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Eurocentrism and International Thinking - a brief introduction

International thinking – a nice expression, widely used by political and economical leaders and easily found on all major newspapers nowadays. But has it been always like that? Globalisation is considered to be a rather new development in history. On the contrary, the term *eurocentrism* is not spread so widely in the common language (not taking into consideration the so-called *scientific community*). However, eurocentrism has been an important phenomenon during the development of Europe in the world. *Eurocentrism*, as a variant of *ethnocentrism*, describes the way of emphasising European values and culture (often also described as the *Western culture*, contrasting with the *Islamic culture* – which actually compares a geographical character with a religious one and therefore, *a priori*, leads to confusion and unfair comparisons!)ⁱ compared to other cultures.

The origins of Eurocentrism

At the end of the 15th century, the European worldview changed dramatically. Originating from Portugal and Spain, that were well-advanced in the exploration of overseas mercantile routes, the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus was only one – but probably the most important – of the precursors of the discovery of foreign cultures by the prosperous European mercantile cultures. The feeling of *European* or *Western* superiority was reinforced during the rising imperialistic age in the 17th and 18th century until finally it reached his peak in the 19th century. During that time, even slavery was justified by the *superiority of the white race*. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), an estimated total of 25 to 30 million black slaves were captured and sold in the “triangular trade”ⁱⁱ.

The 20th century – Eurocentrism and the development of International Thinking

With the end of the Second Industrial Revolution, technological developments in Europe, especially in Great Britain and Germany, reinforced Europe’s position in the world. International thinking at that time mostly consisted on exploring the most efficient and cheap options of accessing raw materials over the world. One of the most horrible and evil effects of a eurocentric idea ended in the Holocaust and the Second World War. The Nazi propaganda that only the *Aryan race* was “pure” led to destruction, despair and death of millions of persons.

It should be mentioned though, that not all effects of eurocentrism or ethnocentrism had been that terrible; the “eurocentric” *Cartesian map* which centres on the north-western part of Europe ensures that the central areas of the map are covered by land and not by water surface. Yet, it is obvious that this map, which was introduced by Gerhard Mercator in 1568, has a serious impact on our perception of the world. Whenever we speak from “the Middle East” this is related to the layout of the world map as used by us. Therefore, other maps were developed in the 20th century. An impressive example is the so-called *Dymaxion-globe* introduced by Buckminster Fuller.

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Globalisation and the 21st century: Ethnocentrism – a dying model?

With the development of new media, new means of transportations and the rapid global technical development, the world has become the famous *global village*. Although the meaning of global (“globus”) and village (“villa”) already originate from ancient Latin, the use of the term *global village* as known today was characterized by Marshal MacLuhan in his book *War and Peace in the Global World* in 1967. Does this mean that finally eurocentrism as well as any other forms of ethnocentrism are a dying model? Not at all.

If you believe Samuel P. Huntington, different ethnocentric attitudes are threading the world in its current post-Cold War status. Samuel P. Huntington published his famous thesis first in the academic journal “Foreign Affairs” in 1993, which was widely discussed especially after the 9/11 attacks in 1999. He had used a term already introduced by Bernard Lewis three years before: *The Clash of Civilizations*. He developed his ideas more elaborately in his book *The Clash of civilizations and the Remaking of the world order* in 1996.^{iv}

His core hypothesis is that in the post-Cold War time, the “fundamental source of conflict” will be not primarily economic or ideological but cultural. The “battle lines of the future” according to him will no longer exist between different nations, but between civilisations. Hence, he defines eight civilisations and investigates their potential of conflict. Above other ethnocentric views, Huntington argues that the *Western view* on universal cultural imperatives and social norms and the consequential actions in the global political processes may inevitably lead to new conflicts. Although after the 9/11 attacks his hypothesis got strong support, his doctrine is controverted. One of the main points of discussion is the definition of his *civilisations*. Next to the differences in history, language, culture and tradition, Huntington focuses on religion. Still, he divides the Latin American civilization (which is characterised by the catholic religion and the Spanish and Portuguese language deeply) from the European. Although not directly focusing on eurocentrism with his hypothesis, the response to Huntington’s publication also in Europe justifies mentioning his work in such a eurocentric context.

Challenges and strategies for tomorrow in a global world

The example of Samuel P. Huntington’s hypothesis and the response raises an important issue: stereotypes and clichés of other cultures together with a lack of cultural knowledge can provoke dangerous xenophobia and reinforce ethnocentrism, leading to social exclusion for members of other “civilisations”. For the future, *international thinking* will be necessary to peacefully balance the needs of different cultures. However, especially for countries in the Eastern part of Europe like Slovenia, Slovakia or the Czech Republic, *eurocentrism* is also a necessary part of political and cultural actions. Having been separated from the political Europe during a Cold War behind the Iron Curtain (as for the Czech Republic) or having been independent from the Eastern Bloc but communist-run, those countries are now, through the integration into the European Union, facing a situation where the point of gravity concerning political actions and responsibilities switches to the western parts, whereas before the end of the Cold War, those states had to focus on the East. Although in a multinational world, the importance of eurocentrism declines and will be substituted by the *multi-polar* world, the new member countries as well as prospective new candidates visibly centre their efforts on Europe as a necessary condition for a successful integration.

Think global – act local. This slogan used by IBM tries to explain one of the main challenges for the future. The World Wide Web, collaboration applications and universal networking enable worldwide fast information and communication. Improved knowledge and simplified collaboration can lead to international thinking, but it does not lead to successful implementation of this concept automatically. International relations are complex dynamic systems. Political

dialogues that focus not only on national or cultural egoism, but on lasting prosperous cultural and economical benefits, needs the international thinking as component as well as the awareness of their own and also foreign cultural heritage. Regarding the limited resources of fossil fuel and clean water, we will have to give up the image that only the highly industrialized cultures have a right to explore the resources and replace this attitude by a responsible, economical and considerable exploitation of resources. Ensuring this throughout the political process will be the major challenge of policy in between local and international thinking for the future.

ⁱ compare: Hippler, Jochen. Eurocentrism, 1998

ⁱⁱUnited Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations. History of Slavery, 2004.

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