

## THE CULTURES AND CIVILISATIONS INITIATIVE

### *Cultures and civilisations: A Tentative Approach*

A draft working paper

by

Adalberto Vallega (a.vallega@iol.it)

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## 1 The background

In late 2004, the document *Cultures and Civilisations* was drafted by Jean-Robert Pitte, President of the Sorbonne University, and Adalberto Vallega, President of the International Geographical Union (IGU), where an international initiative aimed at implementing the intercultural and intercivilisational dialogue was foretold. In the framework of its 23-27 April 2005 meeting, the Executive Committee of IGU adopted that document and decided to carry out the initiative. The Celimontana Committee, in its meeting of April 28, took cognisance that the «Fondazione della Cassa di Risparmio di Roma» (Foundation of the Saving Bank in Rome) decided to allocate 50,000€ in this initiative with reference to the current financial year, and decided to appoint the Home of Geography to serve as the headquarters of the «Cultures and Civilisations project».

As a result, an Action Plan was drafted, according to which a useful set of documents to design motivations, goals and content of this project should be produced during 2005 as the key outcome of discussions to be convened in the course of 2005. Essentially, discussions should culminate in a workshop to be held in December 2005 and to be preceded by a preparatory scientific meeting in October 2005.

The present working paper aims at tentatively sketching the main points of a document that could be extensively drafted in the framework of the October meeting and discussed in the December workshop.

## 2 The context

The global dimension of issues, any kind of fundamental issues, started being perceived by societies in the late 1960s in connections with the vision of Planet Earth that were provided by astronauts moving to the Moon. From that time, three steps have succeeded, provoking an accumulative process.

First step: *global scale of environmental issues* — The discussions of the crucial environmental issues, held in the framework of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972) exerted an unprecedented role in leading human communities to share the

scientific concept of global change, according to which the present changes in nature are driven by climate change, a natural process which since the late Nineteen century has been progressively influenced by industrialised and urbanised human communities. For the first time, peoples become aware that international co-operation had to be activated to manage the Earth system.

Second step: *environmental and developmental issues* — Twenty years after, in the framework of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), a second step took place, in which the global dimensions of needs and issues was referred to a larger context including the ecological and social systems, in a view of pursuing the ecosystem's integrity, economic efficiency and social equity. For the first time, peoples shared an integrated vision of the Earth and the World, according to which the ecological and human dimensions are closely linked and strategies on the global scale are essential.

Third step: *centrality of cultures and civilisations* — At the present time, another step is arising, in which increased attention is concentrated on the role of cultures and civilisation in guaranteeing that sustainable development could be effectively pursued in the whole world and at any geographical scale. International terrorism, triggered or at least justified by cultural reasons, essentially rooted in religions, has strongly contributed to disseminate this social perception. Hence an expanding consideration and discussion of the role of cultures and civilisation has marked recent years. An increased number of intellectuals and scientists shares the persuasion that the issue of cultures and civilisation is intimately associated with the need for sustainable development, and that specific initiatives should be undertaken to deal with it.

### 3 Cultures

The recent approaches by intellectuals, scientists and media to cultures have been marked by an increased consideration and discussion of three concurrent processes.

*Differentiation and diversity* — The progressive differentiation of cultures is the first subject area of discussions. As the world population has increased and migrations, either spontaneous and forced, have expanded, the framework of cultures has become more and more articulated. Hence, the cultural diversity, meant as the result of differentiation processes not only has acquired the connotation of a leading process but also has been perceived as a peculiar characteristics of the present stage of «territorialisation» and the changing Nature into World.

*Identity* — In spite of the widening role of globalising processes, cultural identities have assumed increasing importance because of a couple of factors. First, many local cultural systems have acquired increased distinctive features not only as a result of their intrinsic evolution but also because of their interaction with global processes. In this respect, it may be stated that globalisation is far from bringing about substantial standardisation against the peculiar characters of cultures. Secondly, the public has become increasingly aware of the importance to maintain and value the peculiar cultural characters. As a result, two processes — the ontological one concerned with the interaction between local and global, and the semiotic one concerned with the representation and attribution of values to cultures — have marked the attitude of human communities and media *vis-à-vis* cultural identities.

*Historical roots* — Thank to media, particularly thematic TV, public has become increasingly aware of the linkage between the present and past cultures. The increasing attention to the roots of Western cultures in those cultures that connoted the ancient history of the Mediterranean and the «Fertile Croissant» is a meaningful example. As a result, the search for the heritage from the past may be regarded as another process which gives impetus to the role of cultures in the present historical phase.

As a result of the above mentioned processes, three needs have arisen and solidified.

*Protecting cultures* — There is an expanding inclination to prevent (proactive politics) and abate (reactive politics) any factor and action which may damage cultural identities and may frustrate the differentiation processes which have marked the evolution of mankind;

*Moving toward universal values* — The above mentioned inclination is associated with the willingness to create the conditions apt to identify the common values of cultures, and to give birth to grounds fertilising the design of universal values, such as those of sustainable or human development.

*Primacy of dialogue* — There is also an expanding awareness that dialogue between cultures is the primary tool so identifying common values and to move towards universal principle, which may be felt as fundamental by any culture.

#### 4 **Civilisations**

As has been discussed in the working paper *Culture and civilisation(s): A Possible Discourse*, the nature and role of civilisations may usefully derived by keeping distinct, on the one hand, project-designing and value-building, and on the other hand, instrument-building. The former roles are connatural to culture while the latter one is connatural to civilisation. From this perspective, instruments, which civilisations consist of, embraces two categories:(i) *techniques*, which includes either traditional and primitive tools and sophisticated, modern ones; (ii) *symbolic forms*, which embraces any kind of knowledge, from the rationalist one, performed by science, to the non rationalist ones, performed by religion and art. If attention is concentrated on those civilisations the technical and symbolic endowment of which have influenced extended parts of the world, there is no doubt that only a strict number of contemporary civilisations may be taken into account. Nevertheless, this number has been so influential, in terms either of social organisation and symbolic production, as to bring about two wide consequences, which are closely concerned with the need to consider this subject area in relation to the goal of the «The Culture and Civilisations» initiative of IGU. The first consequence is that these civilisations, such as the Western, Islamic and Chinese, have been extended their influence on wide parts of the world, involving the major part of the world population. The differentiation of the world is the second consequence, which concerns models of life, use of techniques, the production of symbols and values.

As a result, two concurrent and inter-linked processes have solidified: the differentiation of cultures has been associated with the differentiation of civilisations. The building up and refinement of cultural identities has been associated with the building up and refinement of civilisation personality. Differentiation has followed diverging itinerary shifting from *techne* to *symbol*. As regards the former field, i.e. *techne*, differentiation has not been profound. On the contrary, it has been weak, almost absent. This has been basically due to the role of standardisation in the instrumental endowment, from computer apparatuses to communication systems and, finally, to the models of urban life. In parallel, differentiation has grown remarkably as regards the symbolic component of civilisation. As a consequence, when the dialogue among civilisations is considered as the goal of an international strategy, attention should be concentrated on the duo «symbol, signified».

## 5 Design of a background document

The approach sketched in previous sections aims at providing a basis for discussions of how a basic document could be designed in order to operate the IGU initiative. In practical terms, this document should be drafted in the meeting of the Steering Committee (Rome, Italy, October 2005) and should be discussed and adopted as a conclusion of the December Workshop. Bearing this process in mind, it may be expected that, starting from now, the distinguished members of the Steering Committee, will interact each other in order through working papers in order to carry out an effective preparatory work for the October meeting.

Tentatively, the October document —which will be addressed to the December workshop — could deal with the following subjects and issues.

*Conceptual foci of the initiative* — This part would provide a range of concepts and assumptions which form the theoretical basis of the strategic and operational parts of December workshop conclusions. In this respect, it should be expected that the concepts of culture and civilisation, which will be the pillars of the scientific approach to the IGU initiative, will be clearly enunciated.

*The teleological design* — The goal of the IGU initiative should be extensively and clearly presented. In this respect, it could be useful if the teleological design is sketched by distinctly dealing with culture and civilisation. As a preliminary approach, the dialogue among cultures should be oriented to the goal of safeguarding the individual cultures, with special respect to their identities and diversities. Differently, the dialogue among civilisations should be encouraged with the aim of orienting the individual civilisations towards sharing a range of universal values for the sustainable development of humankind.

*The strategic design* — Moving from the teleological design, a Cultures and Civilisations Strategic Plan (CCSP) should be presented, where principle, issues, main steps and the organisational tools are specified. Tentatively, the CCSP should be referred to the 2005-2008 period, in order to ensure that its outcomes will be presented and discussed in the framework of the 2008 Tunis International Geographical Congress.

*The Action Plan* — During the October meeting of the Steering Committee, it should be discussed whether the adoption of the CCSP should be associated with that of an Action Plan.