

Culture and Global Systems

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Keywords cosmopolitan, culture, global systems, hybridity, intentionality

Culture is often treated as a code, a paradigm and more recently as a substance that can spread throughout the world. The position I suggest here is much simpler. Culture in the most general sense, as generic culture, is simply that which is specific to human societies based on the notion of alternative ways of doing similar things. The capacity for culture is the capacity within the same species to constitute different ways of getting organized. It has usually been contrasted with the rest of the biological world, of which we are, of course, a part, by the fact that other species have far less leeway in the organization of their lives, their production of ways of going about the world. This relative fixity has been called instinct in the past, although the behavior of non-humans is today understood as more complex, even displaying cultural learning. This notion of culture as that which makes us human is not the usual usage of the term of course, except for those who deal with the relations between species. Rather, human culture is a differential concept, based on the notion of difference itself, different ways to skin a cat, different ways to relate to the world, different ways of organizing social reproduction, etc.

That culture can be understood in terms of specific structures, even codes, is based on a false dichotomy between culture as specific social practice and culture as the organizing principle of such practice. Culture is difference, of course, but the difference does not precede the practice. Culture is a set of properties of practice, that which is the specificity of the latter. It is not a scheme for the organization of social life that has a prior existence to that life. Nor does the fact of cultural difference convey anything concerning the origins of such difference. The embeddedness of culture within the social is the starting point for examining the way it is constituted as a social-historical phenomenon. In sum, to say that social life is culturally constituted is to say that social life is constituted *of culture* but not *by culture*. It is of course true that there are aspects of culture that are not embedded in actual social relations but exist as relatively autonomous symbolic schemes to be used to socialize members of a particular social world and/or to interpret the

nature of social existence (as in myth). The internal order of the cultural is related to the construction of worlds of intentionality that constitute the immediate, i.e., non-reflexive meaning of action. Understanding such worlds should not be conflated with the external observation of meaning as a set of texts, objects or substance, as is the case in most globalization approaches to culture. The attempt to understand what people are doing in their lives can never be replaced by an external interpretation of the products of their activities. The examples of this confusion are often quite shocking, as when it is assumed that culture A is a melange of cultures B and C, without any analysis of the way the so-called possessors of such culture create their worlds. Thus, spaghetti becomes part-Chinese, and New Guinea masks depicting advertising for South Pacific Beer are assumed to be hybrid works. Hybrid-for-us perhaps, and it is often stated that such hybridity is an objective phenomenon even if local subjects are unaware of it. But hybridity-for-us is not objective since it is only 'for us', in fact, our own subjective interpretation of our objectification of other people's lives. I have suggested that discourses of hybridity are identity discourses rather than attempts to understand what the people we are supposed to be studying are up to. This perspective is symptomatic of global elites, of transnationally identified artists, intellectuals, media people, and global politicians. In cultural terms, it is generated by a gathering of cosmopolitans in the West. This elite congregation is the source of much of the discourse of globalization as well.

The issue of globalization as related to culture is a product of the kind of conflation referred to above. The objectification of culture is one of its instrumental aspects, the reduction of the practice of difference, of meaning, to a product, a text, a substance which liquified can thence flow across all conceivable borders. This process is associated with visions of a new world that we are entering, a millennium of globalization that for some is the announcement of a world of diasporic hybridity, and for others, a world of increasing disorder and inequality.

Global Process and Culture

The global field is one within which globalization, in the sense of movement, can either occur or not occur. Globalization itself does not define the global. The *Fordist* period of nation-states was just

as global as the contemporary world of supposedly disintegrating national sovereignty, even if states are as strong as ever. A systemic approach allows us to ask the very question: why suddenly did culture become a central figure of discourse and why has 'cultural globalization' followed suit (Friedman, 2004b)?

The emergence of culturalist discourse occurred in tandem with the rise of cultural politics, with the decline of modernist structures of identity and the fragmentation of the modernist world into cultural specificities, the search for roots, the demands for culturally based rights as opposed to class rights. This was a major historical transformation in the West and its dependencies, stimulating a series of cultural re-identifications: indigenous, regional ethnicity, immigrant ethnicity and the transformation of national identity from the issue of citizenship to one of cultural belonging. This is what I have referred to as horizontal fragmentation of the national order.

At the same time there has been a rapid vertical polarization separating upwardly mobile sectors of national populations and downwardly mobile sectors, the increase in the rate of stratification in which the lower half indigenizes while the upper sector cosmopolitanizes. While the bottom becomes increasingly xenophobic and indigenizing in its search for a secure identity, the top identifies as the wards of the multicultural world that has been produced by globalization. Here we find the tendency to self-identification as hybrids, as in 'my life space is an assemblage of objects from world cultures', or 'I am a citizen of the world'. At the bottom, those identified and sometimes self-identified as the global rednecks become increasingly angry opponents of what they identify as global elites: Washington, Rome, the Jews and all other representatives of the cosmopolitan agenda. It is interesting that here as well there are alliances across ethnic lines, the 'black' Washitaw Indians who are allied with the Republic of Texas, the KKK in St Petersburg that trains with local black power groups. Sometimes this is made explicit, as when it is stated that all the *trash*, white, black, red and brown, should have it out and then get the real culprits – the gold card-carrying academics (Goad, 1997) who have always succeeded in separating themselves from the multicultural bottom that they so celebrate.

The above polarities are not alone, of course. There is an interesting tendency for the emergence of geo-political polarizations that have been suggested by authors such as Huntington (1996). Others (Buruma and Margalit, 2004) have suggested that a more general hatred of Western modernity is a deeper structure of Western civilization, from the Romantics to more recent cultur-

ally left anti-Westerners. This discourse has been exported, they claim, to Japan in World War II, to Russia beginning in the 19th century, as well as to contemporary Muslim 'fundamentalism'. While it is true that such discourses have been used by anti-Western and anti-modernist movements in order to purify their geographical regions from the disease of modernity, there is plenty of local discourse that can be summoned for the same geopolitical goals. Fractures at lower geographical levels in the global arena are thus supplemented by these larger world regional configurations (Friedman, 2004c).

While fragmentation is occurring in the Western-dominated sector of the world, in East Asia, primarily China, but also in parts of Southeast Asia, the cosmopolitan is in a weak position with respect to nationalist and regionalist discourses, the establishment of larger geographical units, an intensive focus on development and a new Asian modernism, the extinction or integration, by assimilation, segmentation, rather than autonomization of indigenous minorities.

The combination of horizontal and vertical polarization establishes the field of forces that in their specificity are, by definition, cultural (Friedman, 2004a). If particular signifying constructions are produced in such processes – discourses of hybridity and multiculturalism, discourses of indigenization, nationalism, traditionalism and *Kastom* – these are the cultural content or properties of the changing configuration of the global arena itself. Is there global diffusion in all of this? Of course, commodities, brands, technologies, the media, etc. have established themselves across much of the globe and there has even been a certain superficial identification with these sets of objects among rising elites and, to some extent, middle classes. One might wish to call this homogenization, although it is countered by the fragmented production of new identities and cultural forms. From the outside there might indeed be examples of what one could call hybridity, but these are usually *observer-dependent phenomena*. Hybridity only exists, and it does, of course, where those who are so defined identify as such.

All of this of course has occurred in the past, not least in the form of religious expansion related most often to economic and political colonization: the Hinduization and then Islamization of Southeast Asia (and East Africa), the spread of technologies, products, texts, all common phenomena in world history. We note, however, that diffusion is not a process in itself but a result. How things move and the way they are integrated into people's lives must be approached in great detail and with emphasis on the actors involved. For the spread of religion, at least, the conflicts between local elites

in vying for control over trade and other forms of external wealth have been a crucial aspect of such 'diffusion' in Asia, Africa, the Pacific and even in the early history of Europe. The articulation between different logics and strategies originating in different parts of the world forms the site of a true understanding of such phenomena.

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Global History

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Keywords Eurocentrism, global history, globalization, knowledge, new global history, world history

Global history compels us to ask what it is we know about our world, and how we know it. In its simplest terms, globalization, the subject of study in global history, takes us beyond Eurocentrism, nationalism, and their parochial ways of thinking, into a world of both difference and differences being transcended in the name of a common humanity. In doing so, however, it raises many questions about the disciplines by which we try to discern the shape of what it is we are seeking to understand.

These are lofty-sounding statements. We need to come down to earth as well. Global history is, to begin with, a sub-field of history (Mazlish, 1993; Hughes-Warrington, 2005). It is often used as a synonym for world history. This obfuscates our knowledge in an important way. While world history is also an effort to go beyond Eurocentrism, it does not focus on globalization. The latter is a theme, contained within world history, that can be traced from earliest times – hunter-gatherers spreading across the globe – up to the present. It encompasses interconnection and interdepen-

dence of people, trends that appear to be increasing over time. Yet, teleology and determinism must be rejected as we seek to understand globalization's development. The story of the latter is made up of unintended consequences and human agency, with the result being powerful currents that move in a global direction.

We 'know' this since some time after the end of the Second World War, when the factors making globalization achieved a level of expansion and synchronicity and synergy that, like water boiling, has brought us to a new state. The very term 'globalization' only appeared around the 1960s. To reflect our new awareness we would do well to adopt a new periodization: the global epoch. Previously, we spoke of ancient, medieval and modern periods or epochs. Now we must transcend the latter term in this sequence, modern (and its offspring postmodern), for it has lost its potency in orienting us in a 'world' (a word derived from Middle English meaning 'earth') that has become a globe (a word derived from Latin for spheroid, and pointing us outward) (Mazlish, 1998). Our consciousness of space and time has changed to match our changed life experiences. This is knowledge, a knowledge that requires us to re-examine all our social sciences disciplines, which were derived from an earlier transformation, that of the Industrial and French Revolutions.