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When Rudyard Kipling wrote these lines in ‘The Ballad of East and West’, they were applauded and became a raging success because they expressed precisely how the world was viewed in the heyday of Empire. Unfortunately, mental structures long outlast the work of human hands. Ideas conquer more territory and maintain more authority than all the armies of the Queen Empress eulogized by Kipling, who was deeply ambivalent about his own origins in the East as an Anglo-Indian. Despite the evidence of history, politics, economy and culture, Kipling’s simplistic dictum still remains the preferred approach to understanding the world.

What is just so about Kipling’s lines is not its beginning. East and West are different, and the differences are substantive and of enduringly import. Civilization, culture and the experience of history distinguish discrete diversity that makes the East eastern and the West western. The wrongheadedness comes in the conclusion ‘and never the twain shall meet’, at least not till Judgment Day! It is in the conclusion that the power and authority, the potency of simple binary opposition resides. It is not because the East and the West are genuinely different that there is a problem. The problem arises because difference is taken to be an unbridgeable gap: ‘never
the twain shall meet’. Difference has the force of a negative value. What is encoded by this negative value is the basis for fear, doubt of the other, perpetual insecurity and prejudice. In operation, the negative value becomes an active value judgment, a ranking principle. In such simple oppositions the other pole must be inferior, inimical to ‘our’ wellbeing, otherwise differences would be surmountable, and there would be no threat. Thus unbridgeable difference becomes the doctrine of maintaining distance, keeping oneself pure, and ensuring that two sides never actually meet. The formula fulfills its own prediction and sustains the manipulation of power and authority on both sides to maintain an implacable eternal opposition. The truth of the premise, East is East and West is West, taken uncritically at face value, substantiating the implications and construction of meaning placed on evident differences.

Even though Kipling was mistaken at the outset, partial in his premise, and wholly wrong in his conclusion, his reward has been the staying power of his simplistic dictum. The dissipation of the simple binary opposition of superpower rivalry, the end of ‘the evil empire’ of Communism, provided the occasion for Kipling’s much older, more instinctive opposition to return with a vengeance to rescue business, politics, history and everything from the horrendous prospect of thinking through a new perspective. We have had the ‘end of history’, where Western liberalism was declared undisputed victor and ‘clash of civilizations’, where the West was up against all the other civilizations of the world. The speed with which Communism died and the Samuel Huntington’s thesis of ‘clash of civilizations’ emerged and became the centrepoint that constructed how we debate the future is truly astonishing. An impeccable proponent of the Cold War ethos of relentless opposition, Huntington analyzed the post-Communist future within exactly the same framework. The fault lines of future opposition, which was inevitable, essential and not be questioned, would be seven ‘civilizations’ he identified as opponents of the West: Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and ‘possibly’ African. The essential point is that what stimulate these fault lines is exactly Kipling’s dictum and its old familiar oppositions. ‘Civilizations’ is an evocative archaic sounding expression for the operative reality: inimical, unbridgeable difference. Not all the panoply of nation states, development, globalisation and ingested modernity can disguise the ultimate reality, and only meaningful point, that the rest of the world is different and will therefore
Act and contend with the West in the old familiar way. Whatever we think of the clash of civilizations thesis it become pervasive because it represents so accurately how the past, present and future are conceived. The sentiments its substitutes for reason were at work before Huntington propounded them as a theory of international relations. The East, in all its complexity, continues to seen as the provider of a basic service to the West: the provision of ‘bogey men’ and villains. Barbarian hordes, marching towards our borders as ‘immigrants’ and ‘illegals’; Muslims out to terrorize us; old and new villains that match the villains of Communism, from Putin’s Russia to a threatening China. So it was, and it remains just so.

But time has now come for us to transcend this pernicious binary logic. To talk about a neat division between East and West in a globalized, diverse, interdependent world of common problems and shared human destiny is dangerous and absurd. The boundaries and dividing lines of East and West have not only changed but have become blurred and indistinguishable. There is as much East in the West as there is West in the East. The West cannot continue to perceive the East as inalienably different; the classic tirade against the West that promotes the innocence and vaunts the superiority of the East is meaningless. The potency of the ideas that impelled western imperialism is alive and well and operated by the East within itself, by itself.

Searching out the original miscreant and apportioning blame is a way of continuing the game of implacable opposition, and, thereby, keeping all its necessities – suspicion, military preparedness, manipulation of public opinion, double standards and neglect of pressing human needs - in place. The East has been complicit in the perpetuation of the ethos of binary oppositions. The more the East has unquestioningly sought to appropriate the means of the West, to become modern in an uncritical, slavish manner, the more it demands to be seen as different, the more it has romanticized the superior perfections of its own traditions and values. But no matter how bad things get the East has an immediate escape clause, thanks to the prevailing Kiplingesque understanding of the world. Condemnation of the West for its acts of commission (colonialism, neo-imperialism, political and economic dominance) and omission (failure to understand or appreciate and implacable opposition to the worth of Eastern values and ideas) suffices. It covers all contingencies with complacency and avoids the East’s need to examine its own internal shortcomings. East is East and West is West serves everyone.
In as much as East and West are human products – human societies, human cultures, human civilizations, human categories of thought – they are both endowed with goodness and evil. No society is purely evil – that would make it an impossible proposition. But neither is any society totally good – that would make it angelic, not human. Any attempt to move from binary oppositions must take into account the goodness in East and West as well as the evils within both. Only by acknowledging there is no-one with clean hands can we accept that we all have to find new ways of washing away the grime of our own imperfections, both East and West. To make sense of what is wrong in our world we must make visible what is identical and unacceptable in both the West and the East, what is good and wholesome wherever it is found on the planet.

A globalised world is a world in which everyone has problems, and no society has all the answers. We have to learn from each other – whoever ‘we’ are. The differences between East and West are not unbridgeable; they have been made so by the perversity of human understanding. We have to create a mutually comprehensible language in which to explore how analogous principles and shared values inform the diversity of our systems of thought and social organization. This is difficult territory. Nevertheless there are values, principles, imperatives, reflexes for justice, equity, tolerance, the right to individual liberty and responsibility to community and much else in each and every evidently different society, people and civilization. We need a language that focuses on these similarities and brings them to the fore. We have to be able to think our way forward to the realization that East is East and West is West and that is the last best hope for everyone East and West. Unless we can embrace the possibilities of truly plural futures we have to resign ourselves to the despairing conclusion that contemporary problems have no solution, East or West, but are just so.

The need to bring East and West together becomes even more urgent when we consider the truly global nature of many problems that beset us – from climate change, threat of pandemics, increasing competition for energy to growing political and financial instability and increasing inequality. None of these problems can be ‘fixed’ by individual states; and they affect every person on the planet. And they are not simple: there is nothing simple about fixing the economy, or securing our energy supplies, or fighting pandemics or ensuring our security or even doing something positive about climate
change that in 2012 alone brought floods to Manila and drought to several states in the US. These are complex problems; indeed, almost everything we have to deal with nowadays is complex. Complexity is enhanced by the fact that all our problems are interconnected, occur simultaneously, are global in nature and subject to rapid pace of change.

There is another added dimension. Complex, interconnected problems often lead to chaos. Chaotic behaviour is evident not just in the markets and our financial institutions but also in our social, individual and institutional activities. Thanks to mobile phones, blogs, e-mails, and 24-hour news media, we are constantly in the know. We are thus primed to react instantly, equipped with the means to set off new patterns of chain reactions. Things multiply quickly and change occurs in geometric proportion. Thus small perturbations rapidly acquire global proportions. The behaviour of a handful of unscrupulous bankers can lead to financial collapse. A vegetable vendor can start a freedom and democracy movement, what came to be known as the ‘Arab Spring’.

When complexity and chaos combine with accelerating change the only definite outcome is uncertainty. The first decades of the twenty-first century have made it abundantly clear that we are living in a period of uncertainty, rapid change, ambiguity, upheaval and realignment of power. It is a time when old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, very few things seem to make sense, and there is little out there that can be trusted or gives us confidence. Elsewhere, I have characterised this period as ‘postnormal times’, an in-between era where nothing which we conventionally took as normal makes sense.

What is so different about post-normal times?
In normal times, a generalised acceptance of the existing distribution of power and the hierarchy of interests is maintains. Normal times are not without dissent or dissatisfaction but change is overwhelmingly accepted as working through and with the way things are. The social compact that holds society together is the acceptance that the vested interests and power holders care for the common good. Therefore, the powers that be and the hierarchical order of things are the basis from which a better future is envisioned and the premise on which we direct our efforts to realise the future. In normal times, a rich mythology underpins popular understanding
and support for society, science and economy. There are caveats, escape clauses which allow for imperfections in the systems that govern our lives. But the caveats do not undermine collective belief in and acceptance of our institutions: intellectual, academic, political, social and cultural. Heroic science, the will of the people heroically translated into laws and good governance, prudence and probity as the routine principles governing economy and government, instil confidence in the present and hope for the future. If things are not right or even far from perfect we remain convinced we have the means, capability and collective intent to make them not merely work but work better. The mythological underpinnings also create the most sought after luxury of normal times: time. Things may be interconnected but there is confidence that problems are not immediate, there is always time to solve them. Problems could be dealt with in an ordered episodic progression where knock on and even unforeseen consequences would be managed sensibly. In normal times we believe or at least accept the ability of the institutions of society – politics and governance, science and economy, financial organisations and social relations, health and welfare - to generate solutions. This is what institutions are for: solving problems to sustain the society they represent. The system may be imperfect, but it has the ability to rectify problems and contain its abnormalities within its competence.

In postnormal times it is the institutions, the system itself which constitute the problem. Moreover, there is no luxury of time: problems need immediate and urgent attention, and even as we attempt to solve them they entangle themselves into a complex web, and multiply rapidly, concurrently and dangerously. All that we took for granted seems to evaporate and cannot be trusted to deliver what it supposed to deliver. The emperors in whom we placed confidence – scientists, economists, accountants, bankers, politicians; governments, markets, financial institutions, drug companies, technology giants – are seen to have no clothes. It is not that we ever saw the foundations of our societies as perfect. Rather, it is the realisation that these foundations are perilously shaky, unable to resolve the enduring imperfections of our world order, and can infect lead society towards a potential collapse. The entire system is geared to disproportionately rewarding the few at the expense of the majority. The selfish self-interests of power and the powerful are revealed as the only mechanism that works and the reality on which everyone is dependent. Control and management become the grand illusions. All overarching explanations, the mythology
that bound and made society viable, become toxic, the bearers of pathogens
that infect society with distrust and lack of confidence. In postnormal times
we know we have abilities but not the systemic, ethical and organisational
capacity to translate our abilities into providing sustainable solutions to our
endemic, interrelated and proliferating problems. In normal times,
uncertainties are small and manageable. But in postnormal times, uncertainty
takes centre stage. Since everything is interconnected, complex and chaotic,
and changing rapidly, nothing can actually be described with any certainty.
Moreover, given the complexity of the increasing web of problems and the
rate of change, we are unable to relate our present predicament to any past.
We are thus unable to learn from anything from the past, even when we know
there have been comparable systemic failures in history.

It is clear that the predicaments of postnormal times cannot be resolved with
existing tools. They require new modes of thinking and new way of doing
things, East and West. There are, however, lessons to be learned from the
dominant characteristics of postnormal times itself. Complexity tells us that
the notions of control and certainty are becoming obsolete. There is no single
model of behaviour, mode of thought, or method that can provide an answer
to all our interconnected, complex ills. The ‘free market’ is as much a mirage
as the suggestion that science and technology, or liberal secularism, or
religious fundamentalism, will rescue us from the current impasse. It is thus
foolish to place our faith in a single ideology or a monolithic notion of truth.
Diversity and plurality are essential both to understand and deal with
complexity. Chaos teaches us that individual and social responsibility and
accountability are all paramount for our collective survival. The actions of
any individual or group, from unscrupulous bankers to a neglectful social
worker, can cause serious instability and upheaval. On the other hand,
individualism, the notion that an individual can fulfil himself and do
anything he or she wishes, is a recipe for catastrophe. In post-normal times,
the world can really be laid to waste by the actions of a few individuals.

When chaos and complexity come together, often the end product is
contradictions. One year London is ablaze with riots and multiculturalism
is declared to be an unmitigated disaster; the next year multiculturalism is
hailed as a great success as the city celebrates its diversity and Olympic
triumphs. India is supposedly an economic superpower, yet vast majority
of its population lives in abject poverty. As societies become more diverse
and plural, large segments of national populations become more and more nationalistic, fundamentalist and narrow minded. While certain segments of the globe are experiencing unprecedented change - information technology doubles its power every year, our capacity to sequence genetic data doubles every year - large segments of the planet and swathes of our social life are quasi-static. While technology forces us to work faster and quicker, the speed of air travel, since the demise of Concorde, has actually slowed. While billionaires and millionaires have increased throughout the world, grinding poverty in Africa is as bad as in colonial times – if not worse for many. In a world of superabundance food, around 850 million still go to bed hungry every night. While our knowledge increases by leaps and bounds in almost all spheres, our ignorance of other cultures is pitiful.

Not all the obvious contradictions around us are a product of postnormal times. But postnormal times have brought specific types of contradictions to the fore. Take ignorance. Many contemporary problems, such as tackling global epidemics, effect of GM foods and nano materials, have an in-built uncertainty that can only be resolved sometime in the future. We therefore remain ignorant of their consequences in the present and the near future. Rapid change in an uncertain environment also means we remain ignorant of alternatives and the chance of gaining new knowledge is lost. Ignorance is not soluble by means of ordinary research; we therefore have no notion of its existence. We are thus hit by a triple whammy of ignorance. We need to negotiate the future in a state of constant uncertainty, and if not in total ignorance, then at least with only partial or inadequate knowledge. Consider innovation. We imagine that new and innovative products are being constantly produced as technology moves forward with leaps and bounds. In fact, innovations have radically slowed since 1970, as Tyler Cowen points out in *The Great Stagnation*. Most ‘new and improved’ products, from consumer electronics to supermarket goods, are not real innovations but minor tweaks. Some 85-90 per cent of new drugs are anything but new: they are minor alterations to existing drugs with virtually no clinical advantage. Innovations have now been replaced with rent-seeking as Joseph Stigletz shows so brilliantly in *The Price of Inequality*. In fact, rent-seeking has now become the norm as it delivers far greater profits for big business and benefits for executives than socially beneficial innovations.
Contradictions too have lessons for us. They focus our gaze towards what Amin Maalouf calls the threshold of ‘moral incompetence’. The stark contradictions of our economic and financial system, the modus operandi of drug industry and corporations, the behaviour of politicians, and so on are essentially issues of ethics and morality that we have long ignored. In postmodern times, old fashioned ethics move from the periphery to the centre. Contradictions also teach us to accept and appreciate different perspectives. There is no right or wrong answer to any given problem. Even a very basic understanding of a problem requires a dialogue on its various dimensions, involving a whole range of perspectives and interests including those of experts, citizens, adults as well as children, people of different social and cultural backgrounds, different ethical notions, and even consideration of the needs of non-human species. Contradictions cannot be resolved, they have to be transcended. That means we need to put our differences aside, East and West, and manage contradictions and complexity through negotiated consensual dialogue, where all participants are given equal voice. There are no violent means to resolve contradictions or dealing with complexity. Violence only adds further complexity – and takes us even closer to the edge of chaos, as demonstrated so well by Afghanistan and Pakistan. Military action to remove a perceived threat only generates more chaos, leading to further new and unseen threats.

Humility, modesty, accountability, responsibility, diversity, and dialogue are not added extras but an essential requirement for surviving postnormal times of uncertainty, chaos, complexity and contradictions. There is no place in postmodern times for Kipling’s simplistic dictum of East and West as two fuming bulls in a boxing ring. Rather, East and West have to come together and employ the best that their tradition, history and societies have to offer to negotiate our turbulent times with our sanity and humanity intact.

Both East and West, there are more ways of thinking, principles for defining inquiry, shaping theory and informing understanding, than we have ever imagined. To get beyond the impasse of the just so predicament of our times we need new questions and new insights before we can hope to have new, better answers.

This is the explorative journey that East West Affairs intends to undertake.
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East West Affairs
A Quarterly journal of North-South relations in postnormal times

East West Affairs (EWA) is a multidisciplinary journal devoted to that examining the relationship between East and West in a rapidly changing world, where power is shifting from West to East, uncertainty and complexity are the norms - what is generally being described as ‘postnormal times’. EWA provides opportunities for publication of scholarly articles, which may represent divergent ideas and opinions, on international, political, economic, social and cultural issues from the perspective of shifting power balance from West to East. The Journal also publishes essays and commentaries on policy and research relevant to the global South. It seeks to promote understanding of East-West relations and appreciation of non-western concerns and issues. Articles and commentaries are peer reviewed.

Contributions are normally received with the understanding that their content is unpublished material and is not being submitted for publication elsewhere. Translated material which has not previously been published in English will also be considered. The editors do not necessarily agree with the views expressed in the pages of EWA.

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JANUARY-MARCH 2013
In 2006, television audiences in China were offered a twelve-part documentary series titled *The Rise of the Great Powers*. Week by week, viewers were told with newsreel footage and talking heads about the processes that allowed Japan, Britain, and the US to rise to global power. The one country that was not mentioned in the series was China itself. Yet many observers within the country and the region were sure that the programmes would not have been shown had the Chinese authorities not wanted to stimulate discussion on an ever more urgent topic: is China, too, now rising to global power status, and what will it mean for China and world if it succeeds in that rise?

Yet the 2000s is not the first time in recent history that China has made a bid to be seen as a world power. To understand how the China of today might act in a new global order, it’s useful to look at that earlier moment: August 1945. It’s a fateful date in world history —the end of World War II marked a whole new order marked by the emergence of Washington and Moscow as poles of the emergent Cold War, the fading of London and the eclipse of Tokyo. But it’s often forgotten that at that point, a new China also emerged onto the world scene: the Nationalist (Kuomintang) China of
Chiang Kaishek. If the era is remembered at all, it’s only as an interregnum before the victory of Mao’s communists in 1949, with Chiang remembered as a corrupt and unsympathetic leader who deserved to lose.

Nonetheless, the Chiang regime had another side. For China’s victory as one of the Allies of World War II, alongside the USA, USSR and UK, made it, for a brief moment, the only sovereign and non-western state to sit (even if nominally) at the top table in world affairs. Winston Churchill snorted in contempt at the idea that China could be considered any sort of diplomatic equal to the British Empire and the United States. Yet there are legacies, to this day, of the brief period when Nationalist China was able to leverage its contribution to the Allied cause. The most notable is the seat held by China on the UN Security Council, a privilege granted to no other non-western state. China’s status was granted not to Mao’s communist regime, but to Chiang’s Nationalist one.

During those brief four years, Chiang’s government was rocked by fundamental poverty and instability in a way that bears little resemblance to the China of today. Yet in some significant ways, it is clear that the calculations that Chiang had to make about China’s status in the world bore a similarity to those being made in the management of China’s “peaceful development” (the term used to replace the previous idea of “peaceful rise”).

Chiang Kaishek’s China was an authoritarian state with a limited but real public sphere. It was deeply hostile to the imperialist presence which had dominated China for so long, but it also chose to engage with the wider world and sought a stronger role for itself in a new world order. In 1945, Chiang had to decide whether China would become a regional power, or something more or less than that.

There were, after all, precedents even then for an emergent Asian power trying to overcome geographical determinism. In the late nineteenth century, Japan underwent the Meiji Restoration (in truth, a revolution by another means), in which a country moved from closed borders to a full engagement with modernity. At the time, one of the major thinkers of the so-called Japanese Enlightenment, Fukuzawa Yukichi, declared that it was time for Japan to “leave Asia and enter Europe” (datsu-A, nyu-O). In the case of Chiang’s China in 1945, history suggests intriguing hints of a
country that would have exercised greater influence in Asia, drawing on the
credit that it had earned by fighting on the Allied side in World War II.

Ironically, the country that emerged just four years later in 1949, when Mao
won the civil war, bore far less resemblance to the China of today. Mao’s
new regime was not content to cooperate to find a place within the new
world order; instead, it sought to define itself as a revolutionary regime that
would transmit anti-imperialist nationalism to other oppressed parts of the
world. In a post-Mao world, China is currently struggling to define itself: is
it primarily to concentrate on domestic development, should it become a
regional power, or is it genuinely a global superpower?

China’s responses to events in its backyard in recent years have alarmed some
and reassured others. In the summer of 2012, the most notable upheavals
have come in disputes in the South China Sea, where China claims
sovereignty over various areas including Scarborough Shoal, which is also
claimed by the Philippines. China seems at times to have been on the back
foot, surprised at the fierce reaction of the ASEAN countries to China’s claims.
Although a rather weak agreement on the question was brokered in July 2012
which did little to disadvantage China’s regional position, it became clear that
there were bridges to mend if China wished to pursue its desire to become
known as a “responsible great power” in the region.

Yet plenty of Chinese also feel that they have a right to be recognized as a
great power within the region. The term “sinosphere” has been used to
describe the way that China’s culture and influence shaped much of
Northeast and Southeast Asia until the nineteenth century, and the legacy
of everything from Chinese script to Confucian culture is still very apparent
within the region. Yet the succession to the world of the sinosphere in the
early twenty-first century cannot come simply from the exercise of military
might. One of the abiding Chinese complaints against the presence of the
United States in the region is that it exercises undue influence simply
because of its military power; to make this criticism convincing, China has
to find a way not to be seen simply doing the same thing.

So China seems to have adopted a technique of dealing with one neighbour
at a time. During the same summer of 2012 when the South China Sea
dispute made international headlines, another simmering dispute over the

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ownership of the Diaoyutai (Senkaku) Islands in the East China Sea was downplayed. China offered a mild rebuke to Japan over its continued claims to the islands, but did not choose to press the issue. This sort of tactic suggests pragmatism in China’s regional strategy – but also a certain limitation in its capacity to construct a bigger picture.

China has a difficulty in trying to define leadership in Asia because the region is so clearly disparate. In different ways, India, Russia, Japan, and the ASEAN bloc, not to mention the US, have different ideas of their own status in the region. The continuing influence of Russia in Central Asia reminds China that both Moscow and Beijing are capitals of Eurasian powers looking inward (as they have done for centuries). India has little ambition to project power outside South Asia, but has strong interests in its own region and has come to blows with China as a result, most famously in 1962.

China has become the greatest exporting nation in the world. But the one thing it had failed to export is a sense of itself, expressed ideologically or culturally. The Cold War was shaped by a clash of ideologies that were fierce precisely because they sought ownership over the same political terrain, including definitions of “democracy” and “freedom.” However, China today defines itself in terms that eschew ideological language in favour of pragmatism (even when that pragmatism is in fact highly ideological). The memory of the Cultural Revolution, when political position became central to political virtue or even personal safety, robbed classic strident propaganda of its value in Deng Xiaoping’s era of reform from 1978 onward.

It’s commonly stated that nationalism has replaced communism as China’s defining ideology, but the situation is more complex than this binary suggests. Nationalism has been a part of all China’s major political movements over the course of the twentieth century, both nationalist and communist. And large parts of that nationalism have been patronizing or simply destructive of the sensitivities and identities of minority groups within China, with the dominant Han ethnicity posited as position of mentors or guides to less “enlightened” followers.

Nonetheless, there is an importance absence from China’s conception of nationalism over the century. With few exceptions, it has been based on civic identity, even if shaped by ethnicity, rather than on racial identity. The
revolutionary Sun Yatsen struggled to overthrow China's last dynasty and had a brief, doomed spell as China's first republican president. Sun characterized the Chinese revolution that produced Asia's first republic in 1912, defining it as a state that would include five races (Han, Manchu, Mongol, Korean and Tibetan). The Republican governments and the Communists that followed them could have taken refuge in a highly aggressive sense of racial differentiation, as happened in Japan and Germany in the 1930s. They did not do so and have not sought to do so since. This is a welcome instance of an ideological dog not barking.

At the same time, it makes it harder to suggest that a greater Chinese influence in world affairs will necessarily change the terms of global interaction. China has a clear – not crystal clear, but clearly identifiable – idea of what the country will look like at home over the next decade or so: no loosening of the grip of the Communist Party at the top, a drive toward urbanization, improvements in social welfare (likely to be problematic because of lack of control over local governments and widespread corruption), attempts to stimulate domestic consumption rather than underpinning economic growth by exporting, and a cautious continued tolerance of a limited public sphere.

It's not nearly so apparent quite how China views its place in the wider world. In the past decade, it has combined a general statement of geniality toward all peoples and nations with a fairly instrumental attempt to exercise its own interests (for instance, over mineral rights, its entry into the WTO, or interests in the South China Sea). It has not joined Russia as a permanent geopolitical termagant, but it has been easier to identify what China does not like in the international community than what it does. Liberal interventionism is clearly defined as bad (and the enthusiasm of the George W. Bush regime for unilateralism helped to make this position seem more plausible internationally in the post-Iraq War years), but China still has no strongly-defined position on what, if any role organizations beyond the nation-state should play in global order. It is understandable, considering China's own unhappy history with the violation of its borders, that it should stick so strongly to a Westphalian idea of national sovereignty. But China now finds itself in a world where borders are more permeable and flexible, and that it will need to adjust to that reality – even before it can think of shaping it.
There are small signs that China is thinking about how it adjusts to that reality. In the 2000s, China has sent more soldiers on UN peacekeeping missions. It has also sent special envoys to hotspots including the Middle East. But these small gestures don’t really add up to a strategy. Even when it seeks to intervene on global issues, the message is contradictory. During the Euro crisis, there have been notable occasions where Chinese leaders have spoken of the urgent need for the Europeans to learn lessons from China on financial prudence, and just a few days later, assuring the world that China has no intention of interfering in matters that are properly Europe’s concern. Even the most celebrated aspects of China’s cultural diplomacy, the programme of Confucius Institutes around the world, have remained at least ostensibly non-ideological: they teach Mandarin, but certainly don’t seek to teach Confucian (or any other) ideology.

Of course, there are theorists and writers who have been active in trying to define China’s new status in the world. Zhang Weiwei’s book *The China Wave* has sold over a million copies in China. Zhang is a professor of international relations at Fudan University, and the book provides an insight into the way that China’s more confident public intellectuals seek to define China as a country that has no need to learn lessons from the outside world, and which is able to draw on its traditional reserves of philosophy. Yet such books are more concerned with China telling the world that it can remodel its own society without outside assistance. They say far less about what, if any, contribution China might make to reshaping world order, norms, and values. China is much more in a position (in the words of a book popular in the 1990s) to say “No” than it is to disseminate a more proactive message.

If China really aspires to have influence around the world, and that influence is to be attractive, it needs to be more clearly articulated and also defined in tandem with other changes around the world. China takes pride in not criticizing, in principle, any other systems of government, including liberal democracy, although it is capable of making snippy statements on everything from hanging chads to punch-ups in various parliaments when it is useful to do so. But it is adamant that it will not tolerate criticism from the outside of a system of government which it defines as appropriate for China. This creates a problem for dissemination of an idea of China outside its own borders. There is a limit to how much influence teaching Mandarin and holding the Olympics can bring. While many non-western societies
have looked to China as an example of how they no longer have to buckle under to the dictates of neo-imperialism, it remains a fact that most of them have embraced systems of reform and governance that do not look at all like China’s. Pluralist democracy is now mainstream in South America, much of Africa, and most of Asia. Human rights and freedom of speech vary in quantity and quality across these regions but in most cases, they have developed alongside political change. (South America was anyway a crucible of multi-party democracy in the nineteenth century when much of Europe was still under autocracies.) China’s role for many of these nations is a genial enough companion, useful for trade links and for providing a counterpoint to a still-powerful US and increasingly weak-looking Europe. But the warmth is instrumental rather than coming from a deep sense of conviction that Brasilia, Pretoria, and Lusaka are engaged in a truly common enterprise with Beijing.

When Chinese officials are asked how a communist party can have brought about one of the most powerful neoliberal economic experiments in history, the standard answer tends to be that China displays “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” This formulation is one that has proved increasingly useful to describe a whole variety of political and social phenomena in China. The problem is that the term is a way of avoiding definitions rather than clarifying them; and it is also entirely non-exportable. For something to have “Chinese characteristics” suggests that it is only of relevance within China and its areas of influence.

China’s economic influence is now beyond doubt. As a result, its geopolitical and cultural influence receive attention in a way that would have been unimaginable even twenty years ago. But there is a still a strong sense that China has adapted effectively to a global order with which it is not comfortable. It is still unclear how it can reshape that order on its own terms – or even whether it wants to do so.
THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH SUDAN, THE WORLD’S 193RD STATE, WAS ESTABLISHED on 9 July 2011. It was the culmination of a long journey, which did not always have independence as its stated destination, for the people of Southern Sudan. It was also a product of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed between the Sudanese government led by President Omer Al-Bashir and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement led by John Garang. A moment of hope, but also of trepidation, the separation of North and South Sudan was seen as the most significant step in a genuine lasting peace for citizens on either side of the border and the opening of a new chapter for the region rooted in a mutual respect. However, the conflict in Sudan is not a simple story, with one struggle and one ending. It has rarely been free from the specters of authoritarianism and bloodshed. Lasting disputes and animosities remain between South and North, with key aspects of their division and identities still to be determined. There are serious challenges at local, national and international level; and the humanitarian crisis in the Sudan and South Sudan is amongst the most serious on the globe. With chaotic internal politics further influenced by regional unrest and revolution, interventions by major powers and global economic pressures, what hope is there for either state to move forward positively?
The conflict between north and south Sudan has deep roots. The South Sudanese were fighting for their rights even before the country obtained independence in 1956. The South Sudanese complained about the systemic underdevelopment and neglect of their region by both Egyptian and British interests during the joint ‘condominium’ period of rule (1889-1951). There were also concerns about the concentration of political power in the hands of the ‘Three Tribes’: the Ja’ayiiin, the Shaiqiyiyya and the Dangala, an imbalance that continues to this day. The dismissive way the Northern Nationalists treated Southerners mobilizing for a stake in the new country, motivated the formation of what become known historically as Ananya One. Formed in September 1963, and named after a deadly poison, Ananya was a resistent movement against the government in Khartoum. Led by Joseph Lagu, a South Sudanese politician and military officer, it waged a long struggle against the Sudanese government in the first civil war (1955-72). Lagu eventually brokered the 1972 Addis Ababa accords that determined autonomy for the three Southern regions of Upper Nile, Bahr-al-Ghazal and Equatoria. Lagu was succeeded by John Garang, a junior officer in Ananya, who became the chief architect of the second civil war (1983-2005), which saw two and a half million dead and at least twice that number displaced.

But even during this period, the South Sudanese leadership was concerned mostly with equality within a unified Sudan. They issues numerous statements in support of their coalition with Northern opposition groups under the National Democratic Alliance during the 1990s. They argued for the coordination of military and administrative infrastructure under southern control within parallel boundaries and structures to those outlined by the North and agreed at Addis Ababa.

Two factors determined the shift toward self-determination, First, the increasing and continued intransigence of the Bashir regime and its commitment to a project of ‘Islamisation and Arabisation’, within its very strict definition of ‘Islam’ and ‘Arab’, that made the concept of an inclusive Sudanese citizenship a remote distant possibility.

It was not Bashir but Generak Nimari who first declared Sudan an Islamic state and sparked the SPLA munity. But Bashir and Turabi truly embedded a set of practices from top down after the 1989 coup that saw a form of Sharia imposed on all: Muslim, Christian and Animist alike! This moved
John Garang, the figurehead of the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), which was formed in 1983 by mutinying southern officers in the Sudanese Armed Forces, to argue that self-determination for the South was a necessary option. However, he never totally abandoned his own vision of a unified ‘New Sudan’, rooted in a historical narrative that harked back to the ancient kingdom of Kush.

Second, Garang’s unexpected death, in July 2005, brought his lieutenant and chief negotiator Salva Kiir, a skilled and connected individual whose ability to broker agreement across the fractures of the Southern militias contrasted with Garang’s authoritarian leadership style, into the forefront. As vice-president of the interim (2005-2011) Government of National Unity in Khartoum and ultimately the de facto President of the Southern territory, Kiir pushed for independence for the South. With the North essentially abrogating its declared responsibility to make unity ‘attractive’, and repeatedly affirming its commitment to respecting the will of the Southern peoples, momentum gathered around a referendum. It was held on 9-15 January 2011; that received glowing external praise in comparison to the national elections the previous year in terms of transparency and accountability. Numerous Sudanese registered to vote in Juba, Khartoum and at embassies around the world. When the numbers came in the result was beyond doubt: 98.3% of voters participating opted for separation. Bashir fulfilled his promise and endorsed the result. And yet, a year later, he would declare the SPLM administration in the South to be ‘insects’ and claimed that he would ‘liberate’ the South from them.

As a large central African state bordering similarly volatile and conflict afflicted countries in all directions, Sudan’s relative stability has always been determined by what’s happening in its neighborhood. The NATO Intervention in Libya has seen the reality of direct Western military intervention in an African state; and the removal of Gaddafi has inevitably led to further destabilization of Sudan’s Northern borders. Gaddafi was a major supporter of the Bashir regime; and a key player in the interrelated conflicts in Darfur and Chad, though the Gulf States that aligned with the West over Libya have historically been allies of the Bashir regime. The turbulent changes in post Mubarak Egypt, with a political tug of war between the military government and political parties, would also have consequences for the government in Khartoum. Mubarak was no great
friend of Sudan, especially after a 1996 assassination attempt on him was linked back to the Bashir regime. But the election of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mahmud Morsi as president could be equally troublesome, even though Bashir and a number of other key political figures in the North find their roots in the regional spread of the Muslim Brotherhood in the postcolonial era. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has embraced democracy and shifted toward social democracy in a fashion significantly different from Bashir’s National Congress Party. The Sudan is a single party state that validates its power less through the widely condemned elections it orchestrates and more through outright patronage bartering and bargaining with key power blocs and elites and has demonstrated a flexible relationship to its own declared Islamism. The original vehicle for Muslim Brotherhood policies in Sudan was Hasan Al Turabi’s National Islamic Front, which was marginalized by the creation of the NCP and ousting of Turabi, who was seen as the true power behind Bashir’s throne before 2000. The Muslim Brotherhood’s own problems and the dubious credibility of Bashir’s own ideological commitment to the cause may forestall any immediate shift in Sudan-Egyptian relations. However, two countries would continue to share a retained interest in working together to offset the diplomatic force of the combined East African states within the Nile River Basin Initiative, a negotiating framework that determines access and exploitation rights along the length of this most vital pan-African water source.

Bashir’s own reputation as an international pariah would also influence Sudan’s relations with the emerging democracies in the Middle East. Thanks to a concerted campaign by American NGOs and charges levied by the International Criminal Court, Bashir is known only as the accused architect of genocide in the Darfur region of Western Sudan. Despite the highly contested nature of the charges against Bashir their existence continues to undermine his international legitimacy. The more recognition the court and its processes gain amongst African leaders, the more limited Bashir’s room for international maneuver may become. However until universal ratification of the founding statute of the court becomes a reality, and the US becomes a signatory, the charges against Bashir will still be seen as tool of US foreign policy even by many critics of the NCP. The Bashir regime, however, is no stranger to international boycotts: it has been widely ostracized by Western powers since the mid-90s, when Khartoum collaborated with various Islamist groups, most notably hosting Usama Bin
Laden. Bashir wallows in his reputation as an international pariah and projects himself as a victim of western conspiracy.

The renewed American commitment to military expansion in Africa is of more immediate significance. Over the past three years, the US has increased support to the Ethiopian regime to finance its incursions into Somalia and also put troops on the ground in Uganda, ostensibly to support the fight against the Lord’s Resistance Army. Bashir will also have noted that South Sudan features amongst the 12 countries that are undertaking joint military maneuvers with the US. All of this will force him to turn East where he has found much favor. The regime has been able to rely on the diplomatic, economic and military support of China and to a lesser extent other Asian powers such as India and Malaysia as a balancing force. However as the inevitability of separation became apparent, Beijing began to share its attentions between Khartoum and Juba, retaining a focus on the key goal of their endeavors, energy security. Thus the interconnected relations between Juba, Khartoum, Washington and Beijing go beyond that of clearly distinguished spheres of influence. It seems that US-China interactions around the region could be a litmus test of how their relationship plays out across Africa.

Another relationship that has been tested in new ways in Sudan is that of the African Union and the UN. The first-ever joint AU-UN peacekeeping force was deployed in Darfur. Over the past year the two multilateral bodies have made successive attempts to move the post secession peace process forward. Little material progress has been made on the key provisions of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that remain unimplemented and arguably form the crux of future peace and stability for both states: discussions on citizenship rights, the resolution of disputes over three border areas outside of the authority of the referendum, and the long term sharing of oil revenues.

In focusing on self-determination and the development of a fledging Nationalism the SPLM embarked upon a massively ambitious and fraught project. The Second Civil War had seen fighting on many fronts, often by very diverse groups with overlapping arguments and aims in both North and South. The war was not always solely under the SPLA banner. Particularly, the resistance to Northern oppression of the peoples of the
Nuba Mountains was autonomously led. The unique geographical position of the mountains, where a clear border has never been established, the massive diversity of the peoples inhabiting the region, and its relative autonomy from Northern or Southern political establishment, has all made it difficult for them to establish a consistent, independent political voice to match their armed activity on the ground. Whilst the external border of Sudan have retained their integrity for two centuries, internal divisions have rarely been so clear cut, an issue further complicated by regular population movement due to agricultural tradition, economic necessity and the displacement of millions due to conflict. Whilst the CPA integrated the referendum on the Southern question as a key tenet, its provisions to establish peace in more peripheral and contested regions, specifically Blue Nile, South Kordofan and the Nuba Mountains, were hazy, and have continuously been marginalized, questioned and undermined by Bashir from the moment the ink dried on the original agreement. The Southern leadership only took the initiative to revive the push for these provisions to be meaningfully once the referendum had been executed.

The major complication that makes South Kordofan and in particular the dispute area of Abeyi, that is considered part of both South Kordofan and Northern Bahr Al Gazal state, attractive to both countries is its oil reserves. It was the discovery and exploitation of oil for Northern urban development at the expense of the South that was a major factor in the return to conflict and, as the major source of revenues for both governments at present, with most reserves in Southern or disputed territory, but refining and shipping capacity in the South, a resolution to the Abeyi question and the wider question of resources is crucial to any North-South peace. The tensions between the Ngot Dinka in Abeyi and the tens of thousands of Missarya tribes people, who traditionally grazed their cattle in the area seasonally but in the past decades have been imported and settled by the Northern government in their thousands in order to create ‘facts on the ground’ make Abeyi, according to Douglas Johnson, ‘Sudan’s West Bank’ (Johnson 2011, 169-174), the most disputed, most contested and most violent border between two nations, two ideologies and two cramped, deprived communities caught between the ambitions and goals of North and South. South Sudan occupied the Helig oil fields and shut off oil flows in early 2012, further stretching Sudanese military capacity and straining its economy. Though considered almost suicidal by many observers (98% of
South Sudanese revenues are drawn from oil revenues) the latter move has further exacerbated Sudan’s own economic woes, a key motivating factor in the most recent dissent in Khartoum and other major northern centers that began on 16 June 2012.

Sudan has the memory of two bloodless revolutions since independence, both involving a core of frustrated students. With austerity measures biting and economic depression made worse by shutting off the oil flowing from the South, the uprising getting global attention under the tag #sudanrevolts has proved difficult to shake off. Bashir has, once again, used his bogeyman status to his own advantage by blaming dissent on propaganda and provocation from the US, Europe and Israel and appealing to ideals of Arab and Muslim unity, conveniently sweeping his regimes dire abuses of Sudanese Muslims under the carpet. The uprisings tapped into the tradition of protest that sparked the 1964 revolution and the 1986 Intifada that led to the short lived government of Sadiq Al Mahdi, but it represents a very different kind of threat. Bashir has deployed the notorious National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), to repress civilian unrest; and opposition parties, though vocal in their criticism of the government, have yet to formally endorse the protest or mobilize their supporters behind them.

As reports and evidence proliferate online of the horrific abuses NISS, the NCP faces its most severe crisis since the distribution in 2000 of ‘The Black Book’, a publication detailing exhaustively the uneven and unjust distribution of power and wealth amongst select groups since the founding of Sudan. The Black Book’ was allegedly produced by a number of dissident Islamists who would go on to found Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), which swiftly become a key faction in the Darfur conflict. This time the movement is concentrated not only in the periphery but also in Khartoum and other parts of the developed North, driven not by would be guerillas, but the educated middle class youth. Bashir has moved to announce a new constitution that will be ‘100% Islamic’ in a move widely perceived as courting the opposition, many of whom and especially Turabi and Al-Mahdi’s movements, are explicitly Islamist. The challenge for those pushing for change is to link their struggle with those representing the majority of the population outside of the cities and to also to communicate a positive vision for change to Egypt and other African and Arab powers influential on Sudan, such as the UAE and Ethiopia. Otherwise they risk being eclipsed
or subsumed by the pervasive currents of power in Khartoum.

In Juba, Salava Kiir faces his own unrest. The challenges to governmental authority in South Sudan, the Lord’s Resistance Army aside, are a legacy of guerilla struggle. Militia leaders anxious for a piece of the pie have mobilized small groups of young men, who were attached to the SPLA. Only one year in, compared to Bashir’s twenty four, Kiir probably has less to fear regarding challenges from below, especially if his vaunted anti-corruption drive bears fruit. Externally he has a fine line to tread. Seeking to ensure the security of South Sudan as well as the realization of its economic and democratic potential, he must work through issues with the North without actively pushing for regime change. The new state can ill afford another full blown conflict with the North. If Southern action is perceived as interference, then Kiir’s own strident criticism of alleged Northern support to militias in the South becomes moot. Similarly, the courting of both Western and Eastern support, whilst perhaps a necessary reality for a relative diplomatic minnow, risks South Sudan being reduced to a pawn in deals made, in particular by China, with the North. Moreover, the pursuit of economic sanctions against the North in the form of oil freezes is dangerous gambit that may prove zero sum game, cutting off the little trickle of income outside of aid that the South receives.

The material situation of Southern Sudanese people remains dismal. The influx of returnees and lack of education, healthcare, transport and sanitation all present gigantic challenges even before one takes into account the numerous internal conflicts afflicting each state. With income so drastically low, addressing the serious long-term issues of infrastructure, services and decentralization will prove yet more challenging than they already are. There are potentially millions of as yet unregistered citizens not yet protected by the constitution and deprived of key basic services. South Sudan’s roots lie in a fight for equality and liberation. If the legacy of militarism and the feudal patterns of leadership learnt from the North entrench themselves to such a degree that the state ultimately denies its people that promised equality then the construction and maintenance of a national identity and citizenship will prove taxing.

Continued conflict in the East and in Darfur, along with unrest at the center and on the borders, leave Sudan and South Sudan in search of a genuine
reconciliation. Even if negotiations move forward, a demilitarized zone is established along the borders and oil and money start to flow freely again, many questions will have been answered. In particular, the issue of citizenship, both in terms of the post CPA negotiations over joint citizenship, rights of return and freedom of movement, and the question of individual citizenship rights within either state, will be crucial to transformation in the politics of the region.

With thousands of returnees facing up to the realities of life in the South and displacement still an everyday reality for many in the North, there is an urgent need for populations used to defining themselves in opposition and in exile to have a stake in rebuilding their respective states. Maybe the inclusive, rights based national identity that Sudan never achieved will emerge from the present tumult. Women and young people of the region, marginalized for too long, would have to be at the core of change, a massive shift from the status quo. The peoples of Sudan and South Sudan have much to gain from coming together and transcending the divisions enforced by both their own elites and self-interested superpowers. The two sister states must also learn to share their most previous assets, oil and water, two of the prime factors that could drive the next generation of conflicts. As long as the two states work independently of one another in bilateral and multilateral fora then they risk being exploited and shortchanged by resource motivated developed economies. A genuinely ‘New Sudan’ may yet be resurrected from the ashes of Garang’s vision and the legacies of imperialism. Whether this ideal can achieved without further bloodshed and suffering remains to be seen.

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All that was ‘normal’ has now evaporated; we have entered postnormal times, the in between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have not yet emerged, and nothing really makes sense. The road to a new normality begins with all the complexity and contradictions of our messy reality. Accountability begins with taking responsibility for what we know and cherish, which comes wrapped in all the diversity of our cultures, histories and beliefs. What we have to add to this is an ethical clarity, a state of mind which acknowledges we are all beset by ignorance and none of us, no one tradition or outlook, has all the right answers... The most important ingredients for coping with postnormal times, I would argue, are imagination and creativity. Why? Because we have no other way of dealing with complexity, contradictions and chaos. (Sardar 2010)

Mohamed Bouazizi, The Butterfly of Sidi Bouzid
When the 26-year old Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the town of Sidi Bouzid, his suicide became a catalyst for an epic and largely unexpected transformation. Mohamed Bouazizi was not a world leader, a rebel leader, a military leader, or a political activist. He was not a powerful man in the traditional sense. He did not assassinate a world
leader or in some way have a lethal, amicable, or direct connection with a very powerful person. Mohamed Bouazizi was eminently powerless. In fact, his suicide was a gesture of despair precisely because of his powerlessness in the face of constant humiliation and harassment by the Tunisian authorities, by petty bureaucrats and policemen. But Mohamed Bouazizi was a man who had had enough. It soon became very clear that he was not the only one.

Despite his seeming insignificance in life, Bouazizi’s death sparked an outrage that is still going on as I am writing. This chain reaction has led to the fall of Tunisia’s Ben Ali, Egypt’s Mubarak, and the dramatic killing of Muammar Gaddafi. Significant demonstrations and upheavals have occurred from Bahrain to Yemen to Syria and Morocco. The Arab Spring resonates throughout the world. Across Europe, the United States, and India, protests mount. In Egypt, protesters took to the streets to express their solidarity with protesters in Oakland California. Oakland’s protesters held up banners about Tahrir Square.

Bouazizi’s dramatic action has something of the quality of what Chaos Theory calls “the butterfly effect.” In complex systems, a small action can have a large effect. The usual example is that, with geographical sites to taste, a butterfly flapping its wings in, say, Sidi Bouzid can trigger a thunderstorm in Cairo. The butterfly effect goes against the traditional assumption that a large effect requires a large cause. For instance, that “regime change” in the Middle East requires a massive military intervention. The kind of complex system that is susceptible to such an effect is complex because it is an interconnected, interdependent, open system. We might not think of Tunisia as such an open system, but today’s social media technology means that systems that were traditionally “closed” are increasingly open. China in 1989 was not what we might call an “open society,” but the international television cameras in Beijing provided dramatic evidence of the events in and around Tiananmen Square. Even earlier, the Vietnam war, during which the press and television cameras were present for the first time in a major conflict, was greatly influenced by public opinion in the United States. Today, portable technology can provide us with images from “closed” societies. From the heart-breaking images of the death of Neda Agha-Sultan during the Iran uprisings to the ignominious last moments of Moammar Gadhafi, from the demonstrations
in Syria to those in Oakland California, not to mention the footage of the Rodney King beating in 1992 that lead to riots in Los Angeles, it can all appear on our phones or tablets or televisions.

The world is increasingly connected and interdependent by a web of information. Our planetary culture is in a state of considerable disequilibrium. Disequilibrium is an inevitable consequence of open systems. The increasing connectedness and interdependence mean increasing news of differences, increasing heterogeneity and complexity, and with increasing complexity comes increasing disequilibrium. The interesting stuff happens at what has been called “the edge of chaos.” Closed systems are not sensitive to their surroundings. They live in relative isolation. Think Albania in the 20th century and North Korea today. In the 21st century, disequilibrium is on the rise, and it is increasingly difficult to remain a closed social system.

The etymology of the word complex is “what is woven together,” and every day the world is woven together more and more. The tremendous increase in threads criss-crosses the planet and forms a strange and even bizarre tapestry with new patterns and color combinations that may be initially be an acquired taste. It is increasingly difficult to make sense of “systems” (whether individuals or organizations or nations) in isolation, without understanding their complex network of relationship. Indeed, the French philosopher Edgar Morin has said that now every event must be understood in a larger planetary context. As I am writing this, all eyes are on Greece and Italy, and the Dow Jones is doing the headline pogo: bouncing up and down in response to news from countries thousands of miles away.

Chaos theory’s butterfly effect goes against the grain of traditional thinking. The butterfly effect has no linear, determined cause and effect relationship. Numerous self-immolations since Bouazizi, including nuns as far away as Tibet, have failed to trigger the same effect. One of the key lessons of complexity is about uncertainty and unpredictability. The Arab Spring came as a shock to the West. Narcotized in an orientalist fog of its own making, it had largely been lulled into believing that the Arab culture was passive, apathetic, and not ready for democracy.

The complexity of postnormal times teaches us about interconnectedness,
interdependence, unpredictability. It shows us that traditional ways of thinking based on reductionism—taking things apart, looking at phenomena in isolation—and determinism, the belief that events can be predicted based on previous events and behaviors and so-called laws, are inadequate and a recipe for being gobsmacked.

The Arab Spring as a Transformative Moment and a Transformative Movement
There are certain times in human experience that can perhaps best be transcribed as transformative. The Arab Spring is arguably a transformative moment involving a transformative movement. What typifies this transformative moment is a sudden awareness that the reality that was taken for granted, and for all intents and purposes was solid, “real,” and above all unchanging and even unquestioned, is ultimately plastic, a consensus habituation we have come to accept. Things need not be as they are. A transformative moment shows us that the order we take for granted is not the given and necessary and inescapable order. It is merely one order, and even if it is held in place with the barrel of many guns, it is still created by somebody, and serving some individuals and not others. The transformative moment involves a breakdown in the acceptance of that order. Suddenly that order does not seem necessary or inevitable at all. As one slogan of the Arab Spring clearly states: The people want to overthrow the regime. And a world of possibilities seems to open up.

Human history is full of such moments, whether during the French Revolution, notoriously in the 1960s with the youth revolution, or Berlin in 1989. An old order appears to be dying, and something new is emerging, as possibility after possibilities shows itself to us. A radical discontinuity with the past leads us to believe nothing will ever be the same. The old order has been shown to be a human creation rather than a necessity, one that we have become drearily habituated. And if the social order is a human creation, we believe can make a better one.

Transformative movements are marked by great spontaneous solidarity and self-organization. It is a remarkable feature of the Arab spring that there are no major charismatic leaders appearing. The overthrow of numerous long-standing governments is not spearheaded by a charismatic figure like a Mao, or a Che or a Gandhi. What we see instead is a process of self-organization through social media, making it possible for what Howard
Rheingold called “smart mobs” to appear—increasingly large groups able to turn on a dime, as it were, and show up in a chosen location with great speed and coordination. This self-organization does not have traditional leaders and is marked by spontaneous solidarity that gives the movement itself charisma. In fact, the individuals taking part in the movement tend to be so passionate about it that they often risk their lives for it, and the televised images of the brave crowds demonstrate their catalytic charisma.

Going from a transformative moment to a transformative movement with the power to transform a country’s institutions is a very complex process. It is by no means given that transformative moments and movements will lead to real social transformation, in the same way that it is by no means given that no matter how “hard” we fall in love (the transformative moment), we’ll be able to sustain a long term relationship, let alone set up house and having children. It is important to understand the nature of the transformative moment in the Arab Spring (and arguably many if not all of the movements of 2011), and what challenges they face ahead.

The Rejection of Control Culture
The Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, the indignados in Spain, and the anti-corruption demonstrations in India, share many traits. The indignation is, in the broadest terms, the result of a transformative moment when a “normal” order has become untenable, a perception that simply cannot hold. These movements are against corruption, exploitation, abuse of power, and unacceptably high wealth and power differences. About the many (the alleged 99%) feeling some (the alleged 1%) have really gone beyond the pale. About the perception and experience that “the system,” whether Gaddafi’s or Mubarak’s or Wall Street’s is fundamentally broken. That a certain degree of corruption, abuse, inequality may be acceptable, but that what is happening now is not normal, or at least that it cannot be accepted as normal anymore. The transformative moment occurs when suddenly the world is seen anew, alternatives open and there is the shared feeling that the world need not be this way. What was once acceptable is acceptable no more. Suddenly the inevitability of an order has collapsed. The Arab Spring has pronounced a resounding, indignant kefaya—enough!

These particular transformative moments, and the transformative movements they have spawned, share a rejection of what, following the
sociologist Philip Slater, might be called Control Culture. Such systems are marked by, among other things, top-down control, rigid hierarchy, an all-encompassing ideology, a general climate of mistrust coupled with obedience and conformity, either/or thinking, the consolidation of power in small elites, the exploitation of the masses, and the creation of an in-group/out-group, us vs. them mentality. The hierarchical nature of Control Cultures means there are a privileged few and the great unwashed. The tormenters of Mohammed Bouazizi in all likelihood had their own tormenters, one step up in the hierarchy. Control Cultures are fundamentally closed. The less is known about the “outside world,” the better, and the same applies the “inside world,” the inner sanctum of power. The people higher up in the hierarchy can get away with just about anything, and the people below can disappear.

One of the slogans of the Arab Spring has been Bread, Freedom, and Dignity. I would like to suggest that two things the protesters have displayed in their movements, are creativity and solidarity. When we loosen the grip of Control Cultures we see the emergence of characteristics associated with creativity such as thinking for oneself and questioning consensus and authority, the ability to tolerate uncertainty and confusion while one is making sense of a situation, looking at an issue from a plurality of perspectives and acknowledging and attempting to actively address the networked complexity of the world. The creative characteristics get turned into their opposites in Control Cultures: Conformist thinking, interpreting any person or event one doesn’t immediately through pre-existing categories, black and white thinking, and seeking simplistic answers which do not take into account the complex interconnectedness and interdependence of the world. The protests are against exploitation and corruption, and the request for freedom and dignity points clearly to the desire not to have their lives determined by despotic others who care not one whit for them. These people want to be allowed to think for themselves. They do not want to be told what to do, buy into simplistic slogans and a live in cultures designed to reduce rather than foster their individual and collective agency. The Arab Spring itself has modeled creativity and solidarity in the way the protesters have managed to overcome obstacles, and in the process overthrown long-standing despots.

Perhaps we need to step back and look at this often confusing word,
creativity. Our understanding of creativity in the 21st century is changing. It used to be associated with the image of a lone genius, with the magical moment of insight as the light-bulb goes over his cartoon head, and with a groundbreaking contribution in the arts and sciences. Today it is viewed—and practiced—as a much more networked, “everyday, everywhere, everyone” phenomenon. And the implications are considerable. All of a sudden creativity and innovation are everywhere. When I first started seriously researching creativity I would be looked upon askance both in academia and in business. Organizations with rigid control cultures that allowed hardly any individual freedom would sometimes call on me to consult, puzzled at why their people were not being creative. Their expectation was that I would give these uncreative types cognitive tools like lateral thinking to become more creative. Inevitably I would report back that the allegedly uncreative types were not the problem. It was the control culture that was the problem. It was designed precisely to kill creativity. But control cultures in general are increasingly unsuitable for social systems, whether organizations or nations. They are unable to adapt to a rapidly changing external environment, and they oppress individuals—and individuals all over the world seem to have had enough of that.

We are now recognizing the ways in which individuals can be creative in their everyday lives, at home, raising their children, solving problems at work, creating social innovations. Human creativity is not limited artistic masterpieces or a scientific breakthroughs. Individuals everywhere, in different ways, are seeking ways to create their lives. Not perhaps in the sense of some grand Nietzschean opus, but significantly nevertheless. They certainly don’t wish to have somebody else arbitrarily dictate what their lives can and cannot be, what they should and shouldn’t do, and what they can and can’t hope for. The tremendous explosion in social media, the way we are flooded with images from all over the globe, is creating increasingly open systems with a diversity of perspectives that is offering insight into the way other people live their lives. This is no monolithic desire to imitate another culture, to become American or Western or anything as obvious as that. It’s an awareness of diversity, hence of possibilities and of the way lives and cultures and interactions can be created.

Much has been written about why the once so remarkably fertile Arab countries have lost their creativity, their ability to make contributions to
science, the arts, to social, political and economic innovations. It should be clear by now that I believe the central reason is not Islam, or some specific characteristic of the Arab people or Arab “civilization.” At the heart of any Arab stagnation this century lies Control Culture which has simply not allowed the freedom, the wide-ranging inquiry, the opportunity to engage in creative bricolage in the arts, sciences, and in the public and private sphere. Arab youth are mixing and matching music drawing extensively on rap, television channels are emerging with forceful voices and shows like “What would he have done?” which illustrate what the Prophet Muhammad would have done in a variety of everyday, 21st century scenarios.

It doesn’t take a lot to liberate the creativity of the Arab people, particularly starting with the traditionally most oppressed groups, youth and women. But in order for this to happen, the people have to be able to work together in ways that allow them to express their views, perspectives, interpretations of the world. The people need to be allowed to express their creativity, and if there’s one thing Control Cultures will not tolerate it’s unfettered creativity, with all the surprises and potential instability they bring. In Control Cultures, the people must be controlled.

The clash of cultures today is not between Islam and the West. It is between Control Cultures and Creative Cultures. It is between wanting to control others and wanting to create together.

**Networked Creativity on a Networked Planet**
The Arab Spring, and several of the other movements that have marked 2011, are generally leaderless, self-organizing groups that use social media technology to network large numbers of people. Their actions can be viewed all across the globe. Leadership in these movements tends to be networked and temporary. When it is necessary for one person to take an initiative that can happen, but typically decisions are made by consensus. Using terms borrowed from complexity science, the leadership emerges out of decentralized control, distributed problem solving, and multiple interactions. If there are individual leadership roles they are temporary. Hierarchies (Synonyms include “chain of command,” “pecking order,” “pyramid,” “order”) are replaced by heterarchies, where there is no one ladder up one pyramid, but temporary leaders on temporary ladders, individuals appearing at different times and places depending on the
requirements of the moment. And there is no certainly no “ultimate” leader, no charismatic figure that inspires with great thunderous speeches. On the contrary. The individual heroic figures have, if anything, tragically lost their lives like Mohamed Boazizi and Neda Agha-Sultan.

Our understanding of both leadership and creativity in the English speaking world trace their origin at least to the Romantic notion of the heroic Great Man, whether Einstein or Napoleon. At the dawn of the 21st century, the notion of the Great Man is beginning to take a back seat to a more grassroots, participative approach. I do not mean to say that the days of individual leaders/creators, or great leaders/creators, for that matter, are over. Simply that new forms of leadership and creativity are emerging. We are seeing them in action in the Arab Spring and movements like Occupy Wall Street.

Many of the most interesting social innovations of the last 20 years or so have been about networking, participation, and grassroots efforts. These innovations are connected to the emergence of the internet, of social media, and the emergence of a networked society. YouTube, Etsy, Facebook, Wikipedia, WebMed, Lord of Warcraft, farmer’s markets, artisanal foods and the Slow food movement, MySpace, blogs, vlogs, Twitter, Britain’s Got Talent, independent music labels and movies, Garageband, DIY culture and DIY education, Yelp, TripAdvisor, Craig’s list, Dancing with the Stars, American Idol, and reality television, all examples of new forms of expression and networked organization that involve a much greater degree of grassroots participation than before. The traditional role of the critic, the artist, the record label, the audience, the reader, the novelist, the journalist, the photo-reporter, the newspaper, are all being supplemented (and in some cases seriously threatened) by this ability individuals have to connect, participate, and even create. The traditional top-down, one-way communication from author to reader, from performer to audience, from star to public, from producer to consumer, from leader to follower, is changing.

In emerging online grassroots communities participants express their own views about restaurants and hotels, grow their own vegetables, record their own music with other musicians that may live half way across the globe and distribute it over the net, or make their own cheeses to bring to the farmers’ market. They are about blogs where individual writers bypass
publishing houses to connect with in some cases thousands of readers. They allow for increasing grass-roots participation, in ways that were never possible before. They are a move away from centralized, top-down systems to networked, collaborative but highly individualized systems. Whatever we may think of individual examples of this trend, as a whole it represent a new movement that reflects emerging trends in creativity and leadership. It reflects the emergence of networks with communities of interest working together to create content and experiences that they feel strongly about.

This emerging form of networked creativity is influencing the way people think about creativity, what they consider to be creative, and how they can express their creativity. When I ask Baby Boomers about what creativity means to them, they almost always name “eminent” creatives like Einstein or Picasso. Millennials, people who came of age at the turn of the millennium, name friends and relatives who have done something ingenious or helpful. The Millennial generation views creativity much more collaboratively and “locally” rather than as a phenomenon associated with exceptional individual giftedness. They see creativity as cool ways of throwing a party, helping out somebody in need, organizing a great event. Burning Man started off as a spontaneous self-organizing creative process in the rather unforgiving environment of the Nevada desert and is a larger scale manifestation of this new creativity, not least because at the end, nothing is left. There is no great timeless work of art that will end up in a museum. There’s cleaning up the mess and looking forward to next year.

It is not only the Millennials who are bringing a new perspective on creativity. It shouldn’t surprise us that women, who have until recently not featured prominently on the lists of creative geniuses in history (not least because they were historically not allowed access to the arts and sciences) have expressed their creativity in much more collaborative ways in the domestic sphere, creating environments for their children, playing games with them, feeding families day after day with whatever is at hand in the pantry and in the market, and solving daily problems. This is not to suggest women’s creativity is from Venus and men’s is from Mars, or anything like that, but merely that different social roles have led to different expressions of creativity. Women’s expression of creativity has been more networked and collaborative, largely because of social necessity, and it should also not surprise us that women play an enormous role in the use of social media.
and in the new grass-roots creativity. It is therefore interesting to note that women have also been very active participants in the Arab Spring.

The smart mobs of the Arab Spring self-organized and coordinated, like jazz musicians. How did they do it? How do birds move through the sky the way they do, in sometimes huge flocks, without smashing into each other? How do they avoid mid-air collisions? What do jazz musicians do to put together an excellent performance of mostly improvised music? The answers are beginning to emerge, once again through complexity-based approaches and they are take the form of the remarkably simple-seeming rules: Move in the same direction as your neighbors, stay close to them, and avoid smashing into them. For jazz musicians, the same rules can be said to apply, although in a more complex way: play the same song, stay closely attuned, and don’t get in each other’s way. What this means on a very basic level is simple but unusual: pay attention to the people you’re with, listen to them, align with them.

The new creativity is collaborative. It is networked creativity that involves people working together, exchanging ideas, forming and reforming in small groups like jazz bands. They don’t need the ultimate score from the great composer. They can come together, increasingly distributed over great geographical distances, and work on issues, problems, and ideas on a project by project basis. The project or issue is the song they improvise over. They bring their own background and learn how to work together, to adapt to new environments, to share information. They are more like jazz musicians coming together for a recording session and then going their own way again than symphony players who are mostly bound to one orchestra and play the score as written. On one recording or concert the saxophone player is the leader, the next it’s the bass player. The sound is the emergent property of the interaction between the musicians, not the exclusive vision of one person written down on a score for perpetuity. And the leader is often more like catalyst, creating a framework for generative interactions than the great composer or conductor. This new networked creativity may be exciting and complex and fascinating and even very lucrative for some (Google, Facebook etc.) while not at all lucrative for others, like old fashioned record companies. But is it enough to take us over the postnormal hump?
The Crisis of the Future

I recently realized that much if not all of the science fiction I used to watch as a boy in England was supposed to take place in what is now the past. Orwell’s *1984* goes without saying, but it was published in 1949. The oddly dark English series *UFO*, brought to you by the makers of *Thunderbirds*, was supposed to take place in 1980. Lost in Space in 1985. Then we had *Space 1999*, Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and the sequel, *2010: The Year We Make Contact*, and so on. What happened to the future? Already in my youth the silver-clad utopian visions from the 50s and 60s were being replaced by Mel Gibson’s post-apocalyptic *Mad Max* and *Blade Runner*, and later the eugenic and more insidiously dystopian vision of *Gattaca*. The future was suddenly filled with haves and have-nots, with paranoia, control, and coercion. The biggest science fiction hit of recent years has been *Avatar*, where the whole rapacious human race becomes the enemy. In the climax of the movie the human hero becomes an “alien,” perhaps the only possible form of redemption. And then there’s *2012*, a movie where the world is ending. Outside movie theaters the alleged Mayan prophecy about the end of the world is half-jokingly and half-seriously entertained as a plausible scenario.

This cinematic interlude points to a larger crisis of the future. Mayans or no Mayans, *2012* is a symbolic wall of the human imagination when it comes to envisioning desirable futures. Is there really no future in *Earth’s* dreaming? The events of World War 2, the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and China with a history of massive self-inflicted death tolls, the environmental crisis, the loss of faith in techno-science whether through environmental destruction, thalidomide or conflicting information about how to lose a few pounds, and the quantophrenia of macro-economics with its claim to science and its inability to predict anything of real significance, has led to a great suspicion of any notion of progress, whether through science, communism, capitalism, or other forms of earthly salvation. There are no guarantees. Science will not lead us to a shiny silvery happy future. It will not solve all our problems. In fact the application of science by industry has led to many of the environmental and social problems we face today. Science continues to provide us with incredible tools and insights, but it is not our savior. It is not neutral in the sense that it does not exist without people. Communism is dead, Socialism is looking pretty green around the gills, and while in heated denial that anything at all is wrong, capitalism is not feeling too hot either. Intractable problems continue to
plague us: the economy, the environment, immigration, racism, poverty, injustice. European leaders claim multiculturalism is dead, and the same politicians have lost much if not all our trust.

In the countries Arab Spring, the political choices have traditionally been between religious or secular authoritarian systems. Not much of a choice, really, and one can imagine how easy it is to slip back into the habituated grooves of what worked before, particularly if there is no understanding of how to institutionalize the transformative moment of the Arab Spring. How and when does the movement become institutionalized, in the sense that it stops being on the streets and starts being in government? How do we deal with the crisis of the future in this transitional time, when the old orthodoxies are dead and dying, but the new have not yet emerged? When what passes for left and right, secular and religious all seems inadequate to the task?

The motto of Stephane Hessel’s short little bestseller Indignez Vous is “Resist to Create, and Create to Resist.” At this point, the resistance is emerging in many different ways. The indignation aroused by existing political and economic systems is being clearly expressed. But visions of better futures are lacking. We may know what we don’t want, but what we do want is less clear. Postmodernism has taught us to be suspicious of grand sweeping narratives like communism and science, leading us to a promised land. It has also deconstructed the myth of the Romantic hero. We can resist the Control Culture. But where to from here?

When one order is brought down, there is a transitional period between the old and the new. On a macro-, global scale, this is what Sardar calls postnormal times. When the old order falls, when a Mubarak or Gaddafi or Ben Ali is gone, who, how, and what replaces them? The transition time there is also arguably postnormal, but we know the tendency is for the old order to re-establish itself, because of the apparent lack of alternatives. We know that too much chaos and too much disorder make people very anxious, and the natural tendency is to want to get rid of them and have some semblance of order again. The uncertainty in the in between times makes it tempting to establish a new order fast, even if it’s old wine in new bottle. The recent elections in Egypt have pointed to the inability of the younger protestors to fully articulate what kind of society they envision in a way that is appealing to the majority of the voters. And it may take a while
for such a vision to be articulated, let alone expressed in a way that the
majority of the population can resonate with. But the process has to begin.

The poet John Keats used the term ‘negative capability’ to refer to the ability
to “be in uncertainties.” Creativity researchers have found that tolerance for
ambiguity, the ability to remain open to phenomena without wanting to
immediately impose an interpretive framework and remain in uncertainty,
is a key characteristic of creative thinking. Is it possible to develop tolerance
of ambiguity on a grand scale? If indeed we are undergoing a tremendous
change, and if we are living in postnormal times then surely we all need to
cultivate tolerance of ambiguity to a greater or lesser extent. If we are to
imagine new futures, new directions, we’ll surely need all the negative
capability we can get.

Growing Grass-roots Futures
The transformative movement of the Arab Spring is already losing steam in
some places and facing the habituated grooves (and the not so groovy old
faces) of the old order. Part of the problem is that no clear alternatives have
been developed. In the transition from a movement to an elected institution,
what is the Arab Spring promising? What are the alternatives to Control
Cultures of old? What are the dreams of the participants in the Arab Spring?
Do we know? As Hessel states, it’s not enough to resist. We also have to
create. Those alternatives should come from the same people who made the
movement: the people. Indeed, the Palestinian intellectual Khaled Hroub
has written that “the most fundamental change is the return of the people.”

But do we even think about the future, or know how to think about it? The
future talk popular until the 80s has been replaced by talking of fixing—
“fixing” banks, fixing the environment, fixes for jobs, immigration, and so
on. Only fixing. This fixation with fixing leaves us with what are known as
a “avoid motivations.” We are motivated to go to the dentist, but it’s an avoid
motivation. We don’t wear dentist T-shirts and wave dentist flags. What we
are lacking is visions of something to look forward to—“approach
motivations.” We need attractor images, something to work towards.

If we look back at the way the future was conceptualized in the last 150 years
or so, we see two main strands, the science fiction of classic figures like
Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov and Arthur C.
Clarke, and the emerging field of “future studies,” which involved social scientists’ attempts to explore possible or likely futures. More recently scenario planning has been used to develop a series of possible future scenarios in a kind of futures contingency thinking, which allows planners to explore what they might do in a variety of future scenarios. The argument is that this allows one to prepare for a number of different possibilities, and therefore be more prepared for the inevitable uncertainties.

This approach to the future can be modified to some extent to mobilize the imagination at a grass-roots level. What if substantial portions of the population were invited to think about the future together? What if we could elicit visions of better futures—again, not ideal, perfect, utopian futures, simply better futures and approach motivation by using the same social media used to mobilize people to resist? One way to begin to generate alternative scenarios is to invite those traditionally unrepresented in the discourse of the future, namely youth and women, and more broadly ordinary, “everyday, everywhere, everyone” citizens, to apply their own imagination, to start thinking together and imagining different worlds, to wonder what if... Not to envision utopias, but simply better worlds. What if, during this postnormal phase, the imagination is mobilized at the grass-roots level, to systematically envision new futures, new possibilities for coexistence, new solutions to old problems? Perhaps the time when only governments and technocratic experts are asked to solve social problems has passed. While they may still have a lot to contribute, their track records have hardly been stellar. Surely the combined imagination of the Arab countries, and increasing numbers of the world’s population, expressed through the technology of social media in stories, ideas, poetry, skits, images, videos, and so forth, would have a lot to offer.

There are many different methods to elicit imaginative futures being used by futurists already, from Open Space technology to Future Search conferences to Scenario Planning to What If...creativity exercises that can be modified to be used with individuals who have little background experience thinking about the future. Workshops, courses, protocols, and other approaches to generating images of the future could be shared online and terrestrially, creating a movement of “Future Consciousness” designed to explore visions beyond out transitional times, whether at the macro-, meso-, or micro-level.
I am proposing a massive, grass-roots mobilization of the imagination to generate images of desirable futures using social media to create a *glocal* “Theater of the Future.” In this process vast numbers of people could express in a plurality of available media what their lives would look like in a better future. This could be achieved with simple protocols and through the use of existing social media and relatively cheap equipment. The “Future Show” of the “Theater of the Future” would be an alternative to the so-called reality show on television, which as we know is mostly not “reality” television at all. In the same way that people are asked to participate in voting contestants on or off talent or game shows, in the same way that individuals and groups can post YouTube videos of their bands or their holiday adventures or their humorous accidents caught on film, individuals and communities could be asked to envision and collaborate on generating better futures. These futures could begin with creating and publicizing local visions and solutions. There would be no need to centrally control the process, merely begin it and in the process demonstrate one way it could be done. The participants could use grass-roots social media, making videos with cell phones, presenting skits, animations, speeches, poetry—anything that allowed them to express their desire and vision for a better future.

As part of the larger effort to develop future consciousness “Barefoot Futurists” could be sent around to create teach basic scenario and visioning approaches, sharing collaborative methods and providing access to social media with which to seed the noosphere, the virtual planetary web of ideas, and providing basic rules for scenarios, such as non-violence non-coercion, and the inability to make a present “enemy” disappear. One key dimension of this would be to encourage not only the generation of future scenarios, but also the willingness and ability to learn from the diversity of the emerging visions. The interconnectedness allows networked problem solving, sharing of resources, ideas, solutions, and generally drawing on the simple complexity rules of distributed problem solving, multiple interactions, and decentralized control.

Drawing on the language of complexity again, simple rules could be applied in the process as the visions are generated and presented on the web, where they can also be explored, expanded, discussed, critiqued, and, like open source software, modified to suit tastes and purposes. Future Shows and the Theater of the Future would elicit a diversity of knowledge through
participants from potentially all over the globe, friendly competition to
develop the most appealing visions and scenarios, and simple mechanisms
for choice—again, seeing which futures most people flock to, play with,
explore, and so on. The presence of these scenarios and visions can in turn
lead to efforts to make these visions come about at micro-levels in families
and neighborhoods, but also in villages and cities. Groups exploring and
implementing the ideas behind a particular vision could remain connected,
share experiences, and form a virtual community of vision and practice, like
the indirect collaboration of Wikipedia. Initially an important element of
this process would have to be simple guidelines for how to elicit desirable
futures in individuals and in groups, and also how to dialogue about them
in ways that don’t simply replicate existing polarized political discussions.

The Theater of the Future would serve many purposes. It would begin to
mobilize the global grass-roots imagination to envision better futures, and
begin to get beyond the imagination-gate of 2012. It would also give us an
understanding of what people might want, see if there are emergent
patterns, perhaps commonalities among groups that were unrecognized,
creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems, and so on. We might
watch processes of self-organization emerge around common futures,
efforts to mobilize creativity rather than conflict, generating solutions,
collaborating to make some futures more attractive, and so on.

Theater of the Future, with its focus on articulating, enacting and visualizing
the hopes and dreams of ordinary citizens might seem like a frivolous way to
continue the struggle against the Scylla and Charybdis of secular, economic
and religious despotism of Control Cultures. But in postnormal times we
should, I believe, entertain postnormal responses and options. Can we move
from Control Cultures to Creative Cultures? Can we make the shift from top-
down exploitive control cultures to generative cultures where trust,
transparency, creativity, collaboration, gender equality and diversity are
valued? The Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement have already
embodied some of the generative, networked, collaborative characteristics of
Creative Cultures in their efforts to challenge Control Cultures. But the
underlying principles of the alternative need to be explored, articulated, and
put out there. We know what Control Cultures are. The moments of cultural
efflorescence and creativity are remembered as high points of human
civilization—one only has to think of the enormously generative convivencia
in Spain. A new creative convivencia is needed, appropriate for to our times, to help us beyond the chasm of postnormal times. Images of convivencias old and new can be developed to expose growing numbers of people to a wider range of possibilities, and break out of limited, either/or thinking which allows only one option or...nothing.

The real challenge facing the youth and the women who so boldly participated in the Arab Spring is showing what’s next. The ready-made images of existing political formations are easy to understand even in their Control Culture obsolescence. What the movement needs now is not one dominant vision, one mega-ideology, some new grand narrative about a glorious (and clearly inevitable) future. It is, rather, to begin to articulate what a post-Control Culture future would be like, and to create attractor-images that can inspire the emergence of a new Creative Culture. Images of and by people in Arab countries articulating their own vision, showing different to be an Arab or an Muslim, different interpretations of what Islam means to them, of how it is possible to live together in many different ways, and how more generative, inclusive, and progressive realities can be created. It is about creating a culture that is generative, that promotes the development of new visions, solutions, and alternatives. A culture that engages people in a collaborative process of creative inquiry as they explore the possibilities for better futures. The time has come to mobilize the human imagination, show the alternatives to Control Culture, and develop Creative Cultures that thrive on diversity, freedom, and creativity.

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If narration is a kind of story-telling where would one start the story of the Arab Spring? Would one start from the tragic death of Mohammad Bouazizi, the fruit-seller from Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 when he was prevented from pitching his stall in front of a government building? Or would one start earlier? And if one treats the Bouazizi incident as a spark only what kind of tinderbox did this spark set alight? Would this spark have worked if Sidi Bouzid was not, in relative terms, a kind of unimagined community (a community of flesh and blood) - playing on Benedict Anderson’s now famous term ‘imagined community’ - owing to its small population of under forty thousand? Would the spark have had its igniting effect if Bouazzi’s ordeal had not involved issues of dignity and, more importantly, masculinity? (Reports have it that Bouazzi had his dignity trampled on by a woman municipal inspector, Fadia Hamdi, who was known locally for her harsh enforcement of the law: she slapped him on the face and cursed his dead father in front of other fruit sellers). And would the spark have worked if Bouazzi tried to end his life less publicly or by using other means than fire?

Would Egypt have provided its own, internally generated spark if Tunisia had
not ignited earlier? And without the spark provided by Tunisia, what kind of spark would Egypt have had to have to be set alight (the same is true of Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria)? What role have the social media played in the Arab Spring? Would the Arab Spring have succeeded at all without the social media? How did Arab political rivalries play out in the media scramble to cover the Arab Spring? What role did women play in the Arab Spring? What role did religion play in the Arab Spring? Is there one Arab Spring or are there several Arab Springs? Is the Arab Spring a phenomenon of those countries that have experienced it directly only? Or can we talk about an Arab Spring in countries where it may be existing in a prenatal state?

What does narration refer to in talk about the Arab Spring? Does it involve chronology, description, explanation, ideology, hermeneutics, music, popular culture or all of these strands in concoctions of different proportions? To what extent is narration constrained by the lexical currencies in which it is encoded? Does it matter whether the Arab Spring is referred to by that name or by other nomenclatures that have been in circulation: Arab uprisings, Arab awakening, Arab revolutions, Arab refo-lutions or, even, Arab coups? What are the narrational implications of each one of these terms? What implications does the Arab Spring have for the way we have been studying and framing the Middle East in our institutions in the West? These are some of the questions which narrations of the Arab Spring will need to deal with, but, for obvious reasons, it would not be possible to tackle all of them here. I will therefore restrict myself to some explanatory remarks that cut across the countries that have been at the forefront of the Arab Spring.

I would like to begin by reiterating the oft-repeated phrase that the Arab Spring is a case of ‘work in progress’ with roots in an inchoate past. This implies that the Arab Spring, which is still unfolding, did not emerge out of a void and that all narrations of it remain provisional, this one included. In Tunisia and Egypt, there were several strikes before the onset of the Arab Spring. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and a liberal party called Kifaya – which translates as “Enough!” or better still ‘Enough is Enough’ - had led repeated small scale protests against the Mubarak regime. These parties, and others, demanded an end to dynastic rule, an end to state corruption in politics, in the economy and in the administration of justice. They pressed for an end to the constant violations of human rights and to restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly.
In Jordan, the Islamists opposed, in small scale demonstrations, state corruption, the warm government peace policy towards Israel and the constant manipulation of the electoral system to deny them their fair share of the votes. Before the onset of the Arab Spring, Jordanian teachers had mounted many campaigns to establish a professional association/trade union; this was granted only after intense action in Jordan following the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. I doubt if this trade union would have been allowed without the pressure generated by the Arab Spring.

This picture is repeated, with local variations, in other Arab countries. I refer to these events to counter a prevalent motif in discussions of the Arab Spring: no one could have predicted the speed and intensity with which the first wave of Arab Spring uprisings unfolded in Tunisia and Egypt, or how quickly these uprisings spread to other countries. But this does not mean that the Arab Spring came out of a vacuum.

Why, then, did the mighty CIA, MI6, Mossad and other intelligence agencies in the region and beyond – fail to see the Arab Spring coming? The reason, I think, is simple: complacency. These agencies grew accustomed to their belief that ordinary people in the Arab world lacked agency; that the Arabs’ calls for democracy were more rhetorical than real; that cultural expressions of discontent are not really political, but at most just a form of letting off steam; and that the coercive instruments of state security have, time after time, proven their resilience and ability to deal effectively and brutally with any challenge to the authority of the ruling elite. Because of this frame of mind the Arab Spring slogan ‘The People Want to Bring the Regime Down’ was initially considered an empty call by people who huff and puff, if they do at all, but end up in a whimper not a bang.

Owing to this frame of mind and its consequent mode of operation, foreign intelligence agencies ignored grassroots feelings, treating them as idle chat. And because of this these agencies continued to concentrate on the usual targets: the armed forces and the security apparatus for their loyalty or otherwise to the state; trade unions and student organisations for Islamist infiltration; NGOs as the conduits for political activity; political parties if they existed; prominent figures in government and society at large; and, most important of all, Islamist movements as the most likely source for any serious challenge to the stability of the established order.
Ordinary people were discounted because, in effect, they were thought to lack agency or the stamina to bring about fundamental change in society: they could not bring the regimes down. The youth in particular were considered a lost generation that is more interested in Internet communication and computer gadgetry than real politics. Chat and its networks were considered the domain of the virtual and the cyber rather than the real. And all of this stemmed from a fundamentally flawed idea that the Arab world was prone to autocracy as a ‘character trait’ that is antithetical to democratic rule, treating the calls for it as no more than rhetorically declared aspirations that lack real substance. How many times did we hear Arab and Western leaders tell us: ‘The Arabs are not ready for democracy’? Israel’s description of itself as the only democracy in the Middle East, as an oasis of rationality in a jungle-like neighbourhood sums this attitude well. Many in the West accepted this as established dogma.

But in spite of all this, the Arab Spring has acted and seems set to continue to act as a catalyst for real change in the Arab world. Understandably, the world has high expectations of the Arab uprisings, as the Arab themselves do. But it is too early to speak of enduring change in any one direction. Much to the dismay of those in the modelling business, volatility rather than stability will most probably be the shape of things to come. This means that success in the future will depend on how well people in the Arab world and elsewhere can tolerate and harness variability and volatility. It will also depend on how far they can resist the temptation to impose a top down coercive stability that short-circuits the normal course of bottom-up political change, under the banner of fighting anarchy. The same rule will apply to media analysts too: a linear notion of cause and effect in understanding the Arab Spring reduces what are complex phenomena to an emaciated, almost skeletal, structure. This has the effect of creating a false sense of cognitive understanding and control that is intolerant of ambiguity. With these caveats, let me highlight what I consider to be some of the most important features of the emerging political terrain in the Arab Middle East.

A Fearless Attack on Fear
Over the past few months, I have attended many talks on the Arab Spring including at my own University in guest lectures that I have personally helped organise. I have been consistently struck by how the words ‘freedom’, ‘dignity’ and ‘justice’ are never, yes never, invoked in these discussions. This
is in stark contrast to the way the Arab Spring is narrated by the Arabs. Trade, the economy and demographics are not the first things that the Egyptians, Tunisians and others mention when they talk about the Arab Spring. The front line concepts that one usually hears are: ‘izza wa karama (dignity), huriyya (freedom) and ‘adala (justice).1 The Arab Spring is an attack on fear, and a call for freedom: of association, of organisation, of political participation and of speech.

We see this in the names of some of the Egyptian political parties, especially those of an Islamist orientation. When the Muslim Brotherhood established a new party in Egypt after the revolution, they called it the Freedom and Justice Party (Hizb al-Huriyya wa-l-‘Adala), no doubt because they know the deep resonance ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ have in Egyptian society and among a people who have been denied these human rights. This also trades on the name of the Islamist Justice Party in Turkey which is held by some as a model in the Islamist political arena. The Salafist party in Egypt is called Nour (Light). This name has strong Qur’anic associations, but it also suggests that Egypt is emerging, or needs to emerge, out of darkness into a new dawn as a result of the uprising. Another Salafist party is called Asala (Authenticity); this name suggests that what Egypt needs is a return to its (Islamic) roots.

Two Islamist parties go by the names Reform and Development Party and Reform and Revival Party. Actually, the word translated as “reform” – islah – means restoring a condition of rightness and healthiness, getting society in a fit and proper state again. The Sufi Islamist party is called the Egyptian Liberation Party, suggesting that Egypt needs to be liberated. In the past, the word ‘liberation’ in the name of a party alluded to the colonialist context or, in the Palestinian case, liberation from Israeli occupation. Although it is not totally clear what Egypt needs to be liberated from, the name of this party reflects the value-laden belief that Egypt is not yet fully free. The Nasserist party is called Hizb al-Karama, the Party of Dignity, a name that resonates with the yearning for this human value among the Egyptians.

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1 The original slogan in Egypt included the word for bread in Egyptian Arabic ‘eish’ together with freedom and social justice. This word was later replaced in variations on this slogan by the term karama, referring to dignity. This replacement of the particular by the general is a move towards abstraction. The ability to earn a decent and honest living is part of the dignity of the individual. The reference to ‘bread’ in the original slogan must therefore be treated as equally real and rhetorical in the sense that it extends beyond the materiality of bread.
One of the centrist parties in Egypt is called *Al Ghad, Tomorrow*, which in Arabic carries the meaning of hope and a bright new day. A bright economic future is part of this terminological aspiration, but I doubt if it could ever top freedom, dignity and justice in order of popular priority.

The names of these parties, whether of Islamist, (pan)-nationalist or liberal leanings suggest that values are important marketing tools. This is not to
imply that they are just slogans, as the cynics might want to argue. They are effective political marketing tools because they resonate with the Egyptian public - with its aspirations, and the ways in which it seeks to imagine and define the public good. This is reflected in the following placard from Egypt:

I took this picture of a lonely man raising a double-sided placard in Tal’at Harb Square, a few hundred metres away from Tahrir Square in Cairo on 17th November 2011. The placard addresses the Chief of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces asking him: “where is the security and safety of Egyptian streets, Minister of Interior?” It moves from this indignant reference to security and safety to other value-laden words, such as ‘freedom’, and ‘justice’. It refers to the Egyptians as the people of the Nile whose blood is not cheap. Value-laden words such as these had pride of place in the publicity materials of the candidates for the Egyptian parliamentary elections that started on 28 November 2011. This was in addition to the reference to the safety and security (amn wa aman) of the ordinary people against thugs and the coercive power of the police.

Income levels, standard of living, unemployment, and so on are not mentioned as front line lexical items in popular narrations of the Arab Spring. The words that are most readily used refer to human values that are universal in character. To understand the Arab Spring, therefore, we need to inject this value-oriented perspective in narrating it. Sticking to materialist explanations that invoke economics and employment as primary or sole factors, as often happens in Western academic discourses on the topic, will not do justice to what is happening in the Arab world. By the same token, ignoring these materialist explanations will not do. We need to get the order of the cart and horse right if we are to understand the Arab Spring at its inception.

The other side of the placard talks about freedom and its high price. Interestingly, “freedom” is not portrayed on this placard as a Western value, or as a fruit of the European Enlightenment that can be grafted onto Arab or Egyptian political culture only awkwardly and imperfectly. Nor is it seen as a gift to be offered by liberators coming from the outside. The expression on the placard suggests that it is something to be achieved internally, through a process of self-mastery. Only then can it be highly valued. This
The side of the placard reads: the price of freedom is extremely high, Tantawi! You won’t know its value because you are a slave to your own desires”. Freedom here is a moral achievement, won by overcoming the forces that keep a person or a people bound.

The question arises then: why are value-laden concepts avoided in academic
explanations of the Arab Spring that I have come across? Is it because values are believed to be proxies for other more fundamental causes of this Spring that are ultimately related to hard and quantifiable units of political or economic analysis? Could it be that the standards of evaluation and validation we apply in academic discourse militate against the use of soft categories of analysis such as ‘dignity’, ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’ in explaining socio-political phenomena? If so, what are the losses we may incur by ignoring value-laden terms when explaining phenomena of this type? How can we translate local narratives of the Arab Spring to those one finds in Western-style studies of this phenomenon? In other words, what conceptual exchange ‘mechanism’ can we apply to convert the soft and nebulous into the hard and quantifiable in talking about the Arab Spring?

These are fundamental questions that strike at the heart of how we study, conceptualise and narrate the Middle East. Although I have some answers to the basic premises that underlie these questions, I will not attempt to outline these answers here as this would require a separate essay. But let me venture this remark: ignoring native narratives in academic discourses of the Arab Spring is formally similar to ignoring the ordinary people by the CIA, MI6 and the Mossad in monitoring ‘the political’ in the days preceding the Arab Spring. Complacency and outmoded ways of thinking are responsible in both cases. If our categories of analysis cannot accommodate nativist narratives, the answer cannot be to ignore these narratives, but to re-examine the ways in which we think our academic subjects, our analytical tools and the standards of validation we apply in evaluating our research findings. This is tantamount to saying that we need an Academic Spring in our Western-style conceptualisations of the Arab Spring to be able to accord the momentous events we are witnessing in the Arab world the recognition and understanding they deserve.

The People have Agency
The Arab Spring is not just an assertion of universal moral values; it is also, as a courageous discursive act in an authoritarian climate, an affirmation of agency. Such an affirmation of individual and collective agency has itself encouraged people to act. Agency here is opposed not to fatalism – as in traditional Orientalist accounts of Arab life – but to fear. The Arab Spring is if nothing else an attack on the political modality of fear. This attack has itself struck fear into the hearts of rulers and the political elite who had
arrogantly grown accustomed to the idea that agency rested with them and them alone. Whereas the norm in the Arab world was/is for fear to operate top down, from regime or state to people, a new situation is emerging where fear has started to operate bottom up, from people to regime or state. If sustained, this shift in the vector of fear will have the capacity to transform the individual at the cognitive, emotional and political level from subject to citizen. The Arab Spring may, therefore, mark the birth of the Arab citizen in a way which, I think, would warrant calling the Arab uprisings emancipation movements.

The revolutionary potential of the Arab Spring lies in the continuity of this emerging emancipatory horizon and in its embeddedness in the public sphere socially and politically. The fact that Arabs are paying with their blood in the fight against tyranny suggests that the fight is not driven by economics, trade or employment but by the basic desire for dignity, freedom and justice which are the hallmarks of the citizen and not the subject (although the ability of a bread winner to put food on the table for his family is a question of dignity). The fact that the Arab Spring uprisings in such countries as Tunisia and Egypt did not stop at the level of removing the head of the regime but are drilling down to the deeper levels of the political order suggests an awareness of the power of agency that the Arabs have acquired, and a readiness to exercise it. I expect this to be the case in Yemen, and in Syria if the latter goes in the direction of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, as most probably it will.

The Arabs have a saying which may be translated as: Don’t put your head above the parapet because it will be cut off. This, in a nutshell, is what subject-hood is about: acquiescence out of fear. The fact that Arabs are daring to put their heads above the parapet repeatedly, despite the fact that these heads are shot at every time they do so in some countries, suggests that the Arab’s yearning to be citizens is not a passing desire. In ordinary conversations and in TV programmes about the Arab Spring, some Arabs have used the term ‘ubudiyya (slavery) to describe their situation. I have heard expressions such as zhiqna al-‘ubudiyya (we are fed up being slaves/living in a state of slavery), the implication being that an end must be put to this state of existence.
States, Regimes and Rulers are Brittle
As the vector of fear has been reversed, so that realisation has spread that seemingly impregnable Arab states, regimes and rulers are in fact brittle and vulnerable in the face of peaceful mass action. Peaceful mass protest has proved to be more effective, when possible, than violence in challenging the full brutality of the established orders. This brittleness was foreseen by the late Nazih Ayubi. His book *Overstating the Arab State*, written sixteen years before the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, issued a strong health warning to policy makers and academic researchers. Do not accept at face value, he said, the argument that the Arab regimes are here to stay. Like the regimes themselves, Ayubi implied, that argument had become overstated and dogmatic. And dogmas sooner or later reveal their brittleness when challenged by discourses and actions that have more life in them. If Nazih Ayubi were here today he would have been reminding us, perhaps with some modulations in his argument and the inevitable resigned smile, ‘Haven’t I told you so?’

Uncharismatic Leadership
Discourse, dogma, assertion, affirmation – these are all firmly in the domain of the political. As of course are other registers like humour, cynicism and silence. The Arab Spring has reminded us that we need to study what visions and possibilities of life these different registers affirm and deny. But we also need to study how cultural registers themselves are given life or left to become hollow and brittle. In Tunisia, and subsequently in other Arab countries, the affirmation of common human dignity was amplified by the sacrifice of real human life. That costly affirmation has opened the way for other cultural expressions, which are revealing and giving force to new visions and possibilities of life.

One such cultural register that has been given renewed impetus in Egypt recently is the opinion poll. What visions and possibilities have these revealed? Well, recent polls in Egypt have tended to suggest that, for the post of President, the Egyptians want a strong and experienced leader who can gain the respect of his own people, who can take on vested interests, weed out corruption, stand up to the military, dismantle the coercive security institutions of the state and, also, assert Egypt’s position and interests regionally and internationally.2

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2 This predates the election of Muhammad Mursi as President of Egypt. His inaugural speech confirms most of what this paragraph says.
This vision of political leadership chimes with the broader message of the Arab Spring: that neither charismatic leadership nor organised parties or trade unions are an indispensable element in bringing about drastic political change in society. They can help, of course, in preparing the ground for such change. But diffuse power in multiple locations and with different motivations and trajectories has been shown to work. This is a major difference with the colonial and post-colonial worlds in the Arab Middle East in which Nasser-like figures were considered essential in national struggles. It is, however, unlikely that the idea that charisma is dispensable in Arab political life will continue ad infinitum.

Non-Ideological Concerns
As they move away from charismatic leadership, the cultural registers of the Arab Spring also reveal a vision of issues-based politics. This is opposed to how we have tended to think about politics in the Middle East, as based around cross-state or state-based ideologies such as pan-Arab nationalism, pan-Islamism or neo-liberalism, and so on. In its place there seems to be an issues-based politics of demanding political freedoms, constitutional reforms, social justice, equal administration of the law, transparency, and public accountability to fight corruption and nepotism. These issues of course are not devoid of ideology. But they act as rallying cries for broad-based coalitions among different actors, and so they can legitimately be called post-ideological when compared with the divisive party-based politics of the past. It is this character that has given the Arab Spring its appeal and resilience.

A Sphere of Arab Affinity
This is not to say that Arabism – as a cultural expression, a structure of feeling, even a political ideal – is dead. Rather, the affirmations of dignity and justice that I mentioned earlier have given it a new form of life. The Arab Spring reveals that cross state Arab solidarity at the popular level has started to reconfigure the Arab political landscape. It is true, as we have been told ad nauseam, that Egypt is not Tunisia; that Libya is not Egypt or Tunisia; that Bahrain is not Libya, Egypt or Tunisia; that Yemen is not Bahrain or Libya or Egypt or Tunisia; and that Syria is not Yemen or Libya or Bahrain or Egypt or Tunisia. But the very fact that these negative comparisons are made by those striving to shore up brittle regimes suggests a shared awareness that these countries have something in common, and that that notion itself has political force.
What is the register of Arabism today? It is no longer just a shared genealogy of history, language and culture. It is also the expression of shared aspirations for future democracy, justice and the desire to eradicate nepotism and corruption. If anything, the Arab regimes have paradoxically given unity and life to this register, and thus unified Arab peoples, through their leadership’s brutality and corrupt practices. Whether or not these events should properly be called a “Spring”, there is no doubt that they are distinctively Arab. There were revolutions galore before the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia, including the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Velvet revolution in Ukraine and the Orange revolution in Georgia. But none of these stirred the Egyptians into action in the way the Tunisian revolution had moved them. The Shia in Bahrain were not stirred to act by the Iranian revolution in 1979 or by other mass protest movements such as the Green revolution in 2009. But they were moved to act by the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings which I am inclined to treat as dialectal variations of the Arab Spring.

If more evidence is needed, we can point to the cadence of slogans that reverberated through the streets of Arab cities, demanding the fall of the regimes and translated into English as ‘The People Want to Bring the Regime Down’. This same slogan, the common currency of all the Arab uprisings, reveals the transferability of emotions in a regionally networked cognitive, linguistic and affective sphere. We can also point to the fact that from the Atlantic to the Gulf, Arabic speaking audiences were and are glued to their television sets, watching and debating the same news stories. I experienced this in March 2011 in Abu Dhabi and Morocco and in Egypt in November 2011 and February 2012. This attests to the existence of a shared Arab public sphere which also extends to the diaspora.

It is, therefore, important not to conceptualise the Arab Spring at its inception in Islamic terms: it is, first and foremost, an Arab-inflected Spring. There are important country variations and there are Islamic impulses, but it is not an Islamic Spring. The participation of non-Muslim communities in this Spring demands that we do not impose on it a hegemonic Islamic framework to fit it into pre-existing schemata. Otherwise we will miss the different ways that political actors within and beyond the so-called Islamic front are now contesting the nature and legacy of the uprisings. Middle Eastern specialists need to note this and to focus their analytic gaze accordingly.
The Arab Spring, Arab Exceptionalism and Shared Values

The Arab Spring challenges the stereotype of Arab exceptionalism which gained enhanced currency after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. At a time of revolutionary change in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, and before that in Iran in 1979/80, the Arab world was a bystander, mesmerised but paralysed, and enthused but confused. This has changed now in a positive way: the Arab Spring is an indigenous movement and not an importation from the outside; this is an important factor in its success. In spite of all kinds of regime generated conspiracy theories, the Arab Spring is home grown and it has been embedded in an Arab solidarity sphere that has the potential to modulate, even challenge, the trenchant narratives of Islamists in their various forms, regionally and trans-regionally. The challenge facing the agents of the Arab Spring is how to transform this Spring from a seemingly freak, but welcome, weather condition – if I may put it this way - into an enduring aspect of the climate of the Arab Middle East, in spite of all weather fluctuations on the political and economic scene. The biggest dangers in this regard are impatience and cynicism. Cynicism is extremely corrosive: it eats away at sincerity and rationality in public life with equal measure, leading to disengagement, conspiracy thinking and nostalgic comparisons with a past stripped of all of its brutality and corruption. I came across such nostalgic conspiracy views during my visit to Cairo in November 2011 and 2012 by those who wish to go back to the Mubarak days.

In addition, the Arab Spring has pointed to a world of shared values with the West and other regions of the world. No one culture or region has a monopoly on freedom, democracy, justice, and equal opportunity as expressions of universal human aspirations. The West seems to have enjoyed these rights longer than other nations and regions of the world. But it does not own the copyright for these rights. It is important to acknowledge this, and to proclaim it unequivocally in all fora and at all times to ensure that entry into a world shaped by these rights is not seen on the Arab side as capitulation, or as an extension of the privileges enjoyed by the members of an exclusive club to previously morally challenged nations. This attitude of equality among nations can engender respect and dignity cross-culturally at all levels, especially if backed by meaningful action and support from the West to the post Arab Spring world. Approach from this perspective, the West will be as challenged as the Arab world in seeking to reap the harvest of the Arab Uprisings.
Let me return at this point to economic interests and to trust. It is well known that the Arab Middle East is strategically important to global powers because of the latter’s economic interests. Western powers have traditionally favoured political stability over democracy to protect these interests. In order to secure these assets, they have, as it were, been willing to *trade* their standard-bearer values of democracy, freedom and the rule of law for political stability.

However, as any economist will tell you, economies do not just need actors, and things to exchange. They also need trust. In fact, in trading politically according to the old calculus, Western powers have run up a deficit – a *confidence* deficit that characterises the relationship between the West and the Arab world, as seen from the Arab side.

The West, represented by the US, needs to eliminate this deficit. Not through a harsh austerity programme, but by underwriting their words with actions – actions that advance the values to which the uprisings have laid claim. The study of culture as a political medium can help here. It tells us that the West, symbolised by the US in the Arab imaginary, is seen as its own worst enemy – because it fails to recognise unequivocally the truly common currency of human values. The old paradigm of ‘words speak louder than actions’, or, worse still, ‘words speak in place of actions’ has given the West a bad image of duplicity and double standards among Arabs. The West does not just need a policy turn in its dealings with the Arab world. More important, it badly needs an *infrastructural cognitive turn* in its understanding of the Arab Middle East and in the way it thinks and frames its policies towards it. This cognitive turn will prove to be a big soul-searching challenge for the West. It will require *unlearning* all the bad thinking habits the West has internalised and turned into a constant of its foreign policy in the Arab Middle East. For the West, learning new lessons will need to be accompanied with the *unlearning* of old ones.

This is not an easy task. *Un*learning is known to be harder and more challenging than learning, simply because what is to be *un*learned may/does erect a barrier against the penetration of the new learning. Teaching new tricks to an old dog is never easy. At the beginning cognitive infiltration from an emerging horizon is the best we can hope for in the
new order. This process needs to be managed carefully to bring about a break with the bad, old past. The new relationship with the Arab world will need to be based on the principle of ‘actions speak louder than words’ rather than its opposite which has ruled supreme for a long time.

The NATO intervention in Libya has, in my opinion, been beneficial in addressing the confidence deficit, and as a sign that the West is willing to underwrite its words with actions. Normally such action would have been met with mass demonstrations and popular condemnation in the Arab world. The fact this did not happen suggests that the West has been seen to have done the right thing on this occasion. Instead, Russia and China have lost a lot of credibility because of their pro-Gadhafi stance. Their credibility has received a further blow because of the political cover and support these two countries have given to Bashar Al Asad’s regime in Syria.

As an expression of its readiness to tackle the deficit further, the West, led by the US, will at some point have to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It had better do so sooner rather than later. This conflict has been left to fester for a long time. Resolving it on a just and enduring basis will add to the moral authority of the West – that most important of sovereign credit ratings: the triple AAA rating par excellence. And it will remove from the regional sphere an emotionally charged issue that can be exploited by any disaffected party, especially the Islamists. The sense of Palestinian injustice that imbues this conflict resonates throughout the Arab Middle East and will always be a prism through which the ‘good intentions’ of the West are tested. Contrary to what President Obama seemed to say in his Speech of 19 May 2011, anti-Israeli feeling is not created by Arab rulers, the Islamists or Iran, but is the result of Israeli occupation policies and blind American political and economic support for them.

The Arab Spring and the West’s Biggest Bugbear
Another way to address the confidence deficit is to support the democratic order in the Middle East when and if it emerges and solidifies. The key issue will be whether and how to engage with democratically elected Islamists. The Islamists are treated as the West’s biggest bugbear when it comes to articulating daring new policies towards the emerging political order. Continuing this policy posture towards the Islamists may in fact prove counter-productive. The Islamists will not go away; nor should they. Wherever they surface legitimately, they must be considered as an expression of the
popular will, and the popular will must be acknowledged, respected and, if it is thought necessary, openly contested through the force of ideas. A policy of coercively excluding Islamists will give them legitimacy, the opportunity to recruit disaffected segments of the population and to act in the shadows from a position of ideological purity. That is a luxury that should not be given to them. It would be wiser to allow the Islamists – in fact to require them – to take part in the political process in the full light of day. This is an anathema to some Arab liberals of old who seem more willing to tolerate dictatorships, because they oppress the Islamists whom they hate, than to respect the will of the people as it is expressed in free and fair elections.

Political participation according to the rules of the democratic game may prove challenging to the Islamists for whom transparency is not a tool of their political trade. Political participation will expose the distance between ideological posture and practical solutions to questions such as employment, labour rights, economic growth, the provision of services, and the inevitable compromises of regional and international relations. These challenges may prove positive. Experience shows that, when embedded in the political process, Islamists can turn into pragmatists who cut deals across ideological lines in ways that would not be entertained when they are excluded. The Islamists also know that anti-Western policies can be self-harming if they cause aid and foreign investment to be stopped in a way that threatens their position locally. The success of Islamists in Turkey has also offered the Muslim constituencies in the Arab world an alternative model to violent extremism.

In fact, events on the ground may render “Islamism” itself an overly blunt and broad category, as the requirements of deal-making and coalition-building blur the borders of ideological purity. Already, Islamism covers a multitude of opposed political visions and interests: the Muslim Brotherhood opposes Al Qaeda and the Salafis, and it has little tolerance for Shia inspired Islamic parties or movements, such as Hizbullah in Lebanon or the Shia in Bahrain. These feelings of antipathy, distrust and open hostility, sometimes, are reciprocated in equal measure by other Islamist groups.

For some, Islamists are those who may at any moment “revert to type” and exploit the electoral process irreversibly to their advantage. These fears are
summed up in the expression “One man, One vote, One time”. One solution is to build a system of government based on proportional representation rather than majoritarian rule. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has proposed this formula for Egypt. But this may not work as Scotland with its majority Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) that is calling for independence has shown.

We do not yet know how Islamists of different types will position themselves on these issues or what kinds of Islamism will prevail. If those interested in modelling were to advise on the calculus of political probabilities, they would doubtless say that it cannot be done. Any attempt to envisage different scenarios will reveal only the limits of our own imaginations. We are painfully aware of our own limitations in the wake of an event that asks us to make a “cognitive turn” in our understanding of what Arabs aspire to and expect, and what kind of political agency they can wield.

And so we are left with uncertainty, excitement, volatility, fear and hope. Even as the Arab Spring continues to unfold, it has taught us that we need to take cultural expressions seriously as an agent and medium of political change. As scholars, we need to take the Arab Spring seriously as a location of broadly human aspirations. Western governments and policy-makers need to continue to address the damaging confidence deficit that the old political calculus had built up. For all of us, but especially for Western and US thinking, this will require a cognitive turn in the way we think about the Middle East. The cognitive turn involves recognising that when the West acts in accordance with its declared values of freedom and democracy, as it has done in Libya, it gains respect. Or, at least, it avoids the blame it, rightly or wrongly, usually receives. But when the US continues to support Israeli occupation, that credibility is at risk. This is a historic moment. Will the US make a full cognitive turn? Or will it only perform a few cognitive twists? I am not sure, but I am not hopeful.

The Arab Middle East also has a responsibility to protect and nurture its hard-won freedoms wherever these have been secured. The Arabs need to do this not because it matters to the West to do so, but because – as the man with the placard declared – the price of freedom is known only to those who know the value of their own blood.
Acknowledgements
This paper is a modified version of a guest lecture on the Arab Spring the author delivered at the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) on 2nd, December 2011. The author wishes to thank the President of RSE and members of the audience for their comments which helped shape this version of the paper. I have kept the arguments of the paper as delivered in the lecture with little modification to take account of recent developments. The oral tone of the paper has been preserved for immediacy and engagement.

References

Shifting Sands: Australia’s relations with East Asia

Can a Western nation living in the region of East Asia adjust to new global realities?

TONY STEVENSON

By convention, the world is divided into West and East, around the meridian, an imaginary line of longitude running north-south through Greenwich, England. John M. Hobson (2004, 7) argues that the notion of West and East was forced upon the world by a European, ethnocentric imagination that has divided the globe into two radically opposed camps. The West is seen to be superior to the East whose imagined values are set up as the antithesis of rational Western values.

Australia is an example of the arbitrary nature of this scheme. The nation, affectionately called Oz, in a wisp of phonetic wit, has experienced an ethnically varied pattern of human settlement which has led to a cultural mélange. Not infrequently, Australia’s foreign policy has been influenced by European notions of the East as a darker side of the West. Australia also demonstrates the global reach of politics and economics where the very idea of a world divided into two blocs is seems totally irrelevant.

According to recorded history, the first people to occupy this southern island-continent, and the smaller island-state below it, Tasmania, were indigenous Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders. Aboriginal
Australians are thought to have had ethnic connections to the south of the Indian subcontinent – in the global East. And the Islanders, off the north-east of coast of Australia, had links with Melanesia and Papua New Guinea, also from the global East.

There are signs that Australia was visited by adventurers from the Netherlands and China before the arrival, in 1788, of the British *First Fleet*. Commanded by Captain (later Admiral) Arthur Phillip, the eleven ships were sent by the government of Great Britain to establish a colony in what is now Australia. A total of 1,044 people were on board, including civil officials, Royal Mariners and their families, and 696 convicts. The latter gave rise to the larrkin ribbing that today’s Caucasian Australians (Aussies) are descendants of criminals – although some convicts were accused of misdemeanours such as stealing a loaf of bread, and accordingly transported to the antipodes. This mixed salad of humanity set up camp at Sydney Cove which has grown into Australia’s biggest metropolis.

Britain had laid claim to what is now Australia when seaman Captain James Cook landed on the continent’s east coast in 1770 and annexed the land on behalf of the British Crown. The indigenous Australians, of what actually may be the East, given its longitude, were subdued by the British settlers - some would call them invaders - from the West. Indigenous communities were run off their tribal land, slaughtered and infected by exotic diseases. The contemporary Australia has an even richer mosaic of people who can trace their ancestry to many nationalities and ethnicities – from the East and the West. The total Australian population at the census in 2011 was 22.5 million, up 8.3 percent from 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a).

Of these, almost 5.3 million were born overseas. One in four came from the United Kingdom. New Zealand accounted for 9 percent, followed by China, 6 percent. Between 2006 and 2011, the single biggest source of new arrivals was India, at 13 percent, one percentage point ahead of the United Kingdom (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b). While most of the population speak the official language – English - but about 20 percent of the population speak a language other than English at home. There have been scores of inter-related Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, the vast majority of which have disappeared, mainly as a result of government assimilation policies (Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association, 2012).
Assimilation, rather than integration, had been intended to breed out any traces of black skin, along with Aboriginal culture. Some estimates suggest that more than 260 languages are now spoken in contemporary Australia, including indigenous languages. And Australians now identify with 270 ancestries while observing a wide variety of cultural and religious traditions.

There is another surprising connection. Recent DNA testing has identified similarities between the black-skinned Aboriginal Australians and the indigenous Ainu, whose biggest remnant population now lives on Japan’s large northern island of Hokkaido (“Ainu”). There is a smaller group in Tokyo. The Ainu are thought to have migrated to Japan from the Indian subcontinent via India, China and eastern Russia. Aborigines crossed to Australia, perhaps across an early land bridge, from the south of the Indian subcontinent and the Andaman Islands. Thus, it seems, the indigenes of Australia and of Japan may have shared a bloodline back to antiquity.

As the world’s 18th biggest economy, and a stable democracy, Australia enjoys a relatively affluent, Western lifestyle, at least for those people who are well educated and are employed. There is the inevitable eastern influence on its culture, mostly notable in the eating habits. What once was the cooking of English, Scottish and Irish influence, such as sausages and mashed potatoes with gravy, has been replaced by exotic cuisines influenced by Eastern parts of the world: the fare of Thai and Vietnamese restaurants, as well as from the older and ubiquitous Chinese and Greek ‘cafes’. All of which raise the question: how much of the East is now an integral part of Australia?

East Asian neighbourhood
Countries in this sector enjoy the advantage of sharing a generally similar time zone. There is barely more than two hours’ difference from east to west, and this can be convenient for business. Six of Australia’s ten leading partners in two-way trade are in East Asia: China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia. (The four exceptions are the U.S., U. K., New Zealand and India.) Over one-third of Australia’s exports and imports in goods and services are between China, Japan and the Republic of Korea.

The strong trade ties between Australia and Japan have a history that goes well beyond a bitter wartime enmity. When I was a child, I was rudely made
aware of my location in the longitudinal region of East Asia. Our family stuck brown paper on the window panes of our houses to black out possible targets, in case Japanese war-planes flew over at night. My father, with neighbours, dug an air-raid trench in our backyard. At my primary school there were more trenches. We regularly had air-raid drill and wore dog tags on our wrists for identification. We practiced evacuation from the school buildings to the trenches with wooden clothes pegs between our teeth to dull the shock, in the event of exploding bombs.

I lived in Toowoomba, a provincial city about 100km north-west of metropolitan Brisbane, and just above the Brisbane Line. This was an imaginary southern boundary to the northern part of Australia which certain politicians had been prepared to concede to the Japanese in the Pacific War. In February 1942, the Japanese bombed Darwin, and Broome a few weeks later, to prevent the Allies from using these northern coastal towns as bases for a Western invasion of the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia. Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942, when they defeated the British. By mid-1942, the Japanese had landed in the north of New Guinea, Australia’s nearest neighbour.

American General Douglas MacArthur, the Allied commander of the south-west Pacific, moved his headquarters to Brisbane in mid-1942. A year later, the Americans had 100,000 troops stationed in and near the city. There were also troops from the Netherlands and the Philippines. Schools and private homes were turned over to military use. The University of Queensland became military headquarters. Concrete and sand-bagged boxes changed the face of Brisbane.

Japan surrendered in September 1945. At his trial for war crimes, Japan’s prime minister, Hideki Tojo, said he had not intended to invade Australia, just to air-raid the north; he felt the Japanese were already overextended (Gill, 1957). Instead, he set out to isolate Australia, forcing it to submit by cutting its lines of communication with the U.S. (Frei, 1991 Japan’s policy had been to eradicate the British colonies at Hong Kong and in the Malay peninsula. According to Tojo, these were ‘evil bases used against East Asia’, and he wanted to turn them into strongholds for the defence of Greater East Asia (Goto & Kratoska, 2003).
The Japanese cabinet had established the Ministry of Greater Asia to administer overseas territories conquered by Japan during the Pacific War and to oversee the Greater East Asia Prosperity Sphere. It had grand plans to dominate East Asia. But Japan lost the Pacific War. Curiously, Japan then fuelled much of its post-war development using coal and iron ore imported from Australia. And Australia had become a big buyer of cars and whitegoods made in post-war Japan, as well as an important host to Japanese tour groups in the late 1980s and during the 1990s. An important Australian tourist destination, the Gold Coast, had street names in Japanese during the late 1980s and the 1990s.

By the early 1990s, Japan’s ‘economic miracle’ had turned to psychological shock when the ‘bubble’ burst. (There is similar national shock today, following earthquakes and a devastating tsunami.) There is no shooting war today. But there is heated disagreement with Australia which firmly opposes Japan’s whaling, although it is claimed to be for scientific research. The by-product is advertised for sale as whale meat in some restaurants in Japan. As the Japanese economy shrank Australia (at an annual rate of 1.1 percent in the last three months of 2010 alone), Australia turned to the new rising economy of the East: China. Since 2009, China has been the most important trading partner of Australia, in terms of both exports and imports. China’s is hungry for coal and iron ore to fuel its development, and it also must secure its future sources of food. Australia is rich in these natural resources and agricultural land. Not surprisingly, there have been numerous joint projects. Aluminum Corp. of China (Chinalco), in which the Chinese government is a majority shareholder, owns a 12 percent share in the Australian miner, Rio Tinto. They have a joint venture to mine copper on the Chinese mainland and are also partners to develop an iron ore prospect in Guinea. As conventional fields of natural gas are depleted, Chinese and Australian interests are contemplating the exploitation of coal seam gas, methane absorbed on to coal (Day, 2009). China is also eyeing prime agricultural land in Australia; and there are plans to invest in 100,000 hectares, with an estimated investment of up to A$560 billion by 2015 (Cranston, 2012).

But China’s interest in top quality farmland has generated strong feelings of resentment in Australian public opinion. A recent poll by the Lowy Institute for International Policy, an Australian think tank, finds that four
in five Australians are against the Australian government allowing foreign companies to buy Australian farmland to grow crops or farm livestock (The Lowy Institute, 2012). This is an echo of similar sentiments expressed during the 1980s about Japan’s purchases of prime residential land, particularly in the state of Queensland.

There is a different opinion in the business world. Duncan Calder, President of the Australia China Business Council in Western Australia, said recently that if Australia didn’t change its attitude to Chinese investment, its agricultural resource sectors would end up losing significant industry growth opportunities to other countries. A debate was needed about what Australia really wanted from China and what exactly was acceptable in terms of Chinese investment in Australia. Calder believes Australia must become more proactive and approach China with investment ideas, so the investments were done on Australian terms, with benefits for both countries. If Australia continues to send mixed messages to China, it would miss out on its slice of the Chinese investment pie (Varischetti, 2012).

But developing a long and lasting relationship with China requires Australia to perform a balancing act. The situation with Japan was simpler. Australia is developing new relations with China at the same time that its long-term strategic partner, the US, has been playing cat-and-mouse games with China. As former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger (2012) warned in an article in Foreign Affairs, as cooperation between the US and China has increased, so too has controversy. ‘Significant groups in both countries claim that a contest for supremacy between China and the US is inevitable and perhaps already under way’ (Kissinger 2012). Both have ships and submarines in the South China Sea, a cause for concern for the Australian military.

Australia’s political relationship with China is far less developed than its economic relationship. China is not merely an economic power but also a crucial political and security actor in the region. Underdeveloped political and strategic relations between Canberra and Beijing would not only weaken Australia’s ability to exert regional influence, there is also the risk of Chinese leaders viewing Australia merely as a provider of resources. Too close a relationship with the US also has its consequences. When Australia agreed to a base for US marines in its Northern Territory, it risked being
seen as a junior partner of the US (Jakobson 2012). Moreover, there is a danger that problems in the bilateral relationship will escalate into a crisis owing to the lack of familiarity and political trust between key Australian and Chinese decision-makers.

There is clear need for Australia to develop meaningful political and strategic ties with China and build political trust between the two countries. It has been suggested that there should be structured annual dialogue, at least at ministerial level, on political and defence matters, as well as economic. Australia must be careful to avoid political rhetoric about uncertainties on how China will use its power (Jakobson 2012). As Former Lieutenant General Peter Leahy (2012), now heading the national security institute at the University of Canberra in Australia, point out, clashes in the South China Sea are the kind of problem the US might more aptly sort out with Asian allies such as South Korea and Japan, rather than Australia (Leahy 2012).

There is already a top secret ‘Joint Defence Space Research Facility’ at Pine Gap outside Alice Springs, described as a ground control and processing station for satellites and signals intelligence. It has expanded considerably since it was established in 1966. And U.S. troops train every year with Australian forces at Shoalwater Bay on the Australian East Coast.

For older Australians, it is tempting to recall anti-Asian sentiment during the Pacific War when conservatives enthusiastically backed the presence of American troops as helping to ward off the ‘Yellow Peril’ descending on Australia from Japan. In similar vein, before the war, there was criticism from the Australian left, of ‘Pig Iron’ Bob, a relatively conservative prime minister, (later Sir) Robert Menzies, for selling pig iron to the Japanese, because it would be made into weapons against China, fast becoming communist, and later against Australians in the Pacific War. There proceeded a cynical irony when the Japanese were defeated, only to return in the post-war years to take over Australia by economic rather than military means. Japanese corporations, during the term of the ‘economic miracle’ had a presence as purveyors of whitegoods and cars, and as owners, fully or in part, of Australian industries, from electronics to mining.

There are also legal and cultural antecedents to anti-Asian feeling. The
'White Australia' policy, had its origins back in the mid-19th century, when colonial governments in pre-federation Australia restricted Chinese immigration. This was a response to violence between resentful white miners and hard-working Chinese on Australian goldfields. The policy would describe Australia’s approach to immigration from the federation of the Australian states in 1901; it favoured applicants from certain preferred countries. A notable tool for administering the policy was a written test, often conducted in a language nominated by an immigration officer and unfamiliar to the applicant.

The policy was eased out over about 25 years. In that time, a conservative immigration minister, Harold Holt, allowed 800 non-European refugees and Japanese war brides to remain in Australia. In 1973, a Labor government under its prime minister, Gough Whitlam finally removed race as a factor in Australian immigration policies. (Department of Immigration & Citizenship, 2010).

When he was still leader of the opposition, Whitlam led a Labor Party delegation to China early in July, 1971. During this politically controversial visit, he had a two-hour midnight meeting with the Chinese premier, Zhou Enlai. They talked about Australia’s security alliance with the US and its role in the Vietnam War. Whitlam explained how the ANZUS Pact was a security treaty between Australia, New Zealand, and the US, for providing mutual aid in the event of aggression and for settling disputes by peaceful means, it was ‘entirely defensive’ and that Labor supported the withdrawal of Australian and US troops from Vietnam. Zhou said he would welcome back Whitlam when he was prime minister (Switzer, 2011).

Whitlam’s visit was a landmark for a Western political leader; China had virtually been closed to the West since it turned communist under Chairman Mao Zedong in 1949. Three days after this short diplomatic rapprochement with ‘Red China’, Henry Kissinger, national security adviser to US President, Richard Nixon, led a secret mission to Beijing to pave the way for a presidential visit the following year. Whitlam and Nixon helped Canberra and Washington to normalise relations with the People’s Republic of China.

A little over a year after his bold visit to ‘Red China’, Whitlam defeated the
conservative Liberal-National Party government that had been in office continuously for 23 years. On 5 December 1972, three days after winning the federal election, Whitlam ended conscription, released draft resisters from jail and dropped pending prosecutions. Against American policy, he established relations with Hanoi and retained recognition of the government of South Vietnam. Aid was sent for reconstruction, although it was suspended for a while during the war between Cambodia and Vietnam. Australia’s last troops left Vietnam in March 1973. When North Vietnam took over the South, Australia agreed to resettle a share of refugees. Later Vietnamese entered Australia as immigrants. Their visibility, especially in the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta, now jokingly called Vietnamatta, helped swell the number of Asian faces seen on Australia streets.

Suspicions of the Other

The official policy was to welcome people from diverse backgrounds, but it used to be mainly people of Britain and continental Europe. This has changed somewhat and one can witness Sudanese, Iranians, Indians and other non-European nationalities on the streets, particularly in the two big cities of Sydney and Melbourne. But not every white Australian is happy with this; and there have been protests against immigrants from Asia and elsewhere.

The bigotry of among a significant slice of the white population was brought to the surface during September 2001. Australia had its own shock event when the twin towers in Manhattan were under attack. A Norwegian freighter, M.V. Tampa, rescued 438 Afghans from a distressed 20-metre wooden fishing boat in international waters between Indonesia and Australia. The Tampa requested to enter Australian water. The then conservative prime minister, John Howard, seeing an opportunity to gain political mileage for a forthcoming general election, refused permission. When the Tampa entered Australian waters. Howard ordered Australian special forces to board the ship. A few days later, legislation for border protection was introduced in the Australian parliament. It affirmed Australia’s sovereignty to decide who will enter Australia. When the legislation had trouble passing the Senate, Howard excised Christmas Island and many other coastal islands, from Australia’s immigration zone, where asylum seekers could not apply for refugee status. Howard introduced a policy, the ‘Pacific Solution’, which sought to process asylum seekers for refugee status offshore, on the island nation of Nauru, instead
of on the Australian mainland. This affair tarnished the international reputation of Australia. Norway alleged that Australia had failed to meet its obligations under international law to help marines in distress.

Then, just before the October 2011 election, a wooden boat, officially designated SIEV 4 (Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicle), with 223 asylum seekers, and heading south, was intercepted by an Australian naval ship, 190 km north of Christmas Island, and sunk. Australia’s immigration minister, Philip Ruddock, announced that passengers had threatened to throw children overboard as a defensive tactic. This turned out to be a lie. The Howard government was re-elected with an increased majority. The morality and compassion of that government, and almost certainly many voters, had to be severely questioned.

A wave of boats followed, arriving at Christmas Island, Australian territory 2000 km off the north-east mainland and about 500 km south of Indonesia. Hundreds of people were packed like sardines on board unseaworthy vessels, perhaps having paid dearly to people smugglers for their journey. A smug Howard crowed, ‘we will decide who comes to Australia’.

Howard supporters in the conservative benches of parliament, now in opposition, had new political ammunition in mid-2012. With the arrival of the dry season, a new wave of asylum seekers, estimated at 10,000 or more, had reached Indonesia. But the Indonesian government was impatient with its country being used as a waiting room. It wanted Australia to accept more asylum seekers. These were mainly Muslims, fleeing trouble spots in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. The Australian Labor Government arranged to have them sent to Malaysia for processing, rather than in Australia.

Indonesia is an important neighbour of Australia; both share the same region, but have very different cultures. The tropical island of Bali is a favourite destination for Australian tourists and big waves at numerous Indonesian beaches attract Aussie surfers. So does the food. But Australians see Indonesia through a kaleidoscope of negative images: Islamic, terrorist, people smugglers, dreadful tsunamis, violence in East Timor, brutal abattoirs, and Australians on drug charges. The imprisonment of Australian tourists on narcotic charges, such as Schapelle Corby, somehow tells the whole story of Indonesia. Yet, Australians have overlooked the big story:
Indonesia’s economy is growing so strongly that, according to Citibank, it will be the fourth largest in the world by 2040. As Peter Drysdale asks in *East Asian Forum*: ‘can Australia handle having a stronger, richer neighbour?’ (Drysdale, 2012).

The reality of postnormal times, where power is rapidly shifting to the East, has not dawned on Australia. It faces a steep learning curve to adjust to a swiftly changing global environment. It has to learn to coexist with two behemoths to its north, China and Indonesia, plus Japan. Then there is India, across the Indian Ocean to its west. This will be very different from adjusting to Japan during its post-war heyday. China, Japan, Indonesia and India had a combined GDP last year of US$15.63 trillion, more than that of the US, and over ten times greater than that of Australia. The combine population of China, Japan, Indonesia and India is around 2.897 million, compared with Australia’s population of almost 22 million. This is a factor of just over 131 to 1. And this excludes countries, such as the Philippines and South Korea. In the regions of South and East Asia, it is not hard to see where the population vacuum lies. Australia has reached a point in history when, for the first time since Britain’s King George III (1760 to 1801), it finds itself in a totally transformed world.

Meanwhile, the world watches as Australia’s politicians squabble about how to manage the arrival of boats carrying asylum seekers to its shores. Why is it that people fleeing a less comfortable lifestyle than enjoyed by most Australians, cannot have their applications for refugee status processed on the Australian mainland? A nation that takes pride in its cricketing prowess should know: that’s not cricket!

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Mineral deposits, worth over three trillion US dollars, were discovered in Afghanistan in 2010. The discovery, it has been claimed, can ‘fundamentally alter the Afghan economy’. It is seen as a first glimmer of hope for a country ravaged by war and internal strife for over thirty years – since the Soviet invasion in December 1979. But concerns have also been raised: given the track record of various Afghan administrations, the probability that the benefits of mineral deposits would be squandered is alarming high.

If we were to look back from a few decades in the future what would we see? What possible course can Afghanistan take to use the wealth generated by mineral extraction to improve the lives of its citizens? What could go wrong? A workshop on the Futures of Mining in Islamabad, held on 22 February to 5th March 2010, was asked to reflect on these questions. It consisted of people from various walks of life as well as experts in mining, geology and earth science.

The workshop produced three scenarios that explored different ways the future may unfold. The Alpha Scenario, representing the zone of
conventional expectation, is presented in the form of a speech by a fictional senior member of the Afghan Planning Commission, who recounts how the events unfolded in the aftermath of discovery of minerals deposits. The Beta Scenario is presented as a bleak magazine report summarizing the state of events and the factors which brought about the shambolic state of affairs in 2039. Finally, the Delta Scenario, which focuses on high aspiration, is imagined as a TV talk show with relevant stakeholders discussing the then-current-situation of mining in Afghanistan and the changes that have taken place between 2011 and 2039.

**Alpha Scenario: conventional expectations**

Sahibzada Zahid Khan, Keynote Speech, ‘Lessons from a Rentier State’ to the Tenth Developing Countries Economic Congress, Doha, Qatar 21 January, 2040

Looking at this audience I see many young people who think it strange that I am going to talk about a phenomenon considered taboo among economists. The ‘paradox of abundance’, rentier mentality or simply the ‘resource curse’, as it has been variously described, may not be your first choice as a development strategy. But at the beginning of this millennium, there was scarcely any other option for Afghanistan. We are talking about a land-locked country with a meager agriculture base, geologically positioned at the crux of two aspiring superpowers and a former one, in the middle of a religious and ideological war, and with two generations of war weary citizens with limited skills, most of whom had spent their entire lives in refugee camps or dodging bullets, that was heavily dependent on aid and alms for its survival. The option of resource based development was perhaps a gift of nature and a last ditch hope for those who had forgotten hope and harmony. There were voices as there are now, about sustainability, about foreign intervention, about another generation to serve as cannon fodder. But we Afghans took up the challenge.

Right at the beginning, we realized that good governance was the most important condition for general prosperity in Afghanistan. If we were to bring peace in our land, bringing the Taliban into the frame was also important. Multinational corporations also needed to be reined and foreign interference had to be minimized. We had to learn from our history and
avoid a string of possible mistakes. It has not been an easy ride nor have the last thirty years of Afghanistan been textbook models for future generations. But what we have to offer is that with political will and determination, and some original thinking, we could provide hope for our citizens.

It is well documented in economic history that resource rents gradually erode checks and balances and frequently lead to autocracy. These were the pitfalls we had to avoid and to make sure that undermining of accountability did not take place. Thirty years later we have jumped up 108 positions in the Transparency indexes. But back then we were placed at 180. So there is still a long way to go. Contrary to economic convention, the government had to play “Big Daddy” instead of allowing or even promoting the development of market forces. But I assure you there was a good reason for this; the boat had to be rowed instead of just steering at the rudder. Today Afghanistan cannot be described as a ‘business friendly’ country. But we hope that with a diversification towards manufacturing and openness, the situation will change.

We could have allowed foreign powers to do as they wish. But with the will of the people and democratic governments that we were able to stand firm and say: in our land, it’s our way. This was also the time of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, resulting in a radical re-think on the conventional route to globalization. I have mixed views on the developing countries’ economic bloc, which resulted in the aftermath of tumultuous years of 2011 and 2012. There has been some isolation from the developed world, but it has also strengthened national identity and focused our attention on development planning and governance, which was the need-of-the-hour for us. It was also a catalyst in cementing our relationships with specific countries and promoting intensive regional co-operation in exploration and exploitation of minerals, especially with China and India. Not surprisingly, the former superpowers were not too happy with this and we have had an uneasy relationship with them since then.

The Taliban were an integral part of any future that we could envisage. And it was important that they be politically engaged. The 5th Loya Jirga was successful in convincing all parties that no Afghan would point a weapon at another Afghan as long as foreign powers did not interfere with our internal matters. While there have been occasional skirmishes and flashes
of violence, overall there is a conscious effort not to drag our children in the warfare that has tormented us for so long. In a country where tradition and modernity exist in separate blocs, it has not all been easy to bring all sides to the negotiating table. But we learned lesson from countries like Malaysia and Turkey; and have managed to gel the traditional with the modern. This strategic dialogue has also helped us to successfully fight the drug economy. The Taliban have been traditionally intolerant of drug cultivation and with their grass roots connections have brought benefits of mining to the underserved segments of society through artisanal mining practices. Again, it was investments in assets, instead of relying on foreign credit, in compliance with Shariah law that enable Afghanistan to escape unscathed from the Global Economic Crisis of 2028.

Providing employment to the masses was going to be critical. We had a very young and war weary generation to attend to. As a land-locked country, we had to think outside the box: The gray-haired amongst you might actually recall a slogan of the 2010’s, ‘Japan is where the Japanese are’. That was a brainchild of our planning department to convince the Japanese government that instead of investing hundreds of billions of dollars in rehabilitating earthquake victims, a smarter and truly globalized step would be to relocate the vulnerable population to Afghanistan. That was one of many ideas that we tried, some failed, some succeeded. Among the ones which worked were the mobilization and brain-renting programs, which aimed to lure expatriates back to the motherland. We also reined in mining corporations to create the necessary jobs. Also rather than hand out permanent subsidies from the mineral revenues to the underserved, we took the more sensible route by investing in infrastructure, education, and overall productive capacity. Early on, we also established a Mineral Development Fund intended to benefit future generations; about half the yearly surplus of the fund goes into the Afghan national budget. And by the way, not a single cent of that fund goes into buying weapons, and there is an Audit Committee comprised of Nobel Laureates and the Taliban, which oversees this. So we can safely state that we are leaving our future generations in a better shape than the one we inherited.

A talk on resources cannot be complete without commenting on the role of multinational corporations. Our approach has been to become equal partners with corporations, with the emphasis on strengthening local
capabilities. We must admit it has bred some corruption, albeit at a much mellow state than it was 30 years ago. As equal partners, we have worked hard not to let mining corporations run amok – and the power of global civil society and new technology has assisted us greatly in this endeavor. The Mineral Signature program, which uses civil society and social networking to report malpractices, has been invaluable in keeping multinational workings in Afghanistan under control. Mineral companies have reputations to safeguard; the accumulated effects of millions of civil society activists texting, tweeting, blogging, broadcasting, all over the globe, unethical corporate behavior in Kabul has proved to be a good safeguard. The corporations have been persuaded to adhere to international standards for resource extraction. The Domino effect has been that revenues from mining have been directed towards effective development.

I would also like to add a word about civil society organizations and NGO’s who have both played a crucial part in raising public awareness on the duties, responsibilities and accountability of institutions, both international and local. A large part of that success lies in the strategy of convincing our donors that instead of simple handouts, which landed back in donor countries-of-origin, support should be directed towards specific areas such as rural development, building schools and universities, and improving organizational systems. We also insisted that donors commit themselves to periods exceeding ten years, not just the first few photo-op years. Unfortunately, one area where the government and NGO’s have failed is related to environmental sustainability. In our pursuit of development, we lost sight of green issues and ignored protecting local environments from the effects of extractive activities. And sadly, there is a general sense of public acceptance that this is the price of development and prosperity. However, the shift from mineral extraction to manufacturing might actually trigger the changes in the right places and in the perception of people towards environmental issues. Both the government and the civil societies have a role to play and how well we adapt to managing our environment is very much open to question. I believe there are going to be painful choices ahead and I can foresee social unrest as a result.

There is still a long way to go. The globalized world offers more opportunities than the developing country economic bloc, where we are concentrated right now. The challenge we face is how to balance growth
with our environmental and social responsibility. It is a gargantuan task. But it is the way forward.

Thank you for your patience

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**Beta Scenario: growing desperation**

Kabul: June 16th, 2039

*How Mining Destroyed Afghanistan*

by Alexander Merwe and Zhilo Tharanga

The liberation of Afghanistan and the subsequent discovery of minerals (an estimated $3 trillion in 2010), at the start of the 21st century, heralded the beginning of a new era of prosperity. There was much hope that lives of ordinary Afghans will be improved manifold, enabling them to live beyond a subsistence level. There were voices of concerns too. Thirty years on, the pessimists have proved right. Afghanistan has sunk to lower depths. While globally per capita income increased by 27 percent in the last thirty years, per capita income in Afghanistan has declined by almost 41 percent. The country is divided with more than 68 armed militias fighting for influence; there is hardly any family that has not been affected by the conflict.

The irony of it all is that Afghanistan reached peak mineral status four years ago in 2035. Only time will tell if there is a final twist to this tale.

Corruption was already rampant in the government at the time of discovery of huge veins of iron, copper, cobalt, gold and critical industrial metals like lithium. Amplified by the new wealth, corruption took a new turn with a handful of well-connected oligarchs, with personal ties to top government officials, gaining control of the resources. This small group of oligarchs became obscenely wealthy while life for the vast majority of citizens took a turn for the worst. Corruption caused dramatic losses of revenue, with roughly $2 billion of mineral revenue disappearing from the Afghan state's accounts in 2020 alone. More than three-quarters of the Afghan population now lives on less than a dollar a day.

That resource-rich societies are more likely to be autocracies, with regimes
that do not respect human rights and oppose change, has been well documented. Afghanistan has followed this well-trodden path. With Western-backed puppets holding on to power through doctored elections, successive governments did little more than clinging to power. Embroiled in armed conflicts, they had little ability or motivation to deliver basic necessities to their citizens. There has been no investment in much needed areas such as education, health or infrastructure. The bulk of the national budget is devoted to the purchase of weapons and goes direct to the military.

With friends like these, who needs enemies?

It could have been otherwise if foreign, resource hungry countries, involved in Afghanistan, had taken a more enlightened approach to the country’s problems. Much of the aid delivered to Afghanistan has come with specific conditions designed to benefit the donor rather than the recipient. The ‘friendly’ aid agencies and donors have demanded that 80 percent of grants and loans must be used to buy goods and services from the country-of-origin of the donor agency. There have also been unrealistic demands on ‘reform’. Reform, even in the best of circumstances, is always politically difficult. Even the governments that genuinely wanted reform were forced into opposing some of the reforms urged on them by the donors. The genuine reformers have been sidelined; and the quick fixes, that seldom work, have become the norm.

On the whole, foreign donors and international funding bodies have preferred to work with Western and westernized NGOs that have no cultural ties to Afghanistan and no sense of connection with ground realities. A 2014 audit of NATO-AID, which doled millions of Euros into Afghanistan in the name of female empowerment, lamented that most of the money was used to hire Western consultants, host chat shows and conferences and in preparing Afghan women for global beauty pageants. No wonder it only raged the local population, adding further fuel to suspicion and resentment around the role of NGOs in Afghanistan. Local organizations working for change have been starved of funds and systematically marginalized. Mining and drug abuse usually go hand in hand and their affiliation with sleaze has long been acknowledged in the extractive industry. Miners, isolated from families, are fertile candidates of HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD). The mineral belts in Afghanistan have the highest concentration of STD’s in any mining area of the world.
with every one in three miners a carrier of STD. Given their suspicion to contraception and other preventive measures, STD’s are set to rise dramatically. The lack of funding for grass roots civil organizations and foreign intervention has hit the Afghan people literally below the belt.

**Role of the deep diggers**
Most of the mining companies attracted to Afghanistan were unconcerned about poor governance and had no interest in helping the local population. They provided unconditional support to autocratic regimes as long as their mining interests were protected. The corporations even imported the work force en masse, leaving Afghan workers to undertake the most menial and unskilled jobs. This at a time when Afghan unemployment rate was estimated at up to 35 percent, mostly concentrated among youth.

To find a suitable parallel in history, we have to look at the British East India Company, which wrought similar havoc to the Indian sub-continent during the eighteenth and nineteenth century

With hardly any good news coming out of Afghanistan, the world turned a deaf ear to murmurs of catastrophic pollution of water resources, lost agricultural productivity and damaged ecosystems. It really didn't matter to families huddled around their dinner tables listening to the 9 o’clock news, if the most recently conflict in Afghanistan was due to extremists or due to displacement of indigenous peoples by mining companies. And with no checks-and balances in their activities, the mining corporations worked relentlessly to increase their gains, with serious consequences for the local populations and their environment.

**Greasing the engines of war**
Four successive generations have been used as cannon fodder in Afghanistan. The country was already a war zone when the NATO forces arrived in the wake of 9/11. Some 39 years later, foreign troops have come and gone, numerous commitments made to peace, but not much has changed on ground. Since 2010 when minerals were first discovered, according to estimates, roughly 9 million lives, mostly young people, have been lost to conflict. ‘War is a permanent condition here’, says Shamroz Khan, a trader in Kabul. Tears flow in his eyes as he recounts how two of his young boys fell fighting a proxy war. ‘Child soldiers patrol the streets of
my city. I wish they were going to school’. Perpetual and constant conflict has reduced Afghan society to ‘indifference and lethargy’, says social activist Ibrahim Moosa. Even as their political leaders betray them, no seems to be able or motivated to work for positive change. ‘This is why most of the world believes that Afghans aren’t capable of anything constructive besides slaughtering each other and begging for assistance’, says Moosa.

The Taliban are the perfect scapegoat for everything that goes wrong. When minerals were first discovered in Afghanistan, there was a murmur of hope that perhaps, mineral wealth could usher Afghanistan to a new age and a strategic dialogue with the Taliban. Fate it seems is not without a sense of irony. In a vicious circle, the Taliban have become the perfect foil for extended presence of foreign armies in Afghanistan, there to guard foreign mining interests in the region. In many urban areas, mining corporations pay a hefty tax to local Taliban commanders for a safe haven for mining and safe transportation of raw materials and workers. Coming around a full 360 degrees, a large part of the mining revenue is utilized in maintaining armies and updating weapons, to fight the Taliban.

The End is nigh …or is it?
The final sting in the tail: the achievement of peak mineral status about four years ago. In mining jargon, peak minerals is a symbolic marker of a continuing transition from cheap and easy mineral recovery (with high ore grades, simple ores and low mine waste) to complex and expensive extraction (because of diminishing average ore grades, deeper mines, complex ores and larger mine waste). When the history of mining is written, experts will gasp at the rampage of exploitation that occurred in Afghanistan. The initial evaluation of mineral reserves in 2010 was at least 120 years, at the then-current rate of use. As a rule of thumb, when use of a resource grows at 5 percent per year, the rate of use usually doubles in fourteen years. Buoyed by an expanding consumer base, a shambolic system of checks and balances and no tree-huggers to agitate in their countries of origin, the mining corporations accelerated mineral extraction in the past two decades beyond all historical rates. To be more specific, what was supposed to last for 120 years will now disappear in less than thirty years.

With just half of the minerals to be exploited, and that also not very easy to exploit, the mining corporations have started looking elsewhere. Foreign
troops are also signaling an end to their occupation. In a few years, when the mining corporations have packed their bags and foreigners find nothing more to be exploited, the Afghans might finally be forced to make peace with themselves.

Sometimes you have to hit rock bottom to begin to a new ascent.

**Delta Scenario: High Aspiration**

Hello and welcome to NewzNext on the Global News Network – world news and analysis from around the globe. I’m Asad Shafiq from our Kabul studios and on tonight’s program, we drill deep into the resource extraction industry in Afghanistan. Our guests tonight are Mahid Karlai, a senior executive at the Afghan Planning Commission; Hin Chibao, recently retired CEO of the Shanghai Mining Corporation; and Ehad Barak, professor of Sociology at the National University of Kabul. We will also be joined online by Mulla Talib Jan from the Taliban National Party (TNP). Good evening to you all.

**Asad:** Mr. Mahid, let me start with you. In a statement last week, you noted that Afghanistan’s transition from a middle-developed country to a developed country would require the power of civil society and a paradigm shift away from mineral extraction sector. This comes as a surprise for many of us as mining was initially the sector which brought Afghanistan to the status of a middle-developed country in the first place. Would you like to comment on that?

**Mahid:** Thank you, Asad. Thirty years ago when I started my career with the Afghan Planning Commission, there was a general consensus that mineral extraction offered Afghanistan a ‘once-in-a-generation’ opportunity to rise from misery. We had at our disposal lessons from other resource extracting economies like Chile, Botswana, Norway and there was a conscious effort to learn and avoid mistakes. Our strategy was built around two main goals. First we were looking at multiple revenue generation by not just restricting Afghanistan to a quarry for global mineral needs. Success in maximizing revenue streams would automatically take us to the second goal: ensuring impacts from mining are balanced by equity based distribution of revenues. Looking back at the years and the turmoil that we had to go through, we were fortunate to have skilled and determined people...
to run institutions; and for once, foreign interference was minimal. The US and other powers involved realized that change in Afghanistan could only come from within. A strategic dialogue with the TNP was perhaps our bravest and biggest step forward, as Mulla Talib will testify.

Thirty years later, we have been fortunate enough to achieve middle-income status, with a reasonable social development. With 7% average annual GDP growth, the period 2010 to 2030 exceeds Afghanistan’s performance in the previous half-century. To move to the next stage of development, the logical thing to do would be to harness our resource wealth for growth. This has proved difficult, and the normal pattern has been stagnation, or rather booms and busts around a pretty flat trend. So the way forward is diversification. I think it is the appropriate time to take the bitter pill, before it is too late.

**Asad:** Let me turn now to our Shanghai Studio. Hin Chibao, you have been CEO of the Shanghai Mining Corporation, the biggest mining corporation operating in Afghanistan, for the past 30 years. What would be the new role of mining companies in light of Mr. Mahid’s analysis?

**Hin:** Asad, I would like to go back a bit in time, to properly address this question. In the beginning of this century, when China liberalized and opened itself to privatization, and more Chinese companies worked in overseas operations, we found ourselves being held strongly to account for how well we shaped up to various local regulations, some of which were quite onerous. Communities, urged by their youth, were becoming much more agile and sophisticated in harnessing the tools of technology to communicate and mobilize both locally and globally, something which was well demonstrated in uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Multinational companies also started feeling the heat and were persuaded to take their social responsibility seriously. Those with brand names had spent huge sums in building up their reputation and did not want to see their brands suffer or, as we witnessed in some cases, destroyed.

This was the background in which Chinese Mining Corporations began work in Afghanistan. Right from the beginning we have been operating with internationally accepted ethical investment standards, emphasizing engagement with local communities. As Mr Mahid will confirm we have followed a policy of transparency.
Afghanistan has achieved what it has due to its natural resources. It was a conscious policy on our part not to turn Afghanistan into a global mining warehouse. Instead we helped in establishing multiple streams of revenue through mining, through extraction, value-addition and training and though local human resource development. We also made a conscious effort not to get bogged down in local politics and affairs of the state. This has resulted in job creation and brought a modicum of prosperity to the poor of the country – and we feel proud that we were part of a team which helped Afghanistan achieve middle development status four years ago. However, limiting the role of foreign companies now would send a wrong message to the corporate world. The last three decades have witnessed many resource-rich countries successfully use their resources boost employment and produce skilled manpower in processing and manufacturing activities. We could certainly like to play a big role in this transition.

Asad: Professor Ehad Barak, as a professor of Sociology what in your view on the NGO’s and the extent to which local communities in resource-rich areas have been able to demand more social and economic benefits and protection of their local environments. How powerful has civil society become?

Ehad: The situation is better than it was, Asad. Certainly things have changed a lot during the last 25-30 years as my friends have been pointing out. The problem 30 years ago was that the civil society arena was dominated by big Western NGOs. They focused on issues that were not high on the list of priorities for the least developing countries. There was a lot of emphasis on environmental and hiring policies of mining companies, which was peripheral, when what was actually needed was pressure on their policies toward governance. If a corporation supports and prop up dictators in the least developing countries then it does not really matter to the citizens of those countries whether it pursues environmentally sound policies. It was after the successful uprisings in the Middle East, that ushered democracy in the region, that NGOs and civil society organizations started to think about solutions as well as problems. And something else happened: instead of relying on Western NGOs, our society produced a host of indigenous NGOs dedicated to working on local solutions to local problems. The last three decades have witnessed numerous successes in grassroots organizations holding extractive industries to international standards. They
have also been instrumental in raising awareness among decision makers, mining stakeholders and the general public of the actual and potential benefits of mineral resources for the Afghan economy and for the poor.

I would also like to acknowledge the role played by local NGO’s in pushing our government towards environmentally and economically sustainable policies. Thanks to their efforts, over the past two decades we have had fairer mining contracts, revenue-distribution transparency and success in minimizing the environmental footprint of mining. It is an accolade in itself that four years ago, Afghanistan was heralded as a model example of a development-aspiring country by the League of Countries.

**Asad:** Mulla Talib, what are your comments on the current situation?

**Mulla Talib:** Well, Asad, the TnP has always followed a policy of strategic partnership with the Afghan government, based on non-interference of foreign powers and home-grown solutions for local problems. As a grassroots organization, the TnP has been a strong proponent of local participation in all affairs of the state, utilizing our traditional knowledge and promoting self-reliance and self-sufficiency. It is because we have been able to secure some of our policy objectives that Afghans have ceased to be surrogates to Western powers and are now equal partners in a mutual dialogue on viable futures. This dialogue has brought much desired peace, understanding and harmony to our nation. This has also provided a modicum of economic and political power to indigenous communities and representation at state and global level. We are proud to have bought jobs to ordinary Afghans through assistance in small scale and artisanal mining. However, I completely agree with Mr. Mahid that there needs to be an end to the gravy train and we fully support our Afghan brethren in their quest. But I must also admit that we will have to find a different and an appropriate role for ourselves in the future.

**Asad:** Thank you, Mulla Talib. That’s all we have time for this evening. Stay with us for World Business News, and join us next week for another edition of NewzNext.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Abdulazeez Ahmed, Assistant Chief Scientific Officer, Raw Materials Research and Development, Council, Abuja, Nigeria; Air Cdre Salman Absar, Director R&D, and Habeel Ahmed, Head, Department of Electrical Engineering, of National University of Science & Technology (NUST), Pakistan; and Said Ghulam, Deputy Educational Adviser, Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, who participated in the Foresight workshop and contributed to the development of these scenarios.
ThE TErM sufisM (tasawwuf) rEfErs To ThE sPiriTual diMEnsion and innEr core of the world religion of islam founded by the Prophet Muhammad. The tradition practiced by islamic mystics is a religious current of devotion to the message of salvation embedded in the Qur’an and of rapture by the Divine which developed from the eighth and ninth centuries onwards. The texts of the mystic teachers contain a prescriptive utilization of the term Sufi which implies an ideal of ethical and spiritual perfection. The ethical values to which Sufis feel bound and which characterize their traditions include insights and modes of behaviour which in western overviews are categorized as expression of liberalness, desire for freedom and ‘tolerance’. In this sense a Sufi can be called a Muslim humanist. While this designation is not incorrect, it is not entirely correct either: the spectrum of Sufism is so complex that reductions of this type seldom do justice to the subject. Against this background, I will first try to explain Muslim ideas which resemble western ideas of tolerance and then to point out relevant statements in the writings of the Sufis as sources of a factual non-interference in the religious acts of those of other faiths. In their everyday religious practice, Muslims often draw on poetry which belongs to this refined philosophical and literary form of Sufism. Second, in the context
of Sufi rites, pilgrimages and ‘syncretic’ cults, I will discuss the co-existence of various groups and their traditions in sacred places – predominantly at the shrines of Muslim saints.

**Ethical Terms and Ideas of the Sufi Tradition**

In Muslim cultures, there are some terms used by mystics, theologians and thinkers both in texts and in everyday communication which in the broadest sense circumscribe non-interference and the acceptance of differences as well as acceptance of plurality. The Arabic word *tas′lmuh* means roughly forbearance and indulgence; this corresponds to the Turkish word *mısamaha*, for which the Sufi poet Yunus Emre (d. 1321) also used the expression *hoğ goermek* (‘accept everything’). In Persian, alongside *tas′lmuh* the less positive term (‘to resign oneself’, ‘to put up with’) is used. In religious contexts, in the Sufi tradition of South Asia and also Afghanistan, scholars favour the North Indian term *rawdar* (derived from Persian *raw* – ‘permitted’, ‘tolerated’); for ‘letting things happen’; in this sense Pakistani and Indian Sufis often use the expression: *apn̄a ′aq̄da chodo nahêñ, dusre k̄cho chedo nahêñ* – ‘Keep your faith and do not interfere with those of others’. This wise saying in Urdu is based on the Qur’anic verse ‘To you your religion and to me mine’ (109:6) and arose in the nineteenth century in India in the course of the controversy between the Barelvi and the Deobandi movements. Some Sufis practice *rawdar* and non-interference only during prayers in a mosque or devotion at a saint’s shrine, after which time religious differences again take effect. Other followers of the ‘religion of love’ (as Sufism is often called) refrain from emphasizing Islam’s claim to superiority and accept the religiosity of non-Muslims and even respectfully recognize that all religions teach good things. In this latter, positively interpreted sense of *rawdar* Sufis in South Asia have for centuries propagated the old folk wisdom *muhabbat sab ke liye, nafrat kis̄̄ se nahêñ* – ‘Love for all, hate for no one’ – a saying which is written for example even on Pakistani trucks. It reflects the Sufi understanding of basic equality of all *aul̄d-e adam* (‘descendants of Adam’).

**Bridges to Tolerance: Mystical Thoughts and Values in Sufi Poetry**

Sufi poetry contains many such distinct affirmations of God and human love which at the same time are the humanist foundation for the acceptance of diversity. The Andalusian Muhyi’ ud-Din Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240) who was so path breaking for the development of the Sufi tradition sees it as
comprehensive *hub al-hub*, as ‘Love of love’ (Chebel 2010 p21). The love poet Fakhr ud-Din ‘Iraqi (d. 1289) was also inspired by his mystic philosophy and in his *Lama’īt* (‘Highlights’) wrote: ‘Love is exalted above human thought, above the qualities of separation and unity’ (Schimmel 1982, p158). For him and for other Sufis ‘Love is all that exists in the world.’ (Schimmel 1985, p498). The ‘Friends of God’ (*auliyā’ Allāh*) and ‘People of the Heart’ (*ahl-e dīl*), who have shaped mystic Islam with their teachings and their exemplary conduct, have time and again emphasized the concept of love – particularly also ‘empathetic love’ (*rahmah*). Basic values and truths derived from love, such as harmony, the good will and a relaxed from staying side by side or together, set an example which to this day mark the ‘religious climate’ both in the convents of the Sufi orders and at the saints’ shrines. It is to the Sufi saint Bayezid Bastami (d. 874) who defined early Persian mysticism so remarkably that we owe the outstanding maxim: ‘He who grants the greatest leeway is the one who is closest to Allah’ (Holbein 2009, p273).

Ibn ‘Arabi was someone who depicted love of God in vivid images of earthly longing for love. His central teachings were conceptualized by commentators as *wahdat al-wujūd* – ‘Unity of being’; in this theosophical system God appears as the origin of creation manifesting even in the smallest things in the world, as a divine breath permeates all things. This monistic idea of unity of Ibn ‘Arabi was later, especially in the eastern lands of Islam, summarized in the formulaic Persian expression *hama āst* – ‘All is He’ – which has come to define popular devotional Sufi Islam in South Asia. Some verses from his ‘The Interpreter of Desires’ (*Tarjumān al-ashwāq* / poem 11) have repeatedly been quoted since then by advocates of religious tolerance:

My heart can take on any form:
[a meadow for gazelles, a cloister for monks,
for the idols, sacred ground, Ka’ba for the circling pilgrim,
the tables of the Thorah, the scrolls of the Qur’an.
I profess the religion of love; where ever its caravan turns along the way,
that is the belief, the faith I keep.]

As Annemarie Schimmel notes, ‘this seemingly so tolerant remark contains an observation about the author’s high spiritual rank: For him, the form of God is no longer the form of this or that religion excluding all others, but
rather his own eternal form which he encounters at the end of his tawhīd. Thus it is the great self-praise, recognition of an epiphany far beyond the “epiphany by the name”, but not tolerance as it is preached to the masses’ (Schimmel 1985: 384). The experience of absolute unity and the uniqueness of God (tawhīd) which all Islamic mystics speak of led Ibn ‘Arabi to be able to recognize the divine presence pantheistically in all things and beings created. This recognition of diversity is also reflected in the 99 ‘Most Beautiful Names of God’, as well as in the works of Ibn ‘Arabi’s successor ‘Abdul Karim Jili (d. between 1408 and 1417), who in his al-Insīn al-kīmil, ‘The Perfect Man’, names a wide variety of religious communities and then confesses in the context of interpreting certain verses of the Qur’an (5:48, 10:99): ‘Each of these sects reveres God, and God wishes to be revered’ (Jili 1981, p. 122). This shows that in the theosophical system of Ibn ‘Arabi the empirical reality of religious diversity ultimately corresponds to the will of God and all people practice religion in a way intended by Him. When it is stated in the Qur’an ‘There is no compulsion in faith’ (2:256), this means that non-Islamic religions should therefore be tolerated and respected because they carry in them part of universal truth. And to this day the verses of Ibn ‘Arabi are understood as willingness of Sufis to enter into an inter-religious dialogue. However, it must be noted that representatives of a sober, ‘scriptural’ Sufism for the most part do not share these views, warn against mixing religious contents and draw clear distinctions vis-à-vis other groups within Islam.

However, Ibn ‘Arabi distinctly warned against religious exclusiveness. In this vein, he wrote:

Do not attach yourself to any particular creed so exclusively that you disbelieve all the rest; otherwise you will lose much good, nay, you will fail to recognize the real truth of the matter. God, the omnipresent and omnipotent, is not limited by any one creed, for he says, ‘Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah.’ Everyone praises what he believes; his god is his own creature, and in praising it he praises himself. Consequently he blames the beliefs of others, which he would not do if he were just, but his dislike is based on ignorance (Armstrong 2011 p. 142-143).

Ibn ‘Arabi’s contemporary Baba Farid ud-Din Shakar-ganj (1173-1265) lived further in the eastern part of the Muslim world on the Indian subcontinent.
where many mystics are known for their enthusiastic stance of ardent love of God. Tradition has it that he addressed the following remarkable words to a visitor:

Don’t give me scissors! Give me a needle!
I sew together! I don’t cut apart! (Nizami 1976, p 89)

Baba Farid’s dervish convent in Pakpattan located in what is today Pakistan became a place where Muslims and Hindus met and exchanged views peacefully, where saints even discussed questions of spirituality with Hindu yogis. And in this the conversion of Hindus was not Baba Farid’s immediate purpose.

The following quatrain is attributed to the arguably greatest and best-known Sufi master and poet, Jalal ud-Din Rumi (1207-1273) who came from Persia but lived most of his life in Anatolia:

Come! Come! It doesn’t matter what you are,
A kāfir, an idol- or a fire-worshipper.
Come! Our caravan is not a place of despair!
Come! Even if you have broken your vows a hundred times, come yet again!
Come! (Halman and Metin, 1983, p174-75)

Understood as a promise and invitation to brotherliness to everyone who visited his convent and shrine in Konya, these verses today seem virtually omnipresent on the Internet, whether as a motto of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi order or of the Christian Unitarian Church.

Other verses by Rumi show clearly that for him as for other Sufis who – to remain in their imagery – have drunk from the wine cup of ma’rifat (gnosticism) and haqiqat (mystic truth), religious differences among seekers of God are no longer relevant and are transcended. This means that in the pure experience of divine unity there is no more room for religious distinctions. The following two verses are also to be understood in this manner:

For those who love, there are no Muslims, Christians or Jews
(Rumi, 2005, p 75)
Hindus, Kipchaks, Anatolians, Ethiopians – they all lie peacefully in
their graves,
separately, yet of the same colour (Halman and Metin, 1983, p46).
Or this quatrain:
On the path of thirst the fool and the wise man are one.
In the ecstasy of love, uncles and strangers are one.
Let them sip the wine of unity:
And already the house of God and the temple of idols are one
(Holbein 2009, p203).

Sultan Bahu (1631-1691), the first important Sufi poet of rural Punjab in
what is today Pakistan was, like many mystics, disappointed by the
formalistic religiosity of normative Islam based on following laws and
regulations; imbued with the absolute love of God, he very clearly expressed
his dislike of institutionalized scriptural religion in the first two lines of one
of his poems:

Neither am I Sunni nor am I Shi’a – my heart is bitter with both of them.
All long, dry marches came to an end when I entered the sea of mercy

In other Punjabi versions of these verses reference is made to the ‘river of
mercy’ (darya-e rahmat) and the ‘river of unity’ (darya-e wahdat). Dara
Shikoh (1615-1659), the Mughal ruler at that time, was inspired by the same
spirit. As a mystic, he brought Islamic and Hindu thought together and
became known as a translator of the Upanishads from Sanskrit into Persian.

The most impressive realization of the dissolution of religious boundaries
is found in the ecstatic verses of the great Sufi poet Bullhe Shah (1680-1758),
also known as ‘Rumi of Punjab’ who to some extent was on the threshold
between being Muslim and, in a state of ‘as well as’:

We are neither Hindus nor Muslims.
We just sit and turn the spinning wheel –
we have nothing to do with pride in the religious creed.
We are neither Sunni nor Shi’a. We are non-violent toward everyone
(Rama Krishna 1938, p65).
Bullhe Shah’s contemporary ‘Abdul Latif (1689-1752), the ascetic Sufi poet from Sindh, accompanied Shaiva yogis for three years on their pilgrimages to Hindu sanctuaries and praised them with Islamic epithets. In the chapter sur Rōmakōlo in his collection of poems Shōh jo Risōlo (‘The Messages of Shah’) he says for example:

Like nomads these ascetics left on their journey today.
They are being missed at their last camp.
They are exclusively absorbed in the Divine love.
My heart wants to be one with them. I cannot live without them
(Yakoob Agha 1985, p436).

In other verses of this sur as well, Shah ‘Abdul Latif celebrates selflessness and renunciation of the world by those Hindu seekers of God and their ardent love of God; however, due to their devotional practices, differences between them appear to have arisen. Nevertheless, sur Rōmakōlo can be read as an impressive testimony of a mystic ‘syncretism’ which has been documented for many, even if not all Sufis and dervishes in South Asia. Admittedly, those Sufis and dervishes used Ibn ‘Arabi’s concept of wahdat al-wujūd to reject the rigid caste system of the Hindus and in the spirit of brotherliness to cultivate commensality with non-Muslims. Eating together and sharing food is after all a very essential part of the concrete, practiced forms of Sufi-Islam.

One mystic who firmly rejected separating people along religious lines and sects was the Sufi poet Sachal Sarmast (1739-1826) from northern Sindh. In short verses in his native Sindhi, he extols the secret of divine unity, the over-arching ‘Unity of Being’ and the nonsense of demarcations. Here are a few random lines which illustrate the hama ġst-thought of late Persian Sufi tradition.

Neither Sunni nor Shia, neither sinner nor one who is rewarded.
Nah main sunni nah main shia, nah main doah sawōb
(Ghaffaar, 2007, p29 )
Who are you, who am I? We are united in the same way.
Toon kehra, main kehra. Hyun so jalwae jaehra. (Ghaffaar, 2007, p68 )
Neither Hindu, Sindhi or Arab, nor being an African or Turk (am I).
And one of the last great Sufi poets of the subcontinent, Mian Mohammad Bakhsh from Kashmir (1830-1907), sings, inspired by the same spirit:

If He is my friend, then everyone is my friend, even a stranger is also my friend (Saeed 2003, p24).

**Tolerance in Actual Practice: Devotional Religiosity at the Shrines of Sufi Saints**

Due to their God-given healing and blessing power (baraka), many Sufi masters, spiritual leaders and heads of mystical orders are venerated as saints. Miracles attributed to them by the people bestow them with a personal charisma. Local veneration of deceased or living Sufi saints at their shrines has developed in the Muslim world from the 13th century. These saints act in particular for members of the simple rural population, nomads, fishermen and impoverished urban lower classes as mediator and intercessor with God to whom they address their prayers. In this way there arose a mass movement of pious believers who come to the shrine with their cares and needs seeking consolation, healing and inner peace (sokûn).

In this emotional and virtually theology-free everyday religious practice based primarily on oral tradition, God is experienced with all the senses as rahmûn (‘the Merciful’) and rahûm (‘the Compassionate’). The shrines of the ‘Friends of God’ are sacred spaces open to all people, in particular to women but also social outsiders. These are spaces in which ambiguity and paradoxes are tolerated, in which there is no absolute ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ Shrines are also open to devotees of different confessions and religions; Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Middle East and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in South Asia often venerate the same saints, make pilgrimages to their graves and celebrate annual festivals there with devotional music and sometimes ecstatic dancing. The free communal kitchens (langar), institutionalised on the Indian subcontinent at shrines, represent a kind of perpetual act of sacrifice, create a social space in which ‘communitas’ (in the sense of togetherness) can be experienced and a ‘relaxed parallelism’ in the meaning of rawdûr is practiced. Robert Hayden described this form of ‘tolerance’ using the example of ecumenical sacred locations in South Asia and on the Balkans as ‘antagonistic’ as only the competitive demand
and utilization of space is concerned here (Hayden 2002). At the same time there are by all means examples of inclusive tendencies in pronounced ‘syncretic’, hybrid and heterogeneous saints’ cults in which different religious traditions (popular ‘informal Sufism’), local cults and forms of Hindu bhakti piety are shared and interwoven. These traditions can issue into an ‘interconfessionalism’ or even ‘supraconfessionalism’ not only in South Asia but also in the Middle East. One of these charismatic, hybrid figures is, for example, the Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (d. 1274) from Sehwan Sharif in Sindh (Pakistan), who is venerated by Hindus as the Shaiva ascetic Raja Bhartrhari. Diversity and plurality, which is recognized in fact in several verses of the Qur’an (5:48, 49:13), and the dissolution of fixed religious categories, are typical of the veneration of saints in countries marked by Islam.

Closing Remarks
Both in the statements of the Sufi saints and in the devotional Sufi Islam lived at shrines, we find distinct confessions of leniency and tolerance which are practiced to this day in interaction with devotees of other religions. In this sense many Sufis with their spiritually deepened language of love oppose the language of the antagonism of ‘closed’ theocratic world views as well as the discourse of religious hardliners which generates intolerance. Their tolerance of religious differences and their ‘live-and-let-live’ cultural diversity which comes from the philosophical concept of tawhīd – the ‘oneness of the Divine’ – bear testimony to an ‘open’, holistic world view. This view is entirely oriented toward God, refrains from interfering in the religious views and concerns of those of other faiths and welcomes the togetherness of all in sacred places.

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1 Verses retrieved from: www.ibnarabisociety.org/poetry/ibn-arabi-poetry-index.html (translation by Michael A. Sells)
Let’s Talk About This

Enough of this islamophobic nonsense.
There are better ways to represent Muslims

SHANON SHAH

Can We Talk About This? The National Theatre and DV8 Physical Theatre co-production, The National Theatre, South Bank, London, 9-28 March 2012


Has multiculturalism failed? Are practising, believing Muslims to blame for this? Are Muslims homophobic, misogynistic, violent, anti-Semitic robots programmed to destroy the West? Can We Talk About This? sets out to tackle these questions. Somewhere in the middle of the performance, an irate audience member cried out, ‘This is Islamophobic shit!’ and threw a brick onstage. The mixture of spoken word – mostly taken verbatim from interviews – and original choreography on contemporary permutations of ‘militant Islam’ in the West was apparently too strong. Among the choreographed case studies were ex-Muslim Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s condemnations
of the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, the Danish cartoon controversy, forced marriages, and the infamous Rushdie affair.

The irate brick-thrower, it turns out, was part of the performance. So far, no protests or attacks against the production, by “Islamists” or otherwise, have been reported in the media. Yet reviewers in the traditional English press have given the show near-unanimous thumbs-up for its supposed courage and edginess. In its four-star review, the Daily Mail said “the political content of this production is stonking, not for its freshness but for where it is being said, and with such force”. It added that the newspaper has “long spoken about the perils of multiculturalism”. The Spectator’s Nick Cohen said he “sat there thinking, ‘bloody hell, so this is what my book would look like if it were — er — turned into modern dance’”. Tim Walker’s five-star review in The Telegraph said “dance proves a powerful metaphor for freedom – which is precisely what’s all too often having to be sacrificed to accommodate the religious beliefs of others.” The Independent’s Jenny Gilbert called the production “phenomenal”.

The performance opens with a lone dancer onstage quoting Martin Amis, asking the audience, “Do you feel morally superior to the Taliban?” He asks those who agree to put up their hands – a few comply. Those that don’t are in for a lecture. The dancer recites the litany of violent crimes perpetrated by the Taliban, his head tick-tocking from side to side while his arms lurch, his hands grasp, and his legs lunge. The rest of the ensemble’s “case studies” follow and build up the argument with similar choreography. But as Guardian reviewer Michael Billington put it, while ‘the physical side of the show is impressive...intellectually, the show is full of holes’. Going against the trend among arts reviewers who applauded the show, Billington said its ‘debate about multiculturalism is oversimplified’.

No surprises, but I agree with Billington. Yet, its artistic merits aside, the argument put forward by Can We Talk About This? needs to be addressed at length. Of course, these issues have already been addressed by some, including Billington. For instance, the fact that DV8 managed to cull its material from publicly available media interviews with so-called “Islamists” and “progressives” is proof that the public conversation exists and is readily accessible.

Then what really is the production’s issue with ‘multiculturalism’? Why does
it think we cannot talk about it? What does DV8 understand by ‘multiculturalism’? Is it a policy that seeks to divide society into separate, homogenous, unit cultures? Is it then one that allows these unit cultures to get away with murder, so to speak, at the expense of the liberal state’s laws and values? Or is multiculturalism a social reality, given that postcolonial immigration patterns have changed the landscape of Western societies quite considerably? Could it be that ‘multiculturalism’ is also a way of understanding the fluidity, diversity and struggles within different ‘cultures’? Could Western, liberal democracies not learn from their new ethnic and religious minorities in addition to legislating and regulating them?

*Can We Talk About This?* didn’t want to talk about these nuances though. It opted for a simplistic view of ‘multiculturalism’ as a perverse cultural relativism in which ‘liberal’ Westerners let lunatic non-Westerners (specifically Muslims) take over the asylum. For example, the National Theatre website promoted the show as an exploration of how certain events have impacted on ‘multicultural policies, freedom of expression and censorship’ in Western democracies. Yet, DV8’s website said it was investigating issues of ‘freedom of speech, multiculturalism and Islam’ (my emphasis). The implication is subtle but powerful – multiculturalism is under threat in Western democracies. If you’re sly and want to stay on the politically correct side of the debate, you’d end your claim right there. But if you want to be edgy, you’ll take it further – multiculturalism is failing, ‘Islam’ is the cause, and Muslim-lovin’ Western liberals are the catalysts.

Of course, this does not mean that one should not critique the politics of Islam or multiculturalism. Rather, such critiques require some amount of conceptual rigour and a fair and ethical demonstration of evidence to develop the conversation constructively. For sure, there are Muslims who promote violent and coercive agendas based on their readings of Islam and they certainly find ways of doing this in Western democracies. For sure, also, Western democracies are constantly evolving their understandings of how to manage increasing ethnic and religious diversity and have made some serious errors that have disadvantaged ethnic and religious minorities. And for sure, Muslims will be implicated in this debate simply because a large proportion of growing ethnic and religious minorities in the West consist of non-European Muslim migrants and their offspring.

This is a sound premise to start with, but *Can We Talk About This?* just
wasn't interested in developing it with any criticality or depth. It opted for an easy collapsing of ‘Islamism’ with ‘Islam’ on one hand, and ‘anti-Muslim’ sentiment with ‘liberal’ Islam on the other.

The sad thing is it’s a persuasive argument. Especially since the production does its due diligence by seemingly targeting only ‘extremist Muslims’ or groups such as the ‘Taliban’. DV8 seems to be saying, ‘So we’re cool, right? We’re on the side of the good Muslims, those outnumbered progressive and modernist dissenters in the barbaric wasteland of Islam whom we upstanding Westerners are duty-bound to save.’ Yet it is this kind of analysis that leads to Crusade-like claims about the ‘violent’ Qur’an, for example, to be glossed over and accepted as representative of ‘Islam’.

So this is the first big problem with *Can We Talk About This?* It positions the extremism and violence of some Muslims as an inherent characteristic of Islam, thus placing any pious or practising ‘Muslim’ at odds with the ‘West’s’ values. There seems to be only one way out for Muslims in the West – to go ‘liberal’ or better, ‘secular’. And there seems to be only one option for the West – to accept only ‘liberal’ or ‘secular’ Muslims into its fold. There is no discussion of the existing diversity of opinions and conversations among the vast number of believing Muslims on matters related to Islam.

This leads to the next big problem with *Can We Talk About This?* – its lack of journalistic and intellectual rigour. Sure, it’s art. Dancers, like other artists, need to have their creative space to communicate freely with their audience. But for a show that bases so much of its material on journalistic reports, it does not interrogate its own sources. For instance, in the long rant about the Danish cartoon controversy, it was never mentioned that *Jyllands-Posten*, the newspaper that first published the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (S) had earlier censored drawings lampooning Jesus Christ. The editors feared these would be too offensive to some readers and would ‘provoke an outcry’. Yet they thought it was okay to publish the Muhammad cartoons in the interest of freedom of expression. Of course, this is not a trump card to justify the actions of Muslims who reacted violently. Yet it is a crucial fact that usefully opens up the discussion – there is misunderstanding and hostility by some Muslims towards the West, but could similar misunderstandings and hostilities not work in the reverse direction also? Demonising and stereotyping are not one-way street affairs.
By dressing up its argument in a stylish choreography of bobbing heads, contorted limbs and a funky soundtrack, dV8 made itself look like a thinking, liberal person’s dance troupe. Strip away the choreography, however, and all that remains is an intellectually vacuous, selectively argued rant that could be found any old day in a right-wing rags like The Sun in London and the New York Post.

Again, the problem lies with the production’s inability to interrogate its own essentialist understandings of Islam and Muslims. In fact, it is very happy to collapse the two categories. For example, although it never made it into the show, dV8 artistic director Lloyd Newson’s passionate sermon about the 2009 Gallup poll asking ‘500 British Muslims’ about their attitudes towards ‘homosexuality’ is instructive. Zero percent of those polled said it was ‘acceptable’. Proof that ‘multiculturalism’ has failed, with Islam as the chief cause. Yet Newson does not quote the 2011 poll by Demos in which 47 per cent of British Muslims agreed with the gay-rights affirming statement, ‘I am proud of how Britain treats gay people’, a higher percentage than even Christians. Again, this does not mean that one survey is correct while the other is wrong. It just means that things are not black-and-white, neither among British Muslims nor among ‘Western’ pundits. It also points towards the limitations of poll data in relation to question-wording and question-order effects.

But it is these kinds of factual rigour and argumentative nuances that were consistently missing or worse, omitted, in the production. The views of ex-Muslims such as Hirsi Ali, for example, were reproduced and unchallenged, while the views of Islamists such as Anjem Choudary, the leader of the extremists group Islam4UK, were routinely parodied and skewered. Again, while Choudary’s views can and should be challenged vigorously, so should Hirsi Ali’s. Of course, Ali should be given the benefit of the doubt regarding her personal experiences, which might have been horrific. I am saying this despite the challenges to the veracity of her widely publicised personal background. Apparently, she lied to the Dutch government in her application for asylum there. For one thing, she was from Kenya, not a Somali refugee camp, thus rendering her case dubious. Furthermore, there is a lack of verifiable evidence that she was ever a victim of ‘forced marriage’.

Nevertheless, as weird as this may sound, this is not the biggest problem with Hirsi Ali’s rhetoric. The biggest problem is that she then uses these
contested experiences to generalise about ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’, and places herself in the service of whatever anti-immigration, anti-Muslim, right-wing organisation gives her a platform. In fact, what is interesting to note is that Hirsi Ali is the darling of the likes of Jihad Watch director Robert Spencer.

Who else does Spencer like? Try the Florida Family Association, a one-man vehicle that successfully lobbied hardware retailer Lowe’s to pull its ads from the since-cancelled US television show All-American Muslim in December 2011. And what was All-American Muslim’s crime? Apparently it was committing the ultimate deception by highlighting the real lives of ordinary, ‘normal’ American Muslims who cherished American values.

But wait a minute – if we’re so concerned about making multiculturalism work, shouldn’t we be happy that there are shows like this? However, the argument goes, the show obfuscates the fact that most Muslims want to just kill women, gays and Jews. My question to DV8 then is – with apologies to 1066 and All That – can whom talk about what?

Unfortunately, again, Can We Talk About This? is content to use people like Hirsi Ali as props, the same way it uses Muslim women’s experiences as props without asking these other, equally crucial, questions. Take the indignation about ‘forced marriages’ in the UK and ‘honour killings’. Yes, these are big problems and yes, they need to be addressed, but to score points in a generalised rant against multiculturalism?

Also, the class analysis was completely absent in this critique that so often collapsed Islamic politics with violence. The truth is, every context is different. In the UK, for example, what do the statistics say about social or economic hardships faced by British Muslims? Here’s a taster: 68 per cent of British citizens of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin live in low-income housing compared to 21 per cent of Whites. Could we not then ask how this kind of social and economic deprivation affects pressures on marriage and gender hierarchies among British Muslims? Are these social disadvantages faced by British Muslims exacerbated by racist or anti-immigration attitudes? When does this combination result in violent reactions, and when does it not result in violence? And perhaps, instead of pursuing the ‘Islamists are violent’ thesis, could DV8 not have looked at similarities between violence by some British Muslims and the Irish Republication Army’s acts of terrorism in England in the 1980s? London is no stranger to
terrorist attacks, and these have not always come from Muslims. Or are all these facts just too difficult for an edgy dance troupe to grasp?

What is truly flabbergasting, however, is that these critiques already exist and are freely available in the public sphere through various media channels. Yet, the mostly white, middle-class audience was so impressed with Can We Talk About It? they gave it a standing ovation. (Two English, liberal Anglican friends I went with refused to applaud and were actually much more incensed than I was and, to be fair, several people did not applaud.)

So I walked away wondering, ‘Is this for real? Is this all there is to being cutting edge on ‘multiculturalism’? Here’s the good news. In London, the Royal Court, for one, ran a successful programme not too long ago to nurture British Muslim playwrights. One praiseworthy result of this was Alia Bano’s Shades, a play about being a young, single Muslim woman in London for which Bano was named Most Promising Playwright in the 2009 Evening Standard Awards. The Guardian’s Billington called this one ‘fresh, witty’ and ‘something of a theatrical first’. In the US, there is also The Hijabi Monologues, founded in 2006 by three masters students at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago. A nod to Eve Ensler’s widely successful The Vagina Monologues, the production dramatises the experiences of real-life American-born hijabis. There’s the one who stands up to prejudice, and the one who gets pregnant by the Muslim boy-next-door and gets shunned by her community, and the intriguing, ‘awesome’ niqabi. Then there was the Tricycle Theatre’s double bill of two new productions by the MUJU Crew – Flirting with Faith and My Dutiful Laundrette. MUJU, a Muslim Jewish Youth Theatre Group that began in 2004, ‘brings Muslims and Jews together through a collaborative process and a shared passion for creating art.’

In the first show, Flirting with Faith, MUJU newbies teamed up to devise a show about the perils of finding love in a metropolis for both Jews and Muslims. There was the angsty South Asian hijabi ranting to her mother about the umpteenth meeting for her arranged marriage. (‘There’s a pattern here. Pakoras, samosas, rejection. Pakoras, samosas, rejection.’) There was also the Jewish princess looking for lurve online. (‘I don’t have anything against ugly people, but I’m just saying I’m very good looking so it’s better if you’re good looking too.’) And then there was the bungling Muslim boy
trying to pick up a hot hijabi on a night out, ‘Is your dad a terrorist?’ Before the girl can smack him, he says, ‘Because you da bomb!’

Are these stereotypes? Sure they are. But what is refreshing about them is that in the spirit of engagement and artistry, the MUJUs proceed to dismantle these stereotypes. Arranged-marriage victim is actually a highly-educated, feisty young woman who knows exactly what she wants in life. Jewish princess actually has compelling reasons for her neuroses. Geeky Muslim boy has his insecurities too. There was even the flirtatious gay Jew and the passionate and pious, non-hijabi lesbian Muslim looking for romance (though not, it has to be clarified, with each other).

The best part was, none of these characters felt tokenistic. The natural and affectionate multiculturalism onstage was reflected in the natural and affectionate multiculturalism amongst the audience. Inter-religious, inter-racial relationships onstage were mirrored by inter-racial, inter-religious groups of friends seated together amongst the audience.

My Dutiful Laundrette was a linear, narrative play by MUJU’s more experienced members. British Muslim woman Samina wants to hold on to her recently-deceased parents’ laundrette while her brother Illyas wants to sell it. Along the way, we see a romance blossoming between Samina and the adorable English bloke Joe (Raphael Bar) who has worked at the laundrette since he was a teenager. There’s even a growing friendship between the three and a ‘persistent customer’, Marnie. What then unfolds is a story about the impacts of migration, religious identity, class, and gender on the multicultural ‘experience’ among everyday British folk. I give particularly high marks for Joe’s bungling efforts at learning more about Islam to raise Samina’s interest in him: ‘You know chocolate, right? Some of it is....haram, right?’ After Samina responds with incredulity, he continues: ‘And that whole Shia-Sunni thing is really complicated, isn’t it?’

Sure, there are criticisms that can be made about these two plays. These are not productions for those who crave theology-heavy discussions about Islam, or who want hard-hitting analyses of the dynamics of misogyny, homophobia or anti-Semitism among Muslims. But then again, do we always need to put Muslims in the spotlight in this way?

It is ironic that in trying so hard to be edgy and hard-hitting, DV8 only
succeeded in regurgitating and reifying tired old stereotypes about the Muslim Other. And while it wanted so desperately to attack the ideologies of those it considers dangerous ‘Islamists’, we ended up with no new insights about these views and the arguments against them either.

The irony continues, though. In deciding not to focus on these ‘hard-hitting’ and ‘edgy’ themes, the MUJUs actually delivered insights that challenged their audience subtly and effectively. From the passionate lesbian Muslim, to the sweet, Muslim-smitten English boy, to the divorced Jewish man and woman out on a first date, the MUJU’s two pieces pushed gently and honestly all the way. And truly, having Muslims and Jews form a company to make art together, especially in this world where there is so much panic about the ‘failure’ of multiculturalism - that’s edgy. By coming together and focusing on real collaboration, these artists make us reflect on the big things – immigration, racism, class, religion, gender, and sexuality – in profoundly intimate and non-judgemental ways.

So, can we talk about this, ‘this’ meaning Islam, immigration, multiculturalism, or anything contentious in the West? Sure, as long as we’re clear that talking should always involve listening, even to those we might not agree with.

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Writing the Frontier

We need less hysteria and more serious analysis on Pakistan

MUHAMMAD IDRÉES AHMAD

Imran Khan, *Pakistan: A Personal History* (Bantam Press 2011)

Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan* (Viking 2012)


‘If a tree falls in a Pakistani forest and no one is around to write a Taliban piece about it, does it make a sound?’
The tongue-in-cheek question posed by Pakistani director and film critic Hammad Khan contains multiple ironies. Pakistan faces many threats among which terrorism isn’t the most significant. Climate change maybe the biggest challenge facing Pakistan, but it isn’t caused by the Taliban. Western audiences are interested in stories from Pakistan only if the Taliban are featured. Issues are as a consequence amplified or excluded according to priorities that are not Pakistan’s own. Security, since 9/11, is the only frame through which the West sees Pakistan. This demand has in turn generated an industry which furnishes a steady supply of commentary carefully calibrated to the expectations of its intended audience. The more sensational the story, the more diabolical the threat, the more eagerly it is received.

A measure of how the country’s image is shaped, and what is expected of authors writing on the subject, is the titles that most contemporary books on Pakistan carry. It is a very rare book that does not work into its title some combination of ‘failed’, ‘dangerous’, ‘lawless’, ‘deadly’, ‘frightening’ or ‘tumultuous’. Pakistan is a ‘tinderbox’, ‘on the brink’, in the ‘eye of the storm’. It’s all ‘frontier’, no hinterland, ‘descending into chaos’. In the narrow space ‘between the mosque and the military’, there is much ‘crisis’, ‘militancy’ and ‘global jihad’. A recent book carries the dramatic title ‘The Scorpion’s Tale’ with the appropriately alarmist subtitle ‘The Relentless Rise of Islamic Militants in Pakistan’. Perhaps deemed insufficiently attention grabbing, it appends: ‘And How It Threatens America’!

Pakistan, a multi-ethnic country of 185 million with a rich culture and breath-taking geography, troubled in many ways, not all of it related to terrorism, can no longer be treated on its own merits. Its only significance is as a threat to America. The more acute your perception of this threat, the more vivid your nightmares, the more marketable is your expertise. Publishers and audiences duly oblige with attention. Otherwise courageous journalists, such as the late Syed Saleem Shahzad, have also succumbed to this imperative. With a history of sensible reporting at great personal risk, when Shahzad came to writing a book he seemingly felt obliged to draw inferno, obscuring his otherwise fine reporting with an improbable story of a relentless march toward a planned apocalypse. Shahzad’s book, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11* is useful for its reportage, but is in over its head when comes to analysis.
A book which claims that Al Qaeda are near decimated, and that the Taliban are a parochial phenomenon with strictly regional interests is not going to make much of a splash in the West. You have to have a story to rivet audiences. In Shahzad cases, his frequent references to Alf-Laila wa Laila—the One Thousand and One Nights—are apt: his narrative appears to draw much from the world of imagination. He contends that everything that is happening in the south-central Asian theatre is part of a grand design, carefully planned and executed by the Al Qaeda leadership, aimed at hastening a grand apocalyptic show-down, the so-called Ghazwa-e-Hind, supposedly prophesied in a Hadith (as it happens, the hadith is zaeef, or defective). In Shahzad’s reckoning, far from being on the ropes, Al Qaeda is stronger than ever. Contrary to expert opinion, Shahzad’s Al Qaeda is not a loose network of disparate groups unified by a shared ideology, but a centralized, hierarchical organization which encompasses everything from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to Somali pirates.

Shahzad’s main claim that the US presence in Afghanistan helps strengthen Al Qaeda is undeniable. His description of the various militant factions—some sectarian, some jihadist—is fascinating for its detail. He is also good at illustrating the trajectory of jihadism in Pakistan with profiles of individuals whose torture and humiliation at the hands of Pakistan’s thuggish intelligence agencies radicalized them. Shahzad’s most explosive revelations pertain to the former military officers who, feeling betrayed by the state’s participation in the US ‘war-on-terror’, have joined the insurgency. They played prominent roles in targeting military facilities, including the general headquarters of the Pakistani Army in Rawalpindi and the Navy’s PNS Mehran base in Karachi.

But Shahzad strains credulity when he argues that all the disparate local insurgencies in the region are instruments of Al Qaeda. Documents seized from Osama Bin Laden’s home after his assassination in Abbottabad show that the Al Qaeda chief was able to exercise little control over the group’s various franchises, let alone the unruly TTP. Indeed, Bin Laden was concerned that the TTP’s attacks on other Muslims had ‘cost the mujahdeen no small amount of sympathy among Muslims’; they were, he wrote, causing ‘great damage to the message of jihad’. As far as Bin Laden was concerned, the TTP was detracting from the overarching goal of fighting and defeating the American invader.
It may be the case that Shahzad took his sources’ claims at face value, but given the disparity between his earlier reportage and what appears in the book, one can’t help the impression that he, like others, felt the need to tailor his story to suit Western expectations.

The trend in this regard was set by Ahmad Rashid, whose success with *Taliban: The Story of Afghan Warlords* in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 turned him into a sought after pundit, courted by world leaders, confided in by military chiefs, and feted by intelligence officials. The book was said to have been read by everyone, including Tony Blair. According to the Guardian, Blair’s ‘plans for post-Taliban Afghanistan are heavily influenced by this book’. Rashid became the go-to guy on the subject, with his commentaries appearing everywhere from the Wall Street Journal to the New York Review of Books. As Rashid’s stature grew, his message became more amenable to western policy makers. By the end of Bush’s second term, Rashid, who had once supported the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, had emerged as the most spirited advocate for the American ‘war on terror’. But Rashid wasn’t entirely uncritical. He faulted the Bush administration for focusing too much on Al Qaeda and not enough on the Taliban. And if he had criticism of NATO, it was only that it wasn’t prosecuting the war vigorously enough.

The four years of Obama’s presidency have diminished some of Rashid’s earlier enthusiasm for ‘victory’ in Afghanistan. The failure of Obama’s surge has also instilled in him a new-found realism. Rashid started with high hopes—he could hardly do otherwise since he was honoured by the president elect with a personal audience where his advice was solicited over dinner. But Rashid was let down. Ignoring his advice, the President handed over his Afghan policy to the military and intelligence agencies, relegating diplomacy, economic aid, and institution building. Insufficient attention was also paid to Afghanistan’s local politics. As the west’s relations with Afghan president Hamid Karzai soured, so did Rashid’s. Where in the past he had referred to Karzai as a friend, including obtrusive details of their cosy relationship, he now accuses him of seeming ‘pathologically unable to maintain a reasonable working relationship with American and NATO officials.’

As calls for negotiations with the Taliban have grown, Rashid has updated his views—but not entirely. In an interview with the Dutch VPRO
International, he reprised the argument first used by Henry Kissinger in Vietnam, that negotiations with the enemy must be conducted from a position of strength and must therefore be preceded by spectacular battlefield victories. The 15,237 tons of ordnance that were dropped on North Vietnam during the December 1972 Linebacker II bombing raids to strengthen Kissinger’s negotiating hand did little to sway the outcome of the war; the death of 1,624 civilians however did strengthen Vietnamese determination to fight. Rashid also argued during the interview that a NATO withdrawal will necessarily lead to Afghanistan turning into a sanctuary for terrorists. Needless to say that the ‘safe-haven myth’ is rejected by knowledgeable experts including Harvard’s Stephen Walt and Afghanistan specialist Rory Stewart. But as ISAF has walked back from its maximalist goals, so has Rashid. He has found Pakistan.

As the Bush administration approached twilight, in concert with the shift in Washington’s focus, Rashid began identifying rebel sanctuaries in Pakistan as the root of Afghanistan’s problems.

To be sure, Rashid has much in his criticism of the Pakistani state and society which is accurate. But all of these get overshadowed by his overarching one: that Pakistan isn’t more pliant toward the West. Also, legitimate criticism does not always lead to sensible conclusions. Rashid complains that the Pakistani army and intelligence agencies have too much influence yet he wants them to pursue the one course which is guaranteed to further enhance their power: more counterinsurgency operations. As Rashid notes, between 2001 and 2012, Pakistan received $20.5 billion in aid from the US and $10 billion more from Germany, UK, Japan and others, including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. Of this sum $14.4 billion went to the military. Only $6.1 billion was assigned to economic aid, mostly as budgetary support. As long as the military is able to present itself as a bulwark against a global terrorism, it is unsurprising that it should end up as the primary beneficiary of the West’s largesse.

Rashid talks about political solutions in Afghanistan yet is adamantly opposed to any such initiatives inside Pakistan. There are other non-sequiturs. Take this passage: “In 2008, India signed a nuclear weapons deal with the United States, became wealthy and powerful, and received US support for a seat at the UN Security Council, and became the new
destination for Western investors. But Pakistan has escalated its fears of the Indian threat”. In summary: India is growing more powerful and Pakistan is noticing. Rashid is mystified.

Rashid is also faithful in reproducing Pentagon talking points. He questions the Pakistani military’s counterinsurgency practices for not following what according to him are the essential elements of the doctrine: ‘clear, hold, and build’. As a matter of fact ‘clear, hold, and build’ was a slogan dreamed up by ideologues in the Bush administration, as a marketing formula rather than a strategy. As Bob Woodward notes in The War Within, military leaders heard about it for the first time from Condoleezza Rice. Familiarity with it has been no more useful to the US military in Afghanistan than it would be for Pakistanis. The problem is the war itself. But Rashid is convinced that the US presence next door has nothing to do with the turmoil in Pakistan.

Rashid is an attractive figure for western journalists and Pakistanis aspiring to a career in international punditry alike. Western journalists like him because he is a man in their own image: liberal, cosmopolitan, connected. His truths confirm their own presuppositions, with local colour added; they do little to discommodate the powerful since his focus is less on the wisdom of the strategy than on local commitment to implementing it. An otherwise superficial commentary by a western journalism is given a sheen of knowingness by reference to Rashid's expertise. The sheer weight of the names he drops advert to his indispensability. A lot of his recent writing is framed in conversations that begin with an exclusive dinner with Barack Obama, a private dinner at a Swiss chalet with Hamid Karzai (and later in Kabul), a dinner in Berlin with Angela Merkel, a dinner at the presidential palace with Asif Ali Zardari—and so it goes. One can speculate however how this access would be affected should he proffer advice that is not entirely supportive of the broader objectives of his interlocutors. His view of the leaders themselves is mostly complementary (except belatedly of Karzai); he sometimes doubts their methods but never their intentions. As the American journalist I.F. Stone once said of presidential hagiographer Theodore White, ‘A writer who can be so universally admiring need never lunch alone.’

Rashid’s success would not in itself be of much significance were it not for its impact on broader discourse on the Pak-Afghan theatre and western policy toward it. His success has helped crowd out more sensible voices and
turned commentary on the subject into a contest of nightmares. If in recent years Rashid's star has declined somewhat, it is because he has been eclipsed by the purveyors of visions even darker, eminently more amenable to militaristic solutions.

For all these reasons British author and policy analyst Anatol Lieven’s book *Pakistan: A Hard Country* is refreshing for the breadth and sobriety of its analysis. Even its title defies trends in adopting description over emotion, which is fitting for a 519-page myth-busting exercise.

Lieven does not deny that Pakistan is a corrupt, chaotic, violent, oppressive and unjust country. But he notes that it is also a remarkably resilient one, not nearly as unequal as India or Nigeria, or for that matter the United States. The multiple insurgencies it is fighting affect a smaller proportion of its territory than those besetting India. Its cities are violent, but no more so than those of comparable size in Latin or even North America. At five percent of the GDP, Pakistan has one of the world’s highest rates of charitable donations, though its tax-collection rate is the lowest in South Asia. Pakistan’s corruption is due less to the absence of values than to the enduring grip of the old ones of family and clan loyalty. Beneath the chaotic surface, the country is held together by an underlying structure of kinship and patronage which accounts for its relative stability. Leaders of kinship networks derive their legitimacy from property ownership and the capacity to provide protection and patronage. This creates a certain type of accountability and wealth redistribution since in order to retain the followers’ loyalty, leaders have to extract and distribute patronage - and in a country endowed with modest resources and decrepit industry, most of it is stolen from the state.

These forces, which in one respect account for Pakistan’s durability, also impede its progress. The primacy of clan loyalty over civic responsibility has served as a barrier to the development of modern democratic institutions. Both civilian and authoritarian military governments have been frustrated in their attempts at reform. Dictator or democrat, a leader’s capacity to effect change is limited by the inassimilable interests of the kinship network that they have to rely on for their rule. The military, which functions relatively more efficiently than the country’s other institutions, has insulated itself against these forces by turning itself into the biggest
With % of the national budget snatched by the military, this arrangement has left the Pakistani economy stagnant. The only sections of the economy that are dynamic, notes Lieven, are those ‘which have to a greater or lesser extent been shaken loose from their traditional cultural patterns and kinship allegiances by mass migration’—viz. the Muhajirs of Karachi and the migrants from East Punjab. Burdened by the dead weight of kinship networks, a lumbering bureaucracy and the cupidity of the political class, Pakistan’s economic prospects look grim. The growth rate, which had remained between 6.6 and 9 percent between 2003-2008, collapsed following the global economic recession, reaching a meagre 2.6 percent by 2011. With the additional strain of servicing odious debts, the economy is spiralling dangerously toward collapse. Inflation has remained in double digits since 2008, secondly only to Vietnam in Asia. In 2009, at the peak of Pakistan’s internal insecurity, an International Republican Institute poll found that four times as many people considered inflation the biggest threat facing Pakistan as those who did the Taliban.

Outside of Africa, at 10.5 percent of the GDP, Pakistan also has one the lowest tax collection rates in the world. Only 1.8 million people pay taxes; the rich exempt themselves. State revenue is raised primarily through indirect taxation, which makes it a highly regressive system burdening the poorest. In Pakistan: A Personal History, the cricketing legend-turned-politician Imran Khan cites a survey which found that 61 per cent of Pakistani parliamentarians pay no taxes, whereas according their 2009/2010 tax returns, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, a billionaire, paid £40 in income. The president Asif Ali Zardari paid none at all. ‘The poor’, Khan notes, ‘effectively subsidize the rich, and the powerful do everything they can to maintain this injustice.’ More alarmingly, Khan notes, ‘About 65 per cent of all tax collected goes into debt repayment’, which has doubled between 2008 and 2011. ‘In addition’, he writes, ‘the country has lost about 256 billion rupees in loans to the rich and powerful that have been written off.’

A June 2012 Pews Global Attitudes Survey shows Khan as enjoying the highest popularity of any political figure in Pakistan. His 70 percent approval rating is a stark contrast to the ruling party leader Zardari’s 14
percent. Besides his celebrity and public service, it stems from his campaign against rampant corruption, support for the judiciary, and, most importantly, opposition to the drone war. Yet there are few individuals who are more reviled by Pakistan’s English-language commentariat than Khan. There have been many attempts, including a dubiously sourced article by Saleem Shazhad, to paint Khan as a tool of the military. His opposition to drone strikes is taken as evidence of his Taliban sympathies. Khan, as a matter of fact, is a nationalist who is as critical of the military as he is of Pakistan’s other institutions. He laments: ‘Pakistan spends more than 60 per cent of its national budget each year on defence and servicing its debt while 1.5 per cent goes on education, and only 0.5 per cent on health’. Khan is neither more nor less religious than the average Pakistani. It is obvious from his memoir that the kind of liberal Islam he practices, with its unforced spirituality and disdain for ritualistic rigidity, would be abhorrent even to moderate Islamists, let alone the puritanical Taliban. Khan riles Pakistan’s elites because he is seen as someone who has betrayed his class.

Lieven too is unpopular with Pakistan’s liberal commentariat. He is accused of being too generous to the military—an absurd claim since Lieven is unsparing in his criticism of the military’s abuses of power, human rights violations, and economic over-reach. However, he does acknowledge the commonly held view among most Pakistanis that the military is the only functioning institution in the country, even if it is at the expense of other institutions. It seems the real source of the liberals’ displeasure is their unflattering comparison to the Islamists, both of whom are described by Lieven as being equally implacable and removed from the larger society. Lieven observes that Pakistan is a ‘highly conservative, archaic, even sometimes quite inert and somnolent mass of different societies, with two modernizing impulses fighting to wake it up’ – the liberals and the Islamists. Both have been stymied by the nature of Pakistani society as much as by the liberals’ identification with the deeply-loathed United States and the Islamists inability to overcome the political quietism of the conservative, highly superstitious Islam practised by most Pakistanis. In their confrontation with each other, both ‘see the battle between them as apocalyptic, ending with the triumph of good or evil’, yet their chances of success are equally grim.

Lieven bucks convention in his treatment of Islamists. Unlike other extant writings on the subject, which present Pakistan’s Islamists as a menacing
monolithic force, Lieven carefully unravels the various strands of Islamism and gives a measured assessment of their relative influence in Pakistan. What is notable, he writes, is less the strength of Pakistan's Islamists than their weakness. The same kinship networks, loyalty to hereditary saints, and the potpourri of sects and sub-sects are barriers which also prevent the spread of Islamism. With the partial exception of the Jamaat-e-Islami, he notes, Islamists have themselves been swallowed up by the patronage system.

Unlike most Western writers, Lieven's research includes a remarkable range of voices, including soldiers, Islamists, policemen, peasants, presidents, and taxi drivers. He is particularly sceptical of the Pakistani elite - 'even, or especially, when their statements seem to correspond to Western liberal ideology, and please Western journalists and officials'.

Lieven is concerned with the treatment of women in Pakistan, and some of the incidents he describes are horrific indeed. But unlike other Western commentators, he is careful to note that the worst abuses against women in Pakistan are sanctioned by customary law rather than the Sharia. The case of Mukhtar Mai's gang rape and the lesser known (at least in the West) story of three Baloch girls who were shot and buried alive for choosing to marry outside of clan are instructive in this regard. Both were sanctioned by tribal customary law. However, Lieven notes that the murder of the Baloch girls somehow elicited far less outrage from Pakistan's liberal elite than an incident that happened around the same time involving the public flogging of a girl in Swat. The outrage around that incident proved one of the catalysts for the subsequent military operation there. However, Lieven fails to pursue the implications of this comment further. Of course the reason why the Swat incident attracted more attention is that it had entered the 'war on terror' narrative where a whole industry has flourished, thriving on exaggeration and fear.

In May 2009, in a frontpage article for Le Monde Diplomatique, Najam Sethi, editor of The Friday Times, a paper with a larger readership outside than inside Pakistan, gave the country no more than three months to live unless drastic measures were taken to save it from the Islamists, who were poised to march on the capital, and the rambunctious media, which was allegedly cheering on their advance. This was a common refrain among Pakistan's liberal elite, amplified and repeated ad infinitum in the Western
press. The country fortunately proved more durable. Lieven rejects this kind of alarmism but warns that things would be less certain if the U.S. were to intervene directly on Pakistani soil. This could potentially trigger a military revolt. The insurgency at present only affects a very small stretch of Pakistani territory and, as demonstrated by the offensive in Swat, it is no match for the state’s military capability. For Lieven, the Swat campaign was a success but he acknowledges that the terrorist threat in the rest of the country has increased.

These however are not simply parallel developments; they are causally linked. There was never any doubt that the Pakistani army had the capacity to crush the Taliban but the real question was always the human cost and political consequences of such an operation. Predictably, the use of blunt force has turned a geographically delimited insurgency into an amorphous terrorist threat against which the state can do little. Lieven is categorically opposed to foreign military intervention in Pakistan and marshals some eminently reasonable policy recommendations in his brief conclusions.

Pakistan remains in many respects a state that is not yet a nation. Investment is minimal and entrepreneurship thwarted by the myriad palms that have to be greased for small businesses to function. Public infrastructure is crumbling as more and more wealth is squirreled away into gated communities of extraordinary opulence. Notions of civic responsibility are hard to cultivate when the state appears dysfunctional and services are poor. The healthcare system is in a state of collapse and education suffers from chronic underinvestment. Polio was eradicated from the rest of the world, but in Pakistan it is resurgent. According to a Lancet study, at 4.7 percent, Pakistan accounts for the world’s second highest number of stillbirths, over twice the world average. Pakistan is one of the five countries that account for half the world’s malnourished children. A National Nutrition Survey carried out in 2011 showed that 44 percent of children in Pakistan are born stunted, 15 percent wasted, and 32 percent under-weight. Yet the population continues to grow at an alarming rate. At 3.6, the country’s total fertility rate is significantly higher than the replacement level of 2.1. Religious superstition is part of the reason why only 30 percent of families use contraception; but bigger failure is the lack of adequate family planning. The lack of National literacy has improved in the past two decades but at 54 percent, Pakistan is still ranked a hundred
places below Mongolia. An energy deficit has grown steadily since 2007. In summer 2012, some of Pakistan’s largest cities were experiencing up to 18 hour black outs. The glitter of the more affluent quarters of Pakistan’s major cities—the only quarters which most western journalists deign to visit—conceals the grim reality that Pakistan still ranks 145th on the UN’s Human Development Index.

Rashid, Lieven, and Khan all agree that for Pakistan to find its way out of this morass it will have to dial down its obsession with national security. They also admit that this cannot happen in isolation: the solution will have to be regional. Until the dispute over Kashmir is resolved, the hostility between Pakistan and India will remain, giving militaries on either side inordinate influence over national politics. The failure of Pakistan’s monumentally corrupt civilian governments, its bloated bureaucracy, and the weakness of its institutions have conspired to produce a situation where the military, despite its parasitic presence, retains prestige by virtue of appearing less dysfunctional in comparison. According to the Pew survey quoted earlier, at 77 percent, the military had the highest approval rating of any institution in Pakistan—higher than the media (68), higher even than the judiciary (58). This grim reality must temper the celebration over Pakistan’s first democratically elected government completing its term in office.

Saleem Shahzad too was critical of the military; alas, he lacked the celebrity to afford him immunity from its displeasure. Shahzad paid the ultimate price when days before the publication of his book, he was murdered after being mercilessly tortured, allegedly by the ISI.

Back to the forests. In July 2010, when floods submerged a fifth of the country, displacing 20 million people, killing 1,900, and causing $43 billion in damages, climate change and massive deforestation were indicated as the primary causes for the scale of destruction. The floods wiped out 5,000 miles of road and rail, 1,000 bridges, 7,000 schools and 400 health clinics. At its birth in 1947, the country had a forest cover of 33%; but by 2009, the UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that this had been reduced to 2.5%. At 2.1 percent, the deforestation rate is the highest in Asia. Pakistan’s timber mafia is a far greater threat to national security than the Taliban; but its profile does not match the west’s idea of rogues. As forests have receded, the air quality has worsened. According to World Health Organization surveys carried out between 2003 and 2009, six of the world’s
20 cities with the highest outdoor air pollution are in Pakistan. For Anatol Lieven, Pakistan is resilient enough to survive the terrorist threat, but the danger which could really precipitate its collapse is climate change. Pakistan remains one the world’s most water-stressed countries. It receives at an average only 240mm of annual rainfall and is overly dependent on the Indus; much of its land is arid or semi-arid. Natural springs have been drying up, water tables dropping; unless the country makes efforts to better preserve its water resources and prevent waste it will be seriously at risk as its already large population grows further. If population growth continues at present rates, then according to a Woodrow Wilson Center study it will face a water shortfall of 100 billion cubic meters by 2025 (Pakistan’s present water capacity is 236 bcm). If adequate action is not taken in time, struggle over dwindling resources could plunge the country into civil war. There has been a recent increase in rainfall, but there is no infrastructure to harness the water. Though agriculture accounts for 20 percent of the country’s GDP, only 24 percent of Pakistan’s land is cultivated.

What, then, is to be done? Rashid, Lieven and Khan all have useful recommendations, but the formers’ are addressed mainly to Western policy makers. Rashid does have suggestions for Pakistan, some of which, such as his call for greater investment in education and healthcare, are worth heeding. But in most cases Rashid’s suggestions boil down to submitting the country to the superior judgment of Western technocrats. Khan is more precise in his recommendations: he has focused for years on strengthening the judiciary, reforming the education system, and ending corruption. But although his diagnosis is correct and many of his proposals sound, they lack the depth and detail which might turn them into successful policy. Khan shows remarkable judgment in identifying structural problems; his indictment of Pakistani state’s failures is ranging, far more comprehensive than Rashid’s. But the sketchiness of his proposals makes them insufficient to convince sceptics of his capacity to deliver tangible solutions. Only Lieven offers the kind of granular analysis—of both the society and state—which can serve as the basis for sensible policy, both foreign and domestic. But change, if it is to be sustainable, requires policy making to be formalized in a robust process, drawing on the best available expertise. Policies must be adopted only if they can withstand the test of contrary opinion. They demand more than one man’s understanding or good faith. It is obvious from Khan’s conclusions that he understands the importance of good
leadership; but it is less clear if he appreciates the wider mechanics of change.

Pakistan has many Cassandras; what it needs are prophets. It has leaders in abundance; what it needs are master builders. It needs wonks. Until some emerge, offering positive visions and practical proposals for realising them, the rattle of gunfire will continue to drown out the sound of falling trees.
Forging New Identities

Young Muslims are more adoptive and politically and culturally aware than we realise

ZAIN SARDAR


On the 30th March 2012, the Bradford West parliamentary constituency witnessed, arguably, ‘the most sensational victory in British political history’. The maverick politician, George Galloway, won a seat that had been staunchly held by the Labour since 1974 for his Respect Party. While all the media attention has subsequently focused on Galloway, with numerous interviews, allegations and accusations, less attention has been given to the Muslim population of Bradford West, the West Yorkshire constituency in
England. The Muslims turned out in droves to vote for Galloway and propel him to victory in the by-election.

The media obsession with the personality of Galloway, as much vitriolic as charismatic, overshadowed a far more salient issue: the changing nature of Muslim identity and its relation to space and place. What Bradford West by-election shows is that a radically new, progressive (as opposed to essentialist) and uncompromisingly heterogeneous conception of Muslim identity, alongside the spaces that are so critical for its flourishing, is developing (although this varies across countries) amongst second generation Muslims in the West. A transformation spearheaded by youth and Muslim women.

However, the critics and proponents of the self-proclaimed ‘Bradford Spring’ missed the point. The anti-war tilt and rhetoric of George Galloway and the Respect Party was seen by large parts of the media as one of the biggest contributors to Galloway’s success. The Muslim cheerleader for the Labour Party, Mehdi Hasan, who recently moved from New Statement to Huffington Post, felt obliged to ask: ‘why is it that most British Muslims get so excited and aroused by foreign affairs, yet seem so bored by and uninterested in domestic politics and the economy?’ Hasan argued that British Muslims have allowed themselves ‘to be defined by foreign policy and, in particular, by events in the Middle East for far too long...we have to stop our navel-gazing and victim mentality’. Hasan, who often lets his anger cloud his judgement, clearly failed to see that Bradford West by-election was a local issue: it was all about electing a Member of Parliament who would pay attention to the local needs of local Muslims. What could be more local than that?

British Muslims, Hasan thundered in his Guardian ‘op ed’, have trapped themselves into a ‘comfort zone’ or even ‘ghetto’ of fantastical obsession and lurid curiosity around foreign affairs in reaction to demonization in the media and the detriment of domestic politics. The point is to ‘show our fellow citizens that we care not just about events in Palestine and Pakistan, but Portsmouth and Paisley too’. But, of course, the Muslims can do both – simultaneously. They can care about what’s happening to their communities internationally as well as care about their local communities.

There is also the question of the complexities of the media narrative and the special place it has for the Muslim community. Since 9/11, Muslims
have been systemically portrayed as the ‘enemy within’, vilified and
demonised as some subterranean Other or pantomime arch-villain that
have nothing better to do than conspire and engage in clandestine activity
to bring down ‘the West’. The constant negative stereotypes and emphasis
on suspected Muslim terrorists has strengthened the association in
mainstream discourse between Islam and terrorism in the minds of many.
A candidate who questions these narratives, although not always positively,
is bound to appeal to the Muslim electorate. In contrast, a party that has
both directly and indirectly promotes these stereotypes is not likely to find
favour with the Muslim community – even if traditionally Muslims have
been staunch Labour supporters.

The image of Islam that has been touted in the mainstream media is very
much of an ossified, architectonic edifice of religious dogma - a monolith
of obscurantism if you like. In his excellent exploration of the causes of
Muslim alienation in the West, Justin Gest shows that Islam has been seen
as ‘irreducible, impermeable, undifferentiated and immune to processes of
change.’ It is because of this ‘essentialist discourse’ that parts of the Western
media have been ‘able to broad-brush Muslims as a threat to the equally
undifferentiated, “good” societies of the West.’ It is exactly because this
simplistic and puerile dichotomy has been framed so strongly by the
Western media that Muslim extremists are able exploit, so easily, this
antagonistic division for their own ends.

But the demonization of Muslims in western media, literature and
scholarship is an old story. What is relatively new is that the idea of a
Muslim identity has been forced onto the public agenda. Unlike other
people, Muslims have to justify their existence: they must brand themselves
as ‘moderates’, ‘liberals’ or ‘fundamentalists’. Debates focussed on side-
lining radical Islam, in Europe and the US, promote and perpetuate a
moderate, cuddly, apolitical Islam. The internal conflict between different
interpretations within Islam is now a matter of public interest. Young
Muslims are thus forced into adopting a Muslim identity as they are
permanently on the defensive and under continual pressure of judgment
from society. As Gest puts it, ‘while many other Britons will also question
their identity, this is typically a quiet and more personal struggle that is not
given the public scrutiny and paranoid treatment that young Muslims are
attracting from their schools and workplaces’. An oppositional Muslim
identity is thus hoisted onto young Muslims as they react to the inquisition brought about by negative media coverage. But young Muslims are not just empty vessels into which any identity can be poured. Rather, Gest argues, they have proactively constructed a positive counter-identity as ‘younger generations of Muslims’ reclaim a ‘stigmatized identity’ and invert it ‘into a positive attribute’.

Bradford West was a demonstration of this ‘positive attribute’. Far from playing the victim, Muslims were actively politically engaged in the by-election; their empowerment has taken on a political edge. This means they refuse to be taken for granted; Muslim votes are not ‘votes in the bank’ for the Labour Party. Respect’s strategy in Bradford West centred heavily on targeting Muslim women and youth. These sections of the community were always going to be the key to winning the election, especially when more than a third of the constituency is made of Asian women. The campaign was highly organised and targeted. The Guardian journalist Helen Pidd, interviewing women campaigning for Galloway, explains how the women were mobilised: ‘they assigned pairs of women to knock on each door and introduce their “sisters” to the politics of Galloway, choosing to call during the day when the man of the house was likely to be at work. They also targeted primary schools, waiting at the schools gates when the optimum number of mums would be gathered’. While the Labour Party ignored both women and the youth, and took their votes for granted, Respect’s strategy centred on empowering self-organised groups of Muslim women in talking to and forming bonds with others in the community. These women were no longer going to be ‘associated with weapons and jihad.’

In contrast, the local Labour Party was dominated by Asian men who relied on clan politics; the traditional biraderi system which is characterised by kinship, age and rigid hierarchy (with the South Asian male on the top), to deliver a Labour victory. The modus operandi of Labour canvassers was to knock on doors and ask to have a word with the husband of a Muslim family, in which case it would be assumed that the rest of the family would vote the right way along the same line. This scenario and clan system has been untouched in many local councils as many people were elected during the 1980s and the 1990s on this basis. The leader of the biraderi, acting as a voice for his fiefdom, automatically delivered the votes of his clan to Labour. The scores of Muslim women galvanised by Respect were definitive
in challenging the culture practices of the biraderi system; they initiated its breakdown and its stranglehold over the voting patterns in Bradford West. This was significant breakthrough. It also motivated young Muslims frustrated with a system which kept elder Muslim men in control of the political establishment.

The Respect strategy of engaging Muslim women was not only simply based on the obvious fact that they spoke to other Muslim women in their native tongue. It was also based on a plethora of recent research which shows that Muslim women are the most active agents of change in their communities and play a proactive part in creating new identities. They are most likely to challenge ethnic practice; specifically when it comes to religious issues. Canvassers for Respect ensured that they emphasised that there was nothing Islamic about the biraderi. The universal discourse and values of Islam were used to supersede the ethnic practices that were seen as ossified and an impediment to progress. This was particularly important for Muslim women who face dual discrimination being an ethnic minority and being women. They therefore had the most to gain from breaking a system that is primarily based on exclusivity; and the inclusive universal message of Islam provided the best antidote. This kind of engagement is not unique to Bradford. A Scottish government funded study found that Muslim women were engaging actively within their communities in Scotland to dispel stereotypes that they were fundamentally oppressed due to their religion. Indeed, young Muslim women throughout the West are systematically standing up to oppressive ethnic practices and using social criticism to decouple Islam from ethnic and cultural practices.

There is another strand of research that suggests that Muslim women of older generation tend not to have many friends. Respect’s female canvassers provided a chance for Muslim women voters to build up some major associational relationships they may not have had the opportunity to engage in beforehand. Bradford West also highlighted a generational divide within the Muslim community. While many first generation Muslims still strongly identity with their ethnicity and cultural heritage, second generation Muslims are identifying with their religion. Indeed, it was obvious in Bradford West that religion has become the primary identity for many young Muslims, whether they actually practiced their religion or not. The young increasingly question their elders, undertake their own research on
Islam, and compare what they had discovered with what their elders believe.

But this religious identity is complex. Using religion as a marker, such as Muslim women wearing hijab, tends to work only in the context of the West. Religion tends to become irrelevant when young Muslims visit Pakistan, Bangladesh or Turkey. Many British Muslims prefer to be seen as British, with or without hijab or beard, in their ancestral homeland. The meaning of identity thus changes in different places: it is defined by space and place.

There is, of course, an international and political dimension to this religious identity. Second generation Muslims are eager consumers of international affairs. To some extent, this is reaction to the media discourse; but there are also other reasons. As Sughra Ahmed states in Seen and Not Heard, the religious identity include ‘layers of multiplicity in stories of migration, identities and histories, both pre and post migration. It is certainly further complicated by the focus of the media and other agencies attaching labels, implying Muslims are a foreign being within our borders and becoming obsessed with young Muslims and their views on foreign affairs, which often results in making young Muslims feel confused when their British identity is questioned in public domains.’

Engagement with international affairs thus becomes an instrument both for reacting to the media discourse - young Muslims feel they need to provide answers on issues of international importance (such as foreign interventions) as that’s what’s expected of them – and to question the master narratives of the West. Here, the concept of the ummah, the worldwide Muslim community, comes in particularly handy. For some, the ummah has become an issue of loyalty: if Muslims owe their allegiance to an abstract notion of international brotherhood and sisterhood of Islam, then they must be disloyal to the country where they live. This assertion is based on the assumption that Muslims are truncated individuals unable to do two things at the same time. But for young Muslims, the ummah is a source of transnational solidarity and universal values in the face of oppression. The tension between the transnational and local place is used for creative purposes. Young Muslims use the universal values and discourse of Islam, and the collective solidarity of the Ummah, as a way to mediate and negotiate their local sense of place, as well as a way to reject the particulars of cultural practice, from East or the West, or ossified and mechanical ritual. As contributions to Being Young and Muslim demonstrate, religious
identity is often used to question the narratives of an imposed modernity and reconfigure what it means to be young, modern and Muslim in a globalised world. You can be hip, cool and religious. Far from being ‘exceptional’, young Muslims, in Bradford as well as throughout the world, are creating a new kind of politics that is both democratic and transformative.

For young generations of Muslims, it would seem, religion is a way to negotiate a sense of belonging. Religion is used as a source of transnational values, as an instrument of empowerment, and to mediate between their local place and their Muslim identities. In Germany, for example, Turkish immigrants ‘use their transnational practices not to disconnect from German society but, on the contrary, to build meaningful lives within local neighbourhoods that combine aspects of Turkish and German cultures’ (Ryan, 2012, pp103). In France, ‘transnational spaces’, Andre Elias Mazawi tells us in his contribution to Being Young and Muslim, are used by Muslims as ‘a fulcrum in approaching issues of integration, social diversity, and multiculturalism’. In Turkey, the ‘post-Islamist youth’, to use the description of Ayse Saktanber, who also contributes a chapter to Being Young and Muslim, have ‘pieced together from various sources of communal ties, ideals and worldviews’ new identities that not only question naked secularism but rethink and reconnected religious and politics in a creative and pragmatic ways. The examples can be multiplied manifold.

This new Muslim identity can be seen as a new ‘sociological type’. Like a fundamentalist, Islamic identity, it is not dependant on religious conviction. It expresses a sense of collective solidarity both in the West and the Muslim world in the face of a neo-liberalism that is undermining communal and collective belonging. As Justin Gest puts it, ‘the collective strength empowers young Muslims in the light of their feelings of helplessness resisting the onslaught of a perceived neo-imperial ideology and discriminatory society’. Young Muslims may use Islam to build a sense of collective identity against worldwide injustice, but this is not dependent on Islamic pieties, obscurantist dogma and ritualistic practice.

As such, the emerging Muslim identity can be seen as a more flexible ‘quasi-ethnic sociological formation which facilitates a range of factors other than scripture’ (Meer, 2012, Muslims in Britain, pp 158). But this does not mean that scripture is overlooked altogether. The conflicting identities are often negotiated on the bases of hermeneutic engagement with the sacred...
texts as well as Islam in lived experience. All of which serves to emphasis the many layers that are inherent within a Muslim identity.

The Ummah and Islamic discourses provide some stability in a rapidly changing world. Islam’s Universalist discourse and its influence on Muslim identity, as both Gest and Ahmed show, is an adoptive mechanism for Muslims in the West. It enables cooperation and collaboration in mutually shared effort in a contradictory society. In the Muslim world itself, as the contributions to *Being Young and Muslim* demonstrate, young Muslims are re-appropriating and reinterpreting Islamic values to create a new cultural politics in the concrete context of local place. To put it another way, the abstract nature of the Ummah as a pure ‘Muslim consciousness’ does not work without the engagement with the particulars of local place and culture and their embedded social relationships. This adoption involves the mediation between the transnational element of being a Muslim and the politics of local place and its corresponding fluidity of social, cultural, gender and ethnic associations.

We can associate this mediation with the concept of ‘transmodernity’ which is ‘designed to address the positive element of self-renewal and self-reformation that exists in all diverse world cultures.’ (Sardar, pp 26) The Muslim identity amongst the youth of Bradford, and the emerging identity amongst Muslims in the West and elsewhere are leading the way in reinvigorating not just Islam but Muslim cultural practices to ensure that Islam does remain a stagnant monoculture. These young Muslims are the ‘interpretative community’ that seek to take ‘Muslimness’ in a progressive rather than insular and essentialist direction. Instead of reinforcing the message of Islam as a domineering and officious ideology, a new generation of Muslims are renegotiating and finding a consensus through a ‘Muslim identity’ that seeks nothing less than to embed itself into the mainstream discourse.

The dialectic between local and transnational spaces within Muslim identities ensures it is a flexible construction that is always in the process of being negotiated and accommodated. Negotiation always has the possibility of new interpretation, to renew cultural practices and concepts within Islam, and thus leads the way to a conception of a progressive Muslim space. Spaces themselves, according to the geographer Doreen Massey (*Messey 2005*), are nothing but the complex interrelation of social
relationships that produce the distinct identity of a local place. But as social relations are always changing, any sensible notion of place has to have progressive identity rather than an essentialist one. Young Muslims, it seems, understand this more than media commentators or western experts realise.

It is an exciting time to be a young Muslim.

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