

Common Cultures

Interview with Amartya Sen

Is there truly a clash of values between the United States and Europe? The Nobel Prize–winning economist says no. The commonality of our views on human rights goes back to the very beginning of the nation, he argues. But he does argue that one of the bedrock principles of democracy, what he calls “public reason,” may now be undermined by a narrowing of public discourse. One of the invaluable consequences of democracy has always been the public debate over conflicting ideas. He worries that in the United States this tradition may erode.

Q Lately, there is a lot of talk about a clash of values between the European continent and the United States. In your view, is there some truth to this? Or do we have more in common than we think?

A. There is a conflict right now, certainly, but surely it is about the priorities of foreign policy. It is hard to deny that the position the U.S. government has taken, and which seems to have the backing of the majority of Americans, is a position that gets far less support—indeed, comparatively little—in Europe. The contrast holds not only for countries where the official governmental position has been opposed to the U.S. stand, as in France

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or Germany, but also for countries where the government's position has been closely in line with that of the U.S. government, as in Britain, Italy, and Spain.

But to think of it as a clash of values going back a long time would be, I think, a great mistake. If you think about the two central issues that have been important, at the level of general principles, in recent discussions, they are the tenets of democracy on one side and those of human rights and human security on the other. Now, if you trace the history of these ideas, there can be little doubt that the great intellectual developments in the late eighteenth century, which in many ways profoundly influenced the way we think about democracy and human rights, were results not only of American and European cooperation, but to a great extent specifically of Franco-American collaboration. The French Revolution followed on the heels of the American Revolution. The rhetoric of "inalienable rights" was aired in the Declaration of Independence in America, and it found an echo in the so-called Rights of Man proclaimed within a decade or so afterward, in France.

Perhaps from today's very narrow and belligerent perspective, it might look odd that, historically, there was less sympathy for the American concept of "inalienable rights" among the intellectuals in Britain compared to the sympathetic chord it struck in France. For example, in the early 1790s, when Jeremy Bentham wrote his attack on the French view of the Rights of Man in a document called *Anarchical Fallacies*, he noted that the French description of the rights of man as being "natural and imprescriptible" was "an American phrase." Bentham described the idea of natural rights, in the form of "rights of man," as sheer "nonsense," and the American formula of "natural and imprescriptible rights" as a special kind of absurdity: "nonsense on stilts." It is a document that reflected a leading current of thought in contemporary British political philosophy (in the late eigh-

teenth and early nineteenth century), and while the document was mainly critical of French declarations of human rights, there was skepticism also of the entire American rights-based thinking that dominated the frontline of American political thinking at the time of the Declaration of Independence. The British qualms applied both to the American line of political reasoning and to the French revolutionary proclamations that soon followed American declarations, in similar terms—often using, as Bentham noted, exactly the same expressions.

Q So, you are saying we too easily forget our common roots with the French and some of our historical discord with Britain?

A. Yes, this applies particularly to the Franco-American approach to what we now call human rights. Bentham, and several other leading British political thinkers, such as Edmund Burke, were very critical of the rights-based approach to public policy that the French and the American revolutionaries were pursuing and which played a very significant part in constitution-making in the United States as well as France.

One way of looking at the history of the twentieth century is that when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the world community gave a kind of official recognition that the current of world opinion had moved in the Franco-American direction rather than in the more British directions—based either on Burkean conservatism or Benthamite utilitarianism, both very skeptical of human rights as a starting point.

There had been, of course, many discordant voices in Britain itself. Some of them were taken to be rather maverick, like the early feminist voice of Mary Wollstonecraft. However, John Stuart Mill, who was very much a mainstream British political

theorist, did combine his utilitarianism with a focus on the right to individual liberties and generally made considerable room for rights-based thinking in political philosophy. While Mill also tried to square the circle by attempting to place liberty firmly *within* a general framework of utilitarianism, he sufficiently modified the Benthamite framework of utility-based thinking to accommodate parts of the Franco-American interest in the priority of rights.

After World War II, as the new commitments in global thinking received widespread recognition in the world community through the United Nations and other initiatives—including those of activist organizations like Oxfam, Red Cross, Amnesty International, CARE, Human Rights Watch, and so on—there was an acceptance, partly explicit and partly by implication, of the rights-based point of view initiated in the late eighteenth century. In 1792, when Bentham's *Anarchical Fallacies* was written, the reach and range of rights-based thinking were being powerfully expanded by Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, and by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, also published in 1792. Marquis de Condorcet's *Esquisse*, written at about the same time, was published in 1795 (and was instantly denounced by Malthus). These were major documents on the intellectual front that built the foundations of an approach that we now call "human rights," but which was known at that time under various titles: "rights of man," "rights of women," "natural rights applied to men" or "applied to human beings." Despite many ambiguities and differences between distinct formulations of "human rights," the contemporary focus on the generality of human rights has done much to consolidate and extend these early initiatives, which were broadly in line with the Franco-American focus on "inalienable rights" of human beings.

Along with the new global interest in universal human rights

came a strong and growing support for democracy, which, of course, was one of the big ideas behind the French Revolution and, indeed, the American Revolution. It is important to give recognition to the way the joint Franco-American line of political thinking and, more generally, European-American post-Enlightenment theorizations have found reflection in global political ideas in the contemporary world. To miss all that and to see instead a big intellectual division between Europe and America would be a mistake.

Actually, more generally, the alleged intellectual divisions across the world—not just between Europe and America—are widely exaggerated, through such theories as “the clash of civilizations.” Ideas move and change constantly across the world. Post-Enlightenment Europe has many features that can hardly be seen to be ageless characteristics of Western thought. There are, of course, antecedents of the newer ideas in earlier European thinking, but there are similar antecedents in parts of early political thinking in China, India, the Arab world, and so on. Rather than inventing unreal geographical barriers extending way back into history, it is more useful to see the dynamics of changing ideas across the world—in the West as well as in the rest of the world. Democracy, as we now understand it, includes many elements, such as public reasoning as well as public balloting. Early use—and defense—of public reasoning can be found in many civilizations (including parts of Europe, but also elsewhere). What is particularly interesting to consider is how the older ideas were developed and integrated into a fuller view of democracy. In this development, the joint Franco-American efforts, particularly in the late eighteenth century, were pivotally important.

Q What do you think is the source of these alleged conflicts and values these days?

A. I find it quite puzzling. Perhaps differences in historical experiences do play a part, but it is the very recent history that may be particularly relevant, as far the European-American contrast is concerned. There is certainly one big difference, which may be relevant. Even though the United States was a major player in World War II and even though the war would not have gone the way that it did but for American involvement, the fact is that America never felt the sense of invasion that European countries did experience, other than Germany. And for Germany, of course, there was the experience of total defeat and surrender at the end.

I think these experiences make many Europeans rather worried about the idea of there being one superpower that is so exceptionally mighty that it can do pretty much what it likes no matter what people in other countries think about it. Now, no one with a modicum of political understanding would want to compare the use of U.S. power today with the use of German power in the late 1930s and early 1940s. That is not the issue at all. The point, however, is that the general sense of helplessness that characterized France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, indeed so many countries, one after another—and ultimately Germany too—and even the sense of vulnerability in the early war years in Britain, tend to make European countries very suspicious of a singular power that can do what it likes, no matter what others want.

There is a kind of instinctive gut reaction against the presence—and actual deployment—of such a tremendously dominant power. Americans do not seem generally to have this feeling, perhaps partly because Americans themselves are the powerful ones, but also because they have not really had the experience of being overwhelmed as has happened to nearly every European country, and almost happened to Britain too. This is perhaps one reason there is such a general European suspicion of a

world order with one superpower that does not need to listen to others. Even though it is, in some general sense, a difference in political attitudes, its origin may lie, to a great extent, in a contrast of experience connected with World War II.

Q What about from the American point of view? What do you think is the source of the conflict, from the U.S. point of view? Is it merely a division over Iraq, or is there some deeper strain between us in America today and continental Europe?

A. On the recent developments connected with Iraq and other contemporary subjects of contention, I am not able to comment very knowledgably, if only because in recent years I have been mostly in Europe. I have, of course, come to America very regularly, but the fact is that I have not really been able to be clear in my mind whether there has been a general shift in the immediately political attitudes in American society compared with what I remember six years ago and earlier, when I lived in Boston and taught at Harvard. Since I shall be returning to Harvard next January, after resigning from the mastership of Trinity, the question does interest me very much, but I have not figured out a clear answer as to whether there is—or is not—a serious shift.

My memory of America in the period preceding 1998, when I took up my present job in Trinity, includes recollections of a great and most agreeable diversity of opinions. For example, in watching television news, one saw considerable heterodoxy. In contrast, when I came back to Boston for six weeks in March and April last, at the height of the operation in Iraq, I was certainly quite struck by what seemed to me to be an unusually “nonheterodox” American media. It is not entirely monolithic, of course. It is not like anything one would associate with, say, the Soviet Union or China. But still, compared with the earlier rich diversity of coverage and commentary in the United States,

and also in contrast with the media in Britain and Europe, what I saw during those six weeks in March and April gave me the distinct impression of severely reduced diversity. Perhaps less so in the case of radio, especially given the role of public broadcasting and also the presence of the BBC in American airwaves.

Q. The BBC news was widely watched.

A. It is quite interesting, because the BBC is a government-owned operation, and it was being enormously more independent of the government of the country than the privately owned television channels in America seemed to be, vis-à-vis the official U.S. government position. So I think there may have been some change.

Q Is this part and parcel of a growing division about economic issues such as the extent of the welfare state, the philosophical and moral basis of the welfare state? Are we beginning to have more divergent views—America and the Continent—about that?

A. There has been something of a European-American divide on the welfare state for a long time. The attitudinal contrast that I am familiar with between America and Europe (I am thinking of the 1980s and 1990s when I was shuttling quite a bit between Europe and America) is that the Europeans typically had a more immediate sense of supportive sympathy with the idea of social assistance to people who are indigent. The wretched of the earth were—and are—seen as having been, in one way or another, quite unlucky, and the feeling is that something should be done for them. The American attitude, even in those days, seemed to be inclined, to a noticeable extent, toward giving priority to creating opportunity for people to make their own lives less wretched rather than being directly helped by others. This meant that the Americans have been much more interested in maintaining a high level of employment than Europe has. I do not

think that any U.S. government would have been able to survive the kind of 10–22 percent unemployment that Germany, France, Spain, Italy—indeed, nearly all the countries in Europe—had at one stage or another.

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in the world, just about the only way of economically helping oneself is to get a job, if you do not happen to own a lot of capital yourself. So there was a strong focus on unemployment, and the American government—and in general the American public—worried greatly whenever the unemployment rate climbed above, say, 5 percent. There is nothing comparable to that traditional sensitivity about unemployment in Europe. On the other hand, the social security provisions that Europe has had much more comprehensively than America, for a long time, makes the penalty of unemployment far less severe. By the way, the European commitment to a good social security system does not date just from the time of the postwar Labour government in Britain but goes back to much earlier discussions, even to Bismarck in the nineteenth century, and it gives a real role to the society and the state in helping people along when they are in difficulty.

Now, that has been a rather traditional division. There would be nothing new to explain if the European-American contrast continued along this specific line of division. But perhaps things have changed somewhat from that particular contrast in recent

years. One thing that has happened now is that the level of unemployment has risen in America quite a bit. I believe the last number is about 6 percent, which is beginning to look much like Britain and the rest of Europe. Indeed, the unemployment rate in Europe has dramatically come down, while in America it has gone up. The gap is nearly gone now. I wonder whether unemployment has become less of a political embarrassment in today's America than it used to be.

Q If so many people had not left the labor force, it would be more like 7 or 7½ percent.

A. Yes, it would be higher than 6 percent. And yet this unusually high level of American unemployment seems to be generating far less criticism and protest than we would expect, drawing on past experience. There seems to be almost a weakening of what I always took to be one of the very positive aspects of American foundational vision: namely, that people should be able to help themselves and that society should be so organized that people can, by and large, find jobs and be self-supporting—a high-employment society with lots of economic opportunities around. It is that social commitment that, it seems, is beginning to be undermined.

So the change that I see is not a movement against social security: *That* has been a weaker feature of the American system for a long time. It is in fact a movement against the principle that was, in an important sense, the “rival” to social security: namely, the opportunity of self-help in which America traditionally prided itself and which typically it tended to provide much more plentifully than European countries had done. So, I see something of a significant change here that I am not able to analyze fully. If there has really been such a change, I would like to understand it better.

Q. When you say you have seen a change, do you mean that you have seen it very recently?

A. If there is a change, it is indeed quite recent. I would have thought an unemployment rate of 6 or 7 percent would create more of a stir than it has caused recently in America. I would like to know whether this diagnosis is right, and, if so, why things have changed in this way. This question does interest me, par-

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ticularly because it is clearly a contrast with the earlier American emphasis on keeping employment high. The contrast in social security is much older and not especially novel, at least in terms of the principles involved.

Q Do you sense, as do some people such as Kevin Phillips in the United States, that there is some undermining of democracy itself? Are we having a difference of opinion over the value of democracy?

A. I think there is a very serious issue here. Democracy is so much a subject of debate now, and the underlying ideas are interpreted in so many different ways. I am actually trying to do a book on the foundations of democracy. This is partly historical, partly conceptual. One of the principal themes is this. There are two different aspects of democracy. One, which we may call the “public ballot” aspect, focuses on such issues as majority vote: people who win the election have the right to govern as they like. The other is what we may call the “public reason” aspect of democracy. It is to think of democracy in terms of both *support-*

ing and *responding* to a heterodox atmosphere in which different ideas could be tried out and are allowed to confront each other. The focus is on the opportunity to discuss and scrutinize public issues in an open, free, and effective way. The social and political arrangements of such a democracy would both protect and encourage diversity of approaches and intellectual confrontations, and ultimately reflect what emerges from that, in a fair way. In that broader “public reason” perspective, the ballot is only one part of the effectiveness of public reason, and may or may not be the most central issue.

It can be argued that the public-reason aspect of democracy is in some need of further championing and support. The subtleties of vote counting in Florida may catch all the headlines (and that, in itself, is positive enough for people who are interested in democracy), but the danger is in overlooking any weakening of the commitment to public reasoning and the atmosphere of heterodoxy that it requires. There is a large and magnificent American tradition of encouraging public discussions and protecting the freedom of expressing dissenting views. It would be sad if the excitement of war and the sense of being targeted by terrorists led to an enfeeblement of that great heritage.

Q Do you think, to some degree, that the dominance of a sort of market psychology and the rising inequality of income and maybe political power gravitating toward money, given our campaign laws, are contributing to the weakening of public reason?

A. I do not like to speculate on that because it is not an easy subject to settle. When people say that democracy is undermined by the power of money, there is certainly much truth in that. Indeed, I am very much in favor of campaign reform and having sensible laws and practices whereby the influence of money

is reduced. But there is a danger in saying that until you achieve the very best and the influence of money is altogether eliminated, you do not have a “real democracy.” Sometimes the best is dressed up to serve as the enemy of the good, and then you argue against taking democracy seriously until the influence of money has been completely eliminated.

I am not pessimistic about the idea of strongly pursuing democracy and human rights in the Middle East.

It is ultimately a question of being pragmatic about it. It is hard to expect that in the foreseeable future, the influence of money can be completely eliminated in American elections or, for that matter, in any election, whether it is in Britain or France or in India. It is important to work in the direction of doing what we can to reduce this source—and others—of arbitrary differences in influencing public discussions and public voting. But it is also important to defend the positive things we can see in different democratic countries, and not to let it all sink in a sea of cynicism until a “perfect” form of democracy has been reached.

Q Do you find some irony in our position in Iraq, and in the Middle East in general—that one of our main positions now is to export democracy and human rights to that region?

A. I am not one who takes the view that democracy will never work in the Middle East because it is culturally alien to it. I do believe that any nation is capable of democratic governance—no doubt with many imperfections, but that applies to America and Britain as well. Also, the roots of democracy are very widely spread across the world. In the twelfth century, when Maimo-

nides found Europe extremely intolerant, he rightly thought that he would find a more tolerant climate in the Islamic Middle Eastern world, and he was indeed welcomed as a valued member in the court of Emperor Saladin—the same Saladin who fought for Islam in the Crusades against the Christians. Similarly, the Arabs were very open-minded about accepting what Indian mathematicians and scientists were doing and in learning from it, just as they had done with Greek thought. They also engaged in interactive critiques, and it was a relation of “give” as well as “take.”

I am not pessimistic about the idea of strongly pursuing democracy and human rights in the Middle East, and whatever the world community can do to help in that may be a very good thing to do, even though ultimately the choice must lie with the local population. I might mention that one of the very positive documents to look at is last year’s *Arab Human Development Report*, which was produced in collaboration with the Human Development wing of the United Nations Development Programme. It put much emphasis on the public-reason aspect of democracy and also emphasized human rights very strongly, very elegantly, and very powerfully. To encourage these developments would obviously be no bad thing. Whether the present U.S. administration is actually doing this—as one hopes—or is doing something else and only calling it by the same name—as many people fear—remains to be seen.

Q You have made a point that democracy can be central to economic development in poor nations. Are you afraid you might be losing that battle?

A. I do not think I am. The commitment to democracy in the world is strong. My country, India, became a democracy when no other poor country in the world was a democracy. It was the

first non-Western establishment of democratic institutions. There has not been any great weakening of that commitment. This is not to deny that democracy can, alas, be combined with many bad practices, including the possibility of exciting public passions in violent directions (as happened in Gujarat last year). The remedy is not to abandon democracy but to fight the mistakes that can happen even under democracy by better democratic practice. That is very important.

Somehow some people have a general notion that things will go much better once you drop democracy—that if you abandon democracy, India will become like South Korea (especially after its reforms of 1998–99), not like North Korea. It would be like Singapore (supplemented by more freedom of expression), rather than like Sudan or Somalia or Afghanistan. But there is very little evidence to expect that, and I do not think the Indian population believes it.

Similarly, look at other countries where democracy has recently become a very big issue, for which people are willing to fight and ready to make great personal sacrifices, South Korea being one of them. It applies to Indonesia, obviously, and also to Thailand, where their democratic constitution has been strengthened. It is a big issue in China, which is being addressed in many different ways. It is also a point of confrontation in many other countries in Asia, such as Burma, and also in Africa and Latin America. I do not see that we are losing the battle for democracy. No, I am very confident that we are not.

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