

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## Thought Leader: Sir David Cannadine

Thought Leaders Forum

**Sir David Cannadine, Zach Dorfman, Anna Kiefer**

### Transcript

*As part of the Carnegie Council Centennial Thought Leaders Forum, Carnegie Council's Zach Dorfman spoke with Sir David Cannadine. Sir David is Dodge Professor of History at Princeton University and an honorary fellow at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London.*

**ZACH DORFMAN:** What, if anything, is morally distinct about the age we live in? Are the challenges we face today different only as a matter of degree or are they, in some way, unprecedented and categorically different from those in the past?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I'm not sure that we face morally distinct challenges now compared to earlier times, though my grasp of history is not sufficiently broad or deep or wide to offer an authoritative answer to that. I suppose we face, as we always have done, the challenge of how to sustain human life on the scale it is and at the level it is, on a planet where the pressure on resources is greater than it has ever been.

I'm not sure that that's necessarily a moral challenge of itself. It's a challenge about the balance between the numbers of people and the resources that are available to support their lives. But I think, inevitably, it gets us into a world of moral choices about the apportionment of resources, about perhaps the control of reproduction, which seem to me to be particularly challenging. Whether they are more challenging now than they were in earlier times I'm not sure.

Of course, also any such answer must be qualified by the fact that in different parts of the world it may well seem that the moral problems and choices are not necessarily the same as they are here in the United States or in Western Europe.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** Do you think this is because the challenges facing those places now are a result of kind of late modernization and they are coming to the same problems that we did in Western Europe and North America 100 or 200 years ago?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** One of the ways of thinking about the moral problems of our own time is that they are our version of a perennial set of problems about wealth and poverty. That's to say that the West is generating huge amounts of wealth and also huge amounts of inequality, which has certainly gone up a great deal in the West over the last 20 or 30 years, whereas other parts of the world remain in poverty. The challenges about how to do something about that are very acute.

Now, the problems of wealth and poverty as such—the belief that they are problems that can, in some sense, be addressed, is actually a relatively recent human phenomenon, over about the last 200 years or so. Before that, well, the poor were always with us and you just had to cope. Now there is a belief that we ought to try to do something to abolish poverty. That's what [John F. Kennedy](#) said

back in his [inaugural](#) in 1961. But the substance of how to do that remains, I think, very intractable.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** I would like to pick up on this developing consciousness that you just spoke about. In your recent book, *The Undivided Past: Humanity Beyond Our Differences*, you identify six major cleavages that have historically divided humankind: religion, nation, class, gender, race, and civilization. [Editor's note: Check out Sir David Cannadine's Carnegie Council [talk](#) on *The Undivided Past* and Zach Dorfman's [review essay](#) of the book.] While to varying degrees these features of human identity remain quite central to our sense of who we are, do you think that there is an emerging consciousness or global awareness that can transcend these partialities?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I think that all of us probably have a sense that we have many different identities and that it's rarely the case that one of them is so significant, so highly charged, that it, as it were, trumps and subsumes all the others. I think most of us are aware that we have different identities and that that's part of the richness of life that we wouldn't want any other way.

I think it's probably also the case that there is a sense, and perhaps a growing sense—I hope a growing sense—that many human beings share that the one thing we have in common is that we have a lot of different identities. It seems to me that there is work now being done by philosophers, by political scientists, by a whole variety of people in the medical world or the scientific world exploring these aspects of identity, both in terms of individuals and in terms of what this may tell us about humanity as a whole, which I think are hugely interesting and which I think are going to be full of important consequences for the way in which, in future times, we think about ourselves.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** There does seem to be a kind of developing consensus. This consensus parallels, to some degree, maybe what [Herbert Butterfield](#) called the "[Whig interpretation of history](#)," which is the sense that history proceeds in a kind of linear and salutary fashion towards the greater development and enlightenment of the species.

What is your sense of historical development, generally speaking? Do you think that history moves in such a linear fashion? Do we have reason to be optimistic, even if it isn't?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** Of course, interestingly, Herbert Butterfield didn't approve of the Whig interpretation of history. His argument was, "This is what the Whigs think. I'm telling you they're wrong." That of itself, I suppose, is a critique of the notion of history as progress.

I'm not sure that I have any general view about the historical process. I certainly don't think it's the providential working-out of a divine purpose, whoever the deity might be charged with that. I'm not persuaded that that's a helpful way to think about things.

And I'm rather uneager to suggest that things are either just getting better or just getting worse, because again it depends which part of the world you're in, which social class you're born in, and so on. I think it's very difficult to offer simple, sweeping generalizations.

But I am struck, for instance, by the work of [Steven Pinker](#), which does seek to argue—in my viewpoint, interestingly and provocatively—that over the last two millennia, actually the amount of global conflict does seem to be diminishing.

Now, that could all change tomorrow, I suppose, and I certainly wouldn't want to say that that proves that the Whig interpretation of history is right. But it seems to me, in some areas, in some parts of the world, there is sign of progress—and I'm for that—even if, at the same time, in other parts of the world perhaps things aren't getting better.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** If there is a kind of progress, it could be because there's this developing moral sense about the kind of unity—even unity in difference—of humankind.

Something that we're quite interested in at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs is the concept of global ethics. How would you define global ethics? Is the idea of global ethics a new phenomenon or do you think it has older roots? And if you think it's the latter, could you try to identify these roots?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I certainly think it's true that across the modern historical world, which is the only one that I have any plausible competence speaking about, there have always been some thinkers who have pondered the issue of humankind in general, although, of course, our awareness of the global nature of humankind is, in fact, a relatively recent phenomenon. Even in the middle of the 19th century, many people didn't know much about Africa, as it were. So the whole notion of an awareness of the globe and of the people who live on it and of all parts of it and of all the peoples who live on it is actually a relatively recent historical phenomenon.

I think, to some degree, that has been accompanied by thinkers concerned about humanity as a whole, about the human condition as a whole. But what I think is much less clear, which is why your organization is so important, is what the connection is between people who have thought about those broader issues and how far that informs the policies and conduct of people who are actually in charge of running the countries which together constitute the globe. There's a kind of big gap, it seems to me, between what some thinkers might be saying about the human condition as a whole and the possibilities of leaders of particular countries being able to take on that agenda.

Global warming would be an obvious case in point. I'm no scientist, so I can only repeat what I read in the newspapers. But it seems pretty clear that global warming is a serious problem. It's a global problem. How can anybody in charge of one particular nation do much about that? How are all leaders of all nations going to be got to agree to do something about that? Well, I don't know.

But clearly there is a set of problems by which the world is beset—poverty would obviously be one, a lack of education would be another, malnutrition, illness would be another, global warming would be another—that are not confined to individual nations and which require treatment on a scale that transcends the limitations of national politics and national sovereignty.

But how organizations are to be got into being to do that or made to work better to do that—I think of various aspects of the United Nations—seems to me a big challenge that we still face.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** You just spoke a little bit about the structure of global politics. This leads me to the next question, which is how we can reconcile our universal responsibilities or the global ethics with these local partialities, these local cultures, these local beliefs.

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I have to say off the top of my head that I don't know how that's to be done. Having not just written about religion, class, gender, race, and civilization, but also having written about the concept of the nation as a unit of identity, I'm very struck by the fact that many aspects of how the world works or many aspects of how the world doesn't work cannot be understood or defined, let alone addressed or solved, within the boundaries of national units of loyalty, sentiment, jurisdiction, power. How that is to be engaged with and dealt with seems to me to be very difficult to answer.

There are more nations in existence now than has ever been true before in the entire history of the world, as a consequence of decolonization, as a consequence of the end of the [Cold War](#). I think

there are now about 200 of them. For most of human history, the default mode of human organization has, in fact, been large empires. That really only comes to an end with the end of the great European empires after the [Second World War](#) and the [breakup](#) of the Soviet empire more recently. There are still some empires left. The United States is one. China is another. Perhaps Brazil is a third. But on the whole, the default mode of human organization now is the nation-state.

But there are an awful lot of them. Many of them are very unstable. Many of them are of very recent origin. They may not last. But that for now is the unit of political authority that we have and, for many people, one of their most important forms of personal identity.

But it's clearly a unit of authority and identity utterly unfit for the purpose of addressing many of the global problems by which we are faced today. What the solution to that is I don't know.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** You spoke previously about global climate change, global poverty, and then the issues related to the structure of the international system. What do you think is the greatest challenge or dilemma among all of them? Do you think it's a problem like climate change or do you think it's the structure of the international system itself? Is the nation-state the issue? Is that the fundamental dilemma that faces us today? Or is it something more diffuse that could be solved within that system?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I think that it's very interesting that in the aftermath of the Second World War, a whole variety of organizations were created, international organizations, which were going to go beyond the jurisdiction of the nation-state. After all, it was thought by many people that the problem of the Second World War was caused by nation-states falling out with each other—that wasn't the whole truth, but it was part of the truth—and that therefore what was necessary was to devise a set of international organizations which would prevent those sorts of national wars happening again. Hence the United Nations, hence NATO, hence the World Bank, hence the International Monetary Fund—global organizations which were attempting, I suppose, to analyze, to describe, and to solve problems which transcended the boundaries of particular nation-states.

Well, opinions vary as to how well they have done at that, I suppose it would be fair to say, though I'm bound to say that my view is that I'm very glad those organizations have been in being. But it may well be that one of the issues that we face now—I'm not quite sure who "we" is, but I'll come to that in a minute—is that those international organizations created in the late 1940s and early 1950s have kind of run their course and that what is most urgent at the moment is to create a new set of international organizations that are fit for the purposes of dealing with the problems that we now face.

How that could be got to happen and who the "we" would be, who would say, "This is what 'we' ought to do and 'we' are going to go ahead and do it," I have to say I don't know.

But I think there is a serious issue to address: Do we have the right international organizations in being and in place to deal with the problems by which we are now beset, which transcend the bounds of nations, which aren't quite the same—in fact, in many ways, absolutely aren't the same—as the problems which appeared to be at the top of the agenda in the late 1940s and early 1950s were?

**ZACH DORFMAN:** This kind of dovetails nicely with the question of institutions. That's the idea of leadership, and moral leadership. What does moral leadership mean to you? Are there any figures that you can identify that you think embody this ideal of moral leadership?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I began life as a historian of 19th century Britain, and 19th century Britons believed in great men. They wrote very lengthy biographies of great men to prove that they were great men. They believed they were a great nation and that history was moved by great men, and greatness had a moral dimension to it. Even if these people were not wholly admirable, the biographies were written in such a way as to give the impression that, in fact, they were.

I don't think we live in that world now, either in Britain or, in a sense, anywhere else. I think we don't believe, on the whole, that people in public life are motivated by admirable qualities and characteristics. The media rarely wants to give public figures the benefit of the doubt, let alone starting from the presumption that they might actually be rather admirable figures. I don't think, on the whole, religious leaders these days have the credibility that they once did, perhaps in part because the organizations they lead don't have the credibility they once had.

So if one said, "Name anybody alive today who is a leader of extraordinary moral grandeur," I suppose most people would answer—and I certainly would—[Nelson Mandela](#). Of course, I would produce that answer because I think he is a person of extraordinary moral virtues and courage. I think being in prison for so long, then showing such magnanimity to his prisoners, then carrying peaceful revolution in South Africa is an extraordinary list of achievements that is unrivaled by anybody alive today.

But, of course, Nelson Mandela has not been an active leader for a very long time. If you said to me, "Name somebody currently in post who is a leader of Mandela-like towering moral grandeur," I don't think I would be able to produce an answer to that. I think [Barack Obama](#) is a morally admirable figure, and if I had the vote in this country, I would certainly have voted for him. I would love to have dinner with him. But is he a figure of towering moral grandeur? I think probably not. And if he's not, I don't know who else of the current crop of leaders actually is.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** Is there anyone who is not alive who you would recognize to be of that kind of moral stature?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** It seems to me that somebody else of whom that was true was certainly [Martin Luther King](#), and somebody else of whom that was certainly true was [Mahatma Gandhi](#), both of them flawed figures. It seems to me to be possible to be a person of towering moral grandeur and be a flawed figure.

But I think that what was significant about both of them and also, in a sense, about Nelson Mandela was that although they were particularly concerned, respectively, with India being under the [imperial dominion](#) of the British in Gandhi's case or the wish to get [civil rights](#) for African Americans in Martin Luther King's case or the wish to bring [apartheid](#) to an end in Nelson Mandela's case, the fact is that all of them nevertheless claimed that they were not just concerned to promote the sectional interests of one group of people, but that they had a broader concern for humanity as a whole.

That seems to me to be one definition of people of serious moral quality, that they had a broader view of humanity even as there was a particular part of humanity for which they had an especial concern.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** I would like to circle back around briefly to something that you mentioned before, and that's the matter of war and violence. You referenced Steven Pinker and his book [The Better Angels of Our Nature](#). There seems to be a consensus, both empirical and scholarly—as much of a consensus as one could have in scholarly circles—that there has been marked decline in the last 50 years in war between major powers and there has been a notable decline in interstate war in

general, although the assertion that there is less total violence in the world is more controversial.

Do you think that world peace is possible? And—this again touches on the question of the nation-state—what would need to change about the current global political structure, as well as our current consciousness as human beings, to bring about such a state of affairs?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I'm very struck by the fact that the presumption that for world peace to happen, everybody's got to agree to do it and war has to end seems to me to set the bar very high. I think one can argue that across most of human history, most people actually have been at peace with each other and lived with their neighbors, and that's actually the good story about the human past, which, like the good story about the human present, doesn't make the headlines, either in history books or in the newspapers. Actually, for most of human history, most people have lived at peace with each other. We constantly need to remind ourselves of that and ask how and why that has been possible.

From that perspective, the aberrant mode of human behavior is war. Of course, there are different categories of war, different scales of war, different motives for war.

Is war getting less? Well, there seems to be some evidence to that effect. But, of course, we have to remember that it's starting from a position where the [First](#) and Second World Wars were completely dreadful, and compared to that, almost anything is an improvement. That isn't to say that wars haven't gone on since then, but not quite on that scale.

So is the world getting more peaceful? I would like to think it is. The second half of the 20th century was clearly, in many ways—though not all—more peaceful than the first half. And I think—and I would want to stand by this—that throughout most of human history, most people have lived at peace with each other.

But I don't want to be thought by that to be saying that there isn't lots more work to do to promote the cause of peace and to define what peace ideally might mean more vigorously than perhaps many organizations do.

For example, would a world wholly at peace be acceptable if there was an unacceptable amount of poverty and inequality? Peace of itself maybe isn't enough. I'd rather there be a world at peace, with inequality, than a world at war. On the other hand, a world at peace with a great level of inequality isn't the endpoint of the things that still need doing, though it's part of the way there. Since the best is always the enemy of the good in human affairs, I wouldn't want to be thought to be against that.

I'm in favor of more work on peace, on the understanding that maybe it's not quite the big job that we think, because most people have lived together, I think, across the human past in some degree of peace, but also that we need to remember that even if we did have more peace than we've got at the moment, that only means there are more problems to address beyond that.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** Aside from world peace, which is admittedly a laudable but difficult objective—world peace in the grander sense of the term, not the kind of *modus vivendi*, the term that you were talking about—what would you like to see happen in the next 100 years in terms of our advancement as a species? In the *Undivided Past* you note that, historically speaking, it is the categories of religion and nation that have been the most successful in motivating us and, at times, in dividing us from one another.

Do you see these older divisions reasserting themselves in the 21st century or will new cleavages

take their place? Or, alternatively, will all such divisions lose some of their salience or explosive power?

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I don't think there's any doubt that if one takes the long view of the human past, then religion has been a hugely important provider of identities; nations, more recent; class, gender, and race, more recent still; civilization, from the late 18th-century on. The oldest is religion, and I suppose the next most significant has been the nation.

Religion has a particular appeal because it's about faith and belief and about the next world, as well as this world—or about superstition, depending on where you stand on religion.

Nations have a particular identificational pull because they raise income taxes, you have to be a citizen of a certain country, have a passport. There's no exact equivalent to those, as it were, hooks to identity with class or gender or race or even civilization. So it's clear that each of these forms of identity has a different historical trajectory.

Where they are headed in the future I don't know. I suppose my hope would be that when people in future decades, if we're looking 100 years forward, think about identities, write about identities, talk publicly about identities, there will be a greater appreciation of and more attention given to the multiple identities of individual people, which seems to me to be what the richness of humanity is made up of, rather than what seems to me the excessive stress on single collective identities, which I think are a grotesque oversimplification of the richness and complexity of the human condition and often are very irresponsible and lead to no good.

So I suppose, looking forward, what I would hope to see is a greater awareness of the richness of individual identities and less attention given to single, simple, distorted, misleading collective identities.

But since we're talking about 100 years, I shan't be here to see. But that's what I would wish to happen.

**ZACH DORFMAN:** Sir David Cannadine, thank you so much for speaking with us today. It's really a pleasure.

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** Thank you.

### Point B Podcast

**ANNA KIEFER:** I'm Anna Kiefer and this is Point B.

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I'm very struck by the fact that many aspects of how the world works or doesn't work cannot be understood or defined, let alone addressed or solved, within the boundaries of national units of loyalty, sentiment, jurisdiction, power.

**ANNA KIEFER:** Today we're talking with Princeton history professor Sir David Cannadine. Having recently written *The Undivided Past: Humanity Beyond our Differences*, which investigates different categories of human identity, the significance and the artifice of national identity is very much on Sir Cannadine's mind.

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** There are more nations in existence now than has ever been true before in the entire history of the world, as a consequence of decolonization, as a consequence of the [end of the Cold War](#). I think there are now about 200 of them.

**ANNA KIEFER:** The ubiquity of the nation-state wasn't always the case.

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** For most of human history, the default mode of human organization has, in fact, been large empires. That really only comes to an end with the end of the great European empires after the [Second World War](#) and the [breakup](#) of the Soviet empire more recently. There are still some empires left. The United States is one. China is another. Perhaps Brazil is a third. But on the whole, the default mode of human organization now is the nation-state.

But there are an awful lot of them. Many of them are very unstable. Many of them are of very recent origin. They may not last. But that for now is the unit of political authority that we have and, for many people, one of their most important forms of personal identity.

**ANNA KIEFER:** Sir Cannadine points to religion as another important signifier of personal identity.

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I don't think there's any doubt that if one takes the long view of the human past, then religion has been a hugely important provider of identities; nations, more recent; class, gender, and race, more recent still; civilization, from the late 18th century on. But the oldest is religion. Religion has a particular appeal because it's about faith and belief and about the next world, as well as this world—or about superstition, depending on where you stand on religion.

**ANNA KIEFER:** Today, though, national identity is more tangible.

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** Nations have a particular identificational pull because they raise income taxes, you have to be a citizen of a certain country, have a passport. There's no exact equivalent to those, as it were, hooks to identity with class or gender or race or even civilization.

**ANNA KIEFER:** Looking ahead, Sir Cannadine hopes that humanity will move beyond emphasizing collective identities, like nationality or religion.

**SIR DAVID CANNADINE:** I suppose my hope would be that when people in future decades, think about identities, write about identities, talk publicly about identities, there will be a greater appreciation of and more attention given to the multiple identities of individual people, which seems to me to be what the richness of humanity is made up of, rather than what seems to me the excessive stress on single collective identities, which I think are a grotesque oversimplification of the richness and complexity of the human condition and often are very irresponsible and lead to no good.

So I suppose, looking forward, what I would hope to see is a greater awareness of the richness of individual identities and less attention given to single, simple, distorted, misleading collective identities.

**ANNA KIEFER:** That was Sir David Cannadine, Dodge Professor of History at Princeton University.

### Video Clip

“It may well be that one of the issues that we face now is that those international organizations created in the late 1940s and early 1950s have kind of run their course and that what is most urgent at the moment is to create a new set of international organizations that are fit for the purposes of dealing with the problems that we now face.”

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