

## Culture and Conflict-Resolution

Israeli and Palestinian –and, more generally, Arab-cultures may be different from one another. But it is not cultures that either clash or that wage wars. It is men themselves, and, to a lesser extent, also women. Over time, various theories have been proposed as to what to consider as falling under culture, including –I was recently surprised to learn through reading an excellent book on the subject by an Israeli author- the ability to discern and name colours. Indeed, if contrasted with its antonym, ‘nature’, the word ‘culture’ can be regarded as covering a whole range of human behaviors, attitudes and beliefs. In this sense it is not far-fetched to include, within the framework of what we call ‘culture’, such matters as the manifestation, if not propensity, for self-aggrandizement; or for

self-defense, that is, for making provisions for one's fears for oneself; or, at a different level, we could also include belief-systems, such as a supremacist ideology, which could be viewed as an expression of self-worth, or the sense of honor; we could as well also include a teleological creed that a person or people might hold. But in the final analysis, the manifestation of these and other similar traits, as well as the beliefs and creeds in question, are all reducible to the individual human beings themselves who belong to those communities which are said to have those cultures. In other words, it is the people themselves, driven by such traits and beliefs, who go to war- who feel driven to attack others, and to harm them. Climbing still one more step up the ladder of abstraction, one could also propose to include in this context the subject of interest- a matter which really boils down to being nothing but an articulation of these traits and creeds that constitute a common denominator

among the individuals in a particular group, ethno-racist or otherwise. Interests are defined ultimately by or in terms of those traits and creeds, whether an ideology or a propensity for self-aggrandizement or for self-protection. But we must remind ourselves here to distinguish between real and presumed self-interest. It is more often what one feels or perceives to be one's interest, rather than one's real interest, which motivates one to act in certain ways rather than in others. I think most sane observers would now agree that this distinction is unfortunately too blurred in our region. So blurred, in fact, that one party's actions may seem to us so irrational viewed through the lenses of its real interests when such actions are on the contrary considered extremely rational by the party itself given how or what it perceives to be that interest.

I always have in these kinds of contexts an infantile urge to recall Thucydides in that famous passage in

Book 1 where, as Athenian and Spartan representatives are having their pre-war dialogue, the Athenian representatives almost quote precisely those elements -self-interest, fear and honor- as the causes for their being set to wage war against the Spartans. These three elements still seem to me to be highly relevant for our context, especially if we take into account their perceptual –and often distorted or disfigured - manifestations. Neither side –Spartan or Athenian- posed as a bone of contention those other matters we normally associate with culture –art, architecture, plays, poetry, style of life or of government, the robustness of the economy –as an American presidential candidate recently suggested , or the pursuit of knowledge. Let alone the question of the discernment and naming of the colour blue. And while creeds and ideologies, as well as fear and self-interest, are natural and often undeniably useful and enriching accompaniments to human existence

in their moderate forms, it is when these are inflated or distorted or disfigured that they come to underlie conflict, and to feed it.

I hope by this short preamble to remind us that, when we come across a conflict between two groups, we shouldn't expect that it is through exposing the culture of one party to the other –as we might now understand what the term means– that we can hope such a conflict could be resolved. Indeed, and especially if we account for the distinction between straightforward knowledge of the other and moral sympathy with them, there is no guarantee whatsoever that knowledge by itself can help reduce or eradicate the causes of conflict. Quite the opposite, such knowledge –such as the case was following that dialogue between the Athenians and Spartans– may well be totally redundant. As is redundant the knowledge today, for example, by sunnis and shi'ites, of the historical

roots of their mutual distrust and antagonism. Indeed, as may be especially true in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, knowing the basis of creed- or psychologically-based claims can only exacerbate already existing differences. What solace can Palestinians find in a Jewish intention to replace the prized Dome of the Rock by the sought-after Temple? Or Israelis can find in a Palestinian intention to replace Israel by a Muslim State? Or, fixing our gaze on the present turmoils in the Arab and Muslim worlds, what solace can any one of the groups now engaged in a bitter confrontation with the other find in becoming knowledgeable of its foe's cultural framework –when taking into account all that comes under the term 'culture'? In all these cases, surely, bitterness and antagonism are not dissolved by mere knowledge.

So where does this leave us? I think it takes back to the distinction I just made in passing between

knowledge of, and sympathy for the other. Or it leaves us –in Dante’s words- with having to look into ourselves, for, as he tells us, ‘the cause lies in yourselves and only there’. Self-examination, that ancient Socratic injunction, is unfortunately a very under-valued commodity in politics. Instead of turning inwards, we rush into looking outwards. In our genuine effort to negotiate with the other in the hope of resolving conflict, we often give precedence to trying to understand or to articulate to ourselves the others’ concerns and psychologies over trying to understand ourselves. Or trying to convey to the other our own concerns and psychologies, in the hope of creating a change in them towards us. But classical-type negotiations of this kind often fail because, as the common expression so often elliptically puts it, ‘the parties are not yet ready for them’. What is meant by this elliptical expression? A ready answer is this, namely, that rather than putting our own

motivations to the test, we tend to take them for granted. This being the case, we come to see the world, and especially ‘the other’ with whom we intend to deal one way or the other, through a distorted lens. For example, we see them as being less than equal with ourselves, or as less deserving of what we believe we deserve, or as constituting an interminable or even an existential threat that could only be prevented by preemptive suppression through force. Self-examination and, through that, coming to recognize the misshapen expressions of the underlying natural forces that drive us, can go a long way in helping us transform who we are, and what we stand for. Questioning our own beliefs and motivations, understanding our own psychologies, transforming ourselves, even allows us to begin to see the other, or to see them through a new and better lens. Here, knowledge acquires life. Facts begin to appear as they truly are, not as they are constructed as being. Blowing up restaurants full of



civilians ceases to be seen as an act of heroism. It comes to be seen as an act of terrorism. So would the act of bombing of entire neighborhoods, or residential blocks. The confiscation of lands and the building of settlements begin to be seen for what they truly are, as straightforward acts of theft, and as a further robbery of rights, rather than as a fulfillment of what God wants. The suffering of others and their pain begin to be felt, rather than be simply noted as a lifeless item of news.

Self-examination thus does not mean turning a blind eye to the outside world. Ultimately, it means not being blind to that world, thinking and believing all the while that one can see it. Paradoxically, attempting to thus open peoples' eyes out to each other but by way of directly confronting them with each others' miseries and histories may typically not only not work, but it can easily produce the opposite of the desired effect -

such as the case of aggrieved Palestinians or angry Arabs reacting to an exposure to the horrors of the Holocaust simply by shutting their eyes to it, either by not recognizing it altogether, or by willing themselves not to be moved by it. Likewise, an Israeli TV viewer being shown a Palestinian house being demolished may simply cause him or her to switch the channel, or to use that particular moment to go fetch something they want from the kitchen. In short, letting ourselves be frozen inside our shells, prisoners of our pre-existing prejudices and mind-sets, we simply either shut our mental eyes to the facts before us altogether, or we fail to transform the data received in the retina of our mental eyes into fulsome human messages, having the power to shake us out of our moral slumber.

Properly seeing outside of ourselves therefore requires that we dare to stand up to ourselves, questioning our own prejudices and beliefs, and

testing them against what harm they may seem to be causing to others. It could be objected here that it may be that I see the harm, but I care not. True, but I would not, in that case, just be living in a moral slumber: I would simply not have morals. I would be suffering from some form of moral-deficiency, or be totally morally blind. But no amount of exposure to the other, in this case, would by itself ameliorate my moral condition. I would not also have the least interest in trying to make the other, my foe, see my point of view. It would not matter to me if they didn't in the least sympathize with my resolve to suppress or to extinguish their presence altogether in the place I have decided to make my own. Changing their attitude towards me would not be an item on my agenda in the first place.

But if it were, my contention is that it is with myself that I should start. By soul-searching my own beliefs and attitudes, I could begin to adjust these in view of how they may adversely affect the

other, and in so re-positioning myself, or re-defining myself, I may begin to stand a better chance to truly transform them. Re-defining myself, re-articulating my message, re-considering my actions, my foe begins to see me differently. Indeed, they begin to see me, period. For, more often than not, until that point, I am truly invisible to them. At best, my outcries expressing my pains are only felt as an irritant. Indeed, one may even argue that a self-transforming process of the kind described is a far more potent force for making others begin to commiserate with my suffering than deluging them with my own grievances.

In this re-phrased sense, where what one encompasses by the term 'culture' is this wide-ranging spectrum of beliefs and attitudes, and where in their disfigured forms these begin to act as blinders to the outside world, culture can I believe provide an inlet to conflict resolution. But critically,

the path to be traveled in this case would not be a bridge outwards, but a tunnel inwards. I am not of course suggesting that the vigilant efforts constantly being made to inform the world of past horrors or present-day infractions of human values and rights have little or no use. The world must be constantly informed, if only as a deterrent to future misdeeds rather than as a moral eye-opener. But while knowledge is necessary, it is sympathy, or the human appreciation of that knowledge, that turns it into a key for the required response, or action, or that would give it life. Pictures of the Holocaust will only touch the heart if the heart is already there. So, just as much –if not more- effort needs to be invested in helping people cultivate their own hearts as in transmitting data to their eyes and ears.

But how, one may ask, can this self-examining, or soul-searching effort be achieved? How can the individuals- who are the primary agents of deeds-

begin this challenging task of shedding their acquired habits and beliefs, when these seem to them that they constitute their own identities- of who they are. Again invoking Plato and countless thinkers since, the rational answer would seem to be education. What immediately comes to mind here is the role of formal institutions –religious, educational, political. These, ultimately, being in a position of official responsibility, need to take the responsibility for exercising vigilance in countering excess within their respective societies, and to be positively engaged in nurturing a culture of toleration. But even here, it is not so much to encourage dialogue with the other that should top the agenda. While joint endeavors –such as the recent collaboration by Israeli and Palestinian educators to present conflicting narratives of the conflict side by side- are indeed highly commendable and deserving of praise, it is less the joint endeavors that are required for the

psychologically transformative task required as it is separate educational approaches to viewing and appraising historical or political or religious narratives in such a way that students and readers and society members would become sensitized to those universal values that would allow a self-examination to naturally lead them to reigning in the more extreme implications and manifestations of their creeds and passions.

In short, it is self-transformation –rather than the attempt to transform the other- that is often the prerequisite for making peace. But self-transformation is itself a means to transform the other. This implies that one’s cultural inroad to conflict resolution must in the first instance be a self-directed endeavor -a process of a cultural monologue instead of its being a cultural dialogue.

This leaves us with the question of the egg and the chicken, as well as with the question of time. How can the formal institution initiate such a process if it is itself made up of individuals imbued with the hostile extremities of its society's creeds and passions? The answer is that in such bottom-up situations a social educational process clearly and admittedly takes time, and therefore requires patience. But all societies are blessed with those few who are ready and willing to initiate the process. These, eventually, take their places, as fathers and mothers, or as teachers, or as officials and they begin to influence those around them. The process may be slow. But alternatives in any case are not in abundance. Sometimes, it is leaders that can make the change: leaders make agreements, followed by a process of normalization. This hasn't worked in the Israeli-Palestinian case. Not so far, at least. Not that it is ever totally out of the question. Another model is commerce. This is argued to have



been a potent transformative force in various conflict situations throughout history. But again, going by the Israeli-Palestinian experience, especially since 1967, but also since 1994, this model did not prove itself to be suitable in this particular conflict either. Almost all Palestinian trade during this period has been, and continues to be, integrally tied up with the Israeli economy. Yet neither have passions meantime subsided, nor have deep and hostile religious beliefs and feelings become watered down. On the contrary, all the signs are that they seem to be gathering momentum, among Palestinians as well as Israelis. My conclusion, then, does not stray very far from that of Plato, and of many other thinkers since, namely, that it is through a process of internal education that one can hope to acculturate one's habits and beliefs, allowing for having a better view of the other, and therefore for making peace with him. This conclusion might not satisfy one's thirst for peace.

But at least, it could keep the hope alive failing a dramatic breakthrough.