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**Culture and Empire**  
**The Imperial Claim to Cultural Supremacy versus the Dialectics of Cultural Identity**

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## (I)

### **Culture and Civilization in the Era of Global Empire**

It is in the nature of imperial power that it strives to impose the empire's system of values and perception of the world upon the nations within its realm – irrespective of *how* they have come under the respective empire's rule and whether they agree to this form of subjugation or not.

In order to legitimize his rule, the “emperor” – the nation or élite establishing the empire – proclaims his civilization as the paradigmatic one: as the “standard bearer” to whose criteria the other – “lesser” – civilizations within his realm have to conform. Thus, the “emperor” (understood here in the collective sense) negates the “dialectics of cultural self-comprehension;”<sup>1</sup> he engages in a kind of civilizational *soliloquium*, relating to other civilizations or national cultures by way of a *self-encounter* and tending to shape their identity according to his own self-perception, excluding any possibility to see himself through the eyes of the other.

Under the circumstances of global empire, this negation of the dialectics of cultural *self-comprehension* and *self-realization* means that other cultures or civilizations – insofar as they are perceived as the “weaker” ones in the actual global power constellation – are denied *equal status* in terms of their dignity as expressions of the spirit of humanity. The empire accepts the cultural or civilizational “other” only on the condition that (a) the respective community subordinates itself to the “paradigmatic” imperial civilization and (b) that it accepts being recreated – “reinvented,” in imperial newspeak – according to the standards set by the empire. This is evidenced in the “reeducation” campaigns that were conducted in the name of a supposedly superior civilization, claiming to represent humanity as such, in the course of *colonization* and, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the vast public relations (or, more precisely, propaganda) effort that accompanied the measures aimed at establishing a “*New World Order*.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Köchler, “The Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations (Introductory remarks, fundamental considerations, structuring of problems),” in: *International Progress Organization*. Innsbruck: International Progress Organization, 1974, pp. 10-15.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Köchler, *Democracy and the New World Order*. (Studies in International Relations, XIX.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

The end result of this process, if unimpeded and unchallenged, would be global cultural uniformity and, resulting from it, a loss of *cultural and civilizational memory* at an enormous scale – with the further consequence of mankind gradually divesting itself of intellectual (cultural) creativity and regressing towards a “primitive” state of world perception with a much less differentiated awareness of natural and social reality than would be the case under conditions of cultural diversity.

What has unfolded, so far, as part of the multidimensional process of *globalization* – particularly since the collapse of the bipolar world order at the beginning of the 1990s –, testifies to this trend towards uniformity,<sup>3</sup> a process that is further strengthened by the dynamics of global power politics in a politically unipolar environment.

History gives ample proof of the homogenizing effect of imperial rule on local and regional cultures. One of the more extreme forms of the “imperial eradication of cultural identity” was the European project of colonization in the course of which entire civilizations have been wiped off the map and a large part of the cultural memory of mankind has effectively been erased – all in the name of *Christianity* and/or (Western) *Enlightenment*.

The imperial policy of cultural assimilation or homogenization has indeed resulted in a project of *cultural extermination* that was executed in a twofold manner, namely through:

- (1) the use of brutal force of genocidal dimensions (as in the case of indigenous peoples in the Americas, particularly on the territory of what is now the United States);
- (2) the systematic reeducation, indeed brainwashing, of indigenous peoples in order to make them fit into the imperial culture or, in real terms, serve the imperial (colonial) power’s economic interests. (The fate of the indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia is a case in point. The official “apologies” by the

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<sup>3</sup> For details see Hans Köchler, “Philosophical Aspects of Globalization. Basic Theses on the Interrelation of Economics, Politics, Morals and Metaphysics in a Globalized World,” in: Hans Köchler (ed.), *Globality versus Democracy?* (Studies in International Relations, XXV.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2000, pp. 3-18.

governments of these countries [in 2008] testify to their long suffering and humiliation.)

In addition to “formal” reeducation, peoples under colonial rule have been under the undeclared pressure to conform to the exigencies of the dominant civilization also in the management of their daily affairs – merely in order to *survive* in the socio-cultural environment created by the imperial power.

In the present era of Western imperial rule, “cultural imperialism” has become – to use a term coined by Walter Lippmann – a project of the *manufacture of consent*<sup>4</sup> on a global scale.<sup>5</sup> Although hegemony is increasingly challenged in conceptual (that is: ideological) terms and met by resistance in all corners of the world, the “emperor” still insists on the “indispensable” nature of his rule (as has become obvious, for instance, in Madeleine Albright’s famous dictum at Ohio State University).<sup>6</sup> All regions of the globe, all regional cultures and civilizations, are systematically subjected to campaigns of what is called “democratization,” “free market reform,” “human rights education,” etc., whereby a narrow and exclusively Western – mainly U.S. – understanding of norms, principles, values, and forms of political organization is imposed that are nonetheless proclaimed as being of *universal* validity.

One of the most drastic examples of this 21<sup>st</sup> century policy is the U.S. project for the creation of a “New Middle East”<sup>7</sup> – with the implicit assumption that Muslim civilization and socio-cultural habits need to be “modernized” or, more precisely, *reshaped* according to the standards of the dominant civilization while, in actual fact, it is mainly *power* and *economic interests* that are at stake. The “civilizational mission” is

<sup>4</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*. (With a new foreword by Ronald Steel.) New York: Free Press, 1997. – See also Walter Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*. London: The New American Library, 4<sup>th</sup> print 1960.

<sup>5</sup> The main elements of such a policy, in a U.S. perspective, are outlined by David Rothkopf, managing director of Kissinger Associates, in a rather frank analysis (that implies “U.S. ascendancy to undisputed leadership”) in: “In Praise of Cultural Imperialism,” in: *Foreign Policy*, Issue 107 (Summer 1997), pp. 38-53.

<sup>6</sup> “And what we are doing is serving the role of the indispensable nation to see what we can do to make the world safer for our children and grandchildren, and for those people around the world who follow the rules.” (*Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, and National Security Advisor Samuel R. Berger – Remarks at Town Hall Meeting, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, February 18, 1998. As released by the Office of the Spokesman, February 20, 1998. U.S. Department of State.*)

<sup>7</sup> For details see, *inter alia*, Trudy J. Kuehner, “A New Middle East? A Report of FPRI’s History Institute for Teachers,” in: *The Newsletter of FPRI’s Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January 2005), Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA, at [www.fpri.org/footnotes/101.200501.kuehner.newmiddleeast.html](http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/101.200501.kuehner.newmiddleeast.html).

merely the robe in which the imperial power veils its real intentions.<sup>8</sup> All of these measures are carried out with an arrogant and self-congratulatory attitude that has been typical of imperial rule all along history.

However, what is not to be overlooked in this context is the *repressive nature* of imperial rule within the imperial state itself, i.e. domestically. The “manufacture of consent” on the global scale is mirroring that same process and strategy at the domestic level: any form of dissent from the dominant ideology is portrayed as lack of patriotism or lack of commitment to democratic principles – something which has become particularly obvious since the events of September 11, 2001, in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

In an era of global empire such as the present one, “political correctness” is always defined in terms of a view’s, position’s, or principle’s conformity with the requirements of global rule as defined by the imperial power. This obviously implies the oppression of any serious form of dissent, domestically as well as abroad.

In this reflection on culture and empire, it is to be noted that intellectual and social élites in many countries have effectively been silenced as regards the need for a full, independent, and scientific investigation of the terrorist events of September 2001; these colossal – and as yet not adequately explained – events have been used by the ruling establishment in the West to advance an imperial agenda on a global scale and with ideological “intensity” not witnessed in recent history. The element of fear and intimidation is not to be underestimated in this context. The “myth of September 11” has indeed become instrumental for the legitimization not only of the unilateral use of force against disobedient countries and peoples and as part of a strategy of “preventive self-defense,” but of the global hegemon’s claim to *civilizational supremacy*; while presenting itself as the guardian of modern (Western) civilization, the hegemonial power declares *ex cathedra* that civilization as such has been targeted by the supposed perpetrators of those acts and demands obedience from the rest of the world in its self-proclaimed mission in the service of the restoration of “peace” and “justice” as defined

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<sup>8</sup> The author has explained the instrumental role of the civilizational paradigm in a lecture at an international conference on “Civilizations and World Orders” held in Istanbul, Turkey, in May 2006: Hans Köchler, “Civilization as Instrument of World Order? The Role of the Civilizational Paradigm in the Absence of Balance of Power,” in: *IKIM Journal of Islam and International Affairs / Jurnal Islam dan hubungan antarabangsa IKIM*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2008), pp. 1-22.

<sup>9</sup> See now the brilliant analysis by Daniel Sunjata, *Intellectual Dishonesty In The Age Of Universal Deceit: a message to the corporate media and our elected officials*. Published at 911Blogger.com, 4 May 2009, <http://www.911blogger.com/node/20013> (retrieved on 22 July 2009).

by the empire.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the paradigm of the “clash of civilizations,” advanced by Samuel Huntington shortly after the end of the Cold War,<sup>11</sup> a former staff member of the National Security Council of the United States, appears having become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## (II)

### Culture as a Form of Resistance to Global Empire

*Quid nunc?* How to overcome the fear and expose the empire’s claim to cultural supremacy as what it really is, namely a rather crude *tool* that is designed to legitimize the effective *subordination* of the will of the peoples of the world to the interests of the empire?

While the *economy* has been more or less forcefully “integrated” into a globalized framework – which now appears to crumble as result of a systemic crisis of the transnational financial system<sup>12</sup> –, the social reality that is at the roots of *cultural identity* is situated at an entirely different level. So far, indigenous cultures have proven more resilient and, in many instances, have steadfastly resisted what could be described as the global empire’s strategy aimed at a “manufacture of consent.”

Due to what we have characterized earlier as the “dialectics of cultural identity,”<sup>13</sup> culture has become one of the focal points of emancipation from imperial hegemony at a worldwide level. Every culture – or civilization, as a comprehensive

<sup>10</sup> For details see the outline of the author’s research seminar at the University of Innsbruck (Winter Semester 2009/2010): *Terror und der Mythos der westlichen Zivilisation* [Terror and the Myth of Western Civilization], at [http://hanskoechler.com/koechler-iv-ws2009-10.htm#\(III\)](http://hanskoechler.com/koechler-iv-ws2009-10.htm#(III)), retrieved on 22 July 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49. – See also his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York etc.: Simon & Schuster, 1998. – The term was originally coined by Bernard Lewis: “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” in: *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266, No. 3 (September 1990), pp. 47–60.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Köchler, *The Collapse of Neoliberal Globalization and the Quest for a Just World Order*. Lecture delivered at the International Conference “Prague Dialogue on Europe in the XXI Century,” organized by the World Public Forum “Dialogue of Civilizations,” Prague, Czech Republic, 14 May 2009; published by the International Progress Organization: *I.P.O. Online Papers*, 2009, at [www.i-p-o.org/Koechler-Globalization-World\\_Order-IPO-OP-2009.htm](http://www.i-p-o.org/Koechler-Globalization-World_Order-IPO-OP-2009.htm).

<sup>13</sup> For details see the author’s analyses: *Cultural-philosophical Aspects of International Cooperation*. (Studies in International [Cultural] Relations, II.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1978, and *Philosophical Foundations of Civilizational Dialogue. The Hermeneutics of Cultural Self-comprehension versus the Paradigm of Civilizational Conflict*. International Seminar on Civilizational Dialogue (3rd: 15-17 September 1997: Kuala Lumpur), BP171.5 ISCD. Kertas kerja persidangan / conference papers. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Library, 1997.

system including several cultures<sup>14</sup> – can only fully develop its inherent worldview and value system *in distinction from* another such system, i.e. by *definition* in the literal sense of the word. (The Latin term “de-finitio” means drawing the borderline vis-à-vis the “other,” which is the only way to reach a precise understanding of any object of perception.) In structural terms, this process is similar to the dialectical process of self-reflexion that is expressed in the dichotomy of “subject” and “object”: I only know who I am if I am able to relate to the “other,” to distinguish my perception of the world from that of the “other,” or to define my position by locating it in a specific *social* context. This also applies to the collective consciousness represented in a culture or civilization.<sup>15</sup>

The awareness – and fear – of the intrinsic resilience of culture vis-à-vis imperial domination has undoubtedly been one of the reasons why, in the course of history, rulers have often chosen a policy of *physical extermination*. Because they were convinced that “culture” as the focal point of a people’s or national minority’s identity and spirit of resistance cannot simply be eradicated, or effectively “neutralized,” by means of propaganda and reeducation, as sophisticated as those may be.

One of the most obvious examples of the dialectics of cultural identity is the renaissance of Islam in our era. The revival and new assertiveness of Islamic civilization unfolded parallel to the increasing efforts of the Western world, in particular the United States, at remodeling the Muslim mind according to their own image. However, this strategy – that calculates with a “colonized mind”<sup>16</sup> – appears to backfire. The developments we have witnessed since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 (which occurred *in spite* of the totalitarian rule of the Shah) testify to the resurgence of Islamic civilization as a form of *reaffirmation* of cultural (civilizational) identity that, exactly because it is not rooted in the Western tradition, enables people to *resist* a far-reaching

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<sup>14</sup> In the context of this analysis, we understand “civilization” as a comprehensive system (worldview) that comprises “culture” (different forms of cultural expression) as a sub-system.

<sup>15</sup> This “dialectical” approach which the author has worked out as part of his theory of cultural hermeneutics means that any form of essentialist understanding of culture is excluded and that his position cannot be described as “culturalism.” For an analysis and critique of the latter position (which is often referred to in the context of anti-imperialist discourses) see Jens-Martin Eriksen and Frederik Stjernfelt, “Culturalism: Culture as political ideology,” in: *Eurozine*, published 9 January 2009, at <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-01-09-eriksenstjernfelt-en.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has used the term in a speech on the occasion of the Malaysian Human Rights Day: *Special Address on Globalization*. Malaysian Human Rights Day 2005, “Human Rights and Globalization,” Kuala Lumpur, 9 September 2005, published at [www.informationclearinghouse.info/article10305.htm](http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article10305.htm), last visited 23 July 2009.

imperial agenda – in spite of the empire’s military might and its use of modern technology in the service of a large-scale propaganda war.

Although it may appear paradoxical to many observers of international relations, it is a well-established historical fact that cultural identity – the sense of belonging to a cultural community – has in many instances not been weakened, but strengthened as a result of the respective cultures’ being subjected to campaigns of marginalization, even extermination, by the hegemonial power of the time.

In the face of the virtually uncontrollable dynamics of what we have described as the “dialectics of cultural identity,” the empire engages in different forms of *denial of reality*. Ever-new strategies of repression, from propaganda campaigns and information warfare to measures of outright military intervention, are implemented to “reinvent” a “resilient” culture so as to make it conform to imperial standards and eventually subordinate itself to imperial rule. In actual fact, however, the empire creates an opportunity for the supposedly “hostile” or “backward” culture or civilization to assert its very identity vis-à-vis the imperial “other” and thus become more *immune* to attempts at reeducation.

It should not surprise us that, under these circumstances, the Western hegemonial powers have persistently tried to undermine all efforts of the peoples from the developing world, and in particular from the formerly colonized countries, at breaking the Western monopoly over the international media.<sup>17</sup> The call for the establishment of a “New International Information and Communication Order” was systematically sabotaged by the United States and the United Kingdom since it first had been made in the late 1970s. The controversies over the so-called “MacBride report” (1980)<sup>18</sup> that had suggested measures of reform of the mechanisms of international information and communication, led to the two countries’ leaving the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).<sup>19</sup> It is obvious that, at the

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<sup>17</sup> For a detailed analysis of the cultural imperialism that is inherent in this information and communication policy see Herbert I. Schiller, *Communication and Cultural Domination*. White Plains (NY): M. E. Sharpe / Pantheon Books, 1976. – See also Livingston A. White, “Reconsidering cultural imperialism theory,” in: *TBS Archives*, No. 6, Spring/Summer 2001, at [www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring01/white.html](http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring01/white.html).

<sup>18</sup> *Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow, Many Voices One World, Towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order*. Kogan Page: London / Uniput: New York / Unesco: Paris, 1980.

<sup>19</sup> They later returned, after UNESCO had effectively abolished its program for the establishment of a New International Information and Communication Order.



time, the Western countries staunchly defended their dominant position in the field of global information and communication because they saw this as absolutely essential for the perpetuation of their claim to cultural supremacy, which in turn they considered indispensable also in terms of their economic interests.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, the rationale of their rejectionist strategy was based – to a large extent, at least – on the negation of the dialectics of cultural identity. According to their logic, especially in an era of global information and communication, the cultural or civilizational “other” has to be prevented from entering the “common civilizational space” where the respective civilization would be able to interact with other civilizations (cultures) at an equal level and in an ever more differentiated manner. It is the hegemon’s concern that, in such a framework, the “other” might not only be able to reassert itself, but to challenge the very claim to cultural supremacy and have a more than superficial *impact* on Western cultural (civilizational) identity, something that is considered undesirable as far as “vital” Western interests are concerned. The “empire” accepts no competitor; proclaiming its worldview and set of values as the paradigmatic one, it has resorted to setting the standards for the entire world all alone.

This essentially means an insistence, on the part of the “empire,” on living in a *cultural vacuum* where the dominant civilization is being “shielded” from the reality of a multitude of civilizations and cultures that exist simultaneously in today’s global civilizational space. Notwithstanding the lip service paid to the reality of “globalization” (or “globality”) and to the importance of mankind living in a new form of a *worldwide* multicultural society, this denial of reality is motivated by the fear that the privileged position and interests of the imperial civilization might be threatened if others are allowed to enter the forum of civilizations as equal partners.

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<sup>20</sup> For details see Hans Köchler (ed.), *The New International Information and Communication Order: Basis for Cultural Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence among Nations*. (Studies in International Relations, X.) Vienna: Braumüller, 1985.

**(III)****Culture and the Multipolar World Order of the Future**

In spite of the imperial strategies in the field of “mind control,” the world order is presently undergoing a profound transformation due to circumstances triggered by the collapse of the post-World War II financial system, which had been erected by the hegemonial power of the 21<sup>st</sup> century under the auspices of “globalization” – a development unexpected by the apologists of imperial rule.

The system of international relations that had been established on the basis of the ideology of economic liberalism (later: neo-liberalism) has effectively been proven to be unable to ensure *fairness* in as well as steady *progress* of international economic exchanges.<sup>21</sup> Thus, by implication, the ideology of the empire is suddenly losing its paradigmatic status, its “appeal” among the supposed beneficiaries in the international public. “The emperor has no clothes” – and the entire world bears witness to this historical change. Subsequently, again by implication, the system of values that underlies the ideology of (neo)liberalism is put into question – and with it the Western perception of the world or the “culture” of which this value system is the normative expression.

This may indeed be the “multipolar moment” which the peoples, subjugated by an arrogant empire, have to seize. The “unipolar moment,” seized by the “only remaining superpower” in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire, may in the end have created false expectations. In the name of “globalization,” the hegemon all along had tried to enforce a unipolar order in all fields of international relations, whether military, political, economic, or cultural, but apparently has been unable to sustain it. The civilizational paradigm was meant to make that order sustainable,<sup>22</sup> but the related strategy has been undermined – or rendered ineffective – due to the global economic crisis.

With the collapse of neo-liberal globalization the strategic project of reshaping entire cultures according to the West’s perception of the world may also come to an end.

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<sup>21</sup> For details see Hans Köchler, *The Collapse of Neoliberal Globalization and the Quest for a Just World Order*, loc. cit.

<sup>22</sup> For details see the author’s analysis: *Civilization as Instrument of World Order?* loc. cit.

Unipolarity in terms of political power and military might needed to be backed up by an “endorsement,” on the part of the majority of the peoples, of cultural hegemony, a goal that has now become unattainable primarily due to the systemic crisis of the *methods of economic exchange* that were propagated and enforced at the worldwide level by the countries of the West, first and foremost the United States.

Cultural *diversity* and, related to it, cultural *multipolarity* have always existed at the global level, but have equally been rejected by the hegemon of the hour. In the present constellation, in which the empire’s culture appears to have lost its paradigmatic status even among the domestic populace, the “virtues of diversity” may again be properly acknowledged. The principle of “sovereign equality” (enshrined in the UN Charter to describe the status of the nation-state) has also to be applied to cultural communities so that those may interact in an unimpeded way at the global level. Cultural development will thus become a process of mutual enrichment, not of imperial amalgamation or assimilation.

The dialectics of cultural identity which, in our analysis, has all along made it impossible for the empire to impose its parochial “civilizational identity” upon the rest of the world can come to full fruition in a constellation such as the present one – where a unipolar order (in terms of political, military, economic, and cultural hegemony) gradually gives way to a restructuring of international relations in a multipolar fashion.

Under these circumstances, the empire’s *cultural exclusivism* is becoming more and more untenable and is being confronted with the assertion of cultural identity by those nations and peoples who have been told to adapt to the empire’s way of life – or else lose out in a Darwinian-style global competition –, but who are no longer prepared to do so and are determined to reclaim their *dignity* vis-à-vis the self-declared standard-bearer of civilization.

Only the future will tell whether we have seen – at this point in time – the dawn of a new *multicultural* – and thus *multipolar* – order that will have brought the long-term imperial project of a “New American Century” to a premature end.

Empires have always tried to arrest history and to eternalize their privileged position at the expense of those subjected to their rule, *but they have always failed*, and the catalyst that triggered the sudden rearrangement of power relations, leading to their demise, has more often than not been the reassertion of cultural identity on the part of

those who were provoked by the respective imperial strategy of “acculturation” and reeducation. Historically, such resistance has often originated from the peoples of the “periphery” who, today, are the peoples of the Global South.

In view of the lessons of history, a stable global order for the 21<sup>st</sup> century can only be a multicultural one.

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