The Fourth Meeting of the Societe Imaginaire in Cadinabia

Conrad Adenauer Stiftüng
Batuz Foundation Sachsen
Exposure By Prof. Ken Keniston MIT Cambridge

Thank you very much. I am full of anxiety because I have been told by Batuz perhaps twenty times in the last year what I am going to talk about and in each case I realize that this is a subject about which I know nothing and it is therefore impossible for me to discuss it. Particularly the question of virtual reality I was reminded last night I know nothing about virtual reality but I have a student, a first year student at MIT and at MIT the students use abbreviations, they use short hand for things. And for virtual reality, which means using computers, they use VR, for everything else they call RL which means real life. I had a student with eighteen years old and I realized he was spending almost all of his time sitting in front of the computer, looking at a screen. And I said this is a problem don't you think? He said no it's not a problem. He said that it is simply that I prefer VR to RL. One of the nice things of our group here is that this is RL not VR and that I am not going to talk about VR except in an indirect way. What I would like to do is to touch on four points. One is that I want to say just a little word about Sachseny and Uruguay from someone who is neither Sachsen nor Uruguayo. How this looks, because I am struck by the parallels and the similarities. Next I want to anticipate my main conclusions which will really have to do with the rejection of the notion that technologies have any determining power and the assertion that it is people and cultures, values and societies that determine what the affects of technologies are. Third I wanted to enter into my main topic which is to preserve a kind of framework for thinking about cultural relations in the information age. And then finally, briefly I want to return to the Societe Imaginaire as a kind of example of or an experiment in a good way of dealing with culture in the information age. In America, Germany and Uruguay as well, people who are giving speeches usually have a text and my text today will be a comment that Herr Recher made yesterday which I felt was very profound. He talked about this meeting as a meeting between two distant cultures coming together in their integrity and I think that phrase contains many rich associations. That they are distant cultures, that there are two of them, but the phrase in there integrity is very critical. I want to say something about these two cultures, neither which I know well, but perhaps of the perspective of someone who is not a member of either one would be useful. When I was a young man, a boy, I lived in Argentina and in those days we looked to Uruguay in Argentina, in all of South America, in North America as well as a model of Democracy. It was the Switzerland of the Americas. It was a country which had proven that it was possible to have a democratic society, to have tolerance, to have very high levels of social well fare. It was a country a little bit prosperous. It was a country of a very high level of culture and it was looked to as one of the great small countries of the world from the democratic and cultural point of view. It had in short a glorious past, a glorious past. Not more than two weeks ago, I attended a performance in Boston in Boxter Minor Mass, and I was again reminded of Sachsen and the different but even more glorious cultural history in Sachsen of art, philosophy and indeed of democracy for during some period and industry as Sachsen industry is world famous. So I think both countries or both regions have glorious pasts and yet both have been through the twentieth century periods of tragedy and change and decline reverses that have sent them backward politically and economically and yet now both have recovered and both are in the process of reconstructing these deep and honorable and valuable traditions. Both also are parts of larger

political and economic, and are both peripheral, both are marginal, not in a bad sense but in the sense that Uruguay has always defined the boundary between Portuguese speaking and Spanish speaking Latin America. That Sachsen is on the boundary between which used to be called East and West Europe. In short, there are many, many points of similarity between these two regions and yet as minister Kasavich said we do not think of Sachsen, it is an extraordinary and profitable and useful conjunction that these two states can come together here and explore their mutual cultural and finally their political and economic relations. I want to return to telegraph to tell you about my main conclusion which I will come back to. It is very simple and it is a conclusion which we at MIT now often forget, because MIT is an institution built around technology. But my conclusion is that technology has no effects what so ever. And even though we talk of technology as causing this striving math of power from technology in fact if we examine any particular case we always find people, institutions, values, cultures, not the technology. What technologies do, new technologies, what they do is to create possibilities, to give potentials, to generate new problems. How are these possibilities actualized, what there impacts are on society, this is a matter which all of us and everyone else determines. To say that technology causes this adapt is a way of evading the responsibility that people, that human beings, that cultures have for the effects of technology. So there is no such thing as cultural determinism. And this is true above all of the new information technology. It is often said that new information technologies are bringing the world together. It is often said that new technologies are organizing the world. They are reducing the gap between the rich and the poor. They are widening the gap. All of these statements are made as if the technology itself were determining. What I would like to do is lay out a frame work, scaffolding, ideal types, a way of thinking about cultural relations in the information age. And I want to talk about a spectrum of outlooks with regard to the new information technologies. As a preface, I should note that in most discussions of these technologies it is the technical, the legal, and the economic aspects that are most discussed. It happens that I sit among a group that is sponsored by the Marx Plaz Institute and the National Academy of science, it is a German-American group which contains many very wise people. They are lawyers, they are technicians, they are the people in many cases that are defining the technologies for the future. They are representatives of the German telecommunications companies. And from our discussions I learn a great deal from them, but they rarely touch upon which I believe is the central issue and the reason for the creation of this commission. The topic is global networks and local values. But somehow the tension between global networks and local values is rarely discussed . By the tension, what I mean is that it is the threat, the fear that the spread of the new information technologies will contribute to the flattening of world cultures, to the creation of a global monoculture as I will call it. In which the local cultures, including you in the powerful local cultures such as Germany will be flattened or marginalized. I mentioned this to a German colleague who is a long time affiliate to German telecomm, he said that yes, we Germans are worried about this but we let the French do the talking for us. They are the ones who are most active in this area. To come to my spectrum let me come to an extreme which I call cultural imperialism. By cultural imperialism I mean the dominant of a single culture across an entire region or the entire world. I think we see examples of this in the imperial of Rome, we see examples of it in the brief period of Islamic dominance, in the earlier part of this millennium, and according to some we see examples of it in the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon culture at the present time. Cultural imperialism means in affect that it is impossible to do any kind of business or delude any type of life except the most private family life outside of the dominate culture. In many cases the use of another language may even be forbidden, there are nations where it is illegal to speak certain languages because they are considered to be subversive or revolutionary. It certainly means that for any kind of power or preferment or advancement it is essential to be an affiliate to the dominant culture and thus to speak Latin in the time of the Roman empire,

to speak Arabic in the time of the Islamic power, and according to some, to speak English in the present time. Now some argue that we live in a time of defactule cultural imperialism today. That the power of Hollywood, of Anglo-Saxon entertainment, media is such combined with the enormous technological and electrical informational power, particularly the American information technology is such that in effect unless you can speak English and unless you can be part of this Anglo-Saxon culture, you are effectively marginalized or excluded. I sometimes have a dream, a bad dream, and I am not sure if it is a dream or a description of a world governed by a what could be called a deigerati. These people have four characteristics. One is they all have a computer. Two, they all have an internet address. Three, they all regularly access the internet and the web. And four, they all speak English. They also have cellular phones which can be added to their description. But if you take a look at who are these people, approximately one percent at the present time and mainly concentrated in the Northern countries but also found in such places as Bombay or Johannesburg. If you ask what percentage of the world power, wealth, access, does this one percent posses. I think the answer would be well over ninety percent. These are the people that everyone here would be a part of. These are the people who very easily leap from nation to nation, who speak many languages, who speak enough English to get bye. It is not too far fetch to say that this group, this deigerati, constitute a kind of world ruling class. Not in the conspiritual sense, not in the sense that they have a conscious alliance, but they recognize each other. As it happens most of my current research is done in South Asia, in India, and I am very struck that in India, penetration of the internet id very limited. It is about one tenth of one percent. But as it happens to be, every single person that I know in India has an internet address. Which means that I am dealing with a certain part of Indian society, and these are the people who come to meetings like this and who travel across the world. And they are in effect in India , as in most countries, they are the people in India who have the resources, the privileges, the access to the information which ninety nine percent of Indians do not have. The same could be said that the percentage has changed in the United States. The powerful, the privileged have already access to the information society. So cultural imperialism entails making it almost impossible for other people to participate in anything but marginal cultures. The second category is very close to that. It is what I would call global monoculture. And I think it comes closer to the actual situation. We do not live in a situation where the Germans speak Kurd or a Hindu speak Kurd is automatically disqualified. On the contrary in many ways, we live in an era where many cultures are praised. You need only to look at the advertisements for Beneton the many cultures of Beneton to see that this raises a very powerful accord in which people at least live close. So the notion of a multiculture universe is a very powerful one. At the same time, it remains true that if you wanted to do science, if you wanted to do business, if you wanted to do finance, if you are in the academic world, if you are to have read articles, it is extremely useful to know English. That the technological power of the Northern Countries, in particular the United States, is so great, that unless one has access to that culture in one way or another, it is very hard to exist. Now I recognize that Germany is perhaps the most important exception, the most important world power, the most advanced technologically, and that much of what I say is not quite true of Germany or only partly true of Germany. But then again I am reminded of my German colleague who said we too are worried but we let the French speak for us. One of the French who spoke was the French Foreign Minister, whose name I believe was Demourielle, a few years back said that it is the struggle for the culture of the world, that we are the first to realize it. So French cultural nationalism is a part of an effort to limit the dominance of the Anglophonic world and also the case of France, who have a very powerful, ancient and valued culture. It is easy to character this global monoculture. Much has been written about it. There is a book by a political scientist called Barber, Gehard versus Macworld. And he talks about the way in which the American, Australian, British, Anglo-English, culture and products have spread through the

world. Macworld of course refers to Macintosh, and these become representative of a kind of feeling the near of a culture, both world culture/popular culture, and consumers culture but also a Thai culture. The three tenors of the baths of Karakul are an example of a highly engineered Hollywood produced effort to bring Thai culture to the world or the world culture. The constitute of universalization of a very common cultural pattern. I recently was in Buenos Aires and then I went to Bombay, and of course I live in Boston, and all three places have MTV. In Argentina of course it is in Spanish, in Bombay it is in either Marati or Hindi, but I must say that my son watches it in English and so do I sometimes in Boston. The languages are to be different for sure, but the style is the same in everyplace. It is the same MTV. And the MTV in Buenos Aires, and in Bombay is not indigenous. The words are Hindi, but the dances are something else, they are international, they are part of this global monoculture. The same way Indian villagers at the present time watch American soap operas, and these are the villagers who are among the poorest people in the world. They do not have enough to eat. There are three hundred fifty million of them and they watch the epics of American billionaires in Dallas, Denver, etc. So there is a kind of diffusion of a very thin layer of culture. I have a friend, who bought this game, that works for digital, who he himself is French and said that this is not a culture at all, it is an interface. It is too thin to be a culture. But what ever it is it is very powerful and it is very easy to character and it does play a role. And it is a danger. It is precisely that danger to which the French who are the most vocal in their culture, it is to that thread that they are responding. Let me bring you to a third point and that is of cultural diversity. In this room I think we have cultural diversity. But India is also another good example of this. India is a nation which has almost a billion people and it has eighteen official languages. It has no majority linguistically. Unlike other countries where there is a dominate language and culture. There are some common characteristics here. One for example is the dream of a past in which the culture was pure, the time when before foreigners came there was a time of peace, unity and harmony and everyone lived in cornice. With the dictates of the culture. A common characteristic is the sacrelization, the culture itself becomes holy, it becomes beyond criticism. The third is the notion that there has been a fall. That somehow foreigners came, outside elements came, factories came, and they destroyed the purity of the cultures. But the other element was that there was a saving realm. There were a group of people, priests or ideologues, or politicians who preserved the vision of this pure culture. That saved realm can now re-conquer the society and the culture. Expel all the alien and foreign elements and reconstitute the purity of the culture. The problem of course is that once you start expelling the people who don't belong and once you start sacrelizing the culture it becomes very dangerous for everyone who is not a part of the central culture. The people become aliens, subversive and we have seen this in our century in every century. We have seen the cores that have been perpetrated in the name of cultural purity and cultural restoration. This goes on in every country today and am sure that it will continue. But there is a more subtle point. It is not enough simply to say we hate exclusionary cultural nationalism. We have to understand that one of the origins of this exclusionary cultural nationalism, is precisely the feeling of being marginalized, deprecated, denovated, by global monoculture. If you live in a culture which is considered inferior, or second rate or not really useful, marginal, the tendency to reassert that culture aggressively against the foreigners, that reaction tendency becomes much stronger. So there is a political reason to try to emphasize cultural diversity to value local culture. If local cultures are disvalued, then I think the possibilities of cultural reaction of the very ugly sort increases. I think we see this in many parts of the world, today we see it in the United States, certainly in the fundamentalist revivalist reactionary movements which we see in different parts of the United States, and we see it in many other countries as well. My view is that these technologies are apart of a bigger picture. The bigger picture includes not merely computers, computer media, technology, internet, web, although they are increasingly important and will be increasingly important, but

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all of the technology that has been developed over the last hundred years. Radio, television, film and so on. Which together they form a unity and when people talk about Anglo-Saxon monoculture they are not only talking about internet although it does take part. The internet, something like ninety five percent of the sites are in English at the present time. If you are living in South India, and if you want to speak Canada which is the language spoken bye sixty million people around Bangowa, there is no way for there is no software what so ever. The information age cannot be understood outside the context of the broad story trends that have lead what we can loosely call Anglo-Saxon or Northern European culture to play a dominate role, but in particular the Anglo-Saxon culture. I would like to return now to the Societe Imaginaire. The bad dream is the rule of the deigerati, a small handful of people, all with cell phones, computers and controlling the world, flying back and forth in jets and ninety five to ninety eight percent of the population, depending on the country effectively are excluded from any kind of real participation in the culture area, in the power area, in the wealth, in the knowledge of intellectual riches that are possible. The alternative I think is something which the Societe Imaginaire is struggling towards. I use the word struggling deliberately. What we need I think are visions of distant societies coming together in all their integrity. And we need visions of societies, of cultures which respect each other, that retain their individuality, that retain their roots of their traditions, roots, past , language. But which nonetheless communicate, which none the less share their ideas because of the common humanity, because of common aspiration. It would be wrong to say that Batuz, the Societe Imaginaire or the Adenauer Foundation, have found the formula for doing this. But I am impressed that every active of the Societe Imaginaire pushes to define a world in which distant societies, can come together not just in virtual space, not in VR, but in RL as we are in here and can come together in a conversation, in a dialogue from which they can gain an understanding of each other, but also respecting themselves more, also understanding their own culture, also with a deeper appreciation for that which makes them unique. So this dialogue which the Societe Imaginaire struggles toward, is a dialogue without imperialism, without dominance, it is a dialogue that shows that it is possible to be global without being imperial. It is a dialogue in which the new information technologies can be used certainly, but have to be used not to flatten and marginalize but also to deepen and intensify the power every individual culture possesses. So the Societe Imaginaire is a continuing and creative experiment to create a world in which cultural diversity is combined with the possibility of global communication.