# FROM MULTILATERALISM TO ETHICS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF A PRACTICE

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> *"… what might our 'ethical considerations' be when we think, talk and act about sovereignty, multilateral cooperation, international law, diplomacy in an era of violent globalization…?"* Liberato Bautista, June 23, 2003.

The "ethical demand," if not religio-moral imperative, that intrudes from the theory and practice of "multilateralism," has never been as important as it is today.

Multilateralism itself, understood especially as a creature of modernity and the *modern* system of states arising from the so-called "Peace of Westphalia" in 1648, and its various mutations and permutations in the past three hundred and fifty five years, is not new. The history of the West, if not world history itself, is testimony to a number of political, economic, and cultural experiments to establish "multi-sided," pluralist *relationships* at various levels of local, national, regional, international, transnational, and, global life. Early in the 20th century, the West had its League of Nations; and in the post World War II era, the United Nations itself—perhaps, the most successful multilateral experiment of our time.

At the same time, these state-oriented experiments do not exhaust the idea of multilateralism, broadly

defined. From the "Communist International" of the 19th century, to the Non-Aligned Movement of the 1960s, indeed, even Davos and the IMF/WB in the 1990s, and, the myriad political and social formations in "global civil society" exemplified, for example, by Porto Alegre and the World Social Forum, multilateralism, both as a normative aspiration and a pragmatic practice, has cast its long shadow on human life.

To be sure, multilateralism is a contested notion not only because of the complexity of its practices, or its political and ideological uses and misuses, but also because of the enormous appetite that it has for human and non-human capital. The demands of a genuinely *global* multilateral practice require all kinds of resources, which the world, particularly the states and peoples of the global North, may not yet be prepared to offer (or to surrender). In fact, if the past twenty years is to be our star witness, then, we might conclude that despite the clarity of the human aspiration for a multilateral practice, evidenced in the ground swells of global civil society: peace/antiwar movements, human rights movements, ecological movements, labor movements, the "best" that the post-, post-Cold War victors can and have offered, has been a post-9/11, unilateralist leadership, sanitized by a multilateralist sophistry that, when challenged, gives way to what some public intellectuals have called an unapologetic, not to mention unrepentant, "global fascism."

Indeed, the so-called "global war" on terrorism, whether in Afghanistan or southern Philippines, the US-led war on Iraq, justified by the threat of Saddam Hussein's capacity and use of weapons of mass destruction, and, even now, the "new" Africa and Middle East initiatives, all suggest a fundamental retreat of the US leadership into a unilateralist policy, if not philosophy, both in the domestic and international arenas. Multilateralism surrenders to unilateralism, particularly where US "interests" are at stake. Democracy, which, in

principle cannot avoid being a multilateralist practice, is expressed at its worst as “seeking consensus” *but only on US terms*, and is practiced at its best, in bilateral relations. At the level of meaning and the production and reproduction of meaning, the failure of such a unilateralist philosophy lies not only in its use or misuse of power, but also, perhaps, more importantly, in its gross misunderstanding of the realities of the *polis*. Either the present leadership is blind or it is deluded. Still, when practiced without a substantive commitment to the fundamentally “multi-sided” and pluralist realities of international and global life, bilateral relations are nothing more than a truncated, and therefore, inadequate, framework or perspective for human life in the 21st century.

In fact, the argument for multilateralism, as a strategy and as a way of life, is a very straightforward one. It goes simply, but exquisitely, to the fundamental question about the nature and character of life, at least in the 21st century. Science, religion, and faith today lead us down the pathway of pluralism, complexity, and contingency. Each proclaims that life is always and already more than what one can define through reason. One does not need to understand these claims normatively; practice itself demonstrates *without a doubt* that in politics, economics, and culture, indeed, at the level of ecology, *plenitude* is the defining character of *experienced* reality. The refusal to articulate one’s present and future within this context and framework leads to a fundamental denial of human life. To deny life is to enter premature death.

To assert that multilateralism is a practice, is to suggest that, by definition, multilateralism is *more* than a relationship among sovereign (and therefore, formally equal) states. No doubt, this has been the meaning ascribed to multilateralism in international relations. Still, to understand multilateralism as a creature of human life and not simply of the system of states, is to immediately

place it in the realm of "ethics," that is, not only "what we ought to do," but also, "the pursuit of the 'good, the true, and the beautiful'"—thus, the "ethics of multilateralism" called for at the beginning of this essay.

Of course, the multilateralism of the system of states will not easily wither away. In fact, the US and Britain have in the post-9/11 era opened up a "Pandora's Box" that, ironically, gave a lease, once again, to multilateralism understood as a contest among sovereign states, of multilateralism as mere discursive strategy to legitimize unilateralist ideology. Such strategy is neither principled nor democratic—if by democracy we mean the "power of the people" to create and re-create themselves. Any kind of ethics of multilateralism, therefore, must seek to make a distinction between the multilateralism of the system of states and a multilateralism that is principled (it submits to a reality beyond its own interest) and democratic/populist (it locates itself within the life of particular communities).

**The futures of (Principled and Democratic/Populist) Multilateralism: Identity, Reflection, Discourse**

When understood in this way, (principled and democratic/populist) multilateralism *as a practice* raises a number of issues to which an "ethics of multilateralism" must attend: i) the character and location of the political, i.e., the nature of the social totality, ii) whose "multilateralism" is being assumed and under what conditions, i.e., the question of the subject and of subjectivity, and, iii) the languages (or discourses) of multilateralism itself.

The first area of practice asserts that multilateralism is tied to the location of the "political"; and, that precisely because this is so, it is today no longer possible to simply assume that the state (or the system of states) is the primary if not the exclusive, locus of politics, and, therefore, that the "political"—which has always been

more than government or the state—needs to be re-thought in order that the question of multilateralism, and any ethics arising from it, can be re-thought as well. The restructuring of labor on a global scale, does, in fact, raise the question not only of the nature of the social totality, but, of the character and location of the "political." As well, the discourses around, for example, the revitalization of civil societies, of ecological and environmental politics, as well as matters of gender, race, and class—are significant also for this reason.

The second area of practice contends that it is today no longer possible to simply assume that multilateralism, indeed, even unilateralism, is mainly either about the identities of particular individuals or specific states, but, rather, about the demands for recognition by those who have been historically mis-recognized, indeed, excluded; and that, any notion of political identity or formation must include these demands as part of its self-understanding. This is the significance of discourses that raise the question of the marginalization and proletarianization of peoples of color, the pauperization and feminization of poverty, the sexual division of labor, not to mention sexual slavery, the commodification of sex, domestic violence, and enforced prostitution and trafficking of women and children, for the understanding and definition of multilateralism. These peoples are the ones excluded, or mis-recognized, and made to pay for the costly obsessions and rituals of repetition of capitalist-led globalization, best exemplified, perhaps, in the "iron-fisted" US-led global war on terrorism and in the ""velvet glove" of this latest incursion into Africa.

The third area of practice insists that it is no longer possible to make facile assertions, as modern epistemologies and ontologies do, about the separation, say of knowledge and power, reason and desire, fact and value, language and institutions; that, in fact, what appears to be abstract, in reality, are articulations of actual relations of ruling—beyond the fact that they may

also be *mere* ideological legitimations of certain ruling elites. Thus, there is a need to attend today to the very language, that is, the discursive formations and strategies, of multilateralism itself—as part of the task of re-thinking the identity of states, nations, and peoples. The point, of course, is not only that language is not innocent, nor that who speaks, and whose language is spoken, shapes the political agenda; but also, that language, as many have amply demonstrated, is productive—it produces an effect.

Where the multilateralism of the system of states is concerned, at least four areas for further reflection may be raised (following Anthony Smith's 1998 observations about nationalism):

1. The impact of current population movements (particularly of the so-called "migrant labor") on the prospects of the national state, and especially the fragmentation of national identity and the rise of multiculturalism;
2. The impact of feminist analysis and issues of gender on the nature of national projects, identities and communities, and the role of gendered symbolism and women's collective self-assertion;
3. The predominantly normative and political debate on the consequences for citizenship and liberty of civic, ethnic types of nationalism, and their relations with liberal democracy; and
4. The impact of globalization trends and of 'postmodern' supranational projects, on national sovereignty and national identity.

However, the future of (principled and populist) multilateralism as a discursive formation and strategy may require at least, three tasks. First, multilateralist discourses need to continue to recognize, affirm, and articulate different ways of producing and reproducing knowledge (epistemology): here, not only is this about

situated knowledges and partial perspectives, but also of subjugated and insurrectionary knowledges and agents of knowledges—and the ways in which they are related. Even more important, however, is the need to consistently focus, among other things, on the fundamental situatedness and partial character of our ways of organizing thinking, feeling and acting; and, on the necessity, if not desirability, of rethinking "the relationship between knowledge and emotion and construct [ion of] conceptual models that demonstrate the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relationship between reason and emotion." On face value, this may be a straightforward, even simplistic, if not obvious, statement about the nature of knowledge. However, when one understands that these claims are set in the context of the historical pretensions about the universality of (masculinist) reason as opposed to say, feminist desire, and of the reality that emotion is associated with subordinate groups—particularly women—and deployed to discount and silence those realities deemed to be irrational, then one begins to realize how these epistemologies actually explode patriarchal myths about knowledge on which much of political thinking, including multilateralist thought.

Second, multilateralist discourses need to continue to recognize, affirm, and articulate different modes of being (ontology): here, not only is this about thinking, feeling, and acting—as relational practices, but also about "volatile bodies," i.e., of re-figuring and re-inscribing bodies, of moving through and beyond the conventional divide of gender as socially-contructed, on the one hand, and of sex as biologically-given, on the other hand, to "our bodies our selves." Feminists have suggested that the "male (or female) body can no longer be regarded as a fixed, concrete substance, a pre-cultural given. It has a determinate form only by being socially inscribed… As a socio-historical 'object'," they continue, "the body can no longer be confined to biological determinants, to an

immanent ‘factitious’, or unchanging social status. It is a political object par excellence; its forms, capacities, behaviours, gestures, movements, potential are primary objects of political contestation. As a political object, the body is not inert or fixed. It is pliable and plastic material, which is capable of being formed and organized.” Some public intellectuals, who argue that the body is an “inscribed surface of events”, share this profound insight. Thus, the body becomes “malleable and alterable,” its surface inscribed with gender, appropriate behaviour, standards of, for example, femininity. The significance of such an understanding cannot be underestimated. For, this means, not only that multilateralism, for example, is about “imagined communities” or “community sentiments of solidarity,” but that its “what, when, where, and how” are inscribed—written on, embodied—in our very bodies.

Third, multilateralist discourses need to continue to recognize, affirm, and articulate different *empowering* practices (politics): here, not only is this about the importance and power of self-definition, self-valuation, nor of self-reliance and autonomy, but also about transformation and transgression, of finding safe places and voices in the midst of difference, and of making the connections. Chandra Mohanty summarizes this point quite well. She notes,

> …third world women’s writings on feminism have consistently focused on (1) the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the experience of social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist politics in the histories of racism and imperialism; (2) the crucial role of a hegemonic state in circumscribing their/our daily lives and survival struggles; (3) the significance of memory and writing in the creation of oppositional agency; and (4) the differences, conflicts, and contradictions internal to third world women’s organizations and communities. In addition, they

> have insisted on the complex interrelationships between feminist, antiracist, and nationalist struggles… (p. 10).

## Concluding postscript: open space, moving time

One cannot write today about the ethics of multilateralism without referring explicitly to the antecedents of what is referred to above as an "unapologetic, not to mention, unrepentant global fascism." The obvious, yet, difficult, assertion is that the post 9/11 era has revealed the unilateralist logic of the leadership of the global North, the "internal" dynamics of which we are now seeing unfold before our own almost disbelieving eyes. What was true immediately after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon remains true today. Thus, let me conclude this essay by way of repetition, if not somewhat "sermonic."

Almost two years later, and a thousand and one justifications for Homeland Security, a continuing Christian Crusade against global terrorism, and, a war to vindicate the US at any cost (including the truth and innocent lives "at home and abroad"), there is no doubt that we are still moving through a profound crisis. America's response, particularly its Government, is doing, at least, two things: first, it is locking down the space for thinking, feeling, and acting; and, second, it is stopping, freezing, and overwhelming time. Once space, time, and place (and now, we are becoming painfully aware, truth as well) are colonized—incarcerated, if not executed, as we saw in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, or the institutionalization of Homeland Security in the US legitimized under R.A. 3162, "The USA Patriot Act of 2001" and its subsequent supporting laws, and now, the blatant and unrepentant attempts to justify the calculated misleading of the US public in order to eliminate Saddam Hussein—once this happens—the moral/ethical and political life comes to an end. For ethics and politics require

open space, and moving time, i.e., history—human beings actively engaged in the creation and recreation of their everyday lives.

This is why, I believe, it is important for us to press beyond the present unilateralist obsession, to continue to live our lives in struggle against those structures, processes and persons that brought us to 9/11 and its aftermaths. Let us not surrender to the terror and violence that our Government is tempting us into, nor yield to our innermost desires for vindication and security. Instead, let us choose life over death. To live in this way, by intention, design, and structure, is to offer a possibility: to open space, and to keep time moving. Our life together as fellow pilgrims in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom becomes a site of hope and resistance; it returns us to our vocation as communities of Word and Deed. It proclaims, once again, our refusal to incarcerate, execute, and contain the human spirit; as well as reiterates our undying commitment to keep space open, and time moving, so that we can truly experience the enduring freedom, which is the birthright of all the peoples of our planet.

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