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Out of mind, out of sight : are minds of Asians and Westerners different?

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OUT OF MIND, OUT OF SIGHT. ARE MINDS OF ASIANS AND WESTERNERS DIFFERENT?

- Krzysztof Mudyń -

Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought. How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... and Why*, The Free Press, New York 2004.

The work of Richard E. Nisbett, a distinguished contemporary psychologist, although not monumental (in regards to volume or form) is unique, and deserves attention for a number of reasons.

To begin with, the weight of the issues discussed is considerable. The central problem under analysis in this work is: How much do the cognitive processes of people in the East differ from (very broadly understood) cognitive processes of representatives of the West (Americans of European origin)? The author formulates his intention in the following way:

The present book will reach its goal if it inclines Western readers to consider the possibility that there is another reasonable way of thinking about the world and that it can serve as a mirror, in which they have a chance to carefully and critically examine their own beliefs and mental habits (p. 19).

Secondly, for the work of an experimental psychologist, the results of the cited experiments and the conducted research are set against a uniquely broad social-historical and temporal context, starting from Confucius and Aristotle and ending with a contrast between the views of F. Fukuyama and S. Huntington regarding the evolutionary direction of modern civilization.

Next, Nisbett's work takes advantage of a populist form to concretely and concisely translate the results of many very contemporary (and not well known) studies as well as their theoretical implications. The whole formal academic staffage, in the sense of footnotes, references, numbers, tables, and graphs, has been reduced to a minimum, in essence to a few conceptual figures and a bibliography. While reading, the motto comes to mind that (good) populist works are like children's books - they should be written in the same way for adults, but better.

In a formal aspect, the work generally consists of eight chapters and an epilogue, preceded by acknowledgments and an introduction. Besides the bibliography, it also has an index of names and items – which contrasts with the populist form of its contents. The first two chapters have an introductory and somewhat historical character, since the author goes back to the time of Confucius and compares the Confucius tradition with the intellectual tradition of the ancient Greeks – represented in the most systematic way by the works of Aristotle. The next two chapters are devoted to the consequences and meaning of differences – which are formulated in the middle chapters – for the present day and for the future, in the sense of possible evolutionary directions for our globalizing civilization. In chapters 3-7 the author presents the results of experimental studies that show, in a systematic way, the different mentalities of the representatives of Western culture and the inhabitants of Eastern Asia (China, Japan, and Korea). The author in fact suggests that, “The essence of the book is found in chapters 4 to 7” (p. 19), but chapter 3 also appears to be important as (going beyond the specifics of cognitive processes) it familiarizes the reader with a very fundamental difference – the way in which we treating ourselves (our “I”) in both cultures.

In chapter 1, Nisbett reconstructs the mentality of the ancient Greeks and contrasts it with the mental characteristics of their Chinese contemporaries. And, as the author suggests, insofar as in the Greeks it’s easy to detect a strong sense of individual agency expressed by the belief that an individual can and should decide about his own life – “the Chinese counterpart of the Greek sense of agency was harmony” (p. 25). That is why in the case of the Asians rather a sense of collective agency should be discussed. Greek philosophy as opposed to Taoism, Confucianism or Buddhism was very analytical and focused on specific objects that were readily (and also a bit uncritically) abstracted from their surroundings. The Greeks’ way of thinking was also more static and more abstract in comparison to Chinese “dialecticism” and pragmatic concretism. Formal logic along with the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction, on which Western culture is based to a great extent, could not have developed in China. For that cultural tradition the idea of abstraction from context and content would have been something strange, foreign, extravagant and unpractical. It could be said that insofar as European philosophy, starting from Antiquity, paid a lot of attention to pursuing and demonstrating contradictions within the confines of given concepts or among them, for Eastern mentality it was considerably more important to look for relationships and interdependencies.

In chapter 2, the author continues his deliberation on the possible conditions for mental differences of Easterners and Westerners in the broadest context,

starting from the natural environment, economy, and social structure and ending with hypotheses on the processing of concrete cognitive processes. It could be stated that inasmuch as the first chapter is written from a historical perspective (diachronic), the next chapter concentrates on synchronic aspects – and as it were on present day.

The contents of chapter 3 allow the reader to realize that thinking about ourselves as separate beings (and in essence autonomous ones) and generally thinking about ourselves in the singular is to a large extent a product of our Western culture. Even an obvious by appearance belief that “each man is bestowed with a set of characteristic, unique traits,” and similarly that “people want to be unique and be someone different than everybody else,” becomes problematic and even false when contrasted with Eastern mentality. A lot of cited studies point to the fact that Asians more often than Americans define themselves rather in situational contexts than as separate from others, as if not believing that they have abstract, unchanging personal traits. They also present themselves more often in relation to other people, as it were thinking about themselves in the first person plural (“we”, “us” instead of “I”, “me” or “mine”). They feel more as members of their group (than autonomous individuals) in comparison to Americans, but at the same time characteristically keep groups of strangers at a greater distance.

Indications of this individualistic perspective, typical of the Western world, are present according to the author, even in stories addressed to small children learning to read. The first sentences in an American textbook, used till the 1960's were – “Dick runs. Dick jumps. Dick runs and jumps.” Chinese children on the other hand started their education (in the same time period) with the sentences – “The older brother takes care of the younger brother. The older brother loves the younger brother. The younger brother loves the older brother” (p. 63).

Differences in expressing themselves and their relations with other people between the representatives of these two, contrasting cultures can be described, among others, on a scale of independence vs. interdependence. For Americans society is rather *Gesellschaft* while for Asians it is mainly *Gemeinschaft* (commonwealth). The author states that,

The discussion was virtually unknown in ancient China. In contemporary Asia it isn't very popular. In essence, all rhetoric and argumentation, which is second nature to Western man, is practically non-existent in Asia (p. 72).

As a result, aggressive rhetoric and argumentation (as opposed to “conformist” tendencies) still remains something foreign for Asians and these differences are

apparent in such remote it would seem contexts as a docket, the structure of a research article, a school class or a negotiation.

Chapters 4-7 present the results of studies on various, specific aspects of cognitive processes among representatives of both cultures. In no way can they be reported here even shortly. In general it can be said that representatives of Western culture think more analytically, at the cost of a more holistic encompassment of situations and reality in general. To illustrate, let's recall the results of the often cited experiment by T. Masuda who shows the presence of cross-cultural differences already at the level of attention and visual perception. Students from the University of Kyoto and the University of Michigan were shown "animated objects" depicting aquatic life. In each 20 second film, shown twice, there was one larger fish that was lighter in color and moved faster than anything else - as it were "playing" the role of the central object. After each presentation, the students were asked about what they saw. It turned out that even though both Japanese and American students mentioned the "central fish" equally often, in their statements the Japanese referred to background elements (plants, animals, stones, and air bubbles) over 60% more often. Moreover, Americans started their statements three times as often by referring to central objects (fish) than the Japanese students, who talked about relationships between background elements twice as much. The latter started their statements in a manner such as: "This looked like a pond," while American students usually began their statements with: "There was a big fish there, maybe a trout, swimming from the right to the left."

In the second part of the experiment participants were shown pictures, half of which depicted objects present in the previous presentations and half of which were new, and were asked to select those that they had seen before. Some of the objects were presented in their original background settings and some in new ones. In the case of American students, the type of background (new or original) did not influence the efficacy of object recognition. However, Japanese students recognized objects presented on an unchanged background far better than objects presented in new surroundings. This suggests that the given object became cognitively "associated" with the setting and was encoded in precisely such a way.

Concluding this barely begun account, I encourage not only those, who for whatever reason are interested in cross-cultural differences, but also all those who are interested in discovering human cognition - to familiarize themselves with the work of Richard Nisbett.