



Has the Western world gone blind?

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The rise of Japan is one of my favorite stories in modern economic history. During the sixties and seventies with its culmination in the eighties, Japan rose to the status of economic superpower. It started to dominate world markets and spread its activities far into the US and Europe.

In those days it is said that the president of Ford Europe returned 'in a state of shock' after a business trip to Japan [i] | since Japanese automobile productions plants for example produced cars almost twice as fast as those in Europe did. What made it even worse is that "they" didn't play according to "our" rules either. The western business community at that time still played by the rules laid down by people such as Henri Ford, Frederic Taylor and Henri Fayol. Then out of the blue Japan came with totally different approaches such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and Just in Time (JIT). Perhaps the West was expecting a boxing match. Did it ever occur in the Western mind that Japan is the home of jiu-jitsu? In came their kick and we never saw it coming.

Does the same apply to the rest of Western thought as well? When I started my university studies in 1997 my university had a museum that was part of the anthropology department. Of course I visited this museum and if I wouldn't have known any better I would have gotten the impression that everyone outside the Western world was walking around half naked. The museum was filled with tribal artifacts stemming mostly from non-Western cultures. In essence this museum reinforced every stereotype that can be found in the Western mind about non-Western people. Ironical enough one of the first cases at the beginning of my studies was the rise of Japan. But nine point nine out of ten my curriculum never really deviated from Western thought and its approaches. My fellow students and I were trained like boxers.

After some years the anthropology department closed down its museum at the university campus. Did it mean that the previous mentioned stereotypical impressions were out of people's minds as well? Unfortunately not. One day for example I met a professor at the philosophy department. I asked him why students weren't trained in other forms of philosophy as well, for example those stemming from India and China. He retorted like a pompous prick saying: "I wouldn't call that philosophy!". This was not an incident because some time later I tried out some of his students as well. And while never having been formally introduced to other world traditions they replied like their professor saying that "real" philosophy is only to be found in the West. On another occasion I met students who were trying to become a doctor. Although the World Health Organization officially recognizes contributions that are made to human health by traditional medicine practices [ii] | such as ayurveda in India or acupuncture in China, professors and the curriculum at the medicine department in general do not. It was exactly the same mentality like at the philosophy department but now I heard people speaking about "real" medicine when they referred to Western based medicine. At the end of my studies I visited a seminar on religion and science. At the university campus this was expected to be a significant event with all the fuss about creationism at the moment. Afterwards I was pretty disappointed because the main topic was the relation between Western science and Western religion and most of the speakers focused on what had been happening in Europe over the last centuries. There was no mention whatsoever how these developments could or would relate to developments regarding science and religion in other

civilizations in our world.

And why should they? Why should professors and students at Western institutions take an interest in what other civilizations might have to say? Wasn't it the West that was the last standing superpower in our world after the collapse of communism? Wasn't it Francis Fukuyama who wrote^[iii] |?

"What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

Wouldn't this mean that it is just a matter of time before the rest of the world would become like "us" in the West? A world in which everybody would be well versed in Plato and Homer. A world in which everybody enjoys a high tea and a game of chess. Not to mention a boxing match from time to time. Wouldn't that be lovely? Then why wouldn't our students be taught to think in terms of "real" vs. "false" or modern vs. tribal?

There was only one course during my studies that addressed this kind of reasoning. It was a course on gender and diversity and it spoke of the use of binary oppositions^[iv] | in our language and perception. Binary refers to the concept of mutually exclusiveness such as male and female. You are either a male or a female and you cannot be both. The words male and female are also being placed opposite of one another by ascribing different values to them which are regarded as positive or negative. For example the word man in the West is associated with the color blue for heaven and is associated with positive words such as strong and brave. The word female on the other hand is associated with sin (Eve) and associated with being weak and hysterical (Freud). Now I am mentioning this it seems that Western society has these kinds of distinctions written all over it. Its religion speaks about heaven and hell and its followers say you either follow Jesus or you don't. In fascism you are either *Übermensch* or *Untermensch*. Communism on the other hand speaks of labor vs. capital. And capitalism of course has its winners and losers. In Dutch society, from which I stem, there is a new distinction made in Dutch language between immigrants and their descendants who are called "allochtonen" and the supposedly pure-bloods, if I may borrow this term from the Harry Potter novels, which are called "autochtonen". This distinction is strange because Dutch history has immigration written all over it. What Dutch society actually means with this distinction is making a difference between people stemming from non-Western cultures on the one hand and people stemming from Western cultures on the other hand. So if you are German or British and move over to Holland, you are not "allochtoon". In that case you are a foreigner which is a different word in Dutch. Thinking in these clear distinct terms or painting the world in terms of black and white most certainly makes the world easier to understand.

It also gives people a sense of self-esteem. Suppose you are a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Male or WASP. If you fall into this category as many people in the West used to do, the last two hundred years couldn't have been better for you. You were part of the "best" race. You belonged to a superpower like Great Britain or later the US. It was your religion that was "true" and safeguarded your salvation. And of course being a "man" accounts for something as well. This kind of thinking wasn't only in people's minds as we all know since it was also part of our legal system giving women and colored people less rights both in the US and Europe. The era, I think, in which this kind of thinking was most dominant, is the nineteenth century. Today we recognize that most of these ideas are false and the position of colored people and women has improved tremendously, although still has much to be done. This raises the question of course whether our students are still being

indoctrinated with a politically correct version of nineteenth century style ideas which as a result delivers graduates that believe their insights and approaches are to be superior to those used by non-Western civilizations.

What will that mean for relations between the West and its non-Western neighbors such as the emerging economies (China, India, Brazil and Indonesia)? Our graduates are not going to meet half naked people, but people that are proud of their heritage, tradition and culture. People that will have the best education money can buy as we can see for example in the Middle East where Western top universities are opening up subsidiaries right now. Iran for example possesses excellent engineering colleges that deliver graduates who can compete with any college graduate in the world. Not to mention the tens of thousands (engineering) graduates that Chinese and Indian universities will deliver in the next decade or so. How will these graduates react to Western graduates who perceive themselves to be representatives of everything that is to be "true"? Couldn't that make them being perceived as arrogant? And isn't Western arrogance a complaint we hear more and more these days from non-Western nations and its people?

That means this not just involves the young but the elders as well. Some years ago for example there was big discussion in Holland about companies outsourcing labor to India, China and other developing countries. Just like the rest of Europe at that time, Holland too became fearful for loss of jobs and prosperity. The Dutch elite and its politicians reacted by making a distinction (again!). They told people that there are two kinds of jobs: blue collar jobs and white collar jobs. They stated further that Holland like the rest of Europe would transform itself into a so-called "knowledge society" in which the ideas of the future would be developed. Asia and Africa on the other hand would become the place where these ideas could be realized. So Europe would become the world's R&D department making lots of money thus keeping prosperity. Asia on the other hand would develop itself more and more into its sweat shop with low income blue collar jobs. But what does this mean? Is there some biological or natural law that states that Europeans are smarter or more creative than Asians? Is there some biological or natural law that states that Asiatic societies at some point would stop in their development like bush people in Borneo? To me this seems a politically correct version of the supremacy ideas we had in the nineteenth century. And of course it absolutely makes no sense at all. First, if Japan is able to reach the status of economic super power, then why can't the same be possible for the rest of Asia? Second, as we saw earlier, there are and will be many people in India, China and even Iran that are highly qualified. To me it seems very unlikely that these people are going to settle for a factory job. If I were to be from Asia and hear Europeans speaking like this about themselves and the world, I would be insulted.

Unfortunately Europe's black and white portrayal of the world also involves our relation with the US. Especially after Iraq Europe now feels it has some moral high ground because Europe is supposed to talk first and then shoot. And then only if it has to. Americans on the other hand, from a European perspective, first shoot then talk. Europe according to Europeans upholds international law, while the Americans undermine it. In technical terms we are speaking of the distinction between hard- and soft power. Europe now perceives itself to become a superpower foremost by use of soft power. This means making use of diplomatic channels, upholding international law or basically talk yourself out of every problem. The US on the other hand is more and more being perceived as a superpower foremost by its willingness to exercise its military. Although I do not agree with the Bush administration and Bowling for Columbine made quite an impression in European movie theatres, the US is far from being a bunch of cowboys. And when we take the facts into account a less flattering picture of Europe emerges.

After the end of the cold war European nations reduced their defense budgets significantly.

Europeans called it their "peace dividend". What is the result of years of underfunding Europe's military? Some years ago Thomas L. Friedman wrote [v] |:

Europe's armies were designed for static defense against the Soviet Union. But the primary security challenges to Europe today come from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. If you put all the E.U. armies together, they total around two million soldiers in uniform - almost the same size as the U.S. armed forces. But there is one huge difference - only about 5 percent of the European troops have the training, weaponry, logistical and intelligence support and airlift capability to fight a modern, hot war outside of Europe. (In the U.S. it is 70 percent in crucial units.) The rest of the European troops - some of whom are unionized! - do not have the training or tools to fight alongside America in a hot war. They might be good for peacekeeping, but not for winning a war against a conventional foe. God save the Europeans if they ever felt the need to confront a nuclear-armed Iran.

It shouldn't be a surprise that when the Balkan wars erupted in the nineties Europe's only option was to pursue the course of diplomacy. And when that didn't work it was up to the Americans to clean up the mess in Europe. Again! In the 21st century we are dealing with failed states like those in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Somalia. The Kosovo Liberation Army, the Taliban, Al-Qaida and pirates in Somalia aren't members of the established international community. They do not have diplomatic channels and aren't bound to international treaties. Europe's stance on its use of soft power therefore makes no sense in dealing with these kinds of issues. So that means it is up for the Americans to do that for us. As a result we are asking the US to put the lives of their servicemen and women on the line for us. Moreover Europe isn't taking a fair share in safety interests that concern both the US and Europe. The burden regarding safety issues therefore now solely rests on the shoulders of the US. But why should America devote its tax money and the lives of its young people to Europe's safety interests? Wouldn't the American people rather spend that money on health care and education, especially in this time in which America needs to balance its budget? Is there some biological or natural law here too that states Europe will be protected under the American safety umbrella forever? And what right does Europe have to take the moral high ground here? If I were to be from the US and would hear Europeans speaking like this about themselves and the world, I would be insulted.

Like it or not. The world is changing. Just recently a book was published by Kishore Mahbubani, Dean and Professor in the Practice of Public Policy of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore [vi] |. His book is called The New Asian Hemisphere [vii] |. In it he describes a changing world in which the Western world will see the end of its world domination. To be clear, the end of its domination, not the end of the West itself. How such a world would look like is hard for us to imagine, but fortunately Kishore Mahbubani stresses that this change will be positive. And he isn't alone. Newsweek's editor Fareed Zakaria just wrote a book called the Post-American world in which he describes the following [viii] |.

"At the military and political level, we still live in a unipolar world. But along every other dimension - industrial, financial, social, cultural, the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance. In terms of war and peace, economics and business, ideas and art, this will produce a landscape that is quite different from the one we have lived in until now - one defined and directed from many places and by many peoples. The post-American world is naturally an unsettling prospect for Americans, but it should not be. This will not be a world defined by the decline of American but rather the rise of everyone else. It is the result of a series of positive trends that have progressed over the last twenty years, trends that have created an international climate of

unprecedented peace and prosperity.”

In his book and interviews [ix] | that he gave for Dutch television Kishore Mahbubani states that the world is returning to its normal historical state. The last two hundred years with the West on top were the exception and not the rule in world history. The power shift we are facing today towards China and India therefore is a returning back to the world’s historical status quo. And this, according to Kishore Mahbubani, is a blessing in disguise because millions of people will be lifted out of poverty and of course the West will benefit from that as well. The rise of the rest therefore is a development that goes beyond “winning” and “losing”. The West therefore should stop looking at things in black and white.

One of the big questions of course will be how the West and especially Europe will react to this change. To exemplify this Kishore Mahbubani has some striking examples. At this moment the Western world contains 12% of the world population and is dominant in all the governing world institutions. The 500 million people in Europe for example have two seats in the UN Security Council, while Asia with its billions of people just has one! Besides its presence in the Security Council Europe also has 25 seats in the general assembly of the United Nations while the US, representing more than fifty states, just has one! And how come that it is an informal rule that the president of the IMF always has to be European? Does this means that a small country like Belgium with just a few million people can deliver an IMF president while China cannot? The present world order resembles the world after 1945. Now, the 21st century has begun. What will the reaction of Europe be when the emerging economies start pressing for a fairer share in the world’s power pie? Is Europe able to look beyond its own tradition? Is it able and willing to adept to this change? Will it share power? Or wealth? For example with North Africa where there couldn’t be a bigger gap existing between the developing world and the developed one. Questions like these need an answer in the times to come.

The US now has president with a multi ethnic background. He is black, he is white and he is American but was brought up in Indonesia as well. Recently newspapers announced that Timothy Geithner will be running America’s Treasury department in president elect Obama’s administration. Geithner spent his youth in India and Thailand. That means America now starts having people at its helm able to look beyond traditional Western distinctions. People that can recognize the world in its many different colors which I think is positive. Europe is on the other hand is another story. What will it do in the times to come? Is it able to deal with these issues or is there a chance that it will retract even more behind those politically correct sentiments of the nineteenth century? In that case Fortress Europe would not only be build at its borders but in its mind as well. Closing it off. Shutting it down. Then Donald Rumsfeld couldn’t have spoken more prophetic words a few years ago when he referred to Europe as the “old continent” since old age, as we all know, might bring blindness.

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