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Keynote speech

by Professor Dr. Homi Bhabha
Harvard University, Cambridge, USA

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SPEECH FOR HANOVER MAYOR'S RECEPTION

Homi Bhabha

Dear Mayor Weil,

Dear Wilhelm,

Dear friends and colleagues,

It is a great honour to be invited to speak on this occasion, but it is also somewhat daunting to follow two such distinguished colleagues. Mr. Mayor, you rule over the lives of the citizens of Hanover; Dr. Krull, you help shape the minds of the leaders of the future. What have I to say for myself? Ah, if only I were Greta Garbo, I could just stand still, smile and say nothing!

The pleasure I take in being here, in these remarkable Herrenhausen Gardens in the company of such distinguished guests, is rather similar to the pleasure I get in much less spectacular surroundings at Harvard, where the ideas and influence of Wilhelm Krull and the Volkswagen Foundation maintain a strong presence. The Foundation reached out across the Atlantic and helped us launch the interdisciplinary Humanities post-doctoral programme at Harvard's Humanities Centre. Our collaboration enabled us to initiate a programme that is, in its origins, international and interdisciplinary.

We no longer speak for this or that side of the Atlantic; we try to establish ourselves as the crossroads of conversations in-between countries, communities, institutions, generations and disciplines. "Our common future" is not only multicultural; it is also multivocal and multidimensional. And it is a common

future that is part of a world that is lived “at the limits”, facing asymmetrical pressures and anachronistic forces. The past and the present seem to meet in our times to create a tryst of transitions. Doubt and perplexity are also our common future. We frequently live in the midst of worlds of information and identification that lie “in-between” cultures and customs. How do we enhance plurality and equality without turning the world of debate and discourse into a babel of voices?

My own experience of living in the “in-between” of cultural diversity was a lesson I learnt at home. As a member of the Parsi community, a small Zoroastrian minority – neither Hindu nor Muslim – my everyday life was lived in that rich cultural mix of languages and lifestyles that most cosmopolitan colonial, Indian cities celebrate and perpetuate in their vernacular existence – “Bombay” Hindustani, “Parsi” Gujarati, garbled Urdu, all held in a suspension of Welsh-or-Scots accented schoolroom English peppered with American slang picked up from the movies or popular music. My many-accented, culturally diverse English was more than words, or a way of speaking. It was a “language of belonging.” It bore the marks – the conflicts and compromises – of a style of life that emerged out of a complex negotiation between cultural differences; a finely wrought balance between conflicting communities and plural polities.

Learning to work with the contradictory strains of languages *lived*, and languages *learned*, has the potential for a remarkable critical and creative impulse. At times, the English language had the feel of a somewhat archaic parlour that engulfed you in the faded smell of moth-balls and beautiful brittle

linens; at other times my Bombay English had the mix-and-match quality of a moveable feast, like Bombay street food, spicy, cheap, available in all kinds of quantities and combinations, subtle delicacies with a street-wise savour. I went to Oxford to embellish the antique charms of the parlour; I ended up realizing how much I desired street food. My language of integration had a social syntax that was specific to a nation's history, but inserted within a larger discourse that addressed its inter-national genealogies – at one time colonial; in our time, what is termed, 'global.'

There is a kind of global cosmopolitanism, widely influential now, that configures the planet as a concentric world of national societies extending to global villages. It is a cosmopolitanism of relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance, and free-market forces of competition. Global cosmopolitans of this ilk frequently inhabit 'imagined communities' that consist of silicon valleys and software campuses; although, increasingly, they have to face up to the carceral world of call-centres, and the sweat-shops of outsourcing.

A global cosmopolitanism of this sort readily celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies. States that participate in such multicultural multinationalism affirm their commitment to 'diversity', at home and abroad, so long as the demography of diversity consists largely of educated economic migrants – computer engineers, medical technicians, and entrepreneurs, rather than refugees, political exiles, or the poor. In celebrating a

'word culture' or 'world markets' this mode of cosmopolitanism moves swiftly and selectively from one island of prosperity to yet another terrain of technological productivity, paying conspicuously less attention to the persistent inequality and immiseration produced by such unequal and uneven development.

The Bombay Babel in which I grew up was an early sign of a different kind of cosmopolitanism: a post-colonial vernacular cosmopolitanism that has since become the *lingua franca* of the global age. Writers like Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh give it voice; artists like Anish Kapoor give it shape and colour. Individuals, commodities, communities move across nations or in-between traditions – sometimes happily, at others with tragic consequences – revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete, singular world of any one nationality or language.

To belong to a hybridized culture is not to be a 'mimic' man, a missing person, or an inauthentic self; it does not relegate you to a world of broken narratives and half-told stories. A 'hybrid' perspective is intolerant of myths of national (and international) dominance based on claims to cultural supremacy and a historic destiny of expansion – such as Britain's Imperial imperative in the 19th Century, or American 'exceptionalism' in our time. Hybridity is no less critical of groups and communities who claim social or symbolic authority on the grounds that their values are foundational – true for all times and places – and that their beliefs are fundamental, closed to interpretation and intolerant of dialogue and dissent. It is, indeed, the discovery of the transnational *passions* –

for peace, justice, rights, and equality – that enable us to relate to a world that is itself in a rapid process of cultural and technological transition.

We live in confusing and confrontational times. What does it mean to be local and global *at the same time*? Those who celebrate the Informational Technology revolution and enthuse over the “soft power” of global markets, announce (in the company of Tom Friedman of the *NY Times*) that “the earth is flat” – the playing field more level than ever before. All the while, others claim that the world is embroiled in an unusual and terrifying “clash of civilizations”, as much *within* national cultures as across them: Islamicist *jihadis*, who want to cleanse themselves of all “western” traces, nevertheless plan their martyrdoms on the Web before strapping explosives to their bodies in the tradition of age-old rituals of self-immolation. Liberals who invoke universal principles of equality and freedom prescribe gunboat democracy around the world for their security.

Languages of constitutional reform and political rationalism lack a vocabulary that addresses the affective life of global citizens – their sense of public anxiety, ambivalence, uncertainty, indecision – as they ponder choices that emerge in-between cultures and their varied practices. These are the difficult, awkward passions of the political life that are not easily classifiable as public ‘virtues.’ And yet, it is these affective reactions that generate a sense of contingency and confusion amongst citizens who do not merely feel that they are living amongst “foreigners” in the local-global worlds we share, but that they have become strangers to themselves. Sometimes exultant strangers enraptured

by the discovery of diversity; at other times unraveled and unhomed by it. Most often both at once.

A renewed sense of *civic or civil belonging* in a globalised age demands a language of inter-cultural *interpretation* as well as well as the policy-oriented prose of social integration. It must be a language rich in metaphor and imaginative power; a language that evolves *towards* a sense of consensus or community by being able to sustain the *public representation* of social conflicts and political contradictions; but it must also be a language capable of representing (and interpreting) the darker passages of private psychological fears of exclusion, and the emotional ambivalences towards integration that people feel as they experience the disorienting processes of *global transition*.

There could be no more suitable site for reflecting on our contemporary world-picture than Herrenhausen Castle and its historic gardens. As an architectural structure it holds together the past and the present; it has been the place of philosophical speculation and statecraft. Above all, however, it is a symbol of Survival and Reconstruction. As a centre of thought and experiment, it will nurture a belief in the renewal of ideas; in the rebuilding of values; and in the ability to live in-between tradition and transition. How do we link scholarship with responsibility? How do we deal with epistemological uncertainty and ethical doubt? The Castle represents the double-life of our times: a facsimile that turns one face to the past on the outside; while an interior space embraces all that is contemporary, of the moment. Its message is clear: *What you see is not what you get!*

The double-vision of the Castle is a call to looking beyond surfaces; to taking the ethic of deep interpretation seriously; to getting beyond the face-value of peoples and things. There could be no more prescient and powerful message for our times. May "our common future" unfold within its walls; May our diverse global paths cross again in its gardens.