

The Other Side of Globalization

On fruitful tensions between cultures

The concept of globalization is well on the way to becoming the self-designation of our age. It would, however, be more honest to speak of Euro-Americanization or Westernization. After all, it is the triumphal progress of Western and capitalist forms of business and life-style which seems to have become unstoppable since the collapse of Communism. But in the course of the rapid developments of the past decade, people have often overlooked the fact that economic globalization is basically only the interim conclusion to a historical process which began over 500 years ago with discovery of the New World. Colonialism and Christian missionaries paved the way for the worldwide spread of Western ways of living and thinking. They created the initial markets for European goods. Economic globalization was thus preceded by the cultural and political Europeanization of the earth, a process which is still ongoing.

On the other hand, resistance to Western dominance – still by no means cast off, despite formal independence for former colonies – was first articulated in the spheres of culture and religion. Contrary to predictions by theoreticians of modernization, traditional values have experienced an unexpected revival.

When the Shah's pro-Western regime was replaced by the rule of the mullahs in Persia at the end of the Seventies, this was only the start of a worldwide cultural counter-movement. Islamic fundamentalism spread quickly to Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the Middle East, North Africa, and Sudan.

In India it was radical Hindus who protested against cultural globalization, and even in the United States resistance to the global standardization of ways of life, viewed as a decline in moral standards, began to develop in fundamentalist Evangelical groups.

Worldwide cultural standardization?

At the same time, paradoxically, what such pessimistic thinkers as Ortega y Gasset or Claude Lévi-Strauss predicted over half a century earlier seems to be coming to pass. Cultural uniformity continues to spread across the globe. Scarcely any large town in Asia or Latin America lacks an outlet for one of the American fast-food chains; Coca-Cola is available in the African bush and on any South Sea island; and in rural regions of the Third World

the T-shirt has by now ousted the colourful diversity of local clothing. Aided by the attractive products of the modern entertainment industry, film and television across the world propagate the same ideas and the same life-style. The death of cultures seems to go hand-in-hand with the worldwide dying out of species.

However, appearances are deceptive. If you look a little more closely, you quickly recognize that weighty differences are concealed beneath outer similarities. Once integrated in an individual culture, ideas and products imported from the West are endowed with fresh significance. By now they are even turning into weapons which can easily be directed against their suppliers.

In 1978, a year before Ayatollah Khomeini assumed power in Iran, Edward Said, the Palestinian writer who lives in America, published a study in which he demonstrated that the West's traditional view of the Orient bears little resemblance to reality. According to Said's thesis, Orientalism is an invention which derived from the imaginations of European writers and scholars.

If you travel, somewhat over two decades later, to one of the Middle or Far Eastern countries greatly influenced by fundamentalism, you get the impression that, under the pressure of and at the same time in reaction to globalization, the conventional European picture of the Orient has at last become reality. Everyone stops work punctually at the five times of prayer, unrolls a prayer mat, and prostrates himself towards Mecca. Thieves' hands and murderers' heads are cut off in accordance with Sharia law. Separation of the sexes is becoming ever more important. Black clothing concealing the entire body used only to be encountered in the countryside, but today it dominates the street-scene even in cities. On the other hand, it is not thought inconsistent that the muezzin uses a loudspeaker to amplify his voice, that mutilated thieves receive treatment in ultra-modern hospitals, or that heavily-veiled women use computers. The Orient has at long last invented itself. In the guise of Orientalism, Islam is demonstrating that it has now become the last great bastion of resistance to Westernization.

It can only be indirectly deduced from Islamic metropolises that they have adapted to the picture people in Europe always had of them. In other cases, this adaptation is perfectly obvious. Sault-Ste.-Marie is a town on the American-Canadian



Israeli Checkpoint in the West-Bank, 2002. Image from DVD, 60 min. Director Rashid Masharawi. Work shown at Documenta 11.

border, right next to several Ojibwa reservations. Its little university organizes regular conferences on traditional Native American values and ways of life. These usually end with a powwow, an Indian dance festival in which participants wear their “Fathers” costumes. But no matter whether they are descendants of the Ojibwa, Iroquois, Navajo or Apache, they wear costumes and move to dance rhythms which derive exclusively from the cultures of the Sioux, Cheyenne, and other Prairie Indians.

Popularized by Hollywood, the warriors who on June 25th 1876 inflicted a shattering defeat on General Custer’s American troops in the battle of Little Big Horn have become Native Americans’ preferred source of identification. Viewed historically, the Sioux from the Midwest, who lived from hunting bison and moved around with their tipis, did not have much more in common with Iroquois maize-cultivators in the East or the sheep-rearing Navajo of the South-West than Vikings from northern Europe had with the peasants and cattle-breeders of the Mediterranean area. Inwardly the great cultural differences may still be significant, but outwardly people prefer to adorn themselves with attractive symbols in a glorifying image made available from elsewhere.

Just as North American Indians have integrated the Hollywood cliché of the noble savage into their self-image, so too many Aborigines today identify themselves with the romantic idea that their traditional ways of existence and thought represented a different approach to life compared with that of the West. Their spiritual links with the Earth and careful dealings with Nature are mainly put forward as arguments when demanding compensation from mining companies or sheep farmers. Globalization has not only led to the spread of Western concepts and ideas. The worldwide dissemination of goods has exerted a far more sig-

nificant impact. Here too colonialism preceded globalization. Three categories of product helped European traders open up local markets as part of colonial expansion: military articles, textiles, and semi-luxuries.

All three categories – to which the social philosopher Wolfgang Haug from Berlin once added “powerful stimulants” – link attractiveness and utility in exemplary fashion. Ultimately, goods of this kind probably contributed far more to the dissolution of traditional forms of society than all the violent interventions in existing political and social structures.

It is precisely some of those societies previously viewed as ‘primitive’ that have succeeded, over a considerable period of time, in preserving their structures by integrating European imports into their traditional world rather than trying to ban them. In many East Indonesian cultures, for instance, silk cloth, elephant trunks, European weapons and armour, a Dutch trading company’s silver coins, and many other ‘exotic’ objects have been integrated into the cult-houses of individual village clans as holy ancestral treasures. Among the Bolia of the Congo region, the coveted ‘Kannenbäckerland’ clay tankards, which travelled from the Westerwald to Africa by highly roundabout ways, were still used in a similar way in the 1950s.

Consumer goods from Europe are put to very similar use today in both urban and rural cultures in Africa. Their representative value is the primary source of interest. Someone in West Africa who does not possess a refrigerator, television set, or built-in kitchen of his own at least has himself pictured in a suitable setting in a photographer’s studio. As ethnologists Heike Behrend and Tobias Wendl showed in their exhibitions of African studio photographs, such arrangements by no means simply depict the imaginary fulfilment of unattain-

able dreams, but present self-ironizing, playful dealings with the influences of globalization. The same is certainly also true of the magnificent beds modelled on Mercedes limousines, which a number of carpenters' workshops in the northern Nigerian city of Kano have made their speciality. With a radiator grill made of plywood, adorned with headlights and the authentic star, these beds mainly find buyers among members of the upper class.

Appropriation and Reinterpretation

Popular figures from the American and East Asian film industries – such as James Bond, the Terminator, Rambo or Bruce Lee – are also subjected today to the process of cultural appropriation and reinterpretation. In the visual narratives of modernism they have taken over from ancient heroes, and in Africa, Oceania, and South America have entered as spirits or demi-gods into the realm of religious ideas. For instance, James Bond also served in the Army of 140,000 Spirits which helped the Holy Spirit soldiers of Ugandan prophetess Alice Lakwena to defeat state troops on a number of occasions. In Brazil, adherents of syncretist possession cults, such as candomblé and umbanda, have incorporated modern film characters into their pantheon alongside the orisha gods from

Yoruba West Africa and a number of saints from the Catholic Church.

Integration of the American entertainment industry's imaginary heroes into indigenous religions is perhaps the most extreme example of a process of cultural adaptation which is liable to befall elements of modern Western culture in the context of globalization. Far from contributing towards the standardization of the world's cultures, they become the objects of a highly creative process of reinterpretation.

Transforming a luxury limousine into a coffin or a marital bed also entails disregarding its simulated utilitarian worth and putting all the emphasis on its symbolic value. Putting Rambo or James Bond alongside spirits, saints, or gods, and invoking them as helpers in a struggle against real evil reveals the religious dimensions underlying these mythical creations. Literally displaced, appropriated, and declared to be one's own, European ideas, goods, and icons thus assume new dimensions of significance. Global and local elements enter upon hybrid links.

Mixed cultural forms come into existence, and these are anything but uniform or monotonous. They are the embodiment of fruitful tensions between cultures.

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