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Discourse, Identity, and Global Citizenship

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The concept of global citizenship has entered into the lexicon of diverse movements for peace and justice over the past decade. But what does it mean to be a "global citizen?" And how does this concept advance the goals of such movements? The Greek and Latin roots of the term citizen denote an inhabitant of a city, or a community, who possessed certain rights and privileges associated with membership in that community. Of course, many categories of people did not possess the rights and privileges of citizenship in the communities of Greek and Roman antiquity. Nonetheless, the concept of citizenship was a democratic ideal that expanded the boundaries of self-determination beyond the sphere of autocratic rulers. This is the difference between a citizen and a subject: a citizen is a participant in self-governance whereas a subject is not.

Today, the boundaries of citizenship have been expanded beyond the city-as-community to the nation-state-as-community. Legally, the term citizenship now denotes a constitutionally defined relationship between an individual and a nation-state, in which the individual receives a guarantee of certain civic rights in exchange for certain civic duties and responsibilities.

What does it mean, then, when we speak of "global citizenship?" Although global citizenship is not yet an accepted legal construct, the term is becoming a significant discursive construct that can play an important role in the creation of a more peaceful and just global order.

Discourse theory posits that human cultures and human consciousness are shaped, in part, by the patterned ways we think and talk together. The premise is simple: the patterned ways that we collectively think and talk—our discourses—influence our perceptions, our motivations, our actions, and even our construction of social institutions. In this sense, discourses are like the productive scaffolding, or matrix, of human culture and consciousness. Discourses help to structure our mental and social realities.

If we grow up immersed in racist or sexist discourses, for example, we are likely to perceive the world in those ways, we are likely to act

accordingly, and we are likely to support and participate in social institutions that embody these perceptions and actions. The same is true if we grow up in highly nationalistic or xenophobic discourses. On the other hand, if we grow up immersed in discourses of social justice and equality, of caring and compassion, of humanitarianism and cosmopolitanism, then we are likely to perceive the world in those ways, to act accordingly, and to support and participate in corresponding social institutions.

Discourses, of course, are not iron cages from which we cannot escape. We can learn to reflect critically on the particular discourses that surround us and we can intervene in discourses that we believe are problematic. Through conscious commitment and effort, we can change the discourses that surround us, over time. Thus public discourses of overt sexism and racism that prevailed only fifty years ago in the United States have been challenged and at least partially transformed. New ways of thinking and talking about gender and race are clearly gaining ground—even though there is still work to be done in this regard.

In this context, the term "global citizenship" provides a new way of thinking and talking about our global relationship to others, about our place in the world, about our perceived interests and, most fundamentally, about our identities. As a discursive construct, it represents an intervention in prevailing discourses on these subjects—discourses that have historically been bound by tribalistic, nationalistic, and sectarian identity constructs. This intervention is significant because identity constructs lie at the core of human perception, motivation, and action. In an increasingly interdependent world, inherited identity constructs based on race, nationality, ideology, religious sectarianism, and other divisive categories can become obstacles to a peaceful, just, and sustainable future.

One dimension of a strategy to overcome such obstacles is to cultivate an inclusive sense of global citizenship. The rationale for this is simple. As a species, we have been remarkably successful. Our reproductive and technological success has enabled us to populate, and thrive in, every part of this planet. This success has enabled us to live in communities of ever-increasing complexity, which have enriched our existence in many ways. But our success has now brought us to a critical juncture in human history. We have arrived at a moment of unprecedented social and ecological interdependence on a planetary scale, but we have not yet learned how to live together under these new conditions.

The problem is that we are captives of old cultural patterns that are not well-adapted to these new conditions. Among these cultural patterns are the divisive identity constructs referred to earlier. Adapting to our new conditions requires a critical re-appraisal of inherited identity constructs and the pressures in this regard are mounting. We face global ecological crises

and global health pandemics; we face the rise of international terrorism, a growing international arms market, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons; we face unprecedented human suffering, exploitation, displacements, and migrations; we face a growing international drug trade and the rise of global crime syndicates; and we face a market system that has escaped the envelope of democratic governance, resulting in an abysmal gap between the world's richest and poorest peoples that is becoming an acute source of instability.

How do we adapt—globally—to these new conditions? One starting point is to cultivate an inclusive global identity through a conscious strategy of discourse intervention. As long as people understand the world primarily in terms of "us" and "them"—whether those categories be racial, national, ideological, or religious—humanity will be unable to realize its common interests and work toward them. This is because interests are so closely linked to identities.

Reflect, for a moment, on the relationship between our interests and identities. Conventional Western-liberal social theory assumes that people who have common self-interests come together to form common identities, which enables them to work together to advance their interests, often at the expense of groups with divergent interests and hence divergent identities. According to this view, our interests shape our perceived identities. But if we interrogate this relationship closely, the reverse can also be true: our identities can shape our perceived interests.

If we, for example, identify primarily as members of a community whose purpose is to convert others to its system of belief, or to its political and economic values and practices, then we might be willing to sacrifice aspects of our material well-being, and perhaps even our lives, to advance such causes—and this often occurs. Yet, according to conventional Western-liberal theory, our lives and our material well-being rank among the most basic measures of our self-interest. Countless people throughout history have made these kinds of self-sacrifices as a result of their identities as members of specific communities. Clearly, then, our identities can shape our perceptions of our interests.

Of course, one could dismiss cases of self-sacrificing behavior as aberrant examples of religious fanatics and political ideologues who are so blinded by their identities and beliefs that they can no longer rationally assess their own interests. Before jumping to that conclusion, however, consider this even more compelling illustration that identities shape interests. A political psychologist named Kristen Monroe was interested in the phenomenon of altruism. She wanted to know how we can explain altruism, given that altruistic acts run counter to the assumptions about human nature and self-interest that underlie most Western-liberal social

theory. In her study, *The Heart of Altruism*, Monroe defined altruism as "behavior intended to benefit another, even when this risks possible sacrifice to the welfare of the actor."

She examined the cases of 25 altruists, ranging from philanthropists who had given away much of their wealth, to heroes who had risked their own lives to save the lives of strangers in emergencies, to Germans who had sheltered Jews in Nazi Germany at the risk of death to their own families. Monroe conducted interviews with all 25 individuals, supplemented by written responses from each. After analyzing her data, she found that prevailing explanations of altruism from the fields of psychology, economics, and evolutionary biology, which were rooted in the self-interest paradigm, were completely inadequate to explain these cases. She found, instead, that every one of these cases had only one common denominator that could explain the altruistic acts. "World views," she wrote,

> . . . constitute extremely powerful influences on altruism, with the critical factor being the altruist's perception of self in relation to others. But . . . this perception is not framed in terms of group ties. . . . Rather, it is a reflection of the perceived relationship between the altruist and all other human beings. . . . This view appears to bond them to all humanity in an affective manner that encourages altruistic treatment. . . . Altruists, have a particular perspective in which all mankind is connected through a common humanity, in which each individual is linked to all others. . . . Altruists share a view of the world in which all people are one.

What Monroe is talking about here is identity—a globally inclusive, human identity—a sense of oneness—that influences perceptions of self-interest and self-sacrifice in relation to others. This relationship between identities and interests is the reason that a global identity is essential if we are to address the many global challenges that we now face as a species. As long as we continue to understand the world in terms of "us" and "them," whatever the categories are, we will be unable to overcome our narrowly perceived self-interests and work together to create a peaceful, just, and sustainable future together. William Hitt, in a book entitled *The Global Citizen*, puts it this way:

> The global citizen has a sense of oneness with the human family. . . . Most of the life- and-death problems facing humanity are global problems, and these critical problems will never be resolved by individual nation-states working independently. The only way that humanity can cope . . . is through building a global community. . . . The issue is one of identity.

Consider the implications that derive from this insight. Many people believe that this sense of human oneness—or global citizenship—is an

abstract and distant ideal that can only be realized after a host of social injustices, inequities, and other material problems have somehow been solved. Yet, if Munroe and Hitt are correct, the opposite appears to be the case: social injustices, inequities, and other material problems can only be resolved on a global scale after a sense of oneness with the human family is firmly established in human consciousness. Solving global problems is not possible when divisive and competitive identity constructs make global action and coordination impossible.

Skeptics will argue that all human identities are formed oppositionally, and therefore a global human identity is impossible because there is no "other" against which a globally inclusive identity can set itself. According to this widely held view, there can be no "us" unless there is also a "them." Such an argument, however, is pure supposition. There is no empirical evidence to support it, and indeed, it is not an empirically verifiable hypothesis. Moreover, the logic that this argument is based on is flawed, as Abizadeh so clearly demonstrates in an article entitled "Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other?"

As Abizadeh explains, the view that human identities must be particularist, exclusive, or oppositional, traces back from Rousseau and Hegel to more contemporary thinkers such as Charles Taylor and Chantal Mouffe. The view derives from a theory of individual ego formation in which the individual ego or self requires mutual recognition by an external other in order to gain a sense of self-differentiation, self-consciousness, and self-worth. Skeptics of an inclusive global identity tacitly assume that this theory, which was developed to explain processes of individual identity formation, also applies to processes of collective identity formation. Even if we assume, however, that this theory is valid with respect to the differentiation of individual egos, there is no reason to believe that it explains or delimits all processes of collective identity formation. As Abizadeh explains,

> Individual socialization requires interaction with external others. But socializing an individual to identify with a collective identity could, rather obviously, simply occur through social interaction with individuals who also identify with it. . . . In other words, the arguments in defense of the particularist thesis (that only collectivities with an external other can be the basis for identity) suffer from a fallacy of composition. . . . The argument suffers from not being attentive to the distinction between individual and collective identity. It fails to distinguish between an "other" external to the collectivity to which I belong and other individual members of the collectivity to which I belong.

Therefore, even if we agree that there can be no "I" unless there is a "them," it does not necessarily follow that there can be no "us" unless there is a "them." Furthermore, even if we assume that collective identities

must in some way derive from difference, this still does not exclude the possibility of a global human identity. As Abizadeh again explains,

> To be sure, a collective identity might be formed in contrast to, or even in combat with, an actually existing external other excluded from its membership. But it might also be constructed on the basis of difference from hypothetical values and the imagined collective identities centered on them, or on the basis of difference from the values of a past historical identity from which one wishes to mark one's distance ... humanity's own past provides a rich and terrifying repository in contrast to which cosmopolitan identity could constitute it "difference."

In short, the argument that all human identities are formed oppositionally and that a global human identity is impossible because there would be no "other" is neither logically defensible nor empirically verifiable. Rather, the argument derives from an inherited discourse on the particularist nature of human identities that was consolidated alongside culturally contingent processes of racial, national, ideological, and religious identity construction and differentiation. Ironically, this inherited discourse now continues to influence thinking even among progressive scholars who seek to challenge many of the injustices that stem from the increasingly dysfunctional antagonistic identity constructs that reflect and support this discourse. This particularist discourse on identity is powerfully rebutted, however, by the sense of "common humanity" that Munroe found among all of the altruists she studied, who "share a view of the world in which all people are one." It is also rebutted by the experience of steadily growing communities, such as the international Bahá'í community, which is founded upon a similar conception of the oneness of humanity and that understands itself—as Abizadeh theorizes earlier—as an open, inclusive, and outward-oriented community constituted on the basis of difference from historical values and antagonisms from which it wishes to distance itself.

Furthermore, a globally inclusive human identity does not exclude the possibility of other "nested" identities that derive from the rich diversity that characterizes humanity. Any given individual holds multiple, overlapping, non-exclusive, partial identities based on things like gender, age, family, ethnicity, nationality, religious beliefs, occupation, personal interest, socio-economic status, and so forth. None of these partial identities necessarily preclude a sense of oneness with humanity or a commitment to act as a responsible global citizen. A global "we" can accommodate multiple secondary distinctions between "us" and "them" when those distinctions are not understood in a hostile or adversarial manner. Moreover, it only takes one individual who identifies in this way, and acts accordingly, to disprove the hypothesis referred to above that all human identities are necessarily exclusive or oppositional. Surely we can all recognize the existence of individuals who invalidate this hypothesis.

Assuming that trends toward heightened global interaction and interdependence will gradually lead more and more people toward a sense of oneness with humanity and a commitment to act as responsible global citizens, we will still need to learn how to better translate this global identity into concrete social practices and institutional reforms. In other words, we need to learn how to fully operationalize the abstract principle of oneness. Fortunately, there are many ways we can begin to do this.

We can start by ensuring that the decision-making processes we are personally involved in are guided by the principle of oneness. In practice, this means that we need to transcend the tendency toward interest-group competition and begin making decisions by considering the interests and welfare of humanity as a whole—with confidence that the welfare of the part is best served by promoting the welfare of the whole. This principled approach to decision making is especially crucial for those of us who occupy privileged positions in the web of global interdependencies on this planet. Our decisions often have far-reaching impacts, yet our decisions have historically been made in ways that merely perpetuate our privileges at the expense of others.

Another way we can operationalize the principle of oneness is by using it as a standard with which we begin to critically re-evaluate inherited cultural habits, norms, values, institutions, and discourses. Many inherited cultural constructs are consistent with the principles of global citizenship and human oneness, and we should support and build on these. But many are inconsistent with these principles and we will need to abandon them. Of course, this is not a general license to interfere in other peoples' cultural habits and norms. What is needed is a critical reappraisal of our own cultural habits and norms, whatever they may be, and whoever we may be. Nor is this a call for the homogenization of the world's rich and diverse cultural traditions. Rather, the principle of oneness discussed earlier is premised on an appreciation that the world's cultural heritage is a source of collective strength and beauty—much like our collective genetic inheritance.

Another way we can operationalize the principles of global citizenship and the oneness of humanity is by seeking to introduce them into the standard education of every child throughout the planet. Education is a powerful force for identity formation and social change. The concept of world citizenship can be operationalized within curricula around the world—as United Nations agencies such as UNESCO, as well as communities such as the international Bahá'í community, are already striving to do. Children from all backgrounds are receptive to this kind of curricula. Indeed, children appear to be born with an intuitive sense of the oneness of humanity that is only lost when they are raised within discourses of racism, nationalism, religious fanaticism, and other forms of divisive and sectarian socialization.

Even in such cases, however, the concept of the oneness of humanity appears to have such intrinsic appeal at this moment in history that growing numbers of youth who were raised within such discourses are proving eager to abandon their parents' beliefs when they are presented with a unifying vision of humanity—as a generation of youth did during the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

Another way that we can operationalize the principle of global citizenship is by supporting the development of institutions that facilitate democratic decision-making on a global scale, within a framework of international law. In an interdependent world community, unfettered national sovereignty is a dangerous anachronism that prevents us from addressing the social and environmental challenges we now face. We need to abandon the fetish of national sovereignty. We need to recognize that the nation-state is a cultural construct rather than an essential expression of our species-nature. In the broad scope of human history, the nation-state represents a transitory stage of social evolution. The era of unfettered national sovereignty, which began only a few centuries ago, is now, for all practical purposes, over. But our reluctance to accept this has very high social and ecological costs. This reluctance has enabled an emerging global market economy to escape the envelope of democratic regulation, resulting in acute disparities of wealth and poverty, in the denial of human rights and essential services to billions of people, and in the wholesale liquidation of the ecological capital that present and future generations depend on. Reluctance to abandon the fetish of sovereignty has also perpetuated the scourge of war within a new century, and prevented the implementation of collective security measures that could eliminate this scourge.

Yet another way we can operationalize the principle of global citizenship is by taking a clear and sober look at the role of religion in human affairs, assessing both its positive and negative potentials within processes of social integration, and reconciling faith-based beliefs, when necessary, with the imperatives of a global age. This issue, which will require the attention of believers and non-believers alike, requires some further elaboration due to its complex and sensitive nature.

Those who reject religious beliefs in their own lives would do well to recognize that the vast majority of people on this planet assume a spiritual dimension to human existence. Their religious faith serves as a source of inspiration that sustains them in their daily struggles and provides meaning, purpose, and direction to their lives. To dismiss the religious inclinations of the majority of the world's inhabitants as mere expressions of superstition, or as incompatible with the conditions of modernity, is a form of secular arrogance and disrespect that is incompatible with inclusive global values.

At the same time, those who do subscribe to religious beliefs must come to terms with the reality that religious intolerance, conflict, and violence now pose intolerable threats to human well-being on this planet. Such distortions of the religious impulse retard processes of peaceful global integration. The question is: How can believers from diverse religious backgrounds understand, and transcend, these distortions of the religious impulse?

One cause of such distortions appears to be decontextualized, narrow, and literalistic interpretations of ancient religious texts that, by their nature, are historically contextual, figurative, and open-ended. Another cause appears to be the inability to distinguish those universal truths enshrined in all religious traditions from those contingent social prescriptions and ritual expressions that vary according to the historical and cultural context in which a given religion emerged. Yet another cause, undoubtedly, are those claims to religious exclusivity and finality that fail to recognize religion as a universal human experience and that privilege the status of one's own faith community over all others. Fortunately, many believers from diverse faiths have already adopted more mature and globally inclusive interpretations of their own religious traditions, demonstrating by their example that these root causes of religious intolerance, conflict, and violence can be transcended.

Against this backdrop—characterized simultaneously by outburst of religious fanaticism as well as the maturation of thoughtful and inclusive religious values—believers and non-believers alike would all do well to recognize that religion remains a primary sphere of identity formation in the world today. In addition, we would all do well to recognize that religious belief is one of the few forces that reaches to the deepest wells of human motivation—wells of human motivation that may prove indispensable in carrying us through the difficult transition to a global community. Moreover, religion, by definition, is a force that binds people together—this is what the Latin root of the word means. The challenge before us, then, is to harness this force that reaches to the roots of human motivation, shapes human identity, and binds us together into communities, so that it aligns with the construction of a peaceful and just global community.

In this regard, people who are inclined toward religious belief might ask themselves: Should we understand contemporary global conditions according to divisive interpretations of ancient religious texts, or should we re-assess these interpretations according to the imperatives of the global age we are entering? In this regard, the principle of the oneness of humanity can serve as a standard for assessing and re-formulating our religious interpretations in the same way that we can apply this principle to the re-evaluation of

other inherited cultural constructs, as discussed earlier. This, of course, will not be easy. Yet the costs of failing to do so will continue to mount until we can no longer fail to act. On this issue, as well as all the others discussed earlier, the only question before us is how quickly or slowly we respond to these mounting costs. The slower our response, the higher the costs.

In closing, one more point warrants emphasis. Many thoughtful feminist scholars, post-colonial scholars, critical race theorists, and others have articulated a legitimate caution regarding global identity that goes like this: The historical privileges that men have taken for granted, combined with the historical privileges that Anglo-Europeans have taken for granted, have resulted in a tendency among white males to universalize their own experiences and identities, and to project these onto others as universal norms. This is a tendency that can silence, exclude, and marginalize others while reinforcing white male privilege.

This is a noteworthy concern. It speaks to an intellectual and moral hazard that many authors—myself included—have to personally negotiate in our own lives and work. In this context, it bears emphasizing that this article is not prescribing an identity that reflects the image of the privileged white male. Nor is it prescribing a global identity that obliterates all other identities. Rather, it is prescribing a global identity that accommodates and values diversity, and that reconciles what we all share in common with those things that make us unique. Moreover, this is an identity that rejects the inordinate disparities of power and privilege that have become a malignancy in the global body of humanity and represent primary threats to the creation of a peaceful, just, and sustainable global community.

Those of us who occupy relatively privileged positions among our fellow human beings on this planet need, therefore, to be ever-conscious of our positions as we discuss the subject of human unity. As we advocate the concept of global citizenship, we need to recognize that much of the earth's population could still be more accurately described as global subjects—subjects of political and economic forces that are governed in distant capital cities and distant corporate board rooms. Global citizenship means extending the full rights and privileges of citizenship to every human being on this planet, so that all can begin to participate as equals in our collective governance, within an emerging global community characterized by unity in diversity.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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