

EDITORIAL

Champions of cultural diversity are perhaps motivated by one of two differing points of view. For some the ideal is 'a place for every culture and every culture in its place', a view sometimes adopted, often with the best of intentions, by Westerners who are genuinely dismayed by the prospect of Western culture and consumerism conquering the world, but also by extreme nationalists, racists and conservatives. The trouble with this approach is that by misrepresenting cultures as being both static and homogeneous (whereas virtually every culture, however local, is dynamic and diverse), actually and content to be confined within their own ghettos, it would deny them access to modernity and life-giving change. A second attitude, articulated for example by the Swedish ethnologist Ulf Hannerz, refuses to accept that 'cultural diversity is waning, and [that] the same single mass culture will soon be everywhere':

The people in my favourite Nigerian town drink Coca Cola, but they drink *burukutu* too; and they can watch *Charlie's Angels* as well as Hausa drummers on the television sets which spread rapidly as soon as electricity had arrived. My sense is that the world system, rather than creating massive cultural homogeneity on a global scale, is replacing one diversity with another; and the new diversity is based relatively more on interrelations and less on autonomy.¹

This approach rejoices in *multiculturalism* and affirms the right and the ability of people to re-invent and recreate their lives and traditions.

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Some twelve months ago (as I write this) the world's attention began to be seized by extraordinary events in Eastern Europe. Even as we celebrated, many of us were also gravely concerned – concerned not least that countries newly liberated from rigid communism should not imitate, nor submit to conquest by, the culture and values of the capitalist West. Bob Rae, for instance, Ontario's new NDP premier, began a campaign speech with this recollection:

Like millions of others around the world, I have cheered the triumph of popular democracy in Eastern Europe. But I refuse to interpret those astonishing events as a vindication of capitalism, or a repudiation of anything I would call democratic socialism.²

Or as has been written of Vaclav Havel's Czechoslovakia:

What a fine piece of historical irony it would be if from the heart of this wounded part of Europe there were to emerge a politics that would begin the show us how to be at home in the world, decently balancing the requirements of social justice and economic sufficiency, of finite nature and what we call human nature.³

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The world's cultures meet in our art libraries. The use of art libraries as a resource for the re-invention of culture is perhaps seen most clearly in the phenomenon of art students plundering art books and visual collections for motifs and ideas; too often the results are superficial, showing little if any understanding of the sources and meanings of visual languages, yet the art library can further that understanding and supply those meanings. In these times of change, art libraries in Eastern Europe may have a vital (if minor) role – the same role, but in a unique context, of art libraries everywhere: to cherish local cultural traditions (including those of minorities and dissenters), while at the same time providing access to what is new, foreign, and unfamiliar.

Notes

1. Unpublished manuscript, quoted in: Clifford, James. *The Predicament of culture: twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London: Harvard University Press, 1988 p.16-17.
2. Rae, Bob. 'A Socialist's manifesto'. *The Globe and Mail*, 1 October 1990, A13.
3. Webb, W. L. 'The role of truth'. *The Guardian* 30 December 1989, Weekend supplement p.6.