

GLOBAL CITIES VERSUS NATIONAL IDENTITIES: HOW THE MODERN WORLD WORKS
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in Felix Meritis, Amsterdam on the occasion of the public event of P!oneers, a group of recognized young leaders—from Amsterdam and from New York City—brought together in the framework of the celebration of NY400 for a dialogue on how social innovators from different disciplines and cultures can work together to promote active citizenship in diverse, open cities such as Amsterdam and New York City.

It's always such a pleasure to be in this city of canals and gabled homes, of reflections of canals in handsome windows, of reflections of reflections receding into a luminous calm. There's much wisdom in Amsterdam, and much relief from 8th Avenue, and I want to thank the Dutch government for having the wisdom to invest in the future promised by the creative young minds of the Pioneers gathered here, and for inviting me. It's the second time in a week that I've been in The Netherlands. The first was for a meeting on Afghanistan, organized in just three weeks and attended by close to 90 delegations. Don't be fooled by the laid-back, bicycle-riding, have-another-Heineken thing: the Dutch did not round the Cape, name New Amsterdam, tame the sea and harness the wind by pottering about but by *pioneering*. This may be why they identify with those whose spirit draws them to the un-trodden path.

Such paths are the lifeblood of the threatened profession I represent, journalism. Information is now more freely available than ever before on the ubiquitous screens that inhabit our lives. But I urge you always to test what you read against what you see. Not only what you see: what you smell, touch, feel, intuit as you venture, all senses on alert, into the unknown. When everyone is going in one direction, go the other way, not away from the storm, but into it. As Dante observed, "*Go your own way, and let the people talk.*" Understanding is not linear; it's a composite thing, a collage, made up of countless elements, some not easy to identify. Look around the next corner. Get out where you see what Judith Goldstein would call *humanity in action*. Don't allow fear – a commodity people love to pedal -- to hem you in. Don't let links, however viral, take the place of dirt and spice. A desert wind may tell you more than a thousand Facebook friends. Beyond the global mall, now a little emptier than in recent years, lies a still varied world.

One relatively inaccessible path – at least for western journalists who have a hard time getting visas – took me earlier this year to Iran, where I spent close to three weeks. Herodotus has this to say about the Persians:

"The general practice of the Persians is to deliberate upon affairs of weight when they are drunk; and then on the morrow, when they are sober, the decision to which they came the night before is put before them by the master of the house in which it was made; and if it is then approved of, they act on it; if not, they set it aside.

"Sometimes, however, they are *sober* at their first deliberation; but in this case they always reconsider the matter under the influence of wine."

The Persians, as you see, are a wise people.

Today, of course, there is no alcohol in the Islamic Republic of Iran – at least not outside private homes in swinging northern Tehran (where it is delivered, I found, in black garbage bags.) But I think the Iranian habit of reviewing decisions very closely, under various lights, through various prisms, endures.

There are two views of the Mullahs who have governed Iran for three decades now, since the 1979 revolution. The first is they are a mad, apocalyptic bunch driven by a literal reading of Islamic scripture and bent on the development of a nuclear bomb, the violent export of their revolution and the destruction of Israel. The second is that the belligerent, sometimes vile rhetoric of the regime masks an essential pragmatism, and that a look to east and west – at war-torn Afghanistan and Iraq – leads any Iranian to prize stability above all. *I subscribe to this second view.*

We live in a world of aggressive message multipliers. Images, caricatures, can take hold very quickly, such as the one of Iran as today's embodiment of totalitarian evil, a modern-day Nazi state. Debate can get stifled as such ideas snowball across the Web: we saw that in the approach to the Iraq war. Perhaps the first duty of a pioneer is to think differently, to challenge conventional wisdom. After all, as Talleryand observed, "Worse than a crime is a mistake." Mistakes happen precisely when taboo blocks debate.

To me Tehran itself, the capital of Iran, challenges received views. It is a megalopolis, not beautiful, but one of those cities, like Sao Paulo, whose energy is stirring. The city is set on a sloping plain running down from the Alborz Mountains, with the result that snow may fall on the higher, northern districts even as the sun shines on its southern sprawl. Even its weather is many-faceted.

The traffic is dense, leaving the gridlocked traveler much time to seek inspiration in the snowy peaks of the Alborz (at least when the smog lifts) and ponder the puzzles of Persia, a great civilization whose sophistication endures even under a repressive regime. Greater Tehran now has a population of 15 million people. The city keeps growing, part of a trend that has just seen *the world's urban population surpass the rural population for the first time in human history.* (By 2050, by the way, it is predicted that 6.4 billion people will live in cities, against 2.8 billion in the countryside, a fundamental change in the structure of the world.)

Most city dwellers these days, be they in Chengdu or Tehran, are networked in. About two-thirds of the Iranian capital's population is under 30. A majority of the millions of university students are women. They are in touch. They want the latest brands, be it in jeans or laptops. They are on cell phones and the Internet, they are watching satellite TV, they are blogging (blogs and sites get shut down, only to open again, and even the scandalous recent death of a blogger in Evin prison does not deter the activity), and they are thirsty for knowledge of the world. A student opponent of the regime told me the virtual world was fundamental to everything he does.

Iran illustrates some of the ways in which today's world exists in dimensions that defy the lines we still see on maps. Frontiers mislead. Everything has been globalized except politics. Facebook added 100 million members over the past nine months: that's one-and-a-half times the population of Iran. I don't know how many of those new members were Iranian; I do know that trans-border networks transform politics in ways that are often overlooked.

Connectedness dampens revolutionary fervor. It takes the total out of totalitarian. The individual is no longer completely subservient to the state and one party. Many Iranians do not like their regime – just as many Chinese do not like their one-party state – but theirs is not the dark night of the soul of the Soviet Union or Maoist China. *The era of revolutions is therefore over. If they happen they will be of the velvet form.*

Young Iranians, especially women in their hijabs confronting the morality police, want change but they are not going to die for it. They have their online world, which is one form of escape. They have learned to play an elaborate game of cat-and-mouse with the regime. They look back at their 30-year-old lives and what do they see? Traumatized childhoods spent under the bombardments of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (*one million dead between 1980 and 1988*), rationing, sirens, bombs shelters. Compared to that, life has gotten better. So they are pragmatic,

they want stability, just as the Cultural-Revolution-traumatized Chinese see stability as the only basis on which to consolidate their growing prosperity.

It is essential to understand this basic psychology when considering Iran's intentions. If one does, the only reasonable course is engagement, because engagement will help young Iranians to bring reform. Attacking Iran, by contrast, would awaken very worst isolationist, repressive and nationalist instinct of the regime and lock it in for the next half-century. I believe that President Barack Obama understands this. He sees that we live in a world of synthesis, of osmosis, of cross-fertilization, of networks ranging from environmentalist and human rights efforts to activism for the poor, where integrative forces are stronger than divisive religious, ethnic or nationalist movements, however much noise the latter make and however potent they may seem.

Indeed one way of viewing the world's intense hostility to former President Bush is as a global reaction against his *ignorance of, and apparent contempt for, connectedness*.

His world view was Manichean: good and evil, us and them, light and dark, a universe without nuance or shades of grey. But such simplistic slogans have outgrown their shelf life in a world that increasingly *knows what's going on*. American hypocrisy and double standards just don't wash any more. And of course one of the most fundamental things going on is that every problem – energy, climate, financial meltdown, massive urbanization, Afghanistan – now require global solutions. We have to surface the networks binding global cities into the international political discourse. We have to see plugged-in Tehranis in their Persian-produced cars when we talk Iran just as clearly as we see turbaned Mullahs.

Doing so will not resolve the problems of the world, but it will help.

Obama arrived just when we needed him, direct from what you pioneers have called *The Ministry of the Impossible*. I have called him the "providential mestizo." Black and white, a foot here, a foot there, a Christian with several Muslim forbears, he could scarcely better personify a world in flux, or the Generation Global of this early 21st century. What he is intent on doing above all, I think, is undoing that Manichean world view I just described, whose most disastrous effect has been the growing alienation of the Muslim world and the West. Hence his outreach to Iran, the visit he begins today to Turkey, and other gestures. As Obama's campaign showed, he is acutely aware of online networks and the way they have knit the world together *in a way that defies the imposition of the will of any one power, however great*.

Bridging rifts and misunderstanding between Islam and the West is, of course, by no means exclusively an American concern. Here in Europe, here in Holland itself, blood has been shed as the continent grapples with how to assume and accommodate its now partly Muslim identity. The murder in 2004 of an Islam-bashing movie director, Theo Van Gogh, by an Islamist fanatic shocked this nation and revealed the violence of the gulf. Today, the parliamentarian Geert Wilders, gains in popularity with this relentlessly repeated message that Islam is not a religion but a totalitarian political ideology. "Islam is not another leaf on the tree of religion," he has said.

Much more than a leaf, Islam is of course a branch on the monotheistic tree whose roots are Judaic. To claim otherwise is a gross insult to a great world religion followed in peace by more than a billion people. But of course there is no denying that Islam has been deployed as an ideology by a small minority of fanatics with fantastical aims to restore a Caliphate-like theocracy. *New York knows all about that*. These distinctions, and Wilders' outrageous decision to overlook them, need airing, which is why I oppose attempts to silence him like Britain's recent decision not to admit him to the country. Free speech is always compromised at peril. Veto rights cannot be afforded – not in post-Enlightenment Europe – to those who want to place Islam, or any other religion for that matter, beyond criticism.

Certainly that is not the tradition of two great cities, Amsterdam and New York, whose very emblems are openness. My argument is that Tehran has much more in common with them, despite appearances, despite its place in a repressive theocracy, than might initially appear possible. The same ideas, the same debates, the same fashions, the same problems circulate, because this is a networked world. I am of a generation that has difficulty grasping that. I don't believe that's the case of the pioneering generation here, which is a cause for great hope.

Many look at Iran's theocracy and see the very symbol of danger to the openness we prize. But perhaps there is another way of looking at it. After all, Iranians at this point know all about dreams of Islamic rule: been there, done that. They are not naïve, they are not deluded, they know all the problems of making compromises between Shariah law and modernity. They are coming out the far end of fervor. The compromises they are reaching, with difficulty, with a continuous ebb and flow of liberalization, are in my view seminal, not only for the Middle East. The biggest mistake is to believe that one day either Western liberalism or Islam will be triumphant in the Middle East, for a networked world can only be based on the trade-offs of global community. And it is to global community that the 21st century must be dedicated if it is avoid the tragedies of its predecessor.

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