Learning from history

When, through the media and the Internet, we can ‘see’ on the other side of the world, in real time, we get the impression that only one world is being built. In fact, it is only one representation of the world that is being built, projected onto all the screens that now surround us. But on the ground, in people’s minds, alternative worlds still exist and will always exist.

Diversity exists because humans have an intrinsic capability to go beyond what they have learnt, to think differently and to act on those thoughts. Without this capacity, and the conditions which allow the expression of such diversity, there would have been no synergy between cultures historically and no progress.

It would be indeed ironic if, in this beginning of a millennium, people living within the hegemony of the civilization that has been most capable of acknowledging, collecting and using the knowledge of so many other cultures in the last three centuries, that is, western culture, were now to lose this competence on the basis of single-minded economic policies or end-of-history political streamlining.

It helps to remember that no culture, in spite of claims by conservative leaders, has remained infertile, no empire has lasted forever and no religion has been eternal since interpretations and practices change in every epoch. Yet, for all our enquiries into history and social change, we cannot explain why some things endure and others are lost. That is the mystery.
History does show, unmistakably, that when hegemonies become dysfunctional, alternatives arising from diverse forms of thinking, acting and organizing come forth with new visions. The question today is whether military might on a global scale is going to undercut the conditions that would allow for creative diversity, and so for new alternatives to face unprecedented challenges to human prevalence.

What kind of a world do we have now?

For all the uniformizing trends in communications, it is, in fact, quite impossible to describe the present world as a homogeneous and unidirectional world. Capitalism still coexists with socialism, liberal democracies still coexist with diverse kinds of democracies as well as with dictatorships, so-called ‘traditional’ cultures coexist with accelerated post-modern, postcolonial, posthumanist cultures. Diversity is an inherent trait to the human species. And it is especially so in terms of cultural inventions. That is, in ways of organizing society, of coping with human needs and of imagining novel futures.

A different question is that of asking whether cultural capitalism, as Jeremy Rifkin has called it, has the power to impose its way of life on all others. At present, neo-liberals and end-of-history thinkers have presented the globalization of capitalism as the only way forward. Unexpectedly, military might has now made a comeback in support of that claim. Yet, predictably, even within the western world, other alternatives have already been proposed, such as the European ‘social economy’ policies. Contesting western capitalism, other societies are proposing alternative schemes – ‘Asian capitalism’, theocratic regimes in Islamic countries, combined socialism–capitalism in China and Vietnam – while in some countries the collapse of central authorities has brought about a reversion to warlord rule. Even in some countries firmly thought of as wedded to globalization, areas of their territory have different political regimes.

It is within this diversity that alternatives will inevitably arise, as they always have. Capitalism, in fact, has thrived through absorbing critiques and alternative ideas. It has been very efficient in incorporating technologies and productive schemes from other societies. The latest stage in this incorporation of knowledge is the extensive prospecting that pharmaceutical and agri-business corporations are conducting among indigenous societies around the world. The patenting of traditional knowledge without benefits for its originators and custodians is blatant exploitation. Worst still is the plundering of biodiversity and human genetic diversity resources in banks under private control.

Millennia of creativity

On a more global level, the diversity of knowledge and art that had been amassed by the diverse human societies during millennia may soon be depleted. This brings up several serious concerns. On the one hand, of course, only a minimal part of that knowledge and art is being collected. Just as in the biosphere species are disappearing before they are recorded, so too are human cultures falling into the shadows of history.

Anthropologists are far from having registered and collected all the knowledge of even those surviving indigenous peoples that are rapidly being assimilated into the global economy. This particular endeavour of anthropologists registering human creativity has been strongly de-legitimized in the past 20 years, in fact leaving this space open to commercial prospectors. It will be argued that what anthropologists registered was selective, while practical knowledge with technological applications was left aside. True, but the latter is actually just as selective.

But the most worrying trend is that knowledge and creations in different cultures are being expropriated from the people who hold them, mainly by destroying the conditions that allowed them to continue to build their own alternative knowledge and symbolic systems.

In a 1989 article reprinted in *development* (Arizpe, 1995), I had already argued that destroying people’s confidence in continuing to develop their own authentic cultures – however we define them – could seriously limit options for developing countries. Now, 13 years later, this trend has become global and is rapidly proceeding in terms of...