



Deutschland 2016

OSCE Conference on Tolerance and Diversity

Speech by Maestro Daniel Barenboim

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Foreign Minister Steinmeier,
dignitaries,
ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great privilege to address you today on the occasion of your conference on “tolerance” and “diversity”. Both concepts are widely used but I have personally always had very different notions of them than the prevalent ones. Yet, the ideas associated with the larger discourse on “tolerance” and “diversity” have greatly informed my thinking as a human being and my activities as a musician throughout my life.

I have always considered „tolerance“ a highly problematic concept: it is today considered to describe a positive attribute when in fact it refers to a rather negative one. This ambivalence has been succinctly put by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who, in one of his “Maxims and Reflections”, stated: „Toleranz sollte eigentlich nur eine vorübergehende Gesinnung sein: Sie muß zur Anerkennung führen. Dulden heißt beleidigen.“ - “Tolerance should really only be a passing attitude: it should lead to appreciation. To tolerate is to offend.” This differentiation is spot on: merely tolerating someone is ultimately an act of condescension, whereas actual appreciation results in seeing the other as one’s equal. “Diversity”, in turn, is an extension of the principle of appreciation in that it signifies the achievement of equality of opportunity for social, cultural, ethnic religious or other groups that would otherwise be subject to discrimination.

Both concepts could not be more topical in our globalized world in which states and societies are faced with increasing permeability and fluidity and the resulting challenges lead to a host of debates and conflicts. Since the end of WWII, the world and its inhabitants have changed to an almost unimaginable degree. While the Cold War that followed had “guaranteed” a certain cohesion at least within the two blocs it also brought the world to the brink of catastrophe more than once, for example during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. It is therefore more than understandable that the initial general joy that greeted the fall of Berlin Wall and thus the end of the Cold War did not let us imagine all the possible consequences this seismic shift would entail. At first, there seemed to exist only opportunity – German

reunification, new-found freedom in the former Soviet states, economic development. However, as the 90s progressed it became quickly evident that the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the new world order resulted in a new, unprecedented series of wars and conflicts. That joy which was felt in 1989 quickly led to unnecessary triumphalism of the West vis-à-vis the former Soviet Union and its ideology, and in the almost drunken spirit of that triumphalism we failed to see that the Wall – a symbol of a bi-polar world order – had also been a balancing mechanism that was now sorely missing. Wars, economic conflicts and terrorism now tearing apart states, regions and entire continents have created a new world order characterized by, if anything, insecurity – a state that is exemplified by the situation in the Middle East and especially Syria and Iraq. I find it almost ironic that 26 years after the momentous event that was the Fall of the Wall, the US and Russia are fighting again, if not directly than via proxy – over Syria, a conflict that is obviously very dangerous for the entire world.

It is in this constantly shifting climate of insecurity that states and societies have to deal with the enormous challenge of unprecedented levels of global migration – taken here to mean the emigration of people from their country of birth because they cannot stay there anymore for political, religious or economic reasons, and their immigration into a country from which they do not originate, but in which they seek to establish a permanent residence. It is extremely important to insist on precise terminology here, as accepting interpretations of certain concepts based purely on the reigning zeitgeist often leads to oversimplification and dangerous misunderstandings. Take the usage of the terms “global” and “universal” for instance: whilst the two terms can often have the same meaning, namely referring to something that applies to the entirety of our Planet Earth, “universal” has a distinctive additional meaning that is time- and place-independent and categorical: there is a reason why we call it the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and not the “Global Declaration of Human Rights”, or, in other words, “The Declaration of Human Rights for Planet Earth”.

It is specifically in the context of immigration that we are faced with the necessity of reassessing and reaffirming our notions of “tolerance” and “diversity”. I would like to propose to begin this process with an exploration of the writings of the great philosopher Martin Buber who explored the principle of dialogue as a basis of human relations in his seminal work “Ich und Du”. According to Buber, human beings form their identities chiefly in relation to what surrounds them – other humans and the physical world. As Buber says, “there is no I per se, there is merely the “I” of the primary concept “I-You” and the I of the primary concept “I-It”.” Thus, any social construct – be it between human beings in a society or between nation-states – necessitates dialogue and exchange between those who inhabit it. Understanding the other, or in Buber’s words, for every “I” to seek reciprocal understanding of the “You” is therefore the very foundation of humanity itself. It is on this principle that we must base our renewed understanding of “tolerance” and “diversity”. We need to really see the other as our equal and fully accept him in spite of his perceived weaknesses or differences. This is the real intellectual basis of improving relationships between human beings, and by extension between states.

What Buber calls “encounter” or “real dialogue” cannot be forced. The peaceful and equal coexistence of different religious, ethnic or social groups within a society, however, can be

encouraged and enforced by the state. The new order I described calls for – our improved notion of – “tolerance” and “diversity”. Societies are no longer homogeneous, they are multi-faceted and diverse. But only if diversity is applied through a deep understanding of the other, characterized by mutual respect and equality, will it really prosper. It is the responsibility of our leaders to clearly formulate and enforce these basic principles. We are enjoying a vast amount of privileges and rights in our liberal societies, rights that we have long fought to obtain. With every right we enjoy, there is, however, a set of responsibilities linked to it. This applies to each individual as well as the free and wealthy states of the West.

The German government has taken on a leadership role in dealing with what has widely been called the “refugee crisis”. In my view, the position adopted by Chancellor Merkel and her government was the expression of a humanitarian necessity and is a highly admirable example of lived responsibility. In the 14 months since Merkel’s now famous phrase “Wir schaffen das!” – “We can do it!”, it has, however, become evident that this is not a German issue. It is not even a European one, it is a universal one. As an Argentinian by birth, I have repeatedly called for stronger involvement of Argentina and the rest of Latin America in resolving the question of Syrian refugees in particular. Large Syrian communities already exist in Chile, Brazil and Argentina. In fact, there are three Syrian communities in Argentina, a Muslim, a Jewish and a Christian one and the Argentinian society in particular is characterized by the peaceful coexistence of these communities, and by diversity. Argentina is home to more than 3 million Argentinian Muslims, what better place for Syrian refugees to immigrate to? It would only be sensible and economical for Europe to call upon Argentina to intensify its efforts and to financially support Argentina in fulfilling its role.

It is also high time that responsibility is taken on by the Arab world which remains so tragically divided. Not only do they need to address the question of Syria as one and in the interest of the Syrian civil society, together with the rest of the world, they also urgently need to find a common denominator to support the Palestinian narration and work towards intelligently resolving the seemingly unsolvable Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

You all know that this issue is extremely close to me. Without ever claiming that we can bring about real peace or equality in the world and the Middle East in particular, the West-Eastern-Divan Orchestra and I have nonetheless striven tirelessly to lead by example. In our orchestra, diversity is lived on a daily basis and no single musician can exist without a fundamental understanding and appreciation of the other, however different he or she may be. Music, of course, makes this possible because it allows us to think, feel and express different thoughts and emotions simultaneously. Music never only cries or smiles but makes both possible at once. It is a constant, simultaneous conversation between apparent opposites who can peacefully exist side-by-side, in constant dialogue. It is with this experience and in this spirit that I wish you a successful, enlightening and productive time of exchange with one another.