

Global Interchange -- Not new just really intense these days.

Global interchange between people of diverse backgrounds is not unique to the modern era. Curiosity, commerce, conquest, conflict and climate change have inspired mobility of people through the ages. Historically, explorers and traders brought with them their cultural lens and products as they ventured into new lands and encountered new people each with their own cultural lens and products. When driven by curiosity, openness and reciprocity, these intercultural encounters yielded creative interchange; both groups of people and their cultures were productively transformed through the interchange. Vibrant cities, new cultural forms, and technological innovations were born on the frontiers and at the trading crossroads.



The Silk Road offers a complex example of global intercultural interchange. Many diverse drivers -- including conquest and commerce -- contributed to the creation and continuation of the Silk road trade routes. From the 2nd century BCE to the 18th century, many Asian, Arabian, East African and Southern European towns along the “The Silk Road” grew into multicultural cities. Religion and ideas flowed along the Silk Road along with goods. The exchange of information gave rise to new technologies

and innovations that changed the world. Likewise, bustling river and seaport cities in pre-industrial times and cosmopolitan hubs in modern times were sites for concentrated trade and inter-change that resulted in prosperity and innovation.

Driven by other motives, conquistadors and empire builders followed behind the explorers, traders and missionaries with their own ambitions as they used old force and new technologies to dominate the people they encountered and extract resources from the lands. Landscapes, communities and individuals were transformed by these encounters. But the power-over, exploitive, non-reciprocal nature of these interchanges also unleashed destructive forces of environmental degradation, broken social systems, divided communities, internal violence, extreme poverty, and forced or desperate migration of people.

European empire building and colonization of much of Africa (from the 15th century onward) offer vivid examples of such control and exploitation. The contours of these dynamics varied depending upon the colonizing power (French, British or another European culture), the status and resistance of the African kingdoms at the time, and the independence process. These encounters altered the natural landscapes with minerals extractions, large scale commercial crop farming, and large water and transportation projects. These encounters also dramatically changed communities with the introduction of new religions, educational practices, gender relationships, and cultural traditions. These encounters also disrupted individuals' life

trajectories with many being forcefully removed, brutally enslaved or enlisted into military service and cruelly transported far from their homelands .

While the decolonization era addressed the most visible symbols of colonial rule, the legacy of the controlling, non-reciprocal nature of these interchanges is still evident across the continent in post-colonial times. The fact that most of the current nation state boundaries were drawn by European hands from a distance with little attention to existing African communities is one example. The presence of people of European ancestry as significant property holders in many parts of Africa -- such as the dutch Afrikaners in South Africa is yet another example. And the comparatively low level of global investments in critical subsistence infrastructure even while resources continue to be extracted from the continent in abundance is yet another.

Over the long arc of human history, kingdoms and empires have risen and fallen, climates have changed and nature has rebounded, technologies have evolved, people have intermingled, new geo-political and cultural systems have emerged. We like to believe that humankind has evolved and that this long arc of human history ultimately "bends towards justice". In the press of the moment -- as we find ourselves at another crossroads in this larger arc -- this historical perspective offers many lessons but only limited solace. We wonder what is required of us at this juncture to address the pressing global issues of our era?

The technologies, modes of transport, and communication systems present in our era have accelerated and compressed global interchange. Our global communications systems allow us to be in immediate and sustained contact with people from around the world; we can generate ideas and share massive amounts of data in an instant. Our modes of transportation move people and products to all corners of the world within hours in contrast to the days, months and years required in past human history. So on the one hand, we have unprecedented tools available to us in this modern era for creating global solutions and nurturing global community. We have global organizations -- such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization -- which gather leaders and collect information to address geopolitical crises, emergencies and epidemics. We have higher education institutions engaged in collaborations that draw upon the best minds and equipment across the world to construct new knowledge and systems. We have international NGO and multinational companies innovatively applying this new knowledge.

Yet, on the other hand, we need to be attentive to how human psychological, sociological and geo-political systems have been challenged historically to adjust to emergent realities. These adjustments have taken time, practice, and perseverance as well as other qualities which merit additional unpacking. Think about the physical and psychological adjustment required as one takes a flight from one continent to another; jet-lag is one tangible reminder of this challenge, culture shock yet another. Consider the psychological adjustments that families undergo as new members are brought into the fold through childbirth, adoption or marriage then layer in the diverse personalities and cultural lens each member may bring into the mix. The period of pregnancy, the practice of nursing, the perseverance of sibling play, the celebrations of birthdays and the enculturating process of parenting are biological and cultural mechanisms for such adjustment. Likewise, the dynamics of courting, the rituals of weddings, and the milestones

of family gatherings also present venues for negotiating cultural differences. Each though requires practice, support and perseverance. XXXXXX

Taking this to another level, consider the sociological adjustments communities must undertake when new groups of people with their unique cultural traditions enter these communities. As new groups arrive, they may find kindred spirits who speak their language, that support them in taking care of their basic needs, and guide them in becoming productive members of the larger community. Regardless, this adjustment process takes time for the arriving groups. Meanwhile, those in the receiving community are all too often *not* supported in what it means to welcome people from these other cultural traditions into their community. They may find the language and traditions of the newcomers so different from what they are accustomed to and in some cases antithetical to their core beliefs and values. They may feel that the very nature of their neighborhoods are changing and the community services on which they depend are being stretched. They may feel that their very livelihood and approach to life is threatened. If we layer onto these worries, leaders using fear mongering to elevate their status in society, then we have the ingredients for backlash in our communities and unrest in our countries. The current backlash to immigration and refugees in various countries -- including those countries that have historically been shaped by immigration -- is evidence of this challenging adjustment process.

The compressed nature of global intercultural interchange presents opportunities not only for generative ideas and productive dissonance that allows us to evolve but also for missteps, miscommunication, and conflict. A carelessly constructed tweet by a world leader can come close to sparking a war between countries. The misguided foreign policy of one country can result in significant instability in another country and a mass flow of refugees to a third country. A simple linguistic misunderstanding by the pilot of a CIA plane tracking aircraft in cooperation with another country can result in a farmer flying over his land being shot down from the sky. A bitterly angry individual or ideologically driven faction can wreak havoc, death and destruction in a classroom, shopping center, or airport. Due to the compressed nature of interchange, disconnects that happen on the individual level can more rapidly spill out beyond the individuals involved and have broad implications for families, work environments, neighborhoods, communities, eco-systems, nation-states, and the planet.