

Universal: A Continent Beyond Tradition

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When concepts become headlines, we witness – like it or not – their funeral. With real sadness, I have to acknowledge that both universality and tradition (among other things) are in this situation today. Once appropriated in political discourse, they are emptied of what makes them important to philosophers and scientists – who in a given context express an understanding and determination of practical experiences shaped by this understanding.

What have we learned from the experience of constituting the concept of tradition? That human beings tend to shelter themselves from change. Tradition expresses a longing for stability, and thus results from a cognitive effort of generalization and abstraction further translated into a prescriptive script. But let us not take the high road of analytical philosophical exercise without acknowledging the extraordinary scope of the qualifier “tradition.”

There is the action – expressed through the call “Become part of the tradition” – that applies from learning rules of agriculture or Latin texts to becoming a member of a marching band or paying for Fourth of July fireworks (defined as an American tradition). And there is the mystique of traditional medicine (Chinese, American Indian, Ayurvedic), of traditional cuisine (charcoal vs. gas grill, simmering vs. microwaving), of celebrations (weddings, funerals, May Day), of the ancient, pre-Christian, Druid or Mayan ways of reacting the environment. There is the discussion of a semantic tradition, an alliterative tradition, a geometric tradition. And there is much in the current state of world affairs that brings tribal traditions to mind: riots in Portadown over a parade, wars in Kosovo, Chechnya, slaughter in Rwanda and Iraq, economic recession in Japan (the list of regions and concerns can go on).

The concept of universal (and implicitly universality, although the philosophic tradition requires a clear-cut distinction between the two) is a bit less subject to this extraordinary proliferation; but when it arrives in public discourse, it is as trivialized as tradition is. “Rights are universal,” the president of the USA just announced to the Chinese. So are traffic signs (or they should be because people drive all over the world). And so is American English as the *lingua “franca”* (actually *anglica*, and no longer *franca*) of the worlds of business, air travel, and science and technology. And do not forget π and – to approach something I want to bring up – the Feigenbaum number, brought to us by chaos theory (the science of dynamic systems), or the Boolean logic embodied in every digital transaction.

In the conceptual world of our pure thoughts, we can discuss the universal and the traditional from any imaginable perspective. But once we get down to the human experience of constituting tradition or universality through concrete actions, we soon realize that what counts is their pragmatic dimension (1). Our ability to articulate meaningful sentences about the traditional or the universal (and any other concept, for that matter), is affected by the changes we are experiencing at this time in history. The

pragmatics of tradition is the sum total of everything people do under the assumption and expectation of stability. The pragmatics of the universal is no less the human action of realizing the dimension of universality even to the extent that it collides in subtle and less subtle ways with tradition. This might already have the sound and flavor of a conclusion, one that is not derived from arguments but from a conceptual perspective that I have yet to disclose. But this cannot happen before I succinctly define the purpose and method of the inquiry whose results are the object of this paper.

The utopian call to philosophers – Stop contemplating the world and dedicate yourselves to changing it! – builds on a romantic notion of the role individuals (philosophers or not) play in society. It promotes activism over ideas (although it is by nature and expression idealistic), not unlike many other developments peculiar to the Industrial Society.

However, many things have changed since that call was issued and eventually turned into a political program. We are now in the age of the global scale of human life and activity. Within the scale of globality, our self-constitution as individuals places us in a generic conflict: the individual – discreet existence identified on a local level – and the world in which individual awareness and sense of reciprocal responsibility unfold – existence at the global scale of what effectively constitutes humankind. More precisely, it is the conflict between the reassuring condition of living in tradition – embodied in experiences within a limited space (local or national borders) and under the assumption of permanency and progression – and life in the new continent of experiences of human self-constitution at the global scale and within an accelerated time of ever shorter durations. The cohesive set of shared values and ideals of tradition is effectively overwritten by the possibility and necessity of novelty and innovation – an expression of the necessary efficiency of human experiences at the global scale that humankind has reached.

Between the ideal of universalism, corresponding to expectations of unabated meliorist enthusiasm and individual instantiation in tradition, corresponding to reified values as they were validated in past practical experiences, many possible paths have been contemplated by philosophers and social activists. The current dynamics of change is such that almost all of these well intended projects prove to be at most of good intention but nevertheless profoundly naive in their fundamental assumptions.

Instability as a creative blessing

We are at a crossroads in which we experience a condition of instability that precedes any fundamental bifurcation. But as opposed to the dominant view that instability is by definition a negative occurrence, we are witnessing probably the most extraordinary explosion of creativity in the entire history of humankind, matched only by the destructive forces, firmly rooted in various traditions, unleashed as well in this context. To make things clear: first, my purpose is to address change from a cognitive perspective with a focus on understanding the necessary character of change; second, my method is abduction, as Peirce called it: the constitution and pursuit of hypotheses beyond what induction (observation) can support, as well as beyond what deduction affords. (For more on abduction, please see reference section, 2.)

Here is the announced abduction: The dynamics of change in any system depends on its underlying structure. In the case of human society, the way change takes place and its pace are in relation to the practical experience of human self-constitution, more precisely, the means through which this experience takes place. By self-constitution I mean how an individual or group of individuals asserts their own characteristics – biological, cognitive, emotional – in the environment of their existence. The constitution of oneself as an accountant or philosopher corresponds to the pragmatic environment, that is, the need and possibility for accounting and/or philosophy. That is, one pursues a certain path of identifications in respect to others. As a species, humans constitute themselves through their pragmatic and heuristic condition; in other words, through what they do and through dedication to inquiry. This pertains to rationality as it pertains to the emotional component of all those activities through which we identify ourselves. Rationality connects human practical experiences to consistent inferences (sometimes identified as logical conclusions) and to the ability to predict events in nature and society, or even to influence and control them. To orient oneself in a given time and environment – for example, at night while on water – one infers from information available (stars, wind direction and strength) to the goal pursued. In each and every different pragmatic framework, inference changes; and the human changes as well. The rationality implicit in oral communication is different from that of the written. In the oral, the messenger is the assurance; in the written, the authority embodied in the message. Literacy became the guarantor of inferences to the extent that experiences of self-constitution within it ended up being less the result of new cognitive effort and more of comfortable acceptance. By way of one example, it suffices to recall fascist ideology and the war it triggered in order to understand a literate inference that went wrong. The ideal of a world turned into factories (the so-called socialist model of industrialization) is another example. The notion of linear progression – that the future builds on what preceded it, as opposed to the dynamics in which the future determines a current state – is also part of this rationality archived in all literate discourse. Each historic sequence is preceded by a phase of instability. The seeds of its creative unfolding are sown during such a phase.

I mentioned the Feigenbaum number as a universal descriptor of a world whose main characteristic is its dynamics. In this world, which pretty much surrounds us – take a look at the trees, clouds, ripples on a lake's surface – we encounter intervals of stability as well as intervals preceding change. There is a universality of patterns in this world of change, as there are also many distinctions that can be recognized. Although the branching of a fir tree is and will remain different from that of an oak or a palm tree, the intervals between succeeding branches become shorter in a sequence that is captured by the Feigenbaum number (which, incidentally, is $= 4.669201660\dots$). Various studies on population – not just human – show that the same pattern of change can be acknowledged. In a given ecological space, the growth of population follows a non-linear pattern in which the doubling of numbers occurs at intervals that become shorter and shorter. The population clock of humankind ticks at a rhythm quite well described by the algorithm behind the Feigenbaum number.

But here I shall leave Feigenbaum behind us once again as I proceed in a direction that might cause some unease: If rationality is solely related to our ability to articulate thoughts and express them through means characteristic of literacy, we might just be at the very end of that possibility, since literacy itself is reaching its end. Indeed, due to its inherent structural characteristics, literacy is no longer the appropriate mold for the variety of practical experiences of the human self-constitution that has become necessary as human activity reaches the scale of globality.

Why do I claim that literacy is reaching its end, or at least the end of its dominant role as mold of humans constituting themselves through their pragmatics? Literacy is the last and strongest embodiment (or mold, or paradigm) of human self-constitution that led to industrial society. Its main characteristics are: sequentiality, linearity, centralism, hierarchization, continuity, permanence, uniformity and, of course, universalism. Sequentiality is the creation of a chain of successive actions. Writing embodies sequentiality: one letter follows another. The word or the sentence is a larger sequence. Some sequences are linear: start with a piece of metal, process it according to a plan, pass the resulting piece to the next manufacturing procedure. Within linear sequences, cause and effect are kept close to each other. For example, the force used to hammer a hot piece of metal determines the result. The structure of sequences, linear progression, and determinism also makes way for hierarchy – what is deemed most important – and centralism – around which locus or goal an entire process revolves. All these characteristics of human work and living are embedded in the culture of reading and writing and preserved through it. Opposed to these are the non-literate characteristics of the new pragmatics in which human beings constitute themselves. Experiences of thinking and working above and beyond literate natural language – multimedia, architecture, design, music, mathematics, visualization in the fields of medicine, physics, aviation, mathematics, meteorology, astronomy, to name a very few – are different in nature from those shaped by the literate mold. We are effectively engaged in interactions that are neither sequential, centralized, nor hierarchical in nature, and in which dependencies are non-linear. Work is distributed and highly parallel; resources (not just raw materials, but human resources as well) are drawn from the global arena, which is far from being universal in its Weltanschauung.

A short history: What drove the engine of change in the very first stages of humankind was survival under circumstances of a disjoint set of “worlds” (natural and human) that made up a world in which nobody really had the upper hand. As survival was progressively replaced by expectations beyond those accounted for in the Darwinian scheme (as imperfect as it is), human beings reached a stage of ever-increasing dependencies among those belonging to it and making up their respective partial “humankinds” – the village, the city, states, nations.

Overcoming singularity

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the development in question, but let’s take a shot at the broader image. The practical experiences of human beings are attested at roughly 2.5 million years ago; language use came much later, about 200,000 years ago. Agriculture as a patterned experience emerged around 19,000 years ago, and writing

probably 5,000 years ago. I hope you notice the shorter intervals between these crucial developments. As we come closer to our time, trade, alphabetic writing, a pre-industrial age, and, of course, the Industrial Revolution become part of the human pragmatic system. What this chronology does not immediately convey is that in the process, individuals relate more and more to each other, effectively overcoming their singularity. Scale is the expression of many relations, qualitative as well as quantitative, through which individuals overcome singularity and integrate themselves in the life and destiny of the entire human population.

The notion of scale is critical in explaining the major transitions in the human pragmatic experience mentioned above because scale turns out to be the parameter that controls dynamics. The notion of scale allows us to understand how quantity and quality merge as the interplay of the infinite number of variables involved in the process of reaching self-awareness gains in significance. Moreover, this interplay becomes part of self-awareness. Abilities other than natural (e.g., yelling, hurling, running, plucking, etc.) that result as humans constitute themselves as a singular species unfold as scale changes. Planting, cooking, herding, chanting, using tools become possible when changes in scale cause efficiency levels beyond mere survival not only possible, but necessary.

Within a crude scale of life and death, neither tradition nor universality are possible. To the extent that biological elements dominate, reactions are the only expressions of existence. As underlying adaptive strategies are progressively embodied in self-constitutive practical experiences, both tradition and universality become possible. Biological mechanisms are acknowledged through them; so are a multitude of factors making up the polygenetic interplay of forces affecting the nature and condition of human beings. Neither tradition nor universality can emerge in a reactive world. But as the new nature, that is, culture, consolidates, a new experience – interpretation – becomes possible. Both tradition and universality originate from this. Where there is no interpretation, there can be no tradition and no universality.

Tradition is the expression of particular patterns corresponding to the partial “humankind” self-constituted through practical experiences well adapted to their circumstances of existence (geography, climate, shared survival strategies and shared values, etc.). The universal, at least at first glance, is mere generalization of tradition. It celebrates the *apparent* unity of nature and culture, or the unity of humankind to the extent that its constituents are aware of it. However, as the experience of work and the cognitive experience of storing information regarding successful actions differentiate, due to various factors going into self-constitution, tradition and the universal diverge. For example, the various religious traditions vary around the world, and are formed in response to the pragmatics of existence. Still, religion, or better yet what was called religious belief, remains universal. Two peoples live along a seacoast; one, with good natural harbors, develops a large commercial shipping industry while the other, with a sandy, sloping shore, remains agricultural. In industrial society, tradition and the universal often conflict, not the least because the machine – a universal model – and the appropriate self-constitution in industrial work negate all traditions preceding it.

Tradition is increasingly associated with the past, while the universal seems more an unattainable abstract ideal than a concrete embodiment of a longing for transcending immediacy and directness (*Unmittelbarkeit*, as German philosophy describes it).

Vive la différence!

With each experience of individual self-constitution, the phylogenesis of the human being, and thus of the species, is repeated. In a nutshell, this process results in the renewed constitution of human nature, more precisely in the sequence leading from survival instincts to needs to growing expectations. Scale thus entails the intricate relation among population, resources, productivity, variety of human practical experiences and their interrelationship; means for survival, human needs (above and beyond survival) expectations, indeed, the right to partake in the well-being of society. If numbers were related only to survival needs, history would follow a relatively linear path, or at most the geometric pattern of growth that Malthus, among others, described. Beyond geometric growth, non-linearity, along with the dynamic succession of relatively stable periods followed by instability and ending in major bifurcations, originates in the fact that each member of the universal set called humankind is actually subject to extreme forces that mold what we call *individuality*. To be part of the species is to be the same (“...all men are created equal” proclaims the American *Declaration of Independence*), but also to be different: “...endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among these life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Sameness is the mansion of tradition. Rights make up the palace of universalism, provided that at its entrance we read or hear or experience what the French expression “Vive la différence!” celebrates.

Literacy served both; and as always happens in the relation between those served and the servants, they become dependent on one another. This is why any reference to tradition recalls language in the first place, while references to the universal assume that thinking can take place only in and through language. The obsession with literacy is definitely justified within the pragmatic framework that made literacy necessary, i.e., the pragmatics of industrial production. Every characteristic of the self-constitution of individuals as literate is embodied in this society. Within the scale of humanity that made industrial society necessary, the underlying structure of the latter supports literacy, and literacy reinforces it. Sequentiality, linearity, determinism, and centralism, defined above, are identifiers of practical experiences involved in factory work, creating art, politics, education, religion, ethics, and philosophy. There is nothing that corresponds to practical experiences of human self-constitution in a system with a literate underlying structure that escapes these characteristics

The only component not subject to literacy is the scale of humankind. Up to a certain moment, accommodations to literacy within the growing scale were possible. They took place mainly through methods of optimization (such as specialization and automation), and expressed through reforms (concerning working conditions, weekly work hours, tariffs, fair trade practices). Instability sets in as reform no longer adequately squares the variables of the process. What is happening in Europe today – stagnation in education and politics, high unemployment – as governments insist on applying

“traditional” methods, holdovers from the literate industrial society, to problems that escape the bonds of the literate characteristics of a bygone pragmatic framework is a good example of such an unstable state. In the USA, education is in the same condition of suffering from more of what served a purpose 100 years ago, but no longer. The happy news is that the bifurcations heralded by this instability open up new avenues for opportunity and progress.

We are now before such a bifurcation, for which the syntagm “Post-Industrial” has been used, and which I have tried to describe through the provocative, but limiting, expression “[Civilization of Illiteracy](#).” What I actually have in mind is a civilization of many “literacies,” each with its own characteristics. Even the word “literacies” is misleading because each such language has characteristics different from those of the literacy based on natural language. The fundamental difference is that literate characteristics no longer constitute the underlying structure of effective practical experiences. As opposed to the domination of one literacy, which after millennia reached its zenith around the turn of the century, no one language dominates. This domination, which the educational system still insists upon, takes place through the imposition of its characteristics. We experience them as rules. These rules impede practical experiences in domains where literacy has exhausted its potential: jurisprudence (with its antiquated language and procedures), the sciences, technology, engineering, mathematics, education, business, even politics and philosophy. And they hinder the exploration of new domains. This is less obvious in the USA where the avenues for self-constitution are more open than in Europe. As a matter of fact, the USA is in the position it is today despite literacy, but certainly not because of it. There are highly literate societies – one might even say highly traditional societies – that have outlawed genetic research, only to find that the literate act of outlawing something that does not fall within the literate domain means much less in the age of globality than it did in the pragmatic context of the Industrial Age. And we all know of societies so deeply committed to the underlying structure molded by tradition (including literacy) that they simply cannot catch up to the new dynamic of development. The so-called Asia crisis is for me a confirmation of the main thesis spelled out in *The Civilization of Illiteracy*. It is the crisis of a society captive to tradition – one reflected even in its system of language and writing, as well as in its industrial structure – despite the outward appearance of dynamism. It flirted with a pragmatic that does not abide competition from tradition. Probably only discontinuity – a rash break with the underlying structure of tradition – can save the societies and economies of the former Asian tigers.

Feigenbaum’s number deserves mention again here. We are confronted with the increased speed of human endeavor and with shorter cycles of production, development, and research. Fragmentation and interconnectedness of the world, the new technology of synchronization, the dynamics of life forms and of artificial constructs (ALife is but a new domain of science and philosophy) elude the dominating force of literacy as they constitute a new pragmatic framework. Reflecting the fact that a part of humankind has reached yet another critical mass, at which adjustments to scale require a new pragmatics of higher efficiency, humankind effectively abandons the fragmented

territory of a multiplicity of reciprocally contradictory traditions and enters the new continent of an integrating universality. This is a mouthful of words that mean probably as little as any demagogic discourse supporting literacy and traditional institutions. But behind these words is the reality of a concerted effort to discover and utilize alternative resources, compensating for what was perceived as limited natural means for supporting humankind. The search for alternatives is characteristic of progressive self-constitution. Those individuals and societies who do not, stagnate. (And we refer to them as “traditional.”) On a much smaller scale of human activity and thousands of years ago, the Phoenicians were obliged to search for alternative natural resources. Their commerce and the record-keeping it entailed set humankind on the slow path towards literacy. Today, at a much greater scale of existence, humans search for alternatives that are mainly cognitive in nature, transcending the limitations of an intrinsically linear, centralized, hierarchic, and proportional model of contingencies. The picture could look less attractive than we would like it to be. It seems as though in accepting the Feigenbaum number describing the temporal succession of various underlying structures, we also accept a high level of fatalistic forces that pre-empt any form of social activism or meliorist activity. Tradition opposes integration; local wars, which when added together total up to above the level of a world war, are only the expression of what obsession with tradition can lead to, and in doing so opposes the transcendence of all those barriers and borders that emerged in the pragmatic context of literacy.

Democracy and self-organization

The fragile, but very significant, relation between sameness and difference is probably the most exciting aspect of the subject I discuss in these pages. Sameness – to be like others, to have access to what others have, to maintain one’s condition – can be a moving target insofar that the criteria of sameness keep changing. Democracy is the offspring of human experiences based on the postulate of sameness – which is the main assumption of any tradition. Alternatives derive from the dynamics of difference – the only universal characteristic of humankind. Difference, from an individual’s DNA to the never-ending self-constitution of individuality in practical experiences is the source of the dynamics of change. This dynamics takes the form known in the science of dynamic systems as self-organization. Up to this moment in human evolution, social forms of variable organization, based on interactive optimization (reforms) and learning, geared towards preservation, triggered and maintained the obsession with tradition. As the critical mass corresponding to the global scale has been reached, all those disconnected (or barely related) partial “humanities” that made up a generic humankind are integrated in the broader reality of a species ascertaining not only dominance over its environment, but also an active role outside the direct universe of its biological existence.

The unified pragmatic context of digitally based work that is emerging in the world has as its underlying structure a universal language: binary language (*characteristica universalis*, as Leibnitz prophetically called it) which, combined with what is known as the algebra of thought (cf. Boole), supports the effective integration of the only unlimited

sources we can think of – cognitive resources – in human activity.

Adaptability results from diversity. Nuclei of human self-organization corresponding to the diversity of practical experiences in this world will allow for, and indeed require, the multiplicity of languages (means of interaction and communication) of the universal civilization following the civilization of literacy. Self-organization is therefore a process that takes place at a variety of levels, stimulated and supported by the energy corresponding to differences among all individuals and their variable congregation in groups of pursuit (characterized by transience, commonalty, as well as similarity, dissimilarity, occasional coordinates). One does not need to be Chinese in order to use traditional Chinese medicine, as one does not need to live physically in what used to be equated with a certain community in order to partake in its traditions. Communities emerging and disappearing under these circumstances of change are endowed, by the nature of their emergence, with the equivalent of immune systems: they recognize and counteract agents of destruction, agents of social illness, of community self-destruction. Collapse and catastrophe as opposed to hope and unprecedented possibilities – these are the qualifiers emerging from the discussion on the universal as a continent beyond tradition. Perceiving chances for social renewal in interactions that lead to transcending tradition does not mean that tradition should be discarded. But there is no alternative to achieving the value and the dynamic of the universal without freedom from tradition.

The electronic forum of the European Commission, involved in the *Project Information Society*, lists *Ten Bones of Contention*, from which I chose the following: “The system we are stuck with and frantically trying to fix comes from another time and an entirely different set of circumstances. It is changing massively in front of our noses and needs to be completely rethought and radically overhauled.” Does this mean disconnection from the past? Santayana was wrong in his assertion that those who forget the lessons of the past are condemned to repeat them. Those who live in tradition can only go as far as the pragmatics from which these traditions resulted.

We are who and what we are in our inquisitive interaction with others. Our minds exist only through this interaction (3). This statement says in effect that to philosophize became part of the process of human self-constitution and identification. The only referent of philosophy is the human being constituted in practical experiences. Together with other surviving literacies, philosophic literacy will be one of many. The philosophy of the civilization of illiteracy will reflect the circumstances of work and life characteristic of the pragmatic framework. It will also be subjected to the severe test of market exigencies as these reflect efficiency expectations characteristic of the new scale of humankind. Short of living off the past, as literacy, religion, and art do, philosophy needs to refocus on reason as the compass of human activity. Focusing on alternative practical experiences, philosophy can practically help people to free themselves from the obsession with progress – seen as a sequence of ever-escalating records (of production, distribution, expectation) – and moreover, from the fear of all its consequences. It can also focus people’s attention on alternatives to everything that affects the integrity of the species and its sense of quality, including the relation to their environment. When past, present, and future collapse into the illiterate frenzy of the

instant, philosophy owes to those who question its articulations an honest approach to the question, "Is there a future?" But as this future takes shape in the presence of humans partaking in the open world of networked interactions, banalities will not do. In advancing this pragmatic perspective of the universal, I chose to undertake an elaboration well beyond the short-breathed argumentation peculiar to this moment in time. The argument of this presentation is that answers cannot result from tradition, as they cannot come from infatuation with technology, cultural self-replication, models based on biological mechanisms, unfocused bionomic, or unfounded models of the universal, usually reduced to an anthropocentric model of rationality. Affirmations above and beyond the rhetoric of intellectual controversy and political discourse must originate from those *affirmative* actions through which our identity as individuals, communities, and society are established at a level of universality never before reached. The metaphor of the interactive future beyond tradition, which I submit here, is the expression of a simple thesis: At the global scale, human interaction, as the concrete form of engaging infinitely diverse cognitive resources, is the last available resource on which the future of the species can depend. Globality is an opportunity and a challenge.

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