

IMPERIALISM, RESISTANCE, AND CULTURE

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Summary

Imperialism is not just establishing settlements and controlling land you do not possess, land that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others, but it is also developing a set of attitudes, internalized beliefs and certitudes which structure thinking and acting. There are cultures that make imperialism not only possible, but also inevitable. Western culture is one of these cultures. Imperialism generated by this culture had tremendous impact on modern history and changed thoroughly the face of the world in the 20th century. The global situation of relationship between different cultures today can be interpreted as the expression of that imperialism and diverse responses to it.

1. Introduction

On the 10th of February, 1519, twenty-seven years after the first trip of Christopher Columbus to the new world, Spanish hidalgo Hernàn Cortés started from Havana with ten ships to conquer what was to become Mexico. In the ships he had four hundred people, sixteen horses, a few canons and guns. Two years later a huge state and a powerful culture were destroyed and a new order was established.

In the letters he sent to his Spanish Emperor Charles V and to the Empress Dona Juana, Cortés gave a detailed description of the way he had accomplished his mission. It is very significant to see how he explained the purpose of his trip to the indigenous

population he found on the islands and the continent. He said exactly the same thing to all of them, namely, that he didn't come to do any harm to the people. On the contrary, he claimed to be rather interested in their well-being. That is why, so he argued, he wanted to teach them the holy Catholic faith and to make of them good subjects of their majesties, the Emperor and Empress of Spain. And he explained what it meant to be good subjects. They had to become vassals, to serve and obey their new sovereign.

What is remarkable is that Cortés seemed really surprised when the indigenes, instead of immediately cooperating with the invaders, resisted, ran away or attacked them. When, after a lot of pressure threats and fights, the indigenous people surrendered and joined Cortés' project, he described it as the reestablishing of normality. He considered himself simply an instrument of a transcendental will.

At the beginning, Cortés possessed no knowledge of the culture he was discovering. His attitude was therefore not motivated by any problem with that culture. It was only a question of principle. He accepted it as perfectly normal for the Indians to abandon their sovereignty, their religion and culture and become good subjects of the Spanish Emperor and Empress. After he had gained insight into the religious practices of the indigenous population and especially their human sacrifices and anthropophagous rituals, he found in them extra motivation for his missions. These practices were considered horrible, abominable, and satanic. As a result, they were to be fought and stopped by all means. So their temples were destroyed and their priests were pursued. It is very important to mention that, after Cortés had succeeded in stopping the horrible rituals - opening the chests of young men and girls to remove their hearts which were then offered to the Aztec gods - the real catastrophes for the indigenous population began. At the time when Cortés arrived in the highlands of Mexico, there were 25 million natives. When he died in 1547, only six million were left; and at the end of 15th century there were just one million survivors. The rest had died of the epidemics that the Spaniards had brought with them, of ill treatment and of forced labor.

It is impressive to see how people would leave their own country, travel to a foreign territory and consider it normal and necessary to occupy it, transform the habits and the life of the indigenous people and force them to work for foreigners, without showing any compassion, although they claimed to be working for God and for humanitarian purposes.

The main motivation was, of course, greed, the desire to find gold and other valuable objects. The expeditions were conceived from the beginning as a razzia, with the intention of forcing their way into foreign territories and seizing anything valuable which could be found.

But greed alone cannot explain the conquest and the colonization of a whole continent. This required a set of unquestioned attitudes, beliefs and certitude. These factors structured and formed the basis of thought and action. We call them culture. There are cultures that make imperialistic adventures not only possible, but also inevitable.

Biographers of Cortés have said of him that he was deeply influenced by the spirit of chivalry and the ideology of the crusade. His education and his studies were influenced

by medieval culture, the bible and the novels of chivalry. He also mastered the spirit and the workings of the Spanish system. That is why his conception of authority was based on justice and not on legality. In addition to these medieval principles, Cortés was influenced by humanistic ideals, characterized by the desire to acquire knowledge, to discover the unknown and to experiment. But he remained deeply rooted in a conception of the universe governed by the will of God, who was the God of the Spaniards, but the Spaniards wanted him to become the God of all people, a God who did not tolerate any competition. Cortés was the product of these principles that constituted a culture, and the conquista, that is, the conquest of Mexico by Spain was the result of that culture. Such a culture produced, and still produces in the dominated territories, specific cultural practices and reactions to these practices which take different forms we call defensive, resistance, liberation culture and so on. We will deal here with all these processes. But let us first clarify the notion of imperialism.

2. What is Imperialism?

The term imperialism can be used as a political category to name any attempt to gain influence or a dominant position in any field of international relations: political, economical, cultural, etc. In this sense, it is usually given a negative significance, in order to criticize such an attempt. It is therefore used as a polemical weapon by the victims. In this sense nobody or no nation would consider himself or itself an agent of imperialism. But this does not mean that in this case it is solely a subjective category. It is possible to find evidence of inequality and asymmetry in the relationship between states or groups of states.

The term imperialism is also used as a historical category. There have always been empires throughout the whole world, and not only Europe, Africa, Asia and America had their empires. But in historiography the term imperialism is usually used to describe major periods in world history: the expansion of European domination in overseas territories in the 16th century, leading to the colonization of America and South Africa, on the one hand, and modern imperialism, which started at the end of the 19th century, on the other hand. Many historians prefer to consider only the latter as imperialism in the real sense of the word. There are surely differences between the two periods of European expansion. One of the main differences is the fact that imperialism at the end of the 19th century takes place in a European context, where political problems and other matters are not discussed only in cabinets, closed clubs and small groups, but also publicly through newspapers, books, conferences etc. For ideas to become real forces that shape historical evolution, they have to be popular, that means supported by many people. So was imperialism in that era: a popular movement. The popularity of imperialism resulted from the attitude and convictions of masses of people, who in turn it influenced. In this case imperialism is not just a matter of establishing settlements and controlling land you do not possess, land that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others, but it also involves developing an imperial actuality at the heart of metropolitan life, creating ideologies, spreading information influenced by and legitimizing this actuality. In both phases of European imperialism, there was culture of imperialism, but in the second phase, which is called the age of imperialism, such a culture was much more popular.

3. What is Culture?

The term culture needs to be clarified before being used. At least three definitions of culture are possible. Culture can be used to mean the totality of a society with all its manifestations. Culture means in this sense a set of principles that give all the manifestations of the society a certain unity or a special identity. Culture in this sense can only be intellectually reconstructed through observation and analysis of its expressions. Culture can also be used in a restricted sense to mean the symbolic and cognitive models of the interpretation of the world. It can therefore be found in special discursive practices, in texts, in categories, in pictures. It is the way people see themselves, their relationship to others and to nature. Culture is here a more or less clearly formulated set of values, symbols and categories that affect or structure thinking, feeling and action. Most of the time, in contact with foreign groups, culture tends to be associated with the nation, with the state or with the race and it is used aggressively to differentiate "us" from "them". It becomes an instrument of affirmation of one's identity, of legitimizing ideological battles. We shall show how culture in this sense is used as the foundation and organizing principle of domination, and how it is used to resist or to overcome domination.

There is a third sense given to the word culture. It becomes a concept which includes only refining and elevating elements of the cognitive and symbolic order. It includes only the highest ideals that have been created and expressed throughout the ages and throughout the world. And it can not have anything to do with aggression, mercantilism, and brutality. On the contrary, it is divorced from the economic social and political realm and helps to palliate or to transcend everyday life. Culture in this sense is opposed to civilization that is the process of transformation of the world.

Does such a territory where only innocence and concern for humanity prevail really exist? Edward Said has shown how even venerated works of supposedly pure aesthetic expression participate in the brutal reality of imperialism or is used by it.

We shall be using the term culture mostly in its second meaning, that is, in the category of self-definition and self-affirmation. With regard to the archeological or analytical dimension of culture, the first definition will also be taken into account. (see *Foundations and characteristics of culture*)

4. Western Imperialism as an Offspring of Culture

What sorts of culture generate imperialism? It has been said that every culture is imperialistic. Cultures generally considers themselves as an absolute reference, as the best way to give life an adequate framework and meaningful aspirations. Each culture usually regards itself as superior to others. But this is not sufficient to make it become an imperialistic culture. If, in addition to the consciousness of its superiority, a culture also considers itself as best for other people and begins imposing itself on others, it becomes imperialistic. In this sense there have been many imperialistic cultures in the history of mankind on all continents. Even the Aztec culture that Cortés and his conquistadors destroyed was an imperialistic culture. The Aztec empire had a very flexible administrative and political structure with a certain degree of autonomy for

some regions, but all groups had to adopt the Aztec God *uitzilopochtli*. This religion was the cause as well as the expression and the instrument of domination over a mosaic of groups which accepted this imperialism only under force or fear of repression. But at the same time, Aztec culture had other patterns which made it open to otherness. Even if they considered themselves superior to other cultures of the region, they had a myth of the other, a global explanation of their culture, history and future which recognized the existence of a more powerful and legitimate group than theirs.

This myth was one of the causes of their defeat, because some of the Aztecs believed, at least at the beginning of the encounter with the invaders, that the Spanish conquistadors were those people who had the power and the legitimacy to dominate them. From this example, it might be clear, that cultures can have a double hierarchical conception of their relationship with others. A conception that elevates them over some groups, and another that subordinates them to other groups. Both conceptions can only conceive of the relationship between peoples in terms of hierarchical categories.

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Biographical Sketch

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