

TIMES OF TRANSITION

By **Judit Bokser Liwerant, Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico** and **Sergio DellaPergola, Hebrew University, Jewish People Policy Planning Institute**

October 22, 2006

Prof. Bokser Liwerant teaches Political Science at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, where she heads the Graduate School of Political and Social Sciences; Prof. DellaPergola teaches at the A. Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he heads the Division of Jewish Demography and Statistics. Both are affiliated with the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, an independent think-tank in Jerusalem.

Jewish civilization justifies its existence on its own, but it also needs a stable societal environment as a material support to rely on. In the past there were times and places of stability that allowed for a comfortable and creative Jewish presence: ancient Rome provided one such example; the early Middle Age period of a thriving and humanistic Islam was another; Jews knew their fastest expansion in an Eastern Europe that did not love them but long allowed them sufficient physical and social space; they did well in Western Europe during the era of Emancipation and Liberalism while confronting multiple challenges to Judaism; and they have done very well in the tolerant and pluralistic American environment.

With exceptions, the more globally oriented, open, multinational and multicultural environments allowed Jewish and other minorities broader intellectual and socioeconomic options, while the more locally oriented and narrowly particularistic contexts often had deleterious consequences. This does not mean that the Jewish experience in history developed under idyllic conditions, only that a background of stable diversity allowed more congenial space to Jewish communities than monocultural ambiances.

There also were periods of transition when the old order was disrupted and a new one was imposed by force. These often were difficult times for the Jews: the Catholic Reconquista of the ground lost to Islam; the era of Reform-Counter-reform struggle; the disruption of the liberal state and imposition of totalitarian regimes in Europe; and, yes, the dismemberment of colonial empires.

The recent political and military events, namely Iran's efforts to establish a corridor to the Mediterranean and to become a nuclear power, the crisis on the Israeli-Lebanese border, and the ensuing military and diplomatic activity enhance a sense that the diversified Western world, the Mediterranean and the Middle East are again and deeply into an era of transition: a transition amidst changing geopolitical conditions that questions the actuality and relevance of past and present cultural programs and socio-political orders, of value-assumptions and of related institutional arrangements in the host societies.

Important facets of the current epochal change involve the practical and theoretical questioning of the main project(s) that gave birth to Western modernity and its subsequent transformations. Not only are its temporal limits and geo-cultural roots questioned: also rejected are its core substantive contents. Far from coalescing into a uniform or homogenizing model of modernity, cultural traditions, ideological mappings and organizational patterns tend to evolve into diverse and multiple *modernities*, as appropriately defined by S.N.Eisenstadt. However, the universalizing vocation of the Western model through its conceptual assumptions of progress and enlightenment had indeed become a point of reference, though ambivalent and conflictive. Societies and cultures - the Islamic world included - developed modern dynamics through a contesting dialogue with the West, accepting or questioning its fundamentals, promissory notes and

unfulfilled promises, as well as its achievements: among others, human agency, freedom, autonomy, reflexivity, tolerance, pluralism, civil society, democracy.

Today however, a particularistic and aggressive form of Islam has moved away from ambiguities and critical stands. It takes shape in a triangle in which fundamentalism, Islamism and terrorism converge. While the latter articulates into new global networks of terror, the former are channeled as reactions and alternatives to the assumed Western-dominated globalization processes. While religious fervor, authoritarian state power and trans-Islamic alliances of radical groups find their expression in regional efforts to hegemony, their expansive character defies both inner trends in the Muslim world as well as established Western settings.

The corollary of Islam's renewed westward expansion is the ensuing growing presence in the West of people, institutions and symbols tied to integral Islamist aspirations. In theory, growing diversity of social and cultural patterns due to the contemporaneous presence of Christian and Islamic elements in European societies would create one of those situations of cultural diversity, dialogue and enrichment that proved so supportive for a thriving Jewish presence in the past. But in practice it is occurring through a combination of assertive religious indoctrination, aggressive capacities, and massive and largely illegal immigration.

The consequences are diverse as the old continent offers today a wide open scene nourished from different fronts. A radicalized Muslim population mobilized by extremist rhetoric has transferred the Middle East conflict to a European continent in which, as a consequence of the contemporary political re-alignment, interest in the Arab world furthers new (and old) alleged definitions of multipolarity. Instead of a keen effort to incorporate the newcomers as equals by offering them the vintage products of its own civil society - diversity and the development of shared norms of tolerance via common agreement and deliberation - the European system broadcasts a mode of accommodation that suggests renunciation to those same values. Under the argument of a supposed pluralism, a distinct double standard emerges in public discourse through the notion that what is good for "us" is not necessarily good for "them". Democratic praxis and political pluralism, for example, while good for Europeans, are said not to necessarily fit Muslim societies, and by extension, Muslim minorities in European societies. Besides the openly discriminatory if not racist tone of such assertions embedded in unjustified relativism, it follows that if a thing is not good for "them", is it perhaps not good for "us" either.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Pope Benedictus XVI's bold attempts to reassert a sense of superiority of an older spiritual message of Western roots over Islam's are unavoidably followed by universal condemnation and tactical retreat. By advocating a particularistic component of European heritage as supposedly inclusive universalism, the Pope's message reopens cracks and splits that prevented consensus on Europe's constitution.

Amidst these predicaments, the European polity is missing the opportunity to build bridges with the moderate sectors and streams in Islam, which are overshadowed by radical Islam as the unique referent in public debate. Cultures are never unitary, nor indivisible; they are assemblages of distinctive ideas, elements and patterns as well as of its diverse bearers. Thus, committed cross cultural alliances are missed that could allow the silenced and invisible actors speak on a different voice.

In this climate, instead of enhancing the ground for peaceful differences, expressions of rejection become part of the accepted living horizon. Once more, one discovers the role of a deeply antisemitic extreme right which is as much anti-Muslim as anti-Jewish. Not surprisingly, then, the growing Islamic visibility in the city is more significantly associated with important sectors of the European left that manifest themselves with anti-American and anti-global postures and find ample expression through a cognitive elite strongly represented in the media. The variety of currents, streams and arguments and the complexity of interactions and impacts over the public are inherent in the globalization of the Middle East conflict and the political and ideological

transformations and re-articulations of the post-Khomeini world. The intriguing result is a conceptual and practical convergence of religious fundamentalism and secular post-modernism.

The new order in sight is not what progressive minds, pragmatist or idealist, had conceived, but a renewed appeasement of the West to a different new order which leaves little space to its own quintessential values and institutions. Among these it is worth to underscore once again, freedom and tolerance; rights preservation and human agency; State of law and citizenship; and certainly, a civil sphere as a world of values and institutions that generate the capacity of social criticism and democratic integration at the same time.

Facing radical Islam's expansion and its potentiality as a global project that puts into question the accomplishments of the moderate Muslim world as well as the achievements of political and institutional pluralism, Western (and non-Western) societies need to commit themselves to those cognitive and ideological values that are not an expression of an alleged imperial self-confidence but a result of carefully filtered historical and moral lessons. The European experience with irrationality and nihilism should lie behind the awareness that once again the environmental premises to Jewish presence and civilization are being questioned and challenged in one strategically important area of the world.

It would be the task of responsible people to meditate the historical legacies and teachings, draw the right analogies, and elaborate imaginative scenarios for the future. Transition times are times for reflection ... and times for action.