Arjun Appadurai (Alexander Pylyshyn / Alamy Stock Photo).

The Risks of Dialogue

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Starting from the premise that no one can engage in dialogue without taking serious risks, we can understand why they are worth taking. The risk of misunderstanding, for example, is inherent in all dialogue, as is the opposite situation: the risk of being understood too clearly. This requires prudence, as well as limited consensus. Another risk associated with dialogue is its relationship with the internal differences of the parties involved in the dialogue. One conclusion we can draw from a careful analysis of these risks is that we must move away from the tendency to speak in totalizing terms of entire societies, traditions or civilizations as if they had "essentially debatable concepts." In Europe, all these risks are real and we cannot avoid them, but rather manage them productively.

I will make a simple argument about the nature of dialogue. No one can enter into dialogue without taking serious risks. This view is opposed to the commonsense view of dialogue as casual, quotidian, even secondary to the real workings of power and wealth. If we can agree that dialogue is always a risky affair, we can ask ourselves what risks are involved and why it is worthwhile, even compulsory, to take these risks today. I am mainly concerned with dialogue between societies or organized social groupings, such as nations, religions, political movements and parties, and interest groups. Still, it is worth noting that dialogue begins as an idea of exchange between persons. When I discuss the risks of dialogue today, I shall mainly have cultures and civilizations in mind, but I believe these risks are present regardless of the level at which dialogue may take place. The first risk of dialogue is that the other party may not understand what you mean. The risk of misunderstanding is inherent to all human communication, and we have evolved many ways to reduce these risks. We try to choose our words and actions carefully, we pay attention to language and translation, we try to imagine the mental assumptions of the other party; in short, we try to be as intersubjective as possible and to find the best ways to cross the boundaries between the speaker and the listener. Needless to say, when we conduct dialogue in earnest, we also try to listen with the same mental approach, so as to minimize the risks of misunderstanding or miscommunication.

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The second risk of dialogue is exactly the opposite, and that is the risk that we may in fact be understood clearly. This paradox is partly based on the worry that the other party may see through our surface expressions and understand motives or intentions which we prefer to conceal. That is always a hazard in the era of the epistemology of suspicion, coming out of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. But the deeper risk of being fully

understood is the risk that the other party will actually see our deepest convictions, our foundational opinions and even our doubts. The reason why this is a risk is that dialogue is not about everything. To be effective, dialogue must be to some extent about shared ground, selective agreement and provisional consensus. When foundational convictions come on to the table, the improvisational element of dialogue is endangered and the stakes become impossibly high, since basic convictions have to be made commensurable. One major example of this risk is the current dialogue between the Islamic world and the Christian European world, in which dialogue too quickly moves to doctrinal and ethical foundations, without paying attention to more specific and limited arenas. A struggle over headscarves in schools need not become a struggle over competing views of human universality. It can remain a problem of public conduct or etiquette. So when we undertake dialogue, we must take care not to demand too much understanding or to offer too much of our deepest convictions. I am aware that this sounds like a suggestion that we must be hypocritical or cynical. In fact, I am suggesting prudence and limited agreement. When we undertake dialogue, an even greater risk than the risk of misunderstanding is the risk of excess understanding. Let us probe this argument a little more fully. Complete, full and precise mutual understanding is an impossible standard, in any case, given the challenges of culture, language and history that divide individuals and communities. But complete understanding, at the level of primary ethical, religious or political convictions carries yet another danger with it. That danger is the urge to eliminate basic differences altogether. For if we wish to establish common ground at the level of basic convictions, somebody's basic convictions must change, and this usually means that one party's deepest convictions become the measure of common ground.

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This is the way in which false universalisms can erase true differences. So dialogue must always involve a decision about how far to demand negotiation about fundamentals. In this sense, all dialogue is a form of negotiation and negotiation cannot be based on complete mutual understanding or a total consensus across any sort of boundary or difference. There is yet another risk associated with dialogue and that is the relationship of dialogue to internal differences on each side of the dialogue. All individuals have inner doubts, differences and divisions within themselves, such as for example between short and long-term goals, higher and lesser motives, conscious and unconscious interests and so on. When we move up the scale to groups, communities, civilizations and other large social formations, we have in addition the internal differences between the old and the young, the elite and the common people, between the court and the street, between men and women, to name only the simplest categories of internal division. In the age of globalization, these internal differences are further exacerbated by the movement of migrants to new locations, the different identity anxieties of old and young among migrant populations, and the nature of mass media and electronic communication which allows

intensely local and highly remote attachments to be co-present and mutually formative.

As far as the risks of dialogue are concerned, the central problem of internal differences is that there can be no negotiation with the other without a parallel negotiation with the self. In the world of politics, religion and nationalism, such internal negotiations take place under special circumstances which make it hard for anyone to speak confidently on behalf of others without the risk of challenge. The problem of representation by any leader or organized voice that purports to speak on behalf of any collective entity is that challenge is always possible. This sort of challenge has its general source in the gradual spread of ideas about freedom and expression that have been growing in popularity ever since the great revolutions of the eighteenth century. It has become especially strong during the last fifteen years or so, after the end of the Cold War, when ideas about market freedom and political freedom became so deeply connected. But there is yet another special reason for the difficulty of representing whole communities, civilizations or religious groups by any sort of leadership. With the creation of the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, there has been a sharp increase in the global awareness of the right to speak, to be protected, to be treated with dignity and to be granted a voice in public life for all people, regardless of their citizenship rights. Combined with the growth of electronic communication and the ideologies of participatory democracy, the spread of the ideology of human rights has meant that no person or group – women, prisoners, children, refugees, the disabled, and migrants – can be treated as people who can be spoken for without their consent.

The conclusion I draw from this discussion of internal differences is that it is risky, indeed impossible, for any representative voice to speak with authority on behalf of a culture, a religion, a nation, a movement or a civilization. Here again, the solution is to move away from the tendency to speak in totalizing terms of whole societies, traditions or civilizations as if they contain no "essentially contestable concepts". All great religions have skeptics, doubters, dissidents and even heretics. Sometimes they are ignored, sometimes they are burnt at the stake, and sometimes, as in the case of Martin Luther King, they become founders of great religious traditions in their own right. Indeed, the test of a civilization or a great tradition may well be seen as its capacity to incite dissent, inspire debate, and generate internal differences on matters of fundamental importance.

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Thus the risk of dialogue, from this point of view, is that it requires a tricky calculus about bringing internal debate into the dialogue with the other. If you bring in too much internal debate, your position looks weak, illegitimate and perhaps incoherent. If you bring in too little, you look authoritarian, arrogant or simply incredible. In this regard, the risk of true dialogue is a double risk or a risk of falling into the Scylla of incoherence or the Charybdis of authoritarianism. In contemporary Europe, it is evident that these risks are both real. Islam is too often represented as monolithic,

as not having room for dissent, debate or difference.

On the other hand, opponents of Islamic fundamentalism often deny the deep divisions underneath the liberal consensus: between those who are for or against the European union; between those who come out of Catholic, Protestant or Jewish traditions; between those who have become thoroughly secularized and those who have not; between those who have come to embrace the religion of the market and those who have not; between votaries of fast and slow food; and between supporters and opponents of the welfare state. The real challenge is to choose among all these debates and decide which ones are appropriate to bring into a true dialogue. The risk is that we can make the wrong choices and end up negotiating over true foundations (which are almost always immune to real negotiation) and superficial conventions, in which common ground is not really deep or consequential.

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Thus, if we wish to move away from the misleading and dangerous idea of a "clash of civilizations", especially where Islam is concerned, it is important to recognize that all dialogue is risky and that no great tradition or ideology is lacking in internal debates. The challenge becomes how to conduct dialogue about the relevant differences, not about any difference or all differences. After all, we value diversity. How can there be diversity without difference? If we recognize that the purpose of dialogue is not to eliminate diversity of opinion about differences, then how do we move forward in intercultural dialogue? How do we avoid the idea of "clash of civilizations" which amounts to a denial of the possibility of dialogue?

This is of course not a question with a simple answer, but a starting point is to devote real thought to the question of the link between internal and external debates. Some internal debates are entirely internal and have little bearing on external negotiations. Other internal debates are so deep and dramatic that they cannot be brought to any sort of outside negotiation. But there is a middle ground, a set of internal debates which have a genuine but limited link to external dialogues. These are the debates which we need to identify and use to build the platform for common ground. Let us take a few examples. If we consider the current debates between thinkers from the Islamic world and thinkers from other traditions, whether religious or political, one example of a link between external and internal debates is the subject of the obligations of any community to those who are weaker or poorer within it. This subject brings together ideas about justice, welfare, equity and philanthropy. It could be a crucial link between internal debates with Muslim communities about these subjects and external debates in European parliaments, state organizations and the public sphere.

Another example of an area where internal and external debates can come together concerns the issue of violence and non-violence. Among those who consider themselves to be Hindus in India today, there is a sharp difference between those who still

see themselves as descendants of Mahatma Gandhi, and see non-violence as a fundamental principle of moral and political life. On the other hand, there are many Hindu nationalists who have taken up a very militant approach and have directed a new kind of violent mobilization against Muslims in India. This internal debate among Hindu Indians has direct relevance to their approach to nuclear power, peace and the question of Kashmir. Yet it is rarely debated in a focused manner in which internal and external dimensions of the ethics of nonviolence are brought together.

We cannot avoid the risks of dialogue, because dialogue always threatens to hide internal debates or to exaggerate them

A third example concerns the relationship between Church and State in various Western democracies. This is an area where there are deep differences between internal debates in the United States and in various European countries. Bringing the internal debates in this area into the space of negotiation across the Atlantic could reveal richer grounds for trans-Atlantic dialogue than those which currently exist. The point of these examples is to make the case that we cannot avoid the risks of dialogue, because dialogue always threatens to hide internal debates or to exaggerate them. To productively manage the risks of dialogue requires us to identify those internal debates which have the greatest consequence for our external debates. In the era of globalization, it is likely that the subjects which connect internal and external debates have a lot to do with democracy, free markets, migration, poverty, environment, the "just war" doctrine and social welfare. Each of these subjects carries with it very high stakes.

I propose that intercultural or intercivilizational dialogue shall not be structured so as to avoid these subjects. In that case, intercultural dialogue would become a poor second cousin to diplomacy, warfare and terrorism. True dialogue must take up these major subjects. But it must do so in a prudent way, without denying internal debates or inflating them beyond proportion. Above all, we must pick the right internal debates to bring to the table of our external dialogues. The right internal debates can be a sensitive guide to the landscape in which common ground can be found. The wrong ones can take us into the territory of non-negotiable convictions and the clash of totalized ideologies. In conclusion, all dialogue is risky, because it brings internal and external debates into a common framework. But we have no choice but to accept this risk and to find ways to manage it. In doing so, I suggest a strategy of selectivity, so that we do not force ourselves to share all of our humanity with each other all of the time. The negotiation of the right parts of our humanity with each other is both prudent and sufficient to build a contingent and evolving framework for conviviality.

This article was published in May 2008.