

## **Can there be identity without politics?**

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Asked, doubtless by an adoring disciple, about the nature of truth, the German polymath and iconoclast Rudolf Steiner responded with a counter-question: "What is the truth about a mountain?" Responding to his own question, the aging sage said that one could approach the mountain from the north, from the south, from the east and from the west – and, indeed, from above – and one would see different things. And one might add: one could approach the mountain with the mind of a mountaineer, a geologist, a skier, a landscape painter... So what is truth? Perhaps the most sacred contribution of European thought to world culture is the insight that all these views of the mountain are equally true and that we need a world where all the perspectives have a rightful place.

Tzvetan Todorov, in his recent memoir from the 20th century (*Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien*), describes three dangers facing the post-totalitarian world. One is instrumentalisation of social relations – typically expressed as unfettered market liberalism, or rather, a loss of the social principles of solidarity and decency, which prevented markets from expanding outside the economy strictly speaking, and which also curtailed the power of state bureaucracies in liberal societies. In passing, it may be mentioned that these anxieties are neither uncommon nor new. Similar concerns with bureaucracies were expressed by the inventor of the theory of modern bureaucracy, Max Weber, and worries about market expansion were voiced by Habermas in the 1960s, Lukacs in the 1920s, and Marx in the 1850s. The second danger is moral correctness – sanctimonious and authoritarian conformism, in this country typically expressed through the recently implemented ban on smoking in public places. The third danger identified by Todorov is the topic of this lecture: Fragmenting identity politics, where universal values are bracketed in the name of group self-determination,

where commitment to shared societal projects is weakened, and where open conflict between identity based groups may easily flare up – not so much because they are culturally different, but because they have few interests in common. This is a vision of a classic plural society without a colonial ruling class.

I share all his anxieties, although I might have wanted to add one or two myself. Yet there can be no easy way out. The only credible responses to the challenges facing humanity have to be ambivalent, doubtful, cautious, with instincts favouring pluralism and a multiplicity of voices rather than universal recipes for happiness. It is, in other words, the openmindedness of the Renaissance and the optimistic view of human nature of the Enlightenment we should carry with us in this new, old world, as the convenor of this conference has reminded us. It is an ironic fact – given that neither the USA nor its current adversaries, real as well as imagined, are easily given to ambivalence – that the perhaps two most influential ideological thinkers of the American right are both partly correct, although they are wrong in crucial respects. Both are authors of widely distributed books about the “new world order”, and both are keenly listened to in circles near the White House. However, they seem to be saying opposite things. Francis Fukuyama has argued that Western democracy is the only game in town worthy of the name, and that global politics nowadays simply consists in attempts, by the less unfortunate nations, to achieve the same levels of consumption and liberal rights as those enjoyed by Americans. In this context, he also argues that the quest for recognition is fundamental and accounts for various forms of identity politics. Samuel Huntington, on the other hand, has argued that current and future conflicts take place not between ideologies, but between “civilizations”, that is related clusters of cultures, such as the West, Islam, Hinduism and Eastern Christianity. Both Fukuyama and Huntington have been severely criticised by academics and other intellectuals, and this is not the place to repeat all the criticisms. On the contrary, I would argue that they are both partly right. Fukuyama is right to assume that recognition by others is a notoriously scarce resource in the contemporary world, but he is wrong in believing that recognition can only be achieved through the successful adoption of Western values and ways

of life. Huntington is correct in saying that cultural differences are important, but he is hopelessly off the mark when he tries to map out those differences – his concept of civilizations is theoretically inconsistent and empirically misleading – and there is also no reason to assume that such differences necessarily lead to conflict. In fact, it has been shown that *none* of the armed conflicts of the 1990s conformed with Huntington's predictions.

We must nonetheless concede that these conservative American thinkers correctly claim that recognition and respect are important, and that cultural differences matter in politics. Now where does this lead us?

Well, it seems to lead us in the general direction of postcolonial theory. According to writers like Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Edward Said, the most difficult form of decolonisation consists in decolonising the mind; in developing a self, and an identity, and a self-consciousness which is not based on the categories of the colonisers. In giving the people of the world the choice of being either with the US or with the terrorists, Bush II has refused to acknowledge any position which is developed out of other concerns than the US–al-Qaeda axis.

In the context of the 21st century global security crisis involving US global military hegemony and violent reactions often based on the politics of identity, this starting-point implies certain preliminary conclusions: Effective human rights activism requires at least a minimal knowledge about local contexts and, particularly, about local conflicts. For poor countries to give wholehearted support to notions of the inalienable rights of the individual, more is required than decisions to cut aid to countries which are not yet committed to a free press and multi-party parliamentary democracy. What is needed are social reforms which give people increased control over their own existence – land reforms, job opportunities, accountable state institutions and so on. As an implication, a global policy is needed where both big power (state, geopolitics) and small power (family, community) are more equitably distributed. This struggle, moreover, is as much about the means of communication as about the means of production. As the late Algerian author Rachid Mimouni put it, what ought to be required of

the Europeans is "an attempt to understand rather than material aid. What can democracy mean in a country like Ethiopia, where dozens die of starvation every day?" There are, in other words, serious problems which are not solved by a formulaic introduction of human rights, and there are people who for perfectly understandable reasons see talk about the freedom of expression as a diversion from the real issues. One may by all means argue that Muslim men should give their wives the same rights and opportunities as, say, Scandinavian women have (opinions are free), but it would be silly to assume that they think in the same way as we do. If one does so – promoting human rights with the subtlety of a bulldozer – one implicitly says, as missionaries and foreign aid aristocrats have done for years, that the experiences of others have no value, and that the others had better become like ourselves before we bother to listen to them. One actually says that they *do not exist* until they have become similar to ourselves. Respecting other life-worlds is, it must be emphasised, not the same as ethical relativism, but on the contrary a recognition of the need for a dialogue to go both ways, since the alternative is monologue or worse: the sound from one hand clapping.

The very conceptual pair "The West" and "Islam" is deeply problematic. "The West" is a vague relational, pseudo-geographic term, which includes the EU, the USA and their richest satellites (Canada, Norway etc.), as well as two of the easternmost countries in the world, Australia and New Zealand. Islam is a universalistic religion with adherents in every country, including all the Western ones. Could "The West and the East" have been used instead, as a more consistent dichotomy; or perhaps "Christianity and Islam" as in the old days? Hardly. All such dichotomies are Trojan horses concealing the hidden agenda of overstating the importance of one particular boundary at the expense of neglecting all the others.

There is little to indicate that religion as such can be a source of conflict. A Christian fundamentalist has more in common with a Muslim fundamentalist, at the level of basic values, than each of them has with non-religious persons. The forms of religiosity and the expressions of respect for al-Lah (or God, as we say in English), are similar in both cases. Many European Muslims have discovered this

and have joined Christian Democratic parties. Moreover, there are important ecumenical dialogues taking place across "religious divides" in many places, including a major Islamic conference in Cairo in 1995, where central Muslim leaders condemned all forms of terrorism on Islamic grounds, calling for extensive dialogue with the other monotheistic religions from West Asia. At a more everyday level, it is easy to see that folk religiosity on either side of the Mediterranean, for example, has many similarities – saints, prayers, beliefs in the evil eye, and so on. Following the attacks of 11 September, one should also keep in mind, all Muslim heads of state except Saddam Hussain and the Taliban condemned the mass murder. Already on the same evening that the towers fell to the ground, the *Tehran Times* stated that Islam forbids suicide and that a murder of an innocent, according to the Koran, is tantamount to a murder of all humanity.

Malaysia's prime minister Mahathir offered to negotiate between the USA and its adversaries in the autumn of 2001, and this might have been a fruitful move: Malaysia is an overwhelmingly Muslim country, but it is also committed to Western notions of modernity. The USA did not take the offer up, and during a visit a month after the bombing had begun, I heard of no Malays who defended the terrorist attacks, but a lot of them seemed to admire Osama for his courage.

If Malaysia's "moderate Islam" had been granted its place in the sun, fewer Malays would have looked up to Osama bin Laden, and more Westerners would have discovered the similarities between the three great West Asian religions. Seen from a Hindu or East Asian point of view, the three religions appear as virtually identical. Even from the inside, the parallels are striking. The Muslims who have joined Christian Democratic parties in European countries have done so because Christians and Muslims have shared interests in fighting phenomena such as religious slackness, secularisation, birth control and divorces. During another Cairo conference, in the autumn of 1994, the Catholic Church and Muslim clerics joined forces to make a joint statement condemning abortion. Moreover, many – anthropologists, journalists and others – relentlessly show the absurdity of lumping together Indonesian rice farmers with Turkish merchants under the umbrella of "Islam"; just as intellectuals in Muslim countries are

perfectly well aware that "the West" contains something close to a billion individuals with a variety of values, societies and ways of life.

The current trend is nonetheless one of growing polarisation. The relationship between the West and Islam, as it has developed since the Gulf War, is beginning to resemble the armaments race between the USA and the Soviet Union. In the end, both superpowers had enough nuclear weapons to annihilate humanity many times over. These days, self-proclaimed representatives of both Islam and the West compete – not over the number of warheads, but over the souls of unattached individuals, in rhetorical attacks on each other. In research on ethnic relations, this kind of mechanism is sometimes called *dichotomisation*, that is the mutual defining of the other as the opposite of oneself – as that which one does not want to be. Enemy images always depend on this kind of simplistic, stereotypical depictions of the other. Realistic, nuanced descriptions contain too many shades of grey and too much complexity to be of ideological use in creating hatred and implacability. Seen from the north-west, Muslims, or "Islam", may thus appear as undemocratic, sexist, illiberal, underdeveloped, brutal and culturally stagnated. The enemy image, incidentally, is adjusted as the relationship changes historically. While the generalised Muslim woman today is depicted as an oppressed, intimidated and powerless person, it was common in Victorian times to depict her as a profoundly erotic, mystical and seductive character.

Seen from the south-east, the Europeans, or the people of the West, may appear as cold individualists, as normless, immoral, arrogant, brutal, decadent and insensitive. These dichotomisations owe little to objective differences between Islam and Christianity, but to power relations feeding into assumptions about cultural differences. Roughly the same stereotypes that are now commonly used about Muslims have been used variously to describe South Europeans, North Norwegians, blacks and "Hindoos" in the past. They are responses to a need in the population where the stereotypes are formed rather than expressions of characteristics in the stereotyped population.

Muslim stereotypes of "the West" would themselves have been worthy of a book-length treatment; suffice it here to say that they are no less simplistic and no less antithetical to openness and dialogue than the eastern images of Islam and Muslims. For a recent example, it has been shown how the Pakistani press, in the months following the attacks, contributed to strengthening mutual stereotyping through portraying the "clash of civilizations" perspective as the only Western view of the matter.

Beyond cultural stereotypes is the language of undiluted bigotry and chauvinism, as in certain forms of war reporting. During the Gulf War, the Western press wrote of the US-led forces as "lionhearts, professional, heroes, daring, loyal, resolute, brave", while Iraqi soldiers were described as "brainwashed, paper tigers, cowardlike, desperate, the bastards from Baghdad, mad dogs, unscrupulous, fanatical". More recently, Bush II spoke of the suicide pilots of 11 September notoriety as "cowards". As Susan Sontag pointed out shortly afterwards, many strong words may be used to describe these madmen (such as, for example, brainwashed or psychotic), but cowards they were definitely not. Similarly, it is difficult to say that the US pilots, who dropped their cluster bombs on Afghanistan from a comfortable height before returning for breakfast, were exceptionally courageous.

In Gregory Bateson's original model of schismogenesis, presented in his seminal *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, the only way the self-reinforcing circuits could be changed, would be through the interference of a third agent (or network node) leading to a new framing of the issue. Translated into poststructuralist language, the discursive hegemony pitting "the West" against "Islam" in a deadly embrace can only be broken through the intrusion of one or several counterdiscourses framing the world in different terms. These counterdiscourses have been abundantly available both before and after 11 September. However, politicians and a majority of influential media commentators seem to accept that the conflict has something to do with the West and Islam, even if they usually concede that Islam is complex and that most Muslims are naturally peaceful. In the Muslim part of the world, where the media are less liberal and the political leadership by

and large less attuned to the population, the situation has been different. While the political leaders have supported the US against the Taliban/Al-Qaeda, the media have generally not offered a very nuanced picture of the West, portraying the “clash of civilizations” view as representative of “Westerners”. In spite of important cracks in the mutual enemy images, therefore, there are clear indications that they have been strengthened after 11 September. The anti-immigrant new right in the politics of several European countries experienced a healthy growth after the attacks, and in countries like the Netherlands and Denmark, they currently have considerable political power. Public debates about minorities in several European countries have been redefined from a dominant focus on discrimination and labour market issues to a less charitable focus on enforced marriages, sexual mutilation and most recently *hijabs*. Condolezza Rice is on record as having explained to a concerned citizen that the reason “they” hate “us” so much, is that “we elect our leaders” and that “you and I [meaning women] are allowed to work”. Travelling in Muslim countries in the months following the attacks, the French Islam scholar Gilles Kepel met religious leaders who worry that the attacks have led to a deep setback in the ongoing, and in many ways progressing intellectual dialogue between Muslims and Westerners.

There are some exceptions. A few influential commentators and politicians saw the terrorist attacks and the retaliation of the USA in the same light. In an address to the summit of the Organisation of Islamic Countries in February 2002, Malaysia’s then prime minister Mahathir defined a terrorist as “someone who attacks civilians”, thereby seeing the nine-eleven suicide pilots and the US Air Force over Afghanistan as the same kind of agents.

Allow me to end this talk with some personal reflections of a general character, which have nothing to do with Islam as such, but which concern the role of “the West”, or the North Atlantic, and particularly the USA, in global society. Europeans and North Americans of predominantly European origin have now dominated the world for more than five hundred years. It may perhaps be about time that this long hegemony comes to an end, whether it happens indirectly through migration, violently through self-destructive entrenchment against a foe

which is generated from within (terrorism), or simply through shifts in the dynamic of the global economy. One may only hope, if this happens in the century that has just begun, that the new hegemon will continue to absorb, renew and develop the genuine contributions of European and North American society to global civilization, such as the respect (at least in principle) for human life and integrity, impartial bureaucracy and, especially, the capacity for doubt and ambivalence which has been a trademark quality of European culture (if not of European power politics) since the Renaissance. It may also be hoped that the new hegemon is able to learn the right lessons from the mistakes of Europe and the West: the fanatical technological optimism, the lack of community and solidarity, the class divisions and indifference, the fundamentalist arrogance in relation to others, the stressful way of life under careerist regimes of work, growing street crime, racism and discrimination, the lack of consideration for the environment... Looking back on the last centuries – let us say the period that began with Columbus' landing on 12 October 1492 and the subsequent expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain a few weeks later – the chances are good that the networked, decentralised world which may now be emerging, can turn out to be more humane than five hundred years of European hegemony have been. It will not happen with the help of Osama bin Laden and Taliban-like networks, but it won't happen with the help of American bomber planes either. One has to be blind and deaf in order to believe that this is the "best of all possible worlds", a world where every person has the same values and where opportunities are equally distributed. The currencies of the global society are dollars and bombs, and this society speaks business English with an American accent. Nobody ought to be surprised if some of those who are overwhelmed, or overrun, by this power react like greenhouse plants are supposed to react to heavy metal: by rolling up into small, hard balls.

No matter where power and dominance may be concentrated – now and in twenty years – this period, when the world is probably about to be re-moulded, a good period for a renewal of world-views. The old, dominant world-view presented a hierarchical world composed of peoples, civilizations and nations that were clearly delineated in relation to each other, geographically and

culturally speaking; they had their own history, their own values and their own customs, as it were. Europe and the West, according to this view, represented reason and progress, even if others had also contributed bits and pieces. This image is now about to be replaced by a world characterised by exile, flows, intensified contacts, creolisation, hybridisation and all forms of mixing; where no boundaries are absolute notwithstanding attempts to build ever taller walls; but where people continue to have different experiences because they live under varying circumstances. Territorial power is faltering and is being challenged everywhere – Microsoft to al-Qaeda – by the more flexible power of networks. If the demands for justice, respect and recognition from Muslims and others are not now met by another response than condescending arrogance, this world will almost certainly catch fire. In the old world, injustice and rage could be "contained". Not so in the network world.

This is a world of impurities, grey zones, uncertainties and ambiguities, where the belief in progress is being replaced by ambivalence, where self-confidence is being replaced by anxiety, where trust is threatened by suspicion, and where the ability to listen has become a more important faculty than ever before in history.

However, a mere plea for dialogue and mutual understanding will not do. Nor will it be sufficient, even if it is definitely necessary, to follow Amin Maalouf and many other subtle and wise intellectuals in showing that each of us has many potential identities, and that it is our duty to resist attempts to classify us as incumbents of only one – be it national, as in this country, or religious, as among many Jews, Hindus and Muslims. This is necessary, I stress, but not sufficient. In order to break out of the vicious circle of identity politics, we need to build structures which immunise politics from their takeover. It is a human right to belong, to feel the security of group membership and the intimate warmth of cultural familiarity – and, of course, conversely, to leave that group or to invent one's own hybrid identity. Making ironic comments about neo-tribalism, as Western liberals routinely do, fails to take the need for security and belonging into account, and it also underestimates the real and perfectly understandable

sense of humiliation that is the basis of mobilisation for various politics of identity. Instead, impersonal structures must be put into place that prevent legitimate personal and collective identities from degenerating into political mass movements. Nobody has anything to gain from the politicisation of religious and ethnic categories. The complaints from the non-North Atlantic world are legitimate, but if they end up crystallising in sectarian religious or ethnic movements, that is an indication that they have been sent to the wrong address. It is our duty to understand how this can happen, and it may often be our duty to engage in earnest dialogue with identity politicians, but it is also our duty to point out that if the human world is going to come to terms with itself, it needs not only economic redistribution and a global dialogic democracy, but it is also going to need universal values and a proper separation of culture, including religion, and politics. But, I have tried to argue, the universalism of the 21st century has to be more accommodating and wideangled than former, unilateral universalisms; it has to make some detours and to acknowledge that the universal is always particular as well. It has to approach the proverbial mountain from all four sides, morning, afternoon and evening.