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Globalisation and culture: not simply the West versus the rest

Peter L. Berger

The term 'globalisation' has become something of a cliché. It serves to explain everything from the woes of the German coal industry to the sexual habits of Japanese teenagers. Most clichés have a degree of validity; so does this one. There can be no doubt about the fact of an ever more interconnected global economy, with vast social and political implications, and there is no shortage of thoughtful, if inconclusive, reflections about this great transformation. It also has a cultural dimension, the obvious result of an immense increase in worldwide communications. If there is economic globalisation there is also cultural globalisation. To say this, however, is only to raise the question of what such a phenomenon amounts to.

There can be no doubt about some of the facts. One can watch CNN in an African safari lodge, German investors converse in English with Chinese apparatchiks, Peruvian social workers spout the rhetoric of American feminism. Protestant preachers are active in India, while missionaries of the Hare Krishna movement return the compliment in Middle America.

The issue of global culture, the globalisation of culture is a very significant one involving both fears and hopes. There is the notion - and serious political scientists subscribe to this - that the world is becoming increasingly unified. If a global culture is in the making, then perhaps a global civil society might come into being. There is the hope that a putative global culture will help to create a more peaceful world. These are the optimists.

The pessimists offer a different view: in the wake of the cold war, conflicts in the world are going to be less and less ideological, they're going to be what can be called civilizational. The prospect for the future is not at all a more peaceful, harmonious world, but on the contrary, a return to a pre-ideological age where people were fighting over religion, values, culture and so on. Most recently, Samuel Huntington has dis-

cussed the same issues in his *Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) a book to which the present observations are greatly indebted. Huntington, whose view of the contemporary world cannot be accused of being overly optimistic, ends his book with a call to search for commonalities between the contending civilisations, a dialogue of cultures.

My own assumption, and I'm always willing to revise assumptions, is that both the hopes and the fears are exaggerated. We're not going to move into a unified, harmonious world culture, nor are we going to move into an age in which cultures are going to be in perpetual war with each other. The likely scenario is somewhere in the middle. There is a global culture that is of primarily western, American provenance and it is spreading through the world via a number of channels. But that does not mean it is going to have an absolute hegemony. This global culture interacts with indigenous cultural forces in a number of different ways. My interest is in how these processes manifest themselves on the level of personal life of everyday existence.

Acceptance, rejection, adaptation and localisation

You can say there are two poles of complete acceptance and complete rejection of this global culture.

The image of total acceptance I would like to evoke is a by now global human type that one could call the 'global yuppie'. These people operate in certain multinational contexts, come from diverse backgrounds and irrespective of race, colour, creed, or national origin, gender, age, or condition of physical handicap seem to be exactly alike. They talk the same, have the same lifestyles, drink the same whisky, have the same numbers of divorces and manage to communicate with each other beautifully no

In late 1998, CDE hosted a seminar by Professor Peter Berger, director of the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University. This is an edited version of his talk. The views expressed are not necessarily those of CDE.

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matter where they are from. In a way, these are people who have lost their place of origin; they are a new kind of international type. There are not too many of them but they exist and they are quite visible.

The pole of absolute rejection takes different forms, religious, nationalistic - a militant Islamic movement might be an example of this. It can also take political forms, sometimes of a rather grisly sort, the Khmer Rouge, or milder forms of resistance, national resistance against a globalising culture; the French are particularly prominent in this in Europe.

What really interests me as a social scientist is the way in which large numbers of people successfully manage to combine adaptation to a global world, including a capacity to deal with this global culture, with a retention and very often a revitalisation of traditional cultural patterns. I find it fascinating because frankly, I sympathise with it. I like that much better than the two poles. But whether you like it or not, it is a very significant phenomenon and the details, how this works, are fascinating and worthy of research.

A study of MacDonalds restaurants conducted by James Watson, an anthropologist at Harvard University, offers a beautiful metaphor for what the *Globalisation and Culture* project will explore. Next to Coca Cola, MacDonalds is probably one of the most juicy symbols for the notion that what is happening in the world is a standardised, antiseptic, American juggernaut that is ploughing over everything like a steamroller. Watson conducted the study of MacDonalds restaurants in five Asian cities: Tokyo, Taipei, Hong Kong, Beijing and Seoul. The book is called *Golden Arches East*. What Watson and his colleagues found is that while there are standardised elements to MacDonalds - in most places you get similar food - this is not the whole story. The term that Watson uses to describe this is 'localisation', that MacDonalds has had to adapt to local conditions and change its behaviour considerably.

In North America and Europe, Watson says, there's an implicit contract between MacDonalds and its customers. The contract is: we'll provide you with inexpensive clean food, you eat it, get out and do not hang around. That's the economic assumption. It does not work in East Asia. What they found was two groups of people eating at MacDonalds. One group is housewives after shopping, who like it because it's clean, with clean toilets - very important in some Asian countries - and men are not allowed to harass them in any way because MacDonalds would not permit this. The other group is high school students after school before they go home, who sit and do their home-

work there and whatever else, for similar reasons. It's clean, it's safe. This behaviour costs money. These people eat a hamburger and french fries and stay for three hours, breaking the contract. MacDonalds had to adapt to this and I imagine they must have found a way of being profitable all the same or they would not be there. But that's localisation. If MacDonalds has to localise, how much more other institutions and other cultural forces?

If one is to heed Huntington's call for a dialogue between cultures, one must pay as much attention to the manner in which the different processes of cultural globalisation relate to 'each other as to their relation with many indigenous cultures. This dialogue presupposes a clearer understanding of all the processes at work, both those of cultural globalisation and of resistance to it. I believe that there are at least four distinct processes of cultural globalisation going on simultaneously, relating in complex ways both to each other and to the many indigenous cultures on which they impinge.

Davos culture

The first area is arguably the most important - Huntington has coined a nice name for it, *Davos culture* (after the World Economic Summit that meets in that Swiss luxury resort). This culture is globalised as a direct accompaniment of global economic processes. Its carrier is international business. It has obvious behavioural aspects that are directly functional in economic terms, behaviour dictated by the accoutrements of contemporary business. Participants in this culture know how to deal with computers, cellular phones, airline schedules, currency exchange and the like. They all dress alike, exhibit the same amicable informality, and relieve tensions by similar attempts at humor and, of course, most of them interact in English. This culture carries over into the lifestyles and presumably the values of those who participate in it. There is a yuppie style in the corporation, but also in the bodybuilding studio and in the bedroom. Notions of costs, benefits and maximisation spill over from work into private life.

The Davos culture is a culture of the elite and, by way of what sociologists call 'anticipatory socialisation', of those who aspire to join the elite, those who take that elite as their point of reference. What we're interested in in our *Globalisation and Culture* project is not so much the people at the top, who do not want to be interviewed anyway, it's the people who are at the middle echelons of multinational corporations and government agencies, or whatever, who represent the foot soldiers of the

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Davos culture. The interaction of this culture with indigenous cultural traits is one thing we are looking at.

Faculty club culture

Both critics and advocates of contemporary global capitalism mainly think in terms of the Davos culture and its ramifications in popular culture. Yet there are at least two other quite different types of cultural globalisation going on. One of these is what one might call *faculty club culture*. Essentially what we are dealing with here is the globalisation of the western intelligentsia. To put it graphically, if the Davos culture tries to sell computer systems in India, the faculty club culture tries to promote feminism or environmentalism there - a rather different agenda. It's carried not by international business but by international academic networks; NGOs; government agencies that are concerned with non-political, non-economic issues; international foundations, which are very important - such as Ford, Rockefeller, Adenauer maybe, Green Peace and so on.

Like the Davos culture, it too is primarily an elite culture, though here again there are those who aspire to it from the lower echelons of cultural enterprises (for example schoolteachers or social workers who read the books and periodicals that reflect the views emanating from the great cultural centres). It has different levels; the prestige professor but then also the more or less humble official of some foundation or university.

A wonderful example of faculty club culture marching triumphantly through the world in a most imperialist fashion is the anti-smoking movement, which I happen to despise. That's neither here nor there. This is a highly timely example for South Africa. At one point it was a small, marginal sect, hardly noticed in public discourse; today, especially in North America and Western Europe, it has largely achieved the goal proclaimed early on by one of its spokesmen - to make smoking an activity engaged in privately by consenting adults. This movement, clearly a product of Western intellectuals, was disseminated worldwide by an alliance of government and non-government organisations. In a series of conferences, the World Health Organisation propagated the anti-smoking cause internationally. At one of the early conferences the travel expenses of all the participants from developing societies were paid by the Scandinavian development agencies (the conference was held in Stockholm). These participants, mostly from health and education ministries, came from countries with

horrendous health problems and the campaign against smoking was not high on their list of priorities. As was to be expected, they re-ordered their priorities given the incentives to do so. Ironically, the concepts of neo-Marxist dependency theory, which have not been very good at interpreting the transformations of advanced capitalism, fit rather well in the globalisation of the faculty club culture. Here there is overwhelming 'dependency', with an indigenous 'comprador class' carrying out the agendas devised in the cultural centres of the 'metropolis'.

There are obvious tensions between the first and second processes of cultural globalisation. Clearly, the anti-smoking movement collides with the interests of the tobacco industry. While the Davos culture propagates capitalist business in wherever, Green Peace may attack that business in the name of environmentalism or species preservation.

The most visible conflict is between the 'ecumenism of human rights', carried out by a multitude of non-governmental organisations, and the belief of the Davos culture that all good things, including human rights, will eventually result from the global establishment of successful market economies. A recent women's conference in Beijing pitted mostly Western feminists against an odd alliance of Islamists and the Vatican. Most significant politically, the Western-centred human rights community is meeting with strong opposition in a sizeable number of non-Western countries.

Popular culture

The other two areas are somewhat different, less organised, less visible. One of course is popular culture. This culture is most credibly subsumed under the category of westernisation, since virtually all of it is of Western, and more specifically American, provenance. Young people throughout the world dance to American music, wiggling their behinds in American jeans and wearing T-shirts with messages about American universities and other consumer items. Older people watch American sitcoms on television and go to American movies. Everyone, young and old, grows taller and fatter on American fast foods. Here indeed is a case of cultural hegemony, and it is not surprising that others, such as French ministers of culture and Iranian mullahs, greatly resent the fact.

These critics of cultural imperialism also understand that the diffusion of popular culture is not just a matter of outward behaviour. It carries a significant freight of beliefs and values. The attraction of rock music is not just due to a particular preference

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for loud music and dangerously athletic dancing. Rock music also symbolises a whole cluster of cultural values - concerning self-expression, spontaneity, released sexuality, and perhaps, most importantly, defiance of the alleged stodginess of tradition. The consumption of American popular culture has, as it were, a sacramental character.

The people in charge of the globalisation of popular culture are, of course, members or aspiring members of the Davos elite. But the consumers of these cultural exports are a vastly broader population. The indigenous reactions vary from complete acceptance to complete rejection, with many degrees of compromise in between. Complete acceptance generally leads to a conflict between the generations and presumably an important motive for such acceptance among young people is to outrage one's parents. Complete rejection is difficult even under repressive regimes (the Komsomol functionaries, after trying repression, finally had to compromise by inventing something they would call 'Soviet rock').

Evangelical Protestantism

Fourthly (though perhaps not finally), a distinctive process of globalisation is provided by Evangelical Protestantism, especially in its Pentecostal version which accounts for something like 80 percent of its worldwide growth.

Its globalising force is best seen by comparing it with the other dynamic religious phenomenon of our time, that of the Islamic resurgence. While the latter has been limited to countries that have always been Muslim and to Muslim diaspora communities, Evangelical Protestantism has been exploding in parts of the world to which this religious tradition has always been alien, indeed mostly unknown.

The most dramatic explosion has occurred in Latin America, described in David Martin's 1990 book *Tongues of Fire*. Evangelical Protestantism brings about a cultural revolution in its new territories (in that respect it is very different from its social function on its American homeground). It brings about radical changes in the relations between men and women, in the upbringing and education of children, in attitudes toward traditional hierarchies. Most importantly, it inculcates precisely that 'protestant ethic' that Max Weber analysed as an important ingredient in the genesis of modern capitalism - a disciplined, frugal, and rationally oriented approach to work. In effect, defying machismo-laden stereotypes about Latin American culture, these new protestants begin to act like sober, responsible, eighteenth century

English Methodists. In fact, one commentator on Martin's work summed up its findings by noting that 'Max Weber is alive and well and living in Guatemala.'

It is not clear how this startlingly new phenomenon relates to the previously enumerated processes of cultural globalisation. It certainly enters into conflicts with indigenous cultures. Most of the persecution of Christians recently publicised by human rights organisations - notably in China, in the Islamic world, and (sporadically) in Latin America - has been directed against Evangelical Protestants. What is clear is that this type of protestantism is creating a new international culture, increasingly self-conscious (here the relation to American Evangelicals is relevant), with vast social, economic, and political ramifications.

Western cultural imperialism?

The Western provenance of these four processes has given credibility to the frequent charge that they are part and parcel of Western imperialism, with the United States being the core of this malevolent phenomenon. The so-called 'Singapore School' has accused the United States and other industrial democracies of practising cultural imperialism in trying to foist 'Western' values on societies with different traditions. The charge will not hold up. The Davos culture is today fully internationalised. It is centred as much in Tokyo and Singapore as it is in New York and London. Multinational corporations do indeed make large profits from the distribution of popular culture, but there is no coercion involved in their success. No one is forcing Japanese teenagers to enjoy rock music.

During the Cold War period the terms 'West' and 'East' had fairly clear connotations. These were geographical - this side and the other side of the Iron Curtain - but geography itself was defined politically. Washington and its allies were arrayed against Moscow and its allies, with a vaguely delineated 'Third World' supposedly allied with neither. There were some curious aspects of this, as when for instance, Prime Minister Nakasone solemnly announced that Japan was part of the West. But even this made sense politically, even if his Samurai ancestors were angrily tossing in their graves. All this has changed in the last few years. Suddenly the West has once more acquired a much older connotation, cultural rather than political.

The alleged difference between 'Western' and 'Eastern' values is centered in the understanding of the individual's place in society. The 'West' is interpreted as exaggerating the autonomy of the individ-

The struggle is not primarily one between civilisations. The battle lines criss-cross the geographical and the cultural maps. This insight may be disturbing; it is also comforting.

ual, as having institutionalised an abstract, mechanical concept of society, and as being gripped by a spiritually impoverished materialism. Against this the 'East' is characterised as having a more correct view of the individual embedded in community, valuing tradition and hierarchy, holding an organic and thus more natural concept of society, and as retaining a spirituality that limits crasser forms of materialistic acquisitiveness. In this view, what is shaping up is indeed a clash of civilisations.

Where is the West?

I want to focus here on the implied location of the 'West' in this debate as well as on its overall characterisation. Just where is the West? And is it really as it has been described here? A few years ago Edward Said made renewed use of the term 'Orientalism' to refer to simplistic, stereotypical understandings of non-Western cultures by Western scholars. What we have here is an 'accidentalism' - a simplistic understanding of Western culture ironically shared by detractors and advocates alike.

Very much the same dichotomy has repeatedly been evoked between societies that the 'Occidentalists' would all throw into the same (overly individualistic, abstract, soulless) pot. This is how the Slavophiles saw the 'West', which presumably included all the countries beyond the western borders of Russia (with the possible exception of such soul-filled brethren as the Serbs and Bulgarians).

A long line of German ideologists, going back at least to the beginnings of Romanticism, sought to define the German spirit as an antithesis to the nefarious 'West'. Its location was on the other side of the Rhine, though different Germanophiles identified either France or England as the principal antagonist. The Americas have been beset by the same dichotomous thinking. Latin American 'integralism' has its Iberian roots. In its European setting it postulated Spanish wholesomeness against all the heresies flourishing north of the Pyrenees, and it continued to do so in the twentieth century. In Latin America a similar ideology took the name *Arielismo*, from an influential essay by the Uruguayan writer Jose Enrique Rod6, who posted the Latin Ariel against the gross Caliban of the North. Here, the Rio Grande was the great divide.

Yet within the continent of bad *gringos* the very same dichotomy was promulgated by the defenders of the American South, as Eugene Genovese discusses with great lucidity in his book *The Southern Tradition*. Now it is the Mason-Dixon Line that becomes the metaphysical border. However, before

we finally decide that the true location of Western civilisation is in Akron, Ohio, we should reflect that contemporary American culture is full of debates that reiterate the same old themes - 'liberals' versus 'communitarians', 'progressive' feminists versus the partisans of corporate sisterhood, and generally the classical American Creed against a variety of racial, ethnic, sexual and aesthetic tribalisms.

All this does not mean that geography has nothing to do with these value clashes. It was indeed in one particular region of the world that there occurred what one may simply describe as the discovery of the autonomous individual. It was in that rather small territory that includes both Jerusalem and Athens, where the prophet Nathan told David that, king or not, he was a man ('You are the man') responsible before God for his actions, and where the Hellenic dream of the individual liberated by reason was born. Like all genuine truths, the truth of the autonomous individual cannot be contained within one civilisation. By definition truth is universal. Today, the struggle is not primarily one between civilisations. The battle lines crisscross all over both the geographical and the cultural maps. This insight may be disturbing; it is also comforting.

If cultural globalisation today represents the 'Hellenistic' phase of a civilisation originating in the northern parts of Europe and America, then the English language is its *koine* (the 'basic' Greek that served as the lingua franca of late classical antiquity and that, among other things, became the language of the New Testament). We live, as Veliz puts it in his 1994 book *The New World of the Gothic Fox*, in a 'world made in English', and he points out that no other language appears to be a viable successor to English in the foreseeable future. However much this may enrage intellectuals in certain places, English has become the medium of international economic, technological and scientific communication. One does not use a language innocently. Every language carries a freight of values, of sensibilities, of approaches to reality, all of which insinuate themselves into the consciousness of those who speak it.

The picture I have sketched is vast and complex. There are many aspects of it that are not fully understood and the research agenda that we will be tackling in the *Globa/isation and Culture* project is very large.

One tentative conclusion, in response to Huntington's call for a dialogue between what he sees as 'contending civilisations', is that this will not just be a dialogue between 'the West and the rest' but a considerably more complicated enterprise.

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Note: Many of the ideas in this talk are based on Peter Berger's 1997 article, 'Four Faces of Global Culture' published in The National Interest.

The Globalisation and Culture Project:

Professor Berger has initiated a 10 country study into the effects of globalisation on different cultures. Countries to be studied include Chile, Germany, Hungary, Turkey, India, Taiwan, China, Japan, the United States and South Africa. The research at each site is to explore the interaction of globalising and indigenous cultural forces. It is not assumed that either the globalising forces or the indigenous cultures are monolithic; there are 'cultural wars' to be found in both. CDE is conducting the study in South Africa.

Professor Berger is director of the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University, where he is professor of sociology. He has written a number of groundbreaking books, including The Capitalist Revolution, The Social Construction of Reality, Invitation to Sociology, Pyramids of Sacrifice: political ethics and social change, and The Homeless Mind. Professor Berger is CDE's senior international associate.

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