

UNIVERSALIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION. CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF PR IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract: The present society has been described in various ways, but its main trait, the one which, as I believe, makes it different from all the other forms of civilization, is its global and globalizing character. The globalization is a topic approached in the last 50 years, but this term refers to a historical process originating in the beginnings of society's humanization (or of man's socialization). I'm thinking of the process of history's universalization, which means the objective, necessary – that is, inevitable – trend of replacing the local frame of social and human development with a larger one. In this paper I will try to show that global society is nothing but the last stage of this universalization, in which “the frame of social and human development” has become the entire Globe. Also, from this thesis I'll draw the conclusions concerning the role of PR in contemporary society.

Keywords: history's universalization, globalization, legitimization, rationalization, Public Relations.

Various names have been given to the new society: *post-industrial society* or *post-capitalist society*, *post-historical society* or *post-metaphysical society*, *post-modern society* or “*the liquid modernity*”, *disenchanted society* or “*devoid of ideology*”, “*Gutenberg galaxy*” or “*the planetary village*”, *the society of knowledge* or *informational society*, “*image civilisation*” or *communicational society*¹. However, its main feature, which I believe distinguishes it from all the other forms of civilisation ever known, is its *global and globalising character*.

Universalization and Globalization

We have been talking about globalisation for almost 50 years, although the term refers to a historical process that dates back to the beginning of the society's humanisation (or of man's socialization). I refer here to the *process of universalization of history* whereby I understand the objective and necessary trend to *replace the local frame with a broader frame of the social-human development*, correlated with an accelerated rhythm of the historical evolution with all its immediate implications – *the dilation of the historical time and the contraction of the social space*: more and more events take place in a time span and the displacement and communication from one point of the planet to another are faster and faster. The vector product of such trends is the growing subjectivization of the historical processes (they have been taken into possession through scientific theory, technology and social engineering).

The universalization of history began when the first primitive men formed a tribe. Subsequently, the tribes formed peoples which, in their turn, gave rise to nations; in the 19th

¹ I have explained these „labels” elsewhere (Bortun, 2012, pp. 21-45).

century, also named the “century of nations”, these nations asserted themselves within state-nations but, at the same time, they became interdependent, articulating some of their activities around international structures².

This is how Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels described in 1848 the modernization of industry, trade and consumption – in a word “civilization”, which they perceived as an expression of the progressive role of bourgeoisie in history:

“The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere.

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilised nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image”³.

I have quoted this large excerpt since it explains the Marxist theory on Communism as an ‘accomplishment of the process of universality’ (concept obliterated by the parties that came the power in the name of this theory)⁴, as well as the perspective error of the two German thinkers as regards the universality of history. By transferring everything on the account of the bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels give the impression that this process only began along with the modern epoch. In my view, the modern epoch is only the historical moment when the universalization became empirically noticeable, i.e. visible “with the naked eye”. Until then, the rhythm of universalization had been so slow that the process was basically invisible (as invisible as the movement of the hand of the clock).

² The oldest intergovernmental organization within UN is the International Union of Telecommunications, founded in Paris on May 17th 1865 when the first convention between the states was signed (the International Telegraphic Convention).

³ Marx, Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, ed. a IX-a, Political Publishing House, Bucharest, 1969, p. 40-41.

⁴ In their vision, communism meant “the empirical existence of men in their world-historical, instead of local, being” (Marx & Engels, 1958, p. 35), and with “this universal development of productive forces is a *universal* intercourse between men established” (*idem*).

In the 20th century, the *inter*-national structures became trans-national because, in the meantime, the crucial issues for the development of society have become globalised and required global solutions. The defiance of the nuclear war, the ecological issues, the demographic explosion, the tragedy of under-development and the dynamics of the financial markets are issues that can no longer be settled by a single state-nation, not even by a group of states (medium powers, large powers and superpowers) which claim to be “global leaders”. At present, we are all witnessing the globalisation of all acts of contempt as well as of the efforts to approach them. The so-called “war against terrorism” is nothing but the solution to the globalization of terrorism directed against the “global leaders” – itself a product of globalization, a resultant of the new disparities triggered by it⁵.

As such, globalisation is nothing more than the last stage of universality, in which the “setting of social-human development” ended up being the globe Earth. However driven we would be against “historicism”⁶, we must acknowledge that universalization is an intrinsic legality of history which accompanies the history of humanity from its beginnings until present day. Should someone ask me why things are like this and not otherwise, I would not know the answer. Furthermore, I believe this is the particularity of the objective laws – and of the natural or societal laws: in the best scenario we acknowledge them. But we cannot explain them. In exchange, on their basis, we can account for other phenomena. The ones denying the existence of some laws or some objective trends in history, such as Popper, are afraid not to fall in the trap of the millenary eschatology or utopia. But in order to get to such ideological constructions, I believe we need some additional assumptions, two of which are pinpointed by Popper when he explains the degeneration of the Marxist philosophy on history in “Marxism – Leninism”, i.e. in ideology: *the superstition of the “progress”* (this is an implacable, lawful progress; each phase exceeds the previous one) and *the naïve historical optimism* (the belief that society will be fatally better, regardless of the peoples’ actions, options and decisions)⁷. But it is my firm belief that admitting the existence of some objective trends does not necessarily means eschatology⁸.

However, I do not share the last two assumptions of historicism. Although I believe that universalization is an *objective trend* of history, I neither claim that each phase of universalization is fatally superior to the previous one, nor do I consider that the global society will be fatally better, regardless of the peoples’ actions. If I believed that our options and decisions are devoid of importance, I would not write these lines To whom and why then?

⁵ I believe that the Islamic terrorism must be explained first of all in direct connection with the two historical realities: *the existence of some religious states* (non-secularised) and *the existence of an “anti-globalization” movement* (name under which an anti-American attitudes is often concealed).

⁶ Karl Popper rejects historicism as a paradigm of the philosophy of history due to the presupposition that, in his view, is an ideological illusion, i.e. the *historicist presupposition*: “there are laws of history and a certain meaning of history that unfold in successive phases” (Popper, 1993, pp. 210-216).

⁷ Of course, historicism’s epistemological infrastructure is far more complex. It is extensively analyzed by Karl Popper in his *Poverty of Historicism* (Popper, 1996).

⁸ In fact, Popper does not definitively give up the “meaning of history” when he says that today we can interpret history from the perspective of the fight for an open society. Due to this criterion, Popper introduced “through the rear door” a value that derives from the presupposition that history has, however, a meaning: the *passage of mankind from a closed society to an open society*.

The Universalization as Objective Trend of History

I feel it my duty to draw the attention of our readers on the objective and necessary (inevitable) character of globalization due to the too frequent affirmations in the public space such as: “Globalization is an invention of multinational corporations”. There are authors who consider that globalization is the product of some projects and, inherently, of some policies⁹. As hard as it may be to believe, there are many Romanian intellectuals who believe that globalisation is an “American scenario”.

It has been repeatedly argued that “creating scenarios” is an endemic disease among the Romanian intellectuality but I think the disease is even more serious: great part of the Romanian intellectuals is literally refractory to the idea of “objective reality” and, inherently, to the idea of “determinism”. In some cases, we are dealing with a distempering subjectivism, marked by a pregnant mystical tone; they prefer to explain the world by invoking the action of some malefic groups rather than accepting that society, as nature, is governed by objective laws. Whenever they hear about lawfulness, causality and, in general, objective determinism, great part of the Romanian intellectuals rows in the same boat and argue: “This is Marxism!” For many of them, “Marxism” equals everything that comes against their primitive conception on freedom, which they define as the illusory independence toward any exterior constraint; they hate the laws of nature and deny the existence of social laws. This gives rise to an infantile voluntarism in public behaviours, the rejection of the programs and planning, of the strategies and realist objectives. From this belief up to the structural incapacity of the Romanian society to absorb European funds is just a step. These funds can be accessed only through the elaboration of some ... projects! That part of the Romanian intellectuality whose agenda is shifted away both from the agenda of the Romanian citizens and from the agenda of the civilised world is the recruitment pool of this cultural paradigm¹⁰.

The term *globalization* began to be used in the ‘60s when the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan spoke for the first time about the “global village” which emerged following the outbreak and generalization of television. It has been immediately borrowed by the geo-economic strategies to convey the conception on the world as a system (“a totality to be organised”)¹¹. The term *mondialization* has been launched by the French authors as a synonym for the term “globalization” (too American for their taste) but it is generally used to express the geographical dimension of some subsidiary processes of globalization (for instance, the development of telecommunications).

⁹ I shall not mention here François Lenglet who was hastily considered by many an opponent of globalization. In *La fin de la Mondialisation*, Lenglet does not speak about the end of globalization per se, but rather about the end of a model of globalization that he rightfully associates with “a machine producing inequalities”, “a great illusion”, “a permanent crisis” (Lenglet, 2013, pp. 65-145).

¹⁰ One of the most popular philosophers, maybe the only one welcomed with sympathy in the media after 1989, pleads for “an epics of ideas”, “an organic prose” of thinking, released from the trick of the concepts”, which would be superior to the “academic philosophy” and proposes as genres of philosophy “the journal, the epistle, the speech, the dialogue, the excerpt, the essay and the epics of ideas” (Liceanu, 1992, p. 57). It would not be for the first time that the Romanian “civil society of culture” strains to its heart a philosopher that rejects systemic thinking.

¹¹ For the history of the idea of “westernization”, see Armand Mattelart’s study ‘The New Global ideology’ (Cordellier 2001, pp. 74-84).

The fact that globalization is often perceived as Americanization is not fortuitous and this perception is not completely false. Starting with the second half of the 20th century, the universalization of history comprised a very dominant American dimension: from the fact that the term of *Westernization* was shaped by an American (the sociologist Daniel Lerner, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), to the today's explosion of Internet and of all services afferent thereto (that are used in English language and convey the values of the "American lifestyle"). The Westernization of the world unfolded in a constant rhythm and in spite of the Soviet opposition; as a matter of fact, I believe that the very denouement of the Cold War must be seen as a product of the "westernization of the world". But many people prefer to talk about the "Americanization of the world", leading to the anti-American reactions.

The first symptom of anti-Americanism appeared in France, in the '60s when the film-markers street protested against the wave of Hollywood movies, compelling the government to impose a market share for the American movies. Therefore, it came as no surprise that even the student rioters partook in the May 1968 uprising, displaying images with Che Guevara, a symbol of the anti-American fight. In the '70s, americanization was renamed "cultural imperialism" and the fight against it became a major topic of the third world. These were the times when the south-American authors conquered the western libraries, the movement of the unallied countries initiated the fight against the New International Order of Information and Communication and UNESCO was shaken by the conflict between the poor countries, which considered themselves "culturally aggressed" accusing USA of "cultural rape", in spite the fact that this country had the greatest contribution in the funds of the organization (or by virtue of this fact!). Nowadays, the anti-American attitude has been more or less successfully distorted under the veil of "anti-globalization". In reality, almost every movement that fights "against globalization" does not come out against globalization per se but rather against a globalization *à l'américaine*¹².

How grounded is the perception related to the "Americanism of the world"? How well-founded are the accusations brought against the transnational companies from the USA and Washington administrations as regards the "confiscation of globalization"? As I see it, the perception is grounded but the accusations are not!

Following a more thorough analysis of history, we find that in the various stages of the universalization process, it has always been led, inspired, guided – or even "confiscated" – by one or more powers of the epoch. All great empires (Persian, Macedonian, Roman, Ottoman, Russian, Habsburg or British) had the role to manage, in various areas of the world, the integration of some incompatible and rather isolated forms of life in larger and more functional structures, tailored on the new needs of social-human evolution and which generated, in their turn, new mechanisms of evolution. Nowadays, the novelty resides in that between such areas there are no boundaries anymore and that we are dealing with a single power capable of managing by itself the current needs of universalization: the United States

¹² Ten years ago I was surprised to find out that my thesis was supported, with similar arguments, by Jean-François Revel, in the chapter „Anti-globalism and anti-Americanism” from the *Anti-American Obsession* (Revel, 2004, pp. 53-83).

of America represent the “first global society in history” (Zbigniew Brzezinski), and, hence, the most able to inspire the values and the directions of globalization¹³.

And by saying that I do not only refer to the technological, information, economic-financial, political and military power (as a matter of fact, in some of these chapters the USA supremacy is questionable). First and foremost I refer to the *type of civilization*. By its very genesis, the American civilization meets globalization halfway. Its congenital multiculturalism and the cultural attitudes deriving from it, a certain type of communicational culture and a certain pattern of inter-human relations – all generated in the cultural paradigm of Protestantism – engender abilities and capabilities necessary in the current stage of universalization – Globalization.

The discovery of America, in the times of the Great Geographical Discoveries, as well as the birth of the American society, has been the objective result of a certain phase of history’s universalization. Its affirmation as global leader corresponds to another phase of universalization. It took two world (therefore *global!*) wars for America to be released from its isolationism. While in the early 20th century Great Britain ceased to contribute to the universalization in its scope of influence, now, in the early 21st century, America takes over the torch – for the entire world and by itself. I believe that the “loneliness of the long-distance runner” is not a privilege of America; this loneliness is its greatest disability.

The Role of Public Relations in Contemporary Society

I shall not insist upon the defining traits of the new society since they does not make the object of this paper. In fact, a vast specialised literature, of which tens of volumes have been translated in Romanian, has been dedicated to the new society¹⁴. Furthermore, the mutations that interest me here in connection to the role of Public Relations shall be analysed at the right moment. What I would like to prove is that the ascension of Public Relations in the contemporary society is neither an accidental nor a transient phenomenon. In other words, the exacerbated interest in efficient communication does not represent an intellectual fashion (although fashion is involved). The good news is that the PR job is a job of the future.

Some authors make a connection between the Public Relations in Europe and the Marshall Plan, whose consequence was the “Americanization” of the Western societies in almost all lines of activity but predominantly in the social engineering field: *management, human engineering, Public Relations, marketing and advertising*. In my view, the outbreak of Public Relations in the late 19th century discretely announced the new society and the

¹³ In this respect, the most powerful tool is the Internet. As regards the programmatic use of the Internet as a means to universalize the American lifestyle, the American professor Herbert I. Shiller (California university of San Diego) published documents that prove that in the USA Congress there have been debated and approved actions plans and appropriate funds dedicated to the development of the Internet, the most often invoked argument being “the propagation of our values at global scale” (Shiller, 1999).

¹⁴ For the younger readers, I shall evoke only a part of this prodigious literature that no one instructs them to read anymore. It includes volumes that appeared in the last two decades of the communist regime, in the collection “Contemporary Ideas” of Polirom Press: *Civilisation at a Crossroads* (coord. Radovan Richta), 1970; Alvin Toffler, *The Shock of the Future*, 1973; Marshall McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1975; Mihajlo Mesarovic, Eduard Pestel, *Mankind At A Turning Point*, 1975; Jan Tinbergen, *Reshaping the International Order*, 1978; *Catastrophe or a New Society?*, 1981; Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, 1983; John Naisbitt, *Megatrends. Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*, 1989.

evolution after the second WW in the USA and Western Europe was closely linked to the transition to the new society.

I believe that in the field of social communication, the most important phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century was *the generalization at macro-social level of the techniques and procedures proper to Public Relations*, their escape from the “natal nest” (the organisation). In my vision, this phenomenon represents an adaptation reaction of the societal system whereby it ensures its self-balancing and self-reproduction, while the industrial civilisation shifted to the post-industrial one. This is the adaptive function that the Public Relations have had since the very beginning within those organisations that treated them as a managerial activity.

The conception of public relations as a managerial activity originates from the management function of public relations, as defined in the specialised scientific community (Grunig, Dozier, Harlow etc.): „The public relations activity represents a distinctive management function; a means of establishing lines of understanding, acceptance and cooperation, the management of problems and controversies; an emphasis on the responsibility of the management to serve the public interest; a system of early warning; an objective and honest activity” (Rex Harlow, 1976, p. 36).

The role of public relations in the adaption of the organization has essential consequences on the profession of the PR specialist. Once the signals received from the environment have been construed, the PR advisor must cooperate with the manager so as to establish the *organisational change strategy* as well as the strategic reaction plans to the recalcitrant events (foreseeable conflicts, possible crises, etc.). This is how Grunig and White describe this function: “A successful PT advisor unceasingly supervises the environment, trying to broaden the visibility on this domain beyond the current horizon (...) In principal, the attempts to see clearly and to anticipate help the organization to gain time for planning activities, enabling it to avert changes, not only to react to them” (Grunig & White, 1992, pp. 43-44). In this vision, the role of public relations is to provide a “radar”, anticipating the currents of opinion and the topics of public debates that will affect the organisation and its publics.

Today, this function begins to be exercised at the level of the societal system. Regarding the advanced industrial society, in the foreword of the French edition of 1967 of its famous study *One-dimensional Man* (1964), Herbert Marcuse said: “Two results of this society are of an utmost importance: the assimilation of opposed forces and interests in a system that they came against in the previous phases of capitalism and the methodical mobilization of human instincts which render some explosive and “anti-social” elements of the unconscious socially controllable and usable” (Marcuse, 1977, p. 287).

Notorious representative of the “critical theory of society”, Marcuse projected his critical attitude on the American capitalism which he saw as an exemplary sample for the “late capitalism”. But meanwhile, the self-balancing and self-reproduction mechanisms of the capitalist system generalised, although in the Western Europe societies many of the American innovations have been adapted to their own specificity. The field of Public Relations is one of these innovations.

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