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Cultural Dialogue: the Western Encounter with 'the Rest'

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INTRODUCTION

One way of conceptualizing what cultural dialogue might look like in the second decade of the 21st century is to take a philosophical construct and apply it to the present situation. The concept is the Canadian academic Charles Taylor's discussion of *social imaginaries*. Today the Euro-Atlantic community can be seen as a collective, political and institutional incarnation of Western civilization at a particular moment in its long history. Taylor employs the term to describe the way people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others and what normative expectations they have of each other (Taylor, 2004: 171). A social imaginary, in other words, involves common stories, narratives and myths that make possible common practices, which in turn bind people to certain norms of behaviour. Institutionally, these human beings come together with the aim of forming political entities with certain ends in view, including the primary one of *security*.

In short, a social imaginary involves a common understanding of how the world works that makes possible common practices. It offers people perspective on history and explains where they stand in space and time, including their relation to other societies. And every social imaginary offers a sense of how things work interwoven with how they *ought* to. From this derives a sense of disappointment when things go differently from what people expect.

The Western social imaginary as understood today is a product of the Second World War. It was embodied in the Atlantic Charter signed by the United States, Britain and eight governments in exile in 1941. The only country that did not sign at the time was France, which delayed doing so until its liberation from German occupation. The charter embodied Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms': from want, from fear, of worship and of speech – two negative and two positive values (in Isaiah Berlin's terminology). It is quite amazing that it has survived so long. Back in the early 1990s the editor of the conservative American journal *The National Interest* suggested that the political 'West' was not a natural construct but a highly artificial one. It had taken a life-threatening, overtly hostile 'East' to bring it into existence. It was therefore extremely doubtful whether in the absence of such an enemy the 'West' could long survive (Harries, 1993). Yet all those who have speculated that it has lost its rationale in the post-Cold War world have been confounded by its resilience. And this, in turn, has been traced back to the fact that it still remains, in its own imagination, at least, a values- rather than an interest-based coalition. The West, writes Stan Sloan, is a community 'with roots in the hearts as in the minds of the partners' (Sloan, 2003: 4). Even Robert Kagan, who made the headlines some years ago with his criticism of Europe, seems to have changed his mind. NATO, it would seem, does indeed serve a purpose, if only because its members' 'aspirations for humanity are the same' (Kagan, 2003: 50).

It is also important to add that the Western social imaginary did not exclude separate national ones. France and Germany have their own founding myths that make possible the Franco-German community that the young Michel Tournier discovered when he taught in Germany in the early 1950s. He and his fellow students, he wrote in his memoirs, found that the two countries 'belonged to each other at last' (Tournier, 1989: 71). (It is a striking phrase.)

Some of those imaginaries are now beginning to come into question. As the Eurozone crisis deepens, so the European imaginary is becoming more difficult to sell to public opinion, especially in Germany. A widening gap is opening between a transnational elite – whether 'Europe', 'Brussels', or the Franco-German axis – that still subscribes to the stories it has been telling since the 1950s and a public opinion – whether driven by nationalism, populism, anti-capitalism or just democracy – that finds some of those stories difficult to believe.

As the United States enters a post-American era so the message of American exceptionalism is becoming also less easy on the ear. It has taken an ugly twist of late, becoming the angry refuge of an America in denial about the real state of the world. Behind it lies anger as the country's relative decline has become more manifest in stagnant or falling incomes, repossessed homes and massive debts burdens. The idea of exceptionalism served Americans well in the Cold War, as it had in the Second World War. It again came naturally to mind on 9/11 when the United States found itself under direct attack. But the financial cost of the War on Terror (at \$3.2 trillion only marginally less than the cost of the Second World War, at \$3.6 trillion in today's dollars) has exhausted the country and left it uncertain of its future (Brown University, 2011).

The great projects in which America engaged at the end of the Cold War – such as humanitarian intervention, civil society promotion and nation-building – have far less appeal than they once had. And within the West the prospects of eventual separation if not divorce are beginning to be raised, with only 40% of Americans in a recent German Marshall Fund poll identifying Europe as a key strategic interest in the 21st century. Of these a depressingly high number of respondents were aged over 40 (*International Herald Tribune*, 12 September 2011).

The chief explanation for this lies in the fact that two very different social imaginaries are contending for the Western soul, while a third that has emerged has met with broad support in the non-Western world.

The **liberal** 'West' is still strongly internationalist and expansionist in that it sees its values as universal. It states explicitly that these values are suitable for export ('making the world safe for democracy' is still a principal theme).

The **cosmopolitan** 'West' is largely behavioural. It is more normative than value-affirming for it is derived from transnational values and translated into specific norms of behaviour. Norms acquire particular importance, writes Peter Katzenstein, when they crystallize through institutionalization. Once institutionalized, they do not simply express individual preferences but become part of an objective reality for those subscribing to them. The problem is that Europe and the United States cannot always agree on norms of behaviour and therefore sometimes struggle to work together as one. To quote Katzenstein again, the United States' norms impact on identity formation (they are constitutive) while the EU's norms define standards of appropriate behaviour (they are regulatory) (Katzenstein, 1996: 19). In so far as both inform, enable and bind actors at the same time, the existence of two such different normative regimes brings the Western powers into conflict. This was the case recently over Libya, with Germany and Poland distinctly 'off-side', aligning themselves with the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) who could not bring themselves in the UN to vote for the intervention or against it, but preferred to sit doggedly on the fence.

In the non-Western world, a **communitarian** vision is often held in competition to those traditionally espoused by the West, prioritizing the values of the community over the rights of the individual. This has led to the talk of 'Asian values' and an Arab Spring that is linked to an Islamic community that inspires some of the Islamist parties now contending for political power in free elections across the Arab world.

So, which of these visions, if any, are sustainable, and which is most likely to sustain a cultural dialogue between different societies in the 21st century?

LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

'We had better proclaim ourselves the knights errant of liberty and organize at once a crusade against all despotic governments,' US President John Taylor declared in 1852. There was still a place for the use of the sword but only to advance what he called 'the doctrines of republicanism'. The only legitimate reason for going to war was the improvement of the human lot. War could educate for freedom. There have been many different variations on this theme. 'Making the world safe for democracy' remains its most famous expression.

This was reaffirmed in President George H. W. Bush's Christmas 1991 address, delivered during the implosion of the Soviet Union. In his delivery, Bush had all the breathless elation of a baseball coach whose team had won the World Series. 'This is a victory for democracy and freedom! It is a victory for the moral force of our values.' The message was clear. American values had triumphed and Russian leaders could be instructed in the art of becoming good capitalists, which became Western policy over the next 10 years. For the past 20 years, however annual opinion polls have clearly shown that 60% of Russians actually believe that Western liberal democracy is not for them, and that security requires Russia to find a different model of development (Sixsmith, 2011).

Yet 1991 was also the year the West persuaded the UN to recognize that states have responsibilities as well as rights, and that those that fail to acknowledge the former raise legitimate international concerns. The UN General Assembly accepted 'the right to intervene' in catastrophic situations. In 2005 it endorsed the 'responsibility to protect' victims of genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. This was the spirit behind NATO's intervention in Libya – an example of 'muscular liberalism', claimed UK Prime Minister David Cameron, though not, he was quick to point out, a continuation of 'liberal vigilante-ism' that had been a feature of the Blair-Bush years. For the invasion of Iraq came at the very height of America's unipolar moment, which is now over and has been for some time. In the event, the rest of the world went along with NATO because Muammar Gaddafi had few friends, but they disapproved of it. They are unlikely to abstain again in similar UN votes in the future.

Before the Arab Spring, the non-Western world was underwhelmed by the plight of the Burmese people following cyclone *Nargis* in 2008, when France threatened to airlift aid to the country in defiance of the opposition of its military junta. The West had to back down. It was the first – and possibly last – example, wrote one British commentator, of 'gunboat philanthropy' (De Waal, 2008:19). The West also found itself disappointed that African countries would not condemn Robert Mugabe's flagrant breaking of the electoral rules in Zimbabwe. To its surprise it has discovered that even liberal powers like India tend to have *illiberal* foreign policies. Their domestic liberalism does not translate into liberal internationalism.

All of this makes it difficult to imagine expanding the Western alliance into a 'League of Democracies' as mooted by US Senator John McCain during the 2008 presidential election campaign (McCain, 2007: 19-35). If the purpose of NATO was no longer territorial defence, wrote a Washington analyst at the time, but bringing together countries with similar values to combat global problems, then the alliance no longer needed an exclusive transatlantic identity (Daalder, 2006: 105-12). What is the West, however, if not a community of *liberal* societies?

The chief challenge the West may find in Libya over the next few years is the one it has found in Bosnia and even Kosovo, namely that liberalism and democracy are not always compatible. In the words of Philippe Schmitter, 'Liberalism either as a conception of political liberty or as a doctrine for economic policy may have coincided with the rise of democracy. But it has never been immutably or

unambiguously linked to its practise' (Cited in Williams, 2011: 146). Again and again, the West has been disappointed to find people in places like Gaza voting into power distinctly illiberal groups such as Hamas.

This may be true of Libya too. Constitutional liberalism is more than just electing a government or offering 'people power'. It is liberal because it recognizes individual rights and responsibilities; it is constitutional because it recognizes the non-negotiable demands of human dignity. The Western understanding of democracy is unlikely to take root in most of NATO's partnership' countries, and most unlikely of all in post-Arab Spring Middle East. As Michael Doyle contends, Immanuel Kant actively distrusted unfettered, democratic majoritarianism and his arguments offer no support for the claim that NATO – as a security alliance – relies upon most: that all participatory politics is likely to be peaceful. Thucydides associated popular rule with aggression; Machiavelli with imperialism; most recently we have associated it with ethnic cleansing in places like the Balkans (Williams, 2011: 145).

The West now has to recognize that there are other stories, models and narratives than its own. The very success of the liberal world, which from its own vantage point is the most successful and indeed humane experiment in human living (all its present failings notwithstanding), cannot disguise that its experience is likely to remain that of a minority of human beings on the planet. Trying to force states to embrace more liberal positions may yet prove self-defeating. Asking people to show more love and respect for things they neither love nor respect may create a deep sense of resentment. And now of course we have to ask whether the West can actually afford the model of social democracy and market fundamentalism it has adopted, or whether non-Western societies may forge a more sustainable model of capitalism and come up with their own ideas of the good life.

COSMOPOLITANISM

One of the most common claims heard when the state of the Western Alliance is debated is that it is divided despite its members sharing the same values. Another is that the division can best be explained by the fact that European and American values differ significantly. Both arguments are wrong. The United States and Europe share the same values, but they instrumentalize them in different, even competing, ways.

Europe has been involved in a historical project of major proportions: the creation of the world's first, and perhaps only, civilian power. Whereas the Americans still see war in Clausewitzian terms as a 'continuation of politics by other means', the Europeans tend to see it as the promotion of international law. America's criteria for 'just wars' are essentially ethical in nature and their application is not subject to verification by international courts of law; they remain a matter of debate at home. The European preference, writes the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, is for 'cosmopolitan law enforcement', not war (Habermas, 2006: 101). In opposition to America's 'moralization' of war the Europeans prefer its 'juridification'. A West Point military lawyer, Michael Nelson, posits that Europeans seem to prefer 'lawfare' to warfare. They prefer to pursue traditional strategic objectives by using legal manoeuvres, and when the use of force becomes unavoidable by severely constraining it with legal norms. What the Americans complain about most is that the Europeans talk the language of 'ultimate causes' but practise the art of minimum risk. Whatever the explanation for this normative gap between the United States and Europe, it is clear that the United States is not on the road to becoming a cosmopolitan power anytime soon, any more – for that matter – than most non-Western countries.

Yet Europeans are still committed to the idea. As a community the EU embraces global governance as a way of syndicating its values across the world. It has invented a system of overlapping power networks, involving partnership between states, social advocacy groups and pressure groups. These are the building blocks of a cosmopolitan democratic view that is already coming under challenge on different fronts, not least because many non-European powers see it as a form of 'regulatory imperialism'. And where the cosmopolitan view embraces a network of activist groups and NGOs that share universal assumptions, not all of them share liberal ones. One example is the alliance between the Vatican, some African governments, and Muslim and Christian NGOs against some of the family planning initiatives launched at the United Nations in recent years.

The point about cosmopolitanism is that it is the definition of a very specific *European* understanding of power. Take the EU–China Africa initiative launched in 2008, which has tried to promote the idea that anti-corruption, the rule of law and the application of International Labour Organization standards when hiring locals are all 'public goods', i.e. that they are in the interest of all parties. Many Chinese companies, however, still prefer to bribe local officials, to give support, tacit or overt, to African dictators and to apply different labour laws in the bid to win markets. There has been some cultural dialogue – the Chinese seem to have substituted a new doctrine of 'creative intervention' for their previous doctrine of non-intervention. But this is a long way from cosmopolitanism; indeed, one could even argue that in the last decade, Asians have become its loudest critics.

The problem is that cosmopolitanism is not a Western imaginary at all; rather, it is a European one. It could only become Western if the EU were to show more enthusiasm for cooperation with NATO, which has not happened. EU–NATO cooperation has been poor in Afghanistan, for example. The EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, did

not visit the country until 2008 (after intense British lobbying). One of the most egregious examples of lack of cooperation was the EU Police Training Mission (EUPOL), which was so dysfunctional that NATO had to arrange bilateral security agreements with each of its members. One frustrated Canadian ambassador asked why his country, though not a member of the EU, ended up being the mission's fifth largest contributor (Williams, 2011: 99).

With the Eurozone in crisis it is difficult to see the situation changing fundamentally, and unless it does there is no prospect of Europe's cosmopolitan grand concept being realized any time soon.

COMMUNITARIANISM

These debates are about the Western visions of a world order. Much of the non-Western world, by contrast, focuses on primary group loyalty to the exclusion of others. This is based on an idea that people derive their values from the community, and their meaning in life from membership of a group. Communitarians share the idea that groups have a fundamental right to organize themselves into communities that by definition are of an exclusive nature. The basic assumption of those who hold this position is that individuals have no being outside or before community; life is inherently social and it is embedded in culture.

Germany was once the most communitarian Western state in Europe. In the run-up to the First World War the Germans rejected 'civilization' (the market, liberalism, peace) in favour of 'culture' (a view point memorably defended by the young Thomas Mann in his book *Thoughts of an Un-political Man*). By the time Mann himself had embraced 'Western' values (especially those of liberalism), the Third Reich was at war with 'civilization' in what has been described by Jeffery Herf as an attempt by the forces of 'reactionary modernism' to escape the future (Herf: 1986). What was 'reactionary' about the Nazi state was that it rejected all forms of universalism but especially the normative order that the United States under Franklin D. Roosevelt was intent on establishing.

The BRICs in particular have consistently rejected the idea of the West as 'an out-of-area enforcer' (the term is Richard Betts'), or as a vehicle for the export of the 'Open Door' of market democracy to states outside the Atlantic area. They want it to curb its appetite and to become less of a 'destabilizing' force in other regions. The 'return' of Russia has also rekindled this debate. At this stage of history several new social imaginaries have emerged that present an alternative to the narrow Western vision. Since announcing his 'comeback' to the Russian presidency, Vladimir Putin has set out a vision of a 'Eurasian union' reuniting the former republics of the Soviet Union. He envisages a 'supranational bloc' that will constitute 'one of the poles of the modern world', a project entirely in line with his self-conceived historical mission to restore Russian greatness and challenge Western hegemony. Putin's vision involves extending an existing customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, though it is hard to see how much further the project might go. Ukraine might be interested, having abandoned its attempt to join NATO and blown its chance of European integration as a result of corrupt political games at home.

Then there is Poland's nightmare scenario (which France must fear as well if the European fiscal union is abandoned and the Euro collapses). This would be a *Deutscher Weg* – a deliberate contrast to the 'American Way' still popular in certain circles on the Left – that might see a rapprochement between Germany and Russia, a new partnership of powers. Germany anchored itself in the West as a strategy of survival after fighting the liberal powers in two world wars. It also joined the European social imaginary for much the same reason: as the former conservative statesman Franz-Josef Strauss once declared, 'anyone who wants to be a German must first become a European'. But the two strategies are not as self-evidently in Germany's *national* interest as they once were. If Europe falters there will be other visions of the future that might have greater popular appeal, especially in the eyes of the next generation of politicians.

There is also of course one other imaginary to consider: a European Security Community or 'architecture' (proposed some years ago by Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev, initially as an energy community similar to the Coal and Steel Community that launched Western Europe on its tryst with destiny). Russia would return to Europe as an equal member of a new concert of Europe, a balance of power governed by certain norms of behaviour more narrowly

defined – 'Western' rather than 'liberal' or 'cosmopolitan', i.e. the norms that underpinned the 19th-century balance of power. It is an imaginary that might also appeal to Turkey. If denied EU entry, it might still remain in the West, if not of it. The question is whether Russia can be folded into a new security system; it is perhaps, significant that it has successfully avoided coming to direct blows with the West in the last 20 years.

CONCLUSION

The vocabulary of liberal internationalism, it could be argued, is no longer useful, or at least it is not as useful as it once was, even for the West as it is forced to readjust to a changing balance of power. The West just happens to have different purposes that are probably better served by a different vocabulary in what Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini call a 'G-Zero world' (Bremmer and Roubini: 2011). But it is precisely the rise of such a world that makes cultural dialogue so vital, for the authors mean by the term that we live in a period of history when no single power or coalition of powers has the political will to forge a truly genuine internationalist agenda.

Instead of dreaming of a renewed 'League of Democracies', Western countries should be inspired by a different vision of the future. They will still have a supreme interest in cooperating with countries that agree with part of that vision and negotiating on the basis of genuine dialogue with those that perhaps will never share it. Recognizing that, however, does not absolve Western countries of responsibility for defending what they believe to be right for themselves. The main challenge for them is to defend the positions that must be defended and to negotiate on the rest.

Countries like China have long measured themselves against the West and have improved their status greatly as a consequence. Increasingly, as the non-Western world gains momentum, the shoe will be on the other foot. For both sides the challenge will be resisting the winner-takes-all mentality and learning to bring out the best in each other by bringing out the best in themselves.

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