

Neither Babel nor Pentecost.¹

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« Babel or Pentecost? » was the question raised in the title of the conference and the book that recently marked my Faculty's 50th anniversary.² Is this globalised world we are moving into the world of a human species that finds itself increasingly paralysed by the confusion of linguistic diversity or on the contrary one that is energised by the general acquisition of the ability to speak all languages?

The answer to this question is printed on a bag that my wife received a while ago: *jeden 'swiat, Një Botë, Jedan Svet, hal aduunyo, duni kaliya, bir tek dūnya, um só mundo, tenê dinyayek* [I allow myself to skip some of the items whose graphics defeat my reading competence]... but then also— fortunately! -, towering over all the rest in stunning isolation: *One world*.

One World.

Today, and even less tomorrow, globalisation will not mean the disastrous Babel I hinted at by stammering “One World” in only a handful of the languages that are each spoken by millions of people. If I had done the same at the same speed, uninterrupted, in the six thousand languages now (more or less) alive on the surface of the planet, it would have taken me over five hours.

Nor will globalisation mean Pentecost. Let's not delude ourselves. If we, French-speaking Belgians, have proved unable to learn Flemish, if there has never been a Belgian Pentecost, but at best the laborious agreements piously sanctified as “Saint Michel” or “Saint Polycarpe”, let us not pretend to believe that we shall find, on a world-wide scale, the enthusiasm and the resources required to generalise a plurilingualism that would not be systematically asymmetrical. Plurilingualism there will be, but systematically focused on one single dominant language — as was the case, for example, in the asymmetrical bilingualism of the upper classes in “La Belgique de Papa”, including “L'U.C.L

¹ Revised English version of a talk at the final plenary session of the conference on “The challenges of globalisation” organised on 5-6 March 2001 at Louvain-la-Neuve on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the UCL's Faculty of Economic, Social and Political Sciences and of the 575th anniversary of the University of Louvain. Some allusions to the initial context have been erased, but not all, for reasons that should have become obvious by the end of the text.

² *Babel ou Pentecôte? Les défis de la globalisation* (J. Delcourt & P. de Woot eds), Louvain-la-Neuve: Faculté des sciences économiques, sociales et politiques, 2001.

de Papa” — with this single tiny difference that the language asymmetrically learned at the global level will not be French, but English.

For there we have the only credible alternative to both Babel’s hell and Pentecost’s dream: “One World”, the unprecedented and irreversible propagation of the first ever world-wide lingua franca. True, this language is a rather modest one, which nothing seemed to predestine to such a grand role. It is the hybrid conglomerate of a Germanic dialect once spoken in Schleswig-Holstein and of a vulgar variant of Latin still spoken in Île-de-France. It is the outcome of a merger brought about by two successive campaigns of continental conquerors on the largest of the islands off that extreme western protrusion of the Asian continent, which gradually started being called ‘Europe’. It is also a language miraculously close to ours, notwithstanding the bemoaning of some somewhat narcissistic Francophones, who might have lost sight of the incredible luck they have that history decided upon one of the dozen languages or so that are nearest to French, out of the six thousand existing ones). The odds were 998 to 1000 that we should have had a worse, possibly a hugely worse deal.

It is, in any event, a language which is, like any other language, suitable to formulating the most contrasting messages (hardly a miraculous feature : all that is needed is being equipped with a the syntagma of negation!). It is, for example, a language in which you can shoot at capitalism as fervently as is possible in Marx’s *Hochdeutsch*, and a language in which you can mobilise against globalisation à la McWorld no less than in favour of globalism à la Passet.

It is henceforth the language in which it is henceforth possible to make oneself heard from Tokyo to Johannesburg and, soon, from Budapest to Porto Alegre. It is therefore the language that we must make sure our researchers and our students undertake to learn – and sooner rather than later, before someone hits upon the ingenious idea of getting it patented! For in the third millennium, conquering, mastering this language does not amount to capitulating, but to seizing the weapons. It does not mean blind submission to the so-called ‘North-American’ ideology, which it tends to spread more than is reasonable. On the contrary, it is a condition *sine qua non* for preventing this universal medium from being used disproportionately, and with a disproportionate efficacy, by the citizens of the United States, and hence by a perception of what is possible that is excessively constrained by the structure of the US federal political system and by the financial powers that control it.

Consequently, dear colleagues, dear researchers, and above all dear students and activists of all sorts and quarters, please shed any outdated provincialism and old-fashioned vanity, and engage yourselves wholeheartedly into the study of English! Publish, convene, chat, demand, protest and, above all, propose, in

English. If you do not, you will give more leeway, you will concede unjustifiable advantages to precisely those people whose interests and values you fear will prevail over yours.

Shall we lose our heart or lose our soul?

The message which I have just inflicted upon you without any qualification I would convey to you without any reservation or hesitation, had it not been for a thought that came to me, first in a furtive, next in an increasingly gnawing fashion. Its substance can be phrased as a thesis that rests on four premises.³

This thesis consists in a dilemma: to the extent that English emerges as a first world-wide lingua franca, the countries whose mother tongue is not English will either *lose their soul* – they will have to stop protecting their language and hence their national culture-, or they will have to *lose their heart* – they will have to reduce the redistributive part of their welfare states.

This dilemma is the direct consequence of the conjunction of four premises that I shall only list here, each followed by one short comment:

- (1) If weaker languages are to survive, the countries which house them will (increasingly) have to insist on the linguistic territoriality principle, i.e. the installation of the official language of the territory in public education, administration and political life is crucial to their survival.

Comment: The Quebec people will easily understand what I mean; the Francophones of the Flemish periphery of Brussels will only if they make some effort: domination is more easily perceived by those who suffer it than by those who exercise it.⁴

- (2) Plurilingual portfolios do and will increasingly tend to contain English.

Comment: Those who doubt this should have a look at the appendices of my article on “The Ground Floor of the World” (they refer, respectively, to the dynamics of languages in Belgium and at the European Commission).⁵

³ The argument is developed in P. Van Parijs, "The Ground Floor of the World. On the Socio-Economic Consequences of Linguistic Globalisation", in *International Political Science Review* 21 (2), 217-233 (French translation in *Les Défis de la globalisation..Babel ou Pentecôte?* (J.Delcourt & P. de Woot eds.), Louvain-la-Neuve, 2001, 479-500; Dutch translation in *De Nieuwe sociale kwestie* (B. Cantillon ed.), Leuven, 2002, forthcoming).

⁴ See J.Laponce, *Langue et territoire*, Quebec: Presses Universitaires de Laval, 1984.

⁵ See also A.De Swaan, *The World Language System*, Amsterdam, 2001, forthcoming

- (3) If some area's native language emerges as a world lingua franca and if the territoriality principle is in place elsewhere, a growing bias will develop, among the high-skilled, towards the lingua franca countries.

Comment: The metaphor of the ground-floor is about this very asymmetry: it is to this ground floor that the highly-skilled tend to converge.⁶

- (4) If there is a significant asymmetric skill drain and if the associated fall in the standard of living is to be avoided, then the upper floors' governments have no real option but to reduce net redistribution (explicit and implicit) from the high-skilled to the low-skilled workers.

Comment: *Le Monde* (24 February 2001) mentions that India “trains over 150.000 new engineers and scientist every year. This represents manna from heaven for the United States, which houses half a million Indian scientists within its borders.” How can one react to this haemorrhage but by further reducing the (already low) tax rates on this dangerously mobile human capital — e.g. by generously granting the status of essentially tax-exempt NRI (non-resident Indian) - and by dismantling the positive discrimination measures that hamper the professional advancement of the most favoured strata (more mobile than other, be it only because of their linguistic abilities).

From these four premises, the dilemma inevitably follows. True, the countries of the linguistic hills can do away with the competitive disadvantage they incur, in retaining and attracting human capital, as a result of using a language different from the world-wide lingua franca. They can do something else than to compensate for this disadvantage by putting up with the shrinking of their heart, i.e., the contraction of their redistributive ambition. But this alternative option can only consist in the abandonment of the principle of linguistic territoriality or the weakening its application. By doing so, let us face it, they accept that their territory will sink to the ground-floor, they accept the erosion of the sole protection they could durably secure to their national “soul” in a context of intensive mobility and communication, namely the grip of their language on their territory.

Each of these premises would no doubt need to be better grounded, refined, qualified. And there exist some strategies, uncertain perhaps but not desperate, that would permit, if not to dissolve the dilemma, at least to soften it. But instead of exploring them (as I start doing in the article mentioned), I shall rather

⁶ On the net flows of highly skilled workers, see SOPEMI, *Trends in International Migration*. Paris: OCDE, 1998.

address squarely, on the background of the considerations above, the theme set for the final plenary session by the organisers of the UCL's conference on the challenges of globalisation: "An Ethics of Dialogue for a Global Development".

From Paul the globalist to planetary justice.

"Structures of dialogue and negotiation between social categories, nations, cultures and civilisations are indispensable", the organisers state. I fully agree. And the *conditio sine qua non* for the amplification and intensification of such dialogue, and for the transformation of such international negotiation into transnational deliberation, is the existence of a common medium. This medium, we do not possess it fully yet, but, according to one of my premises, we shall have it soon.

"But a procedural logic cannot solve by itself the world's problems and conflicts.", the organisers continue, "We need an ethics. We need to extoll shared values. But how? Can Christian values shed some light on the debate?" From the person in charge of an Ethics Chair at a Catholic University, one probably expects something analogous to what used to be expected from a chaplain. These expectations, I would not like to leave them altogether unfulfilled. I will not evade the question thus raised by the organisers, while not ceasing to pay special attention to the linguistic dimension.

Time and time again, language and religion have played quite similar parts in the history of different forms of nationalism: *cuius regio eius religio, cuius regio eius lingua*. Will these two dimensions of culture keep playing similar roles in the process of globalisation as in the rise of nations? Not at all. True, there is, and there will remain, a joint process of religious and linguistic dissemination as a consequence of repeated migration waves. But there will be no religious globalisation analogous to the linguistic globalisation, no outpouring of a global *religio franca*. Why not? For many reasons, among which the following two are probably the main ones: having several religions at the same time is a trickier matter than plurilingualism is, and living without a religion is presumably more comfortable than living without a language.

In order to make these prospects more concrete, allow me, as I am only a philosopher, to indulge in a predictive exercise that would fall far below the dignity of the respectable (social) scientists by the side of whom I have the privilege to work within our Faculty. I conjecture that the lecture room in which I am now speaking holds, say, 28 % of practising Catholics and 38 percent of people who are able to express themselves easily and correctly in English – in both cases, proportionally well over the average in the population of our region.- When, in the year 2051, the youngest among us will meet again in the UCL's *Grande Aula* – with fewer (real) teeth in their mouth and less (real) hair on their

heads – to celebrate the 100th anniversary of our Faculty, I predict that the percentage of people who have a good mastery of English will have risen to 97 percent, and the number of practicing Catholics will have collapsed to 3,8 percent.

In such a context, do “Christian values” still have a role to play? Can they legitimately and effectively help provide the ethical basis we need in order to solve the problems of the world? Yes, they can, in at least two ways.

The first is rooted in that episode so decisive for the destinies of both Christianity and, consequently, humankind, when Paul the globalist triumphed over Jacob, Jesus’ brother, on the issue whether or not it was necessary to become a Jew before becoming a Christian. From that moment, the people of God ceased to be a particular people, chosen by God among a great many others, and merged potentially into humanity as a whole. The actualisation of this potential, the actual constitution of mankind as a whole into one single people, the big missionary enterprises of Christianity and Islam have attempted it, without success. What they failed to do, economic globalisation will achieve, providing of course it is accompanied by the piecemeal establishment, on the same scale, of social and political institutions that respect the political autonomy of a large number of culturally distinct territorial entities, while firmly expressing a twofold universalistic ideal: an equal concern for the interests of human beings of all races and cultures – all those children of God, endowed with an equal fundamental dignity - and an equal respect for the convictions of each of them in their irreducible and respectable plurality — which Christianity learned to recognise the hard way, through the painful lessons of fratricidal religious wars.

True, this conception of global justice, both “solidaristic” and “pluralistic”, both “egalitarian” and “liberal”, can be reached by other, more direct ways than by following the long trajectory of Christianity. More than any specific moral tradition, the global grip of which is bound to diminish over time, what upholds today, and will uphold even more tomorrow, this “ethics without a morals”, is the simple and growing need to argue and justify in a public sphere that increasingly spans the whole world – and can only do so, incidentally, because of the adoption of a world-wide lingua franca. Nonetheless, the constitution of humanity into one people, hesitant at the onset, at an accelerating pace today, has something to do with this founding moment of the history of Christianity, when the difficult internal debates of a small Jewish sect issued into the ambition of a great universal religion.

The washing of the feet

There is a second sense in which “Christian values” seem to me to be more relevant than ever to permit the fair and harmonious cohabitation of the billions of people which now form our species. It is contained in one of those striking images in which Christianity is encapsulated for people like me (and there is little chance of my being the only one in this room), who are Christians far more through their ethical ideals than through their metaphysical convictions.

This image is the washing of the feet.

At no level is a harmonious cohabitation possible unless the haughtiness of the powerful, the arrogance of the beneficiaries of both avoidable and unavoidable inequalities, is constantly bridled, domesticated. But few experiences inspire as much humility as finding oneself in a situation in which one has to express oneself in a language that is not one’s own, and the temptation of arrogance is rarely stronger than when one enjoys a superior mastery of a language one believes to be superior.

Therefore, the “ethics of dialogue” which is to humanise globalisation is an ethics of the washing of the feet. Such an ethics is compatible with the adoption of a global lingua franca. However, it requires us to put ourselves tirelessly into the shoes of those who have a less easy access to it. It also requires us to make the effort to humbly walk down in the hierarchy of languages.

Dear francophone students, dear friends, I started by urging you to learn English. If despite all meanders and ellipses, you have followed me all along, you will have understood that you should not neglect either to have the humility to learn Dutch. *Think globally, act locally...for a start.*