Towards a Generic Global Issue Statement

evoking an instructive pattern of unquestionable responses

Introduction

This is an effort to learn from the dynamics of global issue articulation using as a first example the highly controversial and provocative presentation by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran on the occasion of the UN Durban Review Conference on Racism and Racial Discrimination (Geneva, 21 April 2009). The conference as a whole was characterized by the absence of key parties (notably Israel and the USA) and by the orchestrated walkout of some delegations (notably European, Australian, Canadian), significantly "white", on the occasion of the presentation.

It is questionable whether the 143-point consensual declaration of the conference to combat racism and discrimination against minorities will be of any further significance -- as has been the case with many such events. Of particular interest is the subsequent media coverage of the pronouncements of the Iranian President in the light of comments by many who are unlikely to have heard (or read) what he said, especially since they appear not to have been carried (or reproduced) in any western media. Typically those comments made and reproduced specifically accused the President of himself reflecting the worst forms of racist perspective, readily compared with the genocidal mentality of Adolf Hitler as an embodiment of evil. In the light of such judgement, appropriately severe punishment of him was freely advocated and considered reasonable.

Of particular interest is the degree to which the President's statements were effectively held to be so dangerous and inflammatory as to be usefully compared with semantically radioactive materials requiring special handling. As such they were too dangerous to be carried by the media for wider consideration especially by those liable to be perturbed by the contents. The "knee-jerk" responses, even by the most eminent, are of special interest to the processes of mature debate on intractable issues -- if that were ever to be possible. In this sense the exploration below is a contribution to concerns with both critical thinking and the supporting technology of argument mapping (Web resources: Critical thinking vs. Specious arguments, 2001).

Preoccupation

The concern in what follows is not with the particular issue represented by the Iranian presentation. The focus is on whether it offers a template that can be used to analyze the pattern of statements on any sensitive intractable global issue -- and the unquestionable reactive responses to them. It effectively explores whether articulations of such global statements could be generated or automated to some degree. This would be consistent with the "cut-and-paste" preparation of consultancy reports to new issues in the light of reports prepared for previous issues -- and therefore consistent to some degree with the process of preparing (in advance) the concluding statements of many global gatherings.

The approach is also consistent with the increasing interest in simulating vital processes in international relations. as in "mock parliaments", but most notably the Sentient World Simulation (SWS). This will be a "synthetic mirror of the real world with automated continuous calibration with respect to current real-world information" with a node representing "every man, woman and child" (Mark Baard, Sentient World: war games on the grandest scale -- Sim Strife, The Register, 23 June 2007). The dynamics of events like the Durban Review Conference would therefore also need to be encompassed -- irrespective of their controversial content, if not because of
it. Simulating the emergence and content of consensual declarations would presumably also be a goal.

From an experimental perspective, of interest is the degree of approximation of the content of any such a generated text to one that emerges by conventional processes from a conference -- allowing for differences in editing. Also of potential interest is the possibility of generating a script for those constituencies obliged to defend reactively and defensively issues with which they deem themselves to be inappropriately associated. This would mean configuring a text with the relevant issue keywords but with defensive protest that frames the accusing source pejoratively (unjustified, illegal, shameful, ignorant, mad, perverted, inflammatory, evil, etc.). A variant of such a text could be used to justify abstention, an "empty chair" posture, or an orchestrated "walk out".

A key question is whether terms in any text on an intractable issue ("racism" in this case) can be appropriately tagged or flagged so that terms applicable to other issues could be substituted ("overpopulation", for example). Such "cut-and-paste" substitution would then provide a distinct text potentially meaningful in relation to the second issue. However, by handling the charged ("hot-potato") terms in this way, a reading of the second text might offer a perspective on the dynamics associated with the response to the first -- or vice versa. In effect the process bears some similarity to that of substituting some neutral phrase for particular "expletives" which might otherwise offend the sensitive.

Given the facilities of interactive web technology, the following is also intended as a preliminary exploration of the possibility of enabling web users to select intractable issues, and related semantic content, in order to be able to generate for themselves global issue statements of some probability and credibility -- whether or not any given statement highlights possibilities that evoke extreme condemnation and demonisation. It is this interactive process across a range of issues to which users are variously sensitive which might hopefully offer instructive perspective on those which are most problematic.

**Methodological precedents**

This experimental approach follows from other exercises with varying degrees of similarity to it:

- Universal Declaration of Responsibilities of Human Intercourse: a draft proposal, 2007
- The Charge of the Light Brigade revised in celebration of current global strategic management initiatives, 2008
- Transformation Metaphors derived experimentally from the Chinese Book of Changes (I Ching) -- for sustainable dialogue, vision, conferencing, policy, network, community and lifestyle, 1997

With respect to controversies previously made by the President of Iran, an analysis of his address to the UN General Assembly has also been made (Just Who's Afraid of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad? commentary on speech by the President of Iran to the UN General Assembly, 2007). To the extent that he repeated any of those arguments at the Geneva conference against Racism and Racial Discrimination, some of the comments also apply (although they are not relevant to the current exercise).

With respect to the controversy aroused by the statement of the President of Iran in Geneva regarding criticism of Israel, a previous text has explored the challenge of defining the parameters of critical dialogue between a range of worldviews defensive of the unquestionable validity of their particular perspective (Guidelines for Critical Dialogue between Worldviews -- as exemplified by the need for non-antisemitic dialogue with Israelis? 2006). This deals with dialogue with worldviews such as:

- Religion | Academic disciplines | Political ideology
- Nationalism and ethnic culture | Aesthetics
- Physically characterized social groups
- Social status and behavioural skills | Lifestyle preferences

More generally the process is concerned with the dynamics of dealing collectively with any "inconvenient truth" (An Inconvenient Truth about any inconvenient truth, 2008) and the process by which any such truth is progressively recognized (Considering All the Strategic Options: whilst ignoring alternatives and disclaiming cognitive protectionism, 2009).

**Reservations**

As a tentative, exploratory exercise, the generic value in what follows lies in indicating a possibility for further development. It is notably defective in only being partially worked, especially with respect to:

- further articulation of categories of semantic content that might be appropriately distinguished. To that extent some traces of the particular focus of the President's text have not been transformed into selectable options, thereby failing (as yet) to render the "template" more appropriately generic
- further articulation of selectable texts (in the menu options) which might be associated with other intractable issues
- activation of interactive web facilities; these would have incorporated the menu options (below) into pull-down options embedded within the text, enabling the web page to be (submitted and) refreshed by the user with the selected options incorporated. There are various well-known techniques for doing this.
- a more developed interactive version would ensure:
  - appropriately constraints on selection options, namely having chosen a "racism" cluster, users might not be exposed to options relating to the "climate change" cluster
  - colour coding is especially problematic in order to ensure that contrasts are adequately evident, especially given the
constraints of browser representation of (web-safe) colours, printable colours, political sensitivity of colour choices, and personal colour sensitivity (even colour blindness). Some thought could therefore be given to allowing the user to select a different set of colour codes prior to making any choices on the semantic content.

The text used here was obtained by the Pine River site whose webmaster prefaced it with the following important reservation:

At the time of this post the internet is replete with false, unprofessional and/or misleading versions of President Ahmadinejad's speech delivered at the Durban Review Conference yesterday in Geneva. My appreciation is therefore extended to the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations for furnishing an official copy of the draft text. Whereas it is my understanding that President Ahmadinejad deviated somewhat from the draft version, this is the closest I can get to an official English rendition of the President's comments from the Government of Iran.

The original statement text has been slightly edited for clarity (introduction of bullet points, normalization of "Mr President" and "Mr Chairman", etc). However, with respect to its adaptation into a generic text -- a "template" -- clearly much more thought is required in seeking an integrative balance between the template text and that which could be optionally inserted via pull-down selection (syntactical compatibility, etc). Perhaps the goal should be understood, as with automatic translation, where any generated result is treated as a useful guide for further manual fine tuning.

A case can also be made for refining the structure of any generic template to enhance its poetic and mnemonic qualities as previously argued (Poetry-making and Policy-making, 1993; Strategic Jousting through Poetic Wrestling: aesthetic reframing of the clash of civilizations, 2009; Structure of Declarations: challenging traditional patterns, 1993).

**Method**

Words or phrases in the original statement have been colour coded according to the following schema. The coloured phrases in the schema below have then be substituted for those words in the generic version of the text. The words replaced in this way have been included as indicative selection options for any future interactive facility for refreshing the generic page with a user specified variant.

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**Text variants and commentary**

This web page can currently be refreshed in one of two versions (with the methodological explanation in a separate document):

- **Version 1**: a generic, template version which presents a skeletal framework into which semantic content (from the menu below) might be inserted as a result of user interaction.
- **Version 2**: the original version of the statement made by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran on the occasion of the UN Durban Review Conference on Racism and Racial Discrimination with the terms susceptible to replacement in an automated process suitably colour coded (according to the schema above).
- **Explanatory introduction**, methodology and reservations

To review this page as indicated, select either **Version 1** or **Version 2**. Or check range of **menu options**.

**Commentary**: Of interest in this approach is how the generic text is read when options are selected that are quite distinct from the original text on racism. Arguably, for anyone, a variant could be selected which would constitute an "inflammatory" perspective (such as that of the original) and would arouse a reactive response of parties who would deem themselves to be most existentially offended. Especially instructive is the selection of options in which one is oneself positioned as the existentially offended party in contrast with options in which some other party is framed as blameworthy. Examples, whether or not they are to be considered "trivial" by comparison with "racism", are:

- speedy driving -- which some consider a fundamental right, whilst others consider it a personally dangerous threat
- tropical forest logging -- which some consider essential to their livelihood, whilst others consider it to be endangering species, ecosystems and the planet's ability to absorb carbon dioxide
- whaling -- which some consider a feature of their traditional livelihood and food preferences, whilst others see it as endangering a species
- capital punishment -- which some consider as a necessary and appropriate punitive measure, whilst others see it as completely inhumane and barbaric
• abortion -- which some consider as a fundamental right of choice, whilst others see it as murder
• gun ownership -- which some consider a constitutional right, whilst others consider it a potentially deadly threat

The question is whether the exploration of such options offers new insight into the pattern of upholding rights considered problematic by others whose response evokes offended, defensive reactions. "Smoking" as a behaviour provides the most seemingly innocent example of a "fundamental right" challenged by "non-smokers" as a potentially life-threatening danger.

Arguably most people identify with some pattern of behaviour which they consider their fundamental right, potentially functioning like "Zionists" (in this example) according to others who challenge that right -- given its problematic implications for others who suffer as a consequence. This leads to the question for whom is one a "Zionist" and for whom is one "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad"?

This question is explored further in Generic Reframing of the 12 Tribes of "Israel": "We have met the Zionists and them is us" (2009), which is effectively an Annex of this exercise.

Menu options

It is these options that could be incorporated into pull-down selections embedded at the relevant points in an interactive web version of the template text. It should be stressed that the options given below are merely indicative. It would necessarily have to allow for multiple choices within the same pull-down. The procedure adopted in building up the content of each option has been, initially, to use the marked items from the source text on racism -- incorporating them below, without editing, in italics. Other potentially relevant selectable items have been added without italics. As noted above, it is of course the case that the items included would have to be adapted for syntax in relation to the template context (as is done in automatic translation). Some comments on the nature of the options are added here -- which might in future form the basis for a "help" feature for use with each pull-down.

1. Transcendental appeal framework (and exemplars). Identifying the spectrum of such appeals (or references) made in practice could usefully consider where the terms are generic but the intended reference is distinct. Such references might of course include secular options where these are understood to substitute for those of a spiritual nature.
   1. Allah, the Almighty Who is Just, Kind and Compassionate
   2. May He bestow upon His prophets, His Blessings and His Grace from Adam to Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ and His last Prophet Mohammed
   3. Almighty God
   4. God Almighty
   5. God Bless America
   6. May the Blessings of God be upon us
   7. Spirit of Science
   8. Spirit of Art
   9. Spirit of Knowledge/Philosophy
   10. etc

2. Values and goals justifying any remedial action taken. These options could include the range identified in declarations on values (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, European Convention on Human Rights, American Convention on Human Rights, Arab Charter on Human Rights, "Asian", etc), or those embodied in proposals for a Global Ethic. Another source would be the more extensive set of values identified by the Human Values Project.
   1. monotheism, fraternity, love, human dignity and justice.
   2. holy and humanitarian
   3. humanitarian or spiritual
   4. justice, equality before law, love and human dignity
   5. humanitarian
   6. moral
   7. selected creature of God
   8. consciously worship God
   9. divine and humanitarian
   10. worship God the Almighty
   11. spiritual and moral
   12. human and divine
   13. justice, freedom, love or brotherhood
   14. love, fraternity and blessing
   15. blessings
   16. family (values)
   17. American (values)
   18. traditional (values)
   19. European (values)
   20. Asian (values)
   21. Hindu (values)
   22. Buddhist (values)
   23. Christian (values)
   24. etc

3. Conference reference title of event focusing on the problematic issue. Many conferences are held periodically to consider the
same issue cluster (see International Congress Calendar)

1. 2nd follow-up to the Durban Conference
2. 3rd follow-up to the Durban Conference
3. Rio+20 UN Conference on Environment and Development
4. Rio+30 UN Conference on Environment and Development
5. G20 Group Summit
6. etc

4. Problematic issue it is desirable to eliminate in light of values. Given the focus of this exercise, a more limited list would include only those variously framed as "wicked problems" or "intractable" issues, many of which are included here. Of related interest are those which are the focus of "wars" (Review of the Range of Virtual Wars, 2005). A far more extensive list are the "problems" profiled in the World Problems Project.

1. Racism
   1. Racism and Racial Discrimination
   2. discrimination
   3. racism
   4. racial discrimination
   5. racist perpetrators of genocide

2. Sexual discrimination
3. Sexual abuse
4. Poverty
5. Substance abuse
6. Drugs trade
7. Arms trade
8. Inhumane treatment of animals
9. Environmental degradation
10. Climate change
11. Energy shortage
12. Unemployment
13. Food shortage
14. Overpopulation
15. Exploitation
16. Secrecy
17. Terrorism
18. Disease
19. Genetically modified organisms
20. Invasion of privacy
21. Torture
22. Ignorance
23. Water shortage
24. Immigrants
25. etc

5. Problematic constituency or ideology viewed as primarily sustaining the problematic issue. Typically such constituencies are sincere in their belief that they have a fundamental right, if not a God-given right, to their worldview. They may assimilate this with a sense of exclusivity (whether based on religion, knowledge, ethical purity, or the like) that may be experienced by others as a "holier than thou" attitude that is effectively "anti-social" or "unacceptable" in some way.

1. Zionism (Zionists)
   1. Zionist regime
   2. Zionists
   3. Zionism
   4. Zionist domination
   5. world Zionism
   6. etc

2. Science (Scientists)
3. Creationism (Creationists)
4. Abortionism (Abortionists)
5. Homosexuality (Homosexuals)
6. Capitalism (Capitalists)
7. Communism (Communists)
8. Christianity
   1. Catholic
   2. Evangelical
9. Fundamentalism
10. Islam (Muslims)
11. Atheism (Atheists)
12. Unbelief (Unbelievers)
13. Hedonism (Hedonists)
14. Forest logging (Loggers)
15. Dangerous / Speedy driving
16. Financial embezzlement (Ponzi scheme operators)
17. Crime (Criminals)
18. Corruption (Racketeers)
19. Noise polluters
20. Waste mismanagement
21. Trade dumping
22. Arms manufacturers / traders (Gun ownership)
23. Animal researchers (Vivisectionists)
24. Nuclear proliferation
25. Speeding drivers
26. Noise polluters
27. etc

6. Complicit forces in sustaining problematic issue. Typically these include a set of "usual suspects" held to be in some way responsible for failing to dissociate themselves from their involvement in many intractable issues.
   1. victorious powers
   2. western governments and the United States
   3. allies in the then U.S. administration
   4. United States and its allies
   5. U.S. administration and its allies
   6. United States, then spreading to Europe and to their allies
   7. western liberalism
   8. communism
   9. etc

7. Problematic actions associated with sustaining problematic issue
   1. oppressions, horror and crimes
   2. ignoring or down treading the rights of other nations by the imposition of oppressive laws and arrangements
   3. discrimination, injustice, violation of human rights or humiliation of the majority of nations
   4. coercion and force
   5. ridicule and violate all laws
   6. military aggression to make an entire nation homeless
   7. bring to power the most cruel and repressive racists
   8. crimes of aggression, carnage and other brutalities of bombardments of civilians in Gaza
   9. U.S. attacks against Iraq or invasion of Afghanistan
   10. etc

8. Pretext reference as rationale of sustaining problematic actions
   1. Jewish sufferings and the ambiguous and dubious question of holocaust
   2. Economic growth
   3. Employment
   4. Food requirements
   5. Health
   6. etc

9. Exemplary victims of problematic issue and associated actions
   1. innocent people, in millions, were captivated and separated from their families and loved ones to be taken to Europe and America
   2. Palestine
   3. etc

10. Problematic consequences of sustaining problematic actions

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