

Two Histories

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The history of mankind should be divided into two parts: the history of cities and the history of villages.

We know enough stuff about the history of cities; it is written in books and we learn it at school. This is a history about kings, wars, states, temples, monuments, fortresses, and inscriptions. This is a history about well-known names, arts and sciences, religion and philosophy, the evolution of ideas, and technological progress.

We do not know the history of villages, and have great difficulty in picturing it. Villagers wrote no books and left no monuments. All we know about them comes from the haphazard observations made by city people who did not want nor could they understand them. Villages had always been the object of exploitation by cities; the former had been destined to provide the latter with agricultural products for consumption or processing as well as with people in order to turn them into urbanites.

By ancient times there had been an immense difference between the inhabitants of cities, the urbanites, and the inhabitants of rural areas, the villagers. All things made them differ from each other, and that was immediately noticeable, even from a distance: their houses, their clothes, their movements, their way of speaking, their way of life as a whole, in its every detail. Yet, the most important difference lay deep within: their world view and their mental structures were radically different. They were two separate categories of people who coexisted in the same wider geographical space. Over the centuries, this difference never ceased to grow until it went away when villagers vanished.

This extinction happened in two ways: villagers migrating to cities, and others staying back in villages but acquiring the characteristics of urbanites. Those who today inhabit villages cannot be called villagers.

Historians and in general all authors never wanted to admit the existence of a gap, neither the fact that a different kind of people lived on the opposite riverbank. Political, religious, and intellectual leaders always talked in the name of all people and made decisions for all people, hiding the fact that they themselves were urbanites and were interested only in urbanites. They seldom mentioned the villagers –although the latter were the overwhelming majority of the population in each country- and never referred to them as a distinct economic or cultural entity.

When in the 19th century the first folklorists started to approach the rural population of each country as something different and worthy of study, they did so –urbanites that they were- through the cities’ eyes and in the cities’ interest. Then came ethnographers who did the same thing when studying villagers in exotic countries, whereas they never admitted slipping into the enemy camp like spies. It was only by the villagers themselves that the now lost village culture could have been saved, an impossibility considering that villagers left no material evidence.

What would we know about the ancient Greeks, if they had not written on parchments or had not chiseled marble of their own free will? We would surely try to imagine their way of life and their way of thinking, drawing from cultural remnants found in today’s Greeks and from references made in ancient Persian or Egyptian texts. But all this would be negligible compared to what we know today and hence mankind would only benefit minimally. Our knowledge about civilizations that left no written texts is infinitesimal -and this information pertains exclusively to urbanites. We know deplorably little about villagers the world over.

Village culture was equally important as city culture, with the former being the roots of and providing a supplement to the latter; yet, it will

continue to be an Atlantis, a lost continent in the world history of civilizations. Cities never appreciated villages and never let them speak their own language.

Villagers used only oral speech, which differed from urbanites' oral speech and operated differently. The only way for such a speech to remain intact was through transmission and memorization. Even if there existed at the time voice recorders and video cameras, they would register an only partial picture of it. As for the written recording, it leaves out a larger portion of the essence –exactly because this is an oral civilization. What is more, villagers have to be turned into urbanites in order to learn to write and feel the need to write. As a result, they will see the world of their people through alien eyes, and they will more or less betray it.

Anyone who has been fortunate enough to mix with illiterate people has a slight idea of the gap that separates us from them. By saying that “they think differently” we do not express what happens –we probably take a misleading stance since the same can be said of anybody who thinks differently from us. Saying that “they have different mental structures” is more to the point, but once again it cannot be fully understood.

Once humans got used to obtaining their most important information from written texts, then their brains operated differently. It is in this way that “a culture of literate people” was developed, the urban culture. On the contrary, the culture of illiterate people, which was based on oral ways of transmitting and storing information, had developed totally different mechanisms to be able to operate.

The fact that information was mnemonically stored and orally transmitted led to the creation of a process for shaping every bit of information. Hence each element of knowledge is different and that is why village culture is different in its origins.

Everybody has been systematically hiding this fact –and trying to persuade us that all those living in villages are some picturesque underdeveloped people who did not yet have time to be like us. The ethnologists' publications on

indigenous peoples in tropical countries are no different from the folklorists' publications on European villagers.

This leaves us with the lowest degree of fidelity, that is the written recording made by urbanites. We thus reach the next chapter. And we end this one by summarizing all of the above, in the form of suggestions:

a) All existing history should belong to one branch of knowledge, urban history.

b) A new discipline, rural history, should be established, into which folklore, ethnology, and anthropology should also be incorporated.

c) It is important that everybody understands the following: when it comes to mankind's civilization, we refer only to the city culture. What we know about the civilization of the rest of mankind, which is a thousand times larger and a thousand times richer, is equal to one thousandth of this knowledge.

Folklore, Ethnology, Anthropology, Ethnography

There was a hypocritical mystification about the study of village culture in relation to its aim and subject. Initially it was stated that it studied the people (folklore), without ever being clear who belonged to the people and who did not. The term "people" is a purely populist word, which is reserved for demagogy. At least when "primitive peoples" were the subject of study, it was evident that primitives were those who, being uncivilized, justified colonialist exploitation. But of course these peoples were not uncivilized at all, they merely had a different culture which colonialists had no reason to place on an equal footing with theirs –and did not even acknowledge as culture.

It was then stated that the nations were the subject of study (ethnology), once again without being clear as to what was meant by "nations". Why is that when French scientists study the German, the former supposedly do not do ethnography? It is obvious that the term "nations" was a euphemism for the exotic peoples who, in consequence, were, if not primitive, yet underdeveloped enough to arouse the interest of the developed ones.

The term “anthropology” was the peak of arrogance, as if the other sciences (history, sociology, psychology, law, etc.) did not deal with humans. The field of anthropology was created with the aim of using every branch of social science when studying a culture. There must have been enough vanity in the first anthropologists to think that the other sciences had such a limited scope that a super-science like anthropology was needed to encompass all of them. Then, having realized that they would not go far in achieving that ambitious goal, the most modest of them started declaring themselves ethnographers, that is simple recorders of a multifarious reality.

The question remained open as to the people whom folklorists or ethnologists or anthropologists or ethnographers studied. They did not turn their attention to the great ancient civilizations, for the apparent reason that they did not have anything to add to what archaeologists already knew. Nor did they want to occupy themselves with studying the more recent cultures of the developed countries –historians could manage well in that field. The contemporary industrial societies are studied by sociologists. Everybody understands what remains unexplored -though no one wants to say it clear.

Terms such as “primitive”, “underdeveloped”, and “archaic” were initially used only to be discarded quickly. Words such as “people”, “nations”, and “humans” were deliberately obscure in order to hide the fact that this was not about all people but only a few of them –those who had been left out by the other scientists. We can assume that the truth weighed on every folklorist’s or ethnologist’s or anthropologist’s mind but no one could tell it. So then they stated that they dealt with “the others”, resorting to the ultimate vagueness.

As far as we all see it, any social group outside our own is “the others”. The question remains as to why ethnologists deal with specific “others” and not with other “others”? Why is that when Americans study Amerindian art they are called anthropologists, whereas when they study Italian or French art they are called art historians? To their mind, are the Indians of the Prairies not as “others” as the Italians of Florence?

Some of those scientists were compelled to half-heartedly approach the truth, stating that their subject of study were traditional societies. That is true; furthermore, that is the heart of the truth, but not the whole truth. Tradition is indeed an essential feature of rural societies, but it is not the only one. This is not the fundamental difference between villages and cities.

It is as if we wanted to have a science that studied peoples of the African continent, and we did not want this to be clear. So we state that our science studies “people of color”. However, there are “people of color” outside of Africa, whereas Africa is not inhabited only by “people of color”; in addition, skin color comes in all gradations, from black to white, and in innumerable tints. The truth is that city people have always considered themselves to be white in mind, seeing all villagers as black in mind.

A village is a distinct continent, a different world from the world of a city. Every village in the world had developed cultures with many common features, whereas every city had developed cultures with other common features. Later on, we will examine the major features that make the fundamental difference between village and city cultures.

Leaving the names of these sciences aside, the differences among folklore, ethnology, and anthropology are insignificant; nevertheless, they are obstinately maintained by the relevant scientists. It would be simpler and more honest for them to admit that they are nothing else but historians exploring a field that history has not bothered with up to now, the history of village cultures. But they should then acknowledge that village cultures are not inferior to city cultures.

The next stage will be for them to recognize that the relations between cities and villages have always and everywhere been relations of one-way dominance and exploitation, characterized by slander and destructiveness. The Marxist class struggle is trifling compared to the struggle of cultures. The hypothetical struggle between religions would also be trifling if it really existed.

Cities have exploited villages throughout history. Eventually today, after 3.000 years, we can say that this exploitation has come to an end, since all the exploited have moved to the camp of the exploiters. The cities managed to absorb villages by soaking up the majority of this population and by imposing the urban culture on those who stayed behind.

The False Villages

Leaving the cities, we see here and there small groups of houses, built near each other. The more underdeveloped the country, the higher the occurrence of these areas and the poorer are the people living there. These settlements take their names from villages which were once situated in the same location; note that the dwellings of the villagers are often still standing. This makes people think that such sites are inhabited by villagers, hence they call them “villages”.

There are no villages in the 21st century. The 20th century was marked by the enslavement of villagers: in early 20th century the last villagers vanished in Western Europe and in the U.S.A., whereas by the end of it, the change had been completed even in the last corner of the earth.

The houses located outside of cities are primary residences of urbanites having chosen decentralization, unless these are secondary residences owned by urban holiday-makers. The fact that the former have an unusual working schedule is due to the nature of their occupation as land cultivators and this does not change anything in practice. Besides, there are other people among them who also have a different schedule, working for city employers via Internet.

A fourth category includes store owners and various public servants (police officers, teachers, post office employees etc.) who have been transferred there and work in exactly the same way as they used to do in the city. But all the aforementioned persons dress, eat, talk, shop, entertain themselves, watch

television, vote, provide for their children's education, have social security protection, and travel by the same means as when they were in the city.

The differences between country and city people are now insignificant and are due to practical reasons. For example, the former have to drive an extra hour to get to a movie theatre –an hour they probably did not have to spend in the morning getting to work. What it matters is that they use exactly the same models as city people. As it is the case with the inhabitants of poor neighborhoods, they differ only superficially from the latter, to the extent that they have been unable to be like them. If, say, they do not have a car, this is not because they do not feel such a need, but because they cannot afford it yet.

Cities refuse to admit that today there are no villages, and even preserve some external features of the latter (e.g. the restoration of old houses or the foundation of folklore museums). This reminds of the camps the Americans built for the last Amerindians after the extermination of all the others and the appropriation of their land.

Tradition

The term “traditional” is often misused –meaning something established, conventional, and habitual. It is also frequently used in advertising in order to give products the special qualities of being genuine, homemade, authentic, old and tested, something that stemmed from an uninterrupted continuity of cordial attentions. It seems that nobody pays attention to the fact that, since all these are industry made products, they are anything but traditional. But even in ethnology, the term “traditional” is widely used, without being clearly defined. As for ethnologists, it would not be in their interests to confess they themselves act in a totally untraditional way.

The traditional is related to a particular way of transmitting knowledge in connection with what is directly handed down from generation to generation, without the mediation of a specialized institution. On the contrary, the untraditional refers to an indirect way of transmitting knowledge through teachers, books, schools, and the mass media. In traditional societies, all

information is transmitted in a traditional manner. Once untraditional ways of such transmission come into use, these societies gradually lose their traditional character and move into a type of modern society, known to all of us (as literate, urban, and industrial).

Even in modern societies, an important part of knowledge is transmitted in a traditional way. Children learn to speak, to play, to eat, and to conduct themselves in their families and communities. The majority of girls learn to cook by helping their mothers in the home kitchen, and not by taking cooking classes. Farmers, cattle breeders, fishermen, and many other working people learn their professions in a traditional way, and complement this knowledge later on with information coming directly or indirectly from specialized institutions.

Let us take cooking as an example. All women in an old-time village had a specific repertoire of recipes which made up the local cuisine. These were the only ones they could teach their daughters. If some of these recipes were left out, the daughters would inevitably learn them from their neighbors or mothers-in-law. One of the many reasons that made a young man not to want to take as wife a woman from a distant village is that she would not cook the way he liked. All women could somewhat vary those recipes but if they crossed some invisible limits, their family (on a daily basis) or their women neighbors (to whom they would bring a sample with pride or who in their turn would enter their neighbor's kitchen and taste some of it) or even the whole village (when invited to a banquet) would show them the way back to what is commonly accepted. A variation of their own could be approved of and find followers in other women cooks, and could eventually be established. However, any innovation which was more audacious than that was sure to be rejected, since each one of them, as much as it is expected, looked for their mothers' cooking.

What happens today in home cooking used to happen in villages in respect with various language expressions, costume and body care, dances and songs,

architecture and housework, and how they labored the land and treated animals.

As shown by the example of cooking, tradition implies:

1. Repertoire

The knowledge one could acquire was finite: it was what the village as a whole possessed and what it could potentially transmit to its members, in addition to what the latter complemented it with through their personal experiences. This body of useful knowledge was stored in the villagers' minds and was handed down after slight additions and subtractions to the next generations.

As far as rural culture was concerned, the sum of available knowledge was not far from the knowledge one acquired or could acquire. On the contrary, when it comes to urban culture, people realize at an early age that there are experts in literally everything, persons who know much more, and of course innumerable books. They come to terms with the idea that their knowledge will be an infinitesimal fraction of the whole body of knowledge.

2. Coexistence

Knowledge was not classified or recorded anywhere, so in order for it to be transmitted in this informal and haphazard way there needed to be intense social interaction. Many individuals lived under the same roof, labored all together in the fields, chatted incessantly in cafés, in wash-houses, in courtyards, at churches, and in revelries. Along with small talk they sang, danced, observed every detail in other people's behavior, and learnt everything about them and from them. It was as if everyone lived the lives of all the others at the same time.

3. Consent

As all individuals gradually acquired the corpus of knowledge of the whole community, they critically approached every piece of information. It was as difficult to doubt commonly accepted elements as it was easy to reject newly found elements whose necessity could make them mandatory. Social criticism, that is gossip, was the cultural police that maintained order. After the initial disapproval and irony, the most severe punishment was to “lose one’s good name”, that is to be stigmatized as a person who had crossed the limits of acceptable behavior.

4. Size

The operation of the system required that the size of this social group be within certain limits. Villages, as opposed to cities, could not be too densely nor too sparsely populated. In a settlement, there could be families differing from each other in religion, language, origin, or occupation. Homogeneity was an important factor but not as decisive as self-sufficiency.

The minimum size was imposed by the need for exogamy: when a young man or a young woman was of an age to marry, there needed to be in the village at least one person their age but of the opposite sex to take as wife or husband. We urbanites have learnt to see villages from an urban planning perspective, i.e. as groups of houses built very close to each other, even though villagers saw things very differently. The dwellings of the families that made up “their people” and the houses of their could-be in-laws occupied a unique arrangement in space. These could be houses away from each other, or even moving camps such as those of nomads. A map may indicate many settlements on an island, on a mountain, or in a valley, hence city dwellers are left with that image. Nevertheless, there was another map in the villagers’ minds, which was not based on geography but on social relations.

They considered themselves part of a primary group of people, their families, with whom they were connected by the ties of cohabitation, co-exploitation, and co-ownership. They then saw themselves as members of a larger group, their relatives, all those who were of the same blood, their

kinsfolk. They had a third circle of persons, which consisted of those who lived in the same village, either the real version or the mental picture of it. They were connected to these persons through a dense nexus of mutual tasks. Any persons outside these three concentric circles were just strangers, their fellow men.

The maximum size of a village was determined by the number of people its vital space could sustain. City dwellers think that a village ends where its houses end, whereas villagers knew that it ended within the boundaries of its vital space, including places that were used by the inhabitants of the village, no matter their location. Any fields, pastures, woods, and wells not owned by locals were not included within the boundaries of a village, even if these were located very close to it. A village could hardly retain fields which were at a distance where one could not go to labor the land and then return within the same day. A farmer could not marry the daughter of another farmer whose land was a ten-hour walk from the village, nor could a shepherd take as wife the daughter of a fisherman whose dwelling was next to his. This would happen only in the uncommon case where one could not find “a shoe made in his land”, though renouncing the benefits of a dowry and of having in-laws, which were more important than the mere acquisition of a wife.

As a result, the vital space of a village was defined by boundaries, so the number of inhabitants able to earn a living within this space was also limited to a few hundreds. The only way to increase the population of a village was to find resources for its inhabitants from farther on, from other villages. The population of the village would increase and the latter would be turned into a town, as it would start to capitalize on other villages' resources.

5. Nature

Saying that villagers used to live close to nature is surely a triviality, but no-one is able to realize what a total dependency on nature meant. Of course today's villagers depend on nature, although to a limited extent. Urbanites think that they know nature because they go on excursions and see

landscapes. They take with them the equipment and knowledge of the city, but when they run short of provisions, they return to it. Anyone compelled to transact with nature on a daily basis, drawing everything from the latter, had a very different relation with nature.

In the last analysis, the difference between summer and winter for people living in big cities is simply a change in external temperature. How could they put themselves in the situation of someone being able to tell apart thousands of plants, daily observing their development in order to eat, to dress, to find accommodation, to play, and to do anything else? How could they place themselves in the situation of somebody whose very skin was affected by the slightest change of the weather, and who was totally dependent on its impact on the vegetable kingdom?

Inanimate things aside, coexistence with anything animate formed a mentality we cannot now visualize. Country people not only took care of their animals but also spent an important part of the day with them, which was often a greater amount of time than the time they spent with family members. They ate and slept next to them, they talked to them, they helped when their cattle produced their young, they were more grieved by the death of a cow than by the loss of a newly-born child.

6. Time

Time went by differently for someone who had never had a watch; it was not the same time. Once humans were imbued with the concept of a countable time, their lives changed because all events in life took on a different shade. Before clocks and calendars, the events were dominant and marked the time. Villagers did not say “in 1905” but “in the year when the earthquake took place” or “in the year of my brother’s marriage”. They used to say “at the hour when the oil lamps are lit”, which is not at all precise, since the hour when a housewife lit them depended on what kind of housework she wanted to do, the orientation of her house, the condition of her eyesight, her choice to save oil, etc.

However, when time goes by in an independent way, with us being chased down by its subdivisions, then time becomes the ruler over the events. At first, it was only on every Sunday that the church bell sounded for mass, then it set the day's milestones under the pretence of prayers, and eventually the bell-tower was equipped with a mechanism that struck the half-hours and hours. The word "schedule" is a purely urban concept. Children got punished when they were late at school so as to be prepared for clocking in as factory workers or office employees at a later time.

On the one hand, there are people ignoring the very existence of hours; on the other hand, there are people wearing watches that relentlessly tick the seconds away. From an existentialist point of view, they stand at the antipodes, as it is the case with their corresponding cultures.

Translated from the Greek by Anastasia Anastasopoulou, 01/02/2008