

## The Unbearable Bitterness of Being

(or from Jesus to Mozart and back)

### Abstract

Bitter Lite – this is the favourite flavour of contemporary social imaginary. Ideologies are dead, but ideologues can retrain into PR wizards or marketing gurus. Accumulation of cultural capital never sleeps, though domains may come and go talking of Michelangelo. Nevertheless, being here and now leaves a bitter aftertaste of a need to believe in culturally validated values in spite of their artificiality and apparent arbitrariness. Why should we believe in what we had ourselves constructed and then negotiated? Even if we manage to believe in values, a bitter taste of randomness, arbitrariness, insecurity remains. Kundera was wrong (to speak of lightness) , Kristeva is right (to speak of sublimated bitterness). Being is unbearably bitter, not light. From Jesus to Mozart, from Montaigne to Freud and from Hannah Arendt to John Paul II we could repeat after Kristeva – “Don’t be afraid of European culture”(Kristeva, 2009). Don’t be afraid to re-engineer it.

### Motto

“Culture is a toolkit employed by individuals to construct their strategies of action in varying social contexts and transitory historical moments” (loosely adopted from Swidler, 1986 and Blute, 2010)

“The exile I went through at the age of twenty-four was a painful experience, even underneath the veneer of a “successful integration”. The life of a woman and a mother, even with the advantages of equality, is strewn with pitfalls.”(Kristeva, 2009, 78)

### 1. Accumulation of cultural capital

The ways we act are influenced by the way we think. The way we think, in turn, is influenced both by innate ideas (cultural softwares) and sensory inputs (empirical data). Cultural softwares are supposed to melt into our socialized unconsciousness. Empirical data are supposed to be perceived, classified and processed in patterned ways. Is our experience unbearably light as Kundera would like us to believe or is it bitter as claimed by Gombrowicz or Kristeva, Cioran or Milosz (mind you, I limit myself to the central-eastern Europeans; Bulgarians, Czechs, Poles and Romanians)? If we think our fate belongs to the category “legal alien lite”, mild eroticised entertainment with a bow towards the Enlightenment (minus de Sade) will do for sensemaking. Bitterness opens new vistas. It accounts for suffering. If we are convinced that a recognition of suffering belongs to the great achievements of Christianity and psychoanalysis – as Kristeva does – then gravity sets in, a much more bitter piece of metaphysics:

“From the polysemy of the word *suffering* come some inevitable intersections between the meanings given to it by psychoanalysis and Christianity. (...) Two points in common: the recognition of suffering as an integral part of the speaking being and the valorization of language as the royal road to traversing it, to its relief (we say *perlaboration*, or *working through*, or *sublimation*” (Kristeva, 2009, 80)

Christianity and psychoanalysis, however, are abstract terms, general labels, and none of us encounters them as framed pictures at the exhibition. The ways we think and experience the Husserls, the Freuds or the Arendts, but also the Formans, the Polanskis, the Jarmusches and the Inaritu's, emerge from a dense jungle of interaction and communication processes, partly patterned, partly random, partly sequenced, partly circular. What we feel and desire can matter more for our experience and accumulation of our cultural capital than what we calculate and rationalize and invest in time and planning. But we should not be surprised by this link between Christianity and psychoanalysis, or, more abstractly, religion and philosophy of culture. We should remember that already with Walter Benjamin (a Jewish mystic interested in Christian medieval mystery performances, but also in a work of art in an era of its mechanical reproduction) we have a clear focus on cultural capital of this European religion as it is invested in cultural creativity. We should remember that already with Andre Malraux and his dream of an imaginary museum we are dealing with a successive retranslation of the vision of the garden of paradise into a program of opening the collections of cultural goods to broader public, of saving more numerous masses of consumer souls through an experience with and exposure to the sublime and the aesthetic.

Let us examine more closely the ways we act when we imagine our worlds, then let us consider what we think about relating to others, and finally let us try to see what happens in the dense jungle of contemporary interactions and communications – and what could it mean for our futures if we agreed to stop blaming the victims (hard working Greeks, or underpaid Mexicans in the USA or undereducated and underemployed Moroccans in The Netherlands). Blaming the victims is one of the most manipulative uses to which cross-cultural studies might be lending themselves. A glance at the jungle of interactions and communications, which shape our ideas and produce actionable knowledge, should allow us to say something about the cultural definitions of lightness and bitterness. Is accumulation of cultural capital sustainable without periodic crises of overproduction and under-consumption?

## 2. Integration of European tempospaces

United or not, all European "societies" witness their "cultures" evolve. A question "is nothing sacred anymore?" clearly announces a cultural change. It means, for instance, that no absolute authority protects privileges of the symbolic domains and high priests of cultural experiences. Artists, public intellectuals, visionary politicians, acknowledged critics, media gurus, educators, trainers, guides, columnists and anchormen and women, in brief - creative producers and critics of culture - witness their societies undergo sociocultural evolution. Elites become vaguely antique – royal wedding matters as a gigantic multimediated experience generated by cultural industries, but the legacy of the British Empire is up for grabs on cultural capital's stock exchanges. Did the Brits pay enough for destroying Indian textile industries? Did they compensate contemporary China for imposing opium on Chinese consumers with the guns of the Royal Navy? Have the remuneration negotiations for the damage done by slave traders already been initiated by the Organization for African Unity?

Easier said than done. But if Picasso's "Guernica" could be successfully claimed by Spain from the NYC's MOMA, then why not take it as a model case? It is quite clear that the debate on the preamble

to the EU Constitution must have stumbled upon the Christian roots. While it is true that our continent was shaped much more by Christianity than by Islam or the Hebrew religion of Jewish communities (although both Jews and Muslims had been significantly present on our continent at all times) – it is also true that we are currently debating on the more general framework for monitoring and guiding increasingly rapid accumulation of cultural capital. Two principles stand out:

- Universal rights of man (slavery is not a bliss, democracy does not stop at a factory door, and these rights include not only material guarantees of survival but also access to cultural experiences – education, artistic production, reflexive recognition)
- Freedom of expression (dogmas are no alibi for censorship, no domain can claim superiority, and a right for cultural recognition remains even if Andy Warhol's prediction that everybody will be famous for 15 minutes on public TV had been cut down to 15 seconds in individualized social media – the Facebooks, the twitters, and the like)

When we look at the present debates on the core values of our cultures, we can clearly see that there is still a conservative tendency to refresh the neocolonial ideology. Niall Ferguson (married to Ayan Hirsi Ali as if in visual argument that he is no white supremacist) links hands with Jacob Burckhardt, the author of "The Culture of the Renaissance in Italy". Written by a German in Switzerland and used by neoromantic European teachers of history ever since to demonstrate the glory of a culture *made in Europe of da Vinci & Co.* at the expense of Byzantines, Persians, Arabs, Indians and Chinese, this book is now somewhat awkwardly shifted towards the "obsolete" section of our universal humanist library. Ferguson's restatement of the difference between "the West" and "the Rest" is the latest case in point of an attempt to resuscitate the glory of the most brilliant continent – but a victory is illusory, as was the military action in the Malvinas. A Fukuyama might chip in, but both Ferguson and Fukuyama, or Huntington for that matter, are investing in decaying cultural funds. Incidentally, Hofstede also suffers from guilt by association – his cultural dimensions model being associated with the missionary zeal of consultants and trainers making the world safe for multinational corporations in pre-ENRON and pre-Lehman Brothers world.

Why? There is also a very strong revisionist tendency to recover the actual reOrientation and balance in understanding and evaluating the universal culture, to which the Chinese astronomers, Indian mathematicians and Arab medical doctors contributed more than our wasp-ish imaginations are willing to admit. Jack Goody's "The Theft of History" is the case in point, as is Anne Gunder Frank's "ReOrient". The process of rethinking and rewriting our handbooks of history, politics, science, philosophy, art and religion is already producing the first shocks, but not yet outside of the well controlled watertight compartments of our institutionalized culture. Time for IACCM to join the struggle?

### 3. The crisis of cultural accumulation

Let us make the long story short. Three partly intelligent designs have emerged out of competition, conflict and cooperation among human individuals crystallizing into cultural programs or paradigms. All three surfaced between the birth of Christ (year 1 of the Christian era imposed tacitly upon the contemporary world as a dominant pattern for setting the clocks in the airports and train stations) and the 10th IACCM annual conference (2011).

- The first was the idea that being alive is an invitation to save one's soul. (Baroque is its most significant legacy in universalized currency of cultural values)
- The second was that being alive is an invitation to contribute to mankind's progress, improving the world for both bodies and souls. (Avant-garde modernism is its contribution to the world's cultural stocks)
- The third was – and still is - an idea that being is a ticket to a self-development casino with a chance for a creative fulfillment as the grand winning lot (postmodernist art with self-reflexive relational aesthetics and multimediated performative twist has already entered cultural stock exchange).

Three types of immortality (mind you, this is another title of Kundera's novels) were supposed to await human beings in these periods.

- In the first, souls went to Paradise and stayed there forever. If you were good, history stopped for you in the afterlife. The good enjoyed eternal life in heaven, the bad suffered without end in hell and the undecided waited out in their respective purgatories.
- In the second, classes melted down to a classless society and lived happily ever after. If you were progressive, history came to an end, the best sociocultural community had arrived. Angelic spirits in Divine Paradise have been replaced by really existing liberty, equality and brotherhood.
- In the third, we went back to individual creative personalities, but kept the idea of progress, although not as a necessity, but as a chance. Creative individuals competed friendly for captive audiences in non-zero sum games, multimedia recycled grateful memories, voluntary communities cultivated traditions and celebrated social recognition, admiration and respect.

For a religious Christian European of – say – 966 or 1454 – the unbearable bitterness of being meant that we had to recognize our sins, bitterly regret that we have committed them, and go on repenting. For a progressive European of 1789 or 1917 the unbearable bitterness of being meant that we had to purge the sinners against historical necessity and progressive forces (Jacobins or Mensheviks, artistocrats or capitalists – they had to go) and build a just, fair and happy society (with concentration camps or guillotine or both for those, who failed to want to be happy as we saw fit). Kundera had noted this, when he observed that when one orders a society to march towards a happy future, one also has to construct a small concentration camp on the side to house those who do not want to march. With time, this gulag gets larger and larger, presumably approaching the happy end of the Nazi or Bolshevik utopia – namely enclosing all of subhuman humans to the benefit of superhuman ones.

For us, today, the unbearable bitterness of being means that we all want to pursue a balanced growth of socioculturally manageable communities, which offer the highest quality of life to their members (who, in turn, are expected to be creative, i.e. to churn out valuable cultural contents – works of art, scientific discoveries, technological inventions, and the like). We want, but we rarely can, because accumulation of cultural capital is subject to frequent crises. Investments pay, but not always and not those that we had hoped most for. Investment of energy of the masses in the communist experiments in, say, 1917 in Russia or 1949 in China turned out as badly as the subprime mortgages in the USA in 2008, though with much more bloodshed and bitter suffering for the compatriots of Milosz, Gombrowicz, Kundera, Cioran or Kristeva.

As we pursue balanced growth and a harmonious improvement of the quality of each individual life, we discover that unfair imbalances and asymmetries of power, unequal distribution of wealth and cultural endowment, unfair acknowledgment and rewards for mediocrity and talent persist. These inequalities may threaten growth, balance, even the very existence of human communities and single individuals, because they give rise to utopian dreams (a Great Leap Forward) and terrorist designs (the ultimate conspiracy to end all conspiracies). The unbearable bitterness of being thus survives the death of God (who could absolve our sins) and the death of Progress (which could justify our terror) and re-emerges as personal, existential experience and a dream of a redemptive, pre-emptive strike.

In societies pursuing the Holy Grail of a balanced growth and praying through ecologically responsible reduction of a carbon footprint, the unbearable bitterness of being results in a birth of a cynical reason (from Cioran and Camus to Sloterdijk and Milosz), in a reaffirmation of the liberal alternative to socialism (from Habermas and Fukuyama to Todorov and Staniszkis), to the new social imaginary of world wide websters (from McLuhan and Simmel to Lem and Castells) and to the existentialist temptation (from Edith Stein and Simone Weil to Witold Gombrowicz, Julia Kristeva, and Milan Kundera).

Kundera seems to have been wrong: being is not unbearably light – it is unbearably bitter. Even if one refuses to believe in the paradise for souls or progress for bodies, bitter taste of imbalanced and checked growth, unfair exchanges and cruel interactions still remains on our retina and inside our conscience. **We have not been liberated from iron cages of belief in a better future and failure to get there still generates bitterness, not lightness, in our cultural communications. What makes it specific and unbearable is that we already live among the overproduction of cultural contents hypercommunicated in multimediated communications, but our sensemaking skills still lag behind.**

#### 4. Re-setting cultural processes,(on iconic wars, structuralists and existentialists).

Re-setting the processes of cultural production/consumption and linking them to community participation requires a change in cultural climate. Some elements of this change are already slowly emerging like a recent discovery that glaciers of the South Pole are melting down – as a result of the warmer and quicker deep sea currents, not the carbon dioxide emissions. First, change drivers are not limited to a national culture and national state as its custodian. Second, no single organization can claim a right to define the framework for public discussion:

“Even mainstream handbooks of organizational change finish with a pious comment that “moral awareness needs to be defined and cultivated as a change initiative”(Grieves, 2010,392)”(Magala, 2011, 363)

The philosophy of existentialism passed away with the rise of structuralism, but survived and re-emerged in many guises after the sad tropics of Claude Levi-Strauss. Structuralism promises a universal grid – and Hofstede’s cultural dimensions are a case in point. In philosophy of science, the place of Geert Hofstede is next to the structuralists, in their struggle against existentialists. Existentialism promises emotional intelligence, sociopolitical empathy and cultural authenticity. No abstract, dry measurement. Concrete, palpable, smell-and-touch, all-round experience.

Existentialists answer the question: what does it feel and think like to be this and that here and there, to experience, to be aware of our existence? Close to a psychoanalyst's coach. Close to an artist's imagination, a writer's tale.

Structuralists offer a grid, a software design, a pattern. They offer the universal pattern recognizer and identifier (resembling an online universal currency converter). Close to a classifying and certifying authority. Close to a strict researcher, professional scientist rising above mere scholarship.

In terms of iconic imagination, the existentialists of the Byzantine empire had won a decisive victory when their charismatic portraits of saints have finally won the right to dwell in churches. Structuralists would burn them and execute or exile the painting monks. There would be no European Renaissance, no Baroque, no multimedia, no communicative power. Victory was not certain afterwards, either – the Protestants preferred empty churches, with naked, raw walls – simple structures facilitating focus on transparent structure of our sins, our moral skeletons – and nothing else. As a matter of fact, the very language in which we describe controversies and debates in science, politics or art betrays our religious roots – after all, why do we speak of winning orthodoxies and losing heresies? (cf. Runciman, 2009) By the way, this tacit, hidden, persistent and all-pervasive influence of religious imagination is not limited to Europe (cf. Jackson, 2011)

From this point of view the processual view of a social psychology of organizing and a close analysis of individual critical cases – both pursued by Karl Weick - are a compromise between structuralists (grid, watchmaker, minimal social situations) and existentialists (ad hoc creative improvisations in face of mortal danger, individual, context-bound, history-sensitive). And those who criticize and critically develop Hofstede (for instance, the GLOBE teams, the SIETAR practitioners or Bennett's interculturalists) are also in search of a compromise. They would agree with Kristeva that:

“An emotional, experiential and shareable knowledge of the inner experience is possible; it is discursive, it rests upon psychoanalytic transference and takes the form of a theoretical hypothesis by definition ongoing and incomplete.” (Kristeva, 2009, viii)

#### Literature:

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