

Opening remarks presented at the conference:

“Pluralistic Societies:
Challenges and opportunities of cultural diversity in liberal democracies”

Séamus A. Power

University of Copenhagen

June 7th, 2023.

Welcome to the University of Copenhagen.
And welcome to the Pluralistic Societies conference.

Being mindful of the plurality of different styles of presenting will we see over the coming two days, and in contrast to how I usually speak, I have prepared some opening remarks to frame the forthcoming events.

The idea for this conference is steeped in recent observations about present state of the world. We live in a time of increasing globalization, the rapid communication of ideas, and the movement of people across historical boundaries of place and identity. Human movement has multiple drivers including economic goals and opportunities; but also war, conflict and other forms of persecution, and; changing environmental conditions and natural disasters. The resulting diversification of societies, in turn, has consequences—for how people think about themselves and others. And also, for how receiving societies make meaning of, and manage, the diversity they experience.

This century is already marked by two notable and opposing narratives about migration into Western liberal democracies. The first narrative is subtractive. Those fleeing their homelands—due to turmoil— are often seen as a threat to the societal and cultural fabric. This notion of threat, exploited and exaggerated by right-wing authoritarian leaders, contributes to anxieties regarding demographic change, an ethnonationalist turn, and the re-emergence of populism in some Western democracies.

The second narrative is additive. Migrants bring cultural, social, economic, and political capital to their new residences, reshaping the national identities in host countries and creating a valuable cosmopolitan mix. At present, however, this more liberal narrative has been subsumed by the rise of right-wing authoritarians, concerns about the fragmentation of society, and fear of “the great replacement.”

Between these two narratives it is vitally important for social scientists to respond with rigorous, balanced, and constructive answers to the fundamental question: How can we create and maintain pluralistic societies in which difference contributes to, rather than jeopardizes, social cohesion?

To help answer this question, and in the formulation of this conference, we draw inspiration from an ontological position described in the opening pages of Rick Shweder's seminal book, "Why do men barbecue: Recipes for Cultural Psychology." He tells us that:

"The knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular. Given the choice between incompleteness, incoherence, and nothingness, I aim to stay on the move, and seek out and engage with multiple points of view" (see Shweder, 2003, p.2).

This maxim is sometimes known as "the view from manywheres" and trying to achieve it is one of the overarching goals of the conference. To do so, we have assembled an exciting array of speakers – who all engage with the reaches, limits, and possibilities of 'Pluralistic Societies.' Over the course of the next two days, we will hear presentations from an invigorating and insightful array of emerging and established scholars stemming from a variety of ontological and epistemological positions. Some presentations will be theoretical. Others are empirical. Some will use qualitative methods. And others will use quantitative or mixed-methodological procedures.

We also have the distinct honor of having two highly distinguished keynote speakers. Jolanda Jetten, who will speak later this evening, is Professor of Psychology at the University of Queensland. Trained in experimental social psychological methods, across her career she has investigated questions of group processes, intergroup relations, and identity. She is a recipient of the British Psychological Society's Spearman Medal and European Association of Social Psychology's Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of her outstanding contributions to Psychology. Most recently she has turned her expertise towards an analysis of the social, psychological, and political consequences of social inequality. We are all excited to hear what you have learned about this often overlooked, but fundamental, axis of diversity within contemporary societies.

Tomorrow our second keynote speaker is Richard Shweder, the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago. I have had the pleasure of knowing and working with Rick for over a decade, particularly during my Ph.D. and postdoctoral studies in the incomparable Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago.

In my early graduate days, I interviewed Rick. He shared a viewpoint which I think helps to set the tone for an engaged conference, with stimulating discussion, so we can push forward – and think through – the scopes, limits, and possibilities of pluralistic societies. Rick told me – and here I am quoting from our published interview – "Being a researcher or an academic is not a process whereby you look around and see what the majority thinks and says, 'oh that's what I'm going to believe.' One 'follows the argument where it leads.' Being willing to upset apple carts and question dogma is one of the responsibilities we have as scholars and intellectuals in the academy."

Thomas and I invite you all to follow each other's arguments where they lead, so the reaches of pluralistic societies tomorrow might move beyond the limitations of today.

Thank you very much.