

Crister Garrett
Concluding Observations

(Please Note: This text represents essentially a write-up of my observations made during the plenary session on Saturday afternoon. These comments are thus meant as nothing more than a “first cut” at trying to find some commonalities in our deliberations and what they might mean for future round tables, thus reflecting the assignment I was provided to undertake as one of the rapporteurs general. I hope that you can accept these comments in that spirit.)

We have gathered the last couple days to discuss and to debate a theme at the heart of the contemporary “transatlantic zeitgeist”: “Societies in Transition—Adjusting to Changing Global Environments”. Whether we observe domestic developments in Germany or the United States, or how these countries try to handle their international affairs, we can quickly note that changing global environments—political, economic, environmental, cultural, demographic, technological—are compelling our societies to attempt multiple transitions while maintaining or perhaps even further encouraging relative social stability.

Indeed here is the basic paradox, or fundamental tension, or inherent challenge, or sobering reality¹ at the center of our round table theme: how do members of the German-American and transatlantic community promote stability within the matrix of mobility in which we find ourselves today. The title of our round table suggests appropriately that meeting this challenge is, as Americans often like to say (and Europeans often find either inspiring or irritating), “doable”, or as Germans might put it, “machbar”. This relative optimism is appropriate because there is no other choice if we are to avoid societal instability (especially of the negative kind such as violent confrontations), and because such an attitude shapes the very purpose of the Round Table USA.

Yet while we assert a relatively orderly process in the management of globalization, one of the striking impressions left upon me after our deliberations at Stanford is just how fluid and contrastive many of our views are, and that indeed even within the “transatlantic community” there are multiple definitions or strategies on how to approach transitions and adjustments to changing global environments. We can to a certain extent welcome this as “vive la différence!”. Yet as Rolf Hoffmann pointed out in his opening remarks, the Fulbright Commission in Berlin has had to cancel its teacher-exchange program for the first time in fifty years because German high school teachers feel that the differences between their society

¹ I wanted to offer my colleagues different options here depending on mood, inclination, and profession. Academics love paradoxes, public officials tend to opt for challenges, journalists like tensions if not crises etc.

and the United States are just too big (e.g., religion and social issues) to allow for any results from such an exchange to be integrated into their teaching back home. Such difference thus poses not just potential, but also the danger, at least for me and I assume for those gathered here today, of a distancing if not partial dissolution of the transatlantic community.

This being said, one of the central benefits of our round table in Stanford has been to underscore the “messiness” in the transatlantic dialog about adjusting to changing global environments. Thus when we talk about “societies” we tend to think of relatively stable units, but as Helmut Anheier underscored during his presentation, our deliberations must start with a most basic and relatively open question: “what kind of societies do we want”? As Anheier made clear, societies face genuine choices here, and we are in the midst of negotiating these choices.

Or let us take the concept of “transition”, which tends to encourage the image of “orderly change” (think of the idea of the ‘transition team’). Yet as we were reminded during Roger Friedland’s presentation, transitions can involve profound uncertainty in that “institutional differentiation is an open game”, or, desired outcomes might not be the outcomes that we wind up with at all.

Making the process even more tenuous is the very act of “adjusting” and how such “movement” is taking place on moving terrain (an image might be that of societal adjustment as sharing more with surfing than skiing). As Russell Berman helped us to understand, wider global mobility disrupts existing narratives, in short, such mobility upends the very guidelines by which societies seek to undertake the adjustment process in the first place.

Finally, the image of “global environments” can be interpreted as providing relatively intact and observable entities. Yet as Detlef Pollack articulated for us in the case of religion, these environments are social constructs involving choice, and often choice from clearly different alternatives. Defining global environments can thus be a highly tricky and tenuous proposition.

Indeed, upon (short) reflection of the round table theme and the nature of our discussions in the eight workshops, four concepts distilled themselves in my effort to try to prepare some remarks for this concluding plenary session. These are displacements, contingency, readings, and perhaps oddly enough (or rather not for a transatlantic gathering), NATO.

In listening to many of the discussions, what strikes me is how the global environments about which we are deliberating often involve profound displacements in our societies, almost a form of “structural turbulence” in that change seems ongoing, increasing in both diversity and intensity, thus disrupting patterns and thereby displacing peoples’ ability to understand or to anticipate. One can argue benignly that such a condition provides an opportunity for “real change”, but one can also argue more somberly that such a condition nurtures profound insecurity. Thus change, real change, can mean the “closing” of societies as much as it can mean the “opening” of societies.

This leads me to the notion of contingency and concomitantly, agency and choice. Again, when we think of transitions and adjustments, we tend to think of “orderly change”. But I was struck during the different presentations about how the transitions before us are contingent upon so many genuine and profound choices. The “good” news is that societies are importantly “agents” of their adjustments, i.e., they have agency or power to shape their own agendas (and are not just passive players in the globalization ‘game’). The more cautious headline is that the process is in a steady state of fragility because of its very contingency.

An important part of that fragility emerges from the honest but often starkly different readings of the change happening around us. Our discussion of global environments and how to adjust to them reminds me of an earlier phase of adjustment to global environments that had to be undertaken by the United States; namely, in the wake of the French Revolution, and how the United States should react to the upheaval and transformation of Europe. Two major Americans, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, observed the same events and facts, and came to profoundly different conclusions. For Hamilton, the French Revolution represented chaos, the abyss, why the country needed more strong government to manage its affairs. For Jefferson, the French Revolution was an opportunity to encourage a new chapter in human affairs, to promote “real change”, to “liberate” citizens from the shackles of central authority.

I have the impression that that we are experiencing another round of “multiple readings” of similar events today as we all try to find some form of “solid footing” on which to plant our conclusions about what needs to be done so that our societies can adjust to the “matrix of mobility” we are currently experiencing. Indeed, I sometimes think that the “honest differences” across the Atlantic are not so much between Germans and Americans but rather, à la Hamilton and Jefferson, really between groups in our respective societies that have differing predilections or value-sets by which to assess change. Instead of German or American publics, for example, one could almost talk about “transatlantic publics”, i.e., progressives, conservatives, liberals (European definition) and the narratives, and resulting strategies for adjustment, which they construct.

This brings me, perhaps a bit surprisingly, to NATO. Now, I am not using NATO in its more formal sense, but as our colleague Peter Theiner introduced the concept at the beginning of our round table, namely, as standing for “No Action, Talk Only”. The organizers of our round table all encouraged us to strive for more than “just talk” and to come up with an “action plan” (more on this in a bit). I am grateful to Peter for putting this image before us, because it provided an inescapable focus for our efforts. The good news is that NATO, with an assist from the EU, can indeed be an important form of an action plan. If one is prepared to buy into, albeit briefly, the observations I made about displacements, contingency, and readings, then it becomes relatively clear that one of the larger tasks ahead for adjusting to changing global environments is the very framing of issues in a highly fluid state of affairs.

Now the EU is sometimes dismissed as little more than a “talking club”. Besides being squarely unfair, the description can also be interpreted in a virtuous way. For if we accept the levels of displacement, contingency and multiple readings to which I alluded, then it becomes clear fairly quickly that reliable framing can only taking place with continuous deliberation, negotiation, construction of consensus, i.e., talking is action (which, in a way, is what Winston Churchill was alluding to). When Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker speaks of the EU as a type of global model, I can only concur, in that the EU provides an excellent institutional format for encouraging the sort of robust (i.e., durable) transnational and transcultural political space needed to encourage relatively stable transitions to changing global environments.

We can view the Round Table USA and transatlantic alumni networks as part of this dynamic, as part of this process; here we have a natural and important integration of deliberation and decision-making-capacity, or, tangible value added. Importantly, the “world of skype” can encourage such a process only so far. As we have experienced in the last two days, bringing people together in a physical space offers irreplaceable opportunities for nurturing constructive dialog and understanding at the heart of any lasting adjustments in the governance of global change.

In this sense the “transatlantic space” is a kind of global environment, in that its dynamics have global implications. That is why having the eight working groups proved a very good idea, in that the diversity of issues underscores the diversity of elements impacting this environment and to which we must pay close attention. The globality of the transatlantic community is also another important reason for holding the Round Table USA in California and on the Pacific Coast, as Rolf Hoffmann has argued convincingly. Such a move correctly removes the Round Table from the constraints of a more traditional definition of the European-American space.

Beyond the general observation that the Round Table represents a type of ongoing “action plan”, I would like at this stage as I begin to wrap up my comments to pick up on Petra Pisulla’s call for an action plan to emerge directly from the 2008 Round Table. In looking ahead to the next Round Table, I would suggest that we might need three refinements to the theme of “adjusting to global environments”, which thematically I think provides an excellent direction for future round tables and the need to encourage a new generation of transatlantic dialog and forms of consensus. Those three refinements would be diversification of readings, bridging themes, and broadening variables.

If globalization is in the twenty-first century what industrialization meant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, leading to what Tamar Jacoby referred to in terms of migration and mobility as “tectonic shifts” and what Manfred Wolfram noted in terms of “change creates conflict” when discussing cultural and personal values, then it seems we need greater diversity in the types of readings of current events that we integrate into the Round Table. Nationalists in the Republican and Democratic Parties in the U.S., or the largest new political phenomenon in Germany, Die Linke, underscore that major sectors of our respective societies

have different readings and agendas than those articulated in the 2008 Round Table. If we are to encourage democratic consensus for durable transitions, then we cannot afford to ignore these voices in our deliberations.

In this respect, it might make sense to address the sources of surges in popularity for nationalists, whether they are found in Die Linke or in the two major American political parties. What these civil society movements are tapping into effectively are the growing feelings of inequality, exclusion, of a sense of being a “loser” in the “game” of globalization, of being socially “stuck”. Thus we might need a type of bridging theme under which we can place the eight working groups and their very important subjects. One possible such theme could be, *Inclusion and Mobility: Constructing Consensus for a New Global Environment*. In important respects, inclusion and mobility lie at the heart of globalization and its legitimacy, much as they did during the era of industrialization. The new global environment ultimately is globalization in all its manifestations, and it will only be allowed to unfold further—meaning further opening of our societies and further interconnections between our societies—if there exists sufficient legitimacy to do so, i.e., sufficiently large numbers of our citizens feel included in the opportunities offered by globalization.

This brings me to my last point, namely a broadening of the variables involved in our deliberations. We talked a lot about values during this Round Table, and this is profoundly important, just think about Rolf Hoffmann’s sobering story about cancelling the teacher exchange program for the Fulbright program. Beyond this key variable for better understanding of where we are possibly heading, however, I think it would be useful to integrate more consciously other factors impacting our transition efforts, such as class, interests, and institutions.

There are sociologically speaking sectors in our respective societies struggling tremendously with adjustments to globalization; I think that we as “winners” generally speaking of globalization need to confront ourselves more with the class dynamics of this transformative turbulence in our societies. We also have key institutions in our societies undergoing deep transformations that will shape much of society’s acceptance of globalization; think of higher education for example. And, we have both the defence and reshaping of interests that are part of the values debate but that also move beyond it—think of the relationship between

economics and environmental policies, for example—and that will also determine much of public opinion on how we are handling adjustments to global environments.

In conclusion, this has been an enormously rewarding two days for me. I think that the Round Table USA is a highly important institution that can foster a new generation of transatlantic dialog in all its facets—discussion, debate, dissent, and new directions for consensus. I look forward to getting together again at the next Round Table to work on these basic elements of any dynamic civil society.

Thank You.