

CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION RECONSIDERED

JOHN TOMLINSON

Professor of Cultural Sociology and director of the Institute for Cultural Analysis, Nottingham, England, has published on issues of globalization, cosmopolitanism, modernity, identity, media, and culture across a range of disciplines from sociology, anthropology, and media studies to geography, urban studies, and development studies, and lectured widely in academic, cultural, and political forums in Europe, the United States, and East Asia. He has acted as consultant to international public sector bodies including UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the NATO Defense College. His books include: *Cultural Imperialism* (Cassell, 1991) and *Globalization and Culture* (Polity, 1999), both of which have been widely translated. His latest book *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* was published by Sage Publications in October 2007. His current research interests include work on the impact of globalization in China, cultural and political cosmopolitanism, and a reassessment of the practices and processes of cultural regulation in Western societies between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

INTRODUCTION: THE WORLD IN YSTAD

One sign of the maturity of the concept of globalization is its application to ever more particular aspects of human life. From the enormous list of published titles containing the phrases “Globalization and...” or “The Globalization of...,” we can now move way beyond general analyses of political, cultural or economic globalization, through more specific but still fairly broad categories—health, sport, literature, family, war, sex, love, religion—and on to decidedly special interest reading. So without going through too many pages on *Amazon*, we can find, inter alia, texts on The Globalization of Mining, Globalization and The Great Exhibition, Globalization and Bioinvasion, Globalization and Islamic Finance, Globalization and Veterinary Medicine, Globalization and Cape Verdean Women, Globalization and The Good, and the rather splendidly specific, Globalization and Sushi.

What this tells us is something more than the cynical fact that publishers know how to ride a good wave. It tells us that globalization, over the relatively short historical spell of twenty-odd years, has become one of the routine ways in which we—that is to say ordinary citizens, and not just academics—grasp modern cultural existence.

Despite the ubiquity of the idea, it retains a good deal of unresolved complexity. This is particularly so in the sphere of culture, consisting as it does in the peculiar entanglements of globalizing political, economic and technological dynamics with human meaning construction, identity and imagination. As we become more familiar with the process, and as we encounter its effects in more and more instances of everyday life, so its subtleties and its contradictions become more apparent. This has at least taken us beyond the more simplistic initial responses. Most serious commentators, for instance, no longer automatically assimilate the idea of cultural globalization entirely to the category of cultural domination—of cultural imperialism, Westernization, Americanization, and so on. And the prediction that globalization would lead to a wholesale homogenization of global culture—a proposition still actively canvassed amongst intellectuals up to the end of the Twentieth Century—now seems almost touchingly naïve in our age of cultural and political turbulence. But we still have a long way to go both in conceptualizing cultural globalization and in making sense of the vexed cultural-political issues it is generating for us.

This discussion attempts to contribute a little to this task. Firstly, by reconsidering the way we approach cultural globalization conceptually. Secondly, by revisiting two of the main controversies that globalization has engendered, the fate of cultural diversity and the incorporative effects of commodification. And, finally, by offering some thoughts on the issue of cultural cosmopolitanism.

To launch this discussion I want to draw briefly on another of those specialist discussions of globalization that I began with. Not, however, one of the standard “Globalization and...” genre; an altogether more oblique and coruscating piece.

In his article, “Henning Mankell, the Artist of the Parallax View,” the philosopher Slavoj Žižek gives us, in under four pages, the globalization of the detective novel. His focus is Mankell’s best selling “Kurt Wallander” series, set in the small town of Ystad in southern Sweden. There are three main moves in Žižek’s analysis.

Firstly, he observes that the impact of globalization on detective fiction is, counter-intuitively, to emphasize the *local* context, exemplified in the mundane, often drab, provincial environment of Inspector Wallander’s Ystad. He contrasts this turn to the “eccentric local” with the paradigmatic settings of, “classic XXth century modernism” in the detective genre: metropolitan cities like London, New York, or Los Angeles. Žižek argues that this popular attraction of very particular locales represents a more general cultural phenomenon, a new articulation of the cosmopolitan imagination:

A true global citizen is today precisely the one who (re)discovers or returns to (or identifies with) some particular roots, some specific substantial communal identity—the “global order” is ultimately nothing but the very frame and container of this mixing multitude of particular identities. (Žižek, 2004:1)

This sense that the global is in itself insubstantial, no more than a “frame and container” for a multitude of particular identifications, is crucial for grasping the impact of globalization in the cultural sphere. No one actually inhabits the global: neither physically (since embodiment ties us all to localities) nor imaginatively (since meaning requires particularity). To understand the force of cultural globalization then, we need to study *localities* and the way they are being transformed.

**GLOBALIZATION,
HAS BECOME ONE
OF THE ROUTINE
WAYS IN WHICH
WE—THAT IS TO SAY
ORDINARY CITIZENS,
AND NOT JUST
ACADEMICS—GRASP
MODERN CULTURAL
EXISTENCE.**

This brings us to Žižek's second move, which is to explore the specificity of Ystad as a setting for the novels. Here the attractions of locality cannot be assigned to a nostalgic retreat into an imagined ideal of *Gemeinschaft*—one of the more commonly assumed responses to the challenges and threats of globalization. Mankell's stories are tinted in the somber hues of the Scandinavian climate and pervaded by a *Bergmanesque* existential angst. But more significantly, Žižek detects in Ystad signs of, "the long and painful decay of the Swedish welfare-state":

Mankell evokes all the traumatic topics which give rise to the New Right populism: the flow of illegal immigrants, soaring crime and violence, growing unemployment and social insecurity, the disintegration of social solidarity. (Žižek, p. 3)

The cases that Wallander eventually solves—in, it has to be said, fairly conventional acts of textual closure—are built around some key sources of the anxiety and uncertainty of global-modern life in the developed world. Most significant of these are the structural economic instability that results from unruly global market forces, and the incursion of various carriers of difference into settled localities. Although Mankell's plots confront the entire range of issues that trouble the liberal conscience of contemporary Swedish society, as Žižek notes, a recurrent theme is the triggering of often-gruesome consequences in Ystad by events in less favored parts of the world. Ystad's implausibly high murder rate is thus often complicatedly linked to questions of racism and xenophobia, the plight of refugees, sex slavery, the trading of human organs in the Third World, or criminal gangs from the post-communist states of Eastern Europe. Admittedly Sweden's ultra liberalism—as expressed, for example in its immigration policies—tend to intensify matters. But we can none the less form a general question from considering the constant, consequential presence of the world in Ystad: what can locality actually *mean* in a world so penetrated by distant forces?

There is a final move in Žižek's terse analysis, in which he brings into play Mankell's own biography to reflect on the possibility of reconciling the experiences and costs of global modernity in affluent Ystad with those in the Third World. His conclusion is not optimistic. But I don't work as fast as Žižek and I'm going to defer this issue for as long as possible.

GLOBALIZATION AND LOCALITY

Žižek's analysis of the detective genre gives us some clues to the way we might produce more precise general conceptualizations of cultural globalization. Tightening up our conceptualizations is not, of itself, going to solve the mysteries of globalization—for this we need, like any good detective, to do painstaking empirical work. But it will help us at least to ask the right sorts of question.

The example of Mankell/Wallander's Ystad suggests two things in this respect: firstly, that the key concept that should concern us is not the global but the local and, secondly, that the way we understand the local must itself be more precisely formulated. Let's take these one at a time.

What is the global? Where is the space of the global? If we ask these questions, we end up with answers that have very little purchase on the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of globalization. The global is the entire physical territory of the world, or, perhaps more relevantly, the global is the entire populated territory of the world. We can't make the specification any narrower than this or we lose the force of the concept entirely. And yet these huge scales give us very little help in understanding what globalization is or how it affects us. Of course it is true that the environmental implications of industrial capitalism have potentially global scale, affecting all the landmasses, the oceans, and even the atmosphere. But this is not the point.

The point is that the global is not a space or even an *entity* that we can meaningfully understand as being causally implicated in globalization. It is not the same as global capitalism—by which we mean a system of production and consumption networked across most, but certainly not all, of the *localities* of the world (and showing great variation in its concentration within these localities). Neither is it a *political* space: for it is abundantly clear that the nation-state system still vigorously divides the space of the global. And as we shall see in what follows it is only rather vaguely imaginable as a cultural space.

None of this would matter too much, were it not for the fact that the idea of "the global" has slipped into becoming the imagined key figure in the globalization process. In many accounts, the "global" and the "local" are conceived as distinct categories existing in a dichotomous relationship. This has given rise to some deceptively simple analyses of the polarization of interests involved: most significantly the idea that the

culture of the local is threatened by the global. Where this occurs, debates tend to become both unclear (because we are not really sure what this threatening entity “the global” actually is) and entrenched. A prime example of this, as we shall see in the following section is the ongoing argument over cultural imperialism.

In fact, it is really just an accident of naming that is to blame for saddling us with the concept of the “global.” “Globalization” was never itself a very precise term to describe the process we are dealing with, but unfortunately it has now become irrevocably inscribed. But if we *define* globalization in its simplest and least controversial terms, we see that what it really refers to is a complex and rapidly developing network of connections and interdependencies operating between *localities*. We can conceive of globalization, then, in very basic terms as the implications of the increasing “flows” around this global network of interconnections of virtually everything that characterizes modern life: flows of capital, commodities, knowledge, information and ideas, people, crime, fashion, images, beliefs, and so on (Castells 1996; Tomlinson 1999; Urry 2003). None of this requires us to think in terms of an entity called the “global.” Globalization has never in fact been global. So let’s be bold and do away with the category of “the global” once and for all.

The appropriate spatial context in which to study cultural globalization, then, is the locality. These are the places where we live—when we are not traveling between them—and where cultures are both generated and experienced. Of course the concept of the locality is not without its ambiguities. We generally conceive of the local according to vague and overlapping criteria: as specific geographical places; as a measure of scale; according to a type of social formation—“community”; in terms of judgments of cultural taste and value—so “authentic” or “parochial”; or even in terms of historical endurance. Often, indeed, the abstract idea of a locality seems to clothe itself in our minds in the features of a more concrete settlement, like a village. But we don’t escape the ambiguities here either, as David Matless’s elegantly meandering definition shows:

Village: A scale of meaning, often tinted with community; regularly small in anatomy; set in country or, if in the town, pretending to a like spirit of belonging; a site set apart for a true life; a site of inbreeding and bestial manners, of forelock tugging and pathetic ser-

vility; a commune of persons made whole in equality and harmonious with a fruitful earth belonging to all or none; a place for microcosmic stories and the unraveling of lives. (Matless 2004: 161–62)

Despite these ambiguities I think the concept of the local is indispensable in grasping the context of our embodied (and so necessarily located) existence, and I am going to suggest a simple way of dealing with the imprecise idea of locality in relation to the process of globalization. This is to use a single dimension, derived from the definition of globalization as a process of increasing complex connectivity. Thus, I suggest that we should understand localities in terms of the degree of connectivity they possess: from relatively high connectivity to low connectivity (I will leave the reader the interesting task of providing their own examples). The point is that it is this degree of connectivity that is the determinant of the transformation of localities, as it allows distant events, processes, and relationships into our everyday lives.

The “reaching in” of the distant exists in different modalities, but it is present in most of the everyday practices of high connectivity localities. It exists in our interaction with a globalized electronic media, which routinely brings news, images, information, and entertainment from across the world into our homes; in the use of communications technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet, enabling more or less instant contact across continents; in the increasing use of Internet search engines like *Google*, rather than local physical stores of information like public libraries, to access information. But it is also found in consumption practices, as people in developed economies are exposed to wider and wider varieties of “global goods” in stores and supermarkets; in food culture, as local-ethnic restaurants make the choice to eat Italian, Chinese, Thai, Indian, Turkish, American, or Japanese food a commonplace of globalized urban life. It is these sorts of activity—now so taken for granted in the advanced economies and growing at such a pace in the urban sectors of the developing world—that are the indicators of cultural globalization. But more significantly, it is through such everyday practices that globalization reaches deep into our individual cultural “worlds,” our understanding of what *counts* as home and abroad, our horizon of cultural and moral relevance, and our sense of cultural identity (Tomlinson 2003, 2007).

WE CAN CONCEIVE OF GLOBALIZATION AS THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE INCREASING “FLOWS” AROUND THIS GLOBAL NETWORK OF INTERCONNECTIONS OF VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING THAT CHARACTERIZES MODERN LIFE: FLOWS OF CAPITAL, COMMODITIES, KNOWLEDGE, INFORMATION AND IDEAS, PEOPLE, CRIME, FASHION, IMAGES, BELIEFS, AND SO ON.

This will do, for the moment, so far as refining our concepts is concerned. Let’s see how this might help when we come to approach real issues and problems.

GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

As I suggested in my opening, many of the earliest critical responses to cultural globalization were framed in terms of a supposed threat to cultural diversity. In a sense there existed a ready-made critical framework for this in the ideas of cultural imperialism and Americanization that have been around in one form or another for half of the twentieth century (Tomlinson 1991). Very few serious critics today, however, unequivocally support the idea that globalization is no more than a process of cultural imperialism.

This said, the wider debate over cultural diversity has certainly not lost its vigor, particularly in the field of cultural policy and within organizations such as UNESCO. There seem to me to be two aspects to this ongoing debate. The first is the (partly) empirical question of whether globalization in fact presents a threat to cultural diversity. The second is the cultural-political question of the *value* that should be attached to cultural diversity, particularly as it is invoked in the justification of cultural protectionist measures by political regimes.

The main reason why the first question remains unresolved is the difficulty in providing clear empirical evidence. Partly this is a matter of the sheer scale of the task. Although individual cases of the loss of particular cultural practices—including, significantly, the loss of languages—are well documented (Crystal 2000; Nettle and Romaine 2000) it is a more difficult task to tie this process (which after all has always been a part of historical cultural change) to the impact of contemporary globalization. And even if this causality can be established, it then becomes a monumental task to gather these particulars into a general thesis about the overall loss of cultural diversity, given the fact that new cultural practices, new languages variants, and so on are constantly being generated. The result of this dearth of hard evidence has been that most discussions have been based on impression and intuition or at best, have enlisted anecdotal evidence.

Very recently, however, some clear evidence has begun to emerge in at least one area, and I will return to this presently. But before this, I want to suggest that the way in which we *frame*

the question of globalization in relation to cultural diversity can make a lot of difference to the intuitions we form.

If we persist in imagining globalization in terms of the empty category of globality, we will be tempted to fill this category up with particular bits of culture—commodities and brands—which we can loosely think of as “global” simply because they are widely distributed around the world. From here it is a small step towards the false deduction that McDonalds, Coca-Cola, and Starbucks constitute a threat to cultural diversity. We have set off down the wrong interpretative path and collected some persuasive impressions along the way (for surely there *do* seem to be Western brands everywhere we travel...), which add weight to the intuition. Hence, the imagined threat of incipient global uniformity.

But if we understand the impact of globalization in the way suggested in the previous section—that is to say, rejecting for good and all the concept of globality and focusing instead on the general increase in the connectivity of localities—we begin down a quite different path of thought, in which globalization seems highly unlikely to result in a wholesale homogenization of culture. Let us stay with the example of food culture to illustrate this.

So imagine a provincial locale, let us say this time the high street of a small English country market town in the years before the most recent global recession. There may perhaps be a McDonalds here (though this will depend on the viability of the customer base) but there is also quite likely an independent Polish food store or a Portuguese café to serve the tastes of the agricultural workers who are here as labor migrants from the EU. This is of course a net *increase* in the cultural diversity of the town—and no one is going to feel a homogenizing threat from *kabanosy* or *caldo verde*. But the example suggests more than this. It demonstrates that local food culture is certainly robust enough to follow its consumers around the world—and by no means vulnerable to domination by global brands.

This point is further confirmed if we consider the much bigger case of China, whose enormously varied regional food culture has arguably been greatly enhanced by globalization: that is with the rise in consumer power stemming from China’s economic growth and entry into the global market since the 1980s. What is interesting about the Chinese case is that, though the consumption of Western fast food as the emblem of an imagined cultural modernity may be

popular, the actual food itself is not (Yan 2000) and forms only a relatively small proportion of a booming indigenous restaurant culture in which variety, innovation, and indeed, food fashion, are key elements.

It becomes clear from these examples that increasing connectivity is not simply a conduit to global cultural uniformity, but beyond this its effects on cultural diversity are liable to be complex. We cannot ignore the vulnerability of some traditional cultural practices to the reach of globalization. This is because the increasing range of cultural experience, and the sense of pluralism that accompanies increasing connectivity presents a challenge to the meaning construction founded on tradition. It does not inevitably follow, however, that traditional practices must be lost to cultural modernity. Globalization may in fact in certain circumstances lead to the rediscovery of certain traditional tastes and practices. Again the case of China is instructive.

The opening up of China's economy since the "Open Door" policy has undeniably seen a flow of globalized cultural goods and a certain level of popular fascination with Western tastes. But at the same time China's economic growth has produced a rather spectacular renaissance in artistic production—stagnant during the most ideologically rigid era of the communist regime—with reinterpretations of classical traditions in music, painting, architecture, and so on. Young women in Beijing and Shanghai are now able purchase traditional Chinese dresses, *Qipaus*, which had been virtually lost to their parent's generation due to a combination of economic centralization and implicit sumptuary regulation (Tomlinson 2003). On a more profound level, there have been significant revivals of interest in Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity amongst urban populations with rising incomes who seek belief systems to replace communist ideology (Cheow 2005; Williams 2007).

All this suggests that the fate of cultural diversity under globalization is likely to be a much more complicated issue than it at first seems.

As I said earlier, one of the problems attending this is the inherent difficulty of empirical investigation of cultural processes on this scale and the resultant paucity of evidence. However, a recently published study by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2009) into the cultural impact of global communications—specifically news media—at last begins to correct this. Norris and Inglehart argue that the threats to cultural diversity arising from exposure to a globalised media

have commonly been exaggerated and they test this out in a meticulously conducted empirical survey of both individual and social outlooks and beliefs. Their research draws broadly on the World Values Survey and European Values Survey conducted between 1981 and 2007, which together constitute the largest data set ever compiled in this area, covering 93 countries; and more specifically in terms of media use, on the most recent fifth wave survey of 57 countries conducted between 2005 and 2007. In both of these sets, the representation ranges across economic and political spectra from some of the lowest to the highest per-capita income societies, and from mature liberal democracies to authoritarian regimes. In terms of scope then, this is pretty much the best data we currently have.

Perhaps the most interesting of Norris and Inglehart's findings are contained in what they call the "firewall thesis of conditional effects." By this they mean that there exist a series of intervening factors at social institutional, economic, and social psychological levels that serve to *moderate* the influence of cultural imports on national cultures, particularly those outside the affluent West. These are of course precisely the societies generally judged to be at risk from the culturally homogenizing effects of globalization. So at the institutional level, low levels of trade integration with the global market, low levels of economic development and investment in communications systems, and often associated low levels of access to information and media freedom will all combine to reduce the impact of global media on national populations. In addition to this, they point to those individual factors—the lack of economic resources and skills—which obviously prevent full engagement with media and communications systems. Finally and perhaps most significantly in terms of meaning construction, they argue that there exists a social-psychological "firewall" in the shape of "socialization filters involved in the acquisition and transmission of core attitudes and enduring values. These firewalls, individually and in combination, help protect national cultural diversity from foreign influence" (Norris and Inglehart 2009, 30).

Their findings are not moreover limited to the situation of non-Western societies. They go on to demonstrate that even in those societies with the lowest levels of institutionalized "firewalls"—that is to say the most affluent, high connectivity, liberal democracies—a growing

consensus on a range of cosmopolitan values does not mean that individual cultural differences are disappearing:

...even amongst post-industrial societies such as the United States and Britain, Sweden and Germany, and Japan and South Korea, which are tightly interconnected through communications networks, trade flows, and economic interdependence, having the greatest share of cultural trade in audiovisual programs, there remain distinctive and persistent cultural differences that show no signs of disappearing. These societies do not share a monolithic Western culture toward which developing societies are converging. Instead, both developing societies and Western societies are changing in ways shaped by broad forces of modernization, while retaining distinctive national cultures. (Norris and Inglehart 2009, 209)

Though Norris and Inglehart's empirical work on news media focuses—as they are careful to point out—on only one aspect of the cultural flows involved in the globalization process, their work does much to support the intuitions of those cultural analysts who, over a long period, have been skeptical about the homogenizing threat of globalization.

However, the debate over cultural diversity at a policy level is not only an empirical one and their comment about the shaping of global cultural experiences by “the broad forces of modernization” points us towards the second question we need to address in relation to cultural diversity today. That is, to put it at its most simple, the relative value to be accorded to diversity in relation to other modern values and principles, such as freedom of expression, human rights, and so forth. As I suggested earlier, this becomes a particular problem in relation to the justification of cultural protectionist measures.

THE POLITICS OF DIVERSITY

The forums in which this debate has been mostly played out have been United Nations agencies, particularly UNESCO. Up until the turn of the present millennium, UNESCO tended to give a fairly straightforward priority to the protection of cultural heritage and thus of cultural diversity. However since that time the discourse of UNESCO has changed to reflect a more sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of cultural

influence, appropriation, and change. Though still promoting a broad agenda based around the preservation of cultural heritage, there has been a move towards reconciling the genuine claims of some communities to the retention of unique and particular cultural identities, with the recognition that, in some circumstances, such claims can mask forms of illiberalism and domestic cultural domination. So for example the 2000 *UNESCO World Cultural Report* states that, “Often, cultural injustice is blurred beneath definitions of diversity that turns norms into essentialist, never-changing values outside history...” (p. 25).

This is not just an advance in the conceptualization of culture: it addresses the real problem of what has been called the “cultural fundamentalism” (Stolcke 2000) involved in some attempts to defend traditional practices. The appeal to cultural autonomy and in a certain sense, rather ironically, to the modern sympathy of cultural relativism can be used to defend many different cultural attitudes and practices that conflict with universal human rights. These include restrictions placed on the freedom of women, repressive policies towards the expression of sexual orientation, illiberal attitudes towards disability, the discriminatory treatment of ethnic minorities and so forth. The recognition of these issues can be read in UNESCO's *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001) in which the aspiration to give the rights to cultural diversity the same status as human rights is expressed within a thoroughgoing pluralism. That is to say, the right to diversity is explicitly conceived as existing *within* national and ethnic communities—and not merely, as in some analogy with political sovereignty—between nation states.

Making this stipulation work however requires a shift in the conceptualization of cultural diversity and probably the most significant move here has been towards seeing diversity not as an end in itself but rather as *indirect* value. For example, the United Nations Development Program's 2004 *Human Development Report* states that: “It would be a serious mistake to regard cultural diversity as valuable no matter how it is brought about... Cultural diversity is not a value in itself, at least not in the human development perspective... The value of cultural diversity rests on its positive connection—as is often the case—with cultural liberty.” (UNDP 2004: 23–24). This understanding of the value of cultural diversity as a facilitator of freedom stems particularly from the work of the

Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen, who provided the conceptual framework for the UNDP Report and developed this approach in his book *Identity and Violence* (2006). Effectively what it does is to treat cultural diversity as a sign of the exercise of cultural liberty. Indeed it treats it as only a *possible* outcome, since, as the UNDP Report rightly points out, “the exercise of cultural liberty may sometimes lead to a reduction of—rather than an increase in—cultural diversity, when people adapt to lifestyles of others and choose in a reasoned way, to go in that direction...” (p. 23).

The attractions of this way of understanding the value of cultural diversity are several. First, by tying diversity so closely to the exercise of individual and collective freedom, it denies its use in the justification of any repressive policies; secondly it recognizes the validity of communal choices for sameness over difference—as for example the choice in favor of the conveniences and comforts of technological modernity over traditional (“authentic”) ways of doing things; and thirdly it avoids the difficult question of why the existence of diversity *in itself* should be regarded as a primary good—a question that is not convincingly answered by analogies sometimes made with significance of biodiversity in the environment.

To summarize, then, the arguments presented here over the relationship between globalization and cultural diversity. In the previous section I suggested that what evidence there is casts great doubt on the thesis—or rather the speculation—that globalization is leading us towards an undifferentiated global culture. And in this section we have seen that international policy discourse in bodies like UNESCO have similarly shifted away from an unqualified defense of cultural diversity at all costs, to a more nuanced stance in which the emphasis is upon the protection of cultural liberty. However these arguments do not put the globalization process entirely in the clear so far as possible adverse culture impact is concerned. For what they do not address is the question of the overall *quality* of cultural experience in a globalized world. A difficult question to which there is probably no definitive answer. But in the following section we will try, at least, to see what is at stake.

CULTURE AND COMMODIFICATION

How can we judge the quality of culture? One way of approaching this difficult question is to consider the most basic role that culture plays

in human existence: that is as a resource and a context for the generation of *meaning*. Culture provides the resources for framing a “life narrative”: providing communally derived answers to the enigma of human existence, giving us reasons for living, and an imagination of the best ways of living together—of flourishing.

If we accept this rudimentary idea of the role of culture, it follows that some cultural contexts might be judged “richer” than others. This is the qualitative judgment, and it does not imply the imposition of an ethnocentrically derived universal standard—“the one-true-just way of living.” Rather for a cultural context to be richer or poorer in this conception means providing greater or lesser scope within which to construct meaningful life narratives. This is a significant issue when we consider the impact of globalization. For it may be that one of the core features of globalized cultural experience—the tendency towards the commodification of culture—involves a restriction of the scope for the generation of meanings proper to human flourishing. This concern indeed is implicit in the stipulation of Article 8 of the UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, which states that cultural goods, “as vectors of identity, values and meanings, must not be treated as mere commodities or consumer goods.”

If there is little evidence that global capitalism is producing a homogenization of culture, there can be little doubt that a significant proportion of cultural practices across the globe have become commodified. By commodified, I mean quite simply converted into entities with intrinsic market value, goods, and services to be bought and sold. The concern here is that this process comes to redefine cultural practices and experiences, to change them being the direct expression of meaning—even if this be no more than in the simple reiterations of everyday life—into something else, something less directly sustaining. The worry is that the commodification of culture involves the over-writing of the nuanced data of the everyday by a powerful but banal master code. And this has been taken by some commentators to signal a serious threat to the integrity of culture. For example, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the grip of the capitalist market is now more or less complete within modern cultures:

It colors inter-human relations at work and at home, in public as well as in the most intimate private domains. It... recasts the destinations

and itineraries of life pursuits so that not one of them bypasses the shopping malls. It relentlessly hammers home the message that everything is or could be a commodity... Whatever [the] market touches turns into a consumer commodity; including the things that try to escape its grip. (Bauman 2005: 88–89)

If Bauman and similar critics of commodification (e.g., Lipovetsky 2005) seem to exaggerate the case, this may—perhaps—be because cultural commodification has become so all pervasive that we are no longer sensitive to it. Perhaps we need an example to give us some historical perspective.

Choosing another example from that laboratory of rapid cultural change that is contemporary China, we can consider the Chinese National Museum of Fine Art in Beijing. When I first visited it in the 1990s, it was an austere sort of place. There were plenty of interesting pictures but very little in the way of interpretative material. And perhaps the most striking thing, nothing whatsoever for sale. No postcards, no posters, no books. And no coffee bar. To western eyes this seemed to signal a lack of sophistication in interpretational skills and entrepreneurial “heritage management” practices on the part of the state-run galleries (something which has in the intervening years been rapidly corrected). And yet the example is perhaps more instructive in the way it reveals core aspects of the common sense that has developed around the presentation practices of art and heritage within global capitalist modernity.

For, by contrast, the internal layouts of almost all public cultural spaces—museums, art galleries, heritage sites—route visitors through to a terminus in a shop, where the experience can be more concretely repurchased in the form of postcards, books, posters, souvenirs, and T-shirts. It is plausible to argue that this routine re-presentation of art works or of heritage sites as commodified entities to be purchased, in replica, as the endpoint of the visit serves to redefine the cultural experience as a whole. Arguably, it reinforces an already widespread disposition to interpret cultural meanings in terms of exchange relationships and within the narrow compass of the aspiration towards individual private appropriation.

And the example also illustrates a subtle aspect of the impact of commodification on cultural diversity. For here we can see that a *form* of cultural diversity is preserved and perhaps even

promoted by the influence of the capitalist market: the display and interpretation of national, regional, or local art and heritage arguably benefits from commercial underpinnings, since this takes pressure off the economic resources of the state or the locality. However at the same time it is clear that this diversity is presented within a single dominant *cultural register*. That is to say, diversity comes to be experienced not as intrinsic to the existence of distinct local communities, but rather as an array of consumer choices. Commodification we might say repackages cultural diversity as a product range.

There is a powerful, market logic to this process that is very difficult to oppose. Priyamvada Gopal for example, cites the example of the Starbucks coffee chain’s new strategy of “de-branding”—that is, of giving its stores new names and more “community personality.” What this strategy is based on, she shows, is a corporate ambition to generate profits even out of anti-corporate cultural sensibilities: “the transformation of the quirky, the unique and the countercultural into mainstream commodity culture” (Gopal 2009). This is indeed a depressing thought and one can understand Gopal’s wondering, like Bauman, if it is, “further evidence of the futility of resisting the gigantic enclosure that is corporate globalization” (ibid).

My answer to this however—and I suspect it would also ultimately be Gopal’s—is no. This is because an over-estimation of the scope of commodification inevitably tends to involve a rather poor account of human agency, of the dynamics of cultural appropriation, and of the capacity of individuals and collectivities to generate meaning and value in contestation with market logics. Moreover, this implicitly weak view of grass-roots cultural agency, which arises from a totalizing account of the grip of the capitalist market, leaves us little scope for conceptualizing and developing viable regulative policy proposals. And it will be some form of regulation—as a systemic expression of cultural will—that has most chance of curbing the ambitions of the corporate actors.

Registering the will to preserve the integrity of cultural expression means not over-estimating the scope of the commodification thesis. And this means insisting on those parts of everyday cultural experience that do indeed escape the grip of the market: deeply-structured senses of national or ethnic identity, a whole range of activities related to religious observance, local communal activities such as music making

or amateur dramatics, volunteering and charity work, teaching your children to swim, having a gossip or a joke, feeding the neighbor's cat... These and many other common practices are not negligible exceptions to an iron rule of market control: as they are enacted and experienced within different local contexts and traditions they produce the "thickening" of cultures (Geertz 1973) that in various ways preserves cultural distinctions and chafes against the smooth advance of a uniform capitalist culture. More importantly, they are reminders that we must approach commodification—however powerful it has become in inflecting contemporary culture—as but one aspect of the complex, contradictory and fluid nature of reflexive modernity, which intrinsically involves the expression of cultural agency (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994).

CULTURE AND COSMOPOLITANISM

I want to conclude with a few brief thoughts on how culture relates to the contemporary debate over cosmopolitanism (Beck 2006; Delanty 2006; Tomlinson 2002; Vertovek and Cohen 2002). We can approach this by returning to Slavoj Žižek's reflections on the work of Henning Mankell. In his final move, Žižek broaches one of the fundamental moral-cultural problems of our time: how to find some single perspective, some "common denominator" between the cultural condition of affluent Ystad and that of the "Third World Other" that so often comes to disturb it:

Every exclusive focus on the First World topics of late capitalist alienation and commodification, of ecological crisis, of the new racisms and intolerances, etc., cannot but appear cynical in the face of Third World raw poverty, hunger, and violence; on the other hand, the attempts to dismiss the First World problems as trivial in comparison with the "real" Third World permanent catastrophes are no less a fake—focusing on the Third World "real problems" is the ultimate form of escapism, of avoiding to confront the antagonisms of one's own society. (Žižek, p. 4)

Žižek finds some sort of answer to this dilemma in Mankell's own biography: the fact that he divides his time between Sweden and Mozambique, where he uses his personal resources to run a small theatre company in Maputo, writing and directing plays performed by local actors. This splitting of life between the two worlds is

not, for Žižek, any form of resolution. On the contrary, he calls Mankell the "Artist of the Parallax View" precisely because this choice of division of life refuses to find any shallow closure:

Aware that there is no common denominator between Ystad and Maputo, and simultaneously aware that the two stand for the two aspects of the same constellation, he shifts between the two perspectives, trying to discern in each the echoes of its opposite. (Žižek, p. 4)

For Žižek, then, the unevenness of globalization means that there exists "no neutral language enabling us to translate one [perspective] into the other." There are various ways of interpreting this. One is that we lack a common moral or aesthetic discourse that can do justice to the enormous disparities that globalization confronts us with—and this may well be true. But another is that we are somehow eternally locked within our separate cultural-experiential worlds with no hope of ever breaking out. In resisting this rather bleak conclusion, I shall suggest that we may be rather more optimistic about the prospects for cultural cosmopolitanism

Is it possible to find a perspective outside of our own cultural experience and the prejudices this fosters? I think it is important first of all to confront the difficulties. The historical record shows that a sort of default position for human cultures is one of ethnocentrism. It is intuitive to understand one's own culture as the way things inevitably are—and from this it is a short step to considering it as the one, true, enlightened, rational, and good way of living. This tendency is doctrinally and discursively structured into many traditional and religious worldviews, but it is a mistake to see it as limited these. Ethnocentrism is also extremely widely distributed in modern secular cultures as an intuitive way of understanding our place in the world. Relativizing our particular cultural experience requires rather difficult efforts of hermeneutic distancing and affective imagination, demanding the ability to conceive of our own experience as not necessarily at the centre of the cultural universe. This is difficult, but not impossible.

One way of understanding this possibility is by considering the closely connected issue of cultural identity. Are we inevitably constrained by our identification with our locality from developing a cosmopolitan outlook, a sense of belonging to the world as a whole? The answer I think

**GLOBALIZATION
MAY JUST IN THE
LONG TERM PROVIDE
THE RESOURCES
NECESSARY TO
SHAPE ATTITUDES OF
CULTURAL OPENNESS
AND TOLERANCE,
PLURALISM,
EMPATHY AND
RESPONSIBILITY.**

is that we *are* constrained, but that this is not inevitable.

Take the most powerful of cultural identifications—that of national identity. As nearly everyone now agrees, this is not a “natural” form of identification, but one involving a great deal of deliberate cultural work. Indeed, far from being natural, spontaneous forms of attachment, cultural identities in general are mostly modern inventions: ways in which our experience is institutionally organized for us. The nation state puts a huge effort into constantly reminding us of our belonging—through education, national ritual, and particularly through the national media (Billig 1995). The same applies to religious identities, constantly reinforced by the practices of religious institutions. Insofar as we tend to prioritize our national or religious identities, we can see that this is the result of the effort that has gone into their construction.

The second thing to recognize is that cultural identities in modern societies are *plural*. We don't just have a national, an ethnic, or a faith-based identity. We also have a gender identity, a sexual identity, an age identity, a professional identity, a familial identity, and so on. Modern people carry with them, as it were, a *portfolio* of identity positions, which they draw upon in different contexts and which they routinely juggle and negotiate—and sometimes have to reconcile.

Understanding cultural identities in this way can give us at least some cause for optimism in regard to the question of building relevant cosmopolitan attitudes. For if we take cosmopolitanism here to mean identification with wider human communities than the locality, the *ethnie*, the nation or the faith community, we can understand it as another type of global-modern identity to be built into our portfolio.

Of course we have to recognize that it won't arise spontaneously. Like all identity positions it

has to be worked at. And for many reasons it is at a disadvantage in comparison with other identity positions. Unlike national identity it does not have the resources of the state to draw upon; unlike religious identity it does not have the traditions, observances, and doctrines of a faith community. And besides this, there are the problems of moral and cultural distance, mediation, and abstraction. Our inherited moral sympathies and imaginations are powerful but largely proximate, when what we need to develop is a long-distance moral sensibility (Bauman 1993; Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006).

But despite all of this, it seems to me that the increasing connectivity of globalization is overall inclined to *increase* rather than to diminish our capacity for cosmopolitan identification. Thus, through the routine experience of a global media and the cultural narratives of identification they can provide (Robertson, forthcoming, 2010), greater levels of mobility, increased interaction with other cultures within multicultural urban settings, more globally aware educational programs in schools and universities, and so on, the positive potential of high connectivity is that it weakens the tendency to ethnocentrism that has been pretty much an historical constant of cultural outlook. To this extent, globalization *may just* in the long term provide the resources necessary to shape attitudes of cultural openness and tolerance, pluralism, empathy and responsibility. This is, of course, a long way short of predicting a better world on the horizon. However, what is important is to resist the idea that our various particularities of cultural location somehow *in principle* rule out the possibility of wider cosmopolitan identifications and commitments. For to resist this is to reserve a place for the project of building cosmopolitan culture on the crowded agenda that globalization sets for us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bauman, Z. *Postmodern Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity, 1993.
- . *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.
- Beck, U. *Cosmopolitan Vision*. Cambridge: Polity, 2006.
- , A. Giddens, and S. Lash. *Reflexive Modernization*. Cambridge: Polity, 1994.
- Billig, M. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage, 1995.
- Boltanski, L. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Castells, M. *The Network Society (The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture: Volume I)*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Cheow, E.T.C. "Religious revival fills a void in China," *The Japan Times*, December 27, 2005.
- Chouliaraki, L. *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London: Sage, 2006.
- Crystal, D. *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Delanty, G. "The cosmopolitan imagination: critical cosmopolitanism and social theory," *The British Journal of Sociology*, Volume 7, Issue 1 (2006): 25–47.
- Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Gopal, P. "Stealth and Starbucks," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2009, 29.
- Lipovetsky, G. *Hypermodern Times*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005.
- Matless, D. "Villages" in S. Harrison, S. Pile, and N. Thrift, eds., *Patterned Ground*. London: Reaktion Books, 2004, 161–64.
- Nettle, D., and S. Romaine. *Vanishing Voices: the extinction of the world's languages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Norris, P., and R. Inglehart. *Cosmopolitan Communications: Cultural Diversity in a Globalized World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Robertson, A. *Cosmopolitan Narratives*. Cambridge: Polity, (in press 2010).
- Sen, A. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. London: Allen Lane, 2006.
- Stolcke, V. "Cultural Fundamentalism." UNESCO 2000: *World Cultural Report: Cultural Diversity, Conflict and Pluralism*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2000: 32.
- Tomlinson, J. *Cultural Imperialism*. London: Continuum, 1991.
- . *Globalization and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
- . 2002: "Interests and Identities in Cosmopolitan Politics," in S. Vertovek and R. Cohen, eds., *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002: 240–53.
- . "Globalization and Cultural Identity," in D. Held et al., eds., *The Global Transformations Reader* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003: 269–78.
- . 2007: "Globalization and Cultural Analysis," in D. Held and A. McGrew, eds., *Globalization Theory: Approaches and Controversies*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007: 148–68.
- UNDP. *Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*. New York: United Nations Development Program, 2004.
- UNESCO. *World Cultural Report: Cultural Diversity, Conflict and Pluralism*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2004.
- . *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2001.
- Urry, J. *Global Complexity*. Cambridge: Polity, 2003.
- Vertovek, S., and R. Cohen, eds. *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Williams, R. "Christianity in the Reinvention of China", *China Review*, issue 40 (Autumn 2007): 1–3.
- Yan, Y. "Of Hamburger and Social Space: Consuming McDonalds in Beijing," in D. S. Davis, ed., *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*. London: University of California Press, 2000: 201–25.
- Zizek, S. "Henning Mankell, the Artist of the Parallax View," 2004. www.lacan.com/zizek_mankell.htm (accessed July 16, 2009).