

Emotions in International Politics

Owada Chair Inaugural Lecture by

Prof. Dominique Moïsi

Tuesday, 24 May 2022



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

It is a great honor and a great pleasure for me to address you this morning as the First Holder of the Owada Chair in Geopolitics and International Law. This Chair translates a new and ambitious collaboration between the Universities of Leiden and Tokyo, between Europe and Asia.

Let me first pay tribute to Ambassador/Professor Owada. I have known him for more than thirty years. We first met when he was Japanese Ambassador to the OECD in Paris in 1988/89. In the course of the following decades I have been able to fully appreciate the refined diplomat, the deep scholar, the respected judge and above all the man. Thank you Hisashi not only for what you did, but above all for what you are. In fact Professor Owada, you have come to personify for me what I appreciate most in Japanese civilization: its elegance, its sophistication and an ongoing sense of permanence through change. The Golden Pavilion in Kyoto “Kinkaku-ji” may have been burned and rebuilt many times: its essence, in Japanese eyes, is eternal .

Can reconciliation be taught? Our share emphasis on reconciliation

Our relationship deepened, as we came to realize we shared a common emphasis, shall I say obsession, with the issue of reconciliation. As the son of an Auschwitz survivor, a man who was submitted to extreme fear and humiliation and yet managed to teach me hope, the concept of reconciliation was primordial in my upbringing. I discovered it first hand in the most trivial manner, when in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the Elysée Treaty between France and Germany in January 1963, my father in a gesture of great magnanimity allowed my mother to buy the German washing machine of the famous Miele brand, she had been dreaming of for so many years. My own very personal dream was to use Franco-German reconciliation as an example and a model for other parts of the world, starting with the Middle – East moving on later to Asia.

I was of course aware of the very specific conditions that contributed to the success of Franco-German reconciliation,

two European and Christian nations of equal status. France had the upper hand in political - strategic matters and Germany was stronger in the economic realm. Both countries were bound by a common threat, the Soviet Union. And of course, both countries were deeply encouraged to engage in and pursue reconciliation, by the enlightened and benevolent protector of the time, the United States. Nevertheless, I still thought Israelis and Palestinians, Japanese and Koreans, despite their differences, could still learn from the success of the Franco-German reconciliation. At regular intervals in the course of the last twenty years I discussed the idea of creating a Franco-German school of reconciliation with Ambassador Owada. As a man of vision and ideals, he immediately saw its merits. As a diplomat, he also recognized its limits. The problem was to find the right moment to launch the project, and this meant an improbable conjunction of the right stars, as had been the case in South Africa in the early 1990's. And even there, can one say for certain that the end of apartheid has meant reconciliation? Foremost amongst the positive accidents of History was the encounter between Mandela and De Klerck. A few years ago I was privileged, to have a private exchange with former President De Klerck. I remember with great precisions his words: “The first time I met Mandela I saw immediately in his eyes that I could trust him, and that we would write History together”. Where were the De Gaulle's and Adenauer's, the Mandela's and De Klerck's of the Middle –East and Asia?

From reconciliation to the emphasis on emotions

My early concern with reconciliation led me naturally to focus on emotions as a tool to approach international politics. It was not obvious. In the 1970's and 1980's international relations, as it was called then, was mostly analyzed through the prism of rationality and calculus. Up till the fall of the Berlin Wall, I had the feeling the main task of international relations specialists was to count the number of missiles on both sides of the ideological divide. But as a young Assistant

Professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in the early 1970's, I had already realized that the Arab/Israeli conflict, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in particular, could not be fully grasped and understood, without integrating the dimension of emotions. On the Israeli side there was resentment especially after the Shoah combined with a superiority complex. On the Palestinian side there was humiliation and an inferiority complex. It soon became obvious to me, in particular after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, that emotions were an indispensable prism to understand the world. I was led to this conclusion by my love of the Arts. Is there a better way to grasp the brutality of the Spanish Civil War, in the 1930's, than Pablo Picasso's iconic painting, Guernica? Picasso summarized Fear. In November 1989 Rostropovitch playing the cello in front of the Berlin Wall, incarnated hope. Artists, far more than analysts, have the intuition - through their respective media, be they poems, paintings or music - of what is coming. They do not know it. They sense it. In my emphasis on emotions as a tool to approach international politics, I had an ulterior motive in mind. I thought that by understanding the emotions of the world, we could all develop a more constructive approach to the conflicts that plague us.

The Triumph of Emotions

This inaugural lecture of the Owada Chair, was originally meant to be delivered, more than two years ago. If such had been the case, its content would have been very different. The world has changed so much in the last two years, and even more so in the last three months. I never thought in my wildest dreams or rather nightmares that emotions would come to play such a preeminent role in the evolution of the world. But that was before COVID 19 and the explosion of Fear that followed it. Above all, it was before the war in Ukraine and the shrewd manipulation and use of humiliation by Putin's Russia. The latest course of History seems to have added further relevance and legitimacy, to what was initially for me

just a conviction and an intuition, one I had transformed into a book published in its first edition 13 years ago: "The Geopolitics of Emotion: How cultures of Fear, Humiliation and Hope are reshaping the world". The book caught the imagination of a large audience as it was translated into more than twenty languages including Dutch and Japanese. In my initial essay I attempted to map the emotions of the world finding more hope in Asia behind the economic growth of China and India, more humiliation in the Middle – East in particular in the Arab/Muslim world and more fear in the Western world in the United States and in Europe. There were, I wrote at the time, as with cholesterol, bad emotions and good emotions: those emanating from the worst of human nature, and those emanating from the best. Hope was a good emotion, humiliation and fear bad ones. The challenge was to find the right balance between them.

Writing in 2022, it is so obvious emotions have become more relevant than ever. At the level of popular culture, one needs only refer to the recent victory of Ukraine in the Eurovision song contest. It was described by NATO, of all institutions, as the demonstration of immense public support for a country that has so far successfully managed to defend itself and to keep the Russians at bay. And the key to this result lies in the emotional difference of motivation between the aggressed and the aggressors.

The prevalence of negative emotions

But beyond the increased relevance of emotions as a tool to understand geopolitics, there exists another reality. 'Bad cholesterol' has prevailed. Negative emotions have spread. Not only have fear and humiliation gained the upper hand in their struggle against hope, but as in the course of a battle, where reinforcement coming from one side or the other decides its fate -remember the famous lines of French poet Victor Hugo on Waterloo "one waited for Grouchy and it was Blucher that came" - negative emotions, such as anger and hatred, are now reinforcing fear and humiliation. In my own country France, the

latest presidential elections were a confrontation between fear and anger. In the end fear of Marine Le Pen, prevailed over anger, if not hatred for Emmanuel Macron. And Macron was reelected. Why have negative emotions taken the upper hand? The reasons are manifold. In the last decade we have witnessed the defeat of Hope in the Middle-East with the “Arab Springs”, not only failing to bring any political progress, but resulting in more humiliation if not terrible bloodshed. In the democratic world we have seen the rise of fear, anger, polarization and even hatred. Think of the explosion of racially motivated murders in the United States. The success of populism led most recently to growing self-doubt concerning even the validity and survival chances of democratic models... to the point where authoritarian/despotic regimes were ready to declare victory over ‘obsolete’ democracies. A verdict that was, to say the least, premature, since it appears clearer everyday that both China and Russia are confronted with their own limitations: China in facing COVID with an unrealistic Zero doctrine, Russia in engaging in an ill prepared an ill conceived war of aggression against its Ukrainian neighbor. The Age of the Strong Man may prove to be deceptive and short – lived. What remains true nevertheless is the fact that the West did not win the Cold War: the Soviet Union lost it. It was a lie to believe otherwise.

Globalization and Fragmentation

If one looks for a macro explanation for the negative emotions that seem to dominate the world I would be tempted to focus on one in particular. Globalization. It has counter-intuitively resulted in a growing fragmentation of the world, and a growing fragmentation of the emotions of the world. This constitutes the major paradox of our time. We have never been more interdependent with one another in order to confront global challenges. We all know “we are in the same boat”. Think of COVID 19 or of climate change, not to mention the consequences of the potential use of weapons of mass destruction. Lest we forget the main motto of the

Cold War, the one that protected us for nearly half a century was: “a nuclear war can never be won, and must never be fought.” And yet we have never been more divided and more attracted by the temptation to go at it alone, and to define us against, and not in relation with others, be they from the opposite side of the ideological divide in our respective countries, or from different civilizations and cultures. This process of fragmentation has been made more dangerous by the revolutions in communication and information and in particular by the use of social networks beyond any kind of official control. Fragmentation has an objective social and economic explanation, with the very rich becoming richer and the very poor lagging further behind. In a bestseller, more remarkable for its historical research than for its policy proposals, the French economist Thomas Piketty has described this explosion of inequality. How could there possibly be any kind of social consensus between those who earn more than a thousand times what others make? In the same vein, one witnesses, a process of emotional fragmentation leading to a series of emotional divorces: within national societies as well as amongst nations-states and even more significantly between continents. The polarization of American society for example may look like an extreme case, but has it not become the “avant-garde” if not the model, for other troubled democracies? Recently a prominent member of the Republican party, went as far as saying that the primary threat for the United States of America did not emanate from China or Russia (it was, to be fair, a few weeks before Putin’s invasion of Ukraine) but from the Democrats.

War in Ukraine: the emotional divorce of the world.

The war in Ukraine – described by some as the Nine Eleven of Europe - has greatly increased this phenomenon of diverging emotions. Immersed in a process of rewriting History to create the impression that Ukrainians and Russians were always “one”, Putin’s Russia has clearly managed to isolate herself, at least in the western world. Seen from the West, the war in

Ukraine is the most Manichean the world has seen perhaps since the American civil war, and World War II. It opposes the forces of good, Ukraine, and the incarnation of evil, Russia. In the immense majority of Europe, pro Ukrainian emotions run deep and are strengthened by fear. Could we be the next victims of Russia's aggressive historical revisionism? Declining powers are more dangerous than rising ones. The images of destroyed cities, of civilians taking refuge in Kyiv's metro stations, seem all to be coming from a documentary film on World War II. And they affect those who feel, for historical and geographical reasons, deeply concerned by the plight of the Ukrainians. This is particularly true of the British. The resistance of the Ukrainians evokes for them, their "Finest Hour" during World War II. By associating with Ukrainians the British are also engaging in a self-satisfactory emotional travel back into their glorious past, when they successfully stood up to a superior Nazi Germany. Beyond the British, we are all startled by this return of war in Europe for the first time since 1945. As Europeans we all believed in the powerful mantra of "never again" that seemed to float above our heads as a great and seemingly eternal protective roof. We had given enough to war between 1914 and 1945. War was for "others", at least that was what we thought, in our spontaneously progressive vision of History. Of course wars in the Balkans in the 1990's, were real wars, killing more than one hundred thousand persons and displacing millions of others. But no one thought seriously at the time that these wars could spread and thus endanger world peace. By contrast, the world has deeply shifted since February 24th. Russian aggression has been a tipping point, a game changer at so many levels. It was clearly so for an organization as NATO, described as "brain dead" not so long ago by French President Emmanuel Macron, and who can now boast having attracted new candidates such as Finland and Sweden. It is also a game changer for the European Union who has potentially done more in the last three months on security and defense, than in the last three decades. And it is also the case for the West at large. The fear of being hanged in the morning concentrates the mind, used to say Samuel Johnson.

Russia is isolated in the West. Is the West isolated in the world?

If Putin has succeeded in uniting the West, the war in Ukraine has acted as a litmus test if not as an accelerator of the divorce of emotions that exists between the West and the rest of the world. Could we go as far as saying that if Russia is isolated in the West, the West is isolated in the world? In 1975, a Nigerian writer educated in the United States, Chinwezu, published an essay entitled "The West and the Rest of us". The title of the book sounds like a perfect summary of the period we are living in. In the United Nations General Assembly vote condemning Russian aggression, on March 24 2022, only four countries supported Russia but the 40 countries that abstained represented 53% of the world population, foremost amongst them of course China and India. In Latin America and Africa, criticisms of the United States rather than Russia were prevalent: In Brazil former/(future?) President, Lula, did not align with the Russian position but condemned strongly the American stance. For him, if the United States had not decided to enlarge NATO to the East, Russia would not have felt threatened and the war in Ukraine would not have taken place. This is almost literally the position taken by Pope Francis, the first ever Latin-American pope, in an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. In the Latin - American continent, anti-Gringos emotions still run high. In Africa, one also encounters criticisms, even more so than in Latin America for what are perceived to be, the selective emotions of the West. A case in point on the African continent is the civil (tribal war) currently taking place in Ethiopia. It has attracted very little interest in the world, though the number of persons killed, displaced or on the verge of famine is infinitely higher than in Ukraine. But the victims are neither, White nor European. The same could be said in the Middle – East with respect to the terrible humanitarian crisis resulting from the war in Yemen. But no one in the West seems to care.

History, Memory and Emotions.

To explain the emotional cultural divide between continents, one must go back to the importance of memory and history. The past has returned with a vengeance. For many non-Westerners, it looks as if defending the West and Western values when they are obviously under attack, for instance in Ukraine, would be betraying the sufferings of their own colonial past. The Russian Empire in its most brutal historical guise may be back, but it keeps using the symbolism of the Soviet Union, as if the “Great Lie” of the twentieth century had managed, in what was then called the Third World, to survive the crimes of its various leaders. In Russia itself, the tradition of rewriting History runs deep and has taken today the shape of applying false analogies. In the case of the war in Ukraine the tendency of both belligerents, to refer to Nazism, when speaking of the other, makes the search for a diplomatic solution close to impossible. How could one compromise with Hitler?

I am very often asked whether I am optimistic or pessimistic about the war in Ukraine. I am the last person to enjoy playing on people’s fears. But the present situation is the most dangerous one I have known since I was born 75 years ago. All the more so that Russia and the United States have both become, and this simultaneously, revisionist powers intent on redrawing the map of the world to create a new international order. Putin cannot accept a defeat that would threaten his grip on power. And in Washington the temptation is growing to exploit Russia’s failed moves – to solve once and for all the Putin problem through regime change –so as to be able to concentrate fully on China, the real challenge in America’s eyes. In this light, Russia is nothing but a dangerous distraction, that must be taken care of quickly.

1648/2022 The world needs a new Treaty of Westphalia.

The fragmentation of emotions between and within societies and nations coinciding with existential challenges such as

pandemics, global warming or the attacks on biodiversity, have made the world a much more dangerous place to live in. To the point that, its present unbalance and fragility is reminiscent of 1648 Europe at the end of the Thirty Years War. It was within that context of religious war between Catholics and Protestants that International Law in the modern sense of the term was created by key figures such as Grotius, a man born not far from here, in Delft. Back then what was at stake was the very survival of Europe. And this led to the signing in Munster of the Treaties of Westphalia that provided the basis of the European order for the centuries to come.

Is the world today in the situation Europe was in in the middle of the seventeenth century? In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is as if the use of force, though restricted to very specific conditions by the United Nations Charter, had become a violent “free for all”. “When there is no law, nothing is unfair” observed Thomas Hobbes, writing a few years after the English Civil War.

Of course demographically the context in 2022 is less dramatic than in 1648. In Germany, which was at that time a mere geographic expression, the population had been nearly reduced by half, between 1618 and 1648 as a consequence of The Thirty Years War and its cortege of plagues and famines. Of course no such human losses will occur through the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Indeed at the planetary level the problem is quite the opposite: the planet cannot survive the demographic explosion it is confronted with, without setting new rules, and without a much more stable and institutionalized international order. But it is precisely the reverse that is taking place. The United Nations are looking more and more like the SDN (The Society of Nations) of such ill repute. Is it already too late or is it still possible to save the planet from itself? One thing is certain. The triumph of negative emotions accompanied by the growing emotional divorce of the world, can be seen as a time bomb. It is at the very moment when multilateralism and multilateral institutions have become more crucial than ever, that unilateralist and nationalist tendencies, often in their most extreme form, are prevailing.

Conclusion

Let me end on a more positive Dutch/Japanese note. A dialogue of civilizations amongst equals is rare but not impossible. More than 10 years ago visiting Milan, I was struck by an exhibit on “Japanese art in the seventeenth century”. In particular by a small room dedicated to mirror images of Japanese and Dutch artists. It was an exchange of mutual respect if not admiration. Dutch artists were celebrating in their works, the refinement and elegance of the Japanese. Japanese artists for their part were paying tribute to the scientific qualities of the Dutch. This dialogue of equals presupposed confidence on both sides. This confidence is the condition for the respect, tolerance of and opening to the other. I had the feeling I had seized a miraculous moment. A few years after this mutual inspiration, Japan closed itself to the world for the next two centuries. A few decades later the “Golden Age” of the Netherlands was over. Let us not concentrate on the fact that this moment ended, but rather on the realization that it had indeed existed. And therefore can be recreated.

I would like to close with a few of words of gratitude. First for the Universities of Leiden and Tokyo and in particular those individuals - I will not mention their names for fear of forgetting someone - who have chosen me as the First Holder of this very prestigious Chair. They were daring enough to have selected a public intellectual rather than a full time academic and on top of it a Frenchman.

I would also like to thank the generations of students I have benefited so much from in the course of the last fifty years since I gave my first lectures at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1972. I have been blessed with their intelligence, curiosity but also their trust. They shared their individual and collective emotions with me.

Finally I would like to thank my wife Diana Pinto who has read and reread this inaugural lecture with her laser like powerful, creative and critical mind.