

- *A version of this paper was presented at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) Research Seminar Series 2006–2007. The talk was cohosted by the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies Ningbo and Institute of Comparative Cultural Studies on 24 November 2006.*
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Globalization and Culture

John Tomlinson

1. Introduction: globalization as ‘connectivity’

In this lecture I want to think about the relationship between the globalization process and that complex human condition we call ‘culture’. But first I need to say very briefly what I understand by globalization. Globalization is a complex process because it involves rapid social change that is occurring simultaneously across a number of dimensions – in the world economy, in politics, in communications, in the physical environment and in culture – and each of these transformations interact with the others. So it’s a complicated process to grasp in its entirety. And there are all sorts of theoretical issues – to do with its causality, its historical and geographical sources, its relationship to other concepts like modernity and postmodernity, its social consequences, and its differential impact – that are difficult and controversial. However, at its core, there is something going on which is quite simple to describe – and I call this a process of accelerating ‘connectivity’.

(Tomlinson, 1999). By this I mean that globalization refers to the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterise

modern social life. At its most basic, globalization is quite simply a description of these networks and of their implications – for instance in the various ‘flows’ - of capital, commodities, people, knowledge, information and ideas, crime, pollution, diseases, fashions, beliefs, images and so on – across international boundaries.

This increasing connectivity is, in some ways, an obvious aspect of our lives. It is something we can all – at least in developed societies - recognise in everyday routine practices: in our use of communications technologies – mobile phones, computers, email, the internet - in the built environment we inhabit, in the sort of food we eat, in the way we earn our livings, and in the way we entertain ourselves – in cinema, television and so on. Its pretty obvious that we are living in a much more globally ‘connected’ world today than even thirty of forty years ago. But what does this all mean culturally? Does it mean that , as many people suppose, we are inevitably being drawn together, for good or ill, into a single global culture ?

2. A Global Culture ?

One reason why people believe that globalization will lead to a single global culture is that they see the effects of connectivity in other spheres – particularly in the economic sphere – producing an integrated system .Whereas it was in the past possible to understand social and economic processes and practices as a set of local, relatively ‘independent’ phenomena, globalization makes the world , to quote Roland Robertson (1992) , a 'single place'. Obvious examples of this are the way in which the economic

affairs of nation-states are locked into a complex global capitalist economic system which restricts the autonomy of individual states , or how the environmental effects of local industrial processes can rapidly become global problems.

However, increasing global connectivity by no means necessarily implies that the world is becoming either economically or politically 'unified'. Despite its reach, few would dare to claim that the effects of globalization currently extends in any profound way to every single person or place on the planet, and speculation on its spread must surely be tempered by the many countervailing trends towards social, political and indeed cultural division that we see around us. This is a point that is frequently made by theorists of development : what used to be called the 'Third World' does not partake of the globalised economy or of globalised communications in the same way as the developed world. So we have to qualify the idea of globalization by saying that it is an uneven process - with areas of concentration and density of flow and other areas of neglect or even perhaps exclusion (Massey, 1994). So globalization in this sense is not quite global!

Despite this , there persists , at least amongst Western critics, a tendency to think about globalization as the production of one single all encompassing 'global culture'. To understand this tendency I believe we have to see it in a long historical context of the imagination of a unified world : as a form of cultural universalism . So I am going to consider, very briefly, three examples of this sort of imagination and I will suggest that they have more in common than at first appears.

My first example comes from long before the current phase of globalizing modernity , in fact from 13th Century Europe.

Image 1 : Ebstorf Mappa Mundi

The Ebstorf Mappa Mundi made in 1284 – and attributed to the English cartographer Gervase of Tilbury - is, like most early-medieval European world maps, a mixture of topography and theology. The sources of such cartographic imagination are complex, with influences from Aristotelian notions of form, and from the more directly topographical style of Roman imperial maps. But what is most striking is the complete domination of the representation by elements of Christian theology. Jerusalem - the Holy City - is placed at the centre, whilst the orientation of the map places the east at the top where is also depicted the Garden of Eden - scene of God's creation of mankind. The tripartite division of the map is inspired by the Biblical story of the re-population of the earth after the Deluge by Noah's three sons Ham, Shem and Japheth. Both of these elements obviously reinforce Christian myths of origin and in so doing represent the world as unified within the faith of Christianity. And most striking of all is the binding force of the figure of the crucified Christ – seen here only in the head, hands and feet - literally embracing the world – giving it life - from the cross.

Here, then, we find a very early, pre-modern example of an imagined theologically revealed 'globalism' The problem with it - as is all too evident to us from our perspective in history – is the entirely spurious nature of its universal pretensions. Just as the

medieval cartographer ignored – or was ignorant of - the rival claims of the non-Christian world – of the Islamic Ummah, of Buddhism or Confucianism for instance - so, many universalising narratives seem to work by ignoring or, worse, denigrating cultural difference

Moreover, the tendency towards unwarranted universalizing – what we might call particular cultures masquerading as universal ones - is not restricted to religious worldviews, but can be seen at the core of European Enlightenment rational modernity. The privileging of the western cultural experience - along with its particular version of rationality and its cultural and political values - over that of the rest of the world can be seen in cosmopolitan thinkers from Kant through to Marx.

And so, moving on six hundred years, it is Karl Marx who provides my second example.

Marx presents a particularly bold picture of a global culture in his depiction of a future communist society. This is a world in which the divisions of nations have disappeared, along with all other particular, ‘local’ attachments, including religious beliefs; a world with a universal language, a world literature and cosmopolitan cultural tastes.

Thus in the Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels write in a way that seems to anticipate the current globalization process :

In the place of the old wants satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant

lands and climes. In the place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature . (Marx and Engels 1969 : 52-53)

But Marx combines this analysis of the power of transnational capitalism, which he argues ‘must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere’, with a deeply Eurocentric attitude to other cultures. Thus he welcomes the way in which the bourgeois era sweeps away pre-modern ‘civilizations’ on the way towards the coming revolution and the communist era which, he insists, ‘can only have a ‘world-historical’ existence’. Towards this end, Marx is quite happy to see the destruction of non-European cultures. The Manifesto continues :

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. (1969: 53)

Though Marx condemned the cruelty and stupidity of British imperialist actions in India and China, he none the less believed that, 'whatever the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia.' - that is, in rescuing Asian societies from their 'ancient despotism', their 'self-sufficiency' and 'stagnation', so that they may progress towards the world historical communist revolution .

The fact is that Marx was a convinced cosmopolitan humanist – an internationalist who despised nationalism and patriotism as reactionary forces in all societies, set against the true cosmopolitan interests of the proletariat - the 'workers of the world'. But, for all his progressive views and the brilliance and percipience of his political-economy - his view of culture was firmly rooted in a European tradition which unquestioningly took its own experience as the pattern for universal experience. Indeed, it might be argued that it was this Eurocentric cast of Marx's thought which was at the root of the flaws in his historical and revolutionary thinking that led him to underestimate the enduring power of ethnic and religious attachments (or their transformation into nationalism) in modernity.

Marx's universalising modernism was, in a curious way, as blind to cultural alteriority as the universalising Christianity of the medieval mapmaker.

Marx's views , formed in the mid-nineteenth century , a similarly turbulent and dynamic period of global capitalist expansion to our own, remain relevant today – though not in the form that he might have imagined .

For what he saw as the inevitable and ultimately benign progress of history towards a cosmopolitan world culture appears to today's cultural critics as precisely the reverse. Marx was unabashedly optimistic about globality; by contrast today's neo-Marxists are intensely pessimistic. Perhaps the dominant cultural perspective on globalization today is the fear that globality will bring not unity but merely uniformity : a 'homogenization' of culture deriving precisely from the triumph of capitalist commodification.

This brings me up to date with my final example. The contemporary assumption that the globalization process inevitably involves a form of cultural imperialism: the spread of Western – particularly American – culture to every part of the globe, and the consequent threat of a loss of distinct non-western cultural traditions. What is feared is the total domination of global culture through the unopposed advance of formulaic Hollywood movies, rock music, consumer goods and fast food : Disney, Coca-Cola, Marlboro Cigarettes, Microsoft, McDonalds, CNN, Nike Sportswear etc. : what the American neo-Marxist critic, the late Herbert Schiller, once called 'homogenized North Atlantic cultural slop', and what the filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci with even more distain referred to as , 'a dreadful American mono-culture, a kind of totalitarianism of culture'. (quoted, Tomlinson 1997: 125, 130).

Of course these fears are not without grounds. Take any index, from clothes to food to music to film and television to architecture (the list is only limited by what one wants to include as 'cultural') and there is no ignoring the fact that certain styles, brands, tastes

and practices can be encountered virtually anywhere in the world. But what does this distribution of uniform cultural goods actually signify, other than the power of some capitalist firms to command wide markets for their products around the world? Well, if we assume that the sheer global presence of these goods is in itself a sign of a convergence towards a single capitalist culture, we are probably utilising a rather impoverished concept of culture - one that reduces a 'culture' merely to its material goods. If culture, at its root, is the production and the experience of meaning through symbolization, the thesis of global cultural convergence must contain the idea that people's interaction with these goods penetrates deeply into the way in which we construct our 'cultural worlds' and make sense of our lives.

The problem with the cultural imperialism argument is that it merely assumes such a penetration: it makes a leap of inference from the simple presence of cultural goods to the attribution of deeper cultural or ideological effects. The reason why it has to be treated with scepticism is, as John Thompson says, that 'it ignores the hermeneutic appropriation which is an essential part of the circulation of symbolic forms' (Thompson 1995: 171). Culture simply does not transfer in this unilinear way. Movement between cultural/geographical areas always involves interpretation, translation, mutation, adaptation, and 'indigenization' as the receiving culture brings its own cultural resources to bear, in dialectical fashion, upon 'cultural imports' (Lull 2000, Tomlinson 1991).

What all this suggests, then, is that arguments which extrapolate from the global ubiquity of capitalist consumer goods or Western media products towards the vision of a uniform capitalist culture are to be doubted precisely because they trade on an inadequate concept of culture.

To conclude I would like to draw one general lesson of cultural analysis from the three examples of 'globalist' thinking that I have given. What unites the medieval mapmaker, the nineteenth century political economist and twentieth and twenty-first century critics of cultural imperialism is the (very understandable) tendency to see the world from their own particular cultural vantage point. In the first two cases the universalising implications are pretty obvious. But I would suggest that there is also a form of universalism operating in the final case. The assumption by western critics that the world simply lies open to the homogenizing advance of western culture is similar to earlier forms of ethnocentrism in at least one respect. This is that it generally involves a failure to appreciate the resilience of cultures in the face of external influence which is itself a failure to imagine globalization from the perspective of other cultures.

If the critical understanding of cultural globalization seems haunted by the tendency to assume either an implausibly utopian or dystopian scenario, then the lesson may be that we need to approach cultural processes not via the macro perspective of globality, but precisely the opposite way, by understanding the effects of globalization as they are felt within particular localities.

The vast majority of us live local lives. But the impact of globalization is to change the very texture of this locality and therefore the nature of cultural experience in general. No longer is culture 'tied' to the constraints of local circumstances. What this implies is not that globalization destroys localities 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 continue to live in places that retain a high degree of cultural distinctiveness – London clearly has its own cultural 'feel' quite different from Beijing - but the point is that this particularity is no longer - as it may have been in the past - the most important determinant of our cultural experience. This 'deterritorialising' aspect of globalization – felt in very ordinary everyday practices like shopping, watching television, phoning our friends, visiting a restaurant – is, I believe the real - rather than imagined – cultural impact of globalization that we must begin both theoretically and empirically to understand.

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