

The Global Transformations Reader

An Introduction to the Globalization Debate

Second edition

2003

Edited by

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Towards a Global Culture?

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The initial problem with the concept of a 'global culture' is one of the meaning of terms. Can we speak of 'culture' in the singular? If by 'culture' is meant a collective mode of life, or a repertoire of beliefs, styles, values and symbols, then we can only speak of cultures, never just culture, for a collective mode of life, or a repertoire of beliefs, etc., presupposes different modes and repertoires in a universe of modes and repertoires. Hence, the idea of a 'global culture' is a practical impossibility, except in interplanetary terms. Even if the concept is predicated of *homo sapiens*, as opposed to other species, the differences between segments of humanity in terms of lifestyle and belief-repertoire are too great, and the common elements too generalized, to permit us to even conceive of a globalized culture.

Or are they? Can we not at last discern the lineaments of exactly that world culture which liberals and socialists alike had dreamed of and hoped for since the last century? [...]

What is the content of such a [...] 'global culture'? How shall we picture its operations? Answers to such questions usually take the form of extrapolation from recent western cultural experiences of 'postmodernism'. Beneath a modernist veneer, we find in practice a pastiche of cultural motifs and styles, underpinned by a universal scientific and technical discourse. A global culture, so the argument runs, will be eclectic like its western or European progenitor, but will wear a uniformly streamlined packaging. Standardized, commercialized mass commodities will nevertheless draw for their contents upon revivals of traditional, folk or national motifs and styles in fashions, furnishings, music and the arts, lifted out of their original contexts and anaesthetized. So that a global culture would operate at several levels simultaneously: as a cornucopia of standardized commodities, as a patchwork of denationalized ethnic or folk motifs, as a series of generalized 'human values and interests', as a uniform 'scientific' discourse of meaning, and finally as the interdependent system of communications which forms the material base for all the other components and levels.¹

It might be argued that there is nothing especially new about a 'global culture', that earlier cultural imperialisms were every whit as eclectic and simultaneously standardized. After all, the hellenization that Alexander's armies carried throughout the ancient Near East drew on a variety of local motifs as well as giving them expression in the Greco-Macedonian forms of theatre, assembly, marketplace and gymnasium. And the same was true of the pax Romana throughout the Mediterranean world (see Tcherikover 1970; Balsdon 1979).

Yet, those pre-modern cultural imperialisms were neither global nor universal. They were ultimately tied to their places of origin, and carried with them their special myths and symbols for all to recognize and emulate. Today's emerging global culture is tied

to no place or period. It is context-less, a true melange of disparate components drawn from everywhere and nowhere, borne upon the modern chariots of global telecommunications systems.

There is something equally timeless about the concept of a global culture. Widely diffused in space, a global culture is cut off from any past. As the perennial pursuit of an elusive present or imagined future, it has no history. A global culture is here and now and everywhere, and for its purposes the past only serves to offer some decontextualized example or element for its cosmopolitan patchwork.

This sense of timelessness is powerfully underlined by the pre-eminently technical nature of its discourse. A global culture is essentially calculated and artificial, posing technical problems with technical solutions and using its folk motifs in a spirit of detached playfulness. Affectively neutral, a cosmopolitan culture reflects a technological base made up of many overlapping systems of communications bound by a common quantitative and technical discourse, manned by an increasingly technical intelligentsia, whose 'culture of critical discourse' replaces the social critique of its earlier humanistic counterparts (see Gouldner 1979).

Memory, Identity and Cultures

Eclectic, universal, timeless and technical, a global culture is seen as pre-eminently a 'constructed' culture, the final and most imposing of a whole series of human constructs in the era of human liberation and mastery over nature. In a sense, the nation too was just such a construct, a sovereign but finite 'imagined community'.

Nations were 'built' and 'forged' by state elites or intelligentsias or capitalists: like the Scots kilt or the British Coronation ceremony, they are composed of so many 'invented traditions', whose symbols we need to read through a process of 'deconstruction', if we are to grasp the hidden meanings beneath the 'text' of their discourse. The fact, therefore, that a global culture would need to be constructed, along with global economic and political institutions, should occasion no surprise; nor should we cavil at the eclecticism with which such a cosmopolitan culture is likely to make use of bits and pieces of pre-existing national and folk cultures.²

Let us concede for the moment that nations are, in some sense, social 'constructs' and 'imagined' communities. Is it because of this 'constructed' quality that they have managed to survive and flourish so well? Are we therefore justified in predicting the same bright future for an equally well crafted 'global culture'?

To answer affirmatively would require us to place the whole weight of demonstration on the common characteristic of human construction and imagination, at the expense of those characteristics in which nations and national cultures differ markedly from our description of the qualities of a global culture. The obstinate fact is that national cultures, like all cultures before the modern epoch, are *particular, imbound and expressive*, and their eclecticism operates within strict cultural constraints. As we said at the outset, there can in practice be no such thing as 'culture', only specific, historical cultures possessing strong emotional connotations for those who share in the particular culture. It is, of course, possible to 'invent', even manufacture, traditions as commodities to serve particular class or ethnic interests. But they will only survive and flourish as part of the repertoire of national culture if they can be made continuous with a much longer past that members of that community presume to constitute their 'heritage'.

In other words, 'grafting' extraneous elements must always be a delicate operation; the new traditions must evoke a popular response if they are to survive, and that means hewing close to vernacular motifs and styles. That was the instinct which guided most nationalists and helped to ensure their lasting successes. The success of the nineteenth-century British Coronation ceremony or the Welsh Eisteddfodau owed much to the ability of those who revived them to draw on much older cultural motifs and traditions, memories of which were still alive; though in one sense 'new', these revivals were only able to flourish because they could be presented, and were accepted, as continuous with a valued past (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

If cultures are historically specific and spatially limited, so are those images and symbols that have obtained a hold on human imagination. Even the most imperialist of those images – emperor, Pope or Tsar – have drawn their power from the heritage of Roman and Byzantine symbolism. It is one thing to be able to package imagery and diffuse it through world-wide telecommunications networks. It is quite another to ensure that such images retain their power to move and inspire populations, who have for so long been divided by particular histories and cultures, which have mirrored and crystallized the experiences of historically separated social groups, whether classes or regions, religious congregations or ethnic communities. The meanings of even the most universal of imagery for a particular population derive as much from the historical experiences and social status of that group as from the intentions of purveyors, as recent research on the national reception of popular television serials suggests (see Schlesinger 1987). [...]

In other words, images and cultural traditions do not derive from, or descend upon, mute and passive populations on whose *tabula rasa* they inscribe themselves. Instead, they invariably express the identities which historical circumstances have formed, often over long periods. The concept of 'identity' is here used, not of a common denominator of patterns of life and activity, much less some average, but rather of the subjective feelings and valuations of any population which possesses common experiences and one or more shared cultural characteristics (usually customs, language or religion). These feelings and values refer to three components of their shared experiences:

- 1 a sense of continuity between the experiences of succeeding generations of the unit of population;
- 2 shared memories of specific events and personages which have been turning-points of a collective history; and
- 3 a sense of common destiny on the part of the collectivity sharing those experiences.

By a collective cultural identity, therefore, is meant those feelings and values in respect of a sense of continuity, shared memories and a sense of common destiny of a given unit of population which has had common experiences and cultural attributes. [...]

It is in just these senses that 'nations' can be understood as historic identities, or at least deriving closely from them, while a global and cosmopolitan culture fails to relate to any such historic identity. Unlike national cultures, a global culture is essentially memoryless. Where the 'nation' can be constructed so as to draw upon and revive latent popular experiences and needs, a 'global culture' answers to no living needs, no identity-in-the-making. It has to be painfully put together, artificially, out of the many existing folk and national identities into which humanity has been so long divided. There are no 'world memories' that can be used to *unite* humanity; the most global

experiences to date – colonialism and the World Wars – can only serve to remind us of our historic cleavages. (If it is argued that nationalists suffered selective amnesia in order to construct their nations, the creators of a global culture would have to suffer total amnesia, to have any chance of success!)

The central difficulty in any project to construct a global identity, and hence a global culture, is that collective identity, like imagery and culture, is always historically specific because it is based on shared memories and a sense of continuity between generations. To believe that 'culture follows structure', that the techno-economic sphere will provide the conditions and therefore the impetus and content of a global culture, is to be misled once again by the same economic determinism that dogged the debate about 'industrial convergence', and to overlook the vital role of common historical experiences and memories in shaping identity and culture. Given the plurality of such experiences and identities, and given the historical depth of such memories, the project of a global culture, as opposed to global communications, must appear premature for some time to come.

'Ethno-history' and Posterity

If it proves difficult to envisage a point of departure for this project in common human experiences and memories, the universal stumbling-block to its construction is not far to seek. That ubiquitous obstacle is embodied in the continued presence of pre-modern ties and sentiments in the modern epoch. Indeed, just as a 'postmodern' era awaits its liberation from the modern industrial world, so the latter is still weighed down by the burden of pre-modern traditions, myths and boundaries. I have argued elsewhere that many of today's nations are built up on the basis of pre-modern 'ethnic cores' whose myths and memories, values and symbols shaped the culture and boundaries of the nation that modern elites managed to forge. Such a view, if conceded, must qualify our earlier acceptance of the largely 'constructed' quality of modern nations. That nationalist elites were active in inculcating a sense of nationality in large sections of 'their' populations who were ignorant of any national affiliations is well documented (see Kedourie 1960; Breuilly 1982). It does not follow that they 'invented nations where none existed', as Gellner had once claimed, even where they used pre-existing materials and even when nations are defined as large, anonymous, unmediated, co-cultural units (see Gellner 1964; ch. 7; also Gellner 1983: ch. 5).

Nationalists, like others, found themselves constrained by accepted cultural traditions, from which they might select, and by popular responses, which they hoped to channel, if not manipulate. But their room for cultural manoeuvre was always limited by those cultural traditions and popular, vernacular repertoires of myth, memory, symbol and value. For nationalists, the 'nation-to-be' was not any large, anonymous, co-cultural unit. It was a community of history and culture, possessing a compact territory, unified economy and common legal rights and duties for all members. If 'nationalism creates nations' in its own image, then its definition of the nation was of a piece with its aspirations for collective autonomy, fraternal unity and distinctive identity. The identity and unity that was sought was of and for an existing historic culture-community, which the nationalists thought they were reviving and returning to a 'world of nations'. It depended, therefore, in large measure on the rediscovery of the community's 'ethno-history', its peculiar and distinctive cultural contribution

to the worldwide fund of what Weber called 'irreplaceable culture values'. This was the nationalist project, and it is one that has by no means run its course, even as signs of its supersession by wider projects are on the horizon. In fact, it can be argued that nationalist and post-nationalist projects feed off each other, and are likely to do so for some time to come.

In fact, the success of the nationalist project depended not only on the creative skills and organizational ability of the intelligentsia, but on the persistence, antiquity and resonance of the community's ethno-history. The more salient, pervasive and enduring that history, the firmer the cultural base it afforded for the formation of a modern nation. Once again, these are largely subjective aspects. It is the salience of that history in the eyes of the community's members, and the *felt* antiquity of their ethnic ties and sentiments, which give an ethno-history its power and resonance among wide strata. It matters little whether the communal events recounted happened in the manner purveyed, or if heroes acted nobly as tradition would have us believe; the Exodus, William Tell, Great Zimbabwe, derive their power not from a sober historical assessment, but from the way events, heroes and landscapes have been woven by myth, memory and symbol into the popular consciousness. For the participants in this drama, ethno-history has a 'primordial' quality, or it is powerless (Smith 1988).³

Why do such myths and memories retain their hold, even today, to fuel the nationalist project? There is no single answer, but two considerations must take priority. The first is the role of ethno-history, its myths, values, memories and symbols, in assuring collective dignity (and through that some measure of dignity for the individual) for populations which have come to feel excluded, neglected or suppressed in the distribution of values and opportunities. By establishing the unity of a submerged or excluded population around an ancient and preferably illustrious pedigree, not only is the sense of bonding intensified, but a reversal of collective status is achieved, at least on the cognitive and moral levels. [...]

The second consideration is even more important. With the attenuation of the hold of traditional cosmic images of another, unseen existence beyond the everyday world, the problem of individual oblivion and collective disintegration becomes more pressing and less easily answered. Loss of social cohesion feeding off an increasing sense of individual meaninglessness, in a century when the old 'problem of evil' has been posed in unparalleled ways, drives more and more people to discover new ways of understanding and preserving 'identity' in the face of annihilation. For many, the only guarantee of preservation of some form of identity is in the appeal to 'posterity', to the future generations that are 'ours', because they think and feel as 'we' do, just as our children are supposed to feel and think like each of us individually. With the dissolution of all traditional theodicies, only the appeal to a collective posterity offers hope of deliverance from oblivion (see Smith 1970; Anderson 1983: ch. 1).

Vernacular Mobilization and Cultural Competition

There are also more specific reasons for the continuing hold of national cultures with their ethnic myths and memories in an increasingly interdependent world.

Perhaps the most common way in which nations have been, and are being, formed is through processes of 'vernacular mobilization' and 'cultural politicization'. Where

ethnic communities (or *ethnie*) lack states of their own, having usually been incorporated in wider polities in an earlier epoch, they risk dissolution in the transition to modernity, unless an indigenous intelligentsia emerges, strong enough to mobilize wider sections of 'their' community on the basis of a rediscovered ethno-history and vernacular culture. The success of the intelligentsia largely hinges on their ability to discover a convincing cultural base, one that can find a popular response, at least among educated strata. The intelligentsia are populist to the extent that they make use of (some) popular culture and a living communal history, even where they stop short of mobilizing actual peasants. The important task is to convince immediate followers, and enemies outside, of the cultural viability of the nation-to-be. The richer, more fully documented the ethno-history, the more widely spoken the vernacular tongue and the more widely practised the native customs and religion, the less difficult will it be to convince others, friends and enemies, of the actuality of the 'nation'; for it can be made to 'flow' coherently with the demonic *ethnie* and seem its reincarnation after a long period of presumed death. Conversely, the scantier the records of ethno-history and less widely spoken the vernacular and practised the customs, the harder will it be to convince others of the viability of the national project, and the more it will be necessary to find new ways of overcoming doubt and hostility. Hence the appeal to lost epics and forgotten heroes – an Oisín or Lemminkäinen – to furnish a noble pedigree and sacred landscape for submerged or neglected communities (see Hutchinson 1987; Branch 1985; Introduction).

To create the nation, therefore, it is not enough simply to mobilize compatriots. They must be taught who they are, where they came from and whither they are going. They must be turned into co-nationals through a process of mobilization into the vernacular culture, albeit one adapted to modern social and political conditions. Only then can the old-new culture become a political base and furnish political weapons in the much more intense cultural competition of a world of nations. Old religious sages and saints can now be turned into national heroes, ancient chronicles and epics become examples of the creative national genius, while great ages of achievement in the community's past are presented as the nation's 'golden age' of pristine purity and nobility. The former culture of a community, which had no other end beyond itself, now becomes the talisman and legitimation for all manner of 'national' policies and purposes, from agricultural villagization to militarism and aggrandisement. Ethnicity is nationalized (see Seton-Watson 1977: chs 2–4; Smith 1986: ch. 8).

Though the intelligentsia tend to be the prime beneficiaries of the politicization of culture, other strata share in the realization of the national project. Peasants and workers are not immune, even if they are rarely prime movers, particularly where a marxist 'national communism' holds sway. On the whole, it is the nationalist motifs which tap peasant energies most effectively, particularly where a foreign threat can be convincingly portrayed, as when China was invaded by Japan (see Johnson 1969; Smith 1979: ch. 5). Because of this 'multi-class' character, the national project retains a popularity that is the envy of other ideological movements; for it appears to offer each class not just a tangible benefit, but the promise of dignity and unity in the 'super-family' of the nation (see Nairn 1977: ch. 9; Horowitz 1985: ch. 2).

One other reason for the continuing power of the national idea today needs to be remembered. This is the accentuation of that idea and of the several national cultures across the globe by their competition for adherents and prestige. I am not simply referring here to the way in which such cultures have become interwoven with the rivalry

of states in the international arena. The cultures themselves have been thrown into conflict, as communities in their struggle for political rights and recognition have drawn upon their cultural resources – music, literature, the arts and crafts, dress, food and so on – to make their mark in the wider political arena, regionally and internationally, and continue to do so by the use of comparative statistics, prestige projects, tourism and the like. These are veritable ‘cultural wars’, which underline the polycentric nature of our interdependent world, as each community discovers afresh its ‘national essence’ in its ‘irreplaceable culture values’ (Weber 1968: ch. 5).

Vernacular mobilization, the politicization of cultures, the role of the intelligentsia and other strata: and the intensification of cultural wars: here are some of the reasons, briefly sketched, why national cultures inspired by rediscovered ethno-histories continue to divide our world into discrete cultural blocks, which show little sign of harmonization, let alone amalgamation. When we add the sharply uneven nature of the distributions of both a ‘rich’ ethno-history and economic and political resources between nations and *ethnie* today, the likelihood of an early ‘supersession’ of nationalism appears remote. Feeding on each other, ethnic nationalisms seem set to multiply and accentuate national and ethnic boundaries and the uneven distribution of cultural and economic resources, at least in those areas where there remain a multitude of unsatisfied ethno-national claims. If the various regional inter-state systems appear strong enough (for how long?) to contain conflicting ethno-nationalist movements, even in Africa and Asia, the number and intensity of current and potential ethnic conflicts hardly suggests a global diminution of the power of nationalism or the hold of national cultures in the next few decades.

[...]

Conclusion

From the standpoint of both global security and cosmopolitan culture, this is a bleak conclusion. There is, however, another side to the overall picture, which may over the longer term help to mitigate some of the worst effects of intensified and proliferating ethno-national conflicts. I refer to the growing importance of the *lingua franca* and of various ‘culture areas’.

[...]

Such culture areas are, of course, a far cry from the ideal of a global culture which will supersede the many national cultures that still divide the world so resoundingly. Their loose patchwork quality and mixture of cultures do not as yet offer a serious challenge to the still fairly compact, and frequently revived, national cultures. [...]

[...] We are still far from even mapping out the kind of global culture and cosmopolitan ideal that can truly supersede a world of nations, each cultivating its distinctive historical character and rediscovering its national myths, memories and symbols in past golden ages and sacred landscapes. A world of competing cultures, seeking to improve their comparative status rankings and enlarge their cultural resources, affords little basis for global projects, despite the technical and linguistic infrastructural possibilities.

At the same time, the partial mixing of cultures, the rise of a *lingua franca* and of wider ‘Pan’ nationalisms, though sometimes working in opposed directions, have created the possibility of ‘families of culture’ which portend wider regional patchwork culture-areas.

Such culture-areas may perhaps serve as models in the more long-term future for even broader inter-continental versions. Even in such distant scenarios, it is hard to envisage the absorption of ethno-national cultures, only a diminution in their political relevance. So attenuated a cosmopolitanism is unlikely to entail the supersession of national cultures.

Notes

- 1 I have brought together different phases of twentieth-century Western culture in this sketch, in particular, the modernist trends of the 1960s, the postmodern reactions of the 1960s and 1970s, and the technical ‘neutrality’ of the mass computer revolution of the 1980s. Of course, these trends and phases overlap: Stravinsky’s pastiche dates from the early 1920s, while ‘modernism’ still exerts profound influences till today. The main point is that this Western image of ‘things to come’ is composed of several contradictory layers.
- 2 For the idea that nations should be conceived as sovereign but limited ‘imagined communities’, see Anderson (1983). His analysis, which gives pride of place to the ‘technology of print capitalism’ and the ‘administrative pilgrimages’ of provincial (read ‘national’ today) elites (to Washington, Moscow, Brussels?), could indeed shed light on the chances, and obstacles, to the rise of wider ‘regional’ cultures today.
- 3 This should not be construed as an argument for ‘primordialism’, the view that ethnicity and nationality are somehow ‘givens’ of human existence and/or history. For a discussion of the issues involved, see the essays by Brass and Robinson in Taylor and Yapp (1979); cf. also A. D. Smith (1984).

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