonomous public sphere do not necessarily lead to a decline of non-rational thinking. On the contrary, and the crisis of rationalism in the West has indeed shown it, public as well as private spheres are largely marked, if not dominated, by non-rational thinking and behaviour.

At the same time, it is possible to argue for a universality of rationality, at least in its simplest form, as the basis for the development of any empirical knowledge.[4] A high degree of abstraction and scientific knowledge are the mark of some societies, but the universality of rationality cannot be questioned, nor can the universality of language. Rationality is therefore not linked to a given culture neither can it be automatically linked with individualism. Numerous non-Western cultures, in particular in the Middle East or Asia, have designed very elaborate visions of rationality, based on a high level of abstraction.

If individualism constitutes a separate category of knowledge, it cannot be reduced to rationality. Individualism may encourage science, as an impersonal and neutral form of knowledge, but it is based primarily on the capacity recognised in the individual to know by him or herself, outside any social authority. Individualism is first of all creating the conditions for a critical speech to exist: the role of freedom of conscience and of expression is more important to the development of the individual than rationality and, in this respect, individualism is largely independent from a particular cultural background.

B. Human Rights and Nation-State

The historical link between individualism and the nation-state has led to the abusive assimilation between the values protecting the individual and the framework within

[4] This idea is developed in detail by Goody, *The East in The West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

which such a protection is exerted. The nation-state is endowed with legal and cultural attributes (sovereignty, national unity, defence of the interests of a group) which exceed the simple protection of the individual. The sovereignty concept, by its indivisible character, confuses the legitimacy of the public space in which the individual is recognised with the protection of the individual.

An historical separation has appeared between the framework in which rights are exercised (the nation-state) and the intellectual and moral domain of individualism (humanity). Hannah Arendt has shown how the confusion between the concept of rights and the state has been detrimental to the idea of rights, by making citizenship a prerequisite to the recognition of rights.[5]

The nation-state has historically been a decisive factor for the construction of the individual's cultural identity. The modern and universalistic form of the nation-state has provided a legal and political framework in which the individual could be concretely recognised, while being a decisive factor in perpetuating and redefining cultural specificity. The nation-state has played a growing role in the transmission of culture, in particular through education. The nation-state has thus contributed to the transformation of cultural difference into a political and legal difference and to ensure the transmission of this difference.

One could thus distinguish two historical stages of the transformation of cultural identity in an individualistic context. In the first stage, individualism leads to an authoritarian vision of cultural identity, in particular (though not exclusively) through the historical form of the nation-state. At this stage the nation-state can be seen as an historical synthesis between an emerging individualism and the persistence of the traditional cultural references ('remnants of holism' to use Dumont's words). In the second stage, a new synthesis appears which could be described as a 'liberal view' of identity, where the collective references do not disappear but are fundamentally pluralist and open. The evolution of the nation-state shows that it would be a mistake to dismiss the nation-state as a notion of the past in a globalised world. What is a *passé* idea is the notion that states are granted unlimited sovereignty.

C. Human Rights and Public Sphere

The existence of a public sphere is also rightly regarded as an essential element of the protection of rights: equality is made possible by the existence of a public space which overrules social distinctions. Protecting the private sphere allows personal freedom to express itself outside the constraints of a given social and cultural context.

But the idea of a public sphere is largely a fiction when it comes to its concrete implementation, as the idea of a completely neutral public space is largely illusory. Cultural expressions, whether art, religion or traditional practices, belong to both the private and public spheres. The concept of the public sphere is not only in itself difficult to define, it is also historically based on the expression of particular cultural values; it expresses the tradition of a given group and results from a history which has led to particular cultural referents defining the public space (language used, religious signs, and choices of the day of leave).

The existence of a public sphere has led to a repression of the traditional hierarchy within the limits of the private sphere: once the door of the private home is

[5] The incomplete nature of human rights in the nation state context is described in detail in Arendt, *Imperialism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951).

closed, all beliefs, even the most regressive ones, can be expressed and professed. Farhad Khorsrokhavar[6] described this mechanism of repression and how it is called into question under the pressure of the diversity of expressions in the contemporary society (minorities in the Western countries, cultures which were subjected to colonial domination), all of which claim their share in the public space.

This crisis of the public sphere takes us back to the classical argument of Edmund Burke on the abstraction of the concept of individual: the rights of the individual are not universal, but are part of a given culture; they are only 'the Englishmen's rights'.[7] A vision of individualism separated from culture does not account for the fact that reference to culture is so resilient. Culture is strikingly absent from the individualistic ideology and this is why the issue of access to the public space is so contentious. This missing link, this gap, will be filled by identity.

3. Dynamics of the Rights and Assertion of Identity

Individualism has to be seen both as a factor of subversion of cultural identity, because it does not define a cultural community (except for a hypothetical universal community), and a reinforcing factor of identity, as a fundamental reference point for the individual in his or her 'struggle for recognition'. This paradox has been shown by Charles Taylor: individualism is at the same time *acultural*, as it is based on the recognition of the equal dignity of all individuals regardless of culture, and cultural, insofar as the recognition of equal dignity implies an equal recognition of all cultural aspirations.[8]

A. Culture as Ideology: Identity and Culture

Everyday discourse induces confusion between the concepts of culture and cultural identity. What is called 'culture' refers more often to the constructed expression of a given culture rather than to the culture itself. Culture is often more about identity than about culture itself. Culture is a complex phenomenon which can seldom be reduced to the simple use made in everyday life.

Norwegian anthropologist Frederik Barth[9] has shown how ethnic groups define themselves through the subjective and historical constitution of a border between groups, which is not based on clearly defined and substantial properties. This approach of cultural identity shows how historical, political and social factors are essential elements of identity definition.

What is missing is a consideration of the cultural factors which inform the identity strategies. The objective existence of culture differences (languages, rituals, etc.) is not questionable: what is questionable is the possibility of identifying a culture as a monolithic and coherent entity having clear borders.

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[6] See his contribution: 'The End of the Monoculturalisms', in Wieviorka and Ohana (eds), *La différence culturelle* (Paris: Balland, 2001).

[7] Burke considered that freedoms were legitimate only insofar as they are part of the heritage of the English people: in his view the rights of the individual are not universal, but are part of the development of a particular culture (quoted by Arendt, supra n. 5).

[8] See Taylor 'Two Theories of Modernity', (1996) 6 *The Responsive Community* 16.

[9] See Barth, Introduction, in Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Cultural Differences* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969) 2.

On the one hand, cultural difference as an objective phenomenon remains independent of any social or political structures, as a reflection of the objective diversity of the historical traditions, of languages, of practices, of visions of the world, of artistic shapes, etc. There is a powerful historical inertia of the cultural forms. The cultural forms are carrying with them pre-ideological patterns, ways of thinking and of behaviour. Owing to their plasticity, they do not form ideologies as such, but they serve as the basis on which the ideology of identity is built.

On the other hand, cultural difference as a subjective phenomenon is the basis of identity as an ideological construction whose aim is to assign precise borders to diffuse cultural phenomena. Cultural identity refers to a social whole: identity is an essential element to ensure and preserve the link between the individual and the group. Identity is also an univocal and simplifying interpretation of culture. It usually gives little or no place to pluralism and to alternative visions of the culture. Identity is finally used as a tool for action: it transforms implicit cultural referents into explicit and asserted referents, in order to justify action (especially in the political field): from symbolic power, identity transforms culture into a source of real power.

One of the impasses in the discussion on multiculturalism is that cultural identity and culture are often confused. The majority of Anglo-Saxon authors speak about cultural rights as if they are attached to cultures which are fixed, easy to define, entities. Wieviorka[10] disputes the simplification which results from a definition of cultures in terms of a clearly defined and fixed identity. Culture is the place of interbreeding and cultural identity than of homogeneity.

B. The Assertion of Identity

Identity is defined here as the historical expression of culture in an individualistic context, resulting from the dialectical relation between culture and individualism. Cultural identity is the legitimate differentiation factor between individuals (freedom of choice of the cultural reference). However, in the egalitarian context of individualism, identity tends to become a factor of hierarchy and a separation between men, given its ideological nature.

Charles Taylor has shown that the value given by the individual to a culture, as part of his or her identity, needs to be recognised at the collective level. This takes us back to the idea of a 'struggle for recognition', where every individual is entitled to ask for the recognition of a particular culture in the name of equality. What is at stake here is the issue of the actual implementation of the principle of equality. What de Tocqueville said of the '*égalité des conditions*' applies to culture: the egalitarian passions described by de Tocqueville concern all the aspects of individual life: the individual's social identity, his political, economic and social rights, but also his cultural rights.

The contradiction within the individualistic society has been underlined, as we have already seen, by Louis Dumont. Such a society is based on the individuals' equality, but at the same time, just as any human society, it produces a scale of values, which necessarily produces a hierarchy between men.[11] As such, culture is not only a symbolic reference, but is also producing a normative reference. Edward Said has

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[10] See Wierviorka, 'Différences dans la différence', [2000] *Comprendre, Revue de philosophie et de sciences sociales*, no. spécial 'Les identités culturelles' 297.

[11] In *Homo Hierarchicus*, supra n. 1.

shown how culture becomes an ideological and political factor. In his view, all cultural forms imply a vision of the world of a political nature and can become a factor of power and domination.[12] Both Dumont and Said show what remains of holism and hierarchy in egalitarian societies.

4. Human Rights and Culture: Towards a 'Clash of Identities'?

The developments above show that the rise of human rights sits uneasily with the assertion of cultural identity. While the discourse of human rights has spread to become universally accepted, a parallel increase in the assertion of particular cultural identities has taken place.

The history of the extension of human rights gives at least a partial answer. The emergence and spread of human rights is entangled with the history of colonisation, which is also the history of how the colonised have used this idea against the coloniser. This situation explains why human rights remain a key source of division in today's world: there is a shared history of colonisation, but not yet a shared meaning.

The key issue for the future of human rights is therefore whether the non-Western world can provide a plausible account for the rise of individualism by redefining the relation to identity and culture, and articulate these in a political community.

A. Human Rights and Colonisation

If there is really anything like a 'clash of civilisations', one should turn to the radical innovation that Western colonisation has represented. Colonisation was a new idea, not because it aimed at imposing a cultural system on other cultures (which is rather common) but because it was aimed at exporting universal values (which have been in turn used by the colonised against the coloniser). Decolonisation happened when ideas from the West were used against it. Individualism is in fact at the heart of the decolonisation movement: the 'struggle for recognition' of the colonised has given a new legitimacy to traditional cultures and allowed a new assertion of cultural identity.

This assertion of identity is the cultural expression of the 'struggle for recognition'. It proceeds by turning upside down the scale of values, according to the 'master and slave' dialectic: the cultures suppressed by the colonial value system are more assertive, the equal dignity of the cultural expression of the colonised *vis-a-vis* that of the coloniser is claimed.

Hannah Arendt showed how imperialism is, for nation-states, a way to solve internal contradictions between the universalistic nature of the state and the particular nature of the nation. Imperialism allowed the release of universalistic aspirations while at the same time asserting the superiority of an individual nation: in that sense, imperialism is a way of solving the conflict of values between individualism and identity. Ultimately, Arendt provides us with a universal model of the articulation between individualism and cultural identity. This takes us back to the idea that the cultural boundaries of individualism (and of globalisation) are nowhere except in humanity itself.

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[12] See Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); and Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

Following this reasoning, the recent history of developing countries can be divided into three stages: colonisation, decolonisation and 'identity revival'. Colonisation led to a major and irreversible westernisation movement. Decolonisation can be seen as the last chapter, the logical conclusion, of the colonisation process (in many cases, decolonisation occurred in agreement with the coloniser and was led by newly urbanised and westernised elites). The 'identity revival' is an internal reaction to the westernisation process with which decolonisation has not really broken. One can legitimately claim that these 'identity revivals' are not different from the traditionalist or nationalist movements which marked the emergence of individualism and of the nation-states in the West.

Colonisation and domination have throughout history been the rule rather than the exception. It is obvious that the situation of colonial domination, its extent and cruelty, has resulted in an assertion of identity based on a return to the categories, languages and rituals of the local cultures. The synthesis between individualism and local culture around the world is always a difficult and often conflicting history of domination. This is where the real 'clash of identities' lies.

B. The Emergence of a Post-Colonial Individualism?

The dilemmas related to the contemporary assertion of identity and to multiculturalism illustrate the historical continuity which connects Western and non-Western worlds, marked by the extension of individualism. In exporting their cultural and value systems, Western countries have left as a historical heritage the dilemmas they had to face.

Individualism has the same disintegrating effect in post-colonial societies as it had on traditional social structures in the West. Individualism often represents in non-Western countries a new set of ideas that clash with a traditional culture still bearing strong values, whereas in the West, such a clash appeared much earlier and individualism has become part of local cultures at the end of a long and painful historical process.

However, the individual and society should not be seen as opposed polarities, but rather as an interactive process where the individual is granted more autonomy *vis-à-vis* his social context: individualism is not diluting identities, but rather transforming them. The new freedom granted to the individual is not only eroding traditional social structures, it also creates new demands of security and stability. Identity is a key element to providing such a new sense of stability.

At the same time as they are increasingly questioned and unstable, identities are also becoming a vital reference point for the individual. Beck and Beck-Gernstein have pointed out that individualisation does not endanger social integration, but is what actually makes it possible.[13] Culture and society provide reference points which are not given by tradition and clear-cut social structures, but by a new balance between the individual and society. Extremist and fundamentalist identities result from the collapse of the social order, and, conversely, a stable social order is based on the recognition of the role of the individual.

Individualism does not represent the 'end of history' in the sense that it does not end the evolution of culture. The ability of local cultures to survive and adapt to historical change is often overlooked. The perpetuation of cultural forms is such that

[13] See Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002).

radical transformations of the context or even the collapse of institutions in which a local culture originated do not prevent ancient cultural forms remaining. Examples are abound: one of them is that of Mexico and the perpetuation of the Indian traditions, even several centuries after the collapse of the Indian empires at the time of the Spanish conquest.[14] French political scientist Bertrand Badie talks of 'empty social spaces'[15] which appear in reaction to the westernisation of the political order, when the legitimacy of the state, founded according to a Western model, is failing. Such informal social areas are precisely pointing to a characteristic of individualism when the public sphere does not take into account particular cultural expressions.

Individualism acts as a catalyst of the potential for historical transformation which lies in every culture. Two inseparable prospects thus characterise culture today: an individualistic trend or how a universal ideology represented by individualism transforms culture, and conversely how culture encompasses and goes beyond the individualistic ideology.

C. Competing for the Public Sphere: the Issue of Cultural Rights

In an individualistic context, the unsolved tension is about arbitrating between competing claims. Individualism raises the question of the possibility of living socially and politically different values. This involves basing a society on common values, in which the individual can recognise himself or herself, while accepting at the same time the equal validity of the values of others.

The discussion on cultural rights seems to be in an impasse which is linked to the crisis of the public sphere. Either one considers that the 'classical' liberal framework is sufficient and gives ample room to the free expression of various cultures, but then nothing is said of the fact that the liberal society is marked by a particular historical context and cultural references (and as such does not give the same recognition to alternative cultural expressions). Or one considers that cultural rights have to be stated, but then nothing defines the form that these rights should take: cultural rights are defined *a priori*, creating distinctions between individuals in a supposedly neutral public space, thus deliberately prejudging the possibilities of choices of the individual.

Cultural rights are attached to cultural identities, which are certainly legitimated by political and social recognition, but are consequently based on a largely arbitrary definition of culture, given by a given group, at a given moment. Each individual or group is entitled to question the dominant cultural framework and replace it by alternative cultural referents.

The issue is therefore political before being cultural. Cultural rights are the result of a political struggle for the recognition of competing identities. In general, the issue of cultural rights points to the difficulty of assigning a stable political framework to liberalism and to individualism. Cultural rights are a by-product of the crisis of the

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[14] Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla has underlined the continuities between the pre-Hispanic culture and the present: for him, present day Mexican culture is still deeply rooted in its Mesoamerican past (see Batalla, *México Profundo – Reclaiming a Civilization*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

[15] In Badie, *L'Etat importé* ('The Imported State') (Paris: Fayard, 1992).

nation-state as a method of legitimate representation, and the crisis of the nation-state is nowhere as obvious as in the developing countries.[16]

5. Human Rights: A Compromise Between Individualism and Culture?

The developments above show the extent of the internal contradictions between greater individualisation and the rise of identities. But they also outline the conditions in which a compromise between such contradictory trends can take place. Rights and culture are not opposed: on the contrary, human rights represent the implicit language of cultural identity.

Human rights can represent a basis for such a compromise between identity and individual, as they fulfil two fundamental functions. First, they allow the co-existence between cultures in the public space: human rights are an element of political regulation. Second, human rights protect the irreducible domain of the individual as a value in itself.

A. The Conditions of a Compromise: a Political Approach

The 'vacuity', or more exactly the neutrality, of human rights tends to make them one of the basic elements of a political compromise in a multicultural context. It enables the various parties to refer to a common base which preserves the expression of each culture, by separating the political and the cultural dimension. The necessary (but not sufficient) condition is that such political pacts are seen as providing viable safeguards for the interests of the groups to whom they apply: human rights and democracy represent such safeguards.

The limits of this approach are obvious in a little or un-democratic context, where the reference to democracy or to human rights is often used for tactical reasons and unrelated motives. However, history shows that 'democracies without democrats'[17] have been common, from the foundation of the 3rd Republic in France until the more recent examples of Japan or Germany, not to mention the Indian democracy or the political compromise between the various confessions in Lebanon. Whether, in the absence of positive support for their expressed values, such democracies are viable in the long run is much more doubtful.

The potential conflict between values becomes a real issue for the relationship between individualism and culture, when in a given society some basic values of this society are seen as being endangered. It is then that the community itself and its survival, which tends to represent the sole legitimate goal and the group dimension of self-defence, becomes all-pervasive. In the absence of an institutional framework to protect them, communities, and their culture, can actually disappear (see 'indigenous' cultures in Africa or the South Pacific). Such extreme cases should encourage us to take seriously even marginal identity expressions. This question is first of all political and brings us back to the problems of cultural rights, as the possibility for any form of identity to ensure its right to political expression (and survival).

Cultural rights can create the conditions of a compromise between the assertion of identity and liberal individualism. However, a truly liberal political compromise can

[16] See in particular Badie, ibid.
[17] In reference to Salamé (ed.), *Démocraties sans démocrates* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

only exist between identities which have incorporated (or at least accepted) the liberal ideology. Examples are abound from Quebec to the Catalans in Spain, not to mention Belgium or migrants in Western countries, or even the homosexual or feminist movements. These groups have realised that the framework offered by human rights is the best guarantee of their protection.

'Anti-globalisation' movements (or rather for an alternative globalisation) also express such new identity claims. For these movements, the world order is not only unjust, but does not respect particular characteristics: it is the expression of only one vision of globalisation. These movements are a good example of such new ideological forms which are both an expression of a universal individualistic ideology, with its claim for equality (mainly economic, but also political, as a quest for recognition against a world order defined as unfair) and the expression of cultural diversity against a globalisation which would erase differences.

B. Freedom or the Irreducible Sphere of the Individual

If the political recognition of human rights appears to be more and more accepted in the current international context, the acceptance of human rights as a positive value within societies is, at the very least, much less obvious.

A fundamental reason is that the recognition of the individual's rights comes, by definition, from minority and dissenting groups. If individualism is perceived through traditional categories, these refer, at least initially, to marginal phenomena (such as the '*individu hors-du-monde*' of Louis Dumont). People perceived as individuals belong to groups seen as marginal, such as persons of mixed origin, artists, intellectuals or religious mystics (Hindu hermits, mystic sufis, etc.).

In the long run, positive adhesion to the values of individualism can only result from a compromise between the group and the individual. In order to achieve that, the values of the individual do not need to be supported actively by the majority. History shows that freedom can be defended by a minority, as long as it has the possibility of expressing itself. What is essential is that the individual's right to dissent is preserved.

From this point of view, elites have a particular role to play in the developing countries. They are more likely to adopt individualistic ways of life and of thinking, while still being connected to the traditional way of life which remains that of the majority of the population. The position of these elites is precisely marked by the contradiction between individualism and tradition. The dominant perception, which equates individualism with westernisation and traditionalism with respect of the local values, does not facilitate a compromise between various values.

The positions developed by Edward Said (and more largely by post-colonial thinkers) and his description of the Western intellectual domination, especially when it comes to the apprehension of non Western cultures is of particular interest in this context. I would argue precisely that human rights are the implicit intellectual reference which makes it possible to go beyond the 'orientalisation' of the other. The individual's freedom of thought, the critical approach permitted by individualism allows us to call into question the institutions producing 'orientalism'. The individual can thus develop autonomous thinking, of course largely subject to external influences, but which allows a new reading of the culture and the emancipation from the institutional power present in the culture.

Individualism can be a source of cultural revival by the dynamics of cultural transformation it creates. This dynamics is that of the coexistence of several temporalities, of past cultural references, which need not be a source of conflicts. Culture is not necessarily a danger, going against the individual's emancipation, but on the contrary as a place of memories, a source of intellectual revival and of new references for creation which can alleviate the alienation of the modern individual.

The post-colonial man is an individual who has to rebuild his own history. In doing so, he cannot erase his historical origins. The reconstitution of a post-colonial vision of culture is a hybrid which will include local as well as Western cultural categories, individualism being one of them, even if it means modifying and reinventing these categories. This is both a source of cultural enrichment and of a crisis of identity.