Language, Truth, and Logic in the Age of Globalism and the Discourse of Civilizations[1]

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Abstract: *Conventional wisdom states that in the Age of Globalism, in which we live, truth has finally been attained within the confines of the democratic, free world that will march forward to break down all the barriers standing in its way. This new gospel of the open world market spreading inevitably to every corner of the Globe will be communicated in English, the only lingua franca of the New Age, primarily through the global medium of communication-satellite television.*

When this vision is challenged, its adversaries are confronted, theoretically, by means of a discourse of civilizations that stipulates the cultural division of the world into separate and inevitably clashing civilizations, and, practically, by means of wars that will bring about the final victory of the New World Order.

This paper attempts to test the validity of the ideas upon which this wisdom is built and to evaluate how much truth it contains and what the logic is upon which it is founded. Doing that, it will focus also on the following key areas: clash of civilizations or dysfunctional dialogue; English as a global language of communication; and freedom of expression and truth in the media today. It will argue, principally, that there is no such clash of civilizations, and indeed it calls to question the very discourse of civilizations, or civilizational narrative, as it has been aptly termed. It will also argue that the promotion of English as the single, unchallenged and unchallengeable language of communication smacks more of linguistic imperialism than anything else and, finally, that the existing state of affairs based on the assumptions of conventional wisdom outlined above, instead of achieving the objectivity it claims, has actually ended up shooting truth as its first casualty.

The Discourse of Civilizations

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On the question of the so-called clash of civilizations, which had just come into scholarly parlance after the publication of Samuel Huntington's *Foreign Affairs* article (72, No 3), in the summer of 1993, one of the most eloquent and most persuasive counter-arguments is still John Obert Voll's Middle East Studies Association Presidential Address of 1993, printed in the *MESA Bulletin*, 28, of July 1994, where he states his position quite clearly, very early in the essay: "My position can be stated quickly: Analyses and narratives based on the concept of separate, clearly identifiable civilizations are no longer adequate, if they ever were. In fact, the "civilizational narrative" may now be an integral part of the problem rather than a part of the explanation" (Voll, 1994, p. 3). Voll continues to explain that, "a major difficulty with the civilizational explanatory narrative is that it assumes the existence of entities that do not exist as independent units" (p. 3).

Voll gives the example of Toynbee, whom he rightly identifies as the author of "perhaps the most comprehensive civilization-based narrative available" (p. 3), but who had admitted after having set out to make a comparative study of twenty-one such "civilizations", and in the conclusion of such a comprehensive study, that, "we may venture to propound a 'law' to the effect that, for a study of the higher religions, the minimum intelligible field must be larger than the domain of any single civilization" (p. 4).

Referring further on to the works of such scholars in this field as Marshall Hodgson (the author of *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 volumes, 1974) and William H. McNeill (the author of *A History of the Human Community*, 1993), Voll finds support for his conclusion that when one looks at the complexity of East / West relations and interactions, even in pre-modern times, it becomes difficult to defend the idea that civilizations are independent, free-standing units. The religious inter-connections between India and China, for example, and between the Middle East and the West are so profound that they give shape to their cultural foundations, so that "by the time of the twelfth century, it would be difficult to extract Buddhism (a worldview originating in India) from even the most xenophobic definition of

"Chinese Civilization", or Middle Eastern tradition of ethical monotheism from the fundamental definitions of medieval Western civilization" (p. 4).

In the context of the "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West that had begun to be propagated in Huntington's notorious article, Voll states categorically that: "Islam cannot be called a civilization, even within the relatively standard definitions. It is a multi-civilzational unit that has significant elements and participation in more than one civilization" (p. 4).

Similarly, Voll points out, "the West also has difficulty fitting into the standard definitions of civilization. It does not have the clear and distinctive cultural unity that seems to be implied by the definitions in presentations like Huntington's" (p. 5).

Voll's comparison between pre-modern and modern societies is also very pertinent. He argues that modern societies are really so different from premodern societies that it would be better to admit that they are not generally the same kinds of units. Indeed, it might be better, he continues, to make a clear distinction when we use the term "civilization" for ancient or medieval societies and when we use it for modern societies, if we are to avoid, for example, such anomalies as excluding Greece from the "West", as Huntington does. We may even have to admit, he concludes, "that "civilizations" and "civilizational forms" are a phase of world history which we have now gone past", and that, on the central issue of the relations between Islam and the West, "it is possible that the attempt to understand the interactions between Islam and the West as interactions between two civilizations will be profoundly misleading because neither are "civilizations" in terms of the definitions of the discussion" (pp. 5-6).

Prophetically, Voll cautioned, in 1993, that: "Those who attempt to see civilizations in conflict when civilizations do not exist may be assisting in the process of creating hypernationalist attitudes and perceptions. Considerations of this type provide the urgency behind the debate over "the Islamic threat." The perception by people in the West of Islam as a categoric threat to "Western Civilization" may create the conditions for the self-fulfilling prophecies of conflict between the United States and the various Muslim groups and movements" (p. 6).

Voll's concluding statements are equally profound and reassuring: "The world in which we now live is particularist *and* universalist. This is a paradox and difficult to cope with but it is a reality . . . The syncretistic, paradoxical, self-contradictory, sometimes human value-destroying, conflict-ridden one-world of World Beat, McDonalds, the information superhighway and a host of other things, this one-world truly exists. Its sounds sometimes drown out the debates in scholarly journals and intellectual assemblies. In many ways in our contemporary world we really are at the end of civilization. We need to accept that and to stop trying to explain our global and regional conflicts by defining and emphasizing divisions that no longer exist . . . The civilizational narrative relies on conceiving the world as divided into large warring units which are culturally and religiously defined . . . "Civilizations" are a kind of solution to problems of social identity, but one which may intensify or even create conflict.

We may be living at "the end of civilization" as we know it. If we recognize this situation and try honestly to cope with its paradoxes and conflicts, we may discover that the end of civilization is not so bad" (p. 7).

John Obert Voll's astute, early critique of Samuel Huntington's ideas has continued since unabated (particularly as they seem to have paved the way for an ideological position adopted as strategy by some of the ruling circles in the United States), culminating in an impressive volume of essays, entitled *Why America's Top Pundits Are Wrong* (2005), which may well be the first comprehensive challenge and refutation of these four figures, among whom Huntington is included. The editors of this brave volume sum up what they mean by the work of these pundits in this way: "Although they do not all come from the same side of the political map, they draw on and embellish a loosely coherent set of myths about human nature and culture that have a strange staying power in American public discourse: that conflict between people of different cultures, races, or genders is inevitable; that biology is destiny; that culture is immutable; that terrible poverty, inequality, and suffering are natural; and that people in other societies who do not want to live just like Americans are afraid of "modernity". We have put together a book subjecting these pundits to cold, hard scrutiny because of our concern that, while their voices are often the loudest, they are not necessarily the wisest. Although they may be glibly persuasive writers with strong points of view, their writing is also dangerously simplistic and ideologically distorted" (Besteman and Gusterson, 2005, p. 2). They continue, "The pundits we review here are American mythmakers with authority . . . while they successfully present themselves as globally knowledgeable and reasonable commentators, the myths they promote exert a reactionary force in public life. Often based on stereotypes of other people, these myths hobble our ability to think critically or to empathize with different kinds of people, and they have the effect of legitimating the status quo. They are also based on wrongheaded assumptions about human nature that we are determined to debunk" (p. 4).

More specifically on Huntington, the book points out that "Huntington's characterizations of different cultures are often based on egregious stereotypes (Muslims are violent fundamentalists, the Chinese are authoritarian) that blur the diversity of opinion and belief within a society and deny the ability of societies to change over time" (p. 12).

Similarly, Thomas L. Friedman's triumphalist and one-sided defense of Globalism comes in for some very sharp criticism, particularly in his presentation of Globalism as an uncontrollable panacea for all the ills and conflicts of the world, and his perception of a global clash between what he calls modernity and tradition that he sees at the heart of all our woes.

The editors of the volume conclude by summing up the position of these pundits and their own counter-response in this way: " The pundits critiqued in this book all share what we might call a reactionary determinism . . . If African Americans are disproportionately poor, it is because they are intellectually inferior, and social programs cannot change this; the rape of women is an inevitable

consequence of our genes, not the result of a distorted culture; globalization is in the hands of "the electronic herd" and cannot be remade in a more humane fashion by activists, trade unionists, and environmentalists; the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims will keep on killing one another because that is the way they are; democracy will not come to Asia because it does not fit their timeless culture; and people from different cultural traditions are destined to interact antagonistically rather that constructively. The authors of this book, believing that these ideas are based not only on bad politics but also on bad social science, promote a kind of realism different from that espoused by the pundits . . . While the pundits whisper in our ears that nothing can be done to make the world a better place, we know that this is wrong." (pp. 22-3).

Globalization and the Crisis of the Media

In this context, we must not forget the economic basis of globalism, here correctly understood and accurately identified, at an early date, through the focus on Western Europe and the European Union that was laying the foundations for the coming globalized age, by Jeremy Seabrooks's *The Myth of the Market* (1990): "The racism of Western Europe is more than colonial nostalgia. The migrants, the blacks, the *Gastarbeiter*, the Mahgrebans are human hostages to global patterns of inequality and exploitation, both the symbols and the living consequences of a third World systematically ravaged and distorted for the sake of the sacred expanding economy of the West" (p. 16).

The shocking effects of globalization on world population and on the peoples of the world is best shown by the statistics compiled by the UNESCO publication, *The World Ahead* (2006): " According to the united Nations Development Program (UNDP), the poorest 20% of the world citizens share the miserable fraction of 1.1% of world revenue, as opposed to 1.4% in 1991 and 2.3% in 1960, while the richest shared 70% of world revenue in 1960 and 85% in 1991.Today the net worth of the ten greatest fortunes is US $ 133 billion, which is more than one and a half times the total national revenue of the total number of the least developed countries. The ratio of the share of revenue held by the richest 20% compared to the poorest 20% has grown from 30:1 in 1960 to 61:1 in 1991 and 82:1 in 1995. Over eight hundred million people are either starving or under-nourished, while two billion people suffer from nutritional deficiencies. Over one billion have no access to health care. Eight hundred and eighty million people in the world are illiterate, 866 million of these being from developing countries. Two billion are not linked to an electricity network. Two thirds of the world population of those in absolute poverty are under 15 years old and 70% are women and girls" (pp. 10-11).

As one recent commentator summed it up in a book, revealingly called, *The Myth of Development: The Non-Viable Economies of the21st Century*(2001), "The history of the majority of the countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, since their independence, has merely recorded a gradual process of dysfunction and global marginalization" (De Rivero, 2001, p.2), so that "today, after more than fifty years of applying a variety of development

theories and policies, the real per capita income of more than seventy so-called developing countries is lower than it was twenty years ago. Of a population bordering 5 billion in the underdeveloped world, around 3 billion survive on only two or three dollars a day, and another 1.3 billion in extreme poverty can no longer even feed themselves, living on less than one dollar a day" (p. 186).

The effects of all this globalization on the politics of our era and its reflections in the mass media of communication have been best outlined by Daya Kishan Thussu in a powerful article, entitled "Selling neo-imperial conflicts: television and US public diplomacy", printed as chapter 14 in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (eds.), *Media and Society* Mass: "It is also argued that imperialism underpins the US mission to create a seamless global market for free trade, one managed and controlled by Washington, the new Rome of twenty-first century imperialism . . . To consolidate and expand this new empire, the USA should depend less on coercion than on persuasion, an indication of the growing realization that imperialism cannot sustain itself by military power alone. The mass media are crucial in making imperialism appear almost as a benign necessity to maintain global peace and order, to thwart 'rogue states' from acquiring weapons of mass destruction and lead the 'war against global terrorism'. This imperial discourse has been promoted around the world, primarily through the medium of television, the most global of global media. The globalization of the US model of commercial television and the multiplicity of dedicated news channels... has transformed broadcasting worldwide" (Thussu, 2005, p. 272).

It is precisely this distorting and falsifying power of the media, especially of Television, that is beginning to occupy the center of the attention of the contemporary scholarly, as well as the general, critique, of the media. A very large proportion of the books published recently in this field focus on this very issue—books with titles like, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms our Lives* (2001), *The Unreality Industry: The Deliberate Manufacturing of Falsehood and what It Is Doing to our Lives* (1984), *Radical Mass Media Criticism* (2006), *The More You Watch the Less You Know* ((1997), *Myths for the Masses: An Essay on Mass Communication* (2004), *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (2002), *Arrogance: Rescuing America from the Media Elite* (2003), *Censored 2006: The Top 25 Censored Stories* (2006), *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (1999), *Tell Me Lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq* (2005), and Noam Chomsky's pioneering studies, *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), with Edward S. Herman, and *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (1989). A recent study, *The Post-Truth Era* (2004), by Ralph Keyes, has, in fact, generalized the study of this phenomenon to cover all aspects of what it calls in its subtitle, *Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. Here, too, the author devotes a whole chapter to the media, occupying as they do, such a central position in creating this web of deceit: "The emergence of post-truthfulness is linked inextricably with the rise of television. Its viewers are inundated from earliest childhood with this medium's mistruths,

half-truths, and outright deceptions. Television is their primary companion (in the sense that they spend more time in its company than they do with any live human being). That being the case, it is hard for TV watchers to avoid absorbing the values they see modeled there" (Keyes, 2004, p. 176). Although this critique of the falsehood inherent in the media has intensified in the last decade or so, its roots go back, in fact to the eighties, as in books like, Michael Traber (ed.), *The Myth of the Information Revolution: Social and Ethical Implications of Communication Technology* (1986), Donna A. Demac, *Keeping America Uninformed: Government Secrecy in the 1980s* (1984), and Henry Porter, *Lies, Damned Lies: Fleet St Exposed* (1984).

Todd Gitlin, the author of the first of these books, states explicitly in its very opening page that, "For me, it [his thinking about the media] began with awareness of a considerable discrepancy between media images and what I was pleased (or displeased) to call reality. This discrepancy came to me as a revelation and something of a shock" (Gitlin, 2001, pp. 1-2).

On a wider scale, Ian Mitroff and Warren Dennis, the joint authors of the second book, had gone into this topic much more extensively. They openly state in their preface that, "The primary contentions of *The Unreality Industry* are that TV and other vehicles of mass communication and entertainment have degraded our general level of education and debased our national discourse. Instead of grappling honestly with our problems, i.e., of dealing directly with reality itself, the inevitable drift to unreality reaches new lows" (Mitroff and Dennis, 1989, p. xii). In this "Age of Unreality and Disinformation", as they call it, they argue that it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish what is real from what is unreal. "We have become so adept", they claim, "at the manufacturing and consumption of fantasy that the distinction between reality and unreality is now virtually meaningless. If anything unreality is the new reality" (pp. 8- 9). We have reached a stage where "TV news has become almost pure entertainment" , especially with its adoption of the characteristic techniques of entertainment, such as the glitzy, hi-tech studios, the pretty faces and pleasing personalities of the anchors, the superficial treatment of issues, the stunning visuals, the slick graphics, the provocative headlines, and the incongruous intermingling of the humorous with the semi-serious, and the bizarre interspersing of the celebrity guests with the potentially world-shattering events (pp. 11-12).

Lastly, another sharp critic of the mass media links the crisis of communication directly to the wider, political crisis, i.e., to the crisis of the capitalist system as a whole. In a book, bluntly entitled, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, Robert McChesney declares that he will develop in his book the theme of "the use of mythology, particularly the myth of the free market, to defend this unaccountable private control over communication" (McChesney, 1999, p. ix), and goes on to argue that " a society like the United States which has rampant inequality, minimal popular involvement in decision making, and widespread depoliticization can never be regarded as democratic in an honest use of the term" (p. 5), and that "the subject of how the media are controlled, structured, and subsidized should be at the center of democratic debate. Instead,

this subject is nowhere to be found. This is not an accident; it reflects above all the economic, political, and ideological power of the media corporations and their allies" (p. 7).

The International Language and Linguistic Imperialism

On the issue of language and linguistic imperialism, Robert Phillipson, one of the most prolific and astute commentators on the topic, argues that: "English can serve benign or pernicious purposes. In a world of increasing globalization, militarization, and vast gaps between haves and have-nots within countries in North and South, and between rich and poor countries, it is vital to assess what purposes the increased use of English is serving" (Phillipson, 1998, pp. 101-2). He contends further that: "Linguistic imperialism is a major legacy of the colonial epoch and the global spread of European languages . . . [and that] . . .linguistic imperialism is a sub-type of cultural imperialism, along with media, educational and scientific imperialism" (p. 104). Phillipson concludes on this frank and forthright note: "When considering whether English is being spread in an imperialist way, it is important to recall that triumphal English is enshrouded in myths, including for the British the comforting myth that they did not impose their language anywhere. A succession of scholarly works (Tollefson, 1991; Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Medgyes, 1995) has not merely exploded this myth but also subjected the global relevance of TESOL professionalism to serious scrutiny. I hope I am wrong in fearing that for every critical voice, there are probably a hundred triumphalists. My view is that the evidence is that we as agents of world English are to some degree facilitating McDonaldization, and that what is promising for Anglo-American business is threatening to everyone else" (pp. 110-11).

In the context of Europe and the European Union, to which Phillipson's latest book, *English-Only Europe?* (2003), is confined, he defines linguistic imperialism as one that "builds on the assumption that one language is preferable to others, and its dominance is structurally entrenched through the allocation of more resources to it. The dominance of English in contemporary Europe can constitute linguistic imperialism if other languages are disadvantaged, and are being learned or used in subtractive ways". Phillipson goes on to recount the example of an extreme reaction to this kind of imperialism as practiced in Japan: "At their crudest, linguistic and cultural imperialism merge, as observed in Japan by an American political scientist, Douglas Lummis, who was appalled by the assumption of cultural superiority of native-speaker Americans. In an article entitled 'English conversation as ideology', he wrote that 'the world of English conversation is racist . . . The expression "native speaker" is in effect a code word for "white" . . . their real role is not language teacher but living example of the American Way of Life'. He recommends that the Japanese should start thinking of English as the language of Asian and Third World solidarity. When English study is transformed from a form of toadying into a tool of liberation, all the famous

'special difficulties' which the Japanese are supposed to suffer from will probably vanish like the mist" (Phillipson, 2003, pp. 162-3).

In case there are doubts about the current state of affairs, it is worthwhile pointing out that a consensus seems to have been reached about this network of relationships that ties together cultural imperialism, globalization, the media, and the dominance of the English language, as can be seen, for example in this succinct definition that appears in a very recent glossary pf cyberculture: "Cultural imperialism is a process of domination whereby the most economically powerful countries in the world attempt to maintain and exploit their superiority by subjugating the values, traditions and cultures of the majority of poorer countries, and replacing them with their own cultural perspectives. It is a significant aspect of the way in which capitalist nation-states, such as the USA and others in Western Europe, can be seen to systematically seek to exercise their economic and political interests over less powerful, underdeveloped countries in the Third World. It can thus also be regarded as an integral component of the perceived trends towards globalization whereby local cultures become threatened and ultimately displaced by the dominant 'Western' cultural values associated with multinational corporations.

The means by which cultural imperialism can be pursued are varied and have a long history dating back at least to the Roman Empire. In the world today they include the education of the future leaders and ruling elites of the world's poorer countries in Western schools and universities where they are imbued with the doctrines and principles of the free market. More widely influential however has been the influence of US films, TV programmes and global news programmes, such as CNN and the BBC, carrying a Western perspective to world audiences. All of these and related aspects of globalization have led perhaps most significantly to the idea that US English has become the most important language for business prosperity, science and development" (Bell, *et al*, 2004, p 37). This cultural / linguistic imperialist project moves forward undeterred by the fact that already it does not conform to existing conditions and current reality demands a necessary departure from it, as has been acknowledged, for example, by a recent commentator: "Almost the final myth and another really big one—that English will be the dominant language on the internet and virtually everywhere else . . . The number of websites in languages other than English appears to be growing at an exponential rate. . . It may also be in the business interests of international media tycoons to recognize that there are world languages other than English. The world is moving towards four dominant language groups—Mandarin, English, Spanish and Hindi—it has been argued" (Snoddy, 2003, 25).

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