

## Introduction

*Doudou Diène*

East–West: the ideological split of the Cold War, a rhetorical emblem, of recent memory and brief duration, of the conflict between communism and capitalism, could not by itself explain a more controlled label, the one that belongs to the world of science and historical research and evokes with this expression the old East–West dichotomy.

From literature to history, from the poetic imaginary to archaeological research, this phrase has often indicated a sense of separation between two universes that regard each other with both fascination and repulsion. At a time when dialogue between cultures and civilizations is required as a basic element in the construction of a lasting peace, in the context of a globalization whose objectives and content are the subject of critical debate, it seems that the time has come to revisit that ancient symbol of the meeting of cultures. This is what *Diogenes* has chosen as the subject of this issue, under the reflexive title: From East to West – civilizations in a looking-glass.

With the support of the Member States and the assistance of the research community, UNESCO has indeed focused on this task by launching the overarching study project Silk Roads, Routes of Dialogue, based on the achievements of the old East–West project. Other major projects on Intercultural Routes have followed, highlighting the fruitful nature of the dialectic of movement – meeting – interaction as a dynamic for dialogue between cultures: Roads of Faith, Slave Routes, Roads of Al-Andalus.

Especially because of the achievements of the Silk Roads Project and the multi-disciplinary study of the intercultural, the basic elements of the East–West cultural relationship that is starting to emerge point up the intensity of cultural interaction more than the reality of two separate and hostile worlds. This basis, which is particularly indicative of the cultural network and has long been underestimated by scientific study, in fact comprises: the importance of the continental continuity of Eurasia; the density over a long period of contacts and exchanges, whether they be human, economic or technological; and the longstanding inter-relationship between

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culture and religion. History and culture have given meaning and significance to geography. From this flow three essential lessons that can shed a powerful light on the current debate about dialogue between cultures. In order for dialogue to be sustainable it must concern not only mutual familiarization, but also discovery and recognition of interaction between cultures. In the cultural domain the relationship between dialogue and conflict is dialectical. In other words, conflict is a stage in the process of dialogue and a condition for it, in a complex, dynamic process where neither is an intangible, final achievement in the long term. Failure to take account of this dialectical relationship, this tension intrinsic to any cultural encounter, is the basic weakness of Samuel Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations. And finally, for depth of dialogue, culture must be understood in its three closely inter-linked dimensions: aesthetic (cultural creations and products, the visible dimension of cultural contact), ethical (the most basic values of the peoples involved, the intangible dimension of the rootedness of culture), and spiritual (the transcendental significance of the cultural experience).

Through the cross-fertilization of ideas, from the authors' different geographical and disciplinary origins, this issue of *Diogenes* touches on these areas which are crucial for intercultural relationships. The new and meaningful idea that best expresses the fluidity of what we must indeed call the cultural movement is the cultural depth that alone makes it possible for us to clarify and understand the reality of a cultural pluralism at work in the whole of Eurasia. This depth, which means the intensity and duration of the cultural relationship, can deny legitimacy to group isolationism, the ghetto of identity that is at the heart of the deadly conflicts between cultures emerging on every continent.

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