

Editorial: The Philosophy of Davos

Though written several years earlier, Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* has had quite a vogue since September 11th. Philosophers of history, however, will recognize its themes as a re-hash, albeit a timely re-hash, of the eighteenth century dispute between the universalism and optimism of the enlightenment and the cultural relativism and pessimism of Herder.

Instead of Voltaire and Diderot in the eighteenth century, in 2002 we have what Huntington calls Davos people, after the annual World Economic Forum meeting in that place. Those who go to Davos include many of the top businessmen, bankers, government officials and opinion formers in the world. They and their kind control most international institutions, most of the world's finances and many governments. They believe in individualism, market economies and political democracy.

There is nothing wrong with these beliefs or with holding them. Problems arise when, in enlightenment fashion, Davos people think of these beliefs not just as universal in content but as universally believed in. For though Davos people control much of the world and form political elites in many countries inside and outside the West, outside the West they and their ideas find favour with probably less than one per cent of the world's population. As Huntington puts it this provokes a typically Herderian reaction: 'The non-Westerns see as Western what the West sees as universal. What Westerners herald as benign global integration, such as the proliferation of worldwide media, non-Westerners denounce as nefarious Western imperialism. To the extent that non-Westerners see the world as one, they see it as a threat.'

And not only non-Westerners. Much of the success of so-called far right and nationalist movements in Western Europe is undoubtedly due to a Herderian reaction within the West to globalization and federalism, and much of the anger implicit in that reaction is stoked by the complacency of the Davos people.

There is indeed nothing wrong with Davos beliefs in themselves, at least nothing that would convict those who hold them of any nefarious or sinister motives. Nor is there anything wrong with the more general enlightenment belief in a universal human nature and

Editorial

a universal standard of morality. The difficulty is to hold this and cognate beliefs, while recognizing that they may not be universally shared, and understanding and even respecting the sensibilities of those who might not share them. In the minds of those who disagree, failure on this point will transform what is supposed to be a liberating faith in universal human rights into an instrument of oppression. But how can one respect what one believes is wrong and even harmful, while not acceding to the very relativism one's commitment to universal truth would strenuously contest—and for the best of philosophical reasons?

We are no nearer to solving this problem on a philosophical level than were our predecessors two hundred years ago. But if Huntington and other observers of the world scene are right, its solution is more urgent now than it has ever been.