

COMMENTS

by

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on

Eileen Barker's

CULTURAL SYNTHESIS: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND MORAL

COMMENTS ON MS EILEEN BARKER'S PAPER:
CULTURAL SYNTHESIS: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND MORAL

I find Professor Eileen Barker's paper very thought-provoking. It is analytic, coherent and interesting. In addition, it raises some fundamental issues about cultural synthesis and the search for absolute values.

The title of her paper is - "Cultural Synthesis: Epistemological and Moral." Eileen Barker seems less worried about what ought to be the nature of this cultural synthesis than she is about how to achieve such a synthesis. In this regard, she identifies two possible types of cultural synthesis - Epistemological and Moral.

Epistemological synthesis, she explains, attempts to put together "our body of knowledge about our culture and all the phenomena that explain why particular cultures (and sub-cultures) exist at particular times and/or places, and what the consequences of such cultures and subcultures are." Basically attracting inter-disciplinary research, it is the sort of research in which social scientists should be interested.

However, Ms. Barker finds this approach, as desirable as it is, fraught "with difficulties which arise out of the nature of culture". This method of synthesis would have to take cognizance of: 1) the individual

ii) the whole and iii) time and its concomitant impacts on culture in different places. These factors, among others, make this approach to cultural synthesis an impossible task.

The other approach is to attempt a moral synthesis of culture. This concerns itself with "putting together and integrating the bits of culture into the coherent whole which they ought to consist of." The problem with this approach, according to her, is that the world of social reality and utopian kingdom are not the same. In addition, the contents or definition of such a utopian world may defy agreement among members of the community. Moreover, attempt to homogenise culture in absolute forms could lead to suppression of other values which many may find desirable. In other words, certain crucial values would be sacrificed for others. As Ms Barker put it, one of the reasons why "cultural synthesizing transformers (as opposed to culturally analyzing reformers) will almost inevitably result in failure may lie in the very fact that any attempt to produce a moral synthesis is almost certainly bound to involve a clarification and a simplification of the messy reality that actual cultures consist of."

In her conclusion, Ms. Barker pointed out that there is nothing wrong in pursuing unobtainable goals or ideals.

However, she advocates a "piecemeal social reform which concentrates primarily on the elimination of societies' ills. Cultural synthesis of the moral or political variety rarely permit the existence of conflicting values that can provide legitimate checks and balances to overly assiduous chasing after particular absolutes." Her preference of approach seems to be the "incomplete epistemological synthesis", which she claims would increase "our understanding of what makes a culture function in a particular way", and thus enable us to "reduce the number of unintended and unwelcome consequences which could arise from moral synthesising."

As mentioned earlier, Ms. Barker's paper raises crucial issues or questions. Is a search for absolute values necessary? Are there likely to be unintended consequences we would rather not experience as a result of such an endeavour? Is there really a cultural revolution? What is the nature of such cultural revolution? Is there a new cultural revolution? How new are these and within which cultural context? What are the dimensions of this new cultural revolution which can be synthesized? Is cultural synthesis necessary?

Perhaps, while one agrees with Ms. Barker on her emphasis on how, a little more attention to what, would have tried to grapple with some of the above questions; for example, cultural synthesis for what?

I agree with her that a search for absolute values does have its inherent dangers. It is true that certain cultural values such as tastes are homogenizing. More people across cultures go for American hamburgers, Italian spaghetti and Chinese sweet and sour pork. Perhaps the first set of emphasis should be on heightening those areas where cultures are being synthesized by inevitable homogenizing features of a gradually shrinking global system.

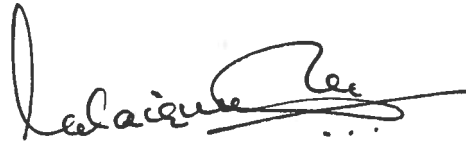
Similarly, a thought needs to be given to a federation of cultures in this synthesizing process which recognizes diversity and conflicting values in the search for greater cultural synthesis - but not in absolute terms.

Perhaps, it is time that ICUS reassesses the issue of absolute values, its desirability and mechanics. I would support Eileen Barker in her call for caution in attempts at cultural synthesis.

I believe that we need to answer some of the questions raised above in our discussions as we grapple with the fluidity, unpredictability and complexity of a world we constantly strive to understand, but which persistently

eludes our comprehension. As a discussant, I need to raise these issues for discussion and have no pretensions that I have any answers. I must end by thanking Ms. Barker for stimulating my thoughts in a new direction.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Isawa Elaigwu', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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