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ETHICS AND REALPOLITIK: ROOM FOR DIPLOMACY

Roberto Toscano

Nation-states are neither the creators nor the prime movers of the dialogue of civilizations, but can (should) establish the conditions for this dialogue to happen – starting, of course, by abstaining from anything that might hamper or block it. The protagonist of this dialogue is society, not the state. Societies create meaning, develop values, define different modalities of being human. In a word, societies create, reproduce, consume and exchange culture. And we know what happens when states – totalitarian states – try to usurp this function.

Can a world of nation-states stage the dialogue of civilizations? A critique of Huntington's theory.

But it is necessary to address a preliminary question: is dialogue possible? If I am asking this question, apparently a purely rhetorical one, it is because for a few years we have been hearing many voices, some of them authoritative and sophisticated, repeating in more articulate fashion (and in the guise of alleged realism) the belief that “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” If we discuss this extremely important theme we owe it more than to anyone else, to Professor Huntington. Not because he will inspire our analyses (at least I hope not), but since it is thanks to his intellectual provocation that in the past few years the subject of civilizations, their clashes and their dialogues, has become central in global debates.

Four objections to Huntington's theories. Since September 11, that fateful date that really changed the world we live in, the “clash of civilizations” has left the sphere of scholarly debate to become a familiar reference. This, in spite of the fact that Professor Huntington himself, in an interview to a German journal, has denied that the amazing terrorist attack on the US could be inscribed in his paradigm, given the fact that “the Islamic world is split.”¹

There is no doubt that today Islam is widely perceived, in the United States and in Europe, as a powerful and menacing challenge, as a totally alien and hostile world, so that today even many of those who have never read Professor Huntington's articles and books believe in the clash of civilizations.

However, we cannot allow ourselves to be simply overwhelmed by events, and abandon intellectual debate under the pressure of dramatic contingencies. What we should do, instead, is to try to use theory and intellectual debate not as an escape from events, but as a tool to make some sense out of them. Thus I will very briefly express my own view on Huntington's theory, since I believe that, if one accepts its fundamental core, dialogue of civilization would only be seen as illusion or hypocrisy or, at most, a way of introducing limitations and truces into a perennial, inevitable conflict (incidentally, this is the meaning of the now universally familiar term of *jihad*).

My objections to Huntington can be summarized in four questions: *Who defines the values that characterize different civilizations?* In too many parts of the world definitions are not left to individuals and so-

cial groups, but are unilaterally proclaimed by non-democratic leaders, be they dictators or terrorists. Taking their claim at face value would entail a racist disrespect for millions of “producers of civilization”. This is especially, dramatically true for millions and millions of Islamic individuals, who are today culturally and politically disenfranchised by the violence of few and the fear of many.

Where do we draw the territorial limits that allow us to define “a civilization”? We cannot but agree with Amartya Sen, when he wrote that he resented being included, as a person coming from the rich, manifold cultural and spiritual tradition of India, in the general “Confucian” category to which Huntington ascribes Asia as a whole.²

When – with reference to which time frame – do we assess the characteristics of a given culture? Fixity is definitely not what characterizes cultures – vital phenomena in constant transformation – so that the attempt to understand them by still photos instead of film can only lead to absurd misunderstandings.

Who has ever seen a self-contained civilization? The history of cultures is one of constant cross-fertilization, of endless exchange and mutual borrowing. Let us take Christianity and Buddhism, and let us follow their path through time and space. Who would say that Christianity, a Middle Eastern product, is not European, nor American? Who would say that Buddhism, born in India, has nothing to do with China and Japan? The same can be said about ideologies that have left a profound imprint in different latitudes: what about that creation of a German Jew and a Russian revolutionary that has never been rejected as alien in China? One has trouble seeing why the Statue of Liberty should be considered more alien in Beijing than Marx’s *Das Kapital* or Lenin’s *Chto delat’*.

The fact is that values meet, cross, merge, clash. And that the clash is possible, real, frequent, but it follows neither geographic, nor cultural, nor religious fault lines. Fault lines exist within each culture, each nation, each religion. And even between individuals. How can we Europeans ignore that, when one of the most horrendous denials of human rights and common humanity originated, less than a century ago, in a Christian, Western country? To which “civilization” do we ascribe Adolf Hitler? As a child he certainly attended a Christian church, not an Islamic *madrassa*. And, for that matter, Stalin was a student in an Orthodox seminary.

But let me go back to dialogue. Dialogue is not only possible, but it is a constant mode (together with conflict, to be sure, but not less natural than conflict) of relations between civilizations. What is central is contact and mutual influence, not separation and difference. The real world is not one of self-contained civilizations generating violent friction at their contact points. The choice is not between self-contained isolation and hostile contact, but between two modes of contact: conflict or dialogue. This alternative defines the task of diplomacy. What is certain is that we have a choice, and there is no reason

for yielding fatalistically to the worst-case scenarios, if not indulging in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Cultural relations in a world divided into different eras. No one, of course, could maintain, especially in times such as these, that dialogue of civilizations is an easy task. And yet a better definition of the issue can point at the real nature of the difficulties that have to be overcome. As I noted before, cultures are, of course, different, but they are neither ossified nor monolithic, thus their eminent "plasticity" and "inner plurality" (unless prevented by authoritarian ideologies and political structures) naturally allows for exchanges and changes that constitute an alternative to confrontation and conflict. I would like, however, to formulate an even more radical concept: that the difficulty of dialogue between cultures, and even conflict between them, is not the product of intrinsic anthropological differences amounting to the existence of irreconcilable "human breeds", but rather to the fact that different groups and different cultures actually live in different epochs. As a brilliant British scholar-diplomat, Robert Cooper, has written, the world today lives simultaneously in pre-modern, modern and post-modern times.³ If we accept this premise, then the consequences we can derive from it are very important: in the first place, our rejection of what we today consider repulsive theories and practices will be tempered by the recognition, in an act of painful but positive humility, that it was only yesterday, in historical terms, that those traits (religious intolerance, to name one) belonged to our own civilization. Secondly, if we locate those traits we now reject (rightly so – mine is definitely not a relativist stand) within a context that is political and economic, if we move from anthropology to history then we will not throw up our hands in fatalistic despair, a despair that runs the risk of assuming racist overtones.

We will instead ask ourselves what were the political and economic prerequisites that allowed our values and our institutions to prevail, and try – the more power, the more responsibility – to contribute to the spreading of those prerequisites, rather than of our institutions and our values. The goal should be to allow each human group, each culture, to grow, evolve, interact, and produce and propose its own version of what being human means. Versions that will be different, but not incompatible nor inherently conflictive. The goal should be to live in the same epoch with different voices, just as we do, individually, with our fellow citizens in a pluralistic democracy who hold values that are radically different from our own.

Why promote dialogue? The role of ethics. Having said that dialogue is possible, we do not automatically answer another, more radical question. Why should we promote dialogue? This is particularly relevant for diplomats: why should officials whose job is to defend the national interest of their respective countries engage in this task?

Perhaps surprisingly, I will start with ethics.⁴ My profession is one that has been traditionally and thoroughly characterized by realism.

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Diplomats are not supposed to be dreamers, do-gooders. And yet, it is impossible to address our theme without having recourse to ethical considerations. Dialogue presupposes that partners reciprocally recognize the other's relevance in ethical terms. The "I", as Buber so incisively taught us, must recognize a "Thou". Or – as another great moral philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, wrote – the starting point must be to recognize "the face of the Other." Dialogue, in other words, presupposes accepting that all belong to common humanity, including them within the scope of ethically relevant relations. But that, unfortunately, cannot be taken for granted.

Diplomacy can be a promoter of dialogue of civilizations only if it is not deaf to ethical considerations; only if it includes them within a complex framework which has at its core the defense of national interest, but at the same time allows legitimacy and space to ethics both when defining goals to be pursued and when choosing and applying the necessary means.

But the rationale for practicing a "diplomacy for dialogue" is not only determined by ethical choice. I think that it is important to stress that, when working for dialogue, diplomats operate in the national interest, and thus act within their most traditional mandate and within their "core business."

Prevention diplomacy. In the first place, the very origins of diplomacy in human history prove that from the very beginning its *raison d'être* has been to provide an alternative to violent conflict. Diplomacy has a lot to do with whether difference is translated into conflict or into dialogue, and promoting the second is a powerful way of preventing the first. Conflict prevention, an interesting new horizon for diplomacy, should of course address a range of root causes, both political and economic. And yet, it should also include a very powerful cultural component: that of dialogue between different value systems, different spiritual traditions. Not only those held by large-scale "civilizations," but also those that define ethnic groups and local realities. Facilitating dialogue in a conflict-prevention mode should be an essential task for contemporary diplomacy.

Maintaining diversity in the age of globalization is another goal which does not need any ethical justification. Just as we all share the belief that "biodiversity" is a task to be pursued in the interest of all, the protection and promotion of cultural diversity should be systematically included into foreign policy and diplomatic practice. Incidentally, this goal is also tied to the preceding one, since we see with utmost clarity that the more diversity is threatened, the more we see the setting up of protective borders that tend to be defended with desperate ferociousness. But there is another very powerful positive reason for saying that maintaining diversity is in the interest of all. It is the same reason that we find convincing when we explain why we think democracy and pluralism are not only morally "right", but can be proved to

be instrumental to better, more effective national communities: also with reference to the international community a variety of voices and options is the best, most promising approach to the search for solutions to problems that affect humanity as a whole, and not only individual countries or civilizations.

International relations should be based upon the recognition of the positive value of diversity. Morally positive, since it does not limit our ethical recognition to those who are similar to us; politically positive, since it is but another way of defining democracy; but even aesthetically positive, since it is only by recognizing diversity that, as Montaigne wrote, we are enriched by the possibility of "savouring such an endless variety of shapes of human nature."⁵ This implies that without diversity there would be no art, since art is indeed about the "endless variety of shapes of human nature."

Beyond tolerance. All this means that we should strive to go beyond tolerance. Tolerance is the bottom line of human coexistence. It is an indispensable principle, but a negative one, insofar as it does not exclude psychological and cultural rejection of difference, but it only implies the acceptance (possibly reluctant) that difference has a right to exist and to be freely expressed. Thus, there can be tolerance without dialogue. Instead, we should remember that, as we can read in the UN Millennium Declaration, "Differences within and between societies should be neither feared nor repressed, but cherished as a precious asset of humanity."⁶

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As we strive as diplomats to contribute to the mediation of difference, as we try to address it in a mode of dialogue, and not of conflict, we are confronted with a powerful force which seems at times to represent the most formidable obstacle to our work: identity. Trained to negotiate about national interest – be it in terms of territory, security or trade – we diplomats have been recently obliged to deal with something that is apparently immaterial and abstract, but that packs a most powerful political punch and often makes the difference between peace and war (take for instance the case of the conflicts in former Yugoslavia).

An anti-ideology identity. Diplomacy is by definition the art of compromise. But how can one compromise if what is at stake is identity, i.e. the very *raison d'être* of groups and individuals? Non-democratic leaders (from dictators to terrorists) know this very well, and they are masters in transforming, through systematic propaganda, every contentious issue opposing one ethnic group to another into a matter of life-and-death, not only in terms of sheer survival, but also in terms of preservation or loss of identity. In their systematic ideological onslaught (indeed, it is false that we live in a post-ideological age) they identify dialogue with possible change, and change as a threat to identity. They can do this because they peddle a spurious concept of identity as a sort of absurd and anti-historical freezing in time (remaining *idem*), instead of the preservation of individuality in spite of inevitable transformation (*ipse*). This is indeed one of the defining aspects of every fundamental-

ism. And this explains why Islamic fundamentalists have identified the United States of America as their arch-enemy: not only, and not so much, because of specific foreign policy aspects but because more than any other country in the world, the US stands for accelerated change that is cultural as much as it is economic. Differently from other radical enemies of the past, Islamic fundamentalists hate the US not for what it does, but for what it is.

The strength of this “identity as ideology” is not only the product of the skills of leaders in search of power and legitimation. It originates in the frustrated longing for community at a time when community has been irreversibly disrupted by economic and social change.⁷

But can dialogue, which the ideology of identity identifies as the enemy, be used to challenge it? And how? Definitely, it would be absurd if we were to reply in kind to this hostility, and we were to identify identity as the enemy. Much as we might ideally be attracted by the hypothesis of a “universal human being”, we should never forget that dialogue is a means and not an end in itself, since it aims at preserving diversity. We are not ready, in our search for peace and dialogue, to sacrifice pluralism and diversity to the negative utopia of a culturally uniform human being.

Through its activities and its institutions, the international community should not only allow for identity, it should promote it. Actually, what is inimical to coexistence and dialogue is not identity, but idolatric identity, that is the raising of one characteristic (racial, religious, political) to the status of sole determinant in the essence of groups and individuals. So we should work also in the international sphere in order to create the necessary spaces for plural identities to grow and manifest themselves. The more identities, combined in each individual with variable geometries, the fewer chances of bipolar, potentially violent hostility.

What should be fought with consistency and determination is the hostile, ideological version of identity, its alleged incompatibility with dialogue and change. What should be challenged is – allow me to venture into philosophy – essentialism, i.e. the claim that cultures and identities can be defined intrinsically, separately from interaction and contact with other cultures and identities. This is manifestly false, and we should say so. There is a cultural battle to be fought here. One that should take inspiration from what contemporary science is telling us. When biologists prove that an essentialist interpretation of the function of individual genes is not scientifically tenable (since in biology “grammar” is nothing and “syntax” is everything, because what the gene is depends on where it is located and which other genes relate to it in a sequence); when psychologists and neurobiologists determine that the mind is eminently “relational” even in the formation of its physiological structures, how can we posit that cultures, the most complex level of human reality, can be defined “in themselves”? But if this is so, then dialogue is not an additional, optional possibility, but

it is an intrinsic, inevitable, determinant mode. As UNESCO maintains, all culture is inherently intercultural.

The importance of institutions. Diplomacy, like politics in general, has the task of turning principles and interests into practice. And in order to do that one needs both strategies and institutions. Through which institutions, and by which strategies, can the international community foster the dialogue of civilizations?

Let me start by saying that all multilateral *fora*, whatever their mandate and composition, constitute a global *agora* where ideas generated by different cultures are exchanged and bear fruit in terms of governance. To see the multilateral system as a merely technical framework for reaching practical solutions to international problems would be reductive and wrong. That system – starting from the most universal organ of all, the United Nations – is always also a framework for dialogue.

The dialogue of civilizations, however, cannot be just the product of a conscious effort to promote it on the part of organizations and individuals who have that specific mandate. The whole international system is involved. We see here circular causation at work: the international system as such can only function if there is dialogue, and by its functioning it allows this dialogue to take place.

What I mean is that, in the first place, one of the main tasks of diplomacy, rule-making, has a direct bearing on the concrete possibility of dialogue of civilizations. If it is true that the hostile and aggressive face of identity is the product not only of ideology and propaganda, but of deep-seated feelings of insecurity, we know that setting precise and enforceable international rules that guarantee rights for all, especially for the weaker groups, is the best way of making dialogue a real possibility. Indeed, dialogue in the absence of precise and respected rules of the game is inevitably viewed with suspicion by the weaker partner, be it a country or a group.

Rules, however, cannot be the whole story. Levels of development also come into the picture. Certainly, if we were to demand, in order for dialogue to be possible, equal levels of development and material conditions, we would concede defeat even before embarking on our endeavour. This is definitely not the way the world looks. But since dialogue presupposes a voice, then – if we want to prevent dialogue from turning into the monologue of the strong – we should indeed make a special effort to strengthen the voice of the weak. Thus, there is a strong link between the effort of the international community in development assistance (I am speaking here of a rather recent branch of our profession: “development diplomacy”) and the promotion of real dialogue of civilizations. There are indeed minimal economic requirements for everyone to be allowed to reach with one’s own cultural message the *agora* where the dialogue takes place. The debate on how to strengthen the voice of the weak is a complex and often heated one.

Let me just say here that it cannot, it should not, be reduced to cultural protectionism and cultural autarchy.

Globalization and the dialogue of civilizations. We can examine the same problem in the framework of what is today an inevitable paradigm: globalization. What is the link between globalization and the dialogue of civilizations? Since dialogue demands at the same time a common space and different voices, we are left with an unsolvable tension between ensuring inclusion in one space and preserving many voices. We have at the same time to increase commonalities and preserve peculiarities.

This is the basic dilemma that cultural difference presents, in the first place within national communities that are rapidly losing their traditional homogeneity and becoming multiethnic and multicultural, but also in the world at large, which globalization is bringing closer and closer, but not less different.

I maintain that dialogue of civilizations in the era of globalization demands rejecting two diametrically opposite answers that are traditionally given to the problem of difference within a given community: assimilationism and differentialism.

Under its misleading appearance of acceptance and anti-racism, assimilation hides two disturbing characteristics. In the first place, the common humanity that it champions bears the easily recognizable features of one specific culture, of one of the many possible ways of being human. In the second place, assimilation destroys, by definition, cultural diversity.



But differentialism too is ridden with contradictions and dangers. It purports to be the most tolerant formula for addressing difference. Tolerance, indeed. In the sense that it does not attribute a positive value to difference, but allows those who are different to build and maintain separate cultural spheres, not necessarily integrated through mutual dialogue. I am afraid that the ghetto and Indian reservations are just around the corner. Or, as Zygmunt Bauman has written: "When mutual tolerance is coupled with indifference, communal cultures may live alongside each other, but they seldom talk to each other, and if they do they tend to use the barrel of a gun for a telephone."⁸

Differences and commonalities. There are no simple formulas, here. Or perhaps one could suggest one: "All the difference that is possible, all the commonality that is necessary." I refer here to the fact, for instance, that living together demands common rules of citizenship and equality under the law. And at the same time that no society has the right to impose spiritual orientations and personal values on its citizens who happen to belong to a different culture. In any case, the tension between assimilation and difference can never be overcome. There is no possible dialectic, here. No synthesis: we will have to learn to live with permanent thesis and antithesis.

To make a reference to Europe, I believe that in looking at the process of European integration we see a very concrete way of escaping both

flat uniformity and discordant diversity. Only a malevolent caricature could represent the European Union as being a monolithic and monocultural Leviathan. No one could say that English, Spanish or Italian cultures are being erased by "European culture": Shakespeare, Cervantes and Dante are still in great shape, being both deeply national and deeply universal. But perhaps one could suggest, in this case, that the terms "civilization" and "culture" should not be synonymous. Perhaps we should speak of national cultures and European civilization. The former, rooted in different languages, literatures, traditions, history; the latter, based upon common values, a common view of the human being, of the citizen, of human rights.

The diplomacy of human rights. This brings me to one of the most delicate, most controversial aspects of the dialogue of civilizations: human rights. Having had the experience of acting as delegate to the Human Rights Commission in Geneva for four years in a row, I can testify both to the complexity of the issue, to the fact that diplomats are deeply involved in this discourse, and, finally, to the fact that that it is a very, very difficult job (see the recent conference on racism in Durban).

One of the reasons for this difficulty is that on practically every issue that comes up in the context of what can be called the "diplomacy of human rights" one is confronted (more or less explicitly) with what often becomes a sort of sectoral "clash of civilizations": the confrontation between relativism and universalism. Of course one could say that all the declarations, covenants and conventions on human rights leave little space for relativism. That the battle over those two different approaches was fought at the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights, and that universalism carried the day. And yet the issue deserves a slightly more sophisticated approach. Certainly not to rehabilitate relativism (often the last refuge of dictators who – as I mentioned before – take it upon themselves to define values for their own, often very diverse, peoples), and neither to find some ambiguous middle path between universalism and relativism.

Civilizations can establish dialogue also on issues relating to human rights, and that dialogue does not necessarily demand that we accept relativist premises. Although we maintain that human rights are universal, we should possess enough fairness, and abandon enough arrogance, to admit:

- a) that there are different spiritual foundations for those traits of common humanity on which the recognition of rights is based – i.e. human dignity, compassion, equity;
- b) that the defense of human rights does not allow any orthodoxy, but only an "orthopraxy";
- c) that the language of human rights can be different in different cultures;
- d) that the tempo and modalities of their implementation, as well as the necessary political and legal institutions, can also vary.

Dialogue is possible insofar, while defending universal principles, we recognize different spiritual foundations, different languages, tempos and modalities of implementation, different institutions.

Conclusion. Just as the main player in the dialogue of civilizations should be the multilateral organizations that deal with culture, bilateral cultural relations play the central role in fostering dialogue between nations and peoples. Again, the task is complex: spreading the culture of your own country, but also allowing your own fellow countrymen to be exposed to other cultures. The enemy here are clichés, cross caricatures that still warp our image of the Other (and here no one can cast the first stone!). We would be naïve, however, if we were to think that knowledge by itself is a guarantee of real dialogue and acceptance of difference,⁹ yet it is equally evident that no dialogue is possible without a basis of reciprocal knowledge. Again, the goal should be neither cultural hegemony nor cultural homogenization, but a mutually beneficial, mutually enriching give-and-take.

In the end, the work of diplomats has a lot to do with the dialogue of civilizations, in a way *it is* the dialogue of civilizations, or at least a very important component. There is no final horizon for this dialogue, which one should consider a never-ending task. Unless, of course, one were to envisage the creation of a World Government – an impossible and, let me add, undesirable hypothesis.

¹ *Die Zeit*, September 18, 2001

² Amartya Sen, *Human Rights and Asian Values*, Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, New York 1997.

³ Robert Cooper, *The Postmodern State and the World Order*, Demos, London 2000.

⁴ See Jean-Marc Coicaud and Daniel Warner, eds., *Ethics and International Affairs: Extent and Limits* (United Nations University Press, 2001), in particular Roberto Ioscano, "The Ethics of Modern Diplomacy", pp. 42-83.

⁵ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, Livre III, Flammarion, Paris 1979, p. 187.

⁶ United Nations Millennium Declaration, GA Resolution A/55/L.2, paragraph 6

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Polity, Cambridge 2001.

⁸ Bauman, *op. cit.*, p. 135

⁹ See Izvetan Todorov, *La conquête de l'Amérique. La question de l'autre*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1982.