

## The Cosmopolitan Challenge:

### Bridging Cultural Differences in a Globalized World

My subject this afternoon involves the utility of a cosmopolitan perspective in a global world many of whose most serious challenges, I will be arguing, arise not just from geopolitical, social, and economic disputes between and across nation-states but also from inter-cultural and cross-cultural misunderstandings conflict going on around and across them. By “cosmopolitan” most people mean “worldly,” “universalist,” “tolerant,” “civilized,” but in truth there are almost as many versions of cosmopolitanism as there are brands of dry cereal. Cosmopolitanism not only comes in various kinds – political, social, economic, cultural – but has been recently described as everything from vernacular, situated, realistic, patriotic, Eurocentric, emancipatory, transgressive, minoritarian, subaltern, thick, or thin.

Some associate cosmopolitanism with the Stoic affirmation of a moral community of human kind where each person is a citizen and owes a duty to every other, or with the Kantian idea that everyone who enters the public sphere has a right to the free and unrestricted use of their own reason. Still others identify cosmopolitanism with specific values like the recognition of human dignity and the expression of human freedoms, and believe that it can be expressed in particular policies deal with everything from governance, security, and the regulation of the economy to environmental protections. Yet still others talk

about cosmopolitanism as a process going on around all of us beyond the container of national and transnational spaces that are creating new forms of global risk – nuclear proliferation, carbon emissions, health pandemics – or new victims of global displacement – migrants, refugees, exiles, the jobless, the homeless – who suffer it as a burden or affliction.

A far cry from what is sometimes ridiculed as the class consciousness of world travelers, cosmopolitanism seems in all such cases to refer to the fact that the boundaries of peoples' lives all over the world are being re-thematized by global processes that have not only expanded, willingly or not, the horizons of their world but altered their consciousness of its meanings. What has been integral to all these processes has been renewed and intensified exposure to strangers, whether actual or imagined, and exposure to strangers has been the chief engine of change from the beginning of human history. Thus I have come to associate cosmopolitanism with being, as I call it, *other-wise*; and the challenge of being-otherwise can be put in the form a single question: what it would take ethically to transform the necessity of living together with so many different so-called others, which we cannot escape, into the possibility of living together somewhat well, or at least somewhat better, which we dare not abandon. I put the question, the cosmopolitan question, this way essentially to highlight the fact that we do not live in a world organized in relation to a hierarchy of ready-made and ideal solutions but rather in a world constructed in relation to a hierarchy of recurrent and almost intractable problems.

Yet this is exactly the opposite of what most people in the world believe, or would prefer to believe. Life, they assume, should be arranged in relation to the best answers, not the most persistent difficulties, and this prejudice, which may have seemed to be weakening after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, only became immensely more extensive and intense as a result of the global event known as “9/11” and the massive set of responses and counter-responses it unleashed. Indeed, the misnamed “War on Terror” and its attendant conflicts only generated an equally heated but misleading war of creeds and convictions that now threatens to drown much thinking about the world and its so-called “others” in a sea of fixed ideas. Despite the shift from what we then referred to as a bipolar to what we now describe as a multipolar world, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that ideology of a particularly s sort now rules, and doctrines, dogmas, and demagoguery, all filtered through a symbolically mediated fog of words and images, are, to paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the saddle. As Frederick Nietzsche warned – Thomas Jefferson once said the same thing -- convictions can be more of a threat to truth than lies.

There is no doubt that religions and sectarianisms of all kinds have played their part in this recourse to extreme, inflexible, often authoritarian, thinking worldwide, but its expansion has had as much to do with the de-coupling of religion and culture as with their recoupling. The relationship between ideas and the public world is being reshaped by two interrelated forces associated with globalization. The first is deterritorialization, which enables religious and other

ideas to circulate in non-territorial spaces that are dissociated from specific locations or grievances and disconnected from any particular societal or cultural articulation of their meaning. Floating free of any particular interpretive frame of reference, they in effect spread outside or beyond the circuits of inherited knowledge. The communities and crises that once shaped their formation and determined their applications now have little or no relation to their expression or authority. They exist almost as free floating signifiers that can be attached to any cause or conflict, their efficacy related chiefly to their ability to represent themselves as universalist, incorruptible, unchanging, antidotes to a world grown strange and frightening because of the “usual suspects”: the collapse of former cultural coherencies, increasing social, economic, and political inequalities, vast demographic movements, accelerated technological change, the normalization of heightened violence and terror, the prospect of irreversible, man-made to the ecosphere, and the increasing “narcissism of minor differences.”

The second of the irreversible forces associated with globalization is that is that this umbrella of term glosses the terrible price they have exacted from so many throughout the world. People are desperate for certitude in an uncertain, divisive world, and absolutisms of almost any kind -- right, center, or left; reactionary, traditional, or revolutionary; political, economic, social, or religious -- offer the illusion of refuge and reassurance -- as well as retribution. Whether such conditions inevitably precipitate the spread of new forms exploitation, oppression, and tyranny, they almost force us to ask what chances there are for

the survival of a view of human beings as potentially capable together, even across immense gulfs of difference, misunderstanding, and injury, of engaging not in predatory world-rending or world-disordering but in collaborative world-creating and world-extending, in what the French philosopher Jacques Derrida called “mondialization”? Mondialization or work-making and world-developing is the capacity that he believed was endangered by 9/11, and he feared for its recovery in the face of technologies that not only place implements of devastation in the hands of state and non-state actors all too eager to use them, but can set off chain reactions, much like the butterfly effect, of reprisals and revenge seemingly without end.

My intention this afternoon is to suggest that we cannot pursue this project of mondialization, of extending the world and the worldwide, unless our commitment to it is matched by a willingness to learn how to see, if not precisely as others see -- which is impossible -- then to see as fully as possible what we might see if we could put ourselves in their place, especially when they see us -- which is not. We know -- or we can know -- a good deal more about those we define as “other,” or “strange” or “different” or “alien” than is assumed either by many of our conventional theories of knowledge or by our own ignorance and indifference. But the task is to figure out what can be learned from such knowledge, and this depends far less on accommodating the strangeness of the other to ourselves than of using that same strangeness as a means to confront and possibly revise our own.

So, let us pursue this issue by asking three interrelated questions:

First, what do we mean by a global world, and what differentiates it from an international one?

Second, What does culture have to do with it, and why is culture so potent and potentially, potentially explosive?

And, third, what, then, makes understanding across and between cultures, what I am calling the cosmopolitan challenge, so difficult to achieve but so crucial to undertake if we are ever?

If we can answer these 3 questions, then I think we can go a long way toward addressing one of the most fundamental and recurrent challenges for leaders in in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: how to learn how to learn from cultural diversity and conflicts in a world recurrently fractured by difference.

## **Global**

Let's start with the term "global," which most of us believe we understand well enough, the increasingly interconnected world around us, a world that is not simply local, regional, national, or even transnational or civilizational but interactive on numerous level of experience. This, of course, is the world you've known ever since you laid hands on a cell phone, a world many of whose parts, at least its virtual parts, you can access with what almost seems to be the speed of light, thanks to YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, LinkedIn,

CafeMom, and all the other programs and apps that your parents and I can't use very well.

But access, as you also know, is not the same thing as understanding. The technological wizardry that has brought the people of the world into closer proximity to one another, into what feels, at least in the palm of one's hand, like a "global village," has also increased still more drastically the problems of how to make sense of that world and what, more critically, to make of each other. It's one thing to discover that time and space can seemingly be compressed with a few simple keystrokes on your iPhone, that "Siri" can answer a number of one's ultimately least important questions. It's quite another to realize that you are now living in a world where your future may be dependent on, possibly even be determined by, people, problems, and perplexities of which you have little or no knowledge, a world over which whose widening, and deepening, and speeding up is creating a world many of whose parts are interconnected but not always interdependent.

We should not forget that there are still vigorous disputes with very large consequences about just when globalization began, or how it is best conceptualized, or what makes it work, or whether it has, or has not, been good for the world and its peoples. The one thing on which many people do agree is that globalization refers as much to a set of interactive processes with systematic properties that affect everything from climate change and security regimes to

social relations and individual consciousness as it does to the interplay of discreet but interrelated nation states.

To some this may sound like a contradiction of sorts. What could be more interconnected than the international world of nation-states whose founding, at least in the West, goes back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This is a world whose formation over the next 150 years depended on the structuration of an emerging system of bounded territorialities which claimed sovereignty within their own realm. Was it not this spreading state system which, despite the asymmetries of power inherent in it, slowly knit the world into an international order that continues in large part to govern, or at any rate to control, its interactions? This might be true if the articulations of the state system had not themselves been dependent on various other developments that were themselves by no means exclusively political even when they served state purposes such the revolutions in economics, industrialization, armaments, transportation, and communications to the growth of global civil society. In short, what has gone on above nation states and above and below them as well as beyond them has become every bit as consequential for world order as what as gone on because of them.

## **Culture**

But this, then, raises my second question about what culture has to do with such developments and why it is so volatile and unpredictable. As it

happens, some people merely think of culture as frosting on the cake of life, the aesthetic icing that compensates, for those who can afford its ministrations, for the gross dullness and hardships of experience. Others assume it to be a kind of “Super Reality,” like religion, ideology, or the law with purposes, protocols, and practices of its own. Still others reduce culture to the brute patterns of collective behavior that are open to observation and measurable by statistics. And yet still others identify culture with, in the phrase the American military is fond of using, “Hearts and Minds,” what one needs to know or believe to operate in manner acceptable to members of a group.

But culture actually plays a still more central role in human life and society. Its pivotal role derives from the fact that human beings apparently suffer, at least by comparison with most other creatures in the animal kingdom, from a genetic deficiency. Unlike other creatures, human beings are not equipped from birth either with all the information they need, or with the requisite skills they need to apply it, to to interact effectively with the world around them. Instead, they have to acquire that information, and those skill sets, by learning how to convert the raw materials of their experience into meanings so that they can both make sense of them and also cope with them. Culture is the name we give to those meanings as they shape themselves, or are shaped for us by all those who pass them on to us – parents, peers, educators, etc. -- into systems of interpretation, systems of interpretation which we can then employ as, in effect, user guides to

manage our relations with the world around us and sometimes shape that world a bit more to our liking and advantage.

Hence in the language of the present moment, culture might be thought of both as an operating system and as a set of software programs to make it work. To be sure, neither the operating system, composed of systems of meanings inherited from the past, nor the software programs, composed of interpretive technologies for employing them, come built in or, as we say, bundled. We have to learn them from the store of systems and technologies our societies make available to us, and those stores and instruments are always changing and being revised, or, as our computer, notepad, or cell phone periodically tells us, in need of updating. Moreover, it is also true that some of us are better at using these tools than others less technologically literate; it is also true that some of us are better than the rest of us in employing them in particular frameworks --- business, finance, sports, politics, human relations, mathematics, fashion. But for better or worse, none of us can escape our dependence on these systems of felt meaning to read our way through life precisely because what life mostly confronts us with and requires us to negotiate are the cultural signs, symbols, gestures, scripts, representations, rituals, performances, practices and requirements by which others, like ourselves, express and enact themselves.

So, what, more specifically, does culture actually do? Among the many different functions culture performs, let me identify two that have a direct bearing on my subject about bridging cultural differences in a globalized world. The first

function culture performs is to provide us with a sense of power, both personal and collective. And culture does so not because, as I have said, it is just a system or complex of behavior patterns but also because it is a set of control mechanisms for organizing and governing it. Without such control, our behavior would remain shapeless, pointless, and chaotic; with its assistance, our behavior can become not only purposeful but, in its way, political. That is to say, cultural forms and technologies enables us to acquire over time a sense of ourselves as actors who have what we call an identity, and the more we function effectually with the support of this identity, the more we are likely to become prepared to assert and defend it against all threats, whether external or internal. Culture in this sense is no mere ornament of behavior but rather its precondition and even protector; as a mode of power, culture furnishes us both with the terms and with the means to express our interests and desires in a world comprised of competing forms of self-assertion, leverage, and competition.

The second of the functions that culture performs is to serve as a medium of exchange, actually a kind of currency, that can be bartered and traded. This is why the cultural universe operates less like a museum and more like a marketplace. Since the cultural universe is composed, as I've noted, of forms of meaning that are defined in part by their import or significance, they possess value and in that sense can be thought of literally as a kind of "capital" or form of wealth. Merely consider how a college degree operates; it is not simply badge of distinction but a kind of asset. But if culture represents, or can represent, assets

that possesses value in certain contexts, then people also can and will struggle over the resources it represents, whether those resources can literally be exchanged for money or merely for the power they lend to those who control their meanings. Either way, struggle over for the resources culture represents are then frequently reproduced as contests or fights, sometimes referred to as culture wars, over what is called “symbolic capital.”

Culture wars over symbolic capital have, of course, gone on throughout history and can take many forms, such as the recent, and perhaps again forthcoming, Congressional debate over the closing of the United States government and the raising of the debt limit, but their virulence is multiplied because the terms of the dispute so often involve entities that are not empirical so much as metaphorical, figurative, symbolic, in truth imaginary. What is being contested, to say it again, is the valuation and validation of things that are no less real, no less actual, for being images, perceptions, and feelings and the social and political work they do. But this further reinforces the idea that the realm of the imaginary, both as a content of culture and as an engine driving it, is not a category mistake but an actual key to the formation of human identity and the shaping of human history.

To some this claim may sound rather far-fetched. How can culture, now viewed as a kind of imaginary universe, or constellation of universes, in which we are suspended, and by which we try to negotiate our relations with the world around us, be so determinative in the construction and reconstruction of the

global world itself? How can forms of life so often associated with poems, narratives, dreams, ceremonies, myths, performances, and celebrations, indeed with entertainment, fantasy, and escape, have so profoundly helped determine over time the kinds of lives people have sought to live not just with, and for, themselves but with, or at the expense of, others?

The answer is to be found in social, political, and economic formations all around us. For example, we speak now of nations, which are based on collective senses of identity, as opposed to states, which are based on specific forms of governance, as imagined communities not because they don't exist but because the terms of their existence have no simple correspondence with fact. Just as their members for the most part remain invisible to each other except statistically, so the boundaries that delimit them and the senses of sovereignty that define them are impossible to represent except through abstractions, and the feelings of solidarity that bind them are based on and expressed through little more than a horizontal form of comradeship.

Still more interestingly, the sudden conclusion of the Cold War revealed in its aftermath that this conflict which could have ended life on earth as we know it began to appear not only a confrontation of opposing powers but of conflicting imaginations and ideological mindsets. James Roseneau spoke for many by arguing that if "weapons build-ups and arms races were perpetuated more by unwarranted perceptions and distorted intelligence reports than by actual plans

for military offenses,” one was compelled to realize “how fully the course of events are fictions of inter-subjective fictions rather than objective conditions.”

But much the same power of the imaginary also helped trigger the Recession of 2008, when the gigantic investment bank and securities trading and brokerage firm Bear Stearns was brought down against a run of its reserves that it had already prudently protected itself against. In the face of radical threats to the stock market, Bear Stearns obtained a multi-billion dollar loan from the Federal Reserve and JP Morgan Chase. While this lifeline thus made the firm absolutely flush with cash, the Market misread act of prudence in a time of panic as a sign that the firm was instead suffering from a lack of cash. This Market misinterpretation of the bank’s liquidity situation then set off a new run on Bear Stearn’s otherwise ample reserves that overwhelmed it, and the rest is, as they say history.

In each of these examples, we see what might be called the logics of the cultural imaginary determining the way some of the other logics of life – in this case, the geopolitical logics of national identity and superpower rivalry and the economic logics of the market -- can be read or interpreted. This is not an issue that proves how the logics of culture always displace other logics of, say, national identity, international affairs, and finance, but rather demonstrates how cultural logics so often influence, if not determine, how those other logics can construed and employed.

But let us not forget that cultures are by themselves extraordinarily complex organisms whose components at any given point or moment are difficult to disassemble and whose internal logics and power can not to be reduced to, or simply identified with, any one of them. Reading cultural meanings and codes has been likened to a kind of game and their interpretation to the process of getting a joke, grasping a pun, fathoming a proverb, reading a poem, or even, in my favorite analogy for it, of comprehending baseball. To follow a baseball game, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz once observed, one must not only understand what a bat, a hit, an inning, a left fielder, a squeeze play, a hanging curve, and a tightened infield are, but also, and most crucially, what the game in which these things are components is all about. To comprehend the game, you need to know what is at stake when the play conforms to an accepted structure of rules.

However, this analogy breaks down when, as in cultural life, the thing to be known and the character of the knowable – that is, what the game in which these things are elements is all about -- change because the games, are not always strictly rule-governed. Cultures, in fact, are rife with such forms, where complete knowledge, what the game is in which these things are elements is all about, is simply unattainable, perhaps even irrelevant. Here the point of interpretation, indeed much of the purpose of the play – think of the law, religion, art, even politics itself -- is to learn how to use the structure of rules to change or, at any rate, to complicate the game by exploring what is not actually fully

knowable or predictable but can frequently only be inferred and exploited. These are the meanings and significances that are not fully represented by the structure but are simply potential to it. To be sure, such meanings are not easily defined or categorized in any given culture or civilization because they constitute the horizon of possibility within which the relations between the known, the unknown, and unknowable are cast. But if these are sometimes the hardest or trickiest meanings to understand in any cultural formation or expression, they can also be the most revealing and fact when we are interested in determining how the wisdom or insight of one culture can be rendered accessible to that of another.

### **Cross-cultural Understanding**

This bring us to the third question of what to make of the differences that define a globalized world and how to bridge them, or, at any rate, how to turn them to constructive rather than destructive purpose. For many people in the world, such differences are not bridgeable at all. They may believe this either because they feel their own traditions and values are inviolate and pure – a common assumption of fundamentalists of one kind or another – or because they are convinced that all civilizations, and thus the cultural systems associated with them, are inherently incompatible and conflicting – the presumption of the clash of civilization proponents. Such claims are often based on the notion that cultures, like civilizations, are anchored in religions whose boundaries are as fixed as their most rigid orthodoxies.

But this is to confuse the beliefs of their adherents with the behavior of such systems. Religions have always suffered from heterodoxy because they have so often been constructed out of components of other faiths and practices. Religions, like the civilizations with which they are only loosely allied, are clearly, except perhaps in their “official” versions of themselves, more fluid, diverse, fractured, inconsistent, and, above all, porous within themselves, not to say between themselves, than the “clash thesis” allows. Yet these same totalizing prejudices about religions and civilizations also re-surface in a more benign but still simplistic and offensive form in much talk about “Asian values,” “Muslim practices,” “Latino beliefs,” “African customs,” of “American dogmas.”

What gives the lie to these prejudices is that a great majority of the world’s people belong to more than one so-called civilization, and often by choice; that most civilizations are deeply influenced by, and thus the creatures of, contributions from other civilizations; that all civilizations are in processes of rapid change and of even more rapid re-description; that the structures of relation and tension between and among civilizations are arranged at all sorts of oblique angles and cross-hatched with diverse lines of pressure, fracture, hierarchy, and difference. Indeed, it is precisely because of this historicity, mobility, and adaptability that even in times of crisis, when their back, as it were, is up against the wall, civilizations, as cultures, can be repositories of ideas and values that are capable -- at least potentially -- of being widely shared even when variously expressed.

How does this occur? What makes it possible for one culture to learn from the insights of another? There are actually three different but interrelated steps.

The first step in the process of understanding other cultures involves an act of what might be called deciphering, of reading, of **interpretation** itself, which does not depend, as many people mistakenly believe, on the identification or fusion of one mind or culture with another. The challenge is rather – and this is not as hard as it looks, but rather to figure out what so-called “others” mind, culture, or civilization is up to or actually seeks.

The second step in this process of understanding entails an act of **translation** by which we convert the practices, performances, or purposes of one mind, culture, or civilization back into the purported idioms of another which is our own. This step actually holds out more possibilities for misreading than the first because we can only grasp what to some degree we can analogize, even if that operation only succeeds in de-familiarizing what we think we already know.

Yet the complete understanding of whatever it is that we seek to comprehend from across cultural divides remains incomplete without the third and crucial step called **appropriation**. Here is where one attempts to gauge the difference such translations make to one’s previous self-understanding and the internal adjustments they exact as a consequence. Without this final step, the interpretive process remains incomplete and the possibility of achieving new understanding permanently thwarted.

What makes this interpretive process so difficult to complete is that most of us, in fact, don't want to change our minds very much, don't care to alter our understanding too drastically. Even if it can be shown that interaction with others is critical to personal self-development and in truth, as I mentioned at the beginning, the basic motor of all historical development, most of us are content to keep things pretty much as they are. We may crave a little variety to escape from boredom but most of us also fear the really different. After all, the really different presents a challenge to our sense of ourselves, and our sense of ourselves, our identity, is the key to our power and thus, as we said, to our sense of worth or value. To lose, or even to risk, that sense of identity threatens the self with an experience of impoverishment, of diminishment, which can turn the self angry, even vengetul.

Hence the potentially symbiotic relationship between the threat of new understanding and the feeling of aggression. And if the loss of former understanding is widely shared, the aggression provoked by its loss can quickly be socialized and politicized into forms of violence intimately linked with rites of sacrifice, where the shedding of blood becomes essential to the preservation of the social or political bond. But this shedding of blood can do more than preserve the social world from destruction; it can and often does also bind the sacrificers into a company of ritual cleansers. In the extreme, the community can be saved through the ritual practice of scapegoating, where the social fabric is preserved by allowing the community to realign itself around the common

repudiation of a victim. That victim is held responsible for aggression against the community, but the community can be preserved because a surrogate has been found to divert and absorb its violence.

From this perspective, scapegoating and the sacrifice it ritualistically promotes is perceived as, if not a remedy for violence, then a means of containing it. But this may underestimate the therapeutics of scapegoating, which are not simply vivisectionist – cutting of the diseased member or limb -- but also purgative – sanitizing the remaining body. As a ritual technology that allows one to project onto others what one potentially fears or despises in oneself, the social, cultural, and political therapy of scapegoating not just protects the community from the threat of pollution but also cleanses and purifies it, thereby making ritual sacrifice, even perpetual war, the key to social survival and redemption.

Part of the challenge for cross-cultural understanding, then, is how to reverse the cycles of violence they can generate whenever people couple the dogmatization or absolutizing of their own identity with the disparagement of the identity of others? How does one forestall or prevent the self from turning the so-called other into a radical opposite in order to inoculate itself against change? The answer is to be found in the fact notions of “self” and “other,” of identity and difference, are not given with nature but constructed by culture. Far from being ontological entities, they are symbolic categories that tell us as much about the people who create and employ them as about the people they can differentiate

and possibly stigmatize. To view them as creations rather than discoveries is to comprehend that such notions can function as reflexive mirrors that reflect back to the self employing them undetected aspects of itself. Put another way, such constructions can reveal to us that the basis of our deepest connection with others may not be our similarity to them so much as our foreignness to ourselves.

Such recognitions ultimately bring us back to the inter-subjective nature of the formation of selves as well as of cultures, both of which develop in part only because of their ability to see themselves from the perspective of others. But seeing from the perspective of others is not the same thing as seeing as, or what, they see. Instead, it is a matter of trying to discern what can be seen if we could, so to speak, put ourselves in their place rather than they in ours. Putting ourselves in someone's else's place, insofar as that place can be reconstructed through observation, study, imagination, and empathy is not the same thing as putting ourselves in their skin or seeing with their eyes, much less adopting their beliefs or sharing their feelings. It is rather a way of determining – but this is everything! -- how the coordinates of our own self-understanding might change if we were to place elements of the experience of others on its map.

This is the recognition on which cosmopolitanism depends, which is difficult but by no means impossible to achieve, only because of the differences and inequalities it must traverse, the entrenched ideological solidarities it must breach, the injuries of fate and policy it must transcend, if it to be anything more than an empty gesture of deference and sympathy that eases the conscience of

the favored. The fact that cosmopolitanism is easy to disparage or dismiss does not discount the fact that without a deepened and enlivened sense of what binds us to all those by whom we are neighbored, we will continue to fail to become other-wise. The challenge is not to make cosmopolitanism more universal, more context-sensitive, or more practical but to make universalisms, contextualisms, and practice more cosmopolitan.

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