

Brazil, China, and the Emergence of the South ¹

Renato Janine Ribeiro²

University of São Paulo, Brazil

Our long, maybe lasting peace

In the last two decades we have seen three major developments in world politics that we can think of as either convergent or divergent. First of all, the prospect of a global war that would imply the destruction of the planet and maybe of life itself has vanished with the demise of the Soviet system. Wars subsist but are waged on a local basis and without involving major powers as foes. World peace is closer to us and seems to have a stronger basis than ever in the 20th century. Actually, if we emphasize the “central countries” of the world, a concept which means Europe for most of the second millennium of the Common Era but has come to include several other countries and maybe even continents in the course of the last century, we can say we had global peace from 1870 to 1914, from 1919 to 1939, and since 1945. This last period is the longest one, at least in the history of the Western world since the fall of the Roman Empire more than fifteen centuries ago, and seems to have good chances to last.

This is a very important development. From 1914 to 1985, roughly speaking, the prospect of a Great or a World War always loomed before us. Death would have ensued on an industrial scale, as happened during the Great War of 1914-1918 or from the massive Japanese aggression against China, in the early 1930s, to the end of the II World War. And if a nuclear war had been waged in the years after the surrender of the Axis the planet as such could have been destroyed, with the end of human species and most living beings. But in the last half century the several peace initiatives that have converted foes into commercial partners and even friends have been instrumental in order to save humankind from destruction. We are fortunate to live in an epoch in which overall destruction no longer seems likely.

Secondly, autocracy and dictatorship have receded all around the world; never before has so large a share of humankind benefited from basic freedoms, both private and public, such as the right to choose one’s profession or spouse, and from some political rights as well. There are of course several different conceptions of the meaning of liberty and freedom, and

¹ A previous version of this paper has appeared as “Other Cultures Come to the Political Fore: South-South possible contributions to political globalization”, in *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 4 (4), Dec. 2011, p. 12-26.

² Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. Member of the Board of the Institute of Advanced Studies of the same University. Visiting Professor at Columbia University, New York, 2003-4. Director of Evaluation at Capes, Brazilian Federal Agency for Evaluation and Support of Graduate Programs, 2004-8. Webpage: www.renatojanine.pro.br. Blog: renatojanine.blogspot.com. E-mail: rjanine@usp.br. Mailing address: Depto de Filosofia, Universidade de S. Paulo, Av. Prof. Luciano Gualberto, 315 Cidade Universitária, São Paulo - 05508-900, Brazil.

as political liberty does not necessarily entail economic or private freedom (and conversely), what really matters is not so much the content given to these words, but the sheer fact that they have become universal or semi-universal values. Different cultures will understand them differently, but in our days very few would praise political repression, arranged marriages, or the absence of personal initiative as being good things. Even societies or countries which do not recognize major liberties are expected by many to do so in the forthcoming years.

New political cultures come to the fore

We are at the point where some would celebrate the global triumph of Western democracy and its values. Francis Fukuyama did it, in a famous essay published when the French Revolution, the seminal event that spelt the end – or the beginning of the end – of absolute monarchy in the European continent, was celebrating its 200th anniversary³. We could say that around 1989 the crucial changes in political landscape initiated by the English, American, and French Revolutions were completing their work. However, in the last twenty years several cultures other than the mainstream North Atlantic ones have come to the political fore. This is our third and most important point. We must then first of all dwell on the issue of different meanings given to the same or similar words. To be aware that some beautiful words, such as freedom or equality, may have different but equally legitimate meanings is a quite recent development. **Indeed**, the West has been able in the last five centuries to ensure its hold on the whole world, from the economic, the political and even the cultural points of view (but its cultural and spiritual dominance has not been as strong as the other two dimensions, at least in Africa and Asia). Of course, this powerful and ever expanding “West” has been defined in several distinct ways. If we emphasize Western expansion, or the Westernization of the world as the expansion of Western values, we will begin by Portuguese navigations and “discoveries”, then switch to Spanish hegemony under the Habsburg dynasty (the *Austrias*, as Spaniards call them), later to the dispute between the French and the Britons for the control of the successive New Worlds that had been discovered, including the Indies, both Eastern and Western; and we will finally come to the 20th or “American century”, when the United States has been able to become the richest and most powerful country in the world. Western foes have also been changing during these centuries. When European expansion began, their major enemy were the Muslims. In the “short 20th century”, from 1917 to 1989, their place has been taken by the Soviets, but in the last ten or twenty years the Muslims have returned as the major foes of the West, even if as imaginary rather than real ones.

The *meaning* of that Western culture in expansion has also changed several times. We could perhaps say its most positive original feature has been the *rule of law*, the idea that law should be stable and independent from the whims of rulers, that legal matters should be discussed by judges autonomous from the executive power, and that law should not vary according to personal status but be one and the same for all. There was however a certain flaw in this great novelty: it tended to create in European countries, and later in their colonies

³ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992. The original essay (“The End of History”) had been published in 1989.

spread all over the world, a huge gap between two social or ethnic groups. One of those groups would benefit from all the advantages of the rule of law and, later, of both democratic and republican values. The other one would be considered as not being worthy to enjoy all the benefits of citizenship. Slaves, for instance, but also native people in all the major continents colonized by the Europeans, would rate as no more than second-class people, as less than citizens. Abraham Lincoln himself would tell Negroes that between their race and the white one no common cultural ground did exist; and let us not forget the same Lincoln said the Negro abolitionist Frederick Douglass was the worthiest man he ever met⁴. At the time of the American Civil War, in several Northern States, even if African-American citizens were free, they did not have the right to vote, to witness in court if one of the parts was white, or to serve as jurors. Democracy and linked values have proved, however, so strong that they have appealed more and more to those who were deprived of their benefits: to take as an example the African continent, the last one to gain its independence from colonial rule, many Africans have endeavored to have the same citizen rights as those born in their former metropolises. In so doing, they followed the American example, since what the Thirteen Colonies essentially wanted in the 1770s was to enjoy the same rights as the British subjects of the crown⁵. In both cases, in the long run they gained their independence from the former metropolis. In both cases, they achieved it at least in part because they began claiming the same rights as their former masters.

It would however be incomplete to depict the history of the last five centuries as a progressive triumph of Western values, or as their globalization, because in the last few decades or even years different political cultures have begun to have their say on what is the meaning of politics. They do not want simply to copy what has been successful in the West, but they wish or sometimes they even need to bring something more original, something more pertaining to their culture, to ideals as strong as liberty, democracy or, to put it simply, the way we live together.

We will emphasize two among those cultures.

Brazil and Latin America: affectivity

I will begin talking about the part of the world I know the best, Brazil and Latin America. Our main contribution to the understanding and even the reshaping of democracy

⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, 2006. After meeting Lincoln, Douglass was surprised to see the President was completely devoid of any racial or color prejudice.

⁵ We could not say the same, however, concerning the creole subjects of Portuguese and Spanish crowns in the Americas. Even if Latin American Creoles were considerably angry at being seen as second-rate subjects of their metropolises, with fewer rights than the ones born in Europe, both Iberian states have been absolute monarchies for a long time – while the United Kingdom and France have incorporated many democratic features in their polities since their revolutions. Creole aristocracies in Latin America lacked the *privileges* their Spanish and Portuguese counterparts enjoyed – while American subjects of the British until the 1770s, as African and Asian men and women colonized by the Europeans since the 19th century, were deprived of the *rights* the Europeans were entitled to. We should remark this has been a problem for the *Libertadores* of Latin America, since it was sometimes unclear if they were fighting in order to have *aristocratic* privileges such as their Iberian cousins enjoyed, or *universal* rights that would benefit all the denizens of their newly independent countries, including the native population of indigenous descent and slaves of African stock.

concerns very likely the importance of *feelings* in politics. Emotions have been carefully excluded from democracy and republic in the West during the last centuries. Broadly speaking, in the field of politics the presence of feelings has been deemed to add to partiality. Judges, for instance, should be as impartial as possible. Even elected magistrates, such as presidents and deputies, should avoid being too partial. In most democratic countries all elected magistrates belong to parties, which would mean they would be partial *par définition*, but they must avoid it as far as possible when they hold power. Since they rule all but especially *for all*, they should not exert power in a sectarian way.

They should also refrain from letting their emotions interfere in their decisions. Even phrases often employed by absolute kings, such as “*tel est mon beau plaisir*” (*it is my pleasure to command you to...*), were to be understood already under the Ancien Régime as no more than mere formulae, meaning only that the will of the king is a sufficient cause for a decision to become law. The same would apply to the Roman adage *quod principi placuit habet vigorem legis*, “what pleases the prince has the force of law”, that was to be understood as no more than the will of the prince – or maybe of an assembly, as they would replace the princes as sovereigns, after the English and French Revolutions – was enough to make a law. *Plaisir* or *placere* should not mean pleasure or whim, but only that no explanations were due by the ruler. He was not considered to be someone who satisfies his pleasures – as was often told of the Sultan, most of all by Montesquieu⁶ – but only as someone whose decision did not need, in absolute monarchies, to be subject to the scrutiny of the citizens of their States, even less of foreign rulers such as the Roman Catholic Pope. So, already in the age of absolute monarchies, pleasure was losing ground to reason as a political Leitmotiv. And, as time goes on and princes are either deposed or downsized, politics becomes more and more rational.

Politicians that appeal to emotions have usually been among the more conservative ones, such as Huey Long in Louisiana, Hitler and Mussolini in Europe, and a string of right-wing leaders in Brazil, such as the former governors of Bahia, Antonio Carlos Magalhães, and São Paulo, Paulo Salim Maluf⁷. But what can be really interesting is that, to focus on these two Brazilian politicians, the former one who has been a major influence in the country for more than two decades, and the latter who fell short of being nominated as president in 1985, they have often employed the picture of a heart in their propaganda. Magalhães wrote the name Salvador – the capital city of Bahia – with a heart replacing the “o”, and Maluf has almost been elected governor of his State using the Brazilian version of the expression “I (heart) NY” with São Paulo in the place of Manhattan. What is a touristic completely apolitical expression in New York has become a very political tool of propaganda in Brazil. We should also notice that,

⁶ Since his *Persian Letters*, and later in *Of the Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu has presented Oriental despots – especially the Muslim ones – as rulers that preferred to enjoy the pleasures of the harem, rather than dedicate themselves to the tasks of the State, a burden they would more or less happily confer on their viziers.

⁷ It might be noticed that American and British heads of government have never appealed to the affectivity of the citizens in the same scale as the names I mention here. In France there has been an affective appeal by the first Napoleon and later, but to no avail, by General Boulanger. The three Western rulers who fought and won II World War always refrained from the excesses indulged by the politicians I have quoted. Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and even Charles de Gaulle have been statesmen, among other reasons, precisely because they were not demagogues.

In Brazil it must be remembered that the only head of State to go to affective excesses has been Janio Quadros, who governed the country for less than seven months in 1961 but was able to leave behind him a crisis that would lead to the 1964 coup d'état and to twenty-one years of military dictatorship.

against these right-wing populists who have been quite popular among their constituencies, the more intellectualized Fernando Henrique Cardoso's PSDB – an acronym for Party of Brazilian Social Democracy – employed slogans such as “honesty and competence”, which obviously even unfortunately would have a rather low popular impact.

The point, however, is that during his whole term as President Lula da Silva has employed a series of metaphors that did have an enormous impact on the electorate, even contributing to making him maybe the most popular president in Brazilian history⁸. He would compare the delays in implementing promises he had made during his electoral campaign to the nine months it takes for a child to be born, or to the couple of years it takes for him or her to walk, or to the ten years a Brazilian tree takes to give its delicious fruits, the *jaboticabas*. His predecessor, the scholar Fernando Henrique Cardoso, would prefer to quote Max Weber⁹ to account for the same delays in implementing his politics, but it is obvious that an explanation couched in emotional experience will get to the public much more effectively than one that has the best academic references.

Anyway, if Lula has been particularly able to replace what I have elsewhere called *the authoritarian affectivity* by something that could introduce a new brand of *democratic affectivity*¹⁰, the reality he dealt with is not deeply different from the one that can be seen in the United States, France, or Italy. All these countries, when they were even prouder than today of their democracies, have elected as presidents or prime ministers people who were patricians, rather than coming from the common stock. Winston Churchill was of pure aristocratic descent, having as one of his ancestors the Duke of Marlborough. Statesmen as Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, Charles de Gaulle, François Mitterrand, for instance, would come from the upper classes and be quite educated, even if their policies could help the poorer populations. Roman Catholics all around the world may have feted the election of the first American president of their belief – and, so far, the only one – but by 1960 the Kennedies were already very well integrated into American élite. However, in the last decades politicians have come more and more from the *vulgus*. They will not and they should not show their electors their high education or their intellectual capacity as an asset; it has rather become a liability. Rulers as George W. Bush, Nicholas Sarkozy and Berlusconi are deemed, be it true or not, to be much less educated and cultivated than their political foes or the élites that had governed their countries before them. In their countries, even if power has been conferred for a long time by popular vote, the people had been used to elect their presidents and prime ministers among their “betters”, that is, among men who would have education and money; this is no longer the case, at least concerning education. Electors will now cast their votes for men or women whom they will consider as more similar to, and no more worthier than, them. This means that a new sort of political discourse is becoming the norm.

Recently, I interviewed former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and asked him about this. Specifically I asked him about the performance of the great populist

⁸ Of course presidential popularity polls began only in the mid-20th century. But before 1945 Brazilian presidents were not properly elected, since electoral fraud was enormous.

⁹ We obviously mean Max Weber's *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*, both published in 1919, sometimes printed separately and sometimes together, as in Portuguese.

¹⁰ See my *O afeto autoritário: televisão, ética e democracia*, São Paulo: Ateliê editorial, 2004.

leader Getulio Vargas who was dictator of Brazil from 1930 to 1945¹¹, then elected president from 1951 to his suicide in 1954. He is responsible for most social rights working people now enjoy. Many trade unions were created, and controlled, by him. “[In spite of the differences between Lula and me]”, Cardoso answered, “we talk to the masses. In other times it was not necessary. Getulio Vargas did not speak as us. He read speeches that were absolutely erudite and *boring*” (italics added). When I asked Cardoso if common people would understand President Vargas, he continued:

I don't think so. They would grasp a symbol. Getulio would talk to the masses wearing a hat, smoking a cigar, he even played golf. This may seem curious, but you must take into account that at that time the society had much less communication than in our days, and the State control was much stronger.

Cardoso, who is not a populist, can thus portray himself as being more able to communicate than Vargas, who for a long time has been considered as the paradigmatic populist leader in Brazil. Cardoso considers himself to differ from Lula because he is “more rational”, but he adds that he “employ[s] reason at the level of common sense, so that people can understand [him]. Each one has his way to express himself, but, if you devise no way at all [to express yourself], if you don't go beyond your own circle, how can you be a political leader? You won't be one.”¹² If President Obama has been able to say at their first meeting that Lula was “the guy”¹³, meaning the then Brazilian president was the most popular political leader in the world, it was most likely due to this charismatic ability of Lula's, which is however an ability that most politicians are required today to share, under the threat of not being able to lead their peoples.

This seems to spell the end of patrician rule, as well as the coming to the fore of new and more popular leaderships. I would risk the hypothesis that those countries that have been considered until now as the most important democracies and economies of the world have recently begun to show a strong need for new sorts of leadership: the affective or emotional feature is becoming prominent in the description of these new leaders. The people – no more the idealized *populus* of classical political philosophy, no more the rational actor suggested by some recent political scientists – have brought to the stage a new political agenda, where communication is essential. *Ergo*, leaders must be able to constantly renew their credentials as spokespersons for and most of all to their people. Some time ago, leaders would speak *for* their people, *on behalf of* them; but what really matters from now on is that they should constantly talk *to* their people, as FDR did some 80 years ago, but with an enormous difference that we can exemplify by a simple detail: the American president that created the New Deal would always hide from his people the fact that he was a paraplegic, while today this would be one of the most apparent features of his personality. His illness would probably have prevented him from becoming president in the 1930s, whereas today it could lead us to

¹¹ To be exact, from 1934 to 1937 he ruled the country as President, elect by a packed Congress.

¹² Interview published in *Sociologia, ciência e vida*, 30 (2010), available at <http://sociologiacienciaevida.uol.com.br/ESSO/Edicoes/30/artigo181631-1.asp>.

¹³ April, 2009, in London.

admire him so much that it could be an important asset in his electoral campaigns, making him someone who has been able to overcome a severe personal problem¹⁴.

Finally, these winds that come from Latin America, where people are considered to be more casual, not so rational, and more emotional than in the North Atlantic countries may contribute to reshape the way democracy has been understood and practiced until now. If modern societies must integrate more and more people, if people less literate and less cultivated than, say, a century ago are deciding their vote by themselves and no longer according to the examples set by their “betters”, meaning the patricians or the *aristoi*, then a verbal, rational communication will have to lend more room to non-verbal, not-so-rational features of communication. Feelings will be taken into account. The important challenge, if we keep ourselves inside the world of democracy, of the rule by the people, is how to shape a democratic affectivity, something that would break with an ages-old usage of emotions that prevented common people from thinking and maintained them as subordinate characters in political life. It will not be easy to associate affectivity and democratic values, but it is feasible. It will require a huge endeavor not only in political fields but also, and maybe foremost, in those of a pedagogical nature. For instance, elementary education might be asked to give more room to some aspects of morality that stress equality: we should respect each other independently of their gender, wealth, religion, or origin. In some countries it is already happening. In many others it will be quite a revolution.

China and Asia: identities

From Asia comes another important possibility that can change the Western-dominated landscape of politics and society, even if it might be very different from the one I have just tried to present. Speaking of and from Latin America, it is impossible not to put the question: do we belong to the West? Of course, all American countries have been colonized by Europeans; from the beginning of the 16th century to the end of the 18th, all of them have been colonies. Most Spanish colonies and the only Portuguese one attained their independence in the years between 1810 and 1830. However, a minority did not separate from their metropolises before the 20th century, as was the case of Cuba and still happens to French possessions in the Western hemisphere¹⁵. Their native populations were exterminated, as happened in the south of Argentina, decimated, as in Brazil, or so repressed in the political, economic, and cultural fields that until a few years ago very few presidents in the continent had been of Indian stock, even in countries where most citizens descend from the native populations of the Americas. But, even if present-day Latin Americans owe a lot to the West with respect to their culture – and the great majority of them have as their maternal language either Portuguese or Spanish – it is more appropriate to think of them as a *dissident* Western culture, rather as a branch of the culture of Europe and North America. The dissidence I just

¹⁴ We should not forget that in 2008 an African-American and a woman were the two favourites for the Democrat nomination for president of the United States. To be able to overcome difficulties, such as being a paraplegic, an African-American or a woman, has become something that is now deemed to be *very* positive.

¹⁵ Since Guyane, Martinique, and Guadeloupe are considered as *départements d'outre-mer* and their inhabitants share the same rights, including the social ones, as the French citizens living in the metropolis, it is not obvious to term them as colonies.

mentioned can pertain to several aspects, but I would stress the affective dimension that I have emphasized above.

When we go to Asia and some other countries, however, even if we refuse to consider Latin America as a full member of the Western condominium, we see that differences are sharper. I will leave aside the Near or Middle East, the countries around the Mediterranean and those which form the Islamic world, because they present particularities quite different from what the West will call the Far East, or Asia beyond the mostly Muslim world. A few important countries were never colonized, such as Japan and Thailand. Afghanistan was never ruled from abroad until the Soviet and later the American invasions, both very recent. Other countries, even if they were subject to strong foreign interference amounting to a sort of invasion, such as Iran, kept their independence. China is the most complex case, because it has been consistently aggressed for more than a century, from the Opium Wars to the end of the II World War; it never lost its independence, but important parts of the country were occupied, many people were murdered as in the infamous Rape of Nanking, and it has been a huge task, after the Liberation, to first of all rebuild the country and then to build a new one. However, even in the worst scenarios, it has been impossible for the colonizers to destroy Asian cultures. Comparing them to Latin America, in our subcontinent many ethnic groups and/or their cultures have completely disappeared, and their languages have been replaced almost everywhere by European ones¹⁶. Explorers that discovered Mayan ruins in Central America had some difficulty in explaining to their native guides that those magnificent pyramids had been built by their own ancestors, such is the difference between the now extinct American civilizations – such as the Aztecs, the Mayas, and the Incas – and people of their descent. Cities and roads far superior to their European counterparts, such as Tenochtitlan and several others, have been replaced by slums. This is not a matter of impoverishment; it is a matter of utter destruction.

In Asia, things have developed in a completely different way. With the major exception of India and Pakistan, where British colonization co-existed with a great number of local, mutually incomprehensible languages, so that the language of the colonizer ended by becoming a sort of lingua franca, the original languages have been maintained, along with other important cultural Asian features. Even those two large countries have kept most of their cultures. This means that at least some major countries, most of all China, are able to integrate important elements of Western culture without destroying their own identities. To continue our comparison, what happened in Latin America was an almost utter destruction of the original cultures, replaced by the languages, the religion, and many of the customs of the Conquistadors; if something comparable also happened everywhere where colonialism took its toll, the degree it attained in Asia was much less evident than in South and Central America. As I said before, Latin American culture, as a blend that has some origins in the decimated aborigines, some other roots among the Africans imported as slaves, and maybe the most

¹⁶ Among the few exceptions we can mention the *língua geral*, or general language, that had two versions, a Paulista one that has long prevailed over the Portuguese in the South of Brazil; of Tupinamba origin, it was still widely spoken in the city of Sao Paulo at the time of Brazilian independence, in 1822, but later disappeared; and there also was and is an Amazonian *língua geral*, still spoken in our days by some thousands of Indians in the North of the country; we can also remember the *Papiamento*, a blend of European (mostly Portuguese) and aboriginal languages in the Caribbean. Of course, Guarani, Quechua, Aymara and other purer aboriginal languages are spoken in several countries, but they are politically subordinate to Portuguese and Spanish employed by the national states.

visible ones in the several European immigrant populations, most of them poor, has been able to be quite distinct from the cultures that prevail in Europe and North America. Now, in Asia, the cultural devastation and the physical massacre of the native populations, even if they must be condemned, have exacted a smaller cultural toll than in Latin America. This means that the issues of identity, even if they are important in all former European colonies or quasi-colonies, be they Western or Eastern, acquire quite different meanings in Asia and in Latin America. Among other factors, preservation of one's culture, demography, territory, and natural wealth may have a role in defining the degree of independence that a country can contend for. Let us not forget that, if the three last factors we have just mentioned are almost natural¹⁷, the first one derives from the sheer political will to maintain or create an independence, and it may coexist with either natural riches or poverty.

Sovereignty only for the happy few?

If we consider the countries that we now have in the world – almost 200 of them, if we take as a criterion membership in the United Nations – we could say that only a few indeed exercise the attributes that political theory books consider pertaining to an independent national state. Full sovereignty, in the times of globalization, has been restricted to a few countries. The United States is the obvious example. It has a currency that not only is respected everywhere but also circulates, even if informally, in many other countries. Its deficit is a burden other countries carry, as much or even more than the U.S. does itself. Its armies are accountable to nobody but their government. China, even if it is a relatively recent member of the closed club of the richest countries in the world, is a second case of sovereignty. Its population, its developing economy, and maybe most of all its strong conviction not to make more concessions than it would deem fair, make it another “sovereign state”, as all countries should be according to political science textbooks, but very few are in practice. The European Union is also, as a union even if not as a collection of national states, a case, albeit quite different, of state sovereignty. It is true that the United Kingdom, France, and Germany have all been important states; but now this is history. In the 1930s almost all important decisions in international politics were taken by them, because the United States had decided to “isolate” itself and the Soviet Union was excluded from the international scene. It is true that two of these European countries are still permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations; but today they are really strong only insofar as they have been able to integrate themselves in the European Union. This is not bad at all, however, since their integration has put an end to internecine European wars that soon became global ones, their experience keeps the U.S. from being more powerful than it already is, and last but not least because they can serve as a model for other countries. The Mercosul, for instance, could benefit very much from being able to integrate its members as Europe has done; however, this is not something we could foresee in the near future. Russia could be a fourth member of this select group, among other reasons because it has preserved from its Soviet golden days an

¹⁷ Or quasi-natural. Territory may be shaped according to history and politics. Wealth can be stolen by the colonists – as Portuguese did in Brazil during the 18th century, when huge amounts of gold were sent to Portugal, and then to Rome or to England. Population can be decimated. But geography, natural riches, and the number of inhabitants a country has are closer to the “natural” world than political will, which is a feature almost purely human.

atomic-bombs arsenal that cannot be ignored. But our main point could be: how many countries, among the almost two hundred we can find in the world, are really able to hold a meaningful degree of sovereignty? Without any doubt the four actors we have just mentioned; other countries may follow, among them the remaining BRICS, i.e., Brazil, India, and maybe South Africa; but, as far as we may go, we will not arrive at twenty quasi-sovereign countries, even if we reasonably include Australia, Argentina, Egypt, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan, besides the above-mentioned states.

This means that around 90% of the countries in the world are not strong to the point of being able to assert or at least negotiate their independence or, if you prefer, their sovereignty. By “sovereignty” we can mean several features, including the ability and will to pursue an independent economic policy committed to national and popular aims, the prioritization of national interests, the definition of a cultural and educational policy and, last but not least, the endeavor to preserve certain important elements of what we can call, even between inverted commas, national “identity”¹⁸. Let us remember two examples of countries which have practically no more than the merely symbolic – not the real, effective – aspects of sovereignty. The centuries-old Republic of San Marino has for a long time been funded by the Italian state, for instance, in order not to have a television of its own, that would compete with the Italian networks. The sale of postal stamps – that will *not* be used to post letters – has also been an important source of revenue for San Marino, as well as for many other small countries¹⁹. My other example is the Pacific Republic of Tuvalu. Due to mere chance, its Internet country code is .tv, and this meant that rather high sums have been paid for it by television networks all across the world; this quasi-bonanza has allowed this 10,000 inhabitants archipelago to send ambassadors abroad in order to try to protect the *physical* existence of their islands against global warming. This could seem a literary, Faustian tale: in order to save itself from almost certain death, a country needs to sell part of its own identity. Many countries face predicaments as such, and both San Marino and Tuvalu are far from being the unhappiest among them.

It seems thus that most countries do not have the power to ensure the minimal “realistic” criteria that ensure their sovereignty. They can have a large territory, an enormous population, a traditional culture and, with all that, be unable to negotiate what they want from other cultures, and what they do not want. It means that only some countries have been able, until now, to not allow some cultural annexation to the major cultures. China is one of the countries that are able to do that. Its population, territory, wealth and most of all the policies it has followed in order to make the best possible blend – the best, according to its own ideas – between East and West constitute an interesting example of an alternative to the still dominant Western or American ideal of globalization. Of course we could say something similar about India, and surely there are other countries able to tread a similar path. We are not talking here of some sort of deterministic fate, according to which only big, populous and

¹⁸ I am strongly critical of the ideal of a national identity. People are plural, and this is why humankind – and every human being – can be spiritually rich. However, we can perceive that cultures are different and, when one is dominated by another, it usually loses more than it gains. This is why a concern with preserving some cultural features is so important.

¹⁹ Curiously they will not be accepted by philatelists, since philately only recognizes as stamps those which are usually employed in letters or packages sent by the post. However, many tourists or curious buy these beautiful images sold as stamps and keep them at home as souvenirs.

potentially wealthy countries could shape their destiny; as important as such inputs – territory, population, land, and minerals – are the popular will and the official policies that each nation chooses to follow. But it seems that these differences from the mainstream Western policies should be taken more into account than they have been in recent years. After a brief span of time when it seemed that the end of Soviet power would ensure an overall American triumph over the world, our planet seems to have become rather multipolar. If we give more room to discussing the different strategies that different peoples can resort to in order to define their different ways of living in a globalized world, we – most of all we who come from peripheral countries – can bring to the fore something new and noteworthy. Humanities will of course be essential in so doing, because human and social sciences can take into account our differences without treating them as problems, liabilities, or social deficits. Indeed the main role of humanities in our new world is to understand and to employ our differences as assets.