

**Dueling multiculturalisms:  
the urgent need to reconceive cosmopolitanism**

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It's a great privilege to be here, a wonderful opportunity for me to listen to many scholars whose work has taught me much. In my brief presentation, I want to make two sets of remarks, both drawing loosely on a book I've written, called the *Global Me: New Cosmopolitans and the Competitive Edge*.

First, I wish to suggest why the need to reconceive cosmopolitanism is an urgent one; why the discussion at this conference is not academic, but bears directly on questions that ordinary people in many places around the world ask every day. These are people who are committed to mixing, to preserving their roots, their inherited identities, while at the same time desirous of wings, of ways to encounter the world that allows them to adapt, to mix and match, to become more than what they think they are. This is not a small group, this is not an elite. In most societies, the people who want both roots and wings to coexist in their lives, to one extent or another, are the majority. So that in some sense, proponents of a reconceived cosmopolitanism have already won, and the big question is whether this victory will be squandered or not.

Let me talk about ordinary people, and their very human predicament, by telling a few stories from my travels. These stories are fragments, and their meaning is contested, but they offer a glimpse of a world often obscured by mass media:

(1)

First, let's visit Dalvík, Iceland. It's the summer equinox, 24 hours a day of light, I am in one of Iceland's northernmost cities, close to the Arctic Circle. I am sitting in the living room of a small house, set among a cluster of homes at the foot of a mountain outcropping. This is avalanche country, and while it is warm today, I can't help myself think about what it's like to look up at the looming mountain when its covered with snow.

The TV is buzzing in the background, and the Kosovar refugees are telling me that they only get two channels, both in Icelandic, so this beautiful TV they have been given isn't so useful. There are four members of this Kosovar family: a husband and wife and two young children. It is the summer of 1999, and their memories of being driven from their homes in Kosovo, and

waiting in a camp in Macedonia, are fresh in their minds. Even their release from the camp hangs heavy with them. The father was waiting around the Norway tent, where Norwegians were offering free transit from the camp to Norway, and then without warning the Norwegians said that there were no more spots for Norway. Then a few minutes later, while the father remained in line, the Norwegians returned and asked whether anyone wanted to go to Iceland. So the father, who'd never even heard of Iceland, agreed to go with his family, and they went, along with about 75 others. On arriving, the family was given a furnished apartment, clothes, cash each month, and Icelandic lessons. They were also promised that they could live permanently in Iceland if they wished.

The day I met the husband was the day before he would begin his first job in Iceland. And his two kids were attending a special summer school, getting reading for the fall session with Iceland kids.

So here is this couple, amazed at the generosity of the Icelanders but still angry, and not just over being unable to understand the TV. They are angry that they can't even with the Serbs. They talk about how they want to get even with the Serbs for what they did, not just to them personally, but to the Kosovar people.

Perhaps because I have heard this before, and am tired of it, I lose my temper and ask them, somewhat mischievously, why the Icelanders are being so generous to them?

The wife says it is because we are victims and the Icelanders feel sorry for them. I suggest that this is the wrong answer. I say this, again, not because I know it is the wrong answer, but because I'm tired of hearing this answer which is supposed explain everything but actually explains little. I tell the husband and wife that the Icelanders want you stop hating the Serbs. This is the reason for their generosity. They have given you this apartment, the furniture, the TV, the schooling for your kids – all in order to help you to stop hating, and to make a start toward forgiveness. And if don't stop hating, and begin forgiving, all of this assistance will amount to nothing. The generosity shown you will have been wasted.

The wife refuses to believe me. She refuses to accept that she will ever forgive the Serbs, ever stop loathing them. It even bothers her that there are

Serbs in Iceland: that even on this big volcanic island there are Serbs somewhere. No, she cannot imagine sitting down with them to speak, not even being in the same room with them.

Her husband isn't so sure that he can never stop hating the Serbs. He has listened carefully as my translator repeated my words, and he is thinking. Perhaps he is only pretending to think, because he wants to get rid of me, and he knows he can do this most quickly by agreeing with me. But he is thinking that I may be right, and he tells his wife this, and now the two of them are telling me that they had thought they were given all this because they were victims and this is the first time anyone has said this to them.

(2)

Let me shift scenes to central Africa, the war-torn country of Burundi, where a Tutsi-dominated government controls a restive Hutu majority. Since 1993, when the Tutsi-controlled Army assassinated a democratically-elected Hutu president, a civil war has dragged on, consuming 200,000 lives and bankrupting the country. Perhaps even worse, the war has shattered the complex web of inter-relationships between Hutus and Tutsis. It has forced people to choose sides: to pick one or another group to ally with.

One night I am sitting in the home of a leading Burundian journalist, a radio journalist who produces programs for an independent station called Studio Ijambo. This man is the child of a native cosmopolitanism. His father was Hutu and his mother Tutsi. In the early 1970s, when he was only a child, his father was murdered -- because he married a Tutsi. In a wave of orchestrated violence around Burundi, hundreds -- and probably even thousands -- of Hutu men married to Tutsi women were murdered.

So this man was raised by his Tutsi family, a family nursing a grudge against the Hutus for leaving his mother a widow. Yet amazingly, this man grows into adulthood without rancor toward Hutus. He attends university, goes into journalism and comes to see that mutual respect between the two groups is the only basis on which Burundi can exist. He joins Studio Ijambo, which is funded by Western donors, precisely because it is committed to representing both Hutus and Tutsis in its media coverage (something unusually in a region where radio broadcasts have been used not just to whip up communal hatreds but also to direct ethnic killing).

This man is both Hutu and Tutsi. This is in his bones, and even if he recognizes that these group identities are constructs, artificial, foisted on him by elites; he also knows these identities have a reality to them, at least now, and that he cannot pretend that he or any other person in Burundi can simply transcend their group identity. He doesn't believe this is possible. What he believes is possible is mixing. I am both, he thinks. Others can think of themselves as both too.

This is in his mind when he chooses a wife. Like him, she is the daughter of a Hutu father and a Tutsi mother. Like him, her father was killed when she was a child, almost at the same time. Like him, she attended university and now works as a nurse. These two people are drawn together by many things, but one draw is their shared past: the children of mixed-group marriages who paid an awful price for their mixing.

Now late one night I'm sitting in their house, and we are playing with their baby, a child of less than a year. The man, the radio journalist, leaves me alone with his wife and son. I do not ask him to do this but he says that if he doesn't leave the room, his wife will not speak openly with me. So he leaves the room and I ask his wife: Who is this baby? What is his identity?

Now I know the husband's answer. We have talked about this. He thinks of his son as a new breed, a new Burundian, a kind of cosmopolitan child, but still a child who carries forward all the traditions of Burundi. In short, this is a child of a reconceived cosmopolitanism.

Whatever you think of his conception of his child, whether you think it is shallow or misguided, I can tell you it is brave. This man is brave. I realize just how brave when I sit in his living room, alone with his wife and baby and his wife answers my question, instantly, without a doubt. "My son is Hutu," she says.

I am stunned. This is not what I expect. Hutu? How can the child be Hutu? Aren't you mixed, I ask? Isn't your husband mixed? Isn't your baby obviously, positively and definitely some kind of mix, some new social category, neither Hutu nor Tutsi?

She looks at me as if I am someone who is either very stupid or playing an impolite trick on her. “Here, when your father is Hutu, you are Hutu,” she says. “Identity follows your father. My husband’s father is Hutu. My husband is Hutu. My son is Hutu.”

When I protest, when I say she must mean only that her husband and son are superficially Hutu, not really *just* Hutu, she disagrees. She grows impatient with me. No, they are Hutu, she says.

I am beginning to realize that perhaps I have no hope of comprehending what is going on in her mind. This very smart woman, no older than 30, whose husband reads passages to her from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, who knows well that her country has been ruined by a decades of killing between Hutus and Tutsis, and who knows that every day, even peaceful, educated Hutus and Tutsis, wonder, even worry, that their neighbor may rise up against her simply because his group identity .... She knows she has no language to describe her situation, her family, her son and so, perhaps, lacking this language, her son only exists as a Hutu.

I call her husband back into the room and I tell him what his wife has said. He is sad and angry at the same time. He wants to be angry with his wife, for embarrassing him; no, for even contradicting him. But he is too sad to express his anger. It seems to me that he also lacks the words to describe the aspirations he holds for himself, his wife, his child. He does not have these words and lacking these words, he is sure that his child is neither Hutu nor Tutsi. He is both, more. Yet what is this something if he cannot even convince his wife that it exists?

(3)

One more scene. This time I am in a Louvan-La-Neuve, a university town in the French-speaking part of Belgium. I am with Burundi’s leading writer and dramatist, a woman named Marie-Louise Sibazuri. She writes and directs a radio soap opera, called “Our Neighbors,” which airs three times a week on Burundian national radio. The program is a clever cross between Ally McBeal and Mike Wallace: among the ensemble cast there is much talk about sex and infidelity, but the show exposes government corruption, incompetence and social inequity. In a country where systems don’t exist to

redress wrongs, this soap opera does – by exposing, with dark humor, a society’s wrongs.

But Sibazuri’s soap opera has another purpose, realized in every episode, which is to dramatize that a Burundian from one group cannot solve their problems, cannot achieve prosperity and happiness, without help from a member of the other. This message is not delivered in a heavy-handed way. Her main characters are either Hutu or Tutsi, but she never identifies which. The audience is left guessing, so that as the characters build alliances with one another, across the two groups, they can still be seen as individuals.

I might say that her characters are new cosmopolitans and that Sibazuri, who left Burundi two years ago to join her husband in exile, is reconceiving cosmopolitanism. In her words, this is her goal: “I want the listeners to judge a character by his or her own actions.” She holds fiercely to this, saying that even in her own mind she doesn’t think of the character’s ethnicity. “I’ve never asked myself this question,” she says. For “bit” characters, coming on for short spells, she does sometimes indicate their group. But main characters “are not part of an ethnic category.... I’ve started from view that there is no typical Hutu or Tutsi behavior. It’s all about their personal character.”

I say her effort to avoid ethnic characterizations is brave. She disagrees. “I don’t think it’s brave. I do it simply because I find it stupid to categorize people by an inherited membership in a group.”

Sibazuri is herself Hutu (so is her husband), but a Tutsi friend, also living in Belgium, says: “I can’t give any ethnic group for her. No ethnic stereotype fits her. She’s too open, too big.”

Sibazuri is bashful about receiving praise. She simply calls herself a cosmopolitan, applying this label without irony. She believes people must achieve their identities, not inherit them. “If a group identity is based on something you can’t change – like the color of your skin – then it’s silly. But if you’re part of a group you’ve worked toward, then you can be proud.”

“I do think ethnic groups are a reality,” she adds. “But my problem is why should anyone be proud of this fact or why should we feel humiliated because we are in the ‘wrong’ group?”

Sibazuri is groping for answers to these questions. So are many others. Using different a variety of words and concepts, many are pointing towards a common destination: a restructured cosmopolitanism in such a way that accounts for both roots and wings – and the relationship between the two -- in a satisfying and attractive way. In my new book, *The Global Me*, I try to find this balance by exploring what I consider a crucial distinction between domestic hybrids and global hybrids. Given the time limitations and the nature of this gathering, I will say only briefly that the concept of hybridity must be seen as applying equally but in different ways to both the transnational, cosmopolitan context and the “purely” domestic, ethnically uniform context. The challenge of balancing roots and wings does not vanish because people insist they are cosmopolitans; this is way cosmopolitans – those “rootless” air travelers described by journalists such as Pico Iyer – desperately need to apply hybridity to their own circumstances or risk becoming pathetic caricatures of successful people. But ethnic separatists also need to view their lives in hybrid terms. Even people who live wholly within a monocultural setting are faced with – whether they admit it or not – the challenge of accommodating difference, of making their world safe for people and styles and values that are different than those they traditionally hold. Because more and more, even people living in what many think of as monocultures – Japan, Kosovo or even neighborhoods in Los Angeles – must make their world safe for difference. It is becoming impossible to keep differences apart. Global hybrids must come to terms with this because their lives are predicating on drawing from diverse cultural styles and traditions. A global hybrid harbors many identities, revealed in the shifting light. But even people who stay at home – who traditionally have affirmed only one cultural identity -- are finding they must hybridize. That they want and must embrace multiple senses of ethnicity, nationality, even race.

How does this relate to the Kosovars in Iceland, and the Burundians coping with societal schisms? I come away from my visits to these places convinced that ordinary people hunger for a new vocabulary, a grammar that describes their hybrid experiences and aspirations. Certainly, there is a great task ahead in providing moral and conceptual justifications for a reconceived cosmopolitan. But there’s also a need – perhaps less obvious but no less important -- for a grammar and a vocabulary for this new cosmopolitanism. This grammar and vocabulary cannot just be appreciated by academics; if it arises from scholarship, as I think is likely, it must still give rise to a

vernacular language, only loosely related to intellectuals. Without this vernacular language, people like Sibazuri and many others, who favor hybridity, who favor cosmopolitanism, will find themselves speechless in the face of their opponents. This would not be so terrible if the Sibazuris of the world were a mere minority, some flotsam and jetsam on the periphery of their societies. But day after day I am struck by how the Sibazuris live at the very core of their societies, inside pulsing heart of their communities, enterprises, nations. The fresh and compelling language that they need will not arise incidentally. This language must be created, but not as a byproduct of the reconceptualization of cosmopolitanism. This language must arise consciously, purposefully and from a project of its own. What will drive this project forward? I can't say. But many people will push this project, if only because cosmopolitans, old and new, will not suffer in silence.

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