Central and Peripheral Cultures and the Problem of Social Conflict in Vietnam

Nguyen Van Dan

Institute for Social Science Information

This article deals with relationship between cultural globalization and local cultures, seen mostly as conflict between centre and peripheries on the world scale and also as conflict among ethnicities in the societies. It also suggests some solutions to the problem of conflict on the global scale in general and in Vietnam in particular. In the era of globalization, there exists a risk of cultural imperialism rising as a cultural centre. Nevertheless, the cultural imperialism always bears the economic and political motives. This is the very cause which leads to politico-cultural conflict. Therefore, in essence, *cultural hegemony is also the very economic hegemony and it serves the economy*. Thus, in fact, social conflicts are often the *contradictions*, but these contradictions could lead to conflict only when they are pushed to *political and economic interests level*, and then they are the truly economic and political conflicts and not cultural ones. Therefore, *in essence, there are not purely cultural conflicts, but culture is only the medium for politico-economic conflict*. There may be various kinds of solutions for the problem of conflict: the economic solutions, the social solutions, the political solutions, and the cultural ones. Vietnam—as a multi-ethnic nation—is not a country without social conflict. To solve the problem of conflict is to solve the contradictions in economic interests and to overcome the lack of democracy. Therefore, the most important solutions for the problem of conflict are the cultural and political solutions. Especially, the article emphasizes the democracy and the rule of law as the critical points in solving the problem of social conflict.

Keywords: culture, centre and periphery, social conflict, cultural globalization, multiculturalism, policies on religion, plural language policies, democracy

1. Cultural Globalization as New Cultural Centre and Social Conflict

General opinion argued that one important cause of social conflict in the present day is globalization, in which there is cultural globalization. This opinion has origin in existence of the risk of cultural imperialism, risen as a cultural centre in the new era. Shi Bingjun and Ma Zhaoqi (2004), two Chinese scholars, remarked that the evolution of globalization has the “monologue dimension” and is not a dialogue one. That is, a strong culture usually had the trend to impose hegemony on other peripheral national cultures. Indeed, the globalization started primarily in economic terms from the West, and then it bore the culture with it. In the peripheral world, the local languages are perishing under the prevalence of English as the most important global language. The Western religious fêtes like Christmas, Easter, Valentine Day ... gain the advantages in the

Nguyen Van Dan, Prof. and Ph.D., Institute for Social Science Information, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam; main research fields: Literary Theory and Methodology, Cultural Studies, and Comparative Culturology. Email: nguyenvandan1@gmail.com.

peripheral countries to the detriment of local fêtes, attracting the young. We can say that Western culture is occupying the first stage, influencing the world and leading to conflict between modern culture and traditional national cultures. In this spirit, David Pearce Snyder (2004), editor at *The Futurist*, wrote: "...cultural modernization will continue to assault the world's traditional cultures, provoking widespread political unrest, psychological stress and social tension. Individual human consciousness will be the battleground on which the struggle between tradition and modernization will be fought."

Nevertheless, the cultural imperialism always bears the economic and political motives. This is the very cause which leads to politico-cultural conflict between ethnicities. The American professor of anthropology John R. Bowen (1996, 13) put it in this way:

What the myth of ethnic conflict would say is ever-present tensions are in fact the products of political choices. Negative stereotyping, fear of another group, killing lest one be killed—these are the doings of so-called leaders, and can be undone by them as well. Believing otherwise, and assuming that such conflicts are the natural consequences of human depravity in some quarters of the world, leading to perverse thinking and perverse policy. It makes violence seem characteristic of a people or region, rather than the consequence of specific political acts. (John R. Bowen 1996, 13)

Thus in fact, social conflicts often are the *contradictions*, but these contradictions can lead to conflicts only when they are pushed to *political and economic interests level*, and then they are the truly economic and political conflicts and not cultural ones. Therefore, *in essence, there are not purely cultural conflicts, but culture is only the medium for politico-economic conflict*. Therefore, in essence, *cultural hegemony is also the very politico-economic hegemony and it serves the economy and politics*.

The cultural hegemony is leading to a very characteristic phenomenon of the present-day epoch of globalization, namely the phenomenon of *cultural exclusion*. It is nowadays becoming one of the most characteristic and acute phenomena, and it is in the close relation with cultural globalization. In the year 2000, Pierre S. Pettigrew (2000, 428), then Minister of International Trade of Canada, remarked properly:

The globalization, although brings important progresses on many planes, also has the perverse effects. First of all, it risks creating the conditions of exclusion and rejecting to the periphery all those—the marginalized states on the world stage or the peripheral populations within the societies—which are not able to insert themselves in the new networks. (Pierre S. Pettigrew 2000, 428)

Another French scholar—Alain Touraine (according to Pettigrew 2000, 429)—described lucidly this situation:

Another time, we had the habit to situate ourselves in relations with each other on the social scales—that were the scale of qualification, of income, of education, and of authority. Now we have replaced this vertical vision by a horizontal one: we must know whether we are being in the centre or at the periphery, inside or outside, in the light or in the shadow. (Pettigrew 2000, 429)

Thus, being exploited is less awesome than being excluded and marginalized from development wave. The exploited could have opportunity to organize the legal struggle forms against the exploiter, but the marginalized could not know which institutions to rely on in order to make struggle. This is the fact about which in the past centuries no one could think.

To overcome the exclusion, besides the efforts of every country, the international community has to have reasonable solutions in order to make the globalization process being realized fairly, taking account of common interests of mankind and in the same time not harming the particular cultures. As the common wealth of mankind, global culture is made to serve common cultural interests of mankind, it can not satisfy the specific

cultural demands of every nation-state.

That's why, to avoid the trend of imposing hegemony of certain culture and the conflict between cultures, the globalization process has yet to respect particular identity of every culture, and thus cultural diversity necessarily exists along with globalization. The more diverse the world is, the richer the creativity of man is; and the more the cultures are diverse, the more the world could avoid the danger of imposing the cultural hegemony on one another. And thus the diversity also contributes to reducing the risk of conflict. That's why UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) saw "cultural diversity in dialogue" as common wealth of mankind, and I want to add that it is a precious wealth of nations worldwide.

Vietnam, like other multi-ethnic nations, is not a country without social conflict. Although the government made many efforts to improve the equality among ethnic groups, but in reality there sometimes existed conflicts between minorities and majority ethnic groups, between minority groups and government, between peripheral regions—especially remote regions like North-Western region and Central Highlands region—and central cities.

As in many countries, social conflicts in Vietnam essentially arose around economic interests, democratic and social equity demands. In recent years, there were not less protests and complaints from peripheral regions to central government. In some cases, it is graver that protests developed into small scale armed conflicts between users of the land and local government. There were also conflicts between local catholic churches and local governments. Or these conflicts were neither cultural nor religious ones, but they were conflicts in the right of using the land in which the church is located. In sum, in a developing country like ours, the conflict is more often caused by the contradictions in economic interests and the lack of democracy.

2. Solutions for the Problem of Conflict in Vietnam

To solve the problem of conflicts is to solve the contradictions in economic interests and to overcome the lack of democracy. Therefore, the most important solutions for the problem of conflict are the cultural and political solutions.

2.1. The Cultural Solutions

2.1.1. Cultural Liberty: A Basic Condition for Preventing Conflict

The cultural liberty right is one of important aspects of human development. Culture is the driving force and in the same time is the goal of development. In this spirit, cultural liberty is also one of the driving forces and goals of development, because, liberty is one of the most important values of human development.

Thus, the cultural liberty right was ranged among the most important human rights. Respecting the human rights is seen as the most important condition to ensure the sustainable peace. Here after all, the cultural rights could be reduced to only cultural liberty right. According to United Nations Development Program (UNDP 2004, 28), cultural liberty is embodied in the rights of: "freedom from interference in the enjoyment of cultural life and the freedom to create and contribute to it, freedom to choose which culture and which cultural life to participate in, freedom to cooperate internationally and freedom to participate in the definition and implementation of policies on culture."

So, cultural liberty is obviously one of the paramount values of mankind. It became one of the meaning aspects of culture notion. Recognizing cultural liberty of people means widening their possibilities of choice. In

the present globalization era, people also say about “cosmopolitan citizenship.” National citizenship and cosmopolitan citizenship are closing to each other.

Now people are paying attention to cultural diversity as a result of everybody’s right to difference and cultural liberty. But the closing to each other of cosmopolitan citizens also led to a conception of a new right which is not less important, or even more important, than the right to difference, namely the *right to resemblance*. Although people have various choices, but they have the trend to choose the similar things. This is a centripetal orientation—a participation in centre to develop.

2.1.2. Multiculturalism: A Feasible Solution for Avoiding the Risk of Conflict

To avoid the risk of conflict, besides the proper conception of cultural liberty in national and international levels as we put it above, countries in the world must put forward and implement the very concrete cultural policies. Scientists have remarked that before now, the cultural planning makers very often paid attention rather to artistic promotion and protection of cultural heritage than to promotion of cultural liberty. Even in nowadays, the major debates essentially yet focus on protection of cultural heritage. So, while the problem of heritage received much importance, the problem of cultural liberty was almost neglected.

To ensure cultural liberty, scientists argued that countries have to promulgate the multiculturalism in strategy of human and social development. This is also a policy showing interest in the peripheries. In making that, we can avoid the risk of domestic and international conflicts. In this spirit, now countries in the world are facing the great challenge of having to elaborate the specific policies allowing to widen the choices and not to narrow them. To achieve this goal, they have to protect and develop national identity while wide opening the frontiers. The multiculturalism has the goal as to protect the identities of people and cultural diversity, promote cultural liberty and international integration, in order to achieve the final end of human development in ensuring the full virtues of everybody. Moreover, multiculturalism could not be effective unless it is associated with the economic and social policies in order to ensure the people, including the immigrants, opportunities to participate in economic, political, and social activities, to have democratic rights, and to be treated equitably and equally. Among the proposals of UNDP for multiculturalism, there are remarkably two types of policies: (1) policies on religion and religious practice; and (2) policies on the use of multiple languages (or plural language policies).

Now in the world, there are many minority religious communities which are suffering the exclusions of various kinds. Because the religion has a great importance for the identities of people, so we are not surprised at the fact that the minority religious communities often mobilized the forces against these exclusions. Unless being controlled properly, these mobilization campaigns could become violence. Thus, the critical problem for the countries in the world is to learn how to control the religious activities.

In Vietnam, according to religion freedom principle, State allows everybody to have both the belief freedom and the non-belief freedom. In this spirit, all religions are allowed to be freely practiced in the framework of laws. We really have freedom of religion. That’s why on 13th November 2006, the US Department of State decided to withdraw Vietnam from the list (the CPC (Country of Particular Concern) list) of countries who need to be put under particular concern in the matter of religion.

In the matter of policies on the use of multiple languages, what multilingual countries need is a three-language formula (as UNDP recommended 2004, 60) that gives public recognition to the use of three languages:

- (1) One international language. In this era of globalization all countries need to be proficient in an international language to participate in the global economy and networks;
- (2) One lingua franca—a link language for a locality or region;
- (3) Mother tongue.

In our country, this formula is concretized in three kinds of languages which are as follows: (1) the international language that is English (or French, Russian, Chinese); (2) the lingua franca that is Vietnamese – an official language of all citizenry; and (3) the mother tongue that is the language of each ethnic minority. There are many ethnic minorities in our country which had no alphabet in the past, but now they have their own writing. Our radio and television also have broadcasting programs that speak some major minority languages. One can say we are acting according exactly to multiculturalism direction of UNDP. This is a direction of establishing the proper relationship between cultural centre and periphery in order to avoid the risk of social conflict.

2.2. *The Political Solutions*

The cultural solutions sometimes appeared to be not sufficient. So it is crucial to appeal to political solutions. In Vietnam, the core solution for problem of conflict is the political solution. In almost cases, the conflict arose as the consequence of corruption and the authoritarian abuse, and in most grave cases, corruption and authoritarian abuse occurred in the field of land and town planning. In the development process, the country had to restructure resources and to plan the towns and villages. Thus, in this process of planning the land and the town, the local and central government officials, including the political party officials, abused their power to seek interests, causing the social conflicts, sometimes leading to violence. Especially, in the Central Highlands, the ethnic minorities are not very content with the practices of some local officials in land planning, leading to violent conflicts. These are not the cultural conflicts, although sometimes they take the cultural appearance.

To avoid the conflicts, the political and legal apparatus must be transparent and have integrity. The laws must be scientific, rational, democratic, and being respected and applied rigorously. The people must have right to criticize and control the executive apparatus of State. This is the major goal of democracy that Vietnam has to pursue. In sum, the rule of law is the supreme goal and the essential basis of democracy in Vietnam. Vietnam must overcome the situation in which the political party sometimes is above the rule of law. This is the critical point in solving the problem of social conflict.

3. **Conclusion**

In essence, *cultural hegemony is also the very economic hegemony and it serves the economy*. Therefore, *in essence there are not purely cultural conflicts, but culture is only the medium for politico-economic conflict*. There may be various kinds of solutions to the problem of conflict: the economic solutions, the social solutions, the political solutions, and the cultural ones. But, the most important solutions for the problem of conflict are the cultural and political solutions. To avoid the risk of conflict, countries in the world must put forward and implement the very concrete cultural policies. But more often, the political solutions proved to be much more effective. So, as to multi-ethnic nations and in the universal trend, Vietnam must give great importance to the policies on ethnic matters, and first of all, it has to consider the democracy as the essential basis of social conflict solution, and thereby as the cornerstone of a sustainable society.

Works Cited

- David Pearce Snyder. "Five Meta-Trends Changing the World." *The Futuris*. July-August 2004. 22-26. [Or: "Five Meta-Trends That Are Changing Our World." <http://www.the-futurist.com/five-meta-trends_that_are_changing_our_world.htm>]
- John R. Bowen. "The Myth of Global Ethnic Conflict." *Journal of Democracy* 7.4 (Oct. 1996): 13.
- Pierre S. Pettigrew. "L'avenir du politique." *Politique étrangère*. No. 2 (2000): 428. (Original in French).
- Shi Bingjun, and Ma Zhaoqi. "To Build the Progressive Culture of China in the Context of Globalization." Original in Chinese, *Wen Hua Yan Jiu*. No. 11 (2004): 53-57. (in Vietnamese by Nguyen Thi Hien, Institute for Social Sciences Information)
- UNDP (United Nations Development Program). *Human Development Report 2004. Cultural liberty in today's diverse world*. Chapter 2, box 2.2. <<http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2004>>