

## Global Bioethics and Culture

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If we consider Bioethics as a forum of interdisciplinary commitment to the issues posed by the development of biotechnology, it is certainly deeply related to what we may call Culture. However, there is a great ambiguity in the practice of Bioethics.

When they are aware of the necessity of a social debate on the role of technosciences in society, scientists often feel that the fears and misunderstandings raised by the new technologies can be waived by a better education of the public, a stronger involvement of the physicians and a proper attention paid by society to the respect of universal principles such as Human Rights.

This rational approach to Bioethics is also shared by members of other disciplines and by public policy makers. It tends to create a parallel between, on the one hand, science and its applications, which follow a rational logic, methodology and use common words and concepts, and, on the other hand, Bioethics and Biolaw, which are supposed to bring appropriate answers to the human consequences derived from the use of biotechnology according to a set of universal values and using a common reasoning and decision making process.

As science Bioethics is then becoming a global and standardised phenomenon. But, at the same time we proclaim the Human Genome the Common Heritage of Humanity, underlying the fundamental unity of the human species, we are still the actors and witnesses of communitarian behaviours leading to civil wars and genocides and challenging what we consider as human dignity.

Regarding the application of universal bioethics principles, many difficulties appear in the practice.

What is, for example, the meaning of the individual informed consent when the social culture implies either a collective decision within the family or the decision made by the person responsible for the group?

A conflict opposing the Human Rights principles to the cultural and social values seems therefore inevitable in many circumstances.

As Culture is however as fundamental for the human species as biodiversity is for the living world, we should not consider Human Rights and Bioethics as a static reality but merely as a socio-dynamic one.

The universality of Human Rights does not imply that their application should lead to a new absolutism. We believe that Human Rights principles should be applied as much as possible in a contextual situation.

This is the reason why we favour the emergence of an “ethno-bioethics”.

First, this would imply acknowledging the existence of other systems of cultural values able to generate their own social norms.

Second, it will lead to abolishing any idea of hierarchy between the different cultural values although it is important to exchange views and even to provoke explanation, sometimes necessarily conflictual between such views.

Third, it is necessary that we consider the cultural systems, mainly based on geographical areas, are not closed systems.

For example, different studies have shown that the Chinese view on abortion was not only expressed in the official governmental position but did also take into account other opinions. Cultures and values are indeed interactive although the mechanisms of this interaction may be complex.

German Culture was imported into 18th century Russia and the knowledge of Russian Culture was brought to France by specialists of German studies. We all know that emigration, not only cultural but economic, has played an important and decisive role in these cultural exchanges.

As Milan Kundera reminded us with lucidity and intelligence: “small nations constitute “another Europe” whose evolution is parallel to that of great nations... In its best period, a small nation may be viewed culturally as an antique Greek city”.

The relationship between Bioethics and Culture has to be interpreted in the same way.