

Culture politique et culture des femmes

(Signposts for the next millenium)

Bristol, 5 September 1991

How can we dare to speak of signposts for the next millenium?

Can we try to see, at least, signposts for the next years, for the next months?

Can we ask for clear directions in these times of turbulence?

Can we attempt to see some signs shining in a period where everything seems to get sucked up in a historical black hole?

- And yet, speak/see/ask/expect/attempt to we must!

Because: it is in the depth of the black hole that energy is renewed and new forces can emerge;

it is in periods of uncertainty and turbulence that complexity is at work; systems are reorganizing themselves and new patterns may emerge.

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The events of the last months and weeks have shaken the world picture of, for most of us, a whole lifetime.

At the heart of it all, we discover an overwhelming and breath-taking complexity. We discover the existence of different autonomous and yet interdependent systems. The simple mechanism of cause/effect within one single logic is outdated.

The striking events in Soviet Union are a sharp illustration of the several systems and processes in presence.

- a) The collapse of communism as a political regime is one of those systems.
- b) But equally important is the breaking down of the last European empire.
- c) And together with these two systems the process of increasing economic under-development and social deterioration is a most important one.

Of course, a more refined analysis would enlighten other systems at play, such as, for instance, the ethnical and linguistic system providing social cohesion to otherwise scattered groups. Or, at another level, the religious dimension of individuals and groups providing islands of hope.

This interplay of different systems comes sharply into light with the Soviet Union.

But it is a general condition of our contemporary world. Even in the most remote and apparently most homogeneous situation, there are different systems, each with its own logic, each demanding a new type of analysis, each contributing in its own way to the shaping of political culture.

The world governance (as well as governance "tout court" in relation to any social and political entity) is a major concern of contemporary political thought. We cannot fool ourselves: the traditional political culture is over.

We need: new tools of perception of the political mechanisms of every society.

We need new mental categories to establish the links between the actors and the issues of political life.

We need a renewed imagination to take the decisions demanded by the novelty of the times we live in.

The political culture is in search of new paradigms.

The so much fought for participation of women in political life is relevant in so far as it carries with it the possibility for new paradigms to emerge.

At the end of this Conference which was guided by the desire to find "new theological directions" for "liberating women", and where so many ideas and experiences have been exposed and shared, we are apparently narrowing down our concerns by concentrating on political culture. I hope that such is not the case. The political scene is in fact a living (and puzzling) metaphor of what goes on in many other fields in the world. It can even be considered as a metaphor of the world in its historical contingency ... (I often say to journalists that the difference between the political scene and the other fields is that what is political is all throughout public and visible). There lies the only difference!)

It is my deep conviction that only now do women begin to be ready to take stock of their own culture and to help shaping the so much needed new political culture.

If their (our) own culture is deeply anchored in the contemporary reality they will intervene in an original way in the shaping of the political culture.

The political picture of today's world seems to demand exactly the perspectives, vision, and attitudes that women's culture carries with it.

Moreover, if the political culture is in search of its new axes, so is the women's culture. We have been two open systems. The period of gestation of a new political culture does offer a rare opportunity not only for women's contribution but also for women's culture to find more clearly (and also more realistically) its own foundations and expressions.

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I will concentrate on three main chapters:

- 1) Some key questions of political culture today;
- 2) the different approaches to women and politics;
- 3) the interface between political culture
and women culture.

Let me then concentrate on some of the ingredients of the political future of the world.

1.1 If there would no other proof, CNN news would have convinced us about the globalization of all issues, the interdependence of all events.

Surely, we have felt already during the last 20 years (since the dollar became the world currency) the economic interdependence. Those of us who had to deal with the international financial institutions (IMF/World Bank) were almost tragically aware of the grip with which the international system was seizing most countries and their populations. Surely, interdependence was also present during the Cold War period, each country being caught up in the zone of influence of each of the two super-powers. What is different then?

Today, it is at all levels of the world scene that interdependence is felt. And yet it is not clear how such an interdependence can be managed. The case of Yugoslavia is a clear example: EEC? CSCE? the Security Council? who else?

..... issues can easily become a world of a one-power domination. In the military and security field the situation is clear: we have moved from a bi-polar world to a uni-polar world.

The task of redefining the conditions for the organization of a multipolar world is imperative. This is why the globalization process demands "new instruments, a new definition of world interests and national interests, new forms of political leadership". (Some steps are taken for a Conference of Security and Cooperation of Africa, the forgotten continent. And some have already expressed the desire for the same type of institution for the Mediterranean region.)

The interdependence of all political entities (and the globalization of all issues) shakes the very basis of the idea of sovereignty, as it has evolved in the modern times.

From the law of non-interference we have moved in the last years (with Ethiopia, Sudan and the Kurdes) to the right of humanitarian assistance.

From the law of untouchable boundaries we seem to be moving to new political entities with new types of links among them.

A few months ago, within the frame of the European Community, it was still possible to speak about delegated sovereignty and enlarged sovereignty, in so far as each country would have increased responsibility. But the sweeping movement in the Balkanic region and Soviet Union puts into question the notion of Nation-State we have applied to countries which were not States or to entities that were still in the process of formation as nations.

This means that the very basis of political culture - sovereignty-citizenship - is in process of being reshaped and redefined.

Old categories don't hold anymore. New forms have to emerge. New concepts are needed.

This is why we can acknowledge the need for a new world order. But certainly not linked with the Gulf war as President Bush has done at the beginning and at the end of the war! Rather, a new world order based on the globalization of issues and events but geared, at every instance to the rights of individuals and peoples and to their solidarity.

1.2 The market economy as ideology

The new world order that seems to take shape is not devoid of ideologies as some appear to think. A global ideology is taking over: the ideology of the market.

The market economy is viewed as a universal remedy to all problems of governance the world is facing.

Of course, the collapse of the centrally planned economies has left us with only one tool: the market economy. No doubt that the Eastern and Central European countries see the market as the path for better standards of living.

However, the globalization of the market system has put into the limelight its shortcomings:

- the "free" market is not truly free at the world level, as most of the countries enter international trade under the heavy and unbearable conditions put on it by the rich countries, with their protectionist measures;
- international financial credit functions in such a way that many countries are paying back more than the amount of wealth they produce annually;
- the boundaries having disappeared for the new armies which are the transnational corporations, direct investments are growing at a rate (27 per cent last year), half of which is invested in USA and the 20 per cent invested in the South going to a handful of ten countries;
- the flux of capital is not moving North/South to help the development of the South but rather South/North - with in the last eight years more than 300 billion dollars from Latin America ...

This amounts to what it is: an organizaed international disorder. It gives the impression that it functions because the institutions proliferate and go on accomplishing their rituals.

But in fact it is creating a massive imbalance, marginalizing the great majority of mankind. The ideology underlying it all is based on the acceptance of exclusion as a legitimate social and political principle. Therefore it assumes a philosophy of inequality among human beings.

This is not an accident of history. Since the 80s' the OECD countries have evolved the concept of structural adjustment as the basis for strengthening our economies.

It defines itself as the "whole set of transformations necessary in order to allow the balanced functioning of the economy."

What does this mean? That every thing in society is geared towards economy and its health.

It means that a purely economic concept has replaced the all-encompassing ideas of "social change" or of "project of society".

But the market economy doesn't see anything that cannot be translated into money.

Therefore, the market is "blind":

- it doesn't see poverty and weakness
- it doesn't see the environment
- it doesn't see the spiritual.

Its basic paradigm is one of the power of force, the supremacy of the winner. (The arrogance of the West in relation to East Europe (when) no Western economist has any solution! [Geoffrey Sacks]).

No atonishment then that the international economy is at the stage of institutionalized injustice. While the economies of the triad (European Community, Japan, USA) are reinforcing each other, the economies of the South hemisphere - Africa, Latin America and the South of Asia - are perishing and entering a period of almost invisibility, continents and the majority of mankind drifting away to marginalization and destitution.

This is why gradually and without any political calculations, from the South start emerging more strategies of survival.

They are already at work in visible problems:

- in the attempt of growing masses of people from the South to reach the North and to come to have a share in its wealth;
- in the astounding population growth of the South - while EC grows 0.3 per cent up to 2000, the Arab countries of North Africa will have a growth rate ranging from 47 per cent to 67 per cent ...;
- they are even present in the production and in the small organizations of the narco-traffic among the poor in the favelas of Brazil, in the fields of Colombia and Peru ...).

1.3 Democracy at stake

Democracy doesn't stand out undamaged in this picture.

It is true that the Western countries have succeeded to impose a new and positive conditionality to all other countries:

- the establishment of a State of law;
- the multipartism and free elections;
- the respect of human rights as a basic moral guarantee of the legitimacy of any constituted power.

However, at the same time, we see the growing uneasiness with the forms of democracy established in the North hemisphere.

The existence of a political class does exclude from the political decisions most citizens:

- who decided the Gulf war?
- who decided about the independence of the Baltic States?
- who decided the conditions for Yugoslavia?

etc., etc.

In the 70s' a "professional political class" was still the object of a debate; today it is seen with distance and contempt. (In a recent French programme after a very good performance of the Secretary of State for Humanitarian Questions, he was considered by more than 60 % as competent, his action as necessary; yet to the question "doest he have a political future?" only 85 per cent said "no"!!).

The fact that electoral campaigns are more and more empty of the real issues and that very few countries have a built-in system of democratic accountability puts into question this kind of representation.

From one side, we are still using the democratic institutions and traditions contemporary of the beginning of industrialization:

- . when the phenomenon of urbanization at a massive scale had not yet taken place;
- . when life expectancy was much shorter and one was supposed to dedicate oneself to the same activity through a lifetime;
- . when women didn't exist as citizens.

From another side, we are today in an era of communication. Mass media have introduced into social relationships totally new factors. They have established in the relationship between the citizens and the elected officers a new mediation the laws of which transform that very relationship.

Democracy is also at stake at the world level. There may be lip-service to the United Nations. But who are those who are deciding now about the new configuration of Europe, about the future of the Soviet Union? The G-7, whose status is the one of "most industrialized countries"!

1.4 Environment as a new social actor

The shortcomings of the world governance, as well as the urgency of some form of decision-making body or binding international laws, are made sharply clear by the questions related to environment.

The Bruntland Report, the Toronto Summit, the Hague Conference, the International Climate Conference, and many other worldwide events have been successive steps in defining the necessary measures to be taken in order to prevent more climate warming, and the depletion of the ozone layer, and fundamentally in order to render the earth habitable and to preserve the harmony and beauty of all life-systems.

More sharply than any other factor, environment emerged as a social actor at the world level.

With the birth of industrialization, nature has entered history. The exploitation of natural resources to feed the process of industrialization in its first stages, the disorder created in nature by the huge human settlements due to accelerating urbanization - these are just the two most striking elements of the encounter between nature and history.

Its consequences are not ignored anymore. For the first time, history - political evolution, economic and social development, international relations - has to take nature into account.

Of course, I am speaking of this new actor whose rebellion pleads finally for our own survival.

But I am also speaking of the interlinkage between nature and all the other political/economic/social processes. I am referring to the orientation of science and technology.

Again it is the question of a change of paradigm: science was supposed to contain in itself its own self-correction. This was the illustration of an endless progress, of the mastering of men over all natural processes.

Moreover, science could be pure and neutral. Pure because there were no immediate applications, neutral because it was conceived in some kind of political limbo ...

Today all science brings with it the technology it leads to. Today Physics, Biology, have shown that they have deep political meanings.

We enter a new type of civilization:

- . a civilization where a deep sense of limits is emerging.

Not the abrupt limit of a linear progress cut somehow by ethical considerations,

but the limit coming from the interdependence of systems and beings, or, as psychoanalysis tells us, the limits coming from the inner law of every being,

- . where the root of life is reached
- . and the depth of meaning is perceived.

2. Women as political actors

2.1 Beyond equality: the option of difference

What about women's culture then?

We cannot overlook the fact that most of the actions and decisions taken at national and international level concerning women during the last 20 years have accepted political culture as it was perceived: institutions / elections / careers. The main goal was the equality with men in the management of political life ; thus left unchallenged.

It was not only the acceptance of the traditions, of the established cleavages, of all the steps that led to the global injustice and indifference to the global commons. It was also the very rules of political management. Politics is in its practice one of the most over-simplified systems one can think of. Different areas of political decision-making are disconnected, separated, each Ministry dealing with one single aspect of life as if the others didn't count.

Of course, it was important for women to participate at all levels of political power. It was the end of forbidden territories, it was the path for a more just distribution of social functions among different groups in society.

Gradually, some women began to see that their presence was relevant in so far as it made a difference.

The separatedness of political thinking,
 the mystification of political action,
 the acceptance of injustices and exclusion under the disguise of distorted pragmatism,
 the submission of politics to economics,
 the pompous rhetoric of the political class,
 the dubious ties kept with the media (so well illustrated in the series Mr Minister),
 the growing disparity between those who are wealthy and thus are self-righteous and powerful,
 the paraphernalia wrapping up the political functions,

- all these are traits that have nothing in common with women's culture, even when women are their practitioners.

The laws of the internal functioning of the political institutions, with their dogmas, codes and liturgies,
 appear as the result of one single pattern, bear the mark of the masculine.

Whenever women accept this kind of political culture, they reinforce the statu quo, giving an alibi to all those who want women to be present everywhere on one condition: that things may remain as they are!

Moreover, experience has shown that very often, in order to function on equal terms with men, women are "forced" to assimilate the cultural values and the codes of masculine behaviour which rule the public space.

Access to political power is often obtained at the expenses of the silencing in women of their own attitudes and ways of being, thinking and doing, of their own culture.

Those who plead for the difference denounce the perverse effects of an equality that finally reduces women's contribution in the political field.

.... is most important at this juncture of time. New ingredients, new approaches, new systems of thought are needed, we say. Women's culture provides already new ingredients and approaches. It is probably on its way to provide new systems of thought.

Most of all the difference expresses itself in the connectedness of problems, of persons, of sectors of decision-making. Women connect and connect, and because they connect, they invent.

As Judith Schlanger shows, when writing about "innovation and history of science",
a different intellectual frame is still within the rational space.

"There is a plurality of frames", she argues, "all adequate but partial and probably temporary, in such a way, that one can go from one frame to another, to invent a new one."

Moreover, as she writes elsewhere the birth of a new thinking depends on the state of the art in a given field. In the realm of political culture we can say that the situation of complexity is a propitious condition for the capacity to connect of women's culture to reach its full fruition.

The sense of connectedness is basic in the exercise of political power, which has the human persons at the core of it.

It sees the person as a whole. Therefore all political measures are centered on that wholeness.

(Contrary to the traditional politics who sees in the human persons:

- in time of elections: the electorate
- in the newspapers: the public opinion
- in the official speeches: the citizens ...)

- . It connects problems and discovers the knots, the hard core to be dealt with. Therefore, it doesn't waste time, it accomplishes all it can.
- . It connects mechanisms: so it works in an intersectorial way.
- . It goes beyond the split between different disciplines as so many are needed to solve problems ...

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1. (Women and New World Order)

At the dawn of the XXIth century, the women's movement remains the most international of all social movements. I said "remain" - but shouldn't I say "can become"?

The women's culture can give an irreplaceable contribution:

- to help the world to speak beyond one's own region, nation, ethnic group,
- to give room to a "we" that encompasses a plurality of situations, convictions, attitudes,
- to establish the transnational character of all initiatives as the best way to express the interdependence of today's world.

It is important, vital for the world, at this time of such striking interdependence, to denounce the fallacy of the outdated concept of "ennemy" - and therefore of building up new concepts of security and defense.

Of course, women, like in Yugoslavia women from both sides, will demonstrate and protest against war. But let us seize the moment to plead for, to establish the rationale and if possible to decide for the systems and "weapons" intimes of peace.

Women's culture of care and connectedness is needed to create the bridges among ethnic groups, to accelerate the formation of nations, to relativise the importance of the State as it evolved in Europe in the last 200 years.

2. (Market)

We can also expect women's culture to correct the excesses of the market ideology:

- to introduce the necessary regulatory and redistributive mechanisms, even if it is a trend now to undo all the State interventions;
- to approach the world of economics with imagination and never, never allow economy to be the guiding factor of political life, as all processes of economic development are there not as an end in themselves but at the service of the human persons.

We can even expect women's culture to re-orientate the market economy by obliging the economy to acknowledge, within its own logic, the value of the quality of life, of the flexibility in patterns of work, of the mobility of people according to their needs and desires ... (OECD).

Women constitute the most powerful agent of consumption.

They can counteract the perverse effect of publicity (creating passive persons who unconsciously obey to its suggestions) by becoming lucid agents of consumption. Thus can they fulfil an economic function, capable of regulating the predominant model of "always more". (IAC-Fukuda)

(We can do one thing. As women, we cannot go on pretending we cannot do anything about the prevailing economic disorder. For years, four decades now, the UN has been asking in the International Strategies for Development that the rich countries give one per cent of their PNB to develop/aid. (McNamara) So far only the Netherlands and Sweden have done so. My proposal is: Didn't time come now for the international community to establish a conditionality for the rich countries? What if all of them, in order to vote in the UN would have to contribute their one per cent for development?)

3. (Democracy)

Women's culture has also to take stock of its own experiences in the sharing of responsibility and power.

Women experience that there are many more instances of power than those offered by the political institutions. By making such situations more visible women help to reconstitute power to everyone in society, they do empower others, most of all those whose voice is not heard.

The manifold tasks of women, the way in which their culture has integrated such tasks, does not only express itself in responsibility as a political component,

but also helps the socio-political reality to organize itself around new issues and with the participation of new actors.

The school, the medical services and the hospital, the public services of all kind, the media - do concern all citizens in a paramount way at different stages of their lives. Therefore, the social partners cannot anymore be confined to the binome employers/trade unions inherited from the industrialization era.

The big institutions which are a pillar of society merit to gather around a table all the social partners whose life or work is directly associated with them.

Women's culture cannot accept as a permanent compromise the party discipline.

Women in political life have to introduce the primacy of autonomy of decision and consequently of majorities not according to party lines but according to ideas and their value.

4. (Environment)

Women's culture can reinforce in political culture the all-encompassing value of the primacy of life.

The relationship of the woman to nature which prevented for so long the expression of a women's culture can be taken up by this very culture and transformed from a handicap to an asset. (It is a sign the fact that many women's groups are involved with the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.)

Moreover, the influence of women's culture can be decisive in some concrete aspects.

Women are the main agents of a sustainable development as they are the pillars and inspirators of new lifestyles, ranging in concrete consequences from energy's conservation and sources to new cultural models of consumption.

The presence of many women in the scientific and technical world can lead to a greater transparency in the perception of the meaning of scientific and technological choices.

They can and must ask the questions:

- are real human needs answered by this knowledge, by this technology?
- are they serving valid human values?

Concluding remarks

The years, the months ahead are decisive. What I said concerns all women - it is not a question of being present to the times we live in ...

This challenge has a particular echo for Christian women. To live fully the Kairos is to bring closer the horizon of our Faith.

To live fully our time is to live the fabrics of our eternity.

("Events were his instruments of work")

Our spirituality cannot be parochial anymore.

The context for our spirituality as well as for our theology is the whole world in its interdependence and complexity. Of course, it is not a question of being aware of everything at once. It is rather the awareness of the interlinkages, the connections, and daring to break new ground by speaking there at the edge of different ways of seeing the world, at the frontiers of what appears in the official discourse as separated and unrelated.

But no contribution will be possible without the deep labour in ourselves, about ourselves.

Spiritual vision and wisdom can only be encountered in the journey of the person to her center.

It is that journey that makes us at once vulnerable
and stronger,
assertive
and humble,
utopian
and realist.

We can then say with Marguerite Yourcenar:

"... we are probably nothing else but crystals through which currents went.

Everything comes from far away and goes much further than we are going.

And we feel humble and amazed for being so pierced by currents which go through us and further than we go."

Currents that go through us and further than we go ... we call this the Spirit of God who, through us, makes all things new.

Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo

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