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Globalization and Cultural Identity

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It is fair to say that the impact of globalization in the cultural sphere has, most generally, been viewed in a pessimistic light. Typically, it has been associated with the destruction of cultural identities, victims of the accelerating encroachment of a homogenized, westernized, consumer culture. This view, the constituency for which extends from (some) academics to anti-globalization activists (Shepard and Hayduk 2002), tends to interpret globalization as a seamless extension of – indeed, as a euphemism for – western cultural imperialism. In the discussion which follows I want to approach this claim with a good deal of scepticism.

I will not seek to deny the obvious power of globalized capitalism to distribute and promote its cultural goods in every corner. Nor will I take up the argument – now very commonly made by critics of the cultural imperialism thesis (Lull 2000; Thompson 1995; Tomlinson 1991) that a deeper cultural impact cannot be easily inferred from the presence of such goods. What I will try to argue is something more specific: that cultural identity, properly understood, is much more the *product* of globalization than its victim.

Identity as Treasure

To begin, let me sketch the implicit (for it is usually implicit) reasoning behind the assumption that globalization destroys identities. Once upon a time, before the era of globalization, there existed local, autonomous, distinct and well-defined, robust and culturally sustaining connections between geographical place and cultural experience. These connections constituted one's – and one's community's – 'cultural identity'. This identity was something people simply 'had' as an undisturbed existential possession, an inheritance, a benefit of traditional long dwelling, of continuity with the past. Identity, then, like language, was not just a description of cultural belonging; it was a sort of collective treasure of local communities. But it was also discovered to be something fragile that needed protecting and preserving, that could be lost. Into this world of manifold, discrete, but to various degrees vulnerable, cultural identities there suddenly burst (apparently around the middle of the 1980s) the corrosive power of globalization. Globalization, so the story goes, has swept like a flood tide through the world's diverse cultures, destroying stable localities, displacing peoples, bringing a market-driven, 'branded' homogenization of cultural experience, thus obliterating the differences between locality-defined cultures which had constituted our identities. Though globalization has been judged as involving a *general* process of loss of cultural diversity, some of course did better, some worse out of this process. Whilst those cultures in

the mainstream of the flow of capitalism – those in the West and, specifically, the United States – saw a sort of standardized version of their cultures exported worldwide, it was the 'weaker' cultures of the developing world that have been most threatened. Thus the economic vulnerability of these non-western cultures is assumed to be matched by a cultural vulnerability. Cultural identity is at risk everywhere with the depredations of globalization, but the developing world is particularly at risk.

This, then, is the story that implicates globalization in the destruction of cultural identity, and in the threat to that particular subset of cultural identity that we call 'national identity'. But another, quite contradictory, story can be told: that globalization, far from destroying it, has been perhaps the most significant force in *creating and proliferating* cultural identity. This story involves a rather different understanding of the idea of 'identity' than the somewhat reified understanding of an individual or collective possession. And it also involves a rather more complex understanding of the globalization process: one, at least, which allows for a degree of unpredictability in its consequences.

Identity as Cultural Power

Let us begin with identity, a concept which surely lies at the heart of our contemporary cultural imagination. It is not, in fact, difficult in the prolific literature of analysis of the concept to find positions which contest the story of identity as the victim of globalization that I sketched above. To take just one example, Manuel Castells devoted an entire volume of his celebrated analysis of 'The Information Age' to the proposition that: 'Our world and our lives are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity.' For Castells, the primary *opposition* to the power of globalization lies in 'the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalization . . . on behalf of cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment' (1997: 2). Far from being the fragile flower that globalization tramples, identity is seen here as the upsurging *power* of local culture that offers (albeit multi-form, disorganized and sometimes politically reactionary) *resistance* to the centrifugal force of capitalist globalization.

This more robust view of the 'power of identity' is one to which anyone surveying the dramatic rise of social movements based around identity positions (gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, nationality) might easily subscribe. So, recognizing the significant cultural sources of resistance to the power of globalization goes a long way towards getting this power in perspective. The impact of globalization thus becomes, more plausibly, a matter of the *interplay* of an institutional-technological impetus towards globality with counterposed 'localizing' forces. The drive towards 'globality' combines a logic of capitalist expansion with the rapid development of deterritorializing media and communications technologies. But this drive is opposed by various processes and practices expressing different orders of 'locality'. Amongst these we can count the cultural identity movements that Castells focuses on, but also less formally organized expressions of identity, for example, those involved in local consumption preferences (Howes 1996). And, on quite another level, we have to add the considerable cultural effort exercised by nation-states in binding their populations into another cultural-political order of local identification.

This more complex formulation clearly implies that cultural identity is not likely to be the easy prey of globalization. This is because identity is not in fact merely some

fragile communal-psychic attachment, but a considerable dimension of *institutionalized* social life in modernity. Particularly in the dominant form of *national identity*, it is the product of deliberate cultural construction and maintenance via both the regulatory and the socializing institutions of the state: in particular, the law, the education system and the media. The deterritorializing force of globalization thus meets a structured opposition in the form of what Michael Billig (1995) has called 'banal nationalism' – the everyday minute reinforcement; the continuous routinized 'flagging' of national belonging, particularly through media discourse – sponsored by developed nation-states.

Of course this is not to deny that nation-states are, to varying degrees, *compromised* by globalization in their capacity to maintain exclusivity of identity attachments, just as they are in their capacity independently to regulate national economies within a global market. For example, the complexities and tensions introduced by the multiethnic constitution of societies arising from global population movements – a chronic feature of all modern nation-states (Smith 1995; Geertz 2000) – pose obvious problems for the continued cultural 'binding' of twenty-first-century nations into coherent identity positions. This problem is, moreover, more dramatic in its consequences for some nations of the developing world, where multi-ethnic composition arising from the crude territorial divisions of colonial occupation combines with comparatively weak state structures to produce a legacy of often bloody political instability and inter-ethnic violence.

But notice that none of these problems conforms to the scenario of the general *destruction* of identities by globalization. Rather, they attest to an *amplification* of the significance of identity positions in general produced by globalization. It is this proliferation of identity that causes problems for the nation-state's hegemony over its population's sense of cultural attachment.

Identity and Institutional Modernity

This brings me to my central claim that globalization actually proliferates rather than destroys identities. In this respect I depart somewhat from Castells's position: in setting identity as a sort of autonomous cultural dynamic, surging up from the grassroots as an oppositional force to globalization, Castells really fails to see the rather compelling *inner logic* between the globalization process and the institutionalized construction of identities. This, I think, lies in the nature of the institutions of modernity that globalization distributes. To put the matter simply: globalization is really the globalization of modernity, and modernity is the harbinger of identity.

It is a common assumption that identity-formation is a universal feature of human experience. Castells seems implicitly to take this view when he writes: 'Identity is people's source of meaning and experience' (1997: 6). But whilst it is true that the construction of meaning via cultural practices is a human universal, it does not follow that this invariably takes the form of identity construction as we currently understand it in the global-modern West. This form of ethnocentric assumption has been recently criticized both by anthropologists and media and cultural critics. For example, David Morley, commenting on Roger Rouse's study of Mexican labour migrants to the United States, points out that these people 'moved from a world in which . . . *identity was not a central concern*, to one in which they were pressed . . . to adopt a particular form of

personhood (as bearers of individual identities) and of identity as a member of a collective or "community" . . . which *was quite at odds with their own understanding of their situation and their needs*' (Morley 2000: 43 – emphasis added).

Understanding that what we call 'identity' may not be a universal, but just one particular, modern, way of socially organizing – and indeed regulating – cultural experience takes some of the wind from the sails of the argument that globalization inevitably destroys identity. The social-psychology of attachment to locality is a powerful phenomenon, but it is also a complex one, with different possible modes of articulation and different consequent implications for people's sense of self and of existential well-being. And these differences are all relative to cultural context. The assumption that these various attachments can and must be focused through the western-modern prism of 'identity' is no less short-sighted than the corollary assumption that these attachments have remained unchanged across time in 'traditional' societies. And this is, of course, related to the common mistake, criticized by anthropologists such as James Clifford (1997), of regarding 'traditional' societies as, *by nature* and not merely in comparison to modern ones, static and immobile.

The implication of understanding identity as a specifically modern cultural imagination is sufficient to undermine the simple idea that globalization destroys identity. But the stronger claim that globalization actually generates identity – and, indeed, the danger that, in some circumstances, it produces *too much* identity – requires more elaboration.

Globalization and Modernity

To appreciate this, it is necessary to take a more complex view of the globalization process than is often adopted – certainly in the polemical discourses of the anti-globalization movement, where globalization is essentially understood as the globalization of capitalism, achieved in its cultural aspect via a complicitous western-dominated media system. This more complex, multidimensional conceptualization, which views globalization as operating simultaneously and interrelatedly in the economic, technological-communicational, political and cultural spheres of human life, is in fact relatively uncontentious – at least in principle – within academic discourses. But the cultural implication, rather less easily swallowed by some, is that globalization involves not the simple enforced distribution of a particular western (say, liberal, secular, possessive-individualist, capitalist-consumerist) lifestyle, but a more complicated dissemination of the entire range of institutional features of cultural modernity.

Modernity is a complex and much contested idea, but in this context it means, above all, the *abstraction* of social and cultural practices from contexts of local particularity, and their *institutionalization and regulation* across time and space (Giddens 1990). The examples of such institutionalization that most readily spring to mind are the organization and policing of social territory (the nation-state, urbanism), or of production and consumption practices (industrialization, the capitalist economy).

But modernity also institutionalizes and regulates cultural practices, including those by which we imagine attachment and belonging to a place or a community. The *mode* of such imagination it promotes is what we have come to know as 'cultural identity' – self and communal definitions based around specific, usually politically inflected, differentiations: gender, sexuality, class, religion, race and ethnicity, nationality. Some
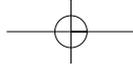
of these differentiations of course existed before the coming of modernity, some – like nationality – are specifically modern imaginings. But the force of modernity is as much in the *substance* of these categories of imagined belonging as in the very fact of their institutionalization and regulation. In modern societies we live our lives within structures that orchestrate existential experience according to well-policed boundaries. We 'live' our gender, our sexuality, our nationality and so forth as publicly institutionalized, discursively organized belongings. What could be a much looser, contingent, particular and tacit sense of belonging becomes structured into an array of identities, each with implications for our material and psychological well-being, each, thus, with a 'politics'. This is what I mean by saying that modernity is the harbinger of identity.

And in so far as globalization distributes the institutional features of modernity across all cultures, globalization produces 'identity' where none existed – where before there were perhaps more particular, more inchoate, less socially policed belongings. This, rather than the sheer obliteration of identities, is the most significant cultural impact of globalization, an impact felt at the *formal* level of cultural experience. This impact might, on a narrow reading, be seen as 'cultural imperialism' – in that this modern institutionalization of cultural attachments clearly arose first in the West. But, more interestingly, it can be understood as part of the cultural package, mixed in its blessings, that is global modernity.

Identity and Deterritorialization

One broad approach to this 'package' is in terms of the 'deterritorializing' character of the globalization process – its property of diminishing the significance of social-geographical location to the mundane flow of cultural experience (Garcia-Canclini 1995; Tomlinson 1999). What this idea implies is not that globalization destroys localities – as, for example, in the crude homogenization thesis, everywhere becoming blandly culturally uniform – but that cultural experience is in various ways 'lifted out' of its traditional 'anchoring' in particular localities. One way of understanding this is to think about the places we live in as being increasingly 'penetrated' by the connectivity of globalization. We may live in places that retain a high degree of distinctiveness, but this particularity is no longer – as it may have been in the past – the most important determinant of our cultural experience. The idea of deterritorialization, then, grasps the way in which events outside of our immediate localities – in Anthony Giddens's terse definition of globalization, 'action(s) at a distance' – are increasingly consequential for our experience. Modern culture is less determined by location because location is increasingly penetrated by 'distance'.

The more obvious examples of this sort of penetration of localities are in such areas of mundane cultural experience as our interaction with globalizing media and communications technologies – television, mobile phones, email, the Internet – or in the transformation of local into increasingly 'international' food cultures (Tomlinson 1999). What is at stake in such examples is a transformation in our routine pattern of cultural existence which brings globalized influences, forces, experiences and outlooks into the core of our locally situated lifeworld. Television news brings distant conflicts into the intimate spaces of our living-rooms, 'exotic' tastes become routinely mixed with domestic ones, assumptions we make about the health and security of our families now routinely factor in an awareness, however vague, of global contingencies such

as environmental risk or stock-market stability. But we can add to these a more subtle example of deterritorialization: precisely, the reach of the institutional-modern form of identity into cultural life.

For the remaining part of this discussion, I shall try to sketch some of the implications of what we call this proliferating but 'uneven' generation of identity, focusing on the key issue of the challenge this poses to the coherence of national identities.

Since the eighteenth century, national identity has been the most spectacularly successful modern mode of orchestrating belonging. And the fact that virtually all of the world's six billion population today either enjoy or claim a national identity is itself testament to the power of the globalization of modernity. It is clear from this that the nation and national identity are not in danger of imminent collapse. But the very dynamism and complexity of globalization is such that the stability of this form of identification is not guaranteed indefinitely. The very dynamic which established national identity as the most powerful cultural-political binding force of modernity may now be unravelling some of the skeins that tie us in securely to our national 'home'. The kernel of truth in the claim that national identity is threatened by globalization lies in the fact that the proliferation of identity positions may be producing challenges to the dominance of national identity.

The most remarked examples of this sort of challenge are, naturally enough, the most immediately destructive ones: the violence and chaos of ethnic and religious confrontations with the nation-state. The repercussions of the fall of Eastern European communism – most dramatically in the former Yugoslavia – in the final decade of the twentieth century are an obvious case in point. The collapse of communism is often interpreted in political-economic terms as a reaction to a step change in the global advance of capitalism. The increasing power and integration of the global capitalist market made it impossible for the control economies of the eastern bloc to survive outside of this indisputably dominant economic world system. Although the capitulation of these regimes was most immediately due to internal pressures for liberalization across both the political and the economic spheres, the impetus towards this lay – so the economistic story goes – in a combination of the external economic forces which were rapidly undermining the economic bases of these countries, and the demonstration, via a globalizing media, of the attractions of western consumer culture ineluctably associated with both economic and democratic liberalism.

But the ensuing conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo could not, on any reasonable interpretation, be judged as the fall-out from an exclusively political-economic process. What the 'opening up' of globalization meant in this context was not the engagement with a global market system, but the unleashing of violent cultural forces – ethnic/nationalist factionalism – which had been, apparently, artificially contained under the communist federal regime. The rapid disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation revealed deep divisions in cultural and religious identities – Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, ethnic Albanians; Christians and Muslims – which became rapidly inflamed into what Mary Kaldor (1999) has aptly called the 'new wars' of the era of globalization. The key point in Kaldor's analysis of these 'globalization wars' is that they are fought around a vicious, particularistic form of 'identity politics' in which 'movements . . . mobilize around ethnic, racial or religious identity for the purpose of claiming state power' (1999: 76).

Such examples of the violent assertion of, and the struggle over, cultural identity seem, on the one hand, to fit the argument about the generation of modern institutionalized

forms of identity rather well. For, far from being simply atavistic reversions, the deliberate aim of such ethnic conflicts is, as Kaldor says, to claim state power – that is, to institutionalize a particular cultural identity in a modern political form. But, on the other hand, we might view such instances as less of a fundamental challenge to the dominant *form* of identity as national identity, than as struggles for dominance within this form (Tomlinson 2000).

There are, of course, examples of projects of cultural 'reterritorialization' – the claiming and reclaiming of localities – which don't inevitably involve claims to state power. For example, the land rights movements of aboriginal groups in Australia, the USA, Canada and elsewhere that have come to prominence in recent years. Though in such examples the claims of identity are inextricably mixed with issues of political and economic justice, there is the indication that what is being argued for is a right to an ethnic 'homeland' that is conceived as coexistent and compatible with a national identity. What is interesting about such projects is that, again, they exemplify a particularly modern cultural sensibility: the very notion of a juridical contestation of rights linked to identity seems understandable only within the sort of global-modern institutional form of identity which we have identified.

But for evidence of a more fundamental shift in the grip of the nation-state over our cultural imagination, we may have to look for more gentle, subtle, long-term shifts in identification. The most discussed aspect of this sort of shift – particularly within cultural studies and in post-colonial studies – is the emergence of 'hybrid' cultural identities as a consequence both of the multicultural constitution of modern nation-states and of the emergence of transnational forms of popular culture (Nederveen Pieterse 1995; Werbner and Modood 1997). Significant as this trend is, there is a danger that the concept of hybridity may be expected to do too much explanatory work and, indeed, that the idea of continual hybridization as the destination of global cultures may be overstated (Tomlinson 1999: 141f.). So, to conclude, I want to present an example, in the form of a little vignette, of a modest popular-cultural consequence of globalization that does not fit into either of the usual schemas of homogenization or hybridization.

The Revival of the *Qipau*

In the fashionable *Dong An* shopping centre in the Wang Fu Jing district of Beijing you will find a small boutique called *Mu Zhen Liao*. Here, young, discriminating and upwardly mobile Beijingers come to choose clothes, not from the designer labels of the West, but 'classical' Chinese clothing: elegant *qipaus*, *cheongsams* and finely tailored jackets in beautiful silks and other traditional fabrics. These clothes display all the detail and finesse of the fashions favoured by the wealthy Manchurian elite in the Qing dynasty of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. But they are not in any simple sense 'traditional' clothes. The young women wearing them in the streets will turn as many heads amongst the locals as amongst the western tourists. For the fact is that ten or fifteen years ago a shop like *Mu Zhen Liao* would not have existed in China. Its appearance amongst the new up-market stores, and the Starbucks cafés, of the *Dong An* centre is a small but interesting consequence of China's open-door economic policy introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s. Effectively, Deng's policy opened up both Chinese economic and cultural life to the process of globalization

– culminating in China's entry into the WTO in 2001. *Mu Zhen Liao* – a chain store with branches in many of the provincial capitals – exists, in cultural as in economic terms, as a consequence of globalization.

Fashion is a significant expression of cultural identity. But what sort of identity does this 'classic' dress style represent for the affluent younger generation of Chinese who choose it in preference to the European fashions or American sportswear brands with which it competes? It is not easy to pin down. Certainly, this is not a national identity (or a reaction to 'westernization') in the simple sense of expressing the version of 'Chineseness' sponsored by the Chinese state. For a rather bland, dull, conservative western style seems, if anything, to be the mainstream dress code smiled upon by China's political leaders. Indeed, after the disastrous experiment in cultural engineering symbolized in the so-called 'Mao Jacket' uniform of the Cultural Revolution, it might seem that China has simply lost confidence in a symbolically 'traditional' dress code. There are some interesting subtleties here, however. What in the West was called the 'Mao Jacket' in fact developed out of the *Zhong Shan* style of clothing invented by the revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen at the start of the first Chinese Republic in 1912. Sun based this design upon a blend of western 'modern' dress with Chinese styles from as early as the Tang dynasty. This was intended to express both modern republican and at the same time 'authentic' Chineseness, in contrast to the dress of the hated Manchu rulers of the collapsing Qing dynasty. The *qipau*, then, is a Manchurian, as distinct from a 'Chinese' (Han) style. It is doubtful, of course, that any of the young women purchasing *qipaus* consciously wish to express a Manchu identity. But at some level below the mere appeal of fashion, they are surely expressing a form of Chineseness that contrasts with the drab, dominant 'People's Republic' version, and the cultural hegemony under which their parents lived. Globalization here does not so much directly challenge, as promote, new and complex versions of national identity.

And this is not, of course, just a problem for bureaucratic regimes such as China, trying to maintain political control over a vast population experiencing rapid economic and cultural transformation. All nation-states now contain and seek to govern populations whose identities are both multiple and *complex*. This complexity does not by any means necessarily entail the diminishing significance of identification with the nation: identity is not a zero-sum game. But it does suggest that the way in which national identity is experienced within globalization is, like everything else, in flux. Political subjects can now experience and express, without contradiction, both attachments to the nation, multi-ethnic allegiances *and* cosmopolitan sensibilities. The really interesting cultural-political question that emerges is of how nimble and reflexively attuned state apparatuses are capable of becoming in response to these changes.

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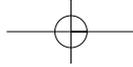
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