Milton Wolf Seminar 2017


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In June of 1947, George C. Marshall unveiled what would become known as the Marshall Plan, a broad sweeping agenda for rebuilding Europe out of the rubble of World War II. Economic recovery was to be the central driver of this vision of a reconstructed Europe. According to Marshall, “the physical loss of life, the visible destruction of cities, factories, mines and railroads… was probably less serious than the dislocation of the entire fabric of European economy.” In the ensuing years, the US Congress poured more than $12.5 billion dollars (approximately $120 billion in current dollars) into the Western European economy. Activities ranged from rebuilding industry, to exchange programs for engineers and industrialists, to setting up trade institutions throughout Western Europe. The sixteen recipient countries formed the Committee of European Economic Cooperation, laying the groundwork for what would later become the European Union. Former Soviet Bloc countries refused participation further chilling the Cold War. In 1953, Marshall received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of the contribution of the Marshall Plan to post War recovery. In the ensuing years, “the Marshall Plan” has evolved into a short hand for ambitious reform plans: “a Marshall Plan for ICTs,” “A Marshall Plan for the Middle East,” “a Marshall Plan for inner cities.” Only recently, German Development Minister Gerd Mueller announced an impending a new "Marshall Plan with Africa." Embedded within the original Marshall Plan and these newer iterations are grand visions for how to build and rebuild society.

Seventy years following the launch of the Marshall Plan, various competing visions and technical paths towards completing those visions have emerged, some of which may be characterized as fragmenting and highly revisionist. As the UK prepares to make its Brexit and other European countries consider similar legislation, the future of the European Union, the origins of which many historians credit to the Marshall Plan, is in question. Populist movements from the United States to Greece are on the rise, signaling large scale dissatisfaction with the globalization of trade. In the Middle East and parts of Africa, ISIS and other Islamist groups seek to establish new political orders. Moreover, nation states, seeking to reassert sovereignty and/or leverage geopolitical power are increasingly relying upon proxy organizations and actors and new forms of propaganda to promote certain visions and undermine others. Grand visions such as the Marshall Plan are never uniformly accepted, interpreted, or successful. Visions for construction or reconstruction of societies necessarily invite acolytes and enemies.

Using the Marshall Plan as a launching point, the 2017 Milton Wolf Seminar examined how such grand visions—even grand (re)visions independent of and inconsistent with the Marshall Plan model—for society are produced, sustained, and at times defeated. By paying particular attention to the role of the media, panels explored the historical legacies and lessons of the origin and execution of the Marshall plan as a vision for a new Europe, the role of persuasion and media in shaping that vision, and the evolution of contemporary competing and complementary visions for society. Case studies examined both reactive visions-ones that seek to rebuild societies and countries such as Syria in the aftermath of physical or economic devastation and proactive visions – ones such as populist movements that seek to transform existing structures.
Panelists included Jim Rutenberg from the New York Times; Former Ambassador Ali Ashgar Soltanieh who served as Iran’s Permanent Representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna during the Iran Nuclear Deal negotiations; William Burke White, Richard Perry Professor and Inaugural Director, Perry World House Deputy Dean and Professor of Law University of Pennsylvania Law School as well as former member of the Obama Administration on Secretary Clinton’s Policy Staff from 2009-2011; Shawn Powers, Executive Director of the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy; Hans Petschar, director of the Picture Archives and Graphics Department at the Austrian National Library; and many more. >> Photos