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The Other Davos: A Sociologist Goes to the World Economic Forum

Image: Evelyn Ruppert

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We are so proud and inspired. In the current political context President Xi is the one promoting openness, not building walls, swimming with others in the ocean and not assuming you can swim the other way. All of this she said to me in relation to Trump, the isolationist, nationalist, self-interested and inward-looking leader. — Notes from a conversation with a Chinese delegate at WEF 2017

It will come as no surprise that the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) is not only socially but geographically divided into zones of wealth and power. Socially, it is divided into [seven categories](#) of industry and business members and partners and [eleven communities](#) such as academic, government, civil society and so on. These divisions not only partition roles and influence but also access to certain venues and meetings. Presidents, Ministers, CEOs, and the like arrive in private jets and are sequestered at the highly securitized centre. Delegates such as myself and other academics, journalists, artists, and WEF workers are allocated to surrounding villages and shuttled in daily through securitized road blocks that cordon off and control the one and only entry and exit to Davos. I am told that this capacity to control entry and exit into this village in the mountains of Switzerland is one of the reasons it was chosen as the location of this annual gathering of ‘the world’s 1,000 leading companies’ who seek ‘to shape a better future.’

It is such descriptions and knowledge of the WEF that resulted in my initial negative reaction when the European Research Council (ERC) invited me to be part of its [delegation](#) to promote fundamental and frontier scientific research. However, as an ERC grantee, a privilege and responsibility I do not treat lightly, I felt obliged to contribute at a time of declining funding for especially the social sciences and humanities. My formal participation involved speaking at a session of the ERC IdeasLab on ‘enabling digitally inclusive societies.’ I also participated on a panel organised by the WEF with TIME magazine that responded to the question, ‘What if: Privacy Becomes a Luxury Good?’ But, in addition to these contributions, I approached the WEF as an ethnographic opportunity to inquire into the workings of this forum, which I have only viewed from the mainstream media. I had also just completed some two years doing an ethnography of international and national meetings of statisticians and so felt well positioned to sharpen my skills in a different context.

Much of what I watched on the main stages of the WEF was broadcast, videoed and written about in the mainstream media, blogs, microblogs or staged in press conferences and interviews. The BBC called this year’s gathering the ‘[global elite in retreat](#)’ in the wake of the (still then) president-elect Trump and Brexit. Listen to [Klaus Schwab](#) (Founder and Executive Chairman) – and any other business or leader – and you will hear a refrain that globalisation has created growing inequality (the richest 1% of the world earning more than the 99% was cited many times), contradictions, instability and uncertainty. I did not hear any one accept responsibility for having a role in the making of a ‘broken’ globalisation but instead they invited us to trust them as its saviour.

And that brings me back to President Xi and the quote above. As noted by many commentators, he is now the ‘new champion for the liberal international order’, a paradox that perhaps can only make sense in our age of alternative facts. As I listened to him via simultaneous translation on my headset, he tells us that globalisation has pitfalls but that ‘honey melons hang from bitter vines’ and nothing is perfect in the world. Globalisation’s defects should not lead to writing it off but to the cushioning of its negative impacts so that it can deliver to all. He tells us that China had doubts in the past about the World Trade Organisation (WTO) but now seeks integration in the global economy and that we need to have courage to swim in its vast ocean. What, for Xi, China did is to embrace the global market and along the way choked on water, faced waves but learned how to swim and this has proved to be the right choice. For Xi, whether you like it or not you cannot stop the global economy and become isolated; that will be like locking yourself in a dark room that keeps the light and air out. Xi emphatically says that nobody will emerge as a winner in a trade war that is received by an equally emphatic clapping. He then cites another Chinese saying that I look up later: ‘People with petty shrewdness attend to trivial matters while people with great vision attend to governance of institutions.’ He tells us that our enemies are hunger, poverty, superstition and prejudice.

I can write much more about his speech, which was laced with many Chinese sayings, proverbs and metaphors – and you can listen to it or read [here](#) – and there are numerous commentaries, summaries and evaluations. But it is not the speech but its charismatic affects that I found fascinating in the conversations and serendipitous meetings with artists, activists, humanitarian workers, bar staff, shuttle drivers, researchers, coat-check staff, journalists, WEF workers, and minor delegates of high profile entourages. Clearly, Xi Jinping found another Davos with whom he created affects and perhaps affections. The other Davos was energized and mobilized by Xi Jinping with uncanny reflexivity that requires explanation. The following diary comes from a small selection of conversations and encounters in shuttle buses, coffee bars, hotel lounges, social events, lunches, receptions and venues not usually covered in the world reportage on the WEF.

Xi

I meet several young Chinese women who are at Davos in different capacities (workers, part of delegations, journalists) and the conversation always comes to the question of Xi’s speech. Without exception, they express pride for China on the international stage. While carefully noting that there are big problems in China from poverty to air pollution – and some question whether Xi’s words will translate

into deeds – I can't deny them the moment of pride when it seems many Americans and Brits just want to hide. One Chinese woman (and they are usually women) tells me the speech was philosophical and provided the Chinese people with a needed direction. This is what they seek because the Chinese economy has been built on an agricultural mind-set that the 'West' might call sustainability: you plant crops this year to take of your needs and those of your village but not only for today but for the long term. This may mean that year-to-year you may need to change the crop you are planting if that is beneficial to the harvest and the ground. You must take care of the ground. To adjust to a new world economy a new philosophy that builds on this is needed. This is, I am told, what President Xi offered in his speech especially from his references to Chinese proverbs. She tells me that this is not a philosophy that is imported from the West like microeconomics and macroeconomics she once studied and which affected her own way of thinking. Our conversation then turns to Adam Smith's lesser referenced text *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and how all economic philosophies are morally oriented, as also argued by E.P. Thompson when he coined 'moral economy' or Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Like every person I meet from China she invites me to visit her, and genuinely so.

May

Against the positive affects Xi mobilized comes the unenthusiastic reception of Prime Minister Theresa May. I am unable to attend her plenary speech because it overlaps with one of my speaking engagements and instead perch at a coffee counter in front of the entrance to the venue. There is growing anticipation and people are queued up to go through the security check. As with all plenary moments there is a flurry of energy and activity and hovering media hordes and so I move to a lounge where I can watch at a distance and hear at least part of her speech on a large screen with my headphones. She talks about still being friends with and part of Europe but that Britain will engage in a form of globalisation and internationalisation that presumably it has not already been a part. This sounds rather hollow and unavailing. She says Brexit will enable Britain to be in control of its own destiny and be a 'Global Britain.' I stop there, not having heard anything new, and already tired of the repetitions.

I am told that May is the least cited at most events and discussions. When I mention this in another conversation, it elicits an opposite reaction by someone who says she has heard a lot of good responses. A British citizen living in the Middle East – who overhears this conversation – says that he passed her and her entourage and says no one seemed to notice and that she was like a non-event. Another person suggests that gender is perhaps a reason. I agree in part – the WEF is 80% men and we know too well how women politicians face inordinate challenges to be heard and taken seriously. Yet I can't help but feel that her unavailing message elicited an appropriately blasé response. Another person says that there is no doubt that Xi has outperformed any leader of the EU and that, again somewhat befitting our age, Xi is doing better than anyone from the EU at advancing EU values. At the closing session of the WEF, Schwab mentions Xi, the EU, and indirectly Trump but not May or Britain. I then wonder how much of Xi's charisma owed to its lack in the current crop of Euro-American leaders.

Sanctuary

Davos is a space full of energy, interaction, conversation and involves a lot of racing between distant venues. Coming and going is wrought with airport like security checks, demands to show your badge and scanning of your badge at readers at every entrance that track you and your authorisation to enter, coat and boot checks, and so on. That those of us who must shuttle in from the outskirts means leaving our hotels at 7 am and returning after 10 pm. Days are long. Therein lies the search for the occasional quiet corner. Along the promenade of Davos, a long street of hotels and storefronts that lead to the main Congress Centre, we scuttle across snow covered pavements and are enticed to enter corporate sponsored venues (Facebook, Tata, Wipro) that are also spaces for rest, coffee, meetings and talks. The street is a throng of moving bodies, limousines, taxis and shuttle buses and not much relief from the indoors. I spot one space called the Sanctuary located appropriately in a church and go there in hopes of exactly that.

Just after I sit down on a warm and comfortable couch (and come to realise the space is sponsored by

CNBC) I observe young Afghani women starting to assemble on the stage. I have serendipitously arrived in time for a short performance of seven women who are part of [Zohra](#), the Afghan Women's Orchestra that will perform the closing concert of the forum. Their story is inspirational and one of hope, courage and passion. From first having to stand against their families and then society to then facing regular security threats one of the women conductors tells us that it is love and peace and hope for her country that made her come here today. Her biggest moment of pride is being part of this orchestra and showing how the way can be opened. She wants us to know that Afghanistan has beautiful things and not only 'bad news' and this is what she wants to say to the world in words and music.



Photo: Evelyn Ruppert

The music is wonderful, the faces of these young women entrancing and I have indeed found a sanctuary. I feel humbled to have witnessed the moment, the story and music and that they have performed in a church is not lost on me. I record the song on my phone so that I can listen again. The audience is small but the event is broadcast by CNBC as is the performance of the full orchestra, accompanied by members of the Swiss youth ensemble, the Orchestre du Collège de Genève, the following night. The night performance takes place during the inauguration of Trump but it is Afghanistan through its women that triumph and prevail on a global stage after years of occupation by Russia, the Taliban, America, Britain and their allies. One of

the young Chinese women that I have chatted with comes and sits near me. She cries during the performance and we reach across and squeeze each other's hand. I am absolutely unsure as to what inspires this elegiac moment: that these women defy all odds to make music or what neo-colonialism has done to their country.

Art

A barista serves me numerous cups of coffee during my long days and is always a delight – a comedian really. I frequently return to his counter both for his coffee and entertainment and it is there that I sometimes find an opportunity to write. On one such occasion – a quiet and boring moment – he cuts two holes out of the front page of a newspaper and holds it up to his face as if reading but to peer out at me.

I look up and burst into laughter and take a photo with my smartphone. A photographer catches the moment from above on a staircase and takes photo of me taking a photo of the barista. He joins us and asks the barista if he could hold onto his laptop for a while adding not to worry because it doesn't contain any data. He says data is going to be the biggest thing in the future and we then have quite a talk about that.

Through many visits to his counter I learn that the barista is a busker who travels around Europe for a living and works at the WEF to make some extra money. His music, travels, humour are a strong antidote to what is staged and on the stages of Davos. He tells me his band is on YouTube and I watch their hilarious romps and shenanigans as they maraud across Europe. I run into the photographer at another space and he tells me his philosophy of life, which is to find what you love to do and to do it. He manages to transform what could be a kind of pop psychology into a spirit and ethos of fulfilment as his main pursuit.

The Loft is a venue I visit often as it is made up of installations designed by scientists and artists that

explore the possibilities and challenges of especially digital technologies. I take a virtual walk through Thoreau's Walden forest, engage with an interactive robot, enter a moral machine where algorithms cannot answer ethical dilemmas, and observe three robotic arms attempt to sketch the human face.



Photo: Evelyn Ruppert

actors with evocations of humanness. His installation includes one of his 'Robots Named Paul' (RNP), which he developed to overcome a creative block and explore artistic prosthetics. His studio is in Lewisham but I had to go to Davos to find him.

Science

I attend the [Britain and the EU: The Way Forward](#) with Philip Hammond, Chancellor of the Exchequer, UK and Ngaire Woods, Dean, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, Jes Staley, CEO, Barclays and Mario Monti, President, Bocconi University (Italian economist who served as the Prime Minister of Italy from 2011 to 2013). I can write so much about this session but Ngaire Wood's case for higher education stands out. The impact of Brexit on the academy finally makes it to a Davos stage and Britain looks anything but global. She says that immigration constraints stand in the way of the knowledge economy and for Britain to be truly on the global stage. She argues that Britain already has difficulty attracting students and the best talent. Immigration is key and she makes the case that has been made by many others that including students in the immigration numbers is 'smashing our own knee caps before starting the race.' If we are going to be of the world, let us thrive via open immigration, she says.

Hammond replies that he agrees and that no immigration system that he can conceive of will cut off highly skilled academics or qualified students from coming to the UK. For Hammond, the political debate on immigration is about the other end of the spectrum of large-scale unskilled migration holding down the wages of low skilled 'indigenous' populations. He is against the principle of free movement and for controlling our own borders, not shutting them, and attracting the brightest and best. I am despondent. Wood does not have an opportunity to respond. The cream of the crop is spared and the rest its fodder.

While Woods did not have the chance for a rejoinder she strikes back during another exchange with Hammond about immigration. He says that the first duty of government is to protect its own people's living standards. To that Woods says that it is cuts that have caused suffering and that many people voted for Brexit because they have been told that the cause is immigration. Hammond does not respond.

And more

There is more still to write about from my notes such as the legion of workers who make the WEF work and always with a smile and hospitality to the shuttle-driving medic who, after suffering the takeover of



Photo: Evelyn Ruppert

Regarding the latter, I meet the artist, [Patrick Tresset](#), who studied computing at Goldsmiths and is now a London-based artist exploring robotic agents as

Davos every year, decided that ‘if you can’t beat them, join them’. So, he takes a week off and instead gets to meet people from all over the world. I met some of the WEF’s 800 ‘[Young Global Leaders](#),’ a community made up of appointees who go through a nomination process and then participate in and interact with others at the Forum’s meetings. I meet [Diego](#) from El Salvador who leads a non-profit social venture that promotes volunteerism in education, health and social integration. He tells me about his work to build community schools in remote parts of Latin America as his contribution to meet the UN sustainable development target of universal quality education by 2030. I talk to [Olivier](#) from the ‘[Global Shapers Community](#)’ of the WEF, who describes himself as a ‘Global Citizen, Social Entrepreneur, Humanitarian, Human Rights and Peace Activist.’ He works with underprivileged children, youth, and poor families and is Co-Founder and Programme Officer of In-for Refugee, a voluntary refugee-driven initiative that helps young refugees in Rwanda. We talk about how to link refugees to higher education in Europe and how mobile phones are currently a key resource.

Already I have written more about Davos than I had originally intended. I haven’t said a word about my four ‘performances’ and will save that for other writings. By paying attention to the others of Davos my intent is not to argue that this makes up for the wrongs and harms of the global elite that gather here. Nor is it to wax sentimental about its others. But like other ethnographers note, the field is an encounter with complexities, contradictions and differences that get lost in generalized accounts. There are many cracks to be found and it is there that I found energy, vitality and edge. As every first-timer that I met agreed, it turned out not to be what I expected. But finding the unexpected calls for an openness and inquisitiveness – sociological and ethnographic skills that I have sharpened a bit in Davos.

The WEF operates under Chatham House rules. I have only identified and quoted speakers from broadcast sessions; I have anonymized locations and any identifying characteristics of others unless the information about them that I cite can be found on the internet. I took notes in quiet corners when they could be found (but always interrupted by another conversation) and mostly at night after returning to my hotel after 15 hour days. I note this because my ethnographic method relied even more than usual on my capacity to recount and conjure up conversations some many hours later.

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