

Wrap-up and Conclusion

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I would like to take two of the principal themes from the seminar – perception and perspective – and discuss them with a view to suggesting tasks for the future.

Perception is an inward process of absorption that enables us to identify and understand the things we see around us. It was neatly encapsulated in a quotation shown to us by Professor Bijak, which likened perception to someone watching a play. At one level, the spectator is absorbing the fact that it is a genre that we call a play; within that, at another level, they are absorbing the content of the play.

But absorbing the content involves understanding, and this can create problems. In literature there is a phenomenon known as hermeneutics, which (put simply) poses the following question: Is the meaning of a play or book located in the author's intentions or in the reader's own interpretation? The difficulty with the former is that we may of course not know the author's intentions; the difficulty with the latter is that it invites multiple interpretations and chaos.

This is not some arcane matter, for it potentially involves all texts, not just literary texts. The finest constitutional brains in the United States are constantly taxed with questions that revolve around whether the original words of the Founding Fathers can be adapted or extended to fit the twenty-first century, or whether the twenty-first century needs to be force-fitted into the intentions of those same Founding Fathers.

And it applies to us, too, because we too depend on texts. I'm thinking here principally of the resolutions of the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSSGN), and especially of Resolution III/20, because that is the resolution which features most frequently in our discussions. It was passed in 1977, and as I have already remarked I was present at and part of the

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process there, which I guess makes me one of its Founding Fathers.

Let me assure you once again that Resolution III/20 was intended to cover land boundaries only. Maritime ramifications were neither thought of nor mentioned. And in any case the date of 1977 precedes concepts that today we take for granted and which are often invoked in support of a particular view of that resolution: the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), and the notion of ‘semi-enclosed seas’. These did not exist at that time.

So I think our first task is a requirement to ask ourselves an important question of perception. How far can a UN resolution from a bygone era be legitimately stretched and adapted to present-day realities?

The second issue is perspective, which is an outward process. When I was a child, I was fortunate in that our family spent summer holidays every year in the Swiss village of Zermatt, at the foot of the iconic Matterhorn. This did wonders for my youthful perception of mountains, but was less developmental for my perspective on the Matterhorn, since my view of it was exactly the same each day. As I grew older, of course, I came to realise that mountains are in reality three-dimensional multi-faceted features, and one cannot claim to know them fully until one has travelled their entire circumference, looking at them from every possible perspective.

I believe that historical events have much in common with mountains. True, for those at a very young age, it is sufficient to say in an educational textbook that such-and-such an event took place in such-and-such a year. But as we become older and more aware, we need to regard historical facts like mountains – three-dimensional and multi-faceted – and explore them further. And if we encounter a historical event that is problematic, then we will not solve the problem unless we look at the fact as a whole, from all perspectives, as we would the mountain.

It can never be sufficient to discuss the problem only with those in the same valley as ourselves, because their perspective on it is likely to be the same as our own. We need to move round and discuss the problem with people in the valleys on the other side, who will have a different perspective altogether.

You will of course understand what I am saying. We should not be content with forming a view on a historical fact that is based solely on one limited perspective. We have a duty to explore all the dimensions, angles and facets of the fact. And we should

even be prepared and willing to re-appraise our opinions as necessary in the light of new thought, new evidence, and the passage of time. We owe this to ourselves and in particular to the younger generations that it is our duty to educate.

And let's not wait for some far-sighted politician to come along and take the lead here; that is akin to waiting for Godot. As German Chancellor Angela Merkel rightly stated, on a recent visit to Japan, the process should emanate from society. That means it should come from people like ourselves. And one of the best methods of exploring all the angles, valleys and perspectives of a problem is for individuals, groups and societies to come together in forums, workshops, seminars, educational exchange visits, and the like – including our own seminar.

So I believe our second task for the way forward is one of perspective, of trying to ensure that as many angles and views as possible are represented in our seminars.