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Reports

The Aging of Empire and Future of the Inter-Civilization Dialogue

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Abstract

In a reflective article published by the Magazine of the United Nations in late 2012, former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami wrote, “dialogue among civilizations is not a philosophical or political theory per se. We presented the issue as a paradigm; as a desirable model and example for relations among humans, societies and different groups.” (1) The promise of such a civilizational dialogue has been tested by several vicissitudes in the last two decades, mainly the 9/11 attacks in the United States and other acts of violence in Europe and beyond.

The quest of institutionalizing this dialogue can be traced back to 1972 when Austrian philosopher Hans Köchler sent a letter to Marie-Pierre Herzog, then-Director of the Division of Philosophy at UNESCO in Paris. He proposed the idea of an international conference on “dialogue entre les différentes civilisations” (dialogue between different civilizations). Two years later, a first international conference on the role of intercultural dialogue, *"The Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations"*, was held in Innsbruck, Austria, under the joint auspices of Léopold Sédar Senghor, President of Senegal, and Rudolf Kirchschläger, President of Austria. The resolution of this international symposium urged “the member States of UNESCO to make all possible efforts for a more intensive training of diplomats in the field of international cultural co-operation especially through the channels of UNESCO itself, and to develop the cultural aspects of their foreign policy.” (2)

The call for dialogue among, or of, civilizations, as well as Turkey's and Spain's call for an "alliance of civilizations", have emerged as a global political discourse against the background of two competing and powerful discourses: Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' and Francis Fukuyama's 'Globalization of Liberalism/End of History', in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Adopting the critical dialectical lens of Hegel, this dialogue of civilizations continues its thesis-antithesis interaction with its detractors with the trajectory of shaping a synthesis of positive engagement, inclusion, and peace.

Some scholars have considered political scientist Huntington's thesis 'Clash of Civilizations' to be a civilizational equivalent of the 'security dilemma', in which misperceptions about the other eventually increases the tension and then leads to conflict." (3) Others have defended the idea of a dialogue of civilizations as "a third political reaction to the end of the Cold War". They have also sought to sketch it as 'an alternative model for World order.' (4) For instance as Fabio Petito points out, "the call for a "dialogue of civilizations" has emerged as a set of ideas, which are often generic but increasingly perceived as a political necessity all over the world to somehow contribute to a more peaceful and just world order." (5)

However, the gap remains wide between dialogue of civilization, as a normative value celebrated in scores of settings and conferences, and its pragmatic edge in delivering results. From this perspective, Aljazeera Centre for Studies and the Berlin-based Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute have collaborated in developing a new practical vision, or strategic foresight, for reconstructing relations between Europe and Islam, through a series of three conferences in North Africa and Europe in 2019 and 2020. As one member of the Organizing Committee put it, "the distinguishing feature of this research gathering [in Tunis] is its epistemological approach, which seeks to develop practical tools and mechanisms to apply alternative ideas, visions, and conceptions for acceptance of the other; and to transmit foundations for a shared existence based on mutual understanding and interests." (6)

In this paper, Dr. Solon Simmons sociologist and professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University in Washington proposes an assessment of the dialogue of civilizations project through several theoretical frameworks, including Thucydides, Ibn Khaldun, Samuel Huntington, Mohammad Khatami, and Edward Said. He examines the significance of this dialogue through the prism of Europe's ageism, or gerontology of empires, in the context of "some new and more balanced international arrangement", which is destined, as he put it, "to replace the Anglophone global supremacy of the past century and a half."

In retrospect, 1978 represented the beginning of the end of an era. Edward Said published his landmark book *Orientalism*, which remains the definitive statement on the damaging and distracting

effects of the patronizing attitude that citizens and scholars of Christian nations have directed towards Islam, increasing in scope and intensity as the West rose in relative power in modern times. Although Said's story began deep in the history of the East-West relationship, the era properly began with Czar Nicholas I and his famous description of the Ottoman Empire as the "sick man of Europe" in 1853. There were many material features that defined the era, military, economic, social and political, but what Said had managed to disrupt with his book, if only in a minor way, was the narrative of the relationship between Europe and Islam. As important as the concrete expenditures of blood and treasure are for the fate of the international community, it is this narrative that makes it possible to transform identity, mobilize the masses, and reimagine the public sphere. It is the dynamics of and points of leverage within this narrative of Islam and the West that we have to better understand.

Because it is so important to map the narrative of the relational identity of Islam and the West, it has been my great pleasure to participate in the opening stages of a process that is intended to do just that. The Tunis Process, a joint project of the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute (DOC), Aljazeera Centre for Studies (AJCS), and the LBH Foundation, is intended to overcome the most pernicious framings of this kaleidoscopic and ancient inter-civilization conversation, especially those aspects dramatized by Huntington, who ominously wrote in his infamous 1993 article "Clash of Civilizations" in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, that "Islam has bloody borders." As described by the organizers, the objective of the Tunis Process is to "bring together more than 40 diverse international participants – policymakers, influencers, academics, and practitioners in intercultural and interreligious dialogue. The process aims to generate policy recommendations and initiatives to make a positive and substantive contribution to debates around the relationships between Islam and Europe." (7)

The Tunis Process will unfold in three major sessions, the first held in Tunis in June of 2019, the second in Rhodes Greece, in October 2019 and a third in 2020. The process is distinctive because of the ambition of its organizers, to speak at the level of inter-civilization dialogue and because of the diverse array of stakeholders involved in the process, including representatives from government, the media, the academy, religion, and civil society. The Tunis Process is exactly the sort of conversation, which should become a commonplace in a world in which we are becoming more alike not less, but where increased interaction enables disagreements at every turn.

Beyond the Clash Hypothesis

Anyone who has ever participated in such a forum will quickly recognize that the tendency of global commerce is to increasingly push us into a worldwide epidemic of what Freud called the narcissism of small differences. (8) The more alike we become, the more opportunity we have to celebrate our misunderstandings. It is precisely in dialogues like this one that these tendencies can be confronted,

and one can imagine them being widely publicized and replicated to an extent that they might have some hope of pushing back on the divisive forces of populism that invariably accompany a period of commercial expansion. As the world comes together materially, it will take a special class of experts to prevent the gathered energy from blowing it apart symbolically.

What we experienced in Tunis is not a stand-alone event, but forms part of a larger mosaic of responses to the Huntington thesis of the early 1990s. Long-term observers of the Muslim world were rightly alarmed to see a leading political scientist of the Pax Americana suggest that the new victors of the Cold War should now turn its sights against the enemies of old Christendom. Huntington hypothesized that “the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics.” (9)

Video 1: Huntington’s Interview with Charlie Rose (January 1, 1997)

<https://charlierose.com/videos/17838>

Edward Said himself penned an attack on the thesis immediately after the events of 9/11 under the title “The Clash of Ignorance,” where he dismissed the use “unedifying labels like Islam and the West” and warned against “vast abstractions” that provide only “momentary satisfaction.”

Earlier in his lecture at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1998, Said contested Huntington’s call that “The West must exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states to support in other civilizations groups sympathetic to Western values and interests.” (10) He criticized Huntington for being “relentlessly aggressive and chauvinistic in his prescription for what the West must do to continue winning, so that the reader is forced to conclude that he’s really most interested in continuing and expanding the Cold War by other means, rather than advancing ideas that might help us to understand the current world scene or ideas that would try to reconcile between cultures.” (11)

My colleague, Rich Rubenstein had co-written a similar piece for Foreign Affairs already in 1994 that accused Huntington of a “Spenglerian pessimism” that proposed little more than a “modification of the Cold War model.” (12) He also contested Huntington’s claim that the clash of civilizations thesis does not come up with a new paradigm since it neatly fits into political realism. Other academic critiques like Richard Rosecrance, John C. Raines, Mohammed Arkoun, and John Bowden voiced similar concerns, but practitioners realized the power of the civilization construct and how it could be turned to good use. For instance, offensive realists may consider Huntington’s hypothesis a reliable

ideological tool for maximizing the West's power. However, Said has cautioned against the coziness between the notion of clash and perpetuation of conflict. He argued, "The core of Huntington's vision, which is not really original with him, is the idea of an unceasing clash, a concept of conflict, which slides somewhat effortlessly into the political space vacated by the unrelenting war of ideas and values embodied in the unregretted Cold War of which of course, Huntington was a great theorist."

(13)

Video 2: The Myth of "The Clash of Civilizations" Lecture by Edward Said at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1998)

<https://www.sam-network.org/video/the-myth-of-the-clash-of-civilizations>

In November 1998, then-president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, proposed a resolution to the United Nations General Assembly to declare a year of United Nations Year of the Dialogue among Civilizations. He was considering the need for "a few corrections. We must say that mankind was freed from the tyranny of the non-sacred disguised as sacred, which is a significant and praiseworthy freedom. The main problem during the Middle Ages and in many ideological countries was that non-sacred disguised as sacred was imposed on people... Religions, such as Islam and Christianity, believe in the sacred, but considering as sacred the socially and historically constructed interpretation of religion, and imposing it on society and thus hindering thought and progress causes hardships." (14)

Ironically, the designated year of dialogue was 2001, the year of 9/11, giving great energy to the clash versus the dialogue side of the debate just when the dialogue counternarrative began to take hold. And yet the forces of dialogue were undeterred, pushing to use the forum of the United Nations as a vehicle for combatting the inexorable logic of power politics. Thus was born the Alliance of Civilizations at the United Nations, the UNAOC, in 2005 under the leadership of then-Secretary General Kofi Annan and Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, a story told on the UNAOC website. "In the aftermath of 9/11 and in the context of the global war on terrorism, Samuel Huntington's theory of the Clash of Civilizations, and a chain of terrorist attacks around the globe, Spanish Prime Minister Mr. José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero formulated the idea of an "Alliance of Civilizations" in his first speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 21 September 2004." (15)

These efforts all demonstrate how hungry the world is for debate and dialogue and how easy it is to encourage efforts to combat xenophobia, intolerance, and suspicion. And yet, this good will is quite often paired with predictable yet trying setbacks. Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the UN Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations Giandomenico Picco said: "History does not kill. Religion does not rape women, the purity of blood does not destroy buildings and institutions do not fail. Only individuals do those things." (16)



UN Secretary General Kofi Annan announcing the Launch of the Alliance of Civilizations (July 14, 2005 UNOAC News)

Dialogue versus Attacks

The narrative of cooperation is easily shattered with acts of violence, focusing the mind on what appears impossible rather than on what could possibly be done. This inherent vulnerability of the peace narrative demands that we look inside the dialogue process itself to tease out the tensions in the nature of such a process, the tentative expressions of frustration with legacies of abuse that haunt all the members of it, and the awkwardness of proposing analyses of global power (cultural, economic, political, and strategic) that well-meaning participants struggle to articulate in a polite way with their newfound friends. Without attention to these dynamics, the peace narrative risks becoming little more than a mechanism for coping with catastrophe.

We certainly see these dynamics at work in the Tunis Process. Let me describe the day of our arrival to the opening session. Many of us arrived for the dialogue process on Thursday morning, the 27th of June. This gave us an opportunity to prepare for the weekend activities. By coincidence, my flight arrived around 11:00 AM, just about the time that two suicide bombs went off in downtown Tunis. Luckily, I had already left the airport and was *en route* to the hotel before things were locked down in response. Not only this, but the organizers soon informed us that it appeared that Tunisian president Beji Caïd Essebsi had also died that day, and it was not clear to us at that point if the events were related. This was particularly troubling because President Essebsi was meant to serve as the host of the dialogue, which was to be held in the presidential palace. As it happened, the attacks were not targeting tourists but police forces, and the president was not dead but only gravely ill. (17)

Nevertheless, the circumstances placed the nature threat to collaboration in stark relief. As a signal of frustration and disempowerment, terrorism is a signal reminder of how much work is to be done to reestablish a respectful balance between the two parties, Islam and Europe.

If the inaugural circumstances of the dialogue served as a reminder of the gross imbalance of the parties to the dialogue, when the affair was formally underway, it became clear that we were also trapped by our assumptions, language, and frames of reference. It was pointed out several times that Islam and Europe are not parallel concepts. Instead one might have compared Islam and Christianity or the Middle East and North Africa with Europe. What did it mean to frame the dialogue with a contrast between a religion and a geography? What ideological baggage were we carrying into our discussion? Many participants were sensitive to the awkwardness of this formulation and made it clear that they worried that we were simply reinforcing symbolic asymmetry by making Europe the base of reference and framing the discussion in terms of welcoming Muslims into Europe—or at least into an international conversation in which Europe was predominant.

Of course, it was precisely this kind of intellectual ethnocentrism that Said had exposed in his Orientalism critique. Even with the best of intentions we fell into the habit of framing the problem in terms of the Eastern Question as our nineteenth century forbears had done, thereby diminishing the richness of the contributions of the Muslim participants. In this way, just as with the anchoring symbolism of Islamic terrorism that began the event, we were not just using the narrative, but it was using us. Luckily, our organizers had acted with enough forethought to include a diverse and wise mix of participants who we were able to reintroduce balance into our shared perspective, even under the shadow of legacies of imperialism that are impossible to miss in Tunis as they are across North Africa.

The asymmetric pull of our conceptual categories was counterbalanced as well by our use of language. The format of the dialogue followed a common pattern in international conferences, working with simultaneous translation in English and in French, but there was an additional element here, an insistence on framing as much of the conversation in Arabic as was possible. Some of the Arabic speakers were fully fluent in all three languages and most also spoke French, but the use of Arabic as a marker of inclusion was an important part of the dialogue and did serve to change the feeling of the conversation. Of course, it is language as much as anything else that is at stake in the global transformation we are living through. Even in North Africa, one can sense the anglophone ascendancy and the fear of cultural displacement is at its most concrete in choice of language. At a minimum, this dynamic makes it clear that sustained inter-civilizational dialogue will require attention to language—perhaps making progress by borrowing philosophical concepts that translate poorly.



Some of the participants at the Tunis Conference (June 28-29, 2019)

The 642-year Journey to Ibn Khaldun

One important example of this philosophical-linguistic pluralism was the emergence of the word ‘asabiyah’ in our deliberations, a word made famous by the great Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun. Asabiyah refers to the group feeling that inclines groups to action, binding them in their solidarity, purpose, and mutual commitment. The word is not only untranslatable, but it is pregnant with twenty-four possible meanings in the Arab context, including ‘solidarity feeling’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘groupdom’, ‘collective consciousness’, and even ‘clannishness’. For Ibn Khaldun, asabiya is “the fundamental bond of human society and the basic motive force of history”. Nurturing as it is for the educated North African/Middle Easterner to have ibn Khaldun’s ideas recognized for the products of permanent genius that they are, the concept invokes anxiety as well in its implications of fundamentalism, rural rebellion and confrontational zeal. Whatever the implications, if dialogue will have the power to transform “the narrative,” it will have to embrace the latent power of native concepts like asabiya to disperse the orientalist fog. If you like, just as English incorporates untranslatable words from the French, so too French speakers should consider doing the same for untranslatable concepts from Arabic.



Dr. Solon Simmons moderating one of the focus-group discussions at the Tunis Conference (June 29, 2019)

France and the French language are clearly an important part of the asymmetry of the Europe-Islam dialogue. If the symbolic role of language in general played an important role in our deliberations, the specter of France as an imposing point of reference was equally important. Even in Tunis this far after independence, the French language has a transporting capacity to it that renders what happens in real life as a kind of pale reflection of the French model. This is strangely familiar. Being a native English speaker, my relationship to French has always been somehow postcolonial. Granted, we are almost as distant from the Norman conquests as they were from the fall of the Roman Republic, but there is something about the French language that brings with it a sense of centrality and naturalness, as if any idea expressed in English were only a wan representation of the original. Things are much worse with the francophone Arabic speakers. As our group spoke of Europe, we kept returning to discussions of conditions in France: how the French relate to Muslims, the false universalism of French republicanism, the unconscious arrogance of the former colonizer, etc.

If we began a sentence speaking of Germany, we ended it with criticisms of France. Although most participants (including the French members) doggedly reasserted the obvious fact that Europe is more than just France, our collective imaginary had a French accent and this had implications for our ability to reimagine relationships. This is only a snapshot or a glimpse of the broader conversation, but it is one that should be addressed directly in any future dialogues. The multiple available future images of Islam will all have to grapple with the past image of France.

It is important to confront this French legacy because France's role in world affairs has already gone through important changes that may prove to be instructive for other nations as their roles change as well. Given the modest size of France and the growing limits to its institutional influence, the French language and the prestige it carries with it may well be out of proportion with the scope of the civilization conversation. And what is true of France is also true of Europe and even the United States. The imperial influences of the European world system are entering a period of profound transition. Even the United States is managing its relative fall in its unilateral influence.

There was a time that I did a lot of television political commentary and I watched a correspondingly large amount of commentary in preparation. I distinctly recall watching a segment with Republican Senator John McCain in which he put down the French influence in international affairs with a sardonic statement something like the following, 'you know, the French remind me a little bit of an aging actress of the 1940s, who is still trying to dine out on her looks but doesn't have the face for it.' The quote is remembered now for its gender insensitivity, but stripped of its gendered aspect, it contains a vital truth. France is no longer the global power it was in the nineteenth century, and it has not yet come to accept all that implies in a graceful way; and if France is the aging woman of the international order, the countries that manage what is left of the British empire are the aging males.

The Civilization-Demographic Shift Connection

Let me motivate this analogy by anchoring the it in some concrete demographic data. Consider the median age of citizens of the following European counties according to the CIA Factbook: Germany, 47.4; Italy, 45.8; Greece, 44.9; Austria, 44.2; France, 41.5; United Kingdom, 40.5. What we notice here is that the average person in much of Europe is over 40 years old, and the United States is a little more vibrant, with an average age of 38.2. Now consider the median ages of countries in the MENA region: Saudi Arabia, 29.9; Morocco, 29.7; Libya, 29.4; Algeria, 28.3; Syria, 24.5; Egypt, 23.9; Yemen, 19.8. The average person in these countries in their twenties. If we expand the lens to include Muslim majority countries (or near majority) in sub-Saharan Africa, the contrast is even more stark: Senegal, 19; Guinea, 19; Nigeria, 18.3; Somalia, 18.2; Mali, 15.8; Niger, 15.5. (18) These countries largely populated by teenagers. The dialogue of civilizations will have to confront the fact that one side is full of people going through mid-life crises while the other is full of people going through young adult identity crises. The dynamics of these processes are quite different.

Returning to the question of nations aging gracefully, if we combine the demographic implications of median age gaps across regions as described above with the reality of the relative decline of unilateral influence of the United States in world affairs over the past two decades, we can see the explosive mix that will make it so difficult for what has been known as the West since the Second World War comes to terms with the churning politics of the Muslim world that produced the Arab Spring and its

aftermath. After all, men age just as women do and are no more likely to adapt to their conditions gracefully. For leaders of the Anglo-American world, we have Boris Johnson and Donald Trump who present like caricatures of the unsuccessful midlife transition. As narrative works on the level of story and not reference, we can see how both Johnson and Trump can be thought of by analogy as representatives of an aging empire that cannot come to grips with its loss of vitality, together representing the remnant of the British Empire—casting the special relationship in another light.

Where the United Kingdom had colonies that spanned the globe, the United States now has over 800 military bases that span a similar geography. They are positioned in more than 70 countries and territories “from giant ‘Little Americas’ to small radar facilities. Britain, France and Russia, by contrast, have about 30 foreign bases combined.” (19) Where once the British navy maintained what it took to be freedom of the seas in support of international commerce, now the American navy does much the same. As the maritime supremacy of the United States has come under challenge in places like the South China Sea, and the coast of East Africa, it has become increasingly clear that some new and more balanced international arrangement is destined to replace the anglophone global supremacy of the past century and a half. To follow the metaphor, as this process plays out in this and other ways, the anglophone imperial remnant vainly grasps for images of youthfulness that are no longer flattering, if ever they had been. The liberal institutions that that empire had desperately promoted are under severe stress. Populism and unilateralism are natural extensions of this trend. As we imagine a shift in the narrative of Islam and the West of Islam, we have to confront this problem of aging empires, otherwise the natural dynamics of world system succession are not promising.

One place we can see these natural dynamics in play is the way that the American international relations community of scholars have reacted to the rise of China, perhaps best characterized by Graham Allison’s recent book *The Thucydides Trap*. (20) Using the classic work by the ancient historian, Thucydides, and his argument for the causes of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, Allison looks back over the centuries with worry about how the China-U.S relationship will develop. Thucydides had argued that, “it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.” As the rising power challenges the hegemony of the established power, it is common for conflict to result between them and to engulf their allies and the world around them as well. Allison identifies sixteen cases like this over the past 500 years, with twelve of them ending in war. Those that avoided war went through what he called “huge, painful adjustments in attitudes and actions on the part of challenger and challenged alike.”

Going through these painful adjustments, especially on the part of the once established party, are what might be called an empire aging gracefully. We can think of these adjustments in narrative terms; the story we tell ourselves about our histories and our nations will have to adjust as the world changes.

In France and Germany, the adults appear to still be in charge, but the British and American cases, at least through the Brexit and Trump phases, are going the way of the sports car and the trophy bride—nationalist populism. To chart the future course of the narrative of Islam and the West, we will need to confront these painful adjustments head on. The United States will lose some of the hegemonic privilege it has enjoyed over the past several decades, but here is where the metaphor breaks down.

Several observers have noticed Trump’s administration appears to bring U.S. foreign policy another step closer to embracing a “Huntingtonian view of the world”; and senior administration members genuinely appear to believe the United States is engaged in an “existential civilizational struggle”. (21) Unlike a man like Donald Trump or Boris Johnson, nations do not age and die, rather they evolve and persist. As China and other countries demand a greater share of the glory of international management, it will become clear that Islam and the quarter of the world’s population who adhere to it will demand and regain some of the glory lost in its “sick man” status that I described at the beginning of this paper. Similarly, China will demand and regain its dignity after its “century of humiliation.” Because glory is a positional good, the gain of the rest will feel like a loss for the West, but it needn’t be so. If we are clever, we will realize that it is an anachronism to speak of civilizations in modern times, instead we are together inventing our new global civilization, a process that began with the peace movement of the later nineteenth century, the League of Nations and all that followed it. Civilization is a characteristic of the city and city life and there is now more in common between Shanghai and Chicago or Dubai and Las Vegas than the differences that separate them. There may well always be many nations in the world, but increasingly, there is only one civilization. Our job as peacemakers is to help the citizens of the world to get over ourselves. Everyone has a role to play in the emerging global commons.

Video 3 : Giandomenico Picco, UN Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations

<http://webtv.un.org/watch/world-chronicle-784-giandomenico-picco-un-year-of-dialogue-among-civilizations/5785694565001/?term=>

Those of us who desire to help can use forums like the Tunis Process to promote richer conceptions of civilization in conversation. We can remind audiences in European and para-European societies like the United States that it was Muslim scholars who preserved the Greek classics, doing more to save civilization than the Irish, to quote a famous narrative intervention by Thomas Cahill. We can confront stereotypes, but the best way to do it is with stories that avoid the dreary romanticism that is so typical of the forsaken, instead building novel and generative stories of common destiny based on shared heritage like the examples of the invention of the concepts of both “Judeo-Christianity” and “the Abrahamic faiths” demonstrate. Khatami’s example is a point of departure. He has conceived dialogue among civilizations as “search for the bases and concepts of the civilizations, in order to define new policies and power and create a new set of relations. It can certainly not ignore politics. By using the

criterion of dialogue, we can criticize policies, not justify them. Thus, dialogue among civilizations would have a constructive effect on politics.” (22)

The idea is to craft stories that are true but unifying. Our grandfathers’ grandfathers did this work in the run-up to the last great era of imperial transition, when a rising Germany confronted an established British Empire, resulting not only in two great world wars, but also the forerunner of the United Nations and the very concepts of the international community and world peace that inspire us today. These ideas were not mechanical reactions to obvious problems but rather the imaginative confections of dreamers who were able to overcome their narrow identities in pursuit of new ones. It is not that history doesn’t matter, but instead that history was always converging on ends much larger than the provincial legacy institutions that we were taught to give our lives for.

Video 4: Dialogue Among Civilizations: Mohammad Khatami's speech at the Australian National University, March 24, 2009

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLXbGwVZLs>

How Deep Stories Will Return?

Let me close these reflections on this novel dialogue process between Europe and Islam that we call the Tunis Process with a final plea for taking narrative seriously and a cautionary tale about what can happen when we do not. I wrote above that, at least for now, Germany as a modern nation, is aging gracefully. It has taken steps to build on its still recent unification, to show leadership in the emerging European super-entity, and to limit the most excessive examples of income inequality, which are fuel on the fire of a national midlife crisis. These are all sensible actions that one might expect of a country with the third highest median age in the world to take, and Germany’s chancellor Angela Merkel is just the sort of adult in the room one would expect to lead such a country. But what the Germans seem to have forgotten is what their philosopher Nietzsche taught us all—Dionysus is just as important in human affairs as is Apollo. In other words, emotion is just as important in the course of history as is reason, and narrative and the literary aspects of politics is where these two come together. Think of it as the Goldilocks standard, not too hot, not too cold.

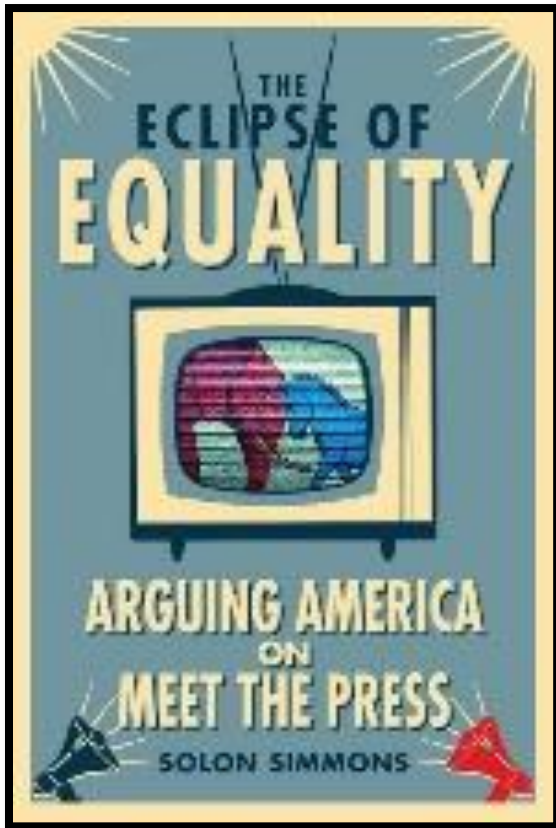
Percy Shelly famously wrote that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” (23) but Germany is governing as if this is all distracting hogwash. Reason is the German guide to global governance not poetry. Merkel’s reign is now so established that Robert Kagan’s provocative and playful claim that “Americans are from Mars, Europeans from Venus” seems to apply perfectly well to the German case. However, a narrative perspective suggests otherwise. How long will Germany be able to resist the allure of its Prussian past? How long will it think of the European project as an

instrumental partnership, better suited to regulating commerce than an identity through which to reenchant the world.

In this period of imperial transition, the deep stories will return. Neoliberal disorder has brought Dionysus back to the anglosphere faster than has the regulated and high-road capitalism of middle Europe, but the change is all in the same direction. The caution therefore is for European leaders to never underestimate the draw and power of the deep stories. From a narrative perspective, Merkel should never have allowed Greece to founder and sink as it did in the crisis of the Great Recession. Lord Byron died to revive this seedbed of Western culture in 1824 when the broader Western empire was on the ascendant at the expense of the East, but in 2010, in the Greek debt crisis, Merkel could dash Greek hopes of a rescue bid with little more concern than she would give closing a failing bank. As a German diplomat put it, "Germany cannot justify its taxpayers having to finance the lovely lives of the Greeks." (24) Greece was no longer an anchor of European identity but merely an example of Mediterranean extravagance, sprung from the pages of Thomas Mann novel.

This narrative collapse may have had dire consequences. Across the English Channel in 2016, Great Britain was no longer in a mood to send its great poets to die for the concept of Europe. It was willing to take the risk of reverting to Little England rather than sacrifice its sovereignty to a foreign entity, even one that might have some modest hope of resisting the centripetal rivalry emerging between the United States and China.

The glories of political Islam are in the past. Baghdad fell in 1300, but demography is destiny. In the 2020s we will be unable to ignore the youthful enthusiasm that will roil the Islamic world. If aging Europe has any hope of productively channeling this enthusiasm, it will have to cultivate its storytellers. These young people can learn to love the West, but only if it properly acknowledges its debt to the East. This is the hope of the Tunis Process. Only in efforts like these can we begin to craft the integrative stories that will move the masses both West and East to some common destiny. The more likely path is the vision of a clash that Samuel Huntington bequeathed us, but let us hope that the better angels of our coming dialogues will visit the process and help us all to tell a better story.



Simmons's book: The Eclipse of Equality: Arguing America on Meet the Press

About the Author



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