



World Public Forum “Dialogue of Civilizations”

Conference proceedings

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In Search of the Continuing Relevance of the “Civilization Debate”

This presentation seeks to bridge two notions: civilization and cooperation. Thus it will be focused on the notion of Partnership of Civilization. The main reason why I have chosen that approach is because “Civilization Debate” remains politically and socially important - intellectually however is visibly exhausting itself – same arguments are repeated – it almost became a pluralistic monologue among advocates of basic two groups that represent two main approaches – dialogue versus clash of civilizations.

The result of that is seemingly growing alienation of grass root activists for whom the notion of cohabitation of different cultures is an everyday practice and those who peruse dialogue at “high politics “level. These two strata have fewer in common today than some years ago. Happily one of the exceptions to this rule is an ongoing effort supported by WPF D of C.

I would like to give some thoughts to two questions that seem to be important:

- (1) why are we going in circles with the notion Dialogue of Civilization –
- (2) what can be done in order to make it more relevant for international community or in other words what might be the policy implications of alternative approaches?

1. So why are we in almost the same place as a decade ago? My tentative answer is: because we are continuously trapped between two main approaches. One group of approaches can be labeled as the “clash of civilizations” which highlights the inevitability of conflict among civilizations based on the difference in value systems that form the backbone of each one culture. The second, opposing group highlights not the conflict but rather the potential for a “dialogue of civilizations.”
2. Our argument is that both the “clash” and “dialogue” approaches are *de facto* different faces of the same intellectual coin and thus can not go beyond the same, limited epistemological core assumption that “cultural difference inevitably leads to conflict.” Both assume that each culture is “conflict-genic” in a sense that their core values can not be reconciled with other’s culture core without compromising them, thus corrupting them, thus making them socially vulnerable to the fundamentalist’s approach of the necessity to come back to the very core. So both approaches are basically coming from the root; what is different is the political conclusions that they draw from that situation.
3. My proposition is that while we do need a dialogue to effectively manage conflicts we need also to supplement it by something else that will be attractive to wider population, NGOs and grassroots activists and answer the question how dialogue of civilization will improve someone’s life?; What can unite a Peru peasant from the Andes, Greek fishermen, Louisiana café owner and so on in other words – seems - that we need to address the issue of “civilizational commonalities”;



those elements of each culture and sections of the global culture that seems to of importance to everyday life of the majority of citizens; local than be link with global by addressing key notions that might serve as the basis for discussion leading to a potential greater global good. Let me explain that in a moment but first let us start from going back for a while to the BIG debate between “clash” and “dialogue” of civilizations and why they are “milk sisters” or “Siamese brothers” that have to be separated first in order for both to survive.

4. Both , the ‘dialogue’ and “clash of civilization” approach admit that the ‘clash of cultures and values’ are *the* major threat to the well being of humankind. So they are both based on the assumption that diversity creates tensions; otherwise why shall we need a dialogue? Or to contrary why we shall see the world from a prism of conflict? A theoretical similarity between the two allegedly rival approaches is further bolstered up by their equal incapacity to explain the logic of the ‘clash of civilizations’.
5. On one hand Huntington fails to demonstrate why and how ‘cultural differences’ would culminate in ‘clashes’. The ‘dialogue’ reciprocates this inability by pointing to such mysterious things as the ‘fear of diversity’ or the ‘perception that diversity is a threat’ as the (only) causes of the ‘cultural’ conflicts. [...] This ‘fears of diversity’ and its misperceptions as a threat are believed to be curable and the ‘dialogue’ is presented as a correct medication to treat such illness”¹
6. So the first point is that we shall go beyond the clash-dialogue dichotomy - BUT I do accept that diversity, inherent in different cultures (regardless of definition), socio-cultural systems, socio-economic conditions, etc. do *contribute* to the causes of conflict, at worst, or simply lead to a lack of common language so that dialogue can either be fruitless or become co-opted by politics.

But how we can “go beyond”? What conditions shall be set up for the beginning of “partnership of civilizations”? Where do we start?

It seems that three considerations may help this idea to take off.

- First, that dialogue may happen only among equals – thus civilizations (and those who live within them) shall be treated as “equals” (as starting from such categories as “oppressed” and “dominated” on one hand and “developed” or “advanced” on the other will frame the debate from the start in purely political categories).

¹ Boris Kapustin, “Some Political Meanings of ‘Civilization’.” *Diogenes* 2009; 56; 151



- The second consideration is the acceptance that sometimes the optimal result of the process may simply be to agree to disagree. As Mark Kingwell has noted, “[n]ot only does it allow a minimal cohesion, staying off the anarchy of war between all and everyone, but the conditions of rational disagreement actually indicate a significant upgrade in human intelligence.”²
- Thirdly, recognition of our global, human vulnerability as a potential catalyst for common action. A shared sense of human vulnerability creates a sense of community, a sense of global collectivity whereby group interests shall be, if not eliminated, then mutated. This might happen not because of the notion of civility or any value attached to ethical pluralism but due to fear of future survival, both as “civilizations,” however defined, and indeed as humanity as we know it. *Thus we have to list areas where we all seem to be vulnerable regardless of our culture and the space we occupy.* Obviously, ours is not a search for a “global identity” but rather an attempt to identify some overarching global worries. And, as such, our bridges are not an attempt at rapprochement between irreconcilable universals but rather an attempt at conceptualizing a set of relatively universal talking points.

Key four universal points for beginning of the discussion come to mind:

Nature,

Space,

Justice,

Governance.

The main idea here is to shift the discourse on civilization from broad and often carefully delineated areas such as religion, economics or society (which are usually framed in “cultural categories” that mixes key values and “real politics” and thus related to culturally rooted differences) to the mutual recognition of *globally shared notions of concern*. In other words to replace one frame of the discourse (dialogue-clash) with another one that de-emphasizes history, making discussion less ideological, non-european , de-westernized, de-modernized thus re-shaping the civilizational discourse and attempts to create – or at least take a step toward establishing - a basic *universality of concerns*. Real , cross-regional and all- human existential threats – presented in non-technical terms, *easy to absorb and ally with* can unite stronger, particularly in times of great economic and political uncertainty, than grand ideas.

Let us have a closer look at what can form a universality of concerns:

² Kingwell, Mark. “The Shout Doctrine.” *The Walrus*. April, 2010.



A debate on *NATURE* will add to our civilizational understanding of human- animal relations, global bio-politics and bio-economics. May reveal our different understandings of human limits in relation to nature and suggest potential points of consensus for social and political action. That debate is already under way but framed in environmental not cultural jargon .

SPACE has different meaning for different people but it embraces such notions as coexistence, migration, alliances, communication, borders, belonging, and others.

The diverse meanings of *JUSTICE* can reveal collective desire, fear and aspirations domestically and internationally. It is closely related to different types of governance of wealth and resources (both human and natural);

Finally, a search for meanings of *GOVERNANCE* (as seen from different civilization perspectives) will potentially give us a sense whether and how we are able to globally manage space, ecology and people within a diversity of cultural, normative and institutional options. What kind of reforms of the old and requirements for a new institutions are “civilizationally” supported.

Substantiation by example.

Lets provide just one most recent example related to first area of potential partnership of civilization – probably the most obvious one for the North American – *NATURE*

Example #1 . On April 20th, a methane bubble broke through a series of protective seals up the drill shaft of a BP well in the Gulf of Mexico, setting off an explosion which killed 20 rig workers and unleashing an oil spill that threatens to be the worst in US history. The potential economic impact in terms of money lost by fishermen and the tourist industry in the affected areas runs into the hundreds of millions; the potential ecological costs in terms of endangered animal death and habitat and wetland destruction are incalculable; BP itself stands by some accounts to lose \$30 billion as a result of the spill. The point here is not to condemn the event itself but to consider its causes and effects from a variety of perspectives.

To start, let us make something clear: oil is as much a part of nature as the affected waters and birds, as the affected human societies. Of course the modern world is dependent on oil and its extraction is therefore a necessity – both an economic and de facto existential one. But at the heart of the failings here, we believe, is a lack of esteem for nature (in the broadest sense possible). The risk taken in the name of economic gain shows a lack of appropriate consideration for the extent of possible damage and the socio-economic complexity of ecosystems which directly involve human beings. So let us look at the consequences and the affected stakeholders. BP is certainly among them – losing money, stock value, and prestige as is the global oil industry. Every disaster like this moves public opinion away from the category of “necessary evil” to considering alternatives. Then there are the people of Alabama, Louisiana, and the other



potentially affected states, losing millions a day is revenue from fishing (and oil drilling) and potentially permanently losing jobs as well as coastal land. And finally there are fragile ecosystems and their non-human residents who risk destruction.

That may happen in any part of the globe in any civilization; can we bring that nature back to the INSIDE of human affairs, inside key civilizational debate?

What can learn from this one simple example? The outcry and response to spill has crossed across Latin American social, religious and political lines. From environmentalists and anti-corporate activists to marine biologists and oil engineers to the affected fishermen and the US coast guard are all involved to some extent in the clean-up and response to the disaster. Most church leaders, building on a growing trend, and urging prayer and action in defense of the environment built cross-denomination anti-spill alliances. The range of effects is so broad that the situation has created a spontaneous and most unlikely coalition of allies. If we can agree on a problem, perhaps it is less important that we all come at it from the same angle than that we recognize it as a common threat, which might make us all be able to consider solutions together and to de-ideologize solutions, considering them policy and personal options.

In simplest terms, if there are no fish, there are no fish to fish for money or food, nor are there any fish to protect or study or to pray for. Or, for the more religiously minded, let us reiterate Bruno Latour’s pointed question: “If you lose the Earth, what good is saving your soul?” And, even for the most profit-minded, consider a recent UN Convention on Biological Diversity report which suggests that the annual destruction of nature in terms of animal species, potential resources, and forests costs the global economy in excess of a trillion dollars a year.³ In such a case, does it not make sense to consider defense of nature as an existential priority that crosses civilizational and interest lines with the same ease that “natural” threats cross borders and civilizations. Even if Descola’s assertion that naturalism and ecological concern is an exception in human history, now might be the time for it to become the norm.⁴ **This bridge of concern can then open us up to action to preserve our habitat and therefore ourselves. We will not make any major tangible suggestions for how this might take place, but just briefly mention some potential solutions which now, in light of our argument, must be treated not as ideological ones but rather as viable options for personal or policy action.**

Global politics might also have to open its ears to new voices. Last week saw a major – but mostly overlooked by the Western media – gathering of Latin American civil society, NGOs, and indigenous groups in Bolivia for the so-called “World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth”. On the agenda was a combination of environmental concern and indigenous rights. Perhaps, given the importance of nature as we have defined it, more attention should be paid to such grassroots initiatives and to their own “bridge-building” attempts linking nature and human concerns.

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science_and_environment/10103179.stm

⁴ Descola, Philippe. *Par dela nature et culture*. Paris, 2005.



Or, for the institutionalists and the legally-minded, consider Robyn Eckersley’s suggestion that the international community draft and enforce laws to prevent “ecocide” – the massive destruction of nature and animal species – and even consider “ecological intervention” into sovereign states.⁵ For some, this might cross the line, but again, can we now look at this suggestion with fresh eyes? Might we not look beyond the walls of traditional notions of state and the purpose of international law to consider new dimensions which give nature its rightful place at the centre of human concern and therefore human action and governance?

In conclusion:

Our approach addresses the issue of a search for a policy-relevant “interface” between civilizationally different positions. What we were interested in are two fundamental questions: (1) can we find common ground that would serve as “civilizationally agreed models for institutionalized political actions” and secondly (2) what might these “civilizational bridges” look like? In other words we would like to test whether we may find an acceptable theoretical approach that might be used in guiding practical actions as a *tool for the partnership of civilizations*.

This is also an addendum to the debate on how to try to de-politicize and de-ideologize the current debate.

Our concern was - what will be left as “common” civilizational ground - a space that belongs to all of us? In the current debate of “dialogue of civilizations,” which is to a certain extent a western-led process, we are preoccupied with the domestication of “others” and a reduction of violence; within the new framework the main purpose is to attempt to reveal the nature of an “inter-civilization” core.

⁵ Eckersley, Robyn. “Ecological Intervention: Prospects and Limits. *Ethics and International Affairs* 21(3) (2007): 275-396.

