

## THE MYTHS AND DANGERS OF THE SINGLE NARRATIVE

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Conference on pluralist societies.

Nothing more timely.

Distaste and rejection surrounding pluralism today is Europe's greatest problem.  
In the form of jihadism it haunts the globe.

Canada celebrates plurality but worries now about respect for core Canadian values. Still, as a settlement immigration country Canada has a uniquely receptive official perspective, possibly because Canadian immigrants come from a wide variety of places. Despite some counter-information recently, second-generation integration has been more or less seamless.

Europe has not been a settlement immigration space for a century or more. Its "immigrants" today are largely refugees, often clustered country-by-country from a few sources.

75 years ago, the composition of European cities was very different. Its great cities, Rotterdam, Hamburg, Prague, Warsaw, were cosmopolitan, reflecting centuries of migration. The Jewish cemetery of Prague is a treasured human site. As you know, the community there emerged from the Sepharade from Catholic Spain in 1492.

But however ethnically diverse these cities were, citizens shared the local language, and culture and had been part of their social fabric for centuries.

There were regions which were mono-ethnic. Italian writer Claudio Magris has contrasted settlement around the two great rivers, the Rhine, and the Danube.

The mono-ethnic Rhineland of Siegfried's myth bred a narrative which morphed into the myth of a Germanic master race, Hitler's home base and platform for extermination of plurality in Europe.

In contrast, the Danube had been the heartland of the Austro-Hungarian Empire under whose benign regard dozens of peoples lived together for centuries.

Hitler's war devastated Europe in many senses. But one outcome was paradoxically the dilution of much benign pluralism.

What his mass murders and deportations didn't accomplish was largely completed in 1945 by a vast movement and rearrangement of peoples, forced or voluntary, a form of retaliatory ethnic cleansing.

13 million ethnic Germans were expelled, from the Czech Sudetenland, from Poland, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia.

Poles and Ukrainians, Turks and Bulgarians, Hungarians and Slovaks, changed places; Italians returned from Istria.

Europe became state-by-state increasingly mono-ethnic.

In 1938, Poland had been 68% ethnically Polish. Today, it is 99%. Czechoslovakia had been 22% German, 5% Hungarian, 2% Jewish. Today the minorities hardly exist.

Ethno-centricity is a source of solidarity but feeds on enmity. The re-surfing of such enmities today, within states and between them, threatens to become a European nightmare.

Cities have reacted badly to new waves of immigrants because they are refugees, unsought and unscreened for settlement. They have not shared the history, do not easily become part of the social fabric, partly because they do not generally speak the language. They become "The Other".

Insightful thinkers like Michel Sauquet urge us to seek benefit from "l'Intelligence de l'Autre". Integration in Canada is promoted as a two-way process. But traditionally open societies do find themselves fearing their proudest social achievements are being challenged by newcomers.

Two examples:

- After centuries of sectarian conflict, the Netherlands reached a consensus agreement to keep religious choices and issues private. They are shocked by the arrival of Muslims, and homegrown Muslims, seeming now to want the opposite for their community in Holland, with a sense of alienation which has been violent.
- I visited Copenhagen after challenging the Danish Minister of Immigration to prove his point that Danish feminists were hostile to refugees today. I indeed saw proud, Danish women whose complete liberation took generations to achieve, contrasted and in their minds insulted by women in burkhas.

The EU project is by definition pluralist, and some see it as giving comfort to independence-inclined minorities, such as Scots and Flemish who contemplate ethnic independence within the EU with greater security. But they are another example of rejectionist single identities. Indeed, there is startling national identity pushback against the EU almost across the board, as revealed by the defeat of the Constitutional project which in fact only mentioned diversity once.

In non-EU Europe, the situation is even more ominous. The dissolution of the two multi-ethnic states, the USSR, and Yugoslavia, has released a cascade of ancestral hatred and conflict.

The recent war between Georgia and Russia over the breakaway ethnic enclave of South Ossetia, "an inane and stupid affair," was a product of, irredentist ethnic enmity, rooted, like the Serbia-Kosovo conflict in ancient narratives of injustice and revenge.

It was caused as well by chips on Russian shoulders at not being taken seriously; Russians believe the rights of Russian nationals are being abused in identity-based neighboring republics.

Ten years ago, I was sent to Kiev to advise the Ukrainians on how to get along with a vastly larger neighbor, having been steeply involved in relations with both the US and Russia. I told restive official audiences of the methods we have used to objectify essential bilateral issues with the US, to insulate them from politics and the leverage of the larger against the smaller partner. The Ukrainians hadn't come to hear such advice: they wanted to hear how to "screw the Russians".

Without tolerance from both sides these relationships will remain toxic. Today, Ukraine and Russia are doing better at realistically trying to understand each other, though Russia can still tend to see through the lens of a would-be dominatrix.

The cultural conflict which most compels global worry is the multi-faceted encounter with Islamic jihadism, and issues affecting Moslems, in the middle east and elsewhere, including, of course, tragic outcomes of violence transported to Spain and London.

When I was High Commissioner in London after 9/11 the Metropolitan Police often warned there would be an attack on the Underground. When it happened on July 7 2005, the reality was horrible.

But the worst news in most respects was who had done it - homegrown jihadists, born and raised in Britain. The fear of "the other" soared.

But increasingly there has been recognition of the two-way failures on integration. One approach has been to try to insulate local muslim communities from islamist globalism.

In confronting the threat and penetration of Al Qaeda, there have been many strategies proposed, particularly to counter the lure of its "single narrative" to potential new recruits.

I attended a retreat in the UK this month of communications strategists who propose a vivid "single narrative" of our own to "defeat" Al Qaeda's.

What could be more counter-productive?

Our strength is that we don't have single narratives. Our story is plurality.

Someone defined a successful film project as one in which the three creative components, the producer, director, and writer, are no more than 10% different in the emphases each brings to bear on the product. Perhaps. But life isn't a film around a single narrative, even if some politicians try to make it seem so.

As Walt Whitman wrote in *Leaves of Grass* about the American republic, "Do I contradict myself? I contradict myself. We are multitudes." This is a far cry from Sarah Palin's exclusive assertions that Barack Obama "sees a different America than you and me."

I understand why communications strategists recommend we aim at discrediting those who are recruiting the faith of young muslim radicals.

But if we tailor a message of "us" against "them" we drive a wedge between ourselves and those who are worried and undecided.

I heard a Pakistani lawyer, a moderate secular but nationalist figure saying he would rather have the Taliban than the Americans. He and the Taliban can find common cultural ground - with the Americans, never.

It is objectively true that the Taliban and he are likely to have a greater mutual awareness, of symmetry within the dimensions of shared culture as set out by Hofstede, for example.

But "Westerners" need to make it their obligation to find such understanding - not in order to appease the killers of innocents, but to reach out to those who are angry. We need to understand WHY.

In a remarkable work of fiction, "The Attack" by Arab-Israeli Yasmina Khadra, an Arab surgeon is searching for the answer of what made his wife secretly a suicide bomber.

He consults a leader of the intifada who tells him, "We're not Islamists, and we're not fundamentalists either. We are only the children of a ravaged, despised people, fighting with whatever means we can to recover our homeland and dignity."

The Doctor rejoins, "I want to know everything. I want the whole truth."

"Which truth? Hers or yours?"

I'm not making a political point about the rights and wrongs of the Middle East. I'm making a point about the essential importance of understanding cultural differences, the variety of "truths".

Kofi Annan's top negotiator, Lakhdar Brahimi, was critical to reducing violence in Iraq by talking to all sides to determine their "minimum requirements" in mediating conflict. The notion that you don't negotiate with adversaries because they contradict your narrative is childish and dangerous.

I head up an international project in democracy support on behalf of the Community of Democracies, which produced this year a book which we are now turning into a basis for diplomatic training in support of human rights defenders and democratic activists.

Rest assured: this is not about the export of democracy. It is not doctrine but a practical handbook rooted in real experiences of support for civil society, on their local terms.

The three basic conclusions of our case-based research on democratic evolution and transition are that:

- the forces of change are indeed local in each very different situation; outsiders are secondary;
- only non-violent methods work;
- it will probably be bottom-up and not top-down.

But a pre-condition of outsiders being helpful at all is that they try to understand the very different cultures involved. The first golden rules of new public and multi-stakeholder diplomacy are to listen, understand, and respect.

Interestingly, diplomatic and military personnel being trained in conflict mediation are now also being exposed to cultural anthropologists able to help them distinguish and relate to different ways of identifying reality; the nature of authority; the role of individualism vis-a-vis collectives; the differing emphases attached to short and long-term thinking; the role of women, and other paradigmatic features which are professionally second nature to many of you, but which have been neglected in diplomacy.

Contrary to popular belief, a growing number of African countries are making democracy work. But it will work on terms adapted to them.

Democracy, of course, is about much more than elections. It is about how governance manages plurality, including political plurality. Elder-respectful African societies are not easy about the concept of loyal political opposition, or about alternance. It tends to be winners take all.

And too often the winners are the dominant tribal component, forcing others into defensive ethnic networks which also occur in our own western societies, among outsiders.

Democracy is about creating spaces, spaces for differences without conflict.

It relies on transparency in order to appease grievance.

One of the remarkable features in post-conflict and post-totalitarian situations has been the emergence of truth and reconciliation commissions. The first was actually in post-Pinochet Chile to obtain the truth about those murdered by the regime for their families. In post-apartheid South Africa the decision was made to exchange truth for immunity from prosecution. Rwanda, Argentina, and others have used variants of the mix and I am aware of the official inquiries in Spain about the locales of dead and murdered victims of the Civil War.

In Europe good intentions are clear, despite populist backlash, as evidenced by the Commissions mandated to examine cultural differences and the challenges of minorities. Major differences persist over the ceiling for freedom of speech in pluralist societies - the Danish Mohammed cartoon scandals - and over whether viable states are synonymous only with the cultural vehicle of a common language. But I am encouraged by the recent news that Jean-Marie Le Pen's Nationalist front is down in the polls and almost, broke and has had to sell its lavish Paris HQ to a school for Chinese.

Stereotyping persists. Some makes me laugh: in Italy the common usage for a maid is now "una philippina"; I have heard serious people vaunt the merits of their philippina from Ukraine. But some is ugly and people die.

The costly truth is that without a full admission of all to the opportunities of a society, there is frozen human capital which we can't afford.

Moreover, as I said at the outset, the resurgence of ancestral hatreds in South Central and Eastern Europe represent a combustible inter-state form of ethnic competition.. Your work is more than ever essential and the good news is that you may find that people are listening acutely.

The news from the United States is paradoxical, but hopeful.

The current financial crisis will moderate economic laissez-faire and may help to moderate extreme economic disparity.

It is impossible not to be elated by the candidacy of the uniquely cross-cultural figure of Barrack Obama, whose anthropological language of understanding and conciliation is seldom heard in the divisive political arena.

His campaign has been based on the audacity of hope.

So, let me close hopefully. I choose the description of a hopeful inter-cultural reality. It is an excerpt from Canadian-Indian author Rohinton Mistry about a phenomenon in pluralism reality he witnessed daily, but which I can only recall

from memory.

Each day, the narrator, to collect his thoughts drove to watch trains coming and going. Each train departed with a kind of human miracle, because human souls would run after the departed train, grasping a railing or a step, dangling and swaying as if their lives were in the balance. But hands would reach out for his hands - and whose hands were they? Moslem, Hindu, Dalit, Christian, Buddhist? No one knew and no one cared. The hands of all brought the runners to safety.