

## The West and the Rest: What's Your Point of View?

It is a truism to say that the way that anyone views anything depends upon the observer's point of view. Men see matters from a male point of view, women from a female one, rich people feel justified in their wealth, poor people think the the rich are robbers. The same can be observed on the international scene. During the period of the Cold War the West saw itself as the champion of the free enterprise system, the Soviet Union as the advocate of a fair distribution of world resources.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, it seems to me possible to make a binary distinction between The West and The Rest. The West, led by the solitary US superpower, includes Canada, Europe (delineation still unclear), Israel, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. The Rest consists of Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East (minus Israel), South Asia and most of South-East Asia. The West, I believe, has come to have a consciousness of itself which amounts to a super-nationalism; in other words people identify themselves as Westerners and regard non-Westerners as 'the other'. Much of The Rest aspires to become part of The West, and to this extent there is a much weaker tendency there to see The West as 'the other'. The more firm the boundary between The West and The Rest becomes, however, and the more The Rest feels excluded, the more likely it is that it will also develop a common identity. The Non-Aligned Movement and the function of Islam as a rallying point for anti-Westernism are indicators of this tendency.

I am going to juxtapose two somewhat artificially constructed points of view, two paradigms if you like, the one typical in The West, the other in The Rest. In doing so, I am not referring to the professed views of leaders in Western and 'Restern'<sup>1</sup> countries, but rather to the mass of ordinary thinking people in those parts of the world. In The West there is a considerable degree of consensus in general world outlook between the professed views of leaders and those of the led. The opposite is often the case in The Rest. This difference between The West and The Rest, if it is remarked upon at all, is usually attributed to the upward motion of ideas through the democratic processes of The West and to the lack of similar mechanisms in The Rest.. Others are inclined to attribute Western consensus to an efficient dissemination of ideas from the top; Restern élites, by contrast, lack the legitimacy which would make them the credible source of ideas.

At the end of the Second World War there was a widespread global consensus, which found its expression in the foundation of the United Nations and other international institutions, that we had henceforth to manage our affairs on an international basis. Certain principles of international behaviour were enshrined in the Charter of the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other earlier agreements, such as the Geneva conventions, were to be regarded as sacrosanct. In particular, there was general acceptance that colonialism was unjust and should be dismantled, and accordingly over the next three decades most countries under European colonial rule gained their independence. This is not to say that the ideas enshrined in the UN

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<sup>1</sup> From now on I will use the word 'Rest' in the forms that the word 'West' is used, without quotation marks. I intend to use capital letters for both. The West already functions in many ways as if it were a nation state, or at least a federation of states. I believe that The Rest could well move in this direction as well.

Charter always, or even usually, held sway. My point is simply that they were a fixed reference point, a set of ideals which world leaders claimed to believe in.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, which was often conducted using the rhetoric of global morality, brought about a new and rapidly changing situation. In 1997 Samuel Huntington published his book on what he regarded as the clash of civilisations<sup>2</sup>. The significance of this book was not that it said much which many, perhaps most, people in The West already thought. Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*<sup>3</sup>, had already explored the Western attitude of superiority vis-à-vis the East. But Huntington's book heralded a change at the level of ideals. He justified the abandonment of the *principle* that people of the world should be treated equally. From now on the superiority of Western civilisation need not be challenged or doubted and could be used to justify policies directed against The Rest.

The attacks on the US of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, were a further watershed which reinforced Huntington's approach. There has followed a right-radical rethinking in the West typified by the call for a new form of Western imperialism by Prime Minister Tony Blair's special advisor, Robert Cooper. The Rest, meanwhile, continues to think and argue in terms of the old post-war principles, usually failing to realise that these have been largely abandoned by The West.

I need to warn the reader that I have a much greater knowledge of popular Middle Eastern views of the world than I do of mass opinion in other parts of The Rest. Nothing I have read or heard, however, has led me to question my assumption that ordinary people in other parts of The Rest share a certain fundamental stance vis-à-vis The West, but of course I may be wrong. If you prefer to do so, you can simply regard the following juxtaposition as being between conservative and radical views. Notice, however, that I have been careful not to identify the Restern view with any particular ideology such as Marxism, Islamicism or anarchism.

### **The Western view**

The world consists of civilised countries and uncivilised ones,<sup>4</sup> that is The West and The Rest. The twin attributes of civilised countries are their economic prosperity and their democratically elected governments. Economic prosperity is based on the principle of free markets, the only workable economic system. Every citizen in a civilised country has an unrestricted opportunity to better him/herself. This prevents a small élite monopolising economic power, while the system of democracy ensures that the abuse of political power is contained. The will of the people is generally heard and translated into benevolent actions by governments. Of course no democracy is perfect, but as a form of government it is infinitely superior to any other, and it is our duty to do all in our power to preserve it. To defend The West *is* to defend democracy. Our economic and military supremacy, which we owe to our civilisation, gives us the means and the right to do so.

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<sup>2</sup> Huntington, S., *The Clash of Civilisation and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, London, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Said, E., *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978 (Penguin Books, London, 1995 with new Afterword).

<sup>4</sup> Some more charitable Westerners say 'less civilised.' In my view it amounts to the same thing.

The ills of the world spring from a number of sources. Governments which reject free-market economics hinder world development and ensure the impoverishment of their countries. This in turn gives rise to dangerous extremism fuelled by jealousy of The West. Lack of democracy allows dictators to arise who threaten not only their own people but Western interests as well. These leaders may attempt to acquire weapons of mass destruction against the principle of non-proliferation. The religious and ethical systems of much of The Rest are, let us be frank, greatly inferior to our own. Human life is not valued in the way we are accustomed to, education is propagandistic and women are treated as second-class citizens. A particular problem arises in relation to Muslim countries. Unlike Christianity, Judaism and agnosticism, Islam has a strong tendency towards fundamentalism and the rejection of Western values. This irrational phenomenon is the single most dangerous threat to world peace today. It is, for example, the main cause of the dangerous situation between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

It follows from the remarks in the last paragraph that the West may from time to time be obliged to use force itself or, more often, to encourage and support its use by others, against uncivilised peoples and their governments. That is why we are quite justified in asking such questions as: ‘What are *we* going to do about Saddam Hussain?’ This is the price The West must be prepared to pay for the preservation of civilisation. Furthermore, in certain circumstances internationally agreed standards of behaviour may need to be suspended, though of course the degree of their infringement should never exceed what is absolutely necessary. We should avoid excessive discussion of such matters which, because we live in democracies, can be left to the discretion of the appropriate authorities.

Where armed conflict occurs a primary aim, subservient only to the successful achievement of the war aims, should be the protection of Western combatants. There is no ducking the reality that this will often entail large enemy casualties. It is therefore better to keep our attention fixed on the greater common good which is to be achieved than on the immediate circumstances of war. While no one would want to interfere with the freedom of the press, there is something disagreeable about an over-emphasis on the suffering of people who may well have evil intentions towards The West. In other words, let’s get real.

It is to be hoped that with time all peoples and states will adopt Western civilisation, after which we can conceive of a harmonious world order in which war would be limited to occasional fire-fighting and where unimagined wealth would be ours for the taking. It is possible that a world government, elected by the entire world population, might eventually be established. This could, however, only occur after The Rest had been incorporated into The West. Meanwhile the United Nations system performs a useful function as a legitimising adjunct to Western policies and as an international organisation coordinating various activities which need to be dealt with globally. The UN cannot, however, be conceived of as the foundation for a world government since it is based on the fatal flaw of equating civilised with uncivilised countries.

While our superior military capability should enable us to pacify The Rest when necessary, to move forward to a safer world order based on consent we will need to convince The Rest that our view is right.

## **The Restern view**

Our history of European colonialism, or at least intervention, leaves us with no illusions about Western values. While we recognise the benefits of railways and electricity grids brought to us by The West we are only too painfully aware of the 'rougher methods,' as Cooper puts it, 'of an earlier era - force, pre-emptive attack, deception.' For this reason we do not share the Western view of itself as a benevolent federation which seeks only mutual benefit in its dealings with us. On the contrary, we see The West as essentially exploitative, seeking to manipulate us in such a way as to further its own economic and political objectives. Look at how the politics of oil underlies the unholy alliances of the Middle East. The West supports unrepresentative regimes in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt not because it really believes that they are moderate but because they maintain the status quo in which the oil keeps flowing cheaply to the West. The same motives underlie the massive underpinning of the criminal Israeli regime. The treatment of the Palestinians is the most abiding and revealing evidence that The West does not believe in the principles which it preaches.

We are obliged to recognise The West's technological, military and economic superiority, but we are not inclined to see this as evidence of a higher form of civilisation. Indeed there is much about Western culture which is unacceptable to us. We are not at all convinced that consumerism, unbridled free-market economics, globalisation, massive imbalances of wealth and poverty, sexual promiscuity, drug dependency and increasingly violent crime are the way we want to go. For this reason we bitterly resent the West's cultural imperialism. The credit which The West gained for playing the major role in setting up the United Nations and a number of other international systems of control has largely dissipated because of its disregard of these instruments. We still believe in those ideals of the post-Second World War era and are surprised and disappointed to discover that The West no longer appears to do so.

We regard with horror The West's callousness and essential racism when it comes to wars conducted in our part of the world. Even if we support particular actions (which is unusual) we are not blind to the distinction which is made between our people and Westerners. The latter, whether civilians or military forces, must, it seems, be protected at the cost of apparently unlimited casualties among us Resterners. Was this not already the case with the largely senseless US carpet bombing in Vietnam? More recently we have seen a cruel sanctions regime against Iraq and a devastating war in Afghanistan, both carried out with little regard for the indigenous people of these countries. In our view history belies The West's claim to moral superiority.

The West is hypocritical on the question of weapons of mass destruction. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is clearly a way of protecting the military superiority of the nuclear states (largely Western) at our expense. In this way The West maintains the ultimate sanction against any state which steps too far out of line. The threatened war against Iraq as lacking in moral credibility at a time when nothing is being done about Israel's nearby arsenal of nuclear bombs. Why should we be impressed by the distinction drawn by Western leaders between Saddam Hussain, a monstrous tyrant who cannot be trusted to behave responsibly, and the democratically elected Ariel Sharon, in whose hands nuclear weapons are considered to be safe? Certainly Halabja was frightful, but so were Sabra and Shatila. And by the way, to extend the question of moral rectitude more widely, who dropped the only nuclear

bombs actually detonated in the conduct of war, thereby wiping out the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima? Apparently Westerners believe that they should have a monopoly on the ability to inflict mass-destruction.

We believe that a system of world government, based around the United Nations Organisation, is the only credible way forward to a just, reasonably prosperous and therefore safe world. We see no reason to agree with the argument that sovereignty can only be state sovereignty. Why should we not have world sovereignty? States could continue to exercise 'subsidiary' power as it is called in Europe. Nor need such a global system extinguish differences between cultures. The new world order would be pluralistic, and though this would certainly give rise to all sorts of problems, it is quite conceivable that these could be contained in the same way that multi-culturalism within the nation state is contained.

While The Rest will always have means at its disposal to resist Western imperialism, to move forward to a safer world order based on consent we will need to convince The West that our view is right.

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We have, then, two worlds views, in many aspects diametrically opposed to each other, which cannot both be right. The aspect upon which they both agreed was that the prospect of a safer world order depended on adopting their respective standpoints. How, then, are we to evaluate these different points of view? The reader will have had little difficulty in divining that I am partial in this debate. I believe the Restern view to be a truer reflection of the global situation than the Western conception. I am therefore out of step with my Western origin. I have no illusions, however, that most people will cling, in broad terms, to one or other of these outlooks not on the basis of reasoned argument but rather because of their perceived group affiliation. In other words, Westerners will, on the whole, accept the Western view, and Resterners will, on the whole, accept the Restern one.

This conclusion, which some will regard as unduly pessimistic, arises out of my experience of campaigning for the rights of the Palestinians. It seems to me that those Westerners who are involved in this particular movement find themselves positioned on a crucial fault line dividing the Western and Restern worlds. From this vantage point we have a particularly clear overview of the current world division of public opinion. On the one hand there is the essentially Western rhetoric of Zionism,<sup>5</sup> on the other is the now largely Restern language of liberation and human rights.

I used to be a strong advocate of dialogue across the Zionist-Palestinian divide. I have to report, however, that I, and others like me, had remarkably little success in bringing about even a degree of meeting of minds. Indeed sometimes we simply inflamed passions further. We came to recognise that reason played little part in the discussions we arranged, while group affiliation was central. Jews, on the whole, clung to Zionism while Arabs and Muslims strongly supported the Palestinians. This is not, of

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<sup>5</sup> I will defer to the current usage of writing Zionism with a capital letter because I do not want to provide opportunities to my critics for diversionary skirmishes. However, it seems to be quite illogical to writing Zionism with a capital letter, but not chauvinism. A study of the politics of capitalisation is long overdue.

course, to say that the positions of the two sides are equally valid. I believe they can be evaluated and I have already made it clear that in my view the Palestinian case is stronger. I am simply saying that neither side generally gets anywhere near attempting a dispassionate evaluation of the other's standpoint.

How, then, did Westerners like me come to be supporting the Palestinian cause against our own natural group affiliation? Within the Palestine solidarity movement there are, of course, Arabs, Muslims and other people of Restern origin who have assimilated, more or less, to Western society. Their support is easily explained. So too is the engagement in the Palestinian cause of the radical left which only recognises as meaningful group affiliation based on class. But I am entirely Anglo-Saxon and have moved towards the left because of my involvement in the Palestinian cause, rather than the other way around. Why have I, and a significant minority like me, embraced the Palestinian cause? And even more importantly, why have a small minority of Jews chosen the same path? These questions would no doubt warrant a psychological study worthy of a PhD, but one thing stands out very clearly. The great majority of those of us who have crossed group affiliation boundaries have done so because of personal connections with Palestinians or at least with the Middle East.

The shock of being faced with people who do not fit into Western stereotypes of Palestinians, and the experience of hearing horrifying stories which are not a part of mainstream Western narratives, is disturbing and destabilising. It causes what is known by psychologists as cognitive dissonance, and this activates the mental energy needed to resolve the conflict. One way of doing this is to deny or exceptionalise what has been heard, thus allowing the threatened *weltanschauung* to restore its equilibrium. Another is to accept as true what has been heard and seen and to reorganise the whole conceptual framework which previously censored this kind of information. Which of these two possibilities is chosen may not in itself depend on the objective validity or otherwise of the Palestinian case, but at least the experience of personal encounter with Palestinians forced the issue onto the agenda and obliged people like me to make a judgement.

Accordingly the Palestine solidarity movement has encouraged and facilitated contacts between Palestinians and Westerners. But there are limits to this approach. There are not that many Palestinians available and willing to engage in such exercises, and in any case many Westerners would prefer not to have their comfortable world view challenged. A similar problem exists with contacts across the global Western-Restern divide. Westerners tend only to listen sympathetically to Resterners who aspire to become Westerners. It is interesting to reflect, then, on how changes in outlook are ever brought about. A very instructive case is Zionism itself.

For many years the great majority of Jews, not to speak of non-Jews, rejected the idea of modern political Zionism, that is the establishment of a Jewish state. The religious idea of a return to Zion at the end of days was for centuries the full extent of Jewish Zionist belief. It was Theodor Herzl who eventually galvanised and popularised a nascent political movement into action. Significantly it was not only, perhaps not primarily, through his reasoned case for Zionism at Zionists congresses that the playwright won converts, but through two works of imaginative literature, a utopian

programme called *The Jewish State*,<sup>6</sup> and a novel, *Old-New-Land*.<sup>7</sup> These books made the incredible credible.

Once again, it must be said that catching people's imagination, and thereby mobilising mental energy to consider ideas which would otherwise have remained dormant, says nothing about the acceptability or otherwise of a programme proposed. But it does indicate that if I wish to persuade Westerners of the justice of Palestinian case or, on a global scale, if I want to convince those around me of the essential validity of the Restern view of the world, I will need to engage with my audience at the imaginative level. It has credibly been argued that this is precisely the function of art. By exposing people to dissonant experience it challenges to them to think constructively. The conclusions which will be drawn are unknown, but at least the thinking has been set in motion.

What follows is a particular variant on this theme. Several years ago it occurred to me that part of the problem with presenting the Palestinian case was quite simply that Westerners had no way of relating the Palestinian situation to themselves. I therefore wrote an imaginative scenario in which we, the British, found ourselves facing a similar challenge.

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<sup>6</sup> Herzl, T., *Der Judenstaat*, 1895, translated as *The Jewish State*, London, Henry Pordes, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Herzl, T., *Altneuland*, 1902, translated as *Old New Land*, Haifa Publishing Company, 1960.