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***HOMO VIATOR:* A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

Abstract

This research starts from the premise that in the 21st century shifting personal identities can be better understood in relation to other identity markers (such as traditional heritage, ethnicity, the historical past etc.). My overall objective in this paper is to place the concept of migration (*Homo Viator*, the man on a journey) in its broader cultural context and to address issues of diversity and permissiveness. Since we live in a globalised world with very different beliefs, societal ideals, moral values and community structures, our investigation on the topic is conducted within a pluralistic framework and from an interdisciplinary perspective. Given that we must face the difficulties in establishing a universal peace-building process through a comparative analysis of the *man on a journey* in the so called “Eastern” and „Western” civilisation area, such an approach will provide a well-grounded evaluation of the abovementioned trends, according to global standards, criteria and principles.

Keywords: Authenticity, cross-culture, *Homo Viator*, spiritual trip, freedom

The comparative perspective is based on an idea of a shared humanity and a cross-cultural comprehensibility corresponding with the idea of equality and dignity in all human beings. Humanity is travelling on a path – always moving towards something, for life is a journey, an adventure of which we are an integral part. Today, travelling features a universal figure: from *Homo numericus* (the “digital man”) to *Homo mobilis* (Georges Amar), everybody is on the road. As the names multiply, the message is loud and clear: the human being is now *Homo Viator*, a constant wanderer, driven

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to leave his/her birthplace and travel further on. The Way and Wayfarer – this is an everlasting antagonism. Does the traveller choose the path or does the road call on the restless soul? The challenge lies in the way one seeks to answer this question. We do not choose to be on the move since it is our existential situation: indeed, we are guided by imagination or become explorers by quite pragmatic purposes. In this article, the metaphor of the journey is explored throughout the East and the West – namely, the Man of *Dao*² (the Road, the Way of the Universe) and *Homo Viator*,³ connecting the way and the wayfarer, being and existence.

Our being is nothing more than a voyage, a peregrination or a state of permanent motion. The stranger is a wanderer between two worlds – by travelling he achieves the auretic and symbolic potential of a divine being, on the one hand, and the suffering of a god-like human, such as the adventurer Ulysses, on the other. The wayfarer may also become a sublime existential figure (as in one of the outstanding works written by the theist existentialist Gabriel Marcel⁴), or an extraordinary “tramp-character” – a man who finds his real meaning in a message coming from outside through the metaphor of constant movement. The state of mind prompting someone to embark on a migration, pilgrimage, or any kind of journey can only be experienced. The adventurer leads us to the so-called “soldier-of-fortune” situation. The Man as a *Viator*, taken with his hope resulting from the trust of “what is available for him,” ends within the mysterious borders of a meta-problematic realm.

The mobile person is subjected to many interpretations, of which I would like to highlight four, namely: descriptive-analytical, socio-critical, civil-democratic and normative- existential. The analytical perspective represents *Homo Viator* as a carrier and a brilliant exponent of the key trends of modern society – deterritorialisation and individualism.

² The Chinese word “dao” (道) has two basic meanings, namely “pathway” and “method.”

³ The concepts of viator; *peregrinos*, peregrination; *alienus*, alienation on the one hand, and *ordo*, *ordinare*, order on the other, are quite essential to medieval thought and life, as well as of the whole of European Christian heritage. In late-modern culture we find a kind of hypertrophy of the idea of alienation and the figure of the Stranger, so vividly described by Camus, Sartre, Le Clézio etc.

⁴ He narrates a journey made by a man toward his own “self”, toward “thou” and “An Absolute Thou,” by means of “homo viator”: an existential experience leading to “Being.”

The socio-critical concept emphasises the constructed nature of the moving personality. A huge industry is mobilised to produce consumers for the products of mobility. Although these products are creative, attractive, and prestigious, such a “dummy traveller” is just a walk-on character in a play written by others. In contrast, however, the step from an immobilised to a mobile condition, from a non-free state of mind to freedom of conscience is a major democratic achievement. With the transition from a closed to an open society, more and more young, or young-at-heart people understand life as a transition from a smaller to a larger world. For the post-communist personality, the *Homo Viator* state of mind is experienced as pure liberty. From the “Eastern” past until the “Western” today, the move is also intensely comprehended as a normative and existential realm.

There is always a kind of topography which corresponds to the temperament of the traveller. The *Way*, as seeking, detection, reconstruction, and the *Path*, as an imaginary geography, magically interact. Although there is no logic or causal links between the movements in space and the transformations of identity, there is poetics and the “ethics of the road.” *Homo Viator* is a controversial figure. On a global scale, he is active and can freely consume his access to mobility; on a local scale, however, there is a kind of imposed passivity, as Zygmunt Bauman describes. According to Bauman (Bauman 2011), such an individual fails to build himself as a social actor, since he is devoid of one of the effective tools for this purpose – that is, mobility. Only freedom of movement can take him out of his marginal locality – geographically, socially and symbolically. On the one hand, we encounter the implementation of a neo-liberal vision of globalisation with its products, images and symbols in an attempt to form the present-day “*viator – consumer*.” On the other hand, the Man as a *Viator* is an expression of identity-related searches, discoveries, dialogues, as well as of the demand for challenges and independence. One of the things that intercultural dialogue has helped us realise, moreover, is the imaginability of ‘others’ as somehow like ‘us’ in spite of diversity.

The mere increase in the flows of migration can be interpreted as an example of the freedom of movement and democratisation. However, loneliness and solipsism are intimately woven into each postmodern identity. The fluid existence of the Man on a journey makes the strong connection, the interference between identity and strangeness, natural and expected. In his expedition conceived by another person, the newcomer

“looks with someone else’s eyes, listens with extraneous ears” (Ciapalo 1997, 265), shooting images with a camera that “blows up” the familiar world. Within the alchemy of identities, the extrinsic becomes more intimately related than the intrinsic, while magical realism is unsurpassed in the reversal of the habitual. The immigrant is an outsider, a stranger and foreigner – an adventurer, belonging neither to his homeland anymore, nor to his new country of residence. In the most tragic scenario, he is a homeless wanderer who does not know the cemetery in which he will be buried when his life comes to an end one day.

It is through the movements within this tension of values that the collective myth is perpetuated through highly codified acts and in meaningful spaces. According to Plato,⁵ the category “*heteros genos*” is used by the Eleatic philosophers as a conceptualised otherness, opposed to the symbolic unity of the self. Hence, we may conclude that through this identification of “*alterity*,” the Stranger’s difference and irreducibility to something common is acknowledged and justified. Through this, the reputation of the citizen of the polis is appreciated more than the foreigner’s; the validity of “truth” is recognised on account of the “non-truth” (ἀλήθεια instead of falsehood). These and other similar binary concepts of ritualised rejection philosophically engendered the background by which the Greeks experienced “the Man on a journey.” In such a way, their practice of identifying and publicly denouncing the lazy, wandering and suspicious outsider corresponds to the ancient question of how to incorporate entities classified as “negative,” “other,” or “unlimited” into the Greek narrative. *Homo Viator*, in this context, indicates a rejected figure whose departure represents an act of purification, juxtaposed to the “*homo sacer*” in the corresponding Roman life-world, used in an exclusionary ritual – “his symbolic execution, his expulsion from the community.”⁶

Meanwhile, the hermeneutic approach to the philosophical background of *Homo Viator* reveals an aspiration to combine the traditional values of the East with the achievements of the modern world. Eastern cultural heritage attracts Europeans not only with its mirror of *otherness*

⁵ In “The Sophist” (256 e, 257 c, d, e, 258–261).

⁶ The *homo sacer*, as presented in Festus’ *On the Significance of Words*, is the man whose character was judged as criminal by the people. “His murderer is granted impunity, however the *sacer*’s death cannot be marked by ritual or sacrifice by the State”. (Ricker 2013, 56).

but mainly with the harmonic relationship of man and nature, as oneness with the Way (道 – *Dao*). Many authors, including poets, writers, philosophers, cultural anthropologists, scientists, and so on, have adopted the fundamental difference between this world and the West as a way of dichotomous thinking based on ontological and epistemological distinctions. Such presuppositions have become the starting point for elaborate theories, comparative studies and political science developments relating to the “Far Eastern spirit,” peoples, traditions and destinies. We ask ourselves whether to construct an overview concerning the range of such different issues as an imaginary whole (covering a boundless civilisational area) is justified and to what extent. “East Asia” as a kind of reproduced stereotype defies full comprehension with its distance, waywardness, and irreducible otherness.

The same can be said for the mysterious figure of *Homo Viator* taken in the Western sense of personality. “Culture” in its turn is a vague and expansive notion which includes many other aspects of human life, namely: folklore, religion (popular beliefs), architecture, literature, aesthetics, and so on. We do not mean to imply here that the Eastern spirit can be expressed in these terms alone. Confucianism is often taken as a metonym for “high culture,” since the educated elite in East Asia had a material interest in asserting the pre-eminence of this teaching. The bureaucratic civil service exam, a political invention of Imperial China, melded Confucian philosophy and state power together in a hegemonic union. Falling into such a perspective, we might miss noting that Daoist influence on the East Asian mentality is no less large and complex.⁷ Although the Eastern *Homo Viator* is not moved by political aspirations, he deals with the question of the true, genuine man responsive through wisdom to the call of the Way (Dao).

The transience of being and universal variability have been an object of scholarly attention both as a philosophical theme and as a social phenomenon within specific Daoist texts and in different aspects and manifestations. In this regard, the Wayfarer (the Man of Dao) is an unconventional personality, tempted by the call of the road, not belonging to his own environment. Taking into account the Eastern principle of difference – each

⁷ Far Eastern culture has always been more than Confucianism – it includes other philosophical movements and thought perspectives, namely: Legalism, Mohism, Buddhism and, of course, local shamanism (Daoism, Sintoism).

thing is unique and exists outside of itself in accordance with the *Dao* – and the principle of transformation, we may conclude that the only constancy is that *myriad beings are always shifting and becoming*. Reducing the vastness of cultural belief, production and performance in East Asia to a single, and far from all-encompassing, rubric is obviously flawed. *Dao* is somehow the core of Chinese culture, the pivot around which all the other elements rotate. This kind of speculation, however, should not limit our capacity to appreciate the full significance of other cultural elements. Buddhism is just as influential; indeed nowadays it might be more central to Far Eastern culture than Daoism.

Eastern narratives often associate the free journey of the mind with an earlier, ideal stage of the development of Heaven and Earth, and of human society. The spiritual journey with its aspiration to virtue, wisdom and transcendence of the corporeal condition is a full-scale allegory of the mental transformation through wandering. This type of trip is conceived as departing from the routine scheme – a departure into an imaginary realm for the sake of a higher state of consciousness and final liberation. Among those who leave the mundane world, the wayfarer is continually on the road, has multiple and open-ended destinations, often improvising his itinerary along the way. His only destination ultimately comes to be the being itself, its illumination and transcendence. The Far Eastern god-like sage wanders above the ordinary situation of the activities of daily life, even if he still lives among other human beings. The “Man on a journey” can be compared with the Western traveller insofar as both are inclined to move – whether inside the mind or out in the world – led by a lack of self-possession, or by equanimity.

Let us now face some of the consequences arising from the tendency to construe philosophically the ideal sage as a wanderer. Daoists focus on the non-standard, non-competitive mind, challenging the legitimacy of their own conceptual schemes. The identification of wandering with the wise man’s life represents the transience of human existence with its difficulties and sudden turns. The movement may be centrifugal – transgressing the boundaries of the familiar for the remote and quasi-legendary; leaving the locus of a stable identity and going to a far-distant, unknown world. Or it can be centripetal – longing for what is perceived to be the ancient centre, involving a ‘return’ to a mythic place of cultural origin. Daoism has a broader influence than Confucianism also because it has been conventionally practiced as a religion in a much more prevalent

manner.⁸ And this is important, as it provides the culture praising the Way for possessing a practical existence that Confucianism might lack.

Homo Viator in East Asia has many faces which, as we can see above, make it an ideal attractor in the post-modern cultural situation – many artistic trends have been inspired by this exquisite mixture of Chinese cosmology and aesthetics. Despising technocratic rationality and the artificiality of modern culture, the cultural orientations broadly associated with the “wandering man,” provide an ideal source of alternative creativity. Post-modern intellectuals and artists from Japan and from other East Asian countries like the Daoist anti-paternalistic message, its playfulness, informality, and insistence on the existential interdependence of life and death.⁹ In the Daoist sense, *Homo Viator* discloses the impermanence of the hidden meaning of life. This is the idea that the universe or some fundamental issues in society may not necessarily be manifested in philosophical theories but can be embodied in the performance of poetry, allegory, and drama. It carries out a kind of philosophical criticism – as we are always in transition, so-called “common sense” may exist in unsuspected branches of knowledge and modes of being. In a certain sense, the Daoist worldview, with its non-Cartesian logic, praises the virtue of living in harmony with nature – indeed, this is not a new fad as it seems in the West, but rather a return to ancestral attitudes *vis-a-vis* natural life.

Returning to the West, we may say that we are not at home in the world; in fact, we are on the way home. We long to be in a place of comfort, yet generally we are not, as there is an inherent “not-yet” penetrating

⁸ Daoist religion is extensively practiced in all Chinese cultural locations, but also in its combination with Buddhism, which yields Chan Buddhism. The esoteric form of Daoism is associated with meditation, visualisation and breathing practices abducting into a world of bizarre cosmography, considering the relation between the body and the cosmos. Ranging from body images to “star voyages,” from heavenly constellations to the underworld in the so-called *True Form Charts*, these objects collectively create an archive of Daoist imagery. We should be very careful in explaining how particular visual forms did specific types of work when we examine the exoteric Daoist works, including the material culture and spatial design of the ritual space, performance and liturgical paintings.

⁹ “The Way that can be walked is not the eternal Way” – this is stated at the beginning of *Daodejing*, the Daoist “Bible.” It discloses the impermanence of the hidden meaning of life, not in a metaphysical sense, but as a kind of existential analytic, or a so-called “concrete philosophy” (the term is invention of Gabriel Marcel – the author of “*Homo Viator*”).

the ultimate depths of being. G. Marcel's *Homo Viator* – man in his pilgrim condition – is situated at the centre of all interpersonal relations: the attitude of hope, the community in its temporal and supratemporal aspects, the alienation and the virtue of personal fidelity. In his concrete analyses of all human preoccupations, he reveals some modern threats to traditional ethical values. *Homo Viator* is a living example of philosophical concern with the urgent problems of man, obsessed with a destructive will to have power through technical rationality. Alluding to the lack of stability (*statu viatoris*), Marcel refers to our condition and rediscovers the values on which we may depend, with a strong emphasis on our urgent need of hope. Far beyond daily platitudes, disclosing the texture of current human experience, he points out that the Western tradition contains truths essential to our contemporary life.

The “new nomadism” is a sort of subversive discourse and metaphor that challenges the very idea of a border. The existential journey rearranges the major cultural strata, but also declasses them, for better or worse. It takes place simultaneously in space, time and inverts the status hierarchy – it brings the passenger thousands of miles away while, at the same time, leading them to climb up or slide down the steps of the social ladder. Sometimes the journey is constructed as a strong object of desire which minimises its pragmatic function – the arrival – and reinforces the imaginary and libidinal dimension. Departure and arrival separate from each other: the first has strongly positive connotations; the second is brought down and devalued: “The journey is much more pleasant than the arrival. The arrival has the unpleasant smell of the end of the road, the bitter taste of monotony and stagnation” (Bauman 2011, 23). The neo-nomadic condition and state of mind ensures we are always alert and problematise everything. If looking for new horizons, *Homo Viator* needs to go beyond the boundaries, pass through difficulties and explore the interspaces.

As finite beings, we are blessed and, at the same time, cursed with the status of *being on the way* – we have not come to this world to be stagnant. Although the gift of travelling is what actually makes us human, we also feel as if we are called to suffer, doomed to wander the earth, instead of prospering peacefully at home. We ourselves cannot take a rest and create the abode that we are longing for. According to J. Moltmann (2022), we are kept in an “unresolved openness to the world” – an outstanding issue which may be resolved when the “God that promises fulfils His promises.” This indicates that we are not only journeying, but that we

are simultaneously in a kind of state of anticipation, driven by an inner need to keep moving and waiting, since we are not the ones who decide what our final destination (τέλος) will be. However, we tend to ignore this fateful finitude, motivated by the idea that we can create our own ends and take shelter in our ideals. Due to the fact that we live in the “not-yet” state of being, we try to make fulfilment happen through our actions, doing what we think is the best for us. Led by this illusion, we posit a false impression – one of who we really are and what exactly means to be at rest – thus distorting the true meaning of life.

Through the figure of *Homo Viator*, alienated from the topographically and imaginatively defined community, the social collective reaffirms its foundation, prevalent ethical framework and future development.¹⁰ Furthermore, the possibility for communal recognition by gradual rejection of an “outside element” confronts dynamic identity formation and exemplifies the difficult birth of the concept of pluralism and divergence. Through this step of renewing society’s self-awareness, another critical social phenomenon has appeared in modern European culture, namely: “the relation to the stranger is regulated by the law of right, by the becoming-right of justice” (Kearney 2003, 70). However, in different cultures we find various interpretations and manifestations of a “deinstitutionalization procedure which formally removed the links connecting the *Viator* to the... citizen” (Ricker 2013, 50). The presence of a community, anticipative of the step where the wanderer and the ritual of rejection meet in a heavily codified space and time, inevitably leads to expulsion. The predominant Western tradition articulates the collective desire to abolish the “alien element,” and to reaffirm the symbolic power of the public audience in a dynamic relationship with the sovereign. Without this support from the multitude, the sovereign could not have even initiated the ritual, as a “civil society necessarily implies the ability and instinct of reflexivity, and that which is beyond the reifying habits of the state and nature” (Tester 1992, 8). The role of the average citizen to condemn *Homo Viator* was mirrored in the

¹⁰ *Catharsis* is the most frequent term used to describe the sensation of purification – κάθαρσις is the way by which the society refreshes its collective memory. Identity in this case is regarded as a “cohesive unit endowed with qualities such as shared symbolic references, similar cognitive categories, and unique traits overtly distinguishing it from other societies” (Ricker 2013, 50).

intention of the sovereign to reiterate the cultural norms which differentiated the settled, righteous and civilised, from the “wandering threat” of the nomad.

The extent to which the rituals concerning the person with *statu viatoris* vary from culture to culture reveals three main universal components, as discussed in the abovementioned theoretical framework: identification and even worship (awe) in some Far Eastern cultures; condemnation and subsequent rejection, coupled with *catharsis* in Greek-Roman culture; and mistrust, stigmatisation up to expulsion in modern European history. As nowadays, great attention is paid to the post-modern reshaping of identities and communities, our focus is on multiculturalism and its place in the public debate. In this diverse but increasingly interconnected world, there is an urgent need to find ways of reasonable agreement and peaceful co-existence. What is essential now is the mutual engagement of different perspectives and heterogeneous traditions: inter-religious and inter-ethnic communication is required to bring together previously opposing groups by means of an open dialogue and a pluralistic approach to differences.

To conclude, discourse referring to the idea of homogeneity and stability of the group belonging should be rejected and displaced by another, one which is suitable for studying identity dynamics, which is predominantly moving, interactive and shifting. The claim that diversity gives rise to civilisational enrichment must be well-provided with reliable criteria for cultural identity, with this problem being very current since Western society has become more and more multicultural and, at the same time, non-discriminatory. In turn, East Asian communities and civilisations try to keep their “melting pot” of identities intact. The holistic view of the world is called to overcome an indefinite, often vague and hollow identity. Thus, when the “agents” are not separated from each other by insurmountable differences, there is a possibility for compatibility and reconciliation of more than one viewpoint.

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