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Moral Philosophy and the Coming World Order
A Dialogue of Civilizations to Counter Global Hegemony

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History since World War II: Loss of moral compass?

If we reflect on the new world order that, many hope, will succeed the present state of global disorder, it is appropriate to look back in history. Upon the end of World War II, the United Nations Organization was built on a *broad moral consensus* among peoples and nations on all continents. In the spirit of dialogue and mutual respect, the founders of the organization laid out a Charter that was meant to secure a sustainable order of peace, based on human dignity and the sovereign equality of states; such was the idealistic commitment of the then international community after the most devastating war in the history of mankind.

In the era of bipolarity that followed, this commitment was quickly put to the test in a fierce power struggle between the capitalist and socialist blocs. However, this competition, often characterized as East-West conflict, occurred within the constraints of a *balance of power* where the two major rivals for global dominance were holding each other in check. Notwithstanding proxy wars in geopolitically sensitive regions, at the worldwide level this was a time of precarious peace – a “cold war” that was also the effect of “mutual deterrence” among nuclear-armed powers. In spite of their intense ideological rivalry, indeed incompatibility of their systems, this constellation provided a framework of peaceful *co-existence* – though not necessarily *dialogue*.¹

When, with the disintegration of the Socialist bloc, the bipolar order collapsed and the checks and balances at the global level suddenly vanished, the only remaining superpower felt an impetus to create the world in its own image. This meant, first and foremost, a claim to ideological supremacy – as legitimization for the assertion of that country’s national and strategic interests virtually everywhere on the globe.²

¹ It was in this constellation – of ideological rivalry and competition shaped by power politics – that the International Progress Organization called, in 1972, for a “dialogue among different civilizations” as foundation of lasting peace at the global level. (Letter, dated 26 September 1972, by Dr. Hans Köchler to the Director of the Division of Philosophy of UNESCO, Mrs. Marie-Pierre Herzog, containing a proposal for an international conference on questions related to the dialogue among civilizations.) At that time, at the height of the Cold War, our concern for a sound “hermeneutical basis” of international relations was not yet understood, or appreciated, in the chambers of power. That moment arrived a quarter century later – with President Mohammad Khatami’s proposal of a “dialogue of civilizations” at the 1998 session of the United Nations General Assembly. For details of the concept of dialogue see Hans Köchler, “Kulturelles Selbstverständnis und Koexistenz: Voraussetzungen für einen fundamentalen Dialog,” in: *Philosophie und Politik: Dokumentation eines interdisziplinären Seminars*. (Publications of the Working Group for Sciences and Politics at the University of Innsbruck, Vol. IV.) Innsbruck: Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Wissenschaft und Politik, 1973, pp. 75-78.

² For details see the author’s analysis written immediately after the end of the Cold War: *Democracy and the New World Order*. (Studies in International Relations, Vol. XIX.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

As we can now say in hindsight, this was a moment of self-delusion, or triumphalism, of the victorious. The “New World Order,” proclaimed by President George Bush in the spring of 1991, after the end of that year’s Gulf War, was rather short-lived. Based on the negation of the national interests, indeed the very identity, not only of individual nations, but entire historical regions and civilizations, this claim to global hegemony (1) led to widespread destabilization in countries and regions targeted by an imperial strategy of “régime change” and, at the same time, (2) triggered a reassertion of their identity and interests by the peoples in those countries and regions. Though labeled as humanitarian action, the military interventions lacked a convincing moral compass. The actual, empirically discernible, motive was in almost all cases the assertion of power in the pursuit of national, essentially economic, interests.

However, up to the present day, the hegemonial power and its allies have proven unable to manage the resulting systemic instability at the global level. In volatile regions such as the Middle East, the massive use of force – in the name of lofty ideals – has provoked vicious sectarian conflicts along ethnic and religious lines, confrontations that cannot anymore be contained to their original space. In a tragic irony, the post-Cold War era of humanitarian action, famously justified by reference to the international community’s “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P), risks to end in disaster.

“Clash of civilizations” as self-fulfilling prophecy?

In this unipolar context, the paradigm of the “clash of civilizations,” proclaimed shortly after the end of the ideological conflict between East and West,³ has served a central *ideological* purpose, conjuring up the stereotype of a civilizational enemy. Unfortunately, it has become a *self-fulfilling prophecy* rather quickly. It was used as an instrument to legitimize a series of coercive measures, including the use of military force, against those who were portrayed as standing against Western civilization and its core values. The victim of the propagation of this conflictual paradigm has mainly been the Muslim world.

Here, one must be aware of the dynamics of power relations. A *unipolar* framework of international relations, i. e. the absence of a balance of power, almost unavoidably – such is human nature – encourages hegemonial discourse and a policy focused on subjugating the

³ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (1993), pp. 22-49.

entire world to the value system of the dominant actor. There can be no dialogue in a situation where there is no competitor, no *equal other* to compete for power and influence. The dominant power is tempted to proclaim itself as “indispensable nation” and, accordingly, arrogates to itself the right, describing it as duty, to reeducate the rest of the world – if need be, by coercion (i. e. military force).⁴ There is ample historical evidence that such a constellation breeds revolt and resistance in the targeted countries and among victimized peoples.

However, even a cautious observer will witness – and Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Adviser of the United States, is certainly one,⁵ that a preponderance of power, the celebrated “unipolar moment,” bears in it the forces of its demise. As has been the case so often in history, such a constellation may trigger a kind of chain reaction of states, peoples, communities asserting, in fact reasserting, their identity, whether national, ethnic, cultural or religious. In the most general and comprehensive sense, this will mean an increased awareness of peoples all around the globe of their unique civilizational life-worlds and the related value systems – indeed an assertion of their identity that derives its strength from the *oppressive power* they are subjected to in a hegemonial system. There must be no illusion about the resilience of culture in a hegemonial context!

These collective identities, associated with the national interests, will be the underlying forces for the gradual emergence of a *new* world order that is truly *multipolar* and that may again lead to a global balance of power, albeit not a bipolar one as in the period of the Cold War.

The meaning of global dialogue

To emphasize yet again: only in such a constellation – not in a unipolar setting – is dialogue possible. Meaningful exchange on the crucial issues of our life-world, on values and the definition of the common good (national and global), can only exist and develop among equal partners (whereby their equality is to be understood in the normative, not factual, sense, which in turn implies the principle of mutuality).

⁴ Cf., e.g., the statement of Madeleine K. Albright, explaining the United States’ Iraq policy, at a Town Hall Meeting at Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, February 20, 1998 (“And what we are doing, is serving the role of indispensable nation ...”).

⁵ I refer here to his recent essay “Toward a Global Realignment,” in: *The American Interest*, Vol. 11(6), July/August 2016, pp. 1-3.

Consequently, dialogue and solidarity – as constructive and productive interaction among a multitude of civilizations at the global level – will alone make a multipolar order sustainable, and only such a constellation will constitute a *real* alternative to a unipolar system where stability is guaranteed by submission to the will of the dominant civilization. This is all the more important in a world where societies have become increasingly multicultural, and cultural or civilizational tensions and conflicts at the international level have a direct impact on the local situation – and vice-versa.

In our era of globalization – which means an ever more complex interconnectedness not only in the economic and financial, but also in the socio-cultural and information sectors – no one, no state, no group, no individual, is shielded from the effects of constant interaction. The “law of interdependence” means that each one’s identity evolves in a kind of dialectical process that is defined by the dynamics of consciousness, individual as well as collective.⁶ In such a context, diversity is a virtue that derives its meaning from mutuality. In this sense, diversity is an essential antidote to hegemonial rule and the cornerstone of a truly *new* world order, one that is not a uniform system of power relations defined by the most influential global actor.

This brings us back to the *moral consensus* on the basis of which, more than seven decades ago, the United Nations Organization was launched – in the name of the *peoples* of the world. It meant a solemn commitment, stated in the Preamble to the UN Charter (1945), “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours.”

This is, in essence, what dialogue, as constructive engagement, among civilizations is all about; and this, in turn, takes us back to basic questions of moral philosophy – relating to the shared responsibility for life in our interconnected, globalized world. If I, as individual and member of a group (community), can only fully *understand* and *realize* myself in distinction from and relation to the other,⁷ the dialogical paradigm in the 21st century must be one of cosmopolitanism.

⁶ For details of this notion in the international context see also the author’s opening statement at the 1974 conference on The Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations: “The Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations (Introductory remarks, fundamental considerations, structuring of problems),” in: *International Progress Organization*. Innsbruck: International Progress Organization, 1974, pp. 10-15.

⁷ This is what we originally defined as “dialectics of cultural self-comprehension.” See the author’s lecture at the Royal Scientific Society of Jordan (Amman, 9 March 1974), chapter IV (“Dialectic of attaining self comprehension”): *Cultural-philosophical Aspects of International Cooperation*. (Studies in International [Cultural] Relations, Vol. II.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1978, pp. 7ff.

Conclusion: Moral philosophy and a just world order

Our values and responsibilities transcend borders. In this era of global interconnectedness, the “national interest” must be redefined with a view of the global common good. This relates to the shared interests of *all* in a *community* of nations and on the basis of mutuality, not in a framework of mere juxtaposition of states as isolated sovereign entities. Thus, the “subject of morality” is not only the individual, but the collective (group, state) as well.⁸

The coming world order will actually be multipolar. However, in order to avoid global anarchy and a constant struggle for power, it must be based on a shared system of values that are crystallized in dialogue: namely, respect for each other’s sovereignty as individual and community.

The “End of History,” proclaimed upon the end of the Cold War’s bipolar power struggle,⁹ has proven to be an illusion resulting from a denial of reality and nurtured by the arrogance of the victors of that struggle. Now, more than a quarter century later, the triumphalism of Western liberal ideology reveals itself as a false eschatology: No one, not even the most powerful and glorious ruler, can arrest history.

What we have been witnessing instead is the end of the unipolar vision and the gradual, albeit chaotic and traumatic, transformation of global order along multipolar lines. It will be up to each of us, and not only upon the states and their leaders, how humane and peaceful this transition will be.

⁸ As Patrick Hayden explained, this can also be proven in light of John Rawls’ philosophy of justice: *John Rawls: Towards a Just World Order*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002, chapter II/3 (“The International Dimensions of Justice as Fairness” / “From Domestic to International Justice”).

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” in: *The National Interest*, Vol. 16 (Summer 1988), pp. 3-18.