

Rights versus diversity? The accelerated extinction of languages and cultures as an aspect of globalisation trends

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This chapter starts from the assumption that linguistic diversity and, more generally, cultural diversity, are intrinsically good. It looks at their opposites – linguistic and cultural poverty – and the current tendencies towards the latter within the globalisation process. The chapter also briefly explores the relationship between human rights and cultural diversity, which may be viewed as somewhat problematic, but the emphasis will be on what is considered the essential aspect of that relationship, namely the mutually reinforcing relationship between rights and diversity, and between their opposites, human rights violations and cultural uniformity (cultural poverty). In this context, the issue of legislative protection and promotion of cultural diversity will be investigated from a global perspective. Finally, the author wishes to assess the roles of Africa and of Africanity with regard to these issues.

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The impending disaster

The forms in which information comes and goes are crucial, but they are sometimes overlooked or underestimated in information ethics, as elsewhere. Language is still the most conspicuous form of information and we tend to rush to use English although there might be other possibilities. Even philosophers and information theorists are usually more concerned with the subject matter of the language used, i.e. the meanings of the words and sentences, than with their linguistic forms. We therefore tend to see language as a means more than as an end. Yet, linguistic diversity is central to cultural diversity, as well as to information ethics, and it is suffering appalling defeats today.

Because we think so much in words, the loss of languages limits the possibilities of human thought, knowledge and communication. Indigenous knowledge is being lost as a result of the death of languages. More than half of the world's languages, perhaps even as much as 95%, are threatened with extinction by the end of this century (UN, 2001). This high rate is perhaps unprecedented in human history. We and our children will therefore almost certainly live through the era during which most languages will die. And Africa is the continent that is hardest hit (FEL, n.d.).

Analysts mainly blame the spread of commercialism and consumerism, and also the rapid global spread of English, as the main factors behind this. It is perhaps the greatest threat ever, not just to linguistic diversity, but also to cultural diversity. There are many additional factors, however, such as United States and United Kingdom-driven cultural imperialism; discriminatory short-sighted policies aimed at supporting members of linguistic minorities;¹ urbanisation;

¹ One example would be offering schooling in English to indigenous Canadian non-English-speaking Inuit children, officially so that they can compete in the wider labour market. Another example would be all-Bulgarian schooling for Roma children in Bulgaria. If anything, this policy is evidence of the decision makers' failure to see the forest due to the overabundance of trees! These children will be behind their native English-speaking peers from the very start and will often never catch up. Most likely, they will be put in classes for students with learning disabilities and fall behind further. The solution is, of

and monopolistic, oligopolistic and expansionist developments in communications business and technology. Other factors include sharp population increases and territorial expansions of already large human populations, and the spread of French, Arabic and Chinese (Hamelink, 2001).

The international system

The concept of "linguistic genocide" was defined separately from physical genocide and roundly condemned by the United Nations (UN) in the final draft of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. But then the article on linguistic genocide was voted down by only 16 members, most of them powerful North Atlantic states (Capotorti, 1979; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Beyond outright genocide, it is likely that some other sort of oppression, whether classicism or racism, is at work when linguistic diversity suffers. These may be the kinds of situations in which an indigenous language is not targeted, but it ends up as "collateral damage". Today, in so-called post-colonial Africa, around 90% of Africa's intellectual output is produced in European languages. Not even a single treaty between Europe and Africa exists in any African language. In more than half of Africa's countries, the official language is different from the language most used by the citizens, and only 13% of African children are receiving primary education in their mother tongue (Wa Thiong'o, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998).

The answer of Africa and much of the rest of the developing world's countries so far has been to put the West to shame. India has 16 official languages. South Africa, a country with some 40 million inhabitants, embraced a total of 11 official languages after liberation from apartheid in 1994. In contrast, the European Union, an association of 27 economically well-off countries (most of whom joined after 1994), has only 26 official languages, less than one per country on average. The US, home to 300 million people, also has only one

course, to offer schooling in both languages, but the moral dilemma, between the individual human right to choose education (for oneself or for one's child) and the duty to preserve and promote cultural diversity, will remain, at least on the individual and familial levels.

de facto official language. Canada, the second largest country in the world, has only two. All of these North Americans only use European languages officially. On the other hand, an estimated 50% of Native American languages, spoken on the continent before the invasion by Europeans, have died out or been killed off. Due to long-lasting centralised states and brutal histories of war and conquests, within their own continents as well as outside them, Western Europe and North America today have the lowest rates of linguistic diversity in the world. Europe is by far the poorest continent with regard to linguistic diversity. Only 3% of the world's languages are spoken there. The percentage of languages spoken on other continents is as follows: 15% in the Americas, 30% in Africa, 32% in Asia and 20% in the Pacific region (Cru & Ponce, n.d.). Yet, nobody seems surprised today when someone says that "Europe is rich" or "Africa is poor".

The concept of globalisation is often taken to involve progress beyond the nation state, since transnational corporations now act regardless of state borders, but in fact the division of the world into a worldwide system of sovereign nation states is a prerequisite for globalisation. The essential characteristics of this system is that the world is divided into around 200 sovereign nation states typically covering huge tracts of territory and containing millions of people. A global market incorporates (or is superimposed upon) all these states, but there is no global state to regulate the global market. As there are 5 000 to 7 000 languages in the world today and up to 95% of them are threatened by extinction within this century, we can see where we are rapidly heading if current trends prevail: towards a maximum of around 200 languages worldwide.

In order to save cultural diversity, we must realise that the global system of nation states, both before and during globalisation, is a huge disaster leading us towards unprecedented global cultural impoverishment, and probably also to massive and otherwise avoidable human rights violations. The bankruptcy of the nation state is not, however, a complete cultural bankruptcy. Obviously, nationality is part of cultural identity for billions of people. It is the sovereignty that is the problem. Africa should not consist of 54 countries, but rather of 2 500. That is the number of languages spoken on the continent at

present. But the Africans were not always allowed to draw their own borders. Not even the people of Europe were asked to draw their own borders. The European elites did it, all over the world. It is a political, democratic and moral bankruptcy. And it is a cultural disaster.

There are precedents, though rather in the realm of religion than language. For example, the introduction of Christianity as the state religion of the late Roman Empire meant the near demise of the ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman and other religions. Perhaps it also brought a fresh sense of identity to many people who had found less and less meaning in the old religions. Nevertheless, from the points of view of cultural diversity and human rights, tolerance instead of institutionalising religion would have been far better.

Mainly a North Atlantic responsibility

The North Atlantic elites do not seem to like to be told or reminded of these events, or of their responsibility for it, but this is exactly what they must be told and reminded of if cultural and linguistic diversity is going to have any chance of escaping the most pessimistic prognoses. The abysmal record of the North Atlantic with regard to cultural and linguistic diversity, at home and abroad, must become a prioritised message of ambassadors from South Africa and the rest of the world to the Western countries and powerful globalised North Atlantic institutions, such as the UN, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Here, for once, South Africa is able to argue from a position of strength, and, more importantly, from a moral high ground.

Not only knowledge is lost with the extinction of a language. Literature (oral as well as written) is also irreversibly lost, so too wisdom and sometimes individual human lives. As Native Americans, Swedish Samiti and Australian Aborigines lose their languages, knowledge, religions and myths; they lose their "bearings" and place in the world as well. Alcohol and drug abuse, and high suicide and crime rates are often the consequences. Some try to fight back against the immediate threat, against the culture that is replacing theirs, for instance the militant Basques in Spain, and therefore lives are being lost outside the threatened ethnic groups as well.

Cultural and linguistic diversity should, in my opinion, not have to be justified. Although they can be a means of survival (e.g. the use of Amazon herbal medicines to prevent cancer) or a means of wellbeing (e.g. Hoodia, the plant used by the San to lose sensations of hunger, which can also be used by obese people to lose weight), they should also be seen as *intrinsically* good. Cultural diversity is not just good as a means; it is also an end in itself. It does not merely make the world a more interesting, more beautiful and more fun place; it is good in and by itself.

Does this mean that, say, 6 billion different languages would be better than 3 billion languages for today's world? Not at all. Long-term viability and effects, such as the inevitable, constant mergers and fragmentations of languages must be taken into consideration. I am not extending an invitation to another Tower of Babel. People can learn additional languages more easily if they know their own well.

The current world language status of English enables communication between more people than ever before. (Unfortunately, so far it seems mainly to consist of one-way communication *to* more people than ever before.) Yet the Jamaican and West African varieties of English are beginning to manifest characteristics of becoming more than just dialects, namely new languages. I believe Africans, at home and in diaspora, can teach many Westerners that it is normal for one person to be able to speak many languages. Cultural diversity does not end even with the individual human being, because each single one of us is a carrier of many cultures as well as a potential of new cultures.

The average number of native speakers of a language today is 5 000 to 6 000. The largest number is 850 million – Mandarin Chinese. Only 80 languages are spoken by more than 10 million people. Such a high number is only achieved by means of imperialist expansion (Cru & Ponce, n.d.). A better distribution would be fewer mega-languages, fewer native speakers of the 80 mega-languages, and more substantial numbers of native speakers of threatened languages. Moreover, special efforts should be made to save language groups and isolates, such as the entire Khoisan language phylum of southern Africa, or the indigenous Japanese Ainu language, which has no known relatives and is spoken by only around 150 people today.

UNESCO initiatives

Along with biodiversity, cultural diversity should perhaps take on and challenge “human rights” as a rallying point for the 21st century. On the occasion of adopting UNESCO's 2001 Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the organisation's Director-General expressed the hope that it would “one day acquire as much force as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (UNESCO, 2001). Yet, most of the time, diversity does not contradict human rights. Rather, they reinforce each other, but so do their opposites.

Of all countries in the world, only the US and Israel voted against UNESCO's legally more binding Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2005. The US routinely vetoes international condemnation of Israel's violations of human rights. The US's vetoes in favour of Israel in the UN Security Council since 1982 actually outnumber all other vetoes by all other permanent Security Council members combined. And so, perhaps, Israel feels obliged to assist the US when the US wants backing for less cultural diversity and more homogenised cultural products and markets at home and abroad. But the proliferation of overwhelmingly pro-Israeli cultural products of Hollywood and other US media products (especially news products) dealing, if ever so slightly, with the Middle East, is of course also in Israel's interest (Unescopress, 2005; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2006; Löwstedt, 2007).

Even if cultural diversity has a somewhat tense relationship with individual rights, under certain circumstances they are in my opinion not antithetical concepts. I believe this is best seen by looking at the powers that regularly violate human rights and counteract cultural diversity. The fate of global cultural diversity has ended up hostage to power politics and insatiably profit-hungry media corporations and their advertiser clients. This is not acceptable. The opposite of cultural diversity is not unity, but cultural poverty. But not only linguistic diversity and cultural diversity are held hostage, human rights are, too.

In official comments on the devastating vote against the US and Israel (148-2, with four countries abstaining), the US said the UNESCO treaty is “deeply flawed”, protectionist, and a threat to freedom of expression (Pauwelyn, 2005). Freedom of expression is a basic human right

(UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, §19), and it appears far-fetched indeed that US cultural products could help to further freedom of expression more when the world is already full of them. It is, in my view, a much graver threat to freedom of expression that so many cultural products need an unofficial go-ahead from the West nowadays in order to reach any mass audiences at all.

One rather covert apologist for the Americans, Joost Pauwelyn (2005), suggests there are two ways of “how best to sustain minority cultures – through public institutions, subsidies and screen quotas, as the [UNESCO] convention implies, or rather by vigorous antitrust rules and the free flow of ideas, as its critics retort”. But he does not mention the obvious facts that vigorous antitrust rules for the global market (which is the mass media market of today) can only work through a global authority, i.e. a world state, and that the US is doing everything it can to prevent the appearance of an authoritative regulator of the global market, i.e. a world state (Monbiot, 2003). The refusal of the US to recognise the International Criminal Court; international conventions against torture, biological weapons, landmines and child labour; the Kyoto Protocol against climate change; and the UN Human Rights Council, is evidence of its opposition to any kind of global democracy or even pluralist global regulation.

The most daunting threat to cultural diversity?

I agree with Pauwelyn that vigorous antitrust rules and the free flow of ideas could do much to sustain minority cultures, but the US is too formidable an obstacle to even entertain the idea of implementing such rules, let alone executive powers that are not controlled by the US itself.

Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton (2000) wrote that a global antitrust regime (an “international competition authority”) is necessary to save democracy, and that the single-most important business to regulate in this regard is the mass media, because the increasingly oligopolistic transnational mass media giants, whether they are Murdoch’s News Corporation, Berlusconi’s Fininvest, or the American-Japanese Time Warner Sony network, are hollowing out democracy worldwide. But this call for sanity has never been

formally echoed by any US or European official. Herein lies possibly the most daunting threat to cultural diversity.

The US’s charge of protectionism against the UNESCO treaty is also suspect. Granted that WTO rules aim to overthrow protectionism, and that the EU member countries all voted for the UNESCO convention for mainly selfish reasons, such as saving their own film industries, it should be remembered that the WTO is an American invention and an arm of US power, and that cultural products cannot be treated like washing powder (Monbiot, 2003). Unfortunately, the economies of scale that now govern the global cultural market can currently only be limited by state protection. State protection in the UNESCO context is not “protectionism”; it is a desperate, last resort to enable the possibility of survival.

Therefore, UNESCO’s cultural diversity convention is the next best thing. Only a fully democratic world state with the authority and enforcement mechanisms necessary to implement vigorous global antitrust policies would be better. And the official US objections to the UNESCO treaty are nowhere near constructive criticism. From the point of view of cultural diversity, they are in fact destructive and otherwise little more than self-serving hypocrisy.

Africa’s central role in the future

In my view, one of the most important things that Africa can teach the rest of the world today is that cultural and biodiversity must prevail. This can be done by practice as well as teaching.

Another important, related thing that Africa can teach us is the unity of humankind: ethically, historically, socially, culturally and even genetically. In my opinion, Africa has suffered, and is still suffering, greater ethical wrongs than any other continent. I am referring to the racist Transatlantic and Arab systems of slavery, as well as to colonialism, apartheid, neocolonialism and more. Yet, still, there is astoundingly little vengefulness or even bitterness in African behaviour towards Europeans, Westerners or Arabs.

Historically, Africa is the source of civilisation and through the ancient Egyptian civilisation it is one of the most important roots (next to Sumer) of ancient Mediterranean and Levantine

civilisations, including the three great monotheistic religions and the ancient Greek as well as the Roman civilisations, whose latter-day offshoots today dominate the world. In terms of human genetic variation, the rest of us humans all fit inside a mere parenthesis within the great spectrum of African genes. Africanity is a necessary complement to cultural diversity. As opposed to the uniformities and cultural poverty resulting from, or imposed by, global anarchic capitalism and by North Atlantic political, military and economic power, Africanity has always been, and still is, a unity that enables and promotes cultural diversity. I am not saying it is the only one. Humanity or, what I think is a better concept, *ubuntu*, is another.

If democracy is to progress at all, then there must be at least a vision of the global democracy to which I have referred above, in which the humble African peasant woman has a vote equal to that of the president of the US, or to the president of the European Commission, or to the chairman of the board of News Corporation International.

Finally, it appears to me that information ethics, whether African or not, must not merely be viewed with individual rights (or duties) in mind. Yes, human rights are good and crucial to human welfare, but *only* if they are understood as the rights of individuals, they will not be conducive to cultural diversity or biodiversity and, therefore, not to humanity or *ubuntu*. Solidarity, tolerance and social rights are lacking in today's world, and at least this may be shown to the impoverished parts of the world by Africa, not least with regard to its still wonderful cultural diversity.

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