

“Globalization and Culture”

Address by Queen Noor of Jordan

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It is a privilege to join you in these 50th Anniversary celebrations and I am so grateful to The Aspen Institute for the invitation to return to Aspen for the first time in around 30 years. On my first childhood visit, the Aspen Meadows provided a peaceful haven for our family enroute to D.C. and my father’s post in the Kennedy Administration.

Later I returned to gain some independence and self reliance through a series of odd jobs, including working with Bob Lewis on the first model of Aspen’s Wildwood School designed to instill an environmental ethic in the young, and as a gofer of sorts mapping the grounds at the Institute. It was then I attended my first Institute conference on Technological Change and Social Responsibility, which featured the wisdom and expertise of the amazing Buckminster Fuller. These proved pivotal influences on my later choices of studies and work.

That first conference, so exactly predicting the then almost inconceivable impact of communications technology and the consequent process of global integration on our selves, societies and cultures- should have prepared me well for taking up today where it left off.

But, in fact, in the course of preparing for this meeting, I found my efforts hampered by some of the chief aspects of globalization itself. As I have struggled, perhaps along with many of you, to get a clear mobile-phone line through these majestic peaks, it reinforced my conviction that globalization is as yet far from universal, in spite of the material evidence on the ground in the very cosmopolitan Aspen town center and airport! And when I did manage to connect to the internet, I found that with the diversity and sheer, overwhelming bulk of information of millions of web pages merely a click away, preparing 12 minute remarks is [as the old saying goes] like trying to get a drink of water from a fire hose. And that info-glut can manifest itself in a rather disorienting sense of déjà vu.

For instance: one writer, awestruck at the interconnectedness of globalization, writes, “When has the entire earth ever been so closely joined together, by so few threads? Who

has ever had more power and more machines, such that with a single impulse, with a single movement of a finger, entire nations are shaken?” And another adds, “when . . . it will have made distances disappear, it will not only be commodities which travel, but also ideas which will have wings. When fiscal and commercial barriers will have been abolished between different states, as they have already been between the provinces of the same state; when different countries, in daily relations, tend towards the unity of peoples, how will you be able to revive the old mode of separation?”

Are these op-ed columnists discussing the pros and cons of cyber trading and instantaneous capital transfers? No – the first is a German philosopher in 1774, and the second is the French diplomat Chateaubriand, marveling at the effect of the steamship, the railroad and the telegraph in 1841.

No doubt ever since the invention of the wheel and the cuneiform tablet, people have been shaking their heads at the dizzying pace of change spawned by new technology, and wondering what it will be like to live in a totally universalized world. Throughout history, civilizations have been shaken by global transformations, when people, commerce, and ideas reached the edge of the map. The Roman empire and the rule of centralized bureaucracy, the Renaissance and the rise of secular humanism, the Enlightenment and capitalist democracy, all of these movements transcended borders.

As so many speakers have noted, what separates the current phase from the previous waves of international interaction that have washed across the map over the past several millennia, is the increased role that individuals, and local businesses, organizations and communities, have to play in the process. The innovation of the new technology is its lightning speed and its limitless interactivity — the routes of communication are no longer top-down, but a multi-directional , and multi-banded web.

But somehow, in the face of all these homogenizing forces, individual cultures survive. Up against the strength of traditions, habits and religion, predictions of the death of difference and the end of history always turn out to be premature. The very technologies that many fear could dilute cultures may promote the opposite.

The current wave of globalization seems to be beset by paradoxes. Our world grows more fragmented even while it becomes more interconnected. [Since the end of the Cold War, nine out of ten conflicts are local or internal , and most are driven by socio-economic disparity or some form of political discrimination or exclusion.] People whose only remaining possession is their culture are relying on ethnic and religious divisions to reinforce their sense of identity in an increasingly impersonal, homogenized world -- a world growing more polarized and unstable due to the widening gulf between the haves and the have nots and the know nots.

The current international system, as Tom Friedman called it Sunday evening, is not an idea to be accepted or rejected, but a fact – a force to be managed with pragmatism and vision. Time and energy can best be used determining how to harness it, rather than debating its advantages or shortcomings. Whether our shared destiny is detrimental or beneficial to the world majority depends on how we approach it — with self-interest disguised as progress in the triumph of the market, or with cultural sensitivity, caution and a true sense of participation.

While on the one hand, the communications revolution of the last few decades — the irrepressibility of the CNN camera, the satellite dish, the mobile phone, the fax machine and the internet —are influencing many countries towards more participatory forms of governance and more global interdependence, at the same time they have bombarded the “have-nots” with images of precisely what they don’t have, breeding resentment, anger, isolationism and even aggression.

The one-size-fits-all political/social/economic model doesn’t fit everyone. Some societies on the fringes are not yet even modern countries, and nevertheless are being asked to move instantaneously from tribal structures to global states. * Especially with economic aid levels at an all time low, it is simplistic, if not downright cruel, to counsel belt-tightening where belts have never been loose, or to tell people who have no boots to pull themselves up by their boot straps – especially from counselors with expensive belts and boots. Globalization, to benefit everyone, must shed the idea that its purpose is to mold weaker countries’ cultures in the image of stronger ones.

The promise of globalization is a fallacy if it is not shared. But it is important not to let new technology blind us to what people need. Internet access is useless to those who have no telephone, or can’t read, or are expected to feed themselves on less than a dollar a day. And lest I be accused of romantic, socialist ideas, remember that worldwide stability, equity, health and prosperity are good, actually essential for global business as was emphasized the opening evening. (by Jim Wolfensohn)

*The first observation I made 25 years ago when I began working in the developing world was that progress cannot be imposed from outside. If the methods for tackling a society’s problems are entirely imported, without respect for cultural and spiritual principles, they may well result in a trade deficit in values as crippling as any trade deficit in the market – presenting a threat to social and political security and a poverty of spirit and identity that would be humanity’s loss.

Globalization need not mean global homogenization, but provides the opportunity for the entire world to gain from the unique wisdom of all its disparate parts. Ideally, increased ease of communication can promote both harmony of ideas and celebration of diversity. There is growing consensus on human rights and needs and the importance of democracy and sustainable development resulting from open, interactive global dialogue which has been enriched by a diversity of cultural perspectives.

This is what makes the current phase of globalization unique. The Internet has allowed civil society networks to develop between within and among nations, increasing their power to influence policies and decision makers. More than ever before, minority, even individual, opinion plays a major role in forging the larger consensus.

Information and communication technology have altered the identity of the state in democratic and non-democratic regimes alike. Access to more diverse sources of information by a wider range of participants and interests, rising literacy rates and continued proliferation of new technologies will lead to increased transparency, and organizational and individual empowerment.

It has enabled even less wired regions such as Latin America, China and South East Asia and international organizations to use new communications to advance both local and global agendas.

In the Middle East and North Africa region, this potential empowerment of civil society organizations provides the possibility to shatter existing monopolies by overcoming political and geographical boundaries and enabling organizations to mobilize local and international support for democratic, health, environmental and development issues.

This new sense of participation is enlivening other areas of culture as well. We are seeing this in discussions within and about Islam in our region and the rest of the Muslim world. While in the West, so-called fundamentalism is viewed in very simplistic terms, the reality is much more diverse -- and is a focus of intense examination. The Internet is providing the instrument for wider explorations of the teachings Islam and a forum for broader dialogue within the faith and among different faiths Just as differing cultural viewpoints are tempering the monolithic market orientation of globalization, the technologies of globalization are fostering diversity and debate within cultures themselves.

Some of the other most valued ideas that we share, from the Magna Carta to Gandhi's passive civil disobedience, are the products of particular cultures, and the individuals steeped in them. Cultural diversity is as irreplaceable as environmental diversity. Just

like the ultimate cure for cancer, possibly hidden somewhere in the rainforest, it is vital that we not homogenize cultures to extinction, because we risk destroying potential inspirational catalysts for progress.

Rather than fostering the divisions between cultures that can breed resentment and even violence, global networks can, and should, provide a means of cross-fertilization of cultures for the growth of peace, and the prosperity in which it can flourish. For several years, Palestinian students and academicians have marshaled the internet to tell their story to the world and discuss the challenges of building a Palestinian state. The region's academics circumvent travel restrictions and limited financial resources and meet colleagues in cyberspace. And as Palestinian and Israeli negotiators work to resolve extremely difficult final status issues, individuals from both sides of the divide meet in that non-territorial space to address concerns, and air opinions.

In Jordan, too, I have seen how even small countries of limited means can work to harness the forces of globalization. His Majesty King Hussein, a globalist by nature and inclination throughout his reign, envisioned Jordan and her people facilitating networks of cooperation and dialogue within the region and internationally. He was a devoted public servant, who led his country from a pre-industrial state to a modern paradigm of political, economic and social progress in two generations — accomplishing these extraordinary achievements by advancing universal education, an exemplary health care system, the role of women, and a participatory and pluralistic system of governance — all within the framework of traditional Arab and Islamic cultural principles.

King Hussein believed deeply that heritage and tradition must complement innovation. For twenty years, the annual Jerash Festival of Culture and the Arts has facilitated a dialogue among civilizations through the universal languages of art, music and dance. Perhaps our greatest accomplishment has been to create and sustain in spite of occasional enormous political and economic pressures a public space or sphere as Michael Sandel described on Sunday, in an ancient Roman city symbolic of a much earlier global expansion, which brings together people of all socio-- economic and geographical backgrounds/conditions to celebrate and honor national pride and identity, and cultural and artistic interaction.

Similarly, Jordanian NGOs have set up programs to turn local traditional handicrafts such as carpet weaving and embroidery into entrepreneurial cottage industries, marketed on the world wide web. These programs boost incomes, particularly for women, building their self-confidence and self-reliance and benefiting individuals, families, and communities on every measure of well-being. But equally important, through the internet they provide a new forum to share Jordanian heritage and culture with the world.

Globalization, and civilizations and their constituent cultures, are not irrevocably incompatible. They can be viewed as two sides of the human story, economic and material on the one hand and social and spiritual on the other, each vitally important.

Globalization itself has given rise to new constituent civilizations, where new bonds have been formed across nations, cultures, and continents, increasing the level of interaction among peoples.

It is almost ironic that one such new-sprung culture was the anti-globalization protest coalition at the WTO conference in Seattle last year, later in Washington DC and further echoed by French Farmers and others around the world — a culture against globalization made possible by the forces of globalization itself.

But it is important to note that these protests are having an impact – these voices are being heard and, where thoughtful and constructive, even welcomed into the policy debate itself, according to Jim Wolfensohn and the constituent cultures are contributing to the larger culture.

The strongest democracies work on a principle of checks and balances; the rights of the individual balanced against the needs of the many. The interrelationship between globalization and culture should be similar. We can have a global civilization made up of many voices — the voices of cultures and of individuals. Each cultural voice can add to the global conversation just as each individual voice adds to national ones. Those other voices, those voices of difference, oblige the larger civilization to pause, and examine itself, its priorities and its aspirations. This is why the United Nations, on the initiative of Iranian President Khatami, has proclaimed 2001 as the Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations.

Any theory that pits warring camps against one another, whether it is clashing civilizations or globalization vs. culture itself, is far too simplistic for the complex world of the new millennium — and in fact, it doesn't do a very good job of representing earlier millennia, either. One of the previous waves of globalization was the spread of Islam in the 7th and 8th century from the Middle East throughout the Mediterranean and into the Far East. After the upheaval of conquest, rather than intolerance and oppression, as many feared then (and some fear today), the movement brought a level of tolerance, religious freedom and cultural sensitivity unusual for the time. Islam spread enlightenment, justice and equity, intellectual creativity and the concept of a humane society, and through education and the preservation of knowledge helped bring about the end of a dark period in European history.

There are even earlier examples of not a clash, but a synergy of civilizations. Jordan has been a crossroads of cultures for about 10,000 years, with each succeeding group including the Phoenicians, the Nabateans, the Romans and Islam, bringing its own elements. In fact, Jordan, located at the juncture of the major trade routes of the ancient world, could be considered one of the first case studies in globalization. Jordan's culture and history is neither a monolithic and immutable structure, nor has it been overwhelmed and destroyed by global forces. Rather, like one our handcrafted carpets, it is a beautiful fabric of interwoven strands from many sources.

And so must be the world culture we hope to weave from the many and varied constituent cultures. We must never forget that this new global system is made up of billions of individuals, each of whom has a face, a voice, and a right to participate. As overwhelming as the idea may seem, the technology is there to give everyone that opportunity. Ideas are the new world currency. We must spend ours wisely, to the benefit of others.