Tradition, Schooling, and the Prospects of Global Peace: A Critical Look

Tilahun Sineshaw[*]

How far would *the star wars approach* to understanding complex global phenomenon take us in the creation of sustainable peace in our fragile world? Does physical victory over a defined terrorist group necessarily lead to a total victory over terrorism? Is global security best served through taking a diversified set of actions? What institution(s) could be made in the service of creating sustainable global peace? These are big questions whose answers need to be informed by scholarly work from a variety of academic disciplines. This short article utilizes a *change-continuity tension model* to understand the tension between transformation and continuity in traditions that led to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Reflecting on the tradition-change dialectic, McLaren (1996) writes that *... the best way to honor the accomplishments of a tradition is not to canonize but to reinvent it.* Throughout human history, traditions and the institutions that hold them and pass them on to successive generations have played adaptive community functions. To the extent that traditions and the institutions that perpetuate them play such functions, they are revolutionary. The need for changing such traditions and institutions arises when they outgrow such functions.

Ideas and actions that contribute for the protection and sustenance of the sociological unit form dominant traditions. Such traditions generate energy for the propagation of the social unit. Social cohesion, which is the prime mover of continuity within a matrix of social history, is maintained as a consequence. Conversely, aged traditions that play destructive roles in the life of the social entity get selected and thrown out into the dustbins of history. When traditions cease to render adaptive functions, change becomes imminent.

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And, as the ancient Roman philosopher, Lucretius, some 2,000 years ago observed, change is the only constant. The survival and, hence the success of traditions, resides in the plasticity it exhibits when dealing with such changes. It may therefore be conceptualized that the struggle to prevail is the struggle against change (Chance, 1999). The relationship between survival and change thus calls for an adoption of a dialectical perspective in conceptualizing the tension.

Societies change and ideas and actions that once played productive roles can become obsolete and dysfunctional. The cultural knowledge, including the social institutions that nurtured and preserved it, should therefore need periodic overhaul in order to continue rendering their adaptive functions. McLaren's choice of reinvention of tradition over its canonization becomes very pertinent when viewed in the dialectical context and text of transformation and continuity.

Consonant with McLaren's view, traditions that have outgrown themselves in terms of their adaptive significance need thorough reinvention before they degenerate into tools of massacre and terror. Terrorist attacks on a particular space are attacks on the *human space*, for, as we shall see below the particular and the universal are intertwined. Traditions and institutions that are antithetical to *humanity* need conscious selection.

Just like McLaren, a coterie of socio-cultural thinkers underscore (Rosa and Montero; Cole; Wertsch; Tudge, in Moll 1990, for example) the need for periodic interrogation of traditions lest they become hindrances to social progress. They emphasize the need to reexamine institutions from time to time and reinvent them when found embodying and nurturing harmful traditions to common human ethos.

In a similar vein, the late Brazilian educator-philosopher, Paulo Freire (1996), in his rendition of the particular and universal dialectic, writes the regional emerges from the local just as the national arises from

the regional, and the continental from the national as the worldwide emerges from the continental... Just as it is a mistake to get stuck in the local, loosing our vision of the whole, so also it is a mistake to waft above the whole, renouncing any reference to the local whence the whole has emerged.

The relationship between the particular and universal is dynamic, ever changing, and fluid. Again, if we are to successfully deal with change, which we must, it is incumbent upon us that we carefully examine and develop a deep understanding of the locale-global dialectic. Such a dialectical understanding could contribute to the creation and maintenance of a long lasting global peace. Hence a localized story based on lived experience is narrated below.

Up until 1974, Ethiopia was ruled by successive autocratic monarchs who had no regard for the social and economic welfare of their own subjects. Ethiopians were never considered citizens, but assets to be used for the accumulation of wealth for the monarchy and the nobility.

During the reign of Haile Sellasie, U.S. foreign policy was shaped by cold war politics and, hence aligned itself with what many Ethiopians considered a near-theocracy. This led most political activists to perceive the U.S as a prime supporter of an undemocratic system of governance.

Gradually, the oppressive social condition radicalized a portion of the urban youth and intellectuals and brought them in direct confrontation with the ancient regime. Along with this was created a heightened anti-U.S. sentiment. Activist political groupings were looking for an alternative system of government, and this eventually led to the 1974 popular upsurge. This social upheaval gradually precipitated toward the severance of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

In the fashionable style of cold-war politics, vying political groups within the country and overseas began their own infightings that culminated in a military take-over. The military dictatorship that

ensued conveniently chose the then Soviet Union as its ally and sharpened its anti-U.S. rhetoric and perfected it at a mass-rally it called in the early 1980s. It was at that public gathering that dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam symbolically expressed his defiance against Ethio-US relations. That could have been constructed as a symbolic declaration of war against the U.S.

At the same time, there were democratic voices in the country and outside who were resisting the military dictatorship. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the Ethiopian people had nothing to do with what Mengistu and his cronies were doing at the time. In fact, this same regime that came to power using the popular disaffection with the monarchial rule was oppressive to them on many fronts. Alas, it would have been terrible for any outside force to declare war on Ethiopia given the circumstances.

Siding with the oppressive imperial rule cultivated the anti-U.S. sentiment that rapidly spread among the politicized youth and, in the final analysis, gave rise to what the military dictatorship dubbed an anti-imperialist stand. Here is why this story becomes relevant today.

It appears to me that policies need to be informed and shaped by the democratic ideals and principles that the U.S. espouses and not by the calculus of shortsighted and short-term political gains. We need not become convenient allies with the Haile Selassies, the Sadam Hussiens, the Bin Ladens, and the Talibans, just to make short term political gains, for we know what happens when change comes!   In order to frustrate the ambitions and plans of potential global terrorists, one has to carefully craft policies that are consistent with democratic ideals. People watch discrepancies and inconsistencies.

Encouraging and coaxing dictatorial regimes to democratize and allow descent within their political space will pay more in the long run than being perceived as close friends to and allies with dictators. Making a darling out of a Musharif in Pakistan might have helped in removing the Taliban from their formal political grip on Afgahnistan but left

grass-roots-based democratic movements in the former disaffected. It is only when societies adopt a transparent system of governance that institutions such as the *madrasses* (religious schools) could be publicly scrutinized and reinvented when found harboring and training potential terrorists! I do not think that micro-managing localities via the creation of alliances with dictators at the expense of fundamental democratic principles will contribute to global peace.

Lasting peace cannot be attained and maintained until and unless we systematically and institutionally address the multifaceted issues that might have stirred the peace in the first place. The institution of what I call *fair local and regional engagement* is a sine-qua-non for creating and nurturing the common human destiny. Democratizing local and regional authoritarian systems of governance and standing on the side of the *local soldiers of democracy,* in the long-run, creates environs that are hostile to terrorist frames of mind.

The foregoing goal is particularly viable and attainable when complemented by a globally-based support for the creation of revitalized educational institutions that compete with such learning centers as the *madrasses.* Competing learning forums would then lead to the creation of a critical mass that would stand up to the menace of terrorist thinking.

Hence, this is the basis for my suggestion for the institutionalization of what I call the *New Global Forum* (NGF), a forum that utilizes new pedagogical approaches to global peace.

Investment on the reinvention of such institutions as the NGF will pay us all in the long run; it will contribute immensely to the creation of a reliable and formidable global community that is devoid of terror. It was gratifying to hear President Bush mention his idea of a "Freedom Core" in his 2002 State of the Union address, for the idea is to send *missionaries of peace and democracy* to the part of the world that experiences only poverty, autocracy, and, in some cases, theocracy all the breeding grounds of a terrorist frame of mind! Implicit in this suggestion is a call for a different kind of school that encourages

diversity and creativity and not mere conformity. I am calling for a new kind of school that throws light on the politics of hope and dreams for all; a school that is guided by what Paulo Freire calls "pedagogy of hope".

Such a school would lead young minds everywhere and anywhere to search for hope not just for sheer hopefulness, but, rather critical hope that can wage war against hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism among the world's youth. I believe that such an institution will in the long-run safeguard the fragile world from even becoming more fragile.

The Author

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