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Response to Kawash

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Response

Vlad Georgescu

Given the increasing intimate involvement of the world's peoples, ethnicity and globalization are two subjects we are tempted to talk about. However, it is possible to find scholars who are able to provide a reasoned view of these issues, and Dr. Samira Kawash is assuredly one of them.

In her essay, she achieves this difficult goal. Her work offers an exciting perspective, one that explores the frontiers and unspoken presumptions governing the ways in which ethnicity and globalization have been conceived. It is a vision focused on key social and intellectual issues in today's world. Because of this broad view, the essay offers an excellent picture of these terms for readers of all cultures, races, and ethnicities.

I. Contributions

Dr. Kawash brings to the International Roundtable a modern view of ethnicity as a source and, at the same time, a product of violence and conflict around the world. She suggests that we refrain from trying to answer the question of what ethnic identity actually is. Asserting that this century has failed to provide a satisfactory definition of this controversial concept, she offers a captivating analysis of the effects of ethnic differences. In her opinion, ethnicity is fictive, because "language, religion, geographical origin, common history . . . either alone or in combination, [cannot] account for the differences and groupings everyone will nonetheless agree actually exist."¹

I see Dr. Kawash's perspective on this issue as dynamic. For her, ethnicity is always contested and reinvented, so it might be accurate to say that conflict is at the source of ethnicity. The key point, then, is to explore effective ways to understand as well as resolve ethnic tension. Dr. Kawash's approach is also very pragmatic. She discusses globalization as a process involving good and bad ethnicities. When these differences manage to coexist, we can afford to say that globalization can be a successful and beneficial phenomenon for society, one based on minimizing

major differences and accentuating commonalities. When bad ethnicities appear, things change dramatically. In such situations, as Dr. Kawash suggests, we are ready to blame an external alien and to find even a hypothetical enemy to blame and to relieve our frustrations.

Analyzing the broadcast of the 1996 Summer Olympics on television, Dr. Kawash discovered a new image of the much talked about "global village," a concept of globalization enthusiasts. Disseminated by the media all over the world, the Olympics portrayed a global hamlet characterized by ethnic assimilation and the elimination of difference. Here, in Dr. Kawash's view, the world appears as "little more than an overgrown shopping mall."² Little attention is paid to the huge differences between the First and the Third Worlds, between rich and poor. The most important thing is to create a feeling of togetherness amongst the inhabitants of this global village and in compliance with the aspirations of multinational corporations. Dr. Kawash reveals this point by way of her analysis of the Hanes commercial, an ad that tries to erase the differences between races by putting everybody in the same T-shirt. At the same time, the commercial reinforces the colonial hierarchy between a small dark boy outside civilization and the attractive, muscular white American male.

From the mass media, Dr. Kawash shifts her analysis of the globalization process to the world of film, specifically, to the huge box-office success *Independence Day*. In this story, the global community discovers the real sense of the term "multi-ethnicity" when humanity is confronted by a ferocious alien from outer space trying to destroy the planet. Here, I must acknowledge the deconstructive talents of Dr. Kawash, who realizes that the global community is viewed in the film as an expanded version of America. The Worldwide Independence Day is, predictably, the Fourth of July. Why is it not July 14, the French Independence Day? Because the American spectator is still the center of the global village.

Dr. Kawash's conclusions are equally perceptive. She gives us a wake-up call: the global village we see in commercials is not only idealistic but also dangerous because it is too radical. It is practically impossible to have such a polarization between good neighbors and bad aliens because the world as we know it is

simply a global village based on a multiplicity of compromises between neighbors.

The discrepancy between the image of the “global village” reflected in the media and in real life is considerable. Even in the world of politicians, the insinuation of a “global village” is still not always popular. In this election year, the American leaders are focusing their campaigns on domestic issues. There is a slogan you can hear every day: “It takes a village to raise a child.” Although this is an African saying, chosen to enlarge the ethnic reach of the campaign, it is highly improbable that the First Lady speaks about a “global village” that is supposed to raise this child. Her reference is, of course, to the same traditional image of the village as a small community with strong internal links. When politicians talk about globalization, they are very cautious and, perhaps, duplicitous. They cannot ignore this trend, but they try to modify it according to the internal needs of their particular public.

II. Personal Notes

In addition to Dr. Kawash’s perspective, I would like to briefly present my opinion as a stranger coming from outside the United States. Watching the Olympics, I could almost sense the worldwide fraternity propagated by the mass media. But at the same time, such a collective identity, for me, remained to be spinning around a very clear center. The United States is undoubtedly the core of this image, dominating the global village thanks to its corporations, which, of course, are willing to sell their products to all the houses of the community.

The coverage of the Olympics revealed very clearly to me that the national American spirit is still more important than the incipient pluralistic sentiments of the global community. Of course, NBC covered mostly the events involving American representatives and left aside events considered very important by the “poor suburbs” of this global village. This is a very common approach. You can sell more goods where the people of the community have a greater purchasing power.

As a journalist coming from Eastern Europe, I have been confronted many times with issues relating to ethnicity. I can identify every day at our borders the most fearful example of deranged ethnicity. I am referring, of course, to the former Yugoslavia, where Bosnians, Serbians, and Croats have managed to demonstrate that forty-five years of communist artificial peace were not enough to eradicate differences. What is remarkable about ethnic conflicts is the speed at which they can evolve. In just a few days neighbors can become irreconcilable enemies, killing each other in the name of a cause they do not really understand. Dr. Kawash points out the importance of globalization in the mass media, showing that this kind of multi-ethnicity tends to become artificial, without any real connection to reality. I would like to underscore some of the indulgences that magnify conflict and perpetuate differences.

First, I would like to mention one of the most horrible crimes committed during the Bosnian war, the killing of more than one hundred civilians in a bombing attack. The mass media immediately blamed one of the belligerents, thereby increasing the fury on the other side and, more important, creating public opinion in support of the UN's intervention in the area. Two months later, the experts discovered that the bombs had not been launched by the ones who had originally been blamed. A radical faction had killed its own people in order to manipulate the news media and, indirectly, public opinion.

The second example is a situation in Romania in 1993. The largest ethnic group in the country, after the Romanians, is the Hungarians. Although we have lived together for more than one thousand years, a very violent ethnic conflict erupted on the streets of one of the Transylvanian cities and dominated the mass media all over the world. The most shocking image was that of four men savagely beating another, who was lying on the ground, unconscious, in a pool of blood. Immediately, a television station broadcast this image with the headline "Majority Romanians savagely beat a representative of the Hungarian minority." The truth was completely different. It was a Romanian who was beaten by Hungarians. The images were broadcast on CNN and elsewhere, causing huge damage to the international image of Romania.

Such errors committed by the mass media could have tremendous impact on situations related to ethnic conflicts. It is not enough to create wonderful images of international solidarity against a ferocious monster coming from outer space or to make multi-ethnic commercials. To be sure, these images have the potential to move people and make them buy products. But, at the same time, the “bad aliens” Dr. Kawash warns about in her essay remain hidden inside us, ready to explode whenever a critical situation occurs.

Globalization and the accompanying processes are a part of our realities that cannot be denied. However, many people tend to neglect the complexity of this phenomenon, which involves numerous factors related to ethnic, psychological, physical, and social differences. There is a very delicate balance between globalization and nationalistic and ethnic aspirations. Mentalities and cultural patterns established over centuries cannot be automatically and immediately suppressed by international efforts.

To conclude, we cannot simply point a finger at the media or other institutions engaged in the processes of mind-shaping, because they do not provide a clear image of what globalization or ethnicity really mean. Accusing the media of ethnic, racial, or gender discrimination does not make a real difference. While we begin with a recognition of the fundamental differences between people from various ethnic groups, at the everyday level we must recognize that we are part of the institutions that perpetuate this and that we must pay attention to the ways in which our own practices create, sustain, and reinforce these differences. As Roxana Ing says, we need to continuously reexamine our history, as well as our beliefs and actions, so that we are better able to understand and confront the ways in which we oppress others and participate in our own oppression.³ While this in itself will not liberate us completely from our own ethnic or nationalist biases, it is a first step in working toward alternative forms of alliances and practices that ultimately will help us to transform the society of which we are a part. By that time, terms like “ethnicity” and “globalization” will no longer be simply tools of advertisements. They will represent an attractive reality that can boon to common enrichment.

Notes

1. Samira Kawash, "Good Ethnic, Bad Aliens: Imagining the Global Village" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 176.
2. *Ibid.*, 184.
3. Roxana Ing, "Sexism, Racism and Nationalism" (publication unknown).