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“CLASHING INSPIRATIONS: PRESUMPTIVE UNIVERSALS AND THE CULT OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE”

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1. Intellectuals: Wreckage and disillusion

As an American who has traveled to Canada to speak to you today, I thought it appropriate to begin with “The Barbarian Invasions.” In case you haven’t seen it, this Oscar-nominated Canadian film is now showing at the Van East movie theatre on Commercial Drive here in Vancouver. It’s a sequel of sorts to “The Decline of the American Empire.” If the American empire declines and years later the barbarians invade Canada, has the American empire risen again? Should we reject the intellectual pretensions of that empire as presumptively universal and disrespectful of local knowledge—including evangelical faith in capitalist democracy as the best and most natural political economy for all human beings?

Although this is not a lecture on U.S. foreign policy, I will revisit these questions shortly. For now I want to recall a scene in “The Barbarian Invasions” that illustrates the first of a series of arguments I hope to make this afternoon:

Some middle-to-advanced-aged French intellectuals in Quebec are sitting around reminiscing about their respective philosophical and political journeys since the 1960s. They run through a litany of “isms”: Marxism, Maoism, existentialism, feminism, structuralism, post-modernism, and so on—intellectual fads that came and went. These Quebecois seem amused, if not also a bit chagrined, by the memory of having believed in such a rapid and bewildering succession of what I am calling in this talk *presumptive universals*—sweeping theories that claim globally paradigmatic status.

It is as if a torrential sequence of systems and ideas forever postpones the arrival of what Thomas Kuhn called “normal science.” The credibility of each new paradigm is too evanescent. The only orthodoxy is constant skepticism, revision, reconsideration. The only assurance is the absence of assurance.

An instance of what I mean may be found in the pages of a periodical that has been publishing for some years now and apparently plans to continue doing so. This seemingly permanent journal is entitled *Rethinking Marxism*. How long should an “ism” be rethought before it is finally abandoned? Is it possible that, compared with the rest of society, intellectuals once they have a big idea are less able to let it go? Is consistency the hobgoblin of large minds?

Perhaps. Nevertheless, nowadays, at least among disillusioned intellectuals, not just in Montreal but throughout what is still sometimes called the “Western world,” presumptive universals—macro theories, global simplifications, encompassing projects, grand narratives—are in disrepute.

This is not a recent trend. In a talk contrasting presumptive universals with local knowledge, it seems fitting to quote from a book by that exact name, *Local Knowledge*, published twenty years ago, in 1983, and written by the widely admired anthropologist Clifford Geertz. I dare say many in this room have read it.

To be fair, Geertz does begin the book by admitting that “those with what they take to be one big idea are still among us.” Note the implied reference to Isaiah Berlin’s famous distinction between the hedgehog who has one big idea and the fox who has many little ideas. If the one big idea is a presumptive universal and the many little ideas illustrate local knowledge, the implied question is how the proportional distribution of hedgehogs and foxes among Western intellectuals has changed and is changing over time.

For Geertz, back in 1983, universalizing hedgehogs were already retreating in the face of a profusion of foxes offering bits of local knowledge. Wrote Geertz:

Calls for ‘a general theory’ of just about anything social sound increasingly hollow, and claims to have one megalomaniac. Whether this is because it is too soon to hope for unified science or too late to believe in it is, I suppose, debatable. But it has never seemed further away, harder to imagine, or less certainly desirable than it does right now.

The Montreal intellectuals in “Barbarian Invasions” are not debating whether it is too soon to hope for durable grand theory. For them, as for many others, it is already too late to believe in that prospect. As the Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates said at a conference convened last year by the journal *Critical Inquiry*, “I missed the day theory was politically transformative. I’m too young.” Also last year, Oxford professor Terry Eagleton, in a book he pointedly called *After Theory*, remembered the thrilling early days when theory “seemed so obviously the herald to a new future, a land of boundless possibility,” and went on to lament the quietly spoken middle-class students who nowadays huddle diligently in libraries decoding the subtexts of television shows.

It is as if grand theory had ended not with one big bang but with a diminishing congeries of whimpers.

2. Reminiscence: From discipline to area

The academic year 1964-65 was my first year in graduate school at Yale University studying political science. The behavioral revolution was in full swing, presuming to offer the promise of a universal science of politics. Like others in my class, I was impressed. We read David Easton’s *The Political System*. We read Gabriel Almond and James Coleman’s *The Politics of Developing Areas*. We memorized taxonomies and models. The hope of moving toward causal explanation captivated us. Structural functionalism claimed universal

applicability. The sweeping assumptions of modernization theory were in vogue. It was tempting (not to mention self-regarding) to think that we were finally going to turn political science into a science.

For me, the euphoria was short-lived. By my second year at Yale, the in-class critiques of behavioralism that we had made and discussed in class had taken their toll. Modernization theory was Procrustean; too much didn't fit. Structural-functionalism was biased toward maintaining systems not changing them. Democratization theory flirted with teleology—against ample evidence that unforeseen contingencies could derail that process. The more we read, the less we believed.

Meanwhile, first African and then Southeast Asian studies were enticing me to part company with hedgehogs. More and more I found myself thinking like a fox—intrigued by small things, enjoying the study of other societies for its own sake, and skeptical of any “Truth” spelled with a capital “T.”

Area studies were fun. Learning local knowledge was a lot more stimulating than tracing the constellated abstractions of grand theory. If before I had been tempted by presumptive universals, now I relished being surprised by outliers and idiosyncrasies—whatever a theory had prepared its partisans *not* to expect.

An Africanist at the time, I facetiously invented a “Zanzibar Ploy” whereby one might greet any declamation of a presumptive universal with the comment, “Well, yes, that seems to make sense. But of course it's not how things work in Zanzibar.” One could only hope that no one within earshot actually knew enough about Zanzibar to be able to disagree.

I never mustered the courage to try out the ploy in class. But I enjoyed thinking about it. I liked the notion that reality on a tiny island might somehow confound the homogenizing bulldozer of scientific political science. I found the exception more interesting than the rule—the area more hospitable than the discipline.

3. Counter-examples: TOE and consilience

I am not against causal generalization. My criticism of presumptive universals is not meant to replace them with faith in odd particulars—as if there were nothing out there but unique Zanzibars, clear to the horizon and beyond, defying summary let alone explanation.

Take the effort in the physical sciences to integrate cosmology with particle physics in what is sometimes jokingly called a TOE: a Theory of Everything—an explanatory system that works as well for black holes as it does for quarks. Is this a naïve search for El Dorado, Shangri La, the Holy Grail? Who am I to say?

In the late 1980s I spent a year in Princeton at the Institute for Advanced Study. While there I heard a lecture by Ed Witten, a leading proponent of something called “string theory,” touted by some in physics as a possible step toward achieving a TOE. Witten acknowledged that the years he had devoted to string theory could turn out to have been

spent barking up the wrong tree. Were that to happen, his time and effort would then seem to have been wasted. Yet being able finally to say with confidence that a given tree was in fact the wrong one—that in itself would be a kind of success.

As I listened, I compared Witten’s assumption of eventual certainty with the messier circumstances of scholars in the social sciences and humanities. Only rarely in the “softer” disciplines are paradigms decisively—permanently—refuted or confirmed. They tend instead to be set aside, fall out of fashion, undergo changes, or get recycled from different angles with new evidence or fresh jargon. The subject of study—human attitudes and behaviors—is elusive and mutable enough that almost no tree turns out to be definitively wrong. And very few trees seem unambiguously not worth barking even part-way up. Revisions sideline orthodoxies, become themselves conventional, and are marginalized in turn by the latest intellectual wave. The appeal of novelty (and the market for it) drives the process onward. Pretensions to universality further shorten the shelf-life of explanations, since a non-banal general theory of society is almost by definition vulnerable to exceptions, qualifications, and unforeseen events.

The sociobiologist E. O. Wilson has championed another grand unifying project. He calls it “consilience.” Wilson proposes to unify the hard and soft sciences and the humanities around the core idea of evolution. His project would launch encompassing chains of explanation causally linking micro- to macrophenomena—from the biochemistry of neurons and synapses in the brain through the full range of human interactions with each other and with their physical environs.

In the year 2050, how much of human behavior now thought to be culturally determined will be known to have a genetic basis? Wilson’s answer is: more than you think. But his project is controversial among critics of sociobiology. Consilience is a grand idea that has so far yielded few results. Wilson illustrates consilience with his explanation of the universality of the incest taboo. But even if his conclusions about that social fact are correct, they amount to a minor achievement when viewed against the sheer size of his would-be-big TOE.

Comparable to one of the micro-macro chains of causation in Wilson’s consilience is Noam Chomsky’s case for language as universally hard-wired. But Chomsky has had to revise his ideas, however reluctantly and partially, under criticism from other scholars. As for other such big ideas, some turn out to be less arresting than at first they seemed. When Steven Piker argues that the mind is not a blank slate, there is a sense in which he sets up a straw person to knock down. Of course the mind is not a blank slate. But neither is it a ready-only text that emerges from the womb fully and permanently pre-composed. The interesting aspect of the nature vs. nurture debate is not which side is right—as if a scholar had to choose *between* these explanations—but what the proportions of nature and nurture are and how they interact in specific instances.

4. Contexts: Faith, history, and policy

One might think of Theorists of Everything as natural foxes, ranging widely across disciplines and up and down scales of abstraction. But insofar as universalist thinkers organize their systems coherently and consistently around a single main idea, they are hedgehogs. By comparison, foxes are bricoleurs, with shorter attention spans and greater tolerance for loose ends.

There will always be a market for hedgehogs, if only because of the monotheistic need to believe—in One Big God, or One Big Thing, or One Big Bang at the origin of all existence. But the demand for hedgehogs surely varies from culture to culture and also changes over time. It would be interesting to explore the proposition that foxes are in greater supply north and hedgehogs more evident south of the U.S.-Canadian border. The distribution of these animals probably also varies with faith, history, and policy.

Faith One of the funniest scenes in “Barbarian Invasions” occurs when several of the world-weary Canadians drive south to the United States. “Hallelujah!” they shout, and “Praise the Lord!”—as if rehearsing their adaptation to church-going American ways.

Jesus Christ was more of a hedgehog than a fox. Love was his big idea, if the New Testament is to be believed. Christianity is a presumptive and popular universal. Evangelical Christians account for an estimated one-third of U.S. adults. In developing countries in Africa and Latin America, the booming denominations consist not of Unitarians comfortable with ambiguity but Evangelicals celebrating certainty.

Insofar as the “war on terror” implicates monotheistic religious beliefs, has it enlarged the market for hedgehogs? Perhaps it has. What do you think? START HERE

History Hedgehogs are well represented among authors of current and future history. Take the death or rebirth of ideological combat as a big idea. Not long after Francis Fukuyama had buried wars of ideas in his *End of History*, they were resurrected by Samuel Huntington as clashing civilizations. Hedgehogs may also be found in policy circles. Think of the monotheistic homage to liberal market capitalism embodied in the “Washington Consensus,” or in “TINA”—British Prime Minister Maggie Thatcher’s assurance that “There Is No Alternative” to that one big idea.

Like the fallen isms in “Barbarian Invasions,” conceptions of future history are vulnerable to being overthrown by it as it unfolds. The financial crisis that ravaged parts of East Asia beginning in 1997 made at least a temporary mockery of “Asian values” and “the developmental state.” Chilean success in fending off hot money gave rise to a “Santiago Consensus” that challenged its Washington-based rival.

Most recently, Jakarta’s disastrous experience with the IMF, Kuala Lumpur’s ability to avoid entanglement in the “Washington Consensus,” and the election of an economically populist regime in Bangkok have precipitated a Thai reply to the “Locomotive Theory” of development. According to that theory, Japan, the U.S., and Europe are the indispensable triple engine of global growth—the world’s locomotive. Developing economies are therefore advised to remain coupled to that triple driver, e.g., by emphasizing exports to its markets.

Against this view now stands “Thaksinomics,” named after Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin advises Asian developers to avoid overdependence on Japanese/American/European markets; seek opportunities in East Asia’s dynamo, China; and protect against deceleration in the advanced industrial economies by incubating domestic demand.

Thaksinomics may be a flash in the pan. Who today remembers the quirky “Habibienomics” attributed to Indonesian President B. J. Habibie in 1999? But the dialectic will go on—presumptive universals triggering objections claiming superior local knowledge.

When it comes to writing future history, the subject of democratization is a typically American source of teleology. Consider this latest statement from Freedom House, headquartered in New York, introducing its classification of countries into “Free,” “Partly Free,” and “Not Free” for 2003: “On balance, freedom registered upward trends in 2003 ... In all, 25 countries showed improvement, [while only] 13 countries suffer[ed] declines in freedom.” Such bookkeeping encourages a view of democratization as quantitative and unilinear.

Associated with this outlook is the optimistic idea that capitalism, democracy, and security are causally intertwined—good things that necessarily go together. In what I have elsewhere called a “Virtuous Spiral” of improvements, capitalism is believed to spawn and strengthen middle classes that demand and deepen liberal democracies that cannot bring themselves to fight each other, thus enlarging a zone of peace and security that enables prosperity, accountability, and comity to gain ever greater ground. Spelled out so baldly, I admit, this presumptive universal may resemble a straw person. In the euphoria that followed the Cold War, parts and versions of the “Virtuous Spiral” nevertheless become staples of American rhetoric on foreign policy and world affairs.

Then came 9/11. The most obvious of the “barbarian invasions” in the film by that title is the penetration of the World Trade Center by Islamist radicals. Apparently, from the hijackers’ standpoint, their suicidal massacres were righteous acts of fealty to Islam and its One Big God—Allah. What eclectic fox could ever have been so monomaniacal?

This is not to discredit the actual religion of Islam, or to associate monotheism with pathology. But just as some foxes are dilettantes, among hedgehogs the prefix mono- can become a straitjacket—as in monochrome, monologue, monopoly, monotony, and yes, monomaniacal. And if, compared with hedgehogs, foxes are more inclined toward second thoughts by the breadth of their interests and a corresponding exposure to diverse ideas, and thus more likely to be deterred by doubt, should that be demeaned as self-paralysis? Or admired as evidence of humility, tolerance, and prudence?

In any event, in the traumatic aftermath of 9/11, the ever-onward-and-upward view of democratization that flourished for a time after the Cold War has been superseded by darker themes, including Fareed Zakaria’s qualitative warning against *Illiberal Democracy*.

Policy Responses to Islamist terror have varied. The dogmatically Manichean assertions and actions of extreme Islamists have stimulated the forceful expression of counter-assertions, including the Bush administration's rejection of second thoughts about its global "war on terror." In France the "rights" of Muslim girls to conceal their hair in public classrooms are pitted against the historically secular construction of French identity. The latter controversy opposes two presumptive universals: Islam and *laïcité*—unless one thinks of Islam as limited to existing Muslims, and secularity as merely French.

A crusade for Christ the American "war on terror" is not. From time to time, the Bush administration restates its assurance that it is not making war on Islam. "Islam," it has said, "is a religion of peace." That statement is politically wise. But it is empirically weak. The Koran is not so thoroughly irenic—any more than the turn-the-other-cheek New Testament erases the eye-for-an-eye vengeance to be found in the Old. Reality is seldom as uniform as ideology dictates.

In the meantime, the post-9/11 fields of battle and debate have not been monopolized by hedgehogs. Consider the work of Manji Irshad, a Canadian Muslim in Toronto, author of *The Trouble with Islam*. I heard her speak recently at a signing of her book in California. She went beyond the easy targets—terrorists. She criticized the literalism of mainstream Islam. She urged creative individual interpretation—*ijtihad* in Arabic. She advocated nuance, complexity, irony, and yes, a number of second thoughts worth thinking before succumbing to blind conviction.

Extreme Islamists such as the late Sayyid Qutb or the not yet late Osama bin Laden—these are hedgehogs to the point of caricature. By comparison, in her talk, Irshad came across as a fox. Without referring to Berlin's analogy, she was in effect asking her fellow Muslims to become foxes—to trade certainty for sensitivity, passion for compassion, arrogance for tolerance. Comparably foxy in Muslim Southeast Asia has been the anti-masculinist *ijtihad* of the Malaysian women who call themselves Sisters in Islam and urge reform from within that presumptively universal religion.

5. The cult of local knowledge

If the fox knows many small things that tend to protect her or him against fanaticism, does that make these animals repositories and exemplars of local knowledge?

There is a case to be made for this conclusion. It is advanced by anthropologists who celebrate what Robert Redfield famously termed "the little tradition" of village religion as against "the great tradition" propagated by high priests. Drawn to foxy local knowledge are scholars who seek out and value what anthropologists call "emic" over "etic" understanding—ideas held by folks on the ground as opposed to the presumptively universal explanations of this or that (Western) science. It is hard to read the work of Clifford Geertz, among others, without gaining respect for local knowledge, and not coincidentally respect as well for the locals who are doing all that knowing. Geertz has even written of "generalizing within cases" rather than across them—an intriguing if not obviously operational recommendation.

Interest in local knowledge is not limited to anthropology. A recent example from political science is James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* and its notion of *metis*, a Greek term that Scott borrows and uses to mean local knowledge based on concrete practice rather than abstract theory.

Ironically, in the assault on hedgehog ideology, one may unintentionally capitalize local knowledge as Local Knowledge—another great big idea—and wind up something of a hedgehog oneself. Romanticizing little traditions to the point of essentializing them is a temptation worth resisting. For a scholar, respecting such traditions should imply approaching them no less skeptically than one would their presumptively universal counterparts.

When I did fieldwork in Java in the 1970s, scholars working in and on Javanese agriculture were inclined to criticize the introduction of so-called “miracle rice” by the Indonesian government as a dangerously one-size-fits-all response to agrarian need. Javanese farmers had hedged their bets by planting different varieties. If one variety succumbed to pests, perhaps the others would not. Introducing one high-yielding variety where formerly farmers had planted multiple if lower-yielding ones amounted, in this view, to the state riding roughshod over what Scott would later call *metis*—sensible local knowledge. Scholars also criticized the replacement of labor-intensive finger knives and pounding by hand with scythes and mechanical hullers in the technology of harvesting and processing the rice. Nevertheless, food production increased, rural welfare improved, and the rise in agricultural productivity facilitated the growth of paid jobs in manufacturing for young women workers no longer consigned to hard and unremunerated labor in the confines of a village.

I'm not saying the farmers' local knowledge was wrong. The authorities made mistakes. Not everything went as planned. Some farmers were hurt. But the scholars who championed the technological status quo underrated the utility, in this case, of “seeing like a state.” Suharto's authoritarian regime was genuinely reprehensible in many respects. It's just that agricultural policy wasn't one of them. Scholars who insisted on portraying his rulership as *uniformly* repellent were, in the name of local knowledge, denying what millions of rural families, over time, came to know—that life was getting not worse but better, or at least not worse. In this regard it was the scholars themselves who wound up “seeing like a state.” In effect, they blanketed the political landscape with their own monocrop—a single, consistency-yielding variety of judgment.

When Marxism was still on offer around the world, its theoreticians were inclined to defend that ideology's presumptively universal message against the “false consciousness” of workers who had things other than class-based revolution on their minds. In this respect, Marxist systematizers were great disdainers of local knowledge. But it does not follow from such critiques that mundane, on-the-ground consciousness is necessarily “true.” Respecting local knowledge is one thing. Elevating that respect into a cult is quite another. While the littleness of “little traditions” may make them vulnerable to bigger ones, that is

ipso facto no reason to treat them as totems incapable of harm. Contrary to a view popularized in the 1960s, small is not always beautiful.

Not only policies are at stake here. So are the ways in which one ought to make them. Compare two styles of decision: synoptic and incremental. Synoptic decisions are preferred by systematizing hedgehogs. Like chess players gazing down on boards and pieces, they seek the fullest possible rule-based knowledge of all available choices, and of the branching trees of further choice and counter-choice these choices open up. Synopticians hope, in this way, to identify the one best move that can be made. Incremental decisions, in contrast, are a matter of short-term zig and zag, trial and error, muddling through. Without thinking too much about it, the fox tries out this move or that, and if it fails, tries something else.

Not all problems are best resolved incrementally, by trial and error. In adverse weather, airline passengers are unlikely to hope that the pilot is flying by the seat of his pants, relying more on emic scuttlebutt than etic science. Local knowledge may be wildly wrong, especially in the face of novel threats—AIDS, SARS, avian flu. Could polio have been eradicated without supra-local knowledge? There are circumstances in which placing all of one's eggs in that one best basket is a good idea—the very big and good idea that hedgehogs are attracted to. Sometimes it makes sense to see like Scott's state. (I leave aside for lack of time the instructive counter-image of the state that sees like a fox, one that improvises ad hocery and diversity in response to contrary pressures or constituencies, or merely for lack of any overriding plan.)

Finally, consider the magnum opus of Edward Said. Under the guise of condemning the “othering”—reification, simplification—of Orientalism, he himself reified, simplified—namely, othered—the diverse works of a variety of Western scholars by lumping them all together under his totalizing label: Orientalism. For foxes who rail against hedgehogs, the lesson is not to become what you deplore.

I may be guilty of the same sin. Arguably I have offered you a false dichotomy: an oversimplified polarity between what I am calling *presumptive universals* on the one hand as opposed to *local knowledge* on the other. A different but no less useful talk would have shown how the former filter into the latter, and vice versa; how the relative insulation of local knowledge from diverging sources and broad perspectives may actually help embed presumptive universals in the minds of folks on the ground; and how prejudicial it is to stereotype the theorist as someone who stubbornly dismisses local exceptions as merely “proving” his or her one and only rule.

6. Scholarship: What is to be done?

So at last we arrive at Lenin's question: *What Is to Be Done?* Or a bit more narrowly, looking at ourselves as scholars, how are we to think?

First, as scholars, we need to cultivate a nuanced awareness of the nature and contexts of analytic choice. What level of analysis is appropriate? What methods? And what

ambitions—what research and writing agendas—are suitable for approaching which problems and what evidence at which scales of description, interpretation, and explanation?

The point is not to play the hedgehog and bristle at foxes, or play the fox and chase hedgehogs. The point is know when the styles and preferences of each stop being useful.

Second, as scholars, we need to commit and recommit ourselves to the desirability of trying to separate facts from values—“Asian” or otherwise. The difficulty of doing so is not a reason to give up trying.

It is not the notion of universality itself that ought to trigger second thoughts. It is the element of presumption. Does the generality of a theory lie in its applicability with the actual facts of real cases, independent of the theorist’s hope for scope? What normative view of the world is most consonant with the theory’s assumptions and conclusions? What is the theorist’s own worldview? Is the correspondence a product of empirical investigation, or of wishful thinking, and if both, in what proportions? A phrase worth emblazoning on a theorist’s screen saver might be: “No generalization without introspection.”

Third, as scholars, we need to be and remain genuinely interdisciplinary. We should refuse to exclude in advance, from ignorance, the relevance of any body of knowledge. The claim of area studies to be trans-disciplinary is not helped when area-oriented faculty and students cultivate disdain for economics as the work of Philistine materialists, or dismiss social psychology as an opportunity for college sophomores to earn spending money volunteering for experiments whose results are then confused with human nature. Compared with the fox who prefers local knowledge, the hedgehog’s hope for scope at least increases the chance of encountering and engaging a range of etic perspectives and literatures. Add this to the screen saver: “How parochial am I?”

Fourth, as scholars, we need to supplement our literacy with numeracy. The case for local knowledge is not a case against quantitative methods. As with the proclivities of hedgehogs and foxes, numbers and words both have their uses. As the saying goes, holding a hammer in one’s hand does not turn problems into nails. The trick is finding the method that is right for the material—not altering the evidence to make it amenable to a particular method in which the analyst is already overinvested.

Fifth and last, as scholars, we ought not neglect the middle range. Between one village and the whole planet there are multiple standpoints from which one can look both upward toward larger, more comparative, and yes, even more universally explanatory statements, but also look downward toward more local knowledge.

It is in such intermediate places that one is more likely to find oneself in the mixed company of presumptively generalizing hedgehogs and locally knowing foxes—and thus to acquire the versatility and flexibility needed to overcome the distinction.