

John Robson: As Azerbaijan Hosts COP29, Academic Theories Could Stifle the Nation's Fledgling Westernization

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Attendees head toward the venue of the COP29 U.N. climate summit in Baku, Azerbaijan, on Nov. 14, 2024. AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool



Commentary

The eyes of the world, or at least one elite segment of it, are on Baku, Azerbaijan, and the COP29 climate change conference. Which I was there to look at for the first half. But when I say “it,” I mean Baku and Azerbaijan as well as the conference. And they are two very different things.



The conference itself descended on the city almost like an alien spaceship full of what I call *homo conferensis*, a species to which I



belong as an urban, Western, English-speaking child of university professors who flew the Atlantic before turning 2 and has attended



more conferences than I can count. Partly because, regardless of topic



of ideological orientation, they are all sociologically similar, including



the airport-taxi-hotel-taxi-venue-and-back routine by multilingual

participants cosmopolitan in a uniform and often narrow way.

Most Azerbaijanis have very different CVs. For starters, not since I was hiking in rural Nepal decades back have I been anywhere so few people could manage a single sentence in broken English. Even cab drivers didn't know hello, yes, no, or please. So in one sense, what they made of our UFO I cannot say.

In another, being *homo conferensis*, I have a strong opinion. You see, everyone at COP29 was part of what we may call the “modernized” world. But really, it's Westernized. Almost everything we take for granted, assume everyone aspires to, and that everyone would have invented long ago if not for unfortunate historical circumstances like invasions or tyranny, are actually of Western origin.

Whether you're thinking of things, habits or institutions, potable tap water, literacy or separation of church and state, highway signs, pop music, or parliaments and feminism, it all comes from the West. And while we find it organic and natural even when disruptive, in Azerbaijan and many other places, it really is like an alien invasion.

Take their alphabet. Please. Before I arrived, unlike most COPpers, I checked into it because I was curious about the country and its people and consider it inept and uncouth to go somewhere unable to read even obvious signs.

In Azerbaijan, it's not always hard. For instance, "Polis," especially given a car with lights, a vest, peaked hat, and sidearm. Or "Ambulans" on a van. Or "Avto servis." But here's where things get a bit tricky, then a lot trickier.

The current phonetic Latin alphabet has been in use, sort of, since 1991 when Azerbaijan pried itself loose from the collapsing Soviet Union. Only to be taken over by a former KGB local party boss in a coup in 1993, then by his son. But I gress.

The point is, Azerbaijan is in a rough neighbourhood and has been rumbled by people you've heard of, including the Mongols, Tamerlane, and the Seljuks, as well as ones you haven't, like Qajar Iran. There's even a Roman inscription here as they fought the Parthians, unsuccessfully, for it. But virtually all these conquerors were culturally similar until the Russians came along and gobbled Azerbaijan up in the early 19th century.

They imposed the Cyrillic alphabet, developed the Baku oilfields, created schools, and otherwise imposed a different way of life. And were resented, to the point that when the Soviets left, the Azerbaijanis phased out their alien alphabet. Only to impose another one. Broadly, the culture is Turkic, and they have that alphabet, too, making product labels a quaint eclectic mess, including some first-rate gorkiy shokolad. But the new and now official alphabet is phonetic and Latin. Except with 32 letters, including a schwa for our "e" in Azerbaijan, and "c" for our "j" in same.

Going Latin was wise since your modernization will be halting if you regard Russia as a beacon of enlightenment and Turkey as an economic powerhouse. But also, entirely foreign. Like a huge part of the vocabulary, including "avto" from the Russian avtomobil and "restoran," French via Russian.

The words are foreign because the things are. And I'm not saying Westernization is bad, despite Marx and Engels' valid lament that "all that is solid melts into air." But, with a hat tip to Theodore von Laue's "The World Revolution of Westernization," while it is chaotic and potentially relativistic where it was born, it is wildly disruptive elsewhere.

I don't think most COPpers tried to venture outside their smug bubble and grasp the disaster for the people of Azerbaijan, already facing massive problems including the ghastly ecological condition of the Caspian Sea, if their one real economic asset, hydrocarbon energy, were breezily shut down because the weather is supposedly getting worse. They neither know nor care how different their whole way of life is from that of most people, including those here for COP29.

Things are hard enough in Azerbaijan, not least Westernization, without us casually stomping their economy flat because of some abstract theory popular in academic salons.

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