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INTERVIEW

Jean Christophe Bas: "When you live in peace, you don't realise how much of a privilege it is"

Former senior advisor of strategic development and partnerships at the UN Secretariat of the Alliance for Civilisations on multiple identities, the role of film in shaping public awareness and European peace



Jean Christophe Bas poses a question at session 532

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[Alex Jackson](#) | 17.07.2014

Jean Christophe Bas is heading in a new direction. His short stop in Salzburg for the session [Conflict Transformation through Culture: Peace-Building and the Arts](#) marks the end of his tenure as senior advisor of strategic development and partnerships at the [United Nations Alliance of Civilizations](#) (UNAOC). In June, he will be taking up a new post with the [Council of Europe](#). But the two jobs are not dissimilar, focusing on fostering dialogue and developing a sense of democratic citizenship between nations on a global level. To successfully promote this, he argues, art is key for

asking people to revisit their own histories, cultures and understanding to better harmonize and collaborate.

“Culture is really at the very heart of the question, the issue. There was a report about three or four years ago from the [Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research](#). The publication centred on conflicts in the world in 2009/10. According to their criteria, there were 140 serious conflicts in the world, and about 109 (more than two thirds of serious conflict) that were partially or profoundly rooted in cultural divides. This is a strong sign of the importance of culture in post-conflict reconciliation and even prevention. Following on from the post Cold War era, conflict first moved from being between countries to become more and more among countries. Internal conflict has risen massively, based increasingly on cultural divides,” says Bas.

Division and unity is something that Bas has continually seen shift in different parts of the world. From European success at moving on from the two World Wars, to recent the invasion of Muslim countries, he believes that a growing dimension of the psychology behind conflict is fear and misunderstanding. In a global world, with global patterns of movement, he is concerned that misgivings and misconceptions between different cultural sectors are causing increased tensions, both at home and abroad.

“Migration and immigration is something that profoundly changes the pattern of our society and that creates some sort of anxiety and some sort of fear that is what we call the identity-based conflict, or identity-based tensions and where people feel that their usual references, their usual cultural paradigm is profoundly challenged by different culture, religion, belief and way of life. It is extremely difficult and sensitive to deal with how to live together in societies,” he explains.

Promoting social and cultural tolerance was a fundamental reason behind his decision to work with the UNAOC, a subsidiary of the UN specifically set up to deal with escalating tensions between the Western world and Muslim society. In the aftermath of 9/11, the bombs in Madrid and London, and the war in Iraq, the creation of a platform where governments and non-government organizations, academics, NGOs, corporate sector, religious organizations, could meet and talk and address the growing issues was a welcome forum. More broadly speaking, of course, as our societies become increasingly complex and fragmented, this was a cross-cutting medium designed to reflect on all worldwide cultural resolution avenues.

“There is a need now to bridge this gap between those extraordinary change-makers and innovators and the policy making world, and to see how those initiatives can move from nice stories. Because for now this is really what it looks like, nice stories here and there and you can say these are very moving and have an impact here and there. But what is it that we can learn and how might it translate into mainstream policies? Arts and culture work needs to such dynamism and energy that government policy makers get a very clear understanding of what it represents, not just nice stories, but what it can represent as a component of the new conflict discussions.”

Throughout his career, forging new avenues for dialogue has been a key priority for Bas, who served as a development policy dialogue manager at the World Bank, where he established innovative relationships between the World Bank and constituencies around the world to tackle issues such as

poverty, climate change, under-representation and so on. What he found facilitating these works was that arts in the media were powerful tools in reshaping ideas about communities, cultures and countries, using specific examples to represent a macrocosm viewpoint.

“There are a few examples of the extraordinary power of entertainment in a way that raises the public awareness or changing people’s minds. If you take for instance movies like [Blood Diamond](#), it has been playing a tremendous role in shedding the light on this specific issue of conflict. The connection between conflict and the diamond industry and promoting change. Even more recently, the George Clooney movie [The Monuments Men](#) is another interesting example of the correlation between art, film and policy making. In terms of raising awareness if you take [Invictus](#), it is extraordinary in the way it has illustrated the willingness of bringing different communities and ethnic communities together to build nation cohesion.

“If we look at all around the world today through those massive events being in the field of sport or music or art, people are altogether in a stadium, or in an amphitheatre sharing the same pleasure or the same interest for an expression of art or culture way beyond their cultural divide or their specific belief or their specific identity. So it is obviously becoming a major engine for bringing people together beyond their divide.”

Just as culture can be a uniting force among people, Bas is reservedly considerate of the fact that it is a dividing force in equal measure. In attempting to mitigate risks associated with dividing factors, Bas has to search for the most common and most fundamental of goals he believes would be shared by all people. When it comes to culture and society, there is a need to engage with what he terms the “real people”, those most affected by changes to social and cultural structures.

“There is a need to bridge the gap between change makers, innovators and policy makers. I think there is a tendency for them to live in two different worlds and there is one group who is absent in most of those discussions and that is the corporate world. I have the absolute conviction that the corporate world can play a positive role in the field of conflict prevention, post-conflict for a very basic reason. The way business is expanding requires peace and stability and a country that is divided or in conflict is a country where business cannot develop. It is a mutual interest of company and society.

“Beyond this, there is the need to build a constituency or give voice to the silent majority because I believe human nature is willing to live in peace, in respect and actually if you take most people around the world, regardless of religious belief, cultural history or whatever, their aspirations are more or less the same. You want to live in peace; you want the capacity to accomplish your dreams with your friends and family and breathe fresh air. I don’t think there are many people around the world who would oppose to those fundamentals.”

Yet in spite of commonalities, Bas is aware of the inability for people to comprehend multiple identities and multiple associations, even in large global events.

“During the Olympics in London, there was really an amazing story: an American athlete won the silver medal for his discipline, so he did what all the athletes are doing after a victory, and he ran

around the stadium with the US flag on his back and having people cheering and applauding him. After a few seconds, he also took the Mexican flag because he was born and raised there, but later became an American citizen. So he was going around the stadium with the two flags to express his double identity and double culture. Many of us would say there is nothing wrong with that, identity is a multi-layered notion.

“But I was fascinated to see that there have been hundreds of comments from people in the US, saying 'This is unacceptable. If he doesn't like our support, he should go back to Mexico. America has trained him and supported him to become an athlete.' But other people say there is nothing wrong because he obviously has a double identity and you cannot just dismiss your culture, but you can eventually have multiple cultures.”

Bas believes that there is a growing gap in the world today between those who are most agile with their belief that identity and culture can be multifaceted and those who are most radically rooted in their belief of the single identity, who fear the dilution of culture through mixing of different traditions. In order to overcome this stagnation in views, there has to be a re-education of the difficulties that have been on public agenda for millennia. Victimization and scape-goating of groups to prove a better culture has been a recurring theme, and in writing his book, *L'Europe à la carte*, Bas poses reflections on the new direction of Europe in the final half of the 20th Century, and what other conflicts in the world might gleam from the current success.

“I published a book in 2009 at the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The intention of the book was to dedicate it to the ERASMUS generation. Those who were born after the fall of the Wall so that they would go back and understand how much has been achieved in basically one generation in terms of peace and reconciliation and I think this really has to be to the credit of Europe and the EU.

“When you live in peace or democracy, you don't realise how much it represents a tremendous change in privilege. I think it's important and history teaching would really give a sense of the change it represents and eventually how fragile it can be and I think this would be part of my work with the council of Europe is indeed to see how to expand, widen, strengthen the rule of law, human rights, democracy, which are fundamental elements, in terms of personal accomplishments and achievements. It is important at all levels to realize that the old fashioned, but still very valid equation to say 'election means democracy' is something that needs to be revisited. I don't say that democracy doesn't mean democracy and election doesn't mean democracy, but it is not the absolute condition for a good democracy.”

Advocating a new approach to cultural interaction, Bas' sentiments resonate with schools of globalisation. In this increasingly interlinked world, we need to be more considerate, more wary of global mind shapers, more pressing of those in power to realize change, and more open to challenging discussions.

“The most important question of all, perhaps, is to whom am I accountable?” says Bas.

We need consider our accountability for our actions, before causing conflict out of ignorance.

Jean Christophe Bas was a session speaker at the Salzburg Global Seminar session "[Conflict Transformation Through Culture: Peace Building and the Arts](#)", which was sponsored by the Edward T Cone Foundation and Robert Bosch Stiftung. You can read interviews with a number of the other speakers and participants of the session on the webpage: www.salzburgglobal.org/go/532

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