OVERLAPPING TERRITORIES: THE PROXIMITY OF STRANGERS

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ABSTRACT

In the era of globalization we in a world of overlapping territories and strangers are now always proximate, her or his otherness can no longer be denied. Present-day modernity is characterized by uncertainty; reason and knowledge-based science are questioned. There is a need for a revaluation of culture, civilization, individual and group identity. This also calls for a moral reassessment of society and the nation-state.

Key Words:
●*Globalization* ●*Modernity* ●*Pluralization* ●*Culture* ●*Civilization* ●*Identity.*

Cultures and civilizations are as old as human history, however, the last two decades or so culture and civilization as concepts have been extensively discussed and questioned in all corners of the (academic) world. Politicians, journalists, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, philosophers and lay people have crowded this Babylon with virulent energy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 aroused enormous euphoria and not only in that particular part of Europe. In this post-Cold War excitement some thought that the West provides the only model to modernization. Other parts of the world should follow the social, political and economic models that have brought prosperity to the West. And these models focus on free market capitalism; science, technology and innovation; meritocracy through the market based on equal opportunities and access to education; pragmatism in politics; democracy and peaceful negotiations; and the rule of law. Pragmatism in politics supposedly leads to an absence of ideological conflict and Francis Fukuyama concluded that history came to an end (history is then defined as ideological conflict in a Hegelian fashion).[1] This overlooks the diversity all around our world and it is clear by now that not all countries are 'progressing' towards Western liberal democracy nor are they willing to do so in the future (the term 'progress' implies that people should only be satisfied if they live in a country like Western countries).

The end of the Cold War, though, posed many new questions. A bi-polar world was rather easy to understand after more than forty years of phony war between the United States and the former Soviet Union. Samuel Huntington designed a multi-polar world order: the clash of civilizations. "People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity."[2] And international politics, according to Huntington, is characterized by identity politics in the era after the Cold War. To define the West, though, as Christian overlooks the fact that the United States are very different from the European Union countries (almost five hundred million citizens) due the secularization in many European countries. Moreover, it overlooks the fact that while many Asian countries are predominantly Buddhist, Hindu, Confucianist or Islamic, there are also many Christians living in these countries (it also remains a question, for example, how much significant impact Confucianism has on communist China or that only lip service is paid to its tenets).

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington of 11 September 2001 ended the joyous nineties. Some see a new bi-polar world emerging: Islam versus the rest, particularly the West. To cope with anxiety induced by terror, non-Muslims started to read the Quran. However, not civilizations can clash, persons can, and a person is never only a Muslim, nor is one Muslim a representation of Islam as such. By seeing an individual person merely through the perspective of community, culture, religion or civilization, is to reduce that person to a single dimension. Well before civilizations can clash, we have already limited the scope to a single

perspective. Then we fall in the trap of stereotypes – sometimes with good intention. That all Muslims are (potential) terrorists is as much nonsense as claiming that all Muslims are by definition peace lovers. Amartya Sen says that we have "to distinguish between (1) the various affiliations and loyalties a person who happens to be a Muslim has, and (2) his or her Islamic identity in particular."[3] We will miss the whole picture if we only focus on the second. To read war through the prism of religion is to overlook other reasons and causes. For example, the Middle East cannot be understood if we only look at Islam and Judaism; the conflict also concerns access to land and drinkable water (after all, most of this area is desert).

The cheerful nineties became even farther away when the bank Lehman Brothers went bankrupt on 15 September 2008 and this bankruptcy ignited a global financial crisis. This financial crisis is also a political crisis, because global market capitalism could only be established through political decisions. Now questions are raised whether the United States can still remain the sole super power in the world of emerging powers. And not so much the power of the United States is declining as that other powers are emerging, for example: China (a country that borrowed huge amounts to the United States, partly to pay for the war-on-terror), India and Brazil have to be reckoned with today and in the future.[4] These historical changes in society, politics and the economy raise many new philosophical questions. How to understand identity, culture and civilization in our globalized world (especially from an Asian perspective)?

Globalization is not something abstract, it is concrete (and its consequences are real). Globalization is not out there, it is here (and now). Globalization is not metaphysical, it is political (because its consequences are real and public). While the consequences of globalization are obviously uneven, that, on the other hand, does not mean that people have merely to accept these consequences passively without any ability to alter, appropriate and acculturate. Fatalism, after all, is the end of power to change.

There is nothing teleological about globalization. History has no purpose and the future is not inevitable. We are not progressing toward a situation where we will all be members of a single civilization, where all peoples of the world will embrace liberal-secular democracy and free market capitalism as the end of ideological conflict. Not only is globalization not a given, its consequences are unequal and not benign (and can be bellicose).

Modernity in the era of globalization is not linear and not singular. The Enlightenment hope for progress and historical inevitability is utopian. Moreover, the Enlightenment dream of a universal civilization is

Eurocentric.[5] A growing interconnectedness and interdependence does not necessarily lead to peaceful cooperation; globalization does not mean an end to all international political conflicts, interstate war remains an immanent possibility. While nation-states might seem to have lost steam, it does not mean an end to state sovereignty. Globalization has impacts on everyone, but not equally. Globalization, writes Ulrich Beck, are "the *processes* through which sovereign national states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientation, identities and networks."[6] Globalization, Anthony Giddens writes, is a "[g]rowing interdependence between different peoples, regions and countries in the world as social and economic relationships come to stretch worldwide."[7] Giddens sees modernity spreading across the globe as globalization progresses.[8] Modernization in the era of globalization is not the same as Westernization or homogenization (hybridization is the keyword). Modernization becomes pluralized;[9] globalization thus means a move away from universalism.[10]

Space and time are being compressed; we can go across space within no time. Activities – from war to entertainment – can occur or experienced simultaneously around the globe. This does not mean that space is no longer of significance, how could we be and act without it? Space is the precondition to all existence, action and interaction. We, to state the obvious, live spatially. Territory is still important and we can see a dialectic between the local and the global, i.e. glocalization. Globalization is thus still spatially constituted, however, the meaning of distance and proximity changes in a world where people, values and goods are mobile. I can be socially near to someone, but that person can be spatially distant (or the other way around).

Globalization is not a one-way process people have to undergo passively, but, of course, not every one has the same power to alter, appropriate and acculturate these changes. We are connected in many ways, and economics is only one way. Globalization should *not* be seen as something 'out there', it is *also* an 'in here' matter. Globalization "affects, or rather is dialectically related to, even the most intimate aspects of our lives."[11] Globalization restructures space, what Giddens calls 'action at distance' is the possibility to act without being present. 'Action at distance' is a two-way process, globalization is without 'direction' and we can no longer speak of globalization as Westernization. No one is outside, and while for a long time, the 'conversation' went only from the West to the 'other' now "mutual interrogation is possible."[12] With 'mutual interrogation' (for example the ongoing debate on post-colonialism and neo-imperialism) not only come all

sorts of forms of (violent) resistance, but also possibilities for all sides to change.

One such interrogation to resist is the three-decade-old book *Orientalism* by the Palestinian-American Edward Said. The illegitimate invasion of Iraq by the United States – by ignoring the United Nations and the territorial integrity of the people of Iraq (as a consequence the United States have lost standing in the international community and therefore (soft) power to get things done) – makes that this book did not loose any of its persuasive power.

What Said calls Orientalism is an Orient based on the experiences of Westerners. Orientalism is a discourse to make a dividing line between 'us' and 'them', between those who are included in the making of history and civilization and those who are not. For this Said borrows from Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci. From Foucault he borrows the term discourse and from Gramsci the term hegemony. Orientalism is an academic, intellectual and cultural discourse that helps to sustain the economic, political and military hegemony of among others the United States.

According to Said, borrowing from Giovanni Battista Vico, "the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either. […M]en make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities [such as nation-states] – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made."[13] However, Said continues, these ideas on space have real consequences for power relations in our global society.

Through Orientalism *the* Orient becomes 'Orientalized', so that the Occident can dominate the Orient. Orientalism is not merely a set of myths that can be removed by revealing the truth. Orientalism is a hegemonic discourse about the Orient to hold power over the Orient. "Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."[14]

Said is not saying that only women can write about women (men can be feminists, John Stuart Mill and Amartya Sen are examples), or only homosexuals about homosexuals, blacks about blacks, Asians about Asians, Muslims about Islam. Said writes that "there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes [Said calls this form of knowledge humanism], and on the other hand knowledge – if that is what it is – that is part of an overall campaign of self-

affirmation, belligerency, and out-right war. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external domination."[15]

Said's book *Orientalism* is about how Westerners perceive the Orient and how this body of knowledge is used in a power structure. His book is not about the Orient in general or about the Arab and Islamic world in particular. This book is also not an anti-Western book. In the Islamic world, so says Said, this book is read as such. Said calls this 'Occidentosis', which means that Muslims claim that "all the evils in the world come from the west."[16]

The Dutch-British Ian Buruma and the Israeli Avishai Margalit wrote a book about 'Occidentosis'. They write in the conclusion of *Occidentalism, The West in the Eyes of its Enemies*: "The story we have told in this book is not a Manichaeistic one of a civilization at war with another. On the contrary, it is a tale of cross-contamination, the spread of bad ideas. This could happen to us now, if we fall for the temptation to fight fire with fire, Islamism with our own forms of intolerance. […] We cannot afford to close our societies as a defense against those who have closed theirs. For then we would all become Occidentalists, and there would be nothing left to defend."[17] Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush inaugurated the war-on-terror by saying that who is not with him is against him. Bush as the commander-in-chief of this war only caused more enemies (Friedrich Nietzsche could have warned him).[18]

Orientalism by Edward Said and Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit's *Occidentalism*, are about those people who divide the world in an 'us' and a 'them', who see the other as different, unlike 'us', less than human, i.e. these are dehumanizing ideologies, which reduces human individuals to sub-human classes, which, in turn, can lead to the destruction of human lives.

The Orientalist sees the other as the 'lazy native', as the 'exotic savant' (often pictured in erotic and feminized terms). The native is backward because of his irrationality, and this justifies colonialism and imperialism. Colonialism and imperialism are justified as civilizational forces, so the argument goes.

Orientalism is as one-dimensional as Occidentalism, but now it dehumanizes not the peoples of the Orient but the peoples of the Occident. Both ideologies have real and violent consequences. Buruma and Margalit's book is an attempt to understand those who hijacked airplanes that destroyed the WTC in New York on an early September morning that reset

the mood for this new millennium.

It is the spiritual and profound East versus the coldly mechanical, shallow, rootless, destructive, sex-obsessed, and materialistic West. Today, Occidentalists often focus at the United States, however, "anti-Americanism is sometimes the result of specific American policies […]. But whatever the U.S. government does or does not do is often beside the point. [… Occidentalism refers] not to American policies, but to the idea of America itself, as a rootless, cosmopolitan, superficial, trivial, materialistic, racially-mixed, fashion-addicted civilization."[19]

How to deal with contingency, disagreement, indeterminacy, inconsistency, incoherence, incongruity, ambivalence, heterogeneity, opacity, paradoxy, risk and uncertainty in our globalized era? Friedrich Nietzsche is the philosopher that warned us that ontological uncertainty causes anxiety, and possibly violence against the 'stranger', against what is 'alien'.[20] According to Zygmunt Bauman the task of philosophy today is to teach us how to deal with uncertainty and contingency. No matter how much we need common ground, the search for absolute and universal values, though, is the existential need for security.[21] In a traditional society the stranger would live on the other side of a mountain or sea (the Greeks called those strangers barbarians), today we no longer have that luxury.

Some long back to a traditional society, for it gives ontological security a society in present-day modernity cannot provide, with all the anxiety consequently. In a pre-modern society the question what a society is remains unasked. Within a tradition a person lives in a pre-established order. In present-day modernity the individual has to ask the questions how (global) society should be ordered. We can no longer rely on pre-established answers for these questions.

Modernity held the promise that we could find security in rationality. However, modernity is now primarily characterized by insecurity and instability. Radical doubt is turned against itself: how could radical doubt lead to certain and stable knowledge with which we could colonize the future? The amount we do not – or: cannot – know is probably as large as what we do know now. Many dangers we face in this world are manufactured by ourselves (for example: global warming or the economic crises of 1997 and 2008). Many things cannot be given, that makes calculating the probable consequences of risks impossible.

We can know how to act if we are able to understand a situation. Indeterminacy makes global society a risk-prone environment. The more complex society is – i.e. the complexity of the network of interactions – the

more insecure and instable. A high-risk environment can lead to anxiety and alienation. We live in an ambivalent territory, as Bauman writes: "life is carried on by strangers among strangers."[22] How to decide how to act if actions of others are unpredictable (because who the other is, is unknown)? This can make life fragmentary. Bauman states that there is a gap between what we need to know how to act and what we can know how to act among people we perceive as 'strange'. Civilization and the freedom to sustain and create cultural values are no longer feasible when fear takes over (see for example the European Union captured in the image of a fortress).

The individual has to negotiate the proximity of differences. The stranger is near but socially distant. The high mobility in present-day modernity makes this situation even more complex. The danger is a renewed longing for communityhood – a community of thick relations of care – to exclude the stranger.

That brings us to the moral problem of cultural relativism. There is an old saying: "In Rome behave as the Romans do." Does that mean there is no room for universal values that cross the boundaries of space and time? One such universal value could be the respect for human life. However, the debates concerning abortion, euthanasia and the death penalty seem to show that we do not have a consensus on the question what constitutes man. What is then the normative source of morality if our moral values and norms merely reflect the cultural conventions of a particular space and time?

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."[23] Geertz is thus a relativist. And indeed, different cultures do have different values and norms. What can be considered as right in one culture can be perceived as wrong in another, and it is then naïve to assume that our norms have universal validity.

Cultural relativists assume that there are no universal truths in ethics, i.e. that every normative standard can only be applied within a culture. Cultural relativists conclude from the fact that there are cultural differences that we also cannot find any agreement on morality. Rachels calls this the 'cultural difference argument'. "The premise concerns what people *believe* […]. The conclusion, however, concerns *what really is the case*."[24] This argument is therefore logically fallacious. As if the simple point that we disagree means that no true position can be found (for example, for a long time most were convinced that the earth was flat and the center of the universe). Cultural

relativism overestimates our differences.

But what if we would take cultural relativism seriously? What are the consequences if we do not have a normative point of view from outside a certain culture? The first consequence is that we can no longer perceive cultural practices as morally inferior to our own practices, i.e. we have no longer a tool for moral criticism (in the debates on human rights and Asian values this position is often taken, criticism is then not seen as enlightened but as a new tool of imperialism). Second, we can only judge our society by the standards of our own society. So even when we know that our society is not perfect, we have no tools to morally improve it. And third, moral relativism not only makes criticism impossible, it also makes moral progress infeasible. Relativism does not give us a standard to judge something as being better or improved, that makes social reform impossible.

Many of our values are indeed products of our cultural conventions and it is mere arrogance to assume that our moral values are based on an absolute rational standard and therefore ultimately better than other moral systems. We should be wary of prejudices. Cultural relativism criticizes the dogmatism of universalism. However, cultural relativists go a step further, a step that leads back to universal morality. Anti-dogmatism, so claim relativists, could lead to the virtues of tolerance and respectfulness; these are, though, moral values, which can according to relativism not be independent from culture.

Multiculturalism, the theory that is connected to cultural relativism, has two major flaws (beside the ones discussed above). First, just as the world cannot be divided into homogenous civilizations, so can a society not be divided into homogenous blocks of separate cultures. Global society is one of overlapping territories and interdependent histories, according to Said. And second, multiculturalism locks individuals up in separate cultures by reducing their identity to a singular identity.

Amartya Sen wants to make clear in his latest book *Identity and Violence* that nations are not diverse because they are federations of peoples, each nation, on the other hand, is a collection of individual citizens and each individual inhibits a wide range of identities. It depends on the context, according to Sen, which part of our identity gets focus. No matter how constraint we are by circumstances, we still have to choose and for making choices we need to reason, i.e. to give arguments and justifications.

Identity is a complicated matter. And identity matters. Identity matters for the way we are, think and act. "When we shift our attention from the notion of *being identical to oneself* to that of *sharing an identity with others* of a

particular group […], the complexity increases further."[25] Huntington is right to claim that there are differences between the East and the West, but he makes those differences too pronounced, there exists considerable overlap. "Civilizational or religious partitioning of the world population yields a 'solitarist' approach to human identity."[26]

We all have plural identities according to Sen and he claims that it depends on a particular context which part gets importance. "When the prospects of good relations among different human beings are seen […] primarily in terms of 'amity among civilizations', or 'dialogue between religious groups', or 'friendly relations between different communities' […], a serious miniaturization of human beings precedes the devised programs of peace."[27]

Society is a 'collection' of strangers; acknowledging this fact is an important step to the cosmopolitanization of society. Cosmopolitanization entails pluralization and hybridization instead of homogenization. The wider world becomes a part of society. Resisting ambiguity can lead to violence: "someone who affirms and elevates 'his own' will almost inevitably rejects and despises the foreign." Prejudices are reflections of fear.[28]

End Notes:

[*] He teaches at Parahyangan Catholic University; fatumbrutum.blogspot.com.

[1] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). This could be regarded as a form of *politicide*, an extreme form of depoliticization as a crisis *of* and not *in* democracy when governance is only seen in terms of policy-making.
[2] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon&Schuster, 1996), 21. Also Samuel P. Huntington, *Who are We? America's Great Debate* (London: Free Press, 2004). In this book Huntington claims that Americans should refocus on the WASP culture, tradition, religion, language and values again as a response to mass immigration from Latinos.
[3] Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence, The Illusion of Destiny* (Princeton: W.W. Norton, 2007), 61.
[4] Fareed Zakaria, *The Post American World* (Princeton: W. W. Norton, 2008); and Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere, The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).
[5] John Gray, *False Dawn, The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (London: Granta,

2002), 170.

[6]   Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 11.

[7]   Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 690.

[8]   Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 63, 177. Giddens defines modernity as "to refer to institutions and modes   of behavior established first of all in post-feudal Europe, but which in the twentieth century increasingly have become world-historical in impact. 'Modernity' can be understood as roughly equivalent to 'the industrialized world',   so long as it be recognized that industrialism is not its only institutional dimension. […] A second dimension is capitalism […]. Each of these can be distinguished analytically from the institutions of surveillance […]. This dimension can in turn be separated from control of the means of violence in the context of the 'industrialization of war'." Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 14-5.

[9]   Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 3.

[10]   Göran Therborn, "At the birth of second century sociology: times of reflexivity, spaces of identity, and nodes of knowledge," *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no.1 (January/March 2000), 14, 19.

[11]   Anthony Giddens, "Living in a Post-Traditional Society," in *Reflexive Modernization, Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order,* Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 95. Also Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy, Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

[12]   Giddens, "Living in a Post-Traditional Society," 96-7.

[13]   Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 4-5.

[14]   Said, 7.

[15]   Said, xix; Said calls Bernard Lewis a modern-day an Orientalist.

[16]   Edward W. Said, "Orientalism and After," in *Power, Politics and Culture, Interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 221.

[17]   Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism, The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 149.

[18]   Friedrich Nietzsche, "The wanderer and its shadow," in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), section 208. Also Matthew 12:30 and Luke 11:23.

[19]   Buruma and Margalit, *Occidentalism*, 8.

[20]   Tony Davies, *Humanism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 32-3.

[21]   Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991),   81-2.

[22]   Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments, Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 125.

[23]   Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973),   89.

[24]   James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 19.

[25]   Sen, *Identity and Violence,* xii.

[26]   Sen.

[27]   Sen, xiii.

[28] Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies," *Theory, Culture and Society* 19, no.1-2 (2002), 38.

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