

‘Democracy as unwavering principle’  
World wars and failed promises

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Summary

1. Democracy as unwavering principle is the only possible voluntarist response to present and future crises resulting from any cultural misunderstanding between East and West.
2. Cosmopolitanism as response to Globalism is the Kantian cultural precondition on the way to a violence-less, then violence-free world. Within the shift to cosmopolitanism is required a Clausewitz-like reflection on war and the conditions for the external use of violence for democratic purposes.
3. Progressivism is a cultural reference point of unsuspected potentiality, to be set by heirs of the socialist and social-democratic tradition in the right-left divide.

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1. *Prophetic words*

. . . No war is any longer possible for Prussia-Germany except a world war and a world war indeed of an extent and violence hitherto undreamt of. Eight to ten millions of soldiers will massacre one another and in doing so devour the whole of Europe until they have stripped it barer than any swarm of locusts has ever done. The devastations of the Thirty Years’ War compressed into three or four years, and spread over the whole Continent; famine, pestilence, general demoralisation both of the armies and of the mass of the people produced by acute distress; hopeless confusion of our artificial machinery in trade, industry and credit, ending in general bankruptcy; collapse of the old states and their traditional state wisdom to such an extent that crowns will roll by dozens on the pavement and there will be no body to pick them up; absolute impossibility of foreseeing how it will all end and who will come out of the struggle as victor; only one result

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is absolutely certain: general exhaustion and the establishment of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class.

Frederic Engels, London, 15 December 1887<sup>1</sup>

## 2. *A world made safe for democracy*

What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us. The program of the world's peace, therefore, is our program;

In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right we feel ourselves to be intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We stand together until the end.

An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak.

Woodrow Wilson, 8 January 1918.<sup>2</sup>

## 3. *Support for democracy, and for democratic forces in undemocratic regions unwavering principle of international relations*

Support for democracy throughout the world must become an unwavering principle of development policy – and of international relations in general. The rhetorical support for democracy expressed by the EU, the USA and other world powers is too often compromised in practice by support for convenient or friendly dictatorships. Governments justify this in the name of pragmatism and national interest, but time and again – in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Asia – we have seen that support for undemocratic government's leads to instability and conflict as well as impoverishment and abuse of human rights. And when – sooner or later – change comes, the credibility and national interests of those who have supported the dictatorship inevitably suffer. Democracy is perhaps the most

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<sup>1</sup> In Preface to Sigismund Borkheim, *Zur Erinnerung für die deutschen Mordspatrioten 1806-1807* (In memory of the German Arch-patriots of 1806-7), Göttingen-Zürich 1888. As cited in Lenin, 'Prophetic Words', 2 July 1918, *Pravda*, in *Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, Moscow 1972, 27, 494-499.

<sup>2</sup> Speech before the Joint Session of Congress, known as 'the 14 points Speech'.

powerful instrument we have for development and peace. Support for democracy, and for democratic forces in undemocratic regions, must become an unwavering principle of international relations.

Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, May 2003.<sup>3</sup>

One will find difficulty in discovering the thread common to these longish quotes, let alone of what such quotes have in common with the issue of cultural understanding. Allow me to bewilder you further by suggesting that the First World War offers that denominator, partly because of what it represents objectively, a waste land of unprecedented proportions for reasons that historians still quarrel about, but mostly for what it underlines in the negative, that is the failed Wilsonian principles of 'self-determination' for colonised peoples as the other coin of a world the US president wanted to make 'safe for democracy'.

There is no such thing about cultural understandings -- i.e. cultural characteristics that require for Shi'i Iraqis, Confucian Chinese, Nomadic Roma, Catholic Irish, Orthodox Serbs or Muslim Women a treatment informed other than by democratic values -- which is specific enough to undermine that which every human being, every political movement, and every government agree upon nowadays: that government must result from the regular and unfettered choice of its citizens, and that individuals have fundamental rights which need to be protected effectively *erga omnes*. All the rest, arguments about historic stages, religious and other types of fundamentalisms, fear of universal suffrage leading to undemocratic movements taking over, demographic considerations, special treatment to protect 'differences', all fall either within the pale of that common denominator as details, or outside it as false or dishonest figleaves to deny the need for the strict implementation of these two characteristics. At worst, one can quarrel about some secondary tactics to affirm that common denominator, but even tactics fall rapidly into place when it is sincerely acknowledged in the thought process and actively pursued as policy.

What has World War One got to do with that ?

When shorn of its proletariat jargon, it is hard to deny that the quote by Frederic Engels was indeed prophetic. It took Europe two active world wars, an eighty-year long Soviet parenthesis and one cold war to overcome in the main the spectre of war within it. This is not the case in the Middle East, whether in the continuing frictions with the EU and the West generally, but more importantly within the ME. This is the subject of the major 'cultural understanding' problem implied in our Seminar.<sup>4</sup> While the war prophesy of

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<sup>3</sup> *Europe and a New Global Order- Bridging the Global Divides, Report for the Party of European Socialists*, May 2003, p.70.

<sup>4</sup> The theoretical argument, though not a particularly profound one, is now rooted in Prof. Huntington's famous *Clash of Civilisations*, New York 1996 (originally an article in *Foreign Affairs*, 1993), which remains true in so far as the Middle East and the West are being estranged by extremes on the alleged ground of religious differences, and false in

Engels (and Lenin) continues to sound impressive with regard to Europe, it belongs to the past. In contrast, it remains as current today for the Near and Middle East (NME) as it was from the aftermath of the earth-shattering events in the region represented by World War I and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, through to the three Gulf Wars.<sup>5</sup>

So whenever a general, cultural metaphor is needed to render the feel for the phase at hand in the Middle East, it is difficult to conjure up a more powerful perspective than this image of the falling crowns whom no one will be found to pick up in the collapse. The First World War was a defining moment in European and world history, dozens of crowns rolled with no one to pick them up, but the cultural impact was no less devastating in the European psyche, as the war ended, not in a bang, but with a whimper, in TS Eliot's immortalised finale of the *Waste Land*. British citizens continue a century later to don the red poppy of remembrance for WWI's dead, in another testimony to the persistent collective wound; Hans Castorp descending to his death from *The Magic Mountain* is a third immortal cultural depiction, so is the last volume of Proust's *Remembrance*. Less known is the devastation wrought in the NME, the most powerful book to date on that period being David Fromkin's *A Peace to end all peace*.<sup>6</sup> The 21<sup>st</sup> century stage was set, in Balfour's declaration and the Sèvres conference, for a Palestinian-Israeli conflict that would get the sad honour of the longest ongoing living conflict in modern history, while other nation-states of very old civilisations were also being carved out for Anglo-French colonialism.

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so far as a) the book's seven 'civilisations' are a figleaf, the only real 'clash' meant concerns Islam and the West (this premise is also true for our Seminar); and b) the Israeli exception gets one footnote in the book, and no recognition as the key point to the 'clash'. More on this and the relevant references in our *The Middle East into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London 1996, 173-76, and in *Democracy in America* (in Arabic), Beirut 2001, 115-25.

<sup>5</sup> One should think the Gulf war as a continuum of Saddam Hussein's failed legitimacy through three wars, the first being the World War I-like Iran-Iraq butchery of 1980-88, with its use of gas by Hussein both against his people and against the Iranians, the second the occupation of Kuwait in August 1990 and its liberation in January 1991, and the third, which is the liberation/occupation of Iraq in April 2003, which is ongoing. We have tried to demonstrate in a number of publications since 1986 that the two first wars were in fact the result of Saddam Hussein's *fuite en avant* because of the domestic pressure on his rule. See our "A l'origine de la guerre Iran-Irak: l'axe Najaf-Teheran", *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, Paris, Autumn 1986, 119-136, "Obstacles to democratization in Iraq: A reading of post-revolutionary Iraqi history through the Gulf War", in E. Goldberg, R. Kasaba and J. Migdal eds., *Rules and Rights in the Middle East: Democracy, Law and Society*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1993, 224-247. The last, ongoing war, is impossible to understand outside the frustrated end of the second one which left Hussein in power despite his severe military defeat.

<sup>6</sup> D. Fromkin, *A Peace to end all Peace: the Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the modern Middle East*, New York 1989. The phrase 'war to end all wars' is Wilsonian.

Some lively historians like Robert Fisk like to draw a 1917/2003 parallel in the occupation by Baghdad by English and now Anglo-American power. This parallel argument can easily be made, and it is unfortunate that the skepticism prevailing in the area is all too easily borne out by history. This explains the relevance of the second quote, which is Wilson's dual promise of self-determination and democracy for the peoples of the Middle East. The promise remains so actual because it has remained unfulfilled since World War I. Instead, as the American isolationists collapsed the honest design of the most visionary of all American presidents, the ugly face of Anglo-French domination took over, and everyone is still paying the price of the promise betrayed. Instead of self-determination + democracy, we have had various colonisations, in addition to the colonial-settler experience of Jewish foreign implantation in Palestine,<sup>7</sup> an experience which has since taken over fascist characteristics<sup>8</sup> with the advent of the leader 'personally responsible' for the massacres of Sabra and Shatila to the helm in Israel in 2000, and the descent to inferno since.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The 'colonial' character was demonstrated over thirty years ago by Maxime Rodinson in "Israel, fait colonial ?", Special issue of *Les Temps Modernes* on the Arab-Israeli conflict, July 1967, 17-90. It is available also in a 1973 English translation.

<sup>8</sup> The qualification is Tony Judt in a recent article, "Israel: The Alternative", *The New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2003. Note that Judt limits the fascist qualification to the targeted assassinations' policy. While the qualification is open to question in our view, one element is certain, Israel has lost its long-standing character of an abolitionist state in the repertory of capital punishment-free countries. More gravely, governments and people in Europe and the United States, as well as colleagues in the Arab world, still talk of Israel as the 'only democracy' in the region. We have argued, on the basis of the groundbreaking work of the leading sociologist of Israel, Baruch Kimmerling, that it is wrong to consider Israel as a democratic country. For details, and references cited herein, Mallat et al. "The need for a paradigm shift in American thinking: Middle Eastern responses to 'what we are fighting for'", available on mallat.com in English and Arabic (also published in full in *al-Nahar*), and French (in press, *Travaux et Jours*)

<sup>9</sup> Kimmerling has recently coined the word 'politicide' to describe the actions of Ariel Sharon towards the Palestinians. Baruch Kimmerling, *Politicide: Ariel Sharon's War against the Palestinians*, London 2003. However enticing a concept, I am reluctant to introduce it for a practice which has precedents in history, and which is more accurately perceived as racial-colonial historically, and undemocratic both in contemporary law and practice. For the non-democratic nature of Israeli governance, see Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness*, California 2001, p.181: "Given the nature of Israeli 'reality', as described in this book..., it is easy to conclude that only one of the five necessary conditions for considering Israel as a democracy is present... The main reason for this is the historically inherent inability to separate religion from nationalism and nationality implicit in the 'Jewishness' of the Israeli state." This does not prevent "Israeli political culture and most of its academic analysts, however, [from] systematically and compulsively deny[ing] the basically undemocratic nature of the Israeli regime." (at p.182); and our "Lawyering in the Arab world: Lessons contemporary and classical", in George Sfeir ed., *Modernisation of Laws in the Arab World*, forthcoming.

Which brings us to Poul Rasmussen's quote and its corollary: for any cultural understanding, the unwavering promise must join an unwavering premise, which is democracy as universally understood. We can and should talk tactics, this is why we are here today. But such a clear definition of cultural understanding comes first, which means that Westerners must embrace democracy for the NME, and gear their tactics towards enforcing it. This is the cultural understanding which is our message, that is us 'decent' Arabs and MEasterners, to our US and European friends both in government and in opposition. It is as simple as it may sound naïve, for we know what the alternative looks like in an area full of precedents. A lack of common understanding about democracy is a certain recipe for a deeper and more tragic repeat of the ME catastrophes: Sabra and Chatila 1982, Halabja 1988, New York 2001, and the visages of these and other mass crime perpetrators, Saddam Hussein, Usama ibn Laden, and Ariel Sharon.

Allow me to push my luck with predictions, and the sense that the rot has taken root in the region so deeply that things are very much in the vein of the troubled period of 1917-1922, and has been indeed since at least 1991 when the promise of freedom from Saddam Hussein was betrayed by the promisor, George Bush Sr:<sup>10</sup> the ugliest dictatorship in the area was allowed by US troops to undermine the largest popular revolt in the history of Iraq. 2003 can be perceived in two ways: as a fulfillment of that betrayed promise, or as another episode of colonialism. We are at a turning point, and a world full with a 'troubled air' (Shakespeare, Woodrow Wilson) can be pregnant of many a possibility. Only democracy as common cultural understanding will allow the advent of the joined Wilson-Engels prophesy in terms of the democratic promise for the region: *a change in governance, that is a change of governments*. It is an oddity that the neoconservative administration in the US sounds far more Wilsonian than skeptical Europeans,<sup>11</sup> and another useful cultural understanding between the EU and the US is needed for that very post-modern conflict which is Iraq.

Leaving aside the issue of tactics and strategy to other occasions, let us indulge instead in some 'looking into the seeds of time', as Banquo in *Macbeth*. From the several questions emerging from a 'cultural understanding' between East and West, it might sound premature to talk about falling crowns, at a moment when radical republics are increasingly turning into absolute monarchies, and the sons of 'socialist' dictators filling up the shoes of their fathers as a recurrent pattern across the region. Premature it is not.

Surely, this is the manifestation of how deeply the rot has from the point of view of cultural understanding, which joins a simple battle for the meaning of words, like republics, democracy, sovereignty, or peace: On the emptied republican promise, there is hardly a single dictator in the region who is not seeking to perpetuate his power through his son. As democracy and independence (or self-determination), Selim Abou has

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<sup>10</sup> Speech of 15 January 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Of whom the central figure is Paul Wolfowitz.

courageously battled the emptying of such words in the modern public sphere,<sup>12</sup> and I have attempted my own, more modest attempt to draw the attention to the (mis)use of the concept of terrorism by both the Israeli and Arab leaders as another example of how quickly words get drafted for maximum emptiness of truth, and maximum ideological use.<sup>13</sup>

Empty words and twisted meanings are but one manifestation of the depth of the rot in NME ‘monarblics’, as the Arabic ugly hybrid neologism has it nowadays (*jamlaka*, from *mamlaka*, monarchy, and *jumhuriyya*, republic). So deep and twisted the rot has become that the key issue is not so much whether the crowns will roll – they have, at least from the perspective of legitimacy, long fallen in disfavour. The question is how to allow these crowns to roll with least possible bloodshed, including for present and would-be kings. This is where we must all read from the same cultural partition, which is how to hasten the change of governments across the region in favour of democracy. This is also why we need to overcome evident paradoxes, like in Iraq, of an occupation becoming a liberation; of bringing Saudi rule to democratic standards without even more medieval characters further wreaking havoc in Mecca and Riyadh; of restoring sovereignty and regular alternation in power to Lebanon without allowing local and regional mischief from making it lapse into civil war; of ending Israeli exceptionalism by protecting the Jewish community in Palestine-Israel without preventing Palestinian non-Jews, -- who have been expelled, dominated or discriminated against by Jews since 1948 --, from moving onto the steady path of full individual and collective equality with Israeli Jews. Like others, we have written books and articles on tactics and strategy for the Middle East to come of age, but the main democratic partition must take root, and have teeth. Like others, we have sometime taken action, for action, not words, will offer the true test.<sup>14</sup> *Mir hilft der Geist ! auf einmal seh’ ich Rat/ Und schreibe getrost: Im Anfang war die Tat.*<sup>15</sup> So far, the Wilsonian promise remains unfulfilled, and ‘the last war dance’, as in the following section of the Engels passage, continues to wreak havoc on NME societies.

This will not be easy: from the Wilsonian prediction of the turning point for the world in 1918, to the elder Bush’s talk about ‘the new world order’ in the wake of the Gulf War, to the younger Bush’s present promise of democracy after the third Gulf War, all the ‘victors’ have seen it their victory as the start of a brave new world. So far, ‘Twas new to thee’ only, as in Shakespeare’s famous cynical reminder by Prospero to the naïve wonderment of his daughter in *The Tempest*. The difficult task ahead is the challenge of

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<sup>12</sup> Sélim Abou, *Les Libertés*, Beirut 2003, 129-50 (Speech of the Rector of USJ, 19 March 2001)

<sup>13</sup> For instance, “September 11 and the Middle East: Footnote or watershed in world history ?,” *Crimes of War Project*, September 2002 (Special issue on September 11, a year after), [www.crimesofwar.org](http://www.crimesofwar.org); “The original sin: ‘Terrorism’ or ‘crime against humanity’ ?”, *Case Western Journal of International Law*, 34, 2002, 245-248.

<sup>14</sup> In national and international fora, see the Sabra and Shatila affair started in Brussels in June 2001, the Indict organization, founded in London in 1996 to bring to justice the Iraqi leaders, and the Imam Musa Sadr’s disappearance case, started in Beirut in 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Goethe, *Faust*, lines 1236-7.

history through an Engels-like prediction reactualised: while the rot strikes deep, helping the change, manufacturing it with a democratic purpose will avoid unnecessary parentheses such as the Soviet experiment, or painful corrections like World War 2: in Middle Eastern terms, Islamic and other religious fundamentalisms, or continuous civil and regional wars.

We could stop here, but this Congress deserves more than underlining democracy as common cultural understanding with our Western friends, a position clearly reached already in Poul Rasmussen's report, so let me indulge in a few further reflections on globalism, war, and progressivism.

There is one radical proposal which can be contributed in this session, which is the replacement of our global efforts with cosmopolitan ones. They are, of course, two coins of the same phenomenon of a shrinking planet, but globalism is a fact, I would submit, whereas cosmopolitanism is a choice. The latter pedigree is Kantian, and Kantian Cosmopolitanism is a concept which we should consider in response to free-flow unhindered market-drifting Globalism. Cosmopolitanism as corrective to Globalism is what we in this forum can offer as a modicum of renewal to the world, in the sense so clearly delineated in Kant's treatise on 'Eternal Peace', *Zum Ewigen Frieden* (1795), which moved the intellectual horizons of humanity from the mutualism of Christian and other world religions to a rule of higher, more sophisticated law – Kant's celebrated principle in *the Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft* for every person to act as if her action be a universal law.<sup>16</sup> In international relations, this translates into Kantian Cosmopolitanism for the international action of governments and people, an action which is premised on its status of universal, enforceable law. This is one theme we should perhaps research further, especially in consideration to the aporia of war and international law in a post-Clausewitzian world.

A third theme emerges under the label 'progressive', which is a shared understanding of political culture in the US-EU-NME triangle, for it rings a particular bell in the Middle East, with the tradition in Lebanon of the late Kamal Jumblatt, and in Iraq of the late Kamel al-Chadirji; in Europe with its rediscovered Jauresian values through the present project, and in the US in the rediscovery of the Progressive Age. The Progressive Age, which was fleetingly revived in John McCain's presidential campaign in 2000 in the US, has been summed up in the important book by Robert Putnam in ways which will be familiar to this Congress:

As a political movement, the Progressives were responsible for the most thoroughgoing renovation of public policies and institutions in American history, rivaled only by the New Deal. The secret ballot (1888, Kentucky); popular initiative and referendum (1898, South Dakota); presidential primary elections (1900, Minnesota); the city manager system (1903, Galveston, Texas); the direct election of senators (1913); women's suffrage (1893, Colorado, 1920 in the U.S.

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<sup>16</sup> § 7. *Grundgesetz der reinen praktischen Vernunft*: Handle so, daß die Maxime deines Willens jederzeit zugleich als Prinzip einer allgemeinen Gesetzgebung gelten könne.

Constitution) – in a few short decades all these fundamental features of our political process were introduced into state and local politics and then gradually diffused nationwide. Quite apart from these basic political reforms, this was also the most intense period of local administrative reform in our history.

Nationally, the Progressives laid the institutional cornerstones for fiscal and monetary policy with the Federal Reserve (1913), the income tax (1913), and the Bureau of the Budget (1921). The first consumer protection legislation in American history (the Food and Drug Administration and federal meat inspection in 1906, the Federal Trade Commission in 1914); the first environmental legislation (the national forest system in 1905 and the national park system in 1913); the creation of the Departments of Commerce and Labor (1913) and the General Accounting Office (1912); strengthened antitrust regulations (1903); child labor laws (1916); the eight-hour day (beginning with the railways in 1916); workmen's compensation (1916); first federal regulation of the communications industry (1910); the US Bureau of Investigation (1908; renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1935); federal campaign finance regulation (1907); the biggest trade liberalization in more than half a century (1913); the foundations for federal water policy in the western states (1902); and Mother's Day (1914) – hardly an area of public policy was left untouched by the Progressive avalanche of policy initiatives. Typically, innovation began with experimental reforms in states and local communities, then gathered strength as it thundered toward Washington.<sup>17</sup>

Both the content and context of this long quote invite a reflection on progressivism as the convergence of unexpected historic strands, beyond the traditional ideological divide, of the EU-US-NME triangle: as for context, Robert Putnam, a leading American sociologist, chose this particular federal age to underline his call for the renewal of community bond and feelings in America, very much in the way this Congress seems to appeal to a 'progressive' vocable which puts it under a tradition that starts with the Enlightenment, and develops in a particular belief in human progress. Under this form of cultural understanding, perhaps we can ensure that the process does lead not only to the Middle East becoming part of a project on global progressive governance, - or progressive cosmopolitanism as we are suggesting -, but that the common denominator reaches well beyond the NME geographically. I suspect, though cannot be as comfortable as on my Mid-eastern turf, that the Gandhi and Sun Yat Sen traditions have much to say about 'progressivism' and 'cosmopolitanism', and we should invite Indian and Chinese colleagues to broaden that nascent cultural understanding by building with us a few more bridges.

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York 2000, 398.