

## THE WORLD PHILOSOPHY COMMUNITY TODAY

William McBride\*

*This paper first discusses the meaning of "community" with respect to both the world community as such, with its comparatively brief history, and some positive connotations that the term has had in philosophical thinking. It then reflects on the fact that philosophies from some cultures have been marginalized in recent times, due to the phenomenon of hegemony, and expresses the hope that this situation is changing now, with the globalization of philosophy becoming an increasing reality. Drawing on statements of intention made by candidates for the recent steering committee elections of the International Federation of Philosophical Societies (FISP) at the World Congress of Philosophy in Athens, it contends that at least two, though probably more, themes seem common to most philosophers today: a dissatisfaction with the current global economic system, and a commitment to eliminating the practice of warfare. Finally, it is suggested that one social/political philosopher who has been an important figure in recent hegemonic thinking, John Rawls, evinces a certain lack of complete agreement with this emerging consensus among philosophers in his late work, *The Law of Peoples*.*

This brief and partly personal essay has to do with the world philosophy community as it has changed and developed in recent years. I have often referred, as others increasingly do as well, to the "globalization of philosophy."<sup>1</sup> I mean it as both a fact, a fact or an event in process, and as an aspiration. The present occasion gives me an opportunity to review, within an overall theoretical context, some of my personal experiences of recent years especially with the International Federation of Philosophical Societies, FISP, of which I was President until very recently, and of which I am now Immediate Past President.

Probably the first point to which I should address myself is the question of what I might mean by the word "community." In one sense, of course, all of us together, not just philosophers, constitute a cosmopolis – much more obviously so now, given what we know about the almost unthinkable vastness of the cosmos, than when the term was first employed by Stoic thinkers. Although apparently more numerous than ever before, we living human beings are still a very isolated and short-lived species in cosmic terms, particularly so if we confine ourselves to the period of recorded history. I never cease to marvel at the fact that, if we take a person 100 years of age, of whom I have known a few, and go back to someone of the same age at the time of his or her birth, and so on backward, it would require fewer than twenty such individuals to get us to the lifetime of Epictetus, for example. And despite our occasional bravado we humans are in fact very vulnerable: The dinosaurs which preceded us were, with

---

\*Dr. WILLIAM MCBRIDE, Current President, International Federation of Philosophical Societies (FISP); Arthur G. Hansen Distinguished Professor, Department of Philosophy, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907. Email: [wmcbride@purdue.edu](mailto:wmcbride@purdue.edu).

<sup>1</sup>William McBride, *From Yugoslav Praxis to Global Pathos* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), Ch. 11, pp. 221-36.

small, rare exceptions if we regard birds as their descendants, eliminated by what is thought to have been the impact of a comparatively small asteroid with the earth; is it not time or even past time, some wonder, for another similar object to pay a visit to our tenuous dwelling place? Given these circumstances, the idea that the human race as a whole may, and perhaps even should, be considered a community makes a great deal of sense, since we all have so much in common: vulnerability, mortality above all.

This has certainly not prevented the human community from tearing itself apart time and time again with internecine strife. The annals of history, as we all know, are filled with wars and slaughters. Far from diminishing, they reached a new crescendo in the century that we recently left behind us. To take one of many possible examples, but one that to many observers seems especially pathetic, especially futile in retrospect, the First World War seems to have been virtually an exercise in killing and maiming for the sake of killing and maiming. Today, while of course we all hope for the best and our hopes have in this respect been vindicated during the decades since World War II, we still live in the shadow of the atomic and hydrogen bombs. Although I am not much given to prediction, I happen to believe that there is a high probability that there will be at least one instance of nuclear weapons use during the next two or three decades, and probably more such instances, although I do not foresee nuclear exchanges at a level leading to the annihilation of all human life during that time. In short, the human community, such as it is, is a far from happy one.

But the word “community” also has, as we all know, some very positive connotations. In the canonical works of Western philosophy, Hegel’s complex account of the religious community at the threshold of Absolute Knowledge near the end of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* has been an important inspiration to many later thinkers. The somewhat vague label “communitarianism” has been applied to the thought of a number of recent and contemporary philosophers and political theorists, the single most common, if you will excuse the expression, characteristic of whom is the criticism of extreme individualism. Now, when I speak of the world philosophy community and of the globalization of philosophy, I do not intend to subscribe to any sectarian communitarianism, but I do mean something positive. My meaning can best be developed, as I suggested at the beginning, by way of generalizing some of my own lived experiences of recent years.

It was in reading one of Enrique Dussel’s earlier works that I first became convinced of the reality of the “center-periphery” binary in philosophy. The expression “Eurocentrism” is no doubt of much earlier provenance, but the metaphor of a philosophical periphery is to me more vivid and meaningful. A glance at the list of sites of World Congresses of Philosophy from the first, in 1900 in Paris, to the most recent one, the twenty-third, helps to substantiate this metaphor: the first one to be held outside of Continental Western Europe was the one in Boston, a child of Europe if ever there was one in the United States, in 1926, followed by Oxford in 1930. Then came the fateful 1934 Congress in Prague, to which I have referred in

passing in an article written for a recent special issue of the journal *Hypatia*<sup>2</sup> and to which I shall return briefly later: the air was heavy with the menace of Naziism and fascism. It was only some years after the end of the Second World War, in 1963, that a World Congress was held in what could arguably be regarded as a country of the periphery, Mexico, the country in which, not coincidentally, I later had a first encounter with Professor Dussel that led to my reading his book. And it was only five years ago that the first World Congress outside of Europe and North America – because Mexico is also a part of North America, and the Istanbul World Congress was held on the European side of the Bosphorus – took place, in Seoul. But it is now guaranteed that the next World Congress, five years hence, will also take place beyond the Europe/North America axis.

Over the past five years, as President of FISP, as well as during the previous five years when I served as Secretary General, I have attended philosophy conferences on every inhabited continent except Australia and in different countries on each. At most of them, to some degree at all of them, there was a perceptible cultural input from the locality in which the conference was being held. In China, for instance, which I have visited often in recent years, the significant realities both of that nation's recent history, with its important philosophical influences, and of the revival of older Chinese ways of thinking, particularly Confucianism, always weighed heavily in the background even when the immediate topic of discussion may have been a Western thinker such as Kant or Sartre. (I have attended actual conferences on both of them in China.) That, I think, is as it should be. But in at least one country in which there is a very old and rich native philosophical tradition -- in fact, more than one tradition -- and in which papers from out of those traditions are routinely presented at the larger conferences, India, I heard some lament that much of the best contemporary philosophical scholarship related to that tradition is done elsewhere, outside the country. This brings me to a very important point about the community that I am attempting to describe and, at least in some very small way, to help realize more fully.

For, despite the wealth of available perspectives or approaches or styles – call them what you will – in world philosophy, there remains a hegemon, and to the extent to which this is true the formation of a real community is impeded. The exact nature of this hegemon is somewhat vague and certainly disputed even among those who can most easily be identified with it, but it goes by the name, in parts of Continental Europe, of “Anglo-Saxon,” or alternatively “Anglo-American,” philosophy. I do not intend to try to elaborate in much detail on just what I mean here, especially since most readers will already have a sense of it. In the area of social philosophy, it is fairly easy to situate it more precisely within the broad liberal tradition, and even to focus on the work of one person above all, the late John Rawls, and the sharers of his legacy. Even the other towering figure of recent decades in this field, Jürgen Habermas, felt obliged to engage in an *Auseinandersetzung* with Rawls and to find

---

<sup>2</sup>William McBride, “Borders Crossed, and Some of Those Who Have Crossed Them,” *Hypatia* 28, 2(spring 2013), pp. 404-09.

much in common with him. What I would like to urge, as I have been urging for some time, is that we all seek to liberate ourselves, as far as it is possible, from service to any dominant hegemon; in short, to be more creative in our philosophizing than many of us, myself included, currently are.

Of course there have always been hegemons, often two or three competing hegemons, in the history of philosophy. Just to take two examples from the World Congresses of Philosophy, the 1934 Congress in Prague featured on the one hand, as I have already implied, a number of papers in support of either Nazi or Italian Fascist ideas – as we know, many philosophers, and not only the weakest intellectually speaking, found what they thought were good reasons for identifying themselves with one or the other of these movements – and on the other hand the wave of logical positivism. An account of the meetings was written by a then still young man, in his early thirties, who came to be strongly identified with the latter movement, Ernest Nagel, and was published in the *Journal of Philosophy*.<sup>3</sup> Nagel, who had himself been born in what was then a part of Czechoslovakia but who was already on the Columbia University faculty at the time, remarked in passing that English speakers at this Congress were relatively few in number and linguistically isolated – as odd as that may sound today. At some of the World Congresses of the Cold War period, by contrast, attended as they were by large delegations from what was then called the Eastern Bloc, Marxist philosophy occupied a very large, though not quite dominant, place. (This was certainly true of the only one that was held in the Soviet Bloc – in Varna, in 1973, which unfortunately I was unable to attend because I was just then in the process of moving to my current university, Purdue.) In short, the waxing and waning of different currents of thought at different times has always been a characteristic of philosophy's evolution – and this is not true of Western philosophy only. But while this is no doubt inevitable, it need not result, as it has resulted too often in the past, in attempts to suppress the voices that are not part of the dominant chorus of the time.

In fact, one of my favorite texts in the work of Aristotle, whom I have come to admire increasingly over the years, is the place in his *Politics* in which, in the process of criticizing Plato's *Republic*, he complains that Plato would like to see a high degree of unity in his commonwealth that it would resemble the reduction of a rhythm to a single beat.<sup>4</sup> I find this a very apt analogy in the effort to understand what the ideal of a world philosophy community may consist of. (Incidentally, in saying this I do not mean to endorse the totality of Aristotle's criticisms, some of which seem to me quite strong and others less so.) This ideal community, unlike the ideal of perfect justice, for example, or Plato's own putatively ideal society "laid up in heaven," seems to me to be a realizable one, indeed one that we may be in the process of realizing asymptotically. It entails the preservation of a very large degree of diversity.

Well and good, it may be said; but then what is there to give it unity, to make it a community, at all? An initial answer to this question will undoubtedly refer to the

---

<sup>3</sup>Ernest Nagel, "The Eighth International Congress of Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophy* 31 (22), 1934, pp. 589-601.

<sup>4</sup>Aristotle, *Politics* 1263b.

love of wisdom, which of course is the original meaning of the word “philosophy,” but this answer taken by itself, without further elaboration, is fairly abstract and runs the risk of reducing the ideal to a mere slogan. So we probably need a little more specificity than this initial answer gives us. On the other hand, however, to seek to identify a theme or a thread that would be common to all members of the community, to all genuine philosophers, is to be at least on the verge of mandating conformity of thought with respect to what “genuine” philosophy is supposed to be – in other words, to create a new hegemon, or at any rate to try to do so. This seems to be a serious dilemma. Let us see whether it is possible to go beyond it.

Perhaps some clue as to what may be common to all philosophers in this contemporary philosophical community under construction may be found in the current FISP Newsletter, itself “under construction” until very recently, in which the statements of the two candidates for the Presidency and the 56 candidates for the Steering Committee concerning what they hoped to contribute to the mission of FISP as they understand it are to be found. Quite a number of them expressed a commitment to making FISP as inclusive as possible, and more inclusive than it is now. But in addition, one detects in many of these statements a feeling of concern about a world in which the consumption of material goods is accorded pride of place – or, more accurately, is treated as being the sole worthwhile human activity. The fact that the word “globalization” has acquired such negative connotations for many people these days is closely connected with this concern. In short, one senses among those candidates who spoke to the issue a strong, virtually across-the-board undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the world’s currently dominant economic system.

Our world is very rich in resources, enough to afford a certain level of comfortable living for all of its inhabitants, and yet as we all know there is a tremendous gap between the richest and the poorest individuals the world over. We have witnessed, over the past several years, the onset of severe economic hardships even in some countries where they had not existed in the previous era, hardships that were due in some measure to straightforward corruption, but that in a much larger measure stemmed from what a colorful American expression calls “gaming the system,” that is, finding ethically very dubious but not necessarily illegal devices whereby a few individuals especially in the financial industry could engage in speculation for enormous profit, and then allow the citizens of the most disfavored countries to bear a very heavy burden of economic sacrifice in order to avoid a total collapse of banking institutions and the chaos that would ensue from that. Among the sufferers have been professional philosophers, some of whom have seen their salaries reduced or have simply lost their positions as a result of funding cutbacks by governments and other agencies. If this had not occurred in a number of countries in recent times, we would have had many more colleagues at the recent World Congress in Athens than we actually had, even though the attendance was nevertheless quite good. It could not be more clear, at least as it seems to me, that deep systematic flaws are to blame at least in part for what has happened and is happening, and I detect a virtual consensus among my fellow philosophers about this. I say “virtual,” not “total,” and I shall return to this in a moment at the end of my paper.

Yet another matter about which I find a virtual consensus, among those who speak to the issue at all, has to do with the phenomenon to which I referred near the outset today, namely, war. In a book chapter entitled “Philosophy as Global Dialogue and the Rejection of Gratuitous Military Violence,” I made the case that even those relatively few figures in the history of philosophy who appeared to endorse warfare in some way or other had to be understood in context and could for the most part be seen as at offering very qualified endorsements at most. But in any case we now live in the era of, as the title of the book in which this chapter appears would have it, *Philosophy after Hiroshima*.<sup>5</sup> I suggest, then, that our world philosophy community under construction, as I have put it, shares a common dedication to the goal of global peace. While the basis of this common concern is in part connected with the previously-mentioned concern about the economic system, I think that it is not entirely reducible to problems with the latter. An analysis of many of the numerous examples of military violence that can be found in recent history will reveal, it seems to me, that, while failures in the economic system often were their “tipping points,” other factors such as plain racism and/or dogmatic religious convictions entailing the requirement that others either convert or submit played important roles as well. Few if any contemporary citizens of the global philosophy community harbor such sentiments.

So if I am right – and I can only be tentative here – there are some points on which philosophers of today can agree, thus getting beyond my original dilemma of supporting openness and plurality of approaches and yet at the same time finding some common ground on which to build community. I have mentioned two such points, and there are no doubt more. But I am forced to admit, particularly since social and political philosophy is one of my principal areas of specialization, that the example offered by the very prominent figure in the recent history of social philosophy in the United States to whom I have already alluded, John Rawls, is a cause for concern. As I have made clear in a chapter that I published on this topic,<sup>6</sup> I find difficulty with Rawls’s late work, *The Law of Peoples*, on a number of grounds, among the most prominent of which are his refusal there fully to apply his theory of justice to the global scene, in part because he believes that some nations are largely themselves to blame, rather than defects in the global economic system, for their own poverty; and his acceptance of the retention of nuclear weapons as a deterrent by some of those nations or peoples which he labels “decent.” While some of his followers have attempted to extract him, using his own theoretical tools, from the negative consequences especially of the first of these two positions that I have mentioned, it would seem that by the criteria that I have offered Rawls, were he still alive, might not be considered a full-standing member of the world philosophy community. This would be paradoxical, to say the least. But in any case these final

---

<sup>5</sup>William McBride, “Philosophy as Global Dialogue and the Rejection of Gratuitous Military Violence,” in *Philosophy after Hiroshima*, ed. E. Demenchonok. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009, pp. 419-430.

<sup>6</sup>William McBride, “Rawls’s *Law of Peoples* and the New World Order,” in *Democracy in a Global World: Human Rights and Political Participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. D. Chatterjee. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, pp. 187-199.

reflections of mine may be seen as reinforcing my earlier counsel in favor of creative dissociation from hegemonic thinking in the interest of building the community of my dreams.

I am somehow reminded, in conclusion, of the words of the fourth paragraph from the end of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, where, having summarized the few, simple dogmas of the civic religion that he is advocating, he says: "These are the positive dogmas. As for the negative ones, I limit them to a single one: intolerance. It belongs with the cults we have excluded."<sup>7</sup> The fundamental problem of constructively establishing the broadest possible common ground while yet maintaining some boundaries could not be better expressed.

#### References

- Aristotle, *Politics*. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.
- Rawls, John. 2001. *The Law of Peoples: with "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,"* Harvard University Press.
- Rousseau, J.-J. 1978. *On the Social Contract*, tr. J. R. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Nagel, Ernest. 1934. "The Eighth International Congress of Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophy* 31 (22), 1934, pp. 589-601.
- McBride, William. 2001. *From Yugoslav Praxis to Global Pathos* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), Ch. 11, pp. 221-36.
- . 2008. "Rawls's *Law of Peoples* and the New World Order," in *Democracy in a Global World: Human Rights and Political Participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. D. Chatterjee. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, pp. 187-199.
- . 2009. "Philosophy as Global Dialogue and the Rejection of Gratuitous Military Violence," in *Philosophy after Hiroshima*, ed. E. Demenchonok. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009, pp. 419-430.
- . 2013. "Borders Crossed, and Some of Those Who Have Crossed Them," *Hypatia* 28, 2(Spring 2013), pp. 404-09.

---

<sup>7</sup>J.-J. Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, tr. J. R. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978, p. 131.