

## Climate change and cultural change

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I would like first to thank you for inviting me to participate in the symposium that you are holding today. It is not so common to discuss issues related to sustainable development and climate change from a cultural perspective, much less from a cross-cultural perspective. The fact that Taiwan engages in an inventory of its own resources - its traditions and its inventiveness - in order to confront the challenges that mobilize the international community constitutes in itself a remarkable initiative which is to be emulated elsewhere. And the role played in that awakening by a local authority, the county of Taipei, shows the outstanding function performed by local democracy in such a mobilization. I am happy to be here today in order to learn with you, to share thoughts and experiences, happy also to be called to reflect on my French and European experience as well as on my present commitment in this dialogue with the Arab world.

That climate change already registered over the past few decades is in a significant proportion a product of human activity is by now a proven fact. Natural variations in climate, due primarily to those of solar activity for the very long period and volcanism in the short period, are now overwhelmed by the effects of greenhouse gas. If evaluations of the extent and consequences of global warming are still debated, there exists a consensus for seeing in this development a global threat of the first magnitude. The changes in natural environments can disrupt (or even break completely) fragile equilibriums, and thus affect the very durability of the human race. Making such a statement does not mean to indulge in apocalyptic predictions but rather to take seriously the findings reported by biologists, chemists, climatologists or geographers, weigh the facts and risks without dramatizing, and thus to conclude that our future and the one of our descendants is largely in our hands. Actually, we can take this conclusion as good news: we are therefore able to partially modify the data that shape the future - only partly because the greenhouse gases already present in the atmosphere will still make their presence felt for a few decades, a few centuries and even a few millennia for some of them, and that whatever we do now.

Human activities that produce greenhouse gases and, consequently, global warming, have their origins in the industrial revolution initiated one hundred and fifty years ago. Gradually, a mode of production has been developed and overextended, a mode of production which has enabled humanity to win many conquests - the increase in human population testifies to these conquests- while experiencing structural limits. Many times announced in the past, these limits are now tangible. According to the International Energy Agency, global emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> from fossil origin caused by energy production account for forty percent, by industry twenty-five percent, by transport twenty-five percent, the remaining part being caused by a variety of other activities, including heating.

The production of greenhouse gas per capita remains closely correlated with the degree of development. Australia, the USA and Canada remain the biggest "per capita polluters." India, Burkina or even Mexico produce a small fraction of what is issued by the first three countries mentioned. But the pattern of consumption and living standards of the richest countries serves as a reference to the rest of the planet, which appears to transform global warming and its consequences on the environment and our species into an unavoidable fate. Economic development is still reflected today by a strong increase in emissions. We see this very clearly in the

case of China, now probably the first producer of global greenhouse gas, but this is true everywhere. An example in Europe: the economic emergence of Spain during the last fifteen years has been accompanied by an increase in emissions of forty per cent per capita.

In light of these data, we understand the fierce debates surrounding international negotiations on the subject. Emerging countries accuse the Western countries of having been, by far, the largest producers of greenhouse gases for the last century and a half, of remaining the biggest emitters per capita, and of protecting their lifestyle while pretending to prohibit to others fair access to the same standards. However, years of discussions and the drafting of international mechanisms have improved the terms of debate and mutual understanding. While the agreement reached between emerging countries and the G8 group at the meeting held in Japan in July remains vague and unsatisfactory, however its overall phrasing augurs well for the conclusion, circa 2010, of an international agreement that will follow the Kyoto Protocol. That protocol was itself an annex to the conclusions of the Convention on Climate Change adopted at the "Earth Summit" in Rio in 1992.

It is clear that climate change is not just a consequence of technical problems. It is linked to a system of values and modes of behavior that define a shared global culture. They have founded a type of development that has been imposed everywhere. At the same time, inventiveness in our answers will draw its sources in the rediscovery, the reinterpretation or perhaps even the creation of alternative cultural resources that could facilitate the social, technical and economic adjustments through which we will face the threats posed by climate change, while generating at the same time the emergence of a fairer and more accountable international community.

I will venture to speak about three areas of reflection that determine the terms of debate:

- 1 - What relationship is there between "culture" and "climate".
- 2 - How can a local political community play its part in managing as complex an issue as the overall binding between "global climate" and "local culture".
- 3 - Finally, my experience at the Institute for the Arab World will inspire me a few thoughts on the subject that brings us together, thus demonstrating the importance of intercultural relations in building the global mechanisms that allow us to meet this global challenge.

## **Cultures and climate**

There are many ways of addressing the link between cultures and climate. After all, this is an ancient issue in the history of political science. Montesquieu, the eighteenth century philosopher, was elaborating on a "theory of climates" already outlined by Greek and Latin authors, and assumed a causal relationship between types of political regime and latitude in which tyranny, democracy or despotism were to be found. The argument today makes us smile, and was already heavily criticized by a philosopher who followed closely Montesquieu, Volney: "What do we mean by warm countries? Where are the precise limits between cold and temperate climates? Montesquieu should answer this question, so that we may know at what temperature you can determine the energy of a nation, and at which degree of the thermometer you can determine the ability of a nation to engage into freedom or slavery." This being said, a culture is indeed partly shaped by the climatic conditions in which it develops, even if it is equally true that these conditions change somewhat during the ages – for instance, the borders of the desert advance or retreat in history.

The key element lies elsewhere: our patterns of consumption and production are related to our value systems, which ultimately determine the choices we make about our development model, and thus our ability to limit the effects of human activity on climate. Jean-Marc Jancovici describes the fight against climate change as a "qualitative project to channel our productive activity," and he adds: "Since man has conquered hunger (there is no famine on earth that is not the consequence of war or political oppression), disease (regardless of country, life expectancy today is exceptionally below 50, which was that of a Frenchman in 1900 and twice the one of a

Frenchman a few centuries ago), cold and predators, we have no more objectives framed by a strong external constraint, and a large fraction of our modern activity is finally a way that we have chosen to 'spend time': making mobile phone, bath mats, software, frozen dishes or flashing sport shoes is not intended to satisfy a vital need, and it seems to me that all this is perfectly subject to discernment and arbitration if our existence, as the present dominant species living a comfortable life, is at stake, which seems to be the case." You can find a little exaggeration in this statement, but it rightly focuses on what is at stake: our system of values determines the scale of our choice. It pushes us toward the accumulation of material goods or, conversely, to a life-saving and balanced lifestyle (walking rather than undertaking short trips by car, time spent with friends rather than the addiction to electronic gadgets, eating fruit or vegetables of the season rather than the ones transported by air from distant latitudes, not to ride in overpowered cars able to go twice as fast as the allowed speed limit) - these attitudes will determine our ability to fight against climate change. To say it otherwise, our "desires" have very differentiated prices in terms of emissions of greenhouse gases.

Our value system does not determine only our "carbon footprint", but also our ability to adapt to new conditions: the same level of climate change will likely have a very different effect depending on the degree of preparation, resistance or resilience of various societies. The ability to share, discuss and think together, to wisely manage the changing natural environment, to make consistent choices on energy consumption, these are the social skills which will help us to react appropriately to the changes we will face anyway.

A last point is to be emphasized when reflecting on the link between culture and climate: the challenge of climate change alters our global culture, the perception of our belonging to a single human community. Climate change increases both the chance to see the emergence of a true international society and the risk of further hardening the "clash of civilizations."

The chance to see global governance fully blossom comes from the absolute necessity of making it happen: as a single place issuing greenhouse gases affects the whole atmosphere, all countries must reduce their emissions at the same time, otherwise a single recalcitrant can annihilate the efforts of all the other nations. Therefore, the only way to way to proceed is to try to develop a collective goal accepted by all.

As to the risk of witnessing the hardening of the clash of civilizations, it is linked to the transfer or depletion of resources related to climate change, with potential conflicts over access to water or fertile territories, accompanied perhaps by the migration of "environmental refugees." In such a context, resentment related to history, religions, conflicts of identity will take on increased importance. In summary, global warming radicalizes the issues of coexistence among cultures and nations.

### **The role of local communities and cities**

Intricately linked to the industrial revolution, the development of cities was initially confined to the Western world before it spread to the entire planet: the majority of the world's population now lives in urban areas versus only 14% in 1900. This is not necessarily bad news: in fact, the city, say many analysts, can become a privileged place in the fight against climate change; the streamlining the system of transportation, water sanitation, energy distribution provide already evidences of it. The experimental construction of "green buildings" that produce the energy they consume is another step forward. The city is also a place of maximum flow of information, inventions, collective discussion, and can generate a number of innovative measures. Much will depend therefore on the urban dweller himself, on the moral environment that policy makers forge for him and on the collective conscience that he will develop. In this regard, the role of locally elected officials is essential. When I was mayor of Toulouse I had to fight to impose an innovative system of underground transportation, because I firmly believed that this technical solution would make our streets less congested and our atmosphere much cleaner. The result has proved that this was indeed the case, and objections were finally totally overcome. The development of downtown, the connections between downtown and suburbs, the method of garbage collection and recovery, the renovation of the systems of water sanitation... Each time, these issues prove to be

partly technical, partly political, for it is always necessary to challenge vested interests and viewpoints so as to build a city at once more hospitable, more balanced and more human. The duty of locally elected officials is to introduce clearly the choices and issues at stake, giving people information and criteria that will allow them to understand, taking into account the diversity of their viewpoints, how to meet the "general interest". My local experience has taught me that it is always right to trust in the ability of the citizens to ponder collective choices and discuss them. It is through local democracy that will emerge responsible, compact and united cities, carrying an innovative environmental project.

The search for the general good can sometimes take the form of local referenda, provided that the issue at stake is clearly formulated and phrases out a real choice. Without doubt this is a good way to settle in difficult situations, when the fight against global warming requires sacrifices (use of automobiles, water prices, choice of such investment rather than another ...) It is up to the citizens then duly informed, to state the scale of their priorities and their values... and to draw the consequences of them.

### **The Arab world and the search for a global partnership against the effects of global warming**

Let me now turn to resources that can provide the international community with full and active inclusion of the Arab world in the fight against global warming. Let me start with a quote, borrowed from Montgomery Watt: "When we realize the extent of the areas that Arabs embraced in their scientific experiments, their thoughts and writings, we see that without the Arabs, science and European philosophy would not have developed as they have done. The Arabs did not simply transmit Greek thought, they were the true successors of this tradition [...] At the time, around the year 1100, when Europeans became interested in the science and philosophy of their Saracen enemies these disciplines had reached their peak. The Europeans had to learn from them anything that could then be learned before they could turn to advance by themselves..."

This means that there exists in the Arab world a directory of wisdom and of scientific and technological knowledge that must be mobilized when it comes to rethink the relationship between man and his environment. In addition, though the Arab world is not limited to Islam, this religion makes itself the vast majority of the people living in the area, and Islam has on the subject that concerns us today an original philosophical and theological reflection. Its focal point probably lies in the fundamental principle of unity (tawhîd), which relies on both a strict monotheism and affirmation of the ultimate unity of all components of creation. Man is thus invited to participate fully in the social and natural world by holding true to his own nature. The life of the individual and those of society and nature can not be separated.

Man, says Islam, exerts "vice-regency" (al-khilâfa) on the earth and its creatures. He is not their master, but only the depositary of a responsibility. Concrete practices result from this world view: attitude of reverence, fair and balanced position vis-à-vis the whole of creation. As a religion revealed on an austere and arid land that does not allow for wastage, Islam is replete with provisions regarding the prohibition of waste, the treatment of animals or water management.

However, the Arab world, like all civilizations, has not always acted according to its principles, and it bears responsibility for the degradation of our natural heritage. Above all, the sincerity of efforts by the Arab world in this task is often questioned because of the key role played by oil in the economy of many of these countries. Historically, this questioning is not without reason. But - we must insist - the situation is changing: many experts, even within oil exporting countries argue for a parsimonious management of remaining oil resources, as oil is not only a source of energy but has other industrial uses. Nowadays, we are no longer in a situation of "competition" between oil and other energy sources.

This new atmosphere is evidenced by the recent launch of the Union for the Mediterranean World, launched in Paris on July 13 and 14, 2008:

The Union for the Mediterranean World proposes a new method. It is based on "concrete projects". The projects must meet two principles: that of equal partnership first, requiring that projects be identified and offered jointly by the countries of the south shore and the north shore; one of variable geometry, allowing that only countries volunteering on a given project associate towards its fulfillment.

Among the priority areas already identified: the environment, renewable energy, civil protection, education, training, culture. In particular, a "solar energy plan" is in the making, which will greatly expand solar energy production on the south side of the Mediterranean.

Efforts initiated for making the Mediterranean a pilot region in the approach to environmental problems are not new: since 1978, a framework convention, the Barcelona Convention, was adopted by the countries bordering the Mediterranean so as to better protect the environment. In 2005, the objective of cleaning the Mediterranean Sea by 2020 was endorsed by the heads of states concerned. But these initiatives have not found so far, concrete translation. The Union provides a framework for better decision-making and innovative financing. Being a semi-enclosed sea, the Mediterranean is particularly vulnerable to pollution: 60% of its cities discharge their sewage into the sea without treatment. The pollutions from inland, whether from cities or agricultural areas, contribute to sea pollution via rivers. Chemical pollutants from industry accumulate in marine life. These pressures will increase sharply: 100 million additional people will live in the Mediterranean basin twenty years from now. Hence the urgent need to change radically environmental management in this region. If the implementation of this partnership between the Arab world and Europe proves successful it will certainly become a model of international cooperation, but also an example of how to exploit the cultural resources that Arab countries can offer the global community.

Allow me an additional observation: Who knows? Perhaps an environmental management plan of the Taiwan Strait and its shores, the development of wind resources, the cleaning of marine waters and other similar priorities could fit into the efforts currently led for fostering a peaceful and positive relationship between China and Taiwan? An "Environmental Plan for the Taiwan Straits" would be both a factor of peace, by creating common interests, and a notable contribution that would be noticed by the global community. It seems to me that it would be in the interest of Taiwan to take the initiative.

These were, dear friends, the thoughts I wanted to contribute to the debate which opens today. I have the conviction that, paradoxically, the challenge of climate change is an opportunity for the international community - as long as it obliges us to reflect on the roots of our behavior, to consider anew our values and priorities, and finally to invent together a model of humane and sustainable development, creating new solidarity among nations, regions and cultures of the globe. The issues that we are tackling today, therefore, go beyond the groups, traditions and interests that we represent. May we, Taiwanese and guests come from afar, contribute actively, in the forums in which we participate and the communities that are ours, to the emergence of cultural innovations arising from the challenges that we must face together.