

## The Culture of Liberty

By Mario Vargas Llosa  
Foreign Policy  
February, 2000

The most effective attacks against globalization are usually not those related to economics. Instead, they are social, ethical, and, above all, cultural. These arguments surfaced amid the tumult of Seattle in 1999 and have resonated more recently in Davos, Bangkok, and Prague. They say this:

The disappearance of national borders and the establishment of a world interconnected by markets will deal a deathblow to regional and national cultures and to the traditions, customs, myths, and mores that determine each country or region's cultural identity. Since most of the world is incapable of resisting the invasion of cultural products from developed countries—or, more to the point, from the superpower, the United States—that inevitably trails the great transnational corporations, North American culture will ultimately impose itself, standardizing the world and annihilating its rich flora of diverse cultures. In this manner, all other peoples, and not just the small and weak ones, will lose their identity, their soul, and will become no more than 21st-century colonies—zombies or caricatures modeled after the cultural norms of a new imperialism that, in addition to ruling over the planet with its capital, military might, and scientific knowledge, will impose on others its language and its ways of thinking, believing, enjoying, and dreaming.

This nightmare or negative utopia of a world that, thanks to globalization, is losing its linguistic and cultural diversity and is being culturally appropriated by the United States, is not the exclusive domain of left-wing politicians nostalgic for Marx, Mao, or Che Guevara. This delirium of persecution—spurred by hatred and rancor toward the North American giant—is also apparent in developed countries and nations of high culture and is shared among political sectors of the left, center, and right.

The most notorious case is that of France, where we see frequent government campaigns in defense of a French "cultural identity" supposedly threatened by globalization. A vast array of intellectuals and politicians is alarmed by the possibility that the soil that produced Montaigne, Descartes, Racine, and Baudelaire—and a country that was long the arbiter of fashion in clothing, thought, art, dining, and in all domains of the spirit—can be invaded by McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, rock, rap, Hollywood movies, bluejeans, sneakers, and T-shirts. This fear has resulted, for instance, in massive French subsidies for the local film industry and demands for quotas requiring theaters to show a certain number of national films and limit the importation of movies from the United States. This fear is also the reason why municipalities issued severe directives penalizing with high fines any publicity announcements that littered with Anglicisms the language of Molière. (Although, judging by the view of a pedestrian on the streets of Paris, the directives were not quite respected.) This is the reason why José Bové, the

farmer-cum-crusader against *la malbouffe* (lousy food), has become no less than a popular hero in France. And with his recent sentencing to three months in prison, his popularity has likely increased.

Even though I believe this cultural argument against globalization is unacceptable, we should recognize that deep within it lies an unquestionable truth. This century, the world in which we will live will be less picturesque and imbued with less local color than the one we left behind. The festivals, attire, customs, ceremonies, rites, and beliefs that in the past gave humanity its folkloric and ethnological variety are progressively disappearing or confining themselves to minority sectors, while the bulk of society abandons them and adopts others more suited to the reality of our time. All countries of the earth experience this process, some more quickly than others, but it is not due to globalization. Rather, it is due to modernization, of which the former is effect, not cause. It is possible to lament, certainly, that this process occurs, and to feel nostalgia for the eclipse of the past ways of life that, particularly from our comfortable vantage point of the present, seem full of amusement, originality, and color. But this process is unavoidable. Totalitarian regimes in countries like Cuba or North Korea, fearful that any opening will destroy them, close themselves off and issue all types of prohibitions and censures against modernity. But even they are unable to impede modernity's slow infiltration and its gradual undermining of their so-called cultural identity. In theory, perhaps, a country could keep this identity, but only if—like certain remote tribes in Africa or the Amazon—it decides to live in total isolation, cutting off all exchange with other nations and practicing self-sufficiency. A cultural identity preserved in this form would take that society back to prehistoric standards of living.

It is true that modernization makes many forms of traditional life disappear. But at the same time, it opens opportunities and constitutes an important step forward for a society as a whole. That is why, when given the option to choose freely, peoples, sometimes counter to what their leaders or intellectual traditionalists would like, opt for modernization without the slightest ambiguity.

The allegations against globalization and in favor of cultural identity reveal a static conception of culture that has no historical basis. Which cultures have ever remained identical and unchanged over time? To find them we must search among the small and primitive magical-religious communities that live in caves, worship thunder and beasts, and, due to their primitivism, are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and extermination. All other cultures, in particular those that have the right to be called modern and alive, have evolved to the point that they are but a remote reflection of what they were just two or three generations before. This evolution is easily apparent in countries like France, Spain, and England, where the changes over the last half century have been so spectacular and profound that a Marcel Proust, a Federico García Lorca, or a Virginia Woolf would hardly recognize today the societies in which they were born—the societies their works helped so much to renew.

The notion of "cultural identity" is dangerous. From a social point of view, it represents merely a doubtful, artificial concept, but from a political perspective it threatens

humanity's most precious achievement: freedom. I do not deny that people who speak the same language, were born and live in the same territory, face the same problems, and practice the same religions and customs have common characteristics. But that collective denominator can never fully define each one of them, and it only abolishes or relegates to a disdainful secondary plane the sum of unique attributes and traits that differentiates one member of the group from the others. The concept of identity, when not employed on an exclusively individual scale, is inherently reductionist and dehumanizing, a collectivist and ideological abstraction of all that is original and creative in the human being, of all that has not been imposed by inheritance, geography, or social pressure. Rather, true identity springs from the capacity of human beings to resist these influences and counter them with free acts of their own invention.

The notion of "collective identity" is an ideological fiction and the foundation of nationalism. For many ethnologists and anthropologists, collective identity does not represent the truth even among the most archaic communities. Common practices and customs may be crucial to the defense of a group, but the margin of initiative and creativity among its members to emancipate themselves from the group is invariably large, and individual differences prevail over collective traits when individuals are examined on their own terms, and not as mere peripheral elements of collectivity. Globalization extends radically to all citizens of this planet the possibility to construct their individual cultural identities through voluntary action, according to their preferences and intimate motivations. Now, citizens are not always obligated, as in the past and in many places in the present, to respect an identity that traps them in a concentration camp from which there is no escape—the identity that is imposed on them through the language, nation, church, and customs of the place where they were born. In this sense, globalization must be welcomed because it notably expands the horizons of individual liberty.

### One Continent's Two Histories

Perhaps Latin America is the best example of the artifice and absurdity of trying to establish collective identities. What might be Latin America's cultural identity? What would be included in a coherent collection of beliefs, customs, traditions, practices, and mythologies that endows this region with a singular personality, unique and nontransferable? Our history has been forged in intellectual polemics—some ferocious—seeking to answer this question. The most celebrated was the one that, beginning in the early 20th century, pitted Hispanists against indigenists and reverberated across the continent.

For Hispanists like José de la Riva Agüero, Victor Andrés Belaúnde, and Francisco García Calderón, Latin America was born when, thanks to the Discovery and the Conquest, it joined with the Spanish and Portuguese languages and, adopting Christianity, came to form part of Western civilization. Hispanists did not belittle pre-Hispanic cultures, but considered that these constituted but a layer—and not the primary one—of the social and historical reality that only completed its nature and personality thanks to the vivifying influence of the West.

Indigenists, on the other hand, rejected with moral indignation the alleged benefits that Europeans brought to Latin America. For them, our identity finds its roots and its soul in pre-Hispanic cultures and civilizations, whose development and modernization were brutally stunted by violence and subjected to censure, repression, and marginalization not only during the three colonial centuries but also later, after the advent of republicanism. According to indigenist thinkers, the authentic "American expression" (to use the title of a book by José Lezama Lima) resides in all the cultural manifestations—from the native languages to the beliefs, rites, arts, and popular mores—that resisted Western cultural oppression and endured to our days. A distinguished historian of this vein, the Peruvian Luis E. Valcárcel, even affirmed that the churches, convents, and other monuments of colonial architecture should be burned since they represented the "Anti-Peru." They were impostors, a negation of the pristine American identity that could only be of exclusively indigenous roots. And one of Latin America's most original novelists, José María Arguedas, narrated, in stories of great delicacy and vibrant moral protest, the epic of the survival of the Quechua culture in the Andean world, despite the suffocating and distortionary presence of the West.

Hispanicism and indigenism produced excellent historical essays and highly creative works of fiction, but, judged from our current perspective, both doctrines seem equally sectarian, reductionist, and false. Neither is capable of fitting the expansive diversity of Latin America into its ideological straitjacket, and both smack of racism. Who would dare claim in our day that only what is "Hispanic" or "Indian" legitimately represents Latin America? Nevertheless, efforts to forge and isolate our distinct "cultural identity" continue today with a political and intellectual zeal deserving of worthier causes. Seeking to impose a cultural identity on a people is equivalent to locking them in a prison and denying them the most precious of liberties—that of choosing what, how, and who they want to be. Latin America has not one but many cultural identities; no one of them can claim more legitimacy or purity than the others. Of course, Latin America embodies the pre-Hispanic world and its cultures, which, in Mexico, Guatemala, and the Andean countries, still exert so much social force. But Latin America is also a vast swarm of Spanish and Portuguese speakers with a tradition of five centuries behind them whose presence and actions have been decisive in giving the continent its current features. And is not Latin America also something of Africa, which arrived on our shores together with Europe? Has not the African presence indelibly marked our skin, our music, our idiosyncrasies, our society? The cultural, ethnic, and social ingredients that make up Latin America link us to almost all the regions and cultures of the world. We have so many cultural identities that it is like not having one at all. This reality is, contrary to what nationalists believe, our greatest treasure. It is also an excellent credential that enables us to feel like full-fledged citizens in our globalized world.

#### Local Voices, Global Reach

The fear of Americanization of the planet is more ideological paranoia than reality. There is no doubt, of course, that with globalization, English has become the general language of our time, as was Latin in the Middle Ages. And it will continue its ascent, since it is an

indispensable instrument for international transactions and communication. But does this mean that English necessarily develops at the expense of the other great languages? Absolutely not. In fact, the opposite is true. The vanishing of borders and an increasingly interdependent world have created incentives for new generations to learn and assimilate to other cultures, not merely as a hobby but also out of necessity, since the ability to speak several languages and navigate comfortably in different cultures has become crucial for professional success. Consider the case of Spanish. Half a century ago, Spanish speakers were an inward-looking community; we projected ourselves in only very limited ways beyond our traditional linguistic confines. Today, Spanish is dynamic and thriving, gaining beachheads or even vast landholdings on all five continents. The fact that there are some 25 to 30 million Spanish speakers in the United States today explains why the two recent U.S. presidential candidates, Texas Governor George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore, campaigned not only in English but also in Spanish.

How many millions of young men and women around the globe have responded to the challenges of globalization by learning Japanese, German, Mandarin, Cantonese, Russian, or French? Fortunately, this tendency will only increase in the coming years. That is why the best defense of our own cultures and languages is to promote them vigorously throughout this new world, not to persist in the naive pretense of vaccinating them against the menace of English. Those who propose such remedies speak much about culture, but they tend to be ignorant people who mask their true vocation: nationalism. And if there is anything at odds with the universalist propensities of culture, it is the parochial, exclusionary, and confused vision that nationalist perspectives try to impose on cultural life. The most admirable lesson that cultures teach us is that they need not be protected by bureaucrats or commissars, or confined behind iron bars, or isolated by customs services in order to remain alive and exuberant; to the contrary, such efforts would only wither or even trivialize culture. Cultures must live freely, constantly jousting with different cultures. This renovates and renews them, allowing them to evolve and adapt to the continuous flow of life. In antiquity, Latin did not kill Greek; to the contrary, the artistic originality and intellectual depth of Hellenic culture permeated Roman civilization and, through it, the poems of Homer and the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle reached the entire world. Globalization will not make local cultures disappear; in a framework of worldwide openness, all that is valuable and worthy of survival in local cultures will find fertile ground in which to bloom.

This is happening in Europe, everywhere. Especially noteworthy is Spain, where regional cultures are reemerging with special vigor. During the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, regional cultures were repressed and condemned to a clandestine existence. But with the return of democracy, Spain's rich cultural diversity was unleashed and allowed to develop freely. In the country's regime of autonomies, local cultures have had an extraordinary boom, particularly in Catalonia, Galicia, and the Basque country, but also in the rest of Spain. Of course, we must not confuse this regional cultural rebirth, which is positive and enriching, with the phenomenon of nationalism, which poses serious threats to the culture of liberty.

In his celebrated 1948 essay "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," T.S. Eliot predicted that in the future, humanity would experience a renaissance of local and regional cultures. At the time, his prophecy seemed quite daring. However, globalization will likely make it a reality in the 21st century, and we must be happy about this. A rebirth of small, local cultures will give back to humanity that rich multiplicity of behavior and expressions that the nation-state annihilated in order to create so-called national cultural identities toward the end of the 18th, and particularly in the 19th, century. (This fact is easily forgotten, or we attempt to forget it because of its grave moral connotations.) National cultures were often forged in blood and fire, prohibiting the teaching or publication of vernacular languages or the practice of religions and customs that dissented from those the nation-state considered ideal. In this way, in many countries of the world, the nation-state forcibly imposed a dominant culture upon local ones that were repressed and abolished from official life. But, contrary to the warnings of those who fear globalization, it is not easy to completely erase cultures—however small they may be—if behind them is a rich tradition and people who practice them, even if in secret. And today, thanks to the weakening of the nation-state, we are seeing forgotten, marginalized, and silenced local cultures reemerging and displaying dynamic signs of life in the great concert of this globalized planet.

Mario Vargas Llosa is a novelist and author of, most recently, *The Party of the Goat* (Madrid: Ediciones Alfaguara, S.A., 2000).