

**Triglav Circle, Harvard-Yenching Institute, 25-26 February 2005**

**Moral Dimensions of the Public Discourse: the Legacy of the Social Summit Revisited**

## **FIRST SECTIONS OF THE REPORT**

### *I. A view on moral philosophy and the concretization of values*

While certainly not new, the concern over moral issues and the apparent decline of moral values is legitimate, but it does not help very much to talk openly and deliberately about these values and to try to plunge back into a debate on moral philosophy.

There are indeed universal values that are recognized and shared in all cultures. Among them, one can mention fairness, kindness, prudence, compassion, courage, and honesty. Again in all cultures, these values are transmitted essentially through the family, through the relations between parents and children. The sense of morality of children is developed by the values that orient and shape the behavior of their parents. Example is the key transmitter, rather than directive and repression. Children know instinctively the values than they want their parents to have. By their behavior, parents succeed or fail to respond to this call.

Governments used these same universal values to legitimate their action. But again, proclamations of indefectible attachment to virtue matter less than actual policy. There are many examples, including on today's world scene, of a moral and moralistic public discourse juxtaposed with morally unacceptable action. The preaching of democracy and respect for human rights and the officially if not publicly condoned practice of torture is a

glaring case in point. Exhortations from concerned citizens do not go very far to discourage such governmental cynicism.

What is crucial, in order to be effective in the efforts to bring universal values back at the core of public policy, is accountability. Values need to be made operational, to be translated into quantifiable or at least immediately and clearly intelligible terms. Indicators, indices and indexes, such as the Human Development Index used by the United Nations Development Programme, are helpful instruments. Such monitoring tools should for instance help determining whether development policies are furthering people's sense of security and respect for human dignity. Violations of basic human rights need to be exposed through precise monitoring and large dissemination of the observed abuses. The moral behavior of public authorities has more chance to be enhanced through institutionalized accountability – which requires a pluralistic and free press – than through debates on the sources of morality and the avatars of moral philosophy.

## II. *On liberal humanism*

This statement, made in response to the questions posed in the Agenda on moral philosophy and the spirit of the time and moral issues in the political discourse, represent a coherent philosophy of life and society, and of life in society. Although the author did not label his views – probably because labeling is seen as a first step towards arrogance and intolerance – they may be considered as representing the best of the Western liberal tradition. This is a tradition coming from the Magna Carta, Locke and Hume, having integrated the insights of Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire and, perhaps above all John Stuart Mill and de Tocqueville, and having learned from the tragic and barbaric events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that while the State and public policies are necessary to human welfare they need to be constantly kept under control, for abuse of power is a recurrent temptation. Such liberalism relies on reason while recognizing that human greatness, and simply human decency, stem from controlled emotions and educated passions. Its motto could be moderation in all human endeavors, personal and collective, private and public, except in educating the self and striving to be fully human. While open to deism, liberalism so conceived is the quintessence of secular humanism. At least for the purpose of this report, this political philosophy might be called liberal humanism.

Although other philosophical and political traditions and sensibilities are represented in the Triglav Circle – including socialist or social humanism – it is to a significant extent this liberal humanism that has been the explicit or implicit frame of reference of the reflections undertaken by the Circle during these last ten years. The initial question posed at the seminar in Slovenia was why and how to enrich morally and spiritually the discourse of the United Nations on development and social progress and this discourse was based on liberal humanism, mixed at the time with an important dose of socialist and social humanism. From various angles and through various reformulations the Circle continues to address the same question. It is therefore legitimate to use the above statement as an entry into a rendering of the debate that took place at this meeting of February 2005.

### ***III. More on liberal humanism, accountability, moderation and discretion***

What was said on the various points made in this statement?

Accountability of national governments is indeed critical but the concept and its concretization have to be extended to nature and to all human beings. It has to be expanded to the global level. Some nations and some private forces, notably transnational corporations, have the power to affect the living conditions of people throughout the world and to affect also the health of the planet. Institutions and processes to hold these nations and forces accountable for their actions are still in their infancy. It should even be noted that efforts in that direction, for instance efforts of the United Nations to subject transnational corporations to a code of conduct, have been successfully brushed aside during these past few decades. What is left today is the protest of non-governmental organizations against the abuses of some giant corporations exploiting their employees and sometimes using their own militias to impose “order” in the lands they have placed their “foreign direct investments.” This protest is most important but not sufficient. The “Global Compact” launched by the Secretary General of the United Nations to engage transnational corporations into a “partnership” with the organization and its norms is an initiative relying on good will and enlightened self-interest. But experience and history show that laws and mechanisms for their enforcement are indispensable instruments for accountability.

Overall, the North, or rather the West has lately be most inclined to denounce corruption in developing countries and to press these countries for “good governance,” often making this governance, also equated with

democracy, a new form of conditionality for obtaining financial and other forms of aid. Indeed there is corruption in countries that, however poor or rich economically or financially, are poor in traditions and institutions of public service. There is also corruption in countries that are engaged in an all-encompassing drive for development, as this concept is currently understood. And there is corruption in countries that are simply poor and struggling for a place and role in the contemporary world. And beyond financial corruption or misuse of public resources, situations of extreme crisis bring extreme corruption in the sense that the common acquired heritage of rules of behavior and habits of the mind that enable people to live together can be broken. In extreme circumstances, what Durkheim and others have called social consciousness, falls apart. Peoples, when subjected to such extreme circumstances, notably of total insecurity, go back to the basic instinct of survival at all costs.

Thus, issues of accountability and corruption have to be replaced in a broad context and not limited to a sort of accounting of cases of immorality. Corruption has to be seen in all its dimensions, in the South as in the North, nationally as well as globally. And, if the South should refrain from exonerating itself on the grounds of its “underdevelopment” or because the West is guilty of selective moral outrage and practice of double standards, the West, in turn, should realize that its crusade for good governance and democracy will be received as imperial arrogance as long as it refuses to submit its institutions and policies to the same critical scrutiny. Problems of monitoring and accountability, and, for that matter, problems of establishing and maintaining democratic regimes and representative governments, are not the “preserve” of the developing world. There are many signs that this is an increasingly wrong assumption: the executive branches of governments are everywhere trying to assert their powers and to escape the control of elected assemblies; the production of data and the dissemination of information is more and more focused on economic and financial issues, notably the ups and downs of stock markets, and on the trivial aspects of politics, and less and less on the living conditions of people – let alone on social and human rights problems; and, the public services, which are in liberal democracies the most reliable source of basic data, are battered by an aggressive ideology attributing all virtues to the private sector.

It would be preoccupying for the future of democracy and the values embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights if a free press and an active and independent civil society were going to be seen as the only

forces responsible for the protection of fundamental freedoms in post-modern societies. If the institutions of the State are no longer animated by a true democratic culture, secrecy, manipulation and abuses are unavoidable. Questions of accountability and monitoring of public authorities – and now of private corporations because of their intrinsic power – ought to remain high on the agenda of public intellectuals. And this should include seemingly mundane questions of indices, indicators and choice of methods of quantification and measurement. The point made in the above mentioned statement that accountability of governments is best enhanced through the monitoring of indices and indicators capturing the results of the policies, notably on the protection and promotion of human rights, that these governments are supposed to pursue, should not be kept within the realm of the conversations of statisticians and other social scientists. Accountability involves concepts of political theory as well as routine bureaucratic practices.

That values, in order to “exist,” need to be interiorized, institutionalized and made operational, was an undisputed point. Idealism, in its various forms, as well as dualism and materialism, and perhaps skepticism, are represented in the Circle, but the Agenda was not geared towards a discussion on the respective merits of these different philosophies. And this point on the necessity of making values operational was not taken, perhaps wrongly, as a rejection of idealism in its meaning of search for an ideal.

The further point that individuals, governments and institutions in general that are the most vocal on their values and the most inclined to present themselves as the champions of truth and virtue are the less likely to apply these values in their actions and are actually dangerous for their fellow human beings, went also undisputed. Past and current examples abound: adepts of the moralizing discourse are usually either hypocritical, or set to impose their views, or both. Political leaders and political regimes stressing alleged moral decadence and need for strengthened morality are invariably coercive. And so are those placing explicitly their actions under divine guidance. It was noted that, as for governments, corporations that are the most ethical are rarely those that proclaim the most loudly their attachment to moral values. It might be added here that the short history of the United Nations appears to confirm that moral greatness is more than often associated with moral discretion. The two past Secretary Generals of the Organization with the most intense spiritual life and the greatest moral rectitude – Dag Hammarskjöld and U’Thant – were also extremely reserved

and private persons. And, while refraining from grand moral pronouncements they took political positions, for instance on the Congo and on the Vietnam War, that were both morally correct and courageous.

Thus, judgment and experience tell that on moral matters proclaimed certitudes and aggressive proselytizing are associated with intolerance and often lead to violence. Discretion, moderation in one's moral convictions and judgments, except precisely to denounce and combat bigotry and fanaticism, are indeed a precious heritage from the Enlightenment and they are perfectly consistent with the much older messages of Buddhism and Confucianism, and, many would say, with the teachings of Jesus. Does it follow that debates on the values that are underlying or ought to govern human thinking and action should be avoided? Should moral philosophy be left in the great books and testimonies of the past in order to avoid the risk of political misuse and manipulation of the moral discourse? If so, how are moral values that enhance human worth and human dignity created and transmitted? In contemporary societies, leaving aside the various types of fundamentalist and aggressive voices, there are plenty of powerful media disseminating some sort of moral message and families and schools still have a powerful role. Should these media and institutions be "trusted" in the sense that neither intellectuals nor established religions nor political voices would openly and purposefully try to influence them in a certain moral direction?

#### *IV. Where do values (presumed to be universal) come from?*

These questions assume that moral relativism ought to be rejected and assume also that a complete moral laissez faire of public authorities – except, and this is of course very important, through concrete and monitored examples of good moral behavior – is neither possible nor desirable. At any rate, two related elements of answer were provided in the initial statement here under scrutiny. The first was that moral values are essentially transmitted, through example precisely, from parents to children. This point was made on several occasions, under different forms, in the Triglav gatherings, notably in relation to the functioning of the brain and with regard to the importance of motherly love in the development of the child. The second was that there are indeed such moral values, which are universally recognized, understood and shared, and an indicative list of these was given. This has also been a frequent subject of exchanges in the Circle, notably apropos the values promoted by the United Nations and the question of

human rights. More will be said later in this report on the pertinence and use of a set of presumably shared values.

But, where do these universal values come from? From the genetic patrimony of humankind? From “something” which we be called human nature? From revelation and the words of great prophets? From the accumulated cultural heritage of humankind? From the spirit of the time, which is the average discourse of an epoch defining what is considered “common sense”? From the liberal humanist perspective, it would seem that several of these possibilities are acceptable, but the main inclination of a liberal spirit is to give only scant attention to the very question of the foundations of morals and the origins of the values that sustain human action. Such reticence is not attributable to intellectual obscurantism but to the conviction that “digging” into the deep layers of the human condition and researching ultimate causes is a source of unnecessary controversies and conflicts and is too often a distraction from the understanding and acting on concrete issues, notably political, that directly affect the human condition. Hence also the same reticence of the adepts of this school of thought for debating spirituality and its religious sources.

Undoubtedly, the Circle will keep exploring the wisdom and limitations of this liberal humanism, also called, notably in *Candles in the Dark*, secular humanism. For example, it would seem useful to look again at the concept of a human nature from different philosophical viewpoints, including humanist and spiritualist.

#### ***V. Voices for a visible and vocal role for moral philosophy***

What other perspectives on moral values and their sources were added to the views contained in this initial statement? Or, whether one believes or not in the usefulness of reflecting and debating on moral philosophy, what are, besides or beyond morals, the sources of decent human behavior?

Before reporting on those sources, it should be mentioned that there were indeed voices at this meeting to defend the legitimacy and practicality of moral philosophy as an academic discipline and as a compass to orient the human person towards the pursuit of truth and virtue, and, as an additional gift, happiness.

....Religious and “metaphysical” foundations for explicitly normative moral philosophy...

***VI. Others sources of decent behavior, more indirect but perhaps more reliable than morals and morality***

This section will include points made on spiritual resources, on the role of arts and aesthetics, on the role of sentiments, most notably love and benevolence, on the role of spirituality in its largest sense, on the alleged link between knowledge, or perhaps rather education, and human decency...

***VII.....Other sections...***

On wisdom. On sources of knowledge. On the African culture and some of its traditions. On religion, religions, and human decency. On fundamentalism. On equality, equity and justice. On the values of the Social Summit and their current status in the UN and in the world. On civil society.