

The benefit of doubt



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'Science makes you learn about deep complexities', claims Richard Dawkins, writer and evolutionary biologist at Oxford University. That poses a daunting task for a magazine that aims to provide brief summaries of scientific developments. Is it possible to keep it short and simple without losing nuance and complexity?

I heard Dawkins talk at a conference, *New Notes towards the Definition of Western Culture, Part II: What is an Educated Man?* The conference, organized by the Dutch Nexus Institute, took place at the Passenger Terminal Amsterdam, where the old and new faces of globalization meet. This anonymous 20-storey building, an airport-like hub for international passers-by, could have been anywhere in the world. Cruise ships can now be seen there, in the same waters where four centuries ago the glorious trading and invading ships of the United East India Company (VOC) once docked, the old warehouses turned into modern apartments.

What does *The Broker* have to do with Western culture, one might ask. I was prompted by the keynote speaker, Shmuel Eisenstadt, a sociologist famous for his comparative studies of civilizations. That is a crucial subject at a time when Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* seems set to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Now aged 84, Eisenstadt does not rely on such oversimplifications to get his message heard. His theory of 'multiple modernities', contrary to Huntington's, sees (religious) civilizations as 'heterodox', as many competing visions with different speeds and modalities.

Eisenstadt's presentation was inspiring. He described how secularization has led to increasing uncertainty (divine wisdom has vanished) and to the ever-growing separation of all spheres of life – economic, political and social. To keep a grip, people tend to make these things absolute, which leads to all kinds of 'fundamentalisms', from Communism and Nazism to today's 'market fundamentalism'. Eisenstadt carefully avoids current religious fundamentalisms. This one-dimensional view is one of the big problems of modernity: 'We do not know how to connect all these different life spheres and cultures in a flexible, multifaceted way'.

Globalization has increased these dilemmas, Eisenstadt believes. Here is a link with *The Broker*. Globalization is much more than international trade. It is also the interference between different cultures. The overall advance of modernity, of new technologies, of mass media, of individualism and all the other accompanying habits, induce severe clashes with and within less modern cultures. Such insights are useful for understanding the ongoing conflicts in many parts of the developing world.

Bill Joy, computer scientist and cofounder of Sun Microsystems, put it this way: first the object of human thinking concerned the relations of man to man, and we had the Ten Commandments and other (semi)religious rules. Then came the centuries in which we thought about how to manage relationships between states, leading to our current international system (including, I would add, traditional development cooperation that focuses only on the internal workings of states or communities). But now the question has once again shifted: it is about how we regulate collective behaviour towards the world and its people. Or, how do we collectively avoid destroying

ourselves through climate change and, Joy added, new technologies like nanotechnology, genetic engineering and robotics?

The quest for progress – the essence of technology-driven modernity – has led to extreme specializations in almost every field. Discussing the 'knowledge society', sociologist Frank Furedi noted that today we have an 'expert society'. Technocracy rules, and everything is 'outsourced' to experts. This has led to a situation in which that 'knowledge' – the broader view that questions, combines and weighs different aspects of a particular subject – is disappearing.

Here is another analogy with *The Broker*. Policy, practice and research in the field of international cooperation together provide a perfect example of Furedi's 'expert society'. The development community is deeply specialized, and very few people have an overarching vision. Complexities are not treated as such, but are cut up into many technical elements, into separate (millennium) development goals, for example. Mainstream development cooperation is like 'pure' science. But whereas fundamental research may yield results that can be adapted for practical use by other scientists along the chain, development practice, to be effective, should relate much more to the context in which it functions.

The Broker is modestly attempting to restore some of the lost connections between separate fields. To show friction and different angles between disciplines, levels of abstraction, and between technical and social sciences. That is why, in this issue, Koos Dijksterhuis describes not only the technical aspects of second-generation biofuels and the need to do something to prevent climate change, but also the possible consequences for food production in developing countries. And that is why Evert-Jan Quak links global financial liberalization with the erosion of the autonomy of many countries to generate sufficient enough tax revenues to finance their own development. It is also the reason why Lars van Troost pictures the contradiction between the long-term need for a global rule of law – through the International Criminal Court – and the immediate need for peace and reconciliation in northern Uganda.

Eisenstadt's view that the increasing separation of the various life spheres leads to 'fundamentalism' can be extended to knowledge. Is knowledge something absolute or 'divine', or does it only acquire meaning if it is connected to the societal context in which it is produced? His answer is that there should always be that link to the context. Scientists, policy makers or other 'developers' cannot act as if they work in a laboratory, but must always relate to the complex surroundings of the real world, which will influence the outcomes of their actions, whether theoretically or ideologically inspired.

This, in essence, is the subject of the online debate launched by *The Broker*, the first 'round' of which is summarized by Ellen Lammers in this issue. This is not a political debate, but a discussion among scientists about the role of politics and power relations in poverty reduction. That is an important distinction. Political statements are guided by ideology or other interests, while science is supposed to be much more critical. Again, at the Nexus conference, Richard Dawkins provided some apt definitions: 'Science is scepticism. Science is curiosity. Science is organized doubt'. ■

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