This is why the West can't Face Itself | Prof. Manuel J. Ramos

The political West has killed countless millions over the decades, yet pretends to be a force for good. What will happen once it's forced to face its own inhumanity? Today, I discuss the many narrative interpretations of our common global reality with Prof. Manuel Ramos. Manuel's Article on Bucha: https://manueljoaoramos.substack.com/p/the-bucha-affair-marchapril-2022 Manuel on Substack: https://manueljoaoramos.substack.com Pascal on Subsack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Shop & Donations: https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody. This is Pascal Lottaz from Neutrality Studies. Today I'm joined again by Dr. Manuel Ramos, an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University Institute of Lisbon. Manuel, welcome back. Good morning. Good morning. It's a pleasure to be here again. Glad to have you here, because you alerted me to some research you're doing about epistemic communities and how things are framed—basically, about narratives. Maybe let's start with this. You just told me a very interesting observation before we started talking, which is that it's the beginning of March—well, mid-March by now, March 12th—and we are not… we are not talking about Bucha. This is, of course, the fourth anniversary of Bucha, something that used to be a very important narrative talking point for the Western understanding of the war in Ukraine. And now we're not talking about it. Can you maybe give me a little bit of your interpretation? Why is that?

#Manuel J. Ramos

Okay. Of course, we're not talking about Bucha because we're, rather embarrassingly, talking about Minab—what happened on the 28th of February, which was the start of the Third Gulf War. That reminds me, or should remind us, that the Romans also had three wars, the three Punic Wars. I don't know if there's any real analogy there, but let's see. Anyway, we are in the Third Gulf War, and Minab was the opening scene of that war, in a way, at least in narrative terms. So, because it more or less coincided with the fourth anniversary of Bucha, suddenly Bucha disappeared from the media.

There was no Zelensky talking about Bucha. There was no Ursula, in a heartfelt way, reminding us of the barbarity of the Russians in Bucha. Because we—the media, the politicians, and the various epistemic communities, as you mentioned—were busy, and still are, trying to make sense of events and create a new narrative. The Western media had been forging and developing another narrative on Bucha, which, in a way, clashed with the values and framings of this new interpretation of events. That meant Bucha had to be erased from the conversation.

And I think that's quite interesting, because what I'm now researching, in a way, with colleagues from the mathematics department at my institute, is a way to bring social sciences together with computing and algorithmic science. We've been developing this—well, I called it for fun the "opposite algorithm." The idea is to try to—well, it's impossible to be neutral, of course. I mean, to find the null point of neutrality is a myth. Complete objectivity, like a 100% objective approach, is impossible. It's totally impossible. But what I find interesting is the process of mitigating bias. Of course, this is something anthropology has been trying to do, even though I know very well that anthropology is a Western construct. But at least, over the years, there's been an attempt to mitigate our Western ideological bias, our semantic bias. And so, working with the IT guys, we came up with a way to analyze that.

#Manuel J. Ramos

How narratives develop from events. Because, you know, one thing is events—as historians remind us—one thing is events, and another, completely different thing, is facts. And of course, a fact is an event that became consensual. And of course, facts are never, you know, it's very difficult to find consensus in events.

#Pascal

So, can you talk about this a little bit more? Because most people probably equate events with facts. Can you just explain that a bit more for everyone?

#Manuel J. Ramos

Yeah, events are things that happen—you know, things happen in the world. But to reach from events to facts—because, as Michael Stanford, I think, mentioned—you can't, sorry, you cannot touch a fact. Is it in the order of imagination or in the order of the world? You don't find facts in the world. A fact is a consensus. You have to agree that something happened. And once everyone agrees that something happened, then you have a fact. But if you don't agree that something has happened, or that parts of that event have happened, then you don't have a fact. So you create narratives from bits of events that turn into partial facts, because there's an epistemic community—a community of belief—that believes that that event led to the creation of a fact.

But other communities, from the same set of events, pick certain parts of those events to create different facts. And once you start this process of creating narratives from events that turn into partial facts, you create communities of belief. They talk with each other; they have dialogue. That's what we did with Bucha. We verified that there were about five epistemic communities, and they all firmly believe that something has happened—but they differ on who is responsible for what happened. So the construction of the narrative is not totally isolated; it's a dialogue, or rather a "five-a-logue," between communities. The beliefs of one community impact the beliefs of another, but that doesn't mean each community questions itself—which is amazing.

You don’t question yourself. You adapt the new narratives of others to fortify your facts. And so you have diverging epistemic communities. This is not always the case. In the case of Bucha, suddenly you don’t have communities because everyone forgot about it. But that doesn’t mean there was a convergence of beliefs. The beliefs are still totally divergent, but because they’re not feeding on each other, you forget them. There are many cases where epistemic communities can reach convergence. It’s not an easy convergence, and it’s not one that’s free of hegemonic pressure. We did a very interesting analysis of the biblical construction of Jesus in rabbinic and in various early Christian communities.

And you can see that there is a convergence, because you created a canon from the non-canon. Christianity was able to create a canon, so there was convergence in that case. In the case of Bucha—which is, of course, very different from the first coming of Jesus—there was no convergence during those four years. And suddenly there’s an eclipse of the narrative, because a new set of events is creating new partial facts. This new narrative, this new creation of narrative, is to some extent superimposed on the previous community. They find it very difficult—the different communities find it very difficult—to incorporate the Bucha network, or the Bucha mesh, into this new mesh, because this new mesh totally contradicts the narrative of the previous one.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again at any time. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack—that’s pascallottaz.substack.com. The link’s going to be in the description below. And now, back to the video. I find this very, very important and fascinating because, until today, we do not have a common narrative about the Ukraine war—and even within the Ukraine war, about individual occurrences or events, as you said. The interesting thing you’re bringing out is that you have a relational understanding of the term “fact,” or a sociological understanding. I mean, we could go into the philosophical realm and ask whether there can be facts without humans, but let’ s not go there. Let’s just say, okay, the definition that you’re bringing here…

#Manuel J. Ramos

Yes, the reason is that, well, as you know, if a leaf falls from a tree and no one sees it, did the leaf really fall from the tree? Of course not.

#Pascal

We don't need to go that far. But if we just accept this idea—the sociological understanding of a fact as something a group of people agrees upon—then that means we need to understand the groups. And this is what you mean by these epistemic communities. Could you maybe give me the five epistemic communities you identified for the Bucha event?

#Manuel J. Ramos

Let me think—because I don't have the study with me right now—but of course, there's the Ukrainian, the pro-Ukraine community, which is the pro-official Ukrainian narrative. Then there's the pro-Russian, the official Russian narrative. You have the Western narrative, which more or less correlates with the Ukrainian community, but it's not the same. Then you have the pro-Russian, but not the official Russian community. And finally, you have what you could call the alternative community, which sometimes leans more or less pro-Russian, but it's in a difficult position. You could also call it the multilateral or alternative community—it confronts the official narratives but differs from both official ones, whether pro-Russian, pro-Western, or pro-Ukrainian. So, there are more or less these five communities of belief. They each create their own set of narratives.

#Pascal

These narratives are in contestation. The interesting thing is that it doesn't depend on a person's level of education. From one end to the very smartest people at universities, we find people in all camps who accept one narrative or another because they believe the facts on the ground, or the evidence we find, support their interpretation. And then we end up with this problem of having to explain why other intelligent or respectable people in society are not in our camp.

And that's where people usually start getting really angry at each other. I had a fellow historian in Kyoto once throw a beer away in front of me, saying he wasn't going to listen to my BS when I told him, "Look, what NATO did to Serbia back in 1999 was a crime. It was a war of aggression." And he said, "No, but we defended Srebrenica. Never Srebrenica again, and I'm not going to listen to this." He got really, really angry—and he's a very good historian, a smart person. So somehow, this isn't a question of intelligence. It's something different. No, no, no.

#Manuel J. Ramos

Yes, because you can rationalize—you can have different strategies, you know. Most people don't have the time or the patience. If you're a blue-collar worker or a white-collar worker completely engulfed in debt and everyday problems, you don't have time to think. So you accept a sort of basic narrative, and you don't rationalize. But if you have time—if you're an intellectual, an essayist, a historian, or a politician—and it's part of your life to rationalize the narrative, then you embellish it, but you don't question the line. You create the line, you embellish the line, you develop it, you rationalize the line, but you don't fall from it. And that's what happens. So it's like a dialogue between people who don't want to dialogue, basically, on different levels. But that's the way the world has always been.

The problem now is that the structure of the media has allowed the development and fortification of this narrative. It's not a lack of information—people don't lack information. But they still have to embrace that information in a way that makes sense within the basic premises of the narrative they'

ve decided to create. Let me tell you one thing: anthropologists are a weird bunch. Sociologists too. What are these guys doing all the time? I've been hearing this for 40 years. In anthropology—and I come from a sort of structuralist school—I mean, nowadays, who remembers Lévi-Strauss? Very few people do. But what I find interesting now is that where people like Lévi-Strauss and the development of structural models have gained traction is in narratology—that is, with the IT people, with the people of big data.

And that I find very interesting. That is, anthropologists and social scientists forgot about developing models to understand narratives. And that's basically what the structuralist model was. You have different myths, you have different variations of myths, and you try to understand the whole cake. As Lévi-Strauss would say, the myth is the totality of all the variations. So there isn't one myth that is more true than another, or one variation that is more true than the others. To understand a myth, or a set of events, or a set of historical facts, you have to listen to all the variations and try to see where they coincide—how each variation transforms the other.

And that is a very strong model—has always been a very strong model. It's been sort of discarded in the social sciences, but it's been resurrected by IT, because big data people deal with lots of tokens, lots of data, you know. And in a way, structural analysis complements and really helps the understanding of big data. So you can have a very interesting and very positive dialogue between anthropology and big data, because big data lacks the human understanding of how narratives are formed and developed. And that's what we've been doing in our institute.

#Pascal

That is super interesting. And where does this lead you to? For me, doing international relations, it's been very clear for the longest time that the history books are written by the victors of war. That's why we usually remember those who win—like, "Oh, they were the good guys, right? Lucky us, good guys." No, no, no, no, no. The good guys always win because they write the stories about it and thereby create the facts that we, in the end, remember. I swear to God, had Hitler won the Second World War, we would remember him as the good guy. I'm absolutely certain. Of course, then later on—like 50, 60 years later, once these people are dead—then come the historians, and they change the picture. That's why suddenly, even in Russia, you remember Stalin slightly differently, and in China, you suddenly have a discourse about Mao. But that comes way after the event. Now, what does your research point us to in terms of how these epistemic communities interact with each other?

#Manuel J. Ramos

Hmm. Well, let me first give you an example, because I've been involved in studying Ethiopia—not as a historian, but dealing with historical facts and events. What happened in the 16th and 17th centuries in northern Ethiopia was quite an amazing clash of cultures—not an encounter of cultures, but a clash. That's the moment when Catholic Jesuits arrived in Ethiopia, an Orthodox country, and

tried to convert the kings and the people from Orthodoxy to Catholicism. And that led to all sorts of events—revolutions and rebellions in Ethiopia—because you cannot forcibly turn a monophysite Orthodox into a dyophysite Catholic from one day to the next. And so, of course, the overall narrative, even today in Ethiopia, relies partly on what the Jesuits wrote.

Because they wrote. And then it also relies on what the church—the Ethiopian Orthodox Church—and the court wrote. But the people didn't write. You have different groups of people who didn't write anything; they just lived the events and retained memories. And it's not a civilization that's only oral—it's both oral and written. So the oral legends in Ethiopia, in a way, feed on the Jesuit discourse. They feed on the king's discourse, the church's discourse, but they also develop other discourses, because they form an identity discourse—as subjects of the kings and as, how do you say, subaltern communities. They have a voice. They have their own voice, even though that voice doesn't reach writing. It's what they call *afatarik*—that is, oral history.

And so you have all these groups in northern Ethiopia that have built their own legends and their own history in dialogue with written history—be it foreign history or internal hegemonic history. And they sort of, you know, create this kaleidoscope of stories that bring these subaltern groups into the picture. You can see that the picture is much more complex than what the official or authoritative historical narratives suggest. Because people do have agency, and they put themselves in history, even though other groups don't want to listen to their histories. Each community has its own history and remembers and forgets what it prefers. They develop, you know, loops, flowerings, and constructions on the official narrative, but they also diverge from it.

And for me, that experience of going into small communities and listening to people—to understand how these various groups see history—was very enlightening. Because you could then say that you have the official narrative, the various official narratives, but you also have non-official narratives that enrich and give a better, more encompassing understanding of the very tragic, dramatic, and tense events that took place when the Jesuits arrived in Ethiopia to convert the Orthodox to Catholicism. And, of course, how they left, and how their heritage is still there—not as a positive thing, but it's there. I mean, those events—you can model them, but you can't forget that at one point the king became a Catholic, one of the kings. And that created all sorts of short circuits in society.

#Pascal

What does this research point us to when it comes to our collective way of understanding events? And, you know, also maybe the power of these narratives. I mean, we all know that propaganda rests on the ability of one group to impose its interpretation of the world on everybody else and then demand adherence to it. And that this is also a tool of power, and so on.

But in a world—especially right now, in a multipolar world—where we have an absence of an absolute narrative-making instance, it seems to me almost as if we are constantly living with the

threat of cognitive dissonance. You know, when one epistemic community is confronted with the narrative of another and gets this shock reaction, like, "No, no, no, your understanding is wrong—you've got it completely backward." And then you see how people start actually getting, like, physically angry, their hearts start pumping, and so on. How should we best make sense of the contest between these epistemic communities and their narratives?

#Manuel J. Ramos

Well, I think, you know, as social scientists—and international relations is a social science, as anthropology is—I mean, we're not going to get into what science is nowadays, because that's a boring matter. But, you know, we have to ask: do we intervene in the world? We know that we are not neutral. We are echoes of research, and I experience this every day. Research is conditioned, modeled, and pushed by policy. You have the European Union giving money to one line of research but not to another, because there's a political interest in supporting some groups of researchers and not others, and some kinds of research and not others.

And so, of course, we are tied by this. We are tied. You know, if I want today to continue working on oral memories of 16th-century Ethiopia, no one's going to give me money. If I say, "No, no, I want to study conflict—how ethnic and religious conflicts are breaking Ethiopia apart," then yes, there's money for that, because we in the European Union want to know something about Ethiopia. But we don't want to know about oral history in the 16th century. So research is conditioned, of course, and yes, policy-driven. But we, as social scientists, have the responsibility of at least asking ourselves to what extent we want to intervene in the world.

Do you want to be more militant, less militant? What are we doing? I think, at least in my zone of comfort now, I prefer not to intervene in the world in policy terms. That is, be critical, keep a critical mind, and, to the extent possible, be neutral—not necessarily objective, but to find my place in a way that I can say to different groups, "Well, look at yourself in the mirror," because I want to look at myself in the mirror. And this act of looking at ourselves in the mirror—you remember, some months ago, I wrote that article on the need to look at ourselves in the mirror.

If the West looks at itself in the mirror, it finds a monster. We find ourselves to be a monster. We don't want to be monsters, but we are monsters—and that's exactly what happened. That's the problem for me now. You can say Russians are barbarians if you're Ukrainian, or European, or North American, or a Westerner. But when Americans bomb schoolgirls, what are we? Are we monsters? No, we cannot be monsters, because we cannot be the others. But if we at least find a way to say, "Look, from this point of view, we have to find a neutral point somehow to understand the monstrosity everywhere," because we are all monsters to some extent.

#Pascal

Yes, we are. And, you know, this really puts a finger on something important, because a lot of us get very upset. I mean, in our epistemic community, we're very upset with how the West is so hypocritical. This hypocrisy—this constant hypocrisy—is something we can't stand, or that we keep pointing out all the time. It's part of how our epistemic community is actually built: to point that out. The interesting thing, then, is that we see on the other side that this mirror—when they look in the mirror, in order not to see the monster—they don't work on themselves; they work on the mirror.

I put a lot of narrative frameworks on the mirror in order to make the monster disappear, right? Instead of changing. And this is such a dramatic event. In a way, what you're doing actually reminds me a lot of what I know from work in violence prevention, you know? When you look at how violence happens—not just physical violence, but also verbal violence, structural violence, or what I'd call cultural violence—one of the things you need to do, especially on the interpersonal level, is start talking about talking. You do metacommunication in order to understand where the violence begins and how it's caused.

And what you're doing is kind of meta-research—not trying to establish what the facts on the ground are, but rather doing research on how these groups perceive the event, and what kinds of constructs they create. By doing that, you're decoding the approach that all of them are taking. You're not getting any closer to the fact itself, but you're getting closer to an understanding of how the entire group is looking at it. Now, what stands in the way of doing this systematically, structurally, for all kinds of narrative disagreements?

#Manuel J. Ramos

Well, in a way, what I find comes in the way—there are two points we should remember. One is that, to a great extent, even in computing terms, in international law, in economics, the West has created a footprint. It's a footprint that's not going to go away anytime soon. It's an ideological footprint that has impacted the world—for better and for worse. The Christian, or Greco-Roman Christian, West's view of the world has shaped it. The West has fostered a dualistic approach to understanding the world—a kind of dualism very different from Hindu or Chinese dualism. We've created and developed a dualism that has definitely influenced the world.

#Pascal

Entrenched dualism—this constant kind of "us versus them," "good versus evil."

#Manuel J. Ramos

Everywhere in the world, you find dualism.

#Manuel J. Ramos

But what's interesting about the Western view—and people like Lovejoy and many others have talked about this—is that Western dualism, Western Christian dualism, or even Platonic Christian dualism, if you like—you can attach all sorts of big names to it—is basically this idea of "we have A versus B."

#Pascal

Okay?

#Manuel J. Ramos

Yeah. But you can say, you know, you have a pair—a conceptual pair—two categories, two opposing categories. But for the categories to be opposed, you first have to find commonalities, and then you find the split. And in the West, we believe that the split is insurmountable. You know, you have good versus bad. You can't have a good-bad, you can't have a bad-good—you have to have good versus bad. The split is insurmountable. And Lovejoy, in the '30s, talked about how we are heirs and vessels of Platonic thinking—that is, in the allegory of the cave, you cannot go into the light. The separation between shadows and light is insurmountable. But that is Western dualism. Other dualisms don't imply insurmountability. That is, you can understand that in yang there's a bit of yin, and in yin there's a bit of yang.

That is, you have properties that are shared by the opposing sides. But the Western view does not—does not allow for, you know, categorically does not allow for—the acceptance that there is a bit of the other in me and of me in the other. You see? And that is very powerful. It's a very powerful semantic, ideological, philosophical, ontological construction. But it is a construction. It is powerful, but it's not a reality. That's not the way the brain functions. That's what I wanted to say. We believe that the brain functions this way to the point that we have created a computer not in the image of our brain, but in the image of the way we think the brain works. So if Indians or Chinese had developed the computer in the 1940s, we'd have a completely different computer system. You know, computation would be different.

But we have a computing system that we think is a copy of our brain—but it's not a copy of our brain. It's a copy of our ideology. And we also know, and I think that's quite important, that life is full of paradoxes. Life is full of ambiguities, and our concepts and our views of the world are full of ambiguities, reversibilities, and paradoxes. But the way the West has dealt with rationality has pushed away a rich understanding of the paradox. Yet we know the paradox is there. If you say that Jesus was born—well, look at Jesus. Jesus was born, but Jesus is the son of God and is God. So he's the creator.

The creator was created by the creature. Does that make sense? It does make sense. It does make sense, but it is a paradox. The problem is, we know there's a paradox there, but we try to push it away. That doesn't happen in many other civilizations. The paradox is not an obstacle to rationality—

it’s a way to develop rationality. And so, the problem today is that the Western ideological setup is crumbling. In the West, we don’t want to understand the possibilities of other ontological setups. And I think that is the problem. Of course, it has always been the problem—to try to understand other semantic, philosophical, ontological setups.

But the problem, the difference today, is that the West has to acknowledge there are other setups—other ways of understanding the world, of moving in the world, of creating the world—that do not relate to ours, or relate only partially to ours, and have as much legitimacy to exist and to impact the world as the West does. And that is the problem. That’s the crisis we’re in: the West’s narrative and its way of categorizing the world are limited, and they’re being challenged. So maybe the way to overcome this is to try to understand other means of understanding the world.

#Pascal

It's a very good point. It's just a very tough sell, because especially in the political realm, the approach is usually to say, “No, the others get it wrong.” Or, as Mr. Borrell would say, “In the garden, we get it right because we invented science, right? Everybody else is just not scientific enough.” And of course, this whole discourse—the rationalist discourse—is part of that problem: to think that facts are facts, and all you need to do is dig enough and then you’ll know them. And anyone who doesn’t accept them is an idiot or an evil man, right? Yeah. Yes, exactly.

#Manuel J. Ramos

But the problem is that other ways of understanding the world are out there. So we’re faced with two alternatives: either we turn inward and become closed off, refusing to understand those other ways—and in a sense, decay inside our little bubble—or we question the bubble. And that’s the crisis we’re in. Either we keep the discourse of the garden versus the jungle—though, honestly, no one cares. I mean, if you ask a Chinese person, “Where is the garden?” they’ll say, “Oh, the garden is somewhere over there in the West.” It doesn’t make any sense. So if Mr. Borrell wants to keep being a gardener, he’ll be a gardener like in the movie *Being There*, where the gardener is just a moron.

I mean, he's... Or you have another possibility: to overcome the bubble and the isolation, and try to have a dialogue with other communities and other ways of seeing the world—to reshape, enrich, and question our own ways. And I think that’s the way to go. But there are many people—too many people—who don’t want to be forced to question ourselves, to think, and to say, “Well, maybe there’s another way.” Actually, yesterday I saw a very interesting short video of a female veteran, a woman who served in the Gulf Wars. And she was saying, yes, we were in Iraq, or we were in the Gulf, fighting terrorism, fighting the war on terror.

But now, today, I discovered that I was the terrorist. I mean, it takes a lot to be able to accept that. And that’s what I think we need to do. You know, as Portuguese people, we say, “Oh, wars are outside. We don’t have anything to do with them.” That’s not true. We are part of NATO, and we’ve

had military forces in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Bosnia, Libya, Iraq. So we can't say we're pacifists and the world is outside. But if you ask 99% of the Portuguese, they'll say wars have nothing to do with us because we're not there. We don't want to recognize that we're part of this setup, for instance. Talking about leaving Portugal…

#Pascal

No, absolutely. Same goes for Switzerland. Same goes for Japan. You know, we should actually keep asking this. And, in a sense, we all know it. I mean, there's this very famous movie scene—I think it' s Monty Python, right?—where two guys, two Germans, are in the trenches, and one asks the other, "Did you ever notice the little skulls on our helmets and uniforms? I mean, this is a skull, right? Is it possible that we're the baddies?"

#Manuel J. Ramos

Could we be the baddies? Is that possible? Nah, not possible.

#Pascal

That kind of questioning of your own position within—but it leaves us with a very unsatisfying insight, right? Let's take Pooja. We know that people use and abuse narratives for purposes of power, and even for purposes of war, right? All great wars are fought in the name of some sort of narrative. And at the end of the day, what we'd like to have is the idea of an objective reality—an observer-independent, objective reality. If we dig long enough, we find the truth, right? The truth, and then we have certainty. But if we follow the advice of trying to abstract and constantly question ourselves, how do we ever get closer to the actual truth—the thing, or the idea of an actual thing—and a common narrative? Because at the end of the day, either we find a common way to understand reality, or we'll go to nuclear war with each other.

#Manuel J. Ramos

Yeah, I think I'll go for option two, basically, because—no, that goes without saying.

#Pascal

I'm not happy with that.

#Manuel J. Ramos

I know I'm not happy, but that's—well, you know, let me tell you, I'll approach the subject in a different way. In anthropology, we're still very much the heirs of Rousseau. You can go anywhere and question everything, but in anthropology, the myth of the "good savage" has always been there.

Rousseau and the good savage are still important references for anthropology. You know, the bad civilization—we've always used the "other" as a mirror that questions our own values. And that's what anthropology is all about: we see our monstrosity by looking at the good savage. And this idea goes back to long before anthropology.

Thomas More and the Utopians have done this. Thomas More, Voltaire, Campanella—all of them, Bacon—created the image of the good savage, and the good savage, in a way, projects the image of the monster onto us. So anthropology and political philosophy have always used the savage, the good savage, to criticize Western society. That's the way things have gone historically. The problem is that the good savage is not necessarily a good savage. That is, to some extent, people don't give credit to the Marquis de Sade as a philosopher because, you know, he was so invested in writing pornographic—and very radically pornographic—novels. People don't see the philosophy behind those novels.

And what he systematically claims is a point of view that's totally opposite to Rousseau. That is, human nature is not a good nature. Human nature is inherently beyond bad. And the problem in anthropology is that we listen too much to Rousseau and not enough to the Marquis de Sade. But we know that humans are—everyone sort of knows, but we don't want to acknowledge that we're part of this. We are inherently destructive. You know, we see another group, and our tendency is to destroy it. I mean, it's always been that way—it's the history of the world. We are aggressive creatures, immensely aggressive creatures, and we can't do much about it.

I mean, I'm sorry. I can sort of get away from it, but as much as there are peace studies—yesterday we had a seminar with a general who works on conflict resolution, conflict management, conflict transformation, conflict prevention, Galtung, and peace studies, etc.—as much as there is a process of conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation, there is also, at the same time, a process of peace prevention, peace management, and peace resolution. You see, conflict is the way to do away with peace, and peace is the way to do away with conflict.

And the two of them go together, you see? If we work only on conflict prevention, conflict management, and conflict resolution, we're missing that conflict is also brought about by peace. We might want to be very Calvinist and good-natured and think we'll reach some glorious moment of complete peace and perfection for humanity. But if we keep that view, we're not understanding ourselves. That was Jonathan Swift's lesson. He said, if you want a perfect society, it won't be a human society.

#Pascal

But is that problem actually embedded in human nature itself, or is it embedded in the way we function with each other? Because I would argue that if two people meet—both of them well-fed, clothed, housed, and neither feels threatened—if those four conditions are met, then they won't take out a knife and kill each other, even if they're the last ones on earth. But the problem arises once

you have larger groups that start creating narratives about others and so on, when this kind of destructive moment begins. And we can see it right now with the narrative that's been constructed again about Iran. Over the last couple of years, we've seen several times how these narratives about Iran were built up, then hyped, and then faded again.

As soon as you need to justify a war, you create a narrative about the other. And some of these narratives are so plainly dumb and have nothing to do with objectively verifiable reality that people trot out stuff like, "Oh, better dead than in a burqa," and things like that—even though Iranians don't use burqas. I mean, apart from how horrible that is. But you see how this is being constructed. And again, the facts—the sociological facts—are relational, right? They exist within society. So isn't the problem actually in the number of people who interact with each other, rather than in the nature of humans?

#Manuel J. Ramos

That's a really weird—well, I mean, it's a great question. The thing is, violent conflict—life, as Georg Simmel reminded us very early on, in 1902 I think—life is conflict. All human relations are conflictual, and conflict is part of life. There's no problem with that. The idea that cooperation somehow excludes conflict doesn't make any sense. Conflict is part of everyday life, and it's okay.

#Pascal

There's good conflict—productive conflict—and then there's destructive conflict, right? So one we should enjoy, and the other we should try to...

#Manuel J. Ramos

You know, where do we cross the line from non-violent conflict to violent conflict? And, you know, you mentioned "destructive"—it is destructive—but isn't this destructive conflict also constructive? That is, if...

#Pascal

It tries to solve a conflict, yeah. Violence is a conflict-resolution mechanism. Exactly. But it's not one that I think we should morally aspire to. Of course.

#Manuel J. Ramos

But, you know, if you have conflicts in Israeli society and Israeli society is torn by conflict, if you have conflicts in American society and American society is torn by conflict, why not create another conflict to solve the internal ones? I think that was partly the problem. The good moment to solve internal disaggregation is to aggregate people by creating an external enemy. I mean, you just have

to read Adolf Hitler to understand the power of this possibility. So war is social cohesiveness—and that's a tragedy, because war can create cohesion. And that is the problem. I mean, you can't solve it. Wars will exist as long as we are human.

#Pascal

Nah, nah, nah. I reject that. I hope we can solve it, but I'd like to understand it. In order to solve it, we need to— I mean, what you're hinting at is this kind of understanding of the epistemic communities. How far do you think we can drive this process forward, in order to create at least an understanding and a common narrative about the differences in the narratives? To get all of these five groups on Bucha to agree that, yes, yes, this is how all of us look at it—then we'd already have won something, right? A common point of...

#Manuel J. Ramos

Yes, I think exactly. I think that's the impossible mission for people like us. You see, you can try to educate, you can try to alert. I mean, in a way, to an extent, this is our duty. But we also have to accept that we are the fools in the king's court. Yes—but there's an important place for the fool in the king's court.

#Pascal

But as a fool in the king's court, do I need to do away with the liar? Do I need to just do away with the idea that the other one is lying? Or does the idea of lying still have a function?

#Manuel J. Ramos

Of course. I mean, you cannot do away with lying. Humans are liars by default. And we are believers by default. You know, for me, it's quite amazing. We know that politicians lie all the time. And I think that's the amazing thing about Donald Trump. As a topic, he's a fascinating figure because everyone knows he lies all the time. I mean, he's very honest in being the liar—he's the most honest politician because he's the ultimate liar.

And people know that he lies, but people want—it's like the magician. You know the magician doesn' t really make pigeons appear out of nothing. We know that magicians lie. We know that politicians lie. But we love to believe that they don't. And this is everywhere. I mean, James George Frazer, the famous British anthropologist who wrote *The Golden Bough* in the early 20th century—it's all about this. You know, we are compulsive believers in lies.

#Pascal

Okay, so we can't do away with this one, but what's your—let's say—advice for people who try to deconstruct or at least understand the different epistemic communities? What's an everyday kind of approach to understanding epistemic communities?

#Manuel J. Ramos

I think it is, like I said, about being an apostate—you know, trying yourself not to be part of an epistemic community. Try to be as neutral as possible, because maybe that's a good example. I mean, there's this very famous Chinese story, the story about the fire in the woods. There's a stork carrying water from a lake, a very faraway lake, to put out the fire. And another bird says, "Look, what are you doing? You have a very thin beak, you're only carrying a drop of water. You'll never be able to put out the fire." And the stork says, "Well, but there's no one else. What can I do? There's no one else to put out the fire. I know I'm not going to succeed, but I'll die trying." And I think that's the way we can at least be at peace with ourselves, because the world is not going to be at peace anytime soon.

#Pascal

We can at least try.

#Manuel J. Ramos

I like that. We have the duty. I think that is—I mean, we have the cynic and skeptic duty to try. As Diogenes said, you know, he had his lamp. He was wandering around with his lamp, trying to find a good person—an honest person—in the world, in broad daylight with a lamp. That's what we have to do. We have to accept that it's an illusion, but it would be too violent for ourselves if we didn't keep on trying. That's the only positive thing I can say in this moment of world history.

#Pascal

Yeah, especially in a time of monsters like now. But I also want to add that I still have hope that we' ll get there one day—when we finally put out the goddamn fire. But Manuel, you gave me a lot of food for thought. Thank you for that. I'll try to link to all your profiles so people can find your videos.

#Manuel J. Ramos

Now I have a little Substack. Finally, I—well, you put that paper on Substack.

#Pascal

Everybody, I'll put Manuel's Substack link in the description box below. Manuel Aramos, thank you for your time. Thank you very much—it was a pleasure.

#Manuel J. Ramos

Bye-bye.