

Draft

Obstacles to Intercultural Co-existence in the Next Decades

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Visions of the fate of the earth and its inhabitants exist in abundance. These visions come both in bleak and optimistic versions. Their main functions are to provide a framework for our interests and values, to construct a schedule for our priorities, and to suggest a guideline for the supply of our resources¹.

Visionary discourse² is often endangered by the tendency to under-estimate the difficulties of implementing valuable concepts and promising strategies³. Dealing with these difficulties is, however, a necessary prerequisite for any systematic attempt to manage the implementation of a visionary goal.

1. Intercultural Co-existence

1.1 The term *co-existence* still bears the political flavour of a bygone era: When the East-West-conflict became less confrontational and more co-operative in the 1960s and early 1970s, some Western politicians used the term *peaceful co-existence* as a label

¹ To quote but one example: *Reimagining the Future: Towards Democratic Governance. A Report of the Global Governance Reform Project*. Melbourne (La Trobe University) 2000.

² My version of the term vision is rather non-utopian. A vision is a long-term concept of order for an extended social, political and cultural area, like the future of labour, the respect for human rights, the reduction of violence or the survival of endangered species. In a globalizing world, these areas often comprise the whole planet.

³ Some seemingly sober philosophers and practitioners have therefore given up concerning themselves with visions. They prefer incrementalism, step-by-step policies and muddling through. But is their soberness more than just the anticipation of disappointment, a kind of mental 'Schonhaltung', to use a German medical term?

for a more desirable atmosphere between the two antagonistic camps. The Soviet-socialist ideology also developed a concept of *peaceful co-existence* which was made compatible with the traditional idea of international class-struggle. In this perspective, *peaceful co-existence* meant the easing of the forms of conflict, temporary co-operation in matters of arms control and the economy and the continuation of the ideological competition. In the long run, only one side would benefit from peaceful co-existence: the forces of progress in history.

1.2 The current use of the term *co-existence* is quite different. Intercultural co-existence is regarded as a process of exchange between actors from different cultures. This process is characterized by the attempt to mutually make sense of cultural differences⁴. The opposite of intercultural co-existence is what Samuel P. Huntington, Bassam Tibi and others call the “clash of civilizations”⁵. These pessimistic and alarmist contributions to the debate on the future of war and peace in a globalizing world have been harshly criticised. Their theoretical and methodological flaws put aside, they provide a useful kind of negative reference for all strategies of intercultural co-existence.

They also provide a point of departure for the search for the main obstacles on the way towards intercultural co-existence.

2. Cultures and Human Security

2.1 Cultures play a leading role in politics. A culture is formed by a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a social group or society, that encompasses art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, common perceptions, and beliefs. Culture is an indispensable element of

⁴ In an ideal social situation, this implies the following: A attempts to understand the cultural characteristics of B; B acknowledges that A wants to understand B's otherness; B attempts to understand the cultural characteristics of A; A acknowledges that B wants to understand A's otherness. By doing so, they should be able to gain a common platform of understanding beyond their respective cultural reference systems. In everyday life, this symmetric situation occurs seldom.

collective identities, and therefore can often intensify conflicts by mobilizing people to fight against “others”. But because culture is so fundamental to human experience, it can also work to promote conciliation, co-operation and democratic participation.

2.2 *Human Security* is an unconventional security concept which centres on people, not on states. States and their governments are regarded as providers of the means for introducing, augmenting, and deepening the security of people. This is one of their salient functions. In the past as well as today, governments have often forgotten this task and sometimes even contributed to their citizens’ insecurity. Human Security primarily means freedom from illegitimate violence. But it also comprises people's capacity to forge their lives and to pursue their livelihoods with dignity -- not only in economic terms, but also in terms of health care, educational resources and matters of self-determination.

2.3 *Cultural Human Security* is an integral part of Human Security, for the effective development of a peaceable global community depends on an internationally shared culture of human solidarity-- one that acknowledges global unity in local diversity. Any concept of security for a globalizing world must neutralize the conflict-increasing aspects of culture as much as possible and must, by the same token, make use of the conflict-decreasing aspects of culture. Cultural Human Security therefore becomes a political challenge for states and governments as well as for other (non-state) actors.

3. International Community

3.1 The term *international community* is mostly a euphemism, for the rules of the game’ in international relations are less communitarian than competitive. Usually, we mean the member states of the UN and especially the UN Security Council when we talk of the international community. After the end of the East-West conflict, some

⁵ The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate. A *Foreign Affairs* Reader. New York: Council on Foreign Relations 1993. Bassam Tibi: *Krieg der Zivilisationen. Politik zwischen Vernunft und Fundamentalismus*. Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe 1995.

observers relished high expectations in the capacity of the international community in the UN to avoid violent conflicts, to create a new and more suitable (= fairer) international order, to enhance the relevance of and the respect for human rights, and to find a generally accepted balance between universalism, regionalism, and localism in political, economic and cultural terms.

These expectations did not materialize. The international community and its main political organization, the UN, were unable to prevent civil wars and the break-up and failing of states. Ethnic cleansing, genocidal massacres, and terrorist attacks in the name of religious fundamentalism became a hallmark of the period after the end of the East-West conflict.

3.2 Political scientists and IP specialists debate about a kind of bifurcation of the international system. The international community of states (the state-centric world) forms only one dimension of the international system. Other actors, non-governmental organizations (NGO), transnational business communities, groups and networks with transnational scope and interests, and international regimes have grown into a second dimension of the international system. Actors in this level can be very influential and powerful, some of them decidedly in a destructive way⁶

All non-state actors are usually much less transparent than democratic states.

The concept of Public-Private Partnership is a first and rather cautious step towards a future where governments (even in the most stable and strong states) have to form reliable coalitions with non-state actors in order to be able to provide good governance.

3.3 It is, however, more than probable that the emergence of a non-state world and the relative decline of the state-centric world⁷ will increase the difficulties of managing conflicts and of preventing their escalation in organized violence and war from above (that is, from UN headquarters and state capitals). In spite of some remarkable developments in some sectors of international relations (like the creation

⁶ The 'European Security Strategy' from December 2003 enumerates terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure, and organized crime as "key threats" to Europe. Most of these threats are not situated on the state level (at least not exclusively) but on the level beneath.

of the International Criminal Court in The Hague) the international community will hardly, in the foreseeable future, be able to create and nurse an international order which facilitates the implementation of intercultural co-existence.

4. Individual Liberty and Collective Identities

4.1 The basic unity of any policy in order to enhance cultural co-existence is the individual. The individual is never a pure monad but always integrated in social and cultural contexts. In some societies, these contexts are losing some of their binding force; in others, they function as a strong encasement for the individual. Despite these differences, it is always a person who thinks, speaks, listens, understands or misunderstands, decides and acts. Collective identities are not an exogenous part of the individual. They define where the individual belongs. The mixture of collective identities (from the family level to the level of the nation or a religion) has a strong impact on the individual's behaviour.

4.2 Any policy of intercultural co-existence has to strengthen the role of the individual. This is necessary for mostly two reasons. First, the individual must be aware of the fact that he or she is living in a culturally heterogeneous world and must be able to accept and cope with this heterogeneity. This is not to say that the model of Western secular individualism should be taken as a blueprint for other societies and cultures. But the open or hidden repression of individuals in many parts of the world deprives them of their potential to develop a reliable self-consciousness which is an essential condition for the understanding of and empathy with other people of a different cultural background. Secondly, it is only when the individual is able to gain at least a little distance from his or her collective identities that intercultural competence has a chance to develop. The counter-strategy by leaders of groups with a strong and demanding collective identity for their members is usually based on a clear and simple division between the own group (= good) and

⁷ The 'Westphalian system of international relations' in the terminology of Holsti, Zacher, Held, and others.

others (= evil). This thinking in patterns of black and white is wide-spread and functions as one of the most powerful obstacles for intercultural co-existence.

4.3 The various processes of globalisation provide ample evidence for the idea that many current and future problems (the environment, hunger and misery, certain diseases, mass migration etc.) on the planet can only be successfully tackled when humankind overcomes the different cleavages between groups, nations, religions and civilisations and develops a common cosmopolitan identity. A cosmopolitan or global collective identity will not weaken and harm other collective identities, but it is often regarded as a threat to a particular collective identity. Apart from mostly superficial declarations and euphemisms, the formation of a common cosmopolitan identity has not yet entered its take-off phase. Without such a comprehensive framework, any policy of intercultural co-existence remains an uphill fight.

5. Culture and Violence

5.1 One of the salient conditions of intercultural co-existence is the minimizing of spontaneous or organized violence between groups. The political conditions for the achievement of this goal vary between the macro-regions of the earth. In vast parts of Africa, Asia and South America violence is deeply entrenched in the fabric of social life and has become a permanent ingredient in everyday-life⁸. Terrorist and criminal networks have successfully managed to have this violence spill over into the metropolitan areas of the West.

The latent and manifest presence of violence and also, albeit to a lesser degree, the build-up of institutions and agencies for the protection against this violence function as an obstacle for intercultural co-existence. This is the case, as they erode the basis of mutual confidence which is, at least marginally necessary for the development of intercultural co-existence.

⁸ There are a growing number of studies about the origins and forms, the driving motives and consequences of the so-called new wars and asymmetric warfare.

5.2 Very often, violence is motivated and fed simply by greed. The use of violence becomes a habit and sometimes a lifestyle.

5.3 There are, however, many violent conflicts which are generated and sustained by cultural motives – to expand or preserve one's culture, the territory of one's ethnic group, or religious convictions. These motives are certainly often used as 'more acceptable' labels for material interests. The problem here is that cultural motives, whether authentic or instrumentalized, possess a rather strong, sometimes even uncontrollable potential for the mobilization of people's willingness to fight. This is especially true in the case of religious convictions. When religious organisations with a community of strong believers develop a political agenda which includes the use of violence it is becoming extremely difficult to respond in another fashion other than by the use of violence as well. Culturally motivated and religious wars will probably occur very often in the next decades. One of the premises of this account is that the use of violence is the opposite of intercultural co-existence.

6. (Mis)Perceptions

6.1 Unilateral and mutual misunderstanding is a main source for mistrust which only too easily generates unfriendly behaviour. This may eventually crystallize into deeply entrenched conflicts between groups, that is: between people with different collective identities.

6.2 Although we indeed witness the emergence of what Alberto Martinelli and others call "a cosmopolitan ethic"⁹ among significant minorities in the contemporary world as well as a partial hybridisation of elements of various cultures on a regional and global scale¹⁰, this should not be regarded as a process which will overcome resistance to the establishment of a set of common goals in the years to come.

⁹ Alberto Martinelli: From World System to World Society? In: <www.sociologistswithoutborders.org/contributions.html> (Jan 10, 2006).

¹⁰ See for instance the very optimistic and stimulating account by Joana Breidenbach and Ina Zukrigl: *Tanz der Kulturen. Kulturelle Identität in einer globalisierten Welt*. Munich: Kunstmann Verlag 1998.

6.3 For a majority of people, it remains too difficult to participate in a non-destructive encounter of cultures. They are (made) afraid of the loss of their own cultural atmosphere, and they are not inclined to grow beyond their achieved (mis)perception of other cultures. Any strategy of intercultural co-existence has to break up this syndrome.

7. Outlook

7.1 Disputes, quarrels, conquests, competition, and conflicts are basically constructive social constellations – both on the intra-cultural and the intercultural level. They only become destructive when there is no instrument to settle the dispute, to regulate the competition, to manage the conflict. In these cases, conflicts may escalate into violent conflicts. The use of violence has a ‘manifest’ and a ‘latent’ meaning. It does not only create a pecking-order among individual or collective actors, but it could also open the perspective on the annihilation of the other (in physical or in cultural terms). This is the opposite of intercultural co-existence.

7. 2 Here is an all but comprehensive list of obstacles to intercultural co-existence:

- All attempts to enlarge the distance between cultural communities which automatically includes the proclamation of difference in value (physical, mental, racial etc.) between the members of different cultural communities (usually in terms of the superiority of one’s own group).
- The instrumentalization of the past as a means to foster exclusive cultural identities.
- The politization of transcendence.

- The failure to understand different cultural contexts (cognitive level).
- The determination to misperceive other cultural contexts (psychological level).

7.3 A cosmopolitan ethics of intercultural co-existence is being forged, but it is still comparatively weak. Civil society institutions which push this agenda are still not strong enough to make themselves heard in all parts of the world. Resorting to violence is still, in some parts of the world more than ever, a rather attractive attitude for 'winners'. The mobilization of militancy against enemies, especially against people who are suspected to be enemies of one's own deepest convictions, is still comparatively easy. Some recent events¹¹ demonstrated the influence of effectively (mis)used mass media on such processes of mass mobilization.

Continuing globalization certainly creates a rising consciousness for the "fate of the earth", but it also creates fragmentation and hybridisation – and in many people fears of losing their orientation. The pressures of exposure result in closures. The push for change evokes the desire to preserve. The world-wide tendencies towards mixedness (Ralph Grillo) also generate a cry for homogeneity. As we live in a world of "distant proximities"¹², there is no alternative which would make sense to intercultural co-existence.

¹¹ The stunning success of Serb propaganda against the other ethnic and/or cultural communities in former Yugoslavia is a case in point. The normality of the social, political and cultural co-existence with equal rights of these communities which had developed since the end of World War II dissipated within several months in the early 1990s.

¹² James N. Rosenau: *Distant Proximities: Dynamics beyond Globalization*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003.