

To some extent, what is being debated is the tension between the 'global' and the 'local' in the transformation of identities. National identities, as we have seen, represent attachment to particular places, events, symbols, histories. They represent what is sometimes called a *particularistic* form of attachment or belonging. There has always been a tension between these and more *universalistic* identifications — for example, to 'humanity' rather than to 'Englishness'. This tension has persisted throughout modernity: the growth of nation-states, national economies and national cultures continuing to provide a focus for the first; the expansion of the world market and modernity as a global system providing the focus for the second. With Section 5, which examines how globalization in its most recent forms impacts on identities, you may find it helpful to think of such impact in terms of new ways of articulating the particularistic and the universalistic aspects of identity, or new ways of negotiating the tension between the two.

5 THE GLOBAL, THE LOCAL AND THE RETURN OF ETHNICITY

Are national identities being 'homogenized'? Cultural homogenization is the anguished cry of those who are convinced that globalization threatens to undermine national identities and the 'unity' of national cultures. However, as a view of the future of identities in a post-modern world this picture is too simplistic, exaggerated and one-sided as it stands.

We can pick up at least *three* major qualifications or counter-tendencies. The first arises from Kevin Robins's argument and the observation that, alongside the tendency towards global homogenization, there is also a fascination with *difference* and the marketing of ethnicity and 'otherness'. There is a new interest in 'the local' together with the impact of 'the global'. Globalization (in the form of flexible specialization and 'niche' marketing) actually exploits local differentiation. Thus, instead of thinking of the global *replacing* the local, it would be more accurate to think of a new articulation between 'the global' and 'the local'. This 'local' is not, of course, to be confused with older identities, firmly rooted in well-bounded localities. Rather, it operates within the logic of globalization. However, it seems unlikely that globalization will simply destroy national identities. It is more likely to produce, simultaneously, *new* 'global' and *new* 'local' identifications.

The second qualification to the argument about the global homogenization of identities is that globalization is very unevenly distributed around the globe, between regions and between different strata of the population *within* regions. This is what Doreen Massey calls globalization's 'power geometry'.

ACTIVITY 2 You should now read **Reading B, 'A global sense of place'**, by Doreen Massey. Note her examples of the ways in which the *same* processes affect groups and places *differently*.

The third point in the critique of cultural homogenization is the question of who is most affected by it. Since there is an uneven direction to the flow, and since unequal relations of cultural power between 'the West' and 'the Rest' persist, globalization — though by definition something which affects the whole globe — may appear to be essentially a Western phenomenon.

Kevin Robins reminds us:

For all that it has projected itself as transhistorical and transnational, as the transcendent and universalizing force of modernization and modernity, global capitalism has in reality been about westernization — the export of western commodities, values, priorities, ways of life. In a process of unequal cultural encounter, 'foreign' populations have been compelled to be the subjects and subalterns of western empire, while, no less significantly, the west has come face to face with the 'alien' and 'exotic' culture of its 'Other'. Globalization, as it dissolves the barriers of distance, makes the encounter of colonial centre and colonized periphery immediate and intense.
(Robins, 1991, p.25)

In the latest form of globalization, it is still the images, artefacts and identities of Western modernity, produced by the cultural industries of 'Western' societies (including Japan) which dominate the global networks. The proliferation of identity choices is more extensive at the 'centre' of the global system than at its peripheries. The patterns of unequal cultural exchange, familiar from earlier phases of globalization, persist into late-modernity. If you want to sample the exotic cuisines of other cultures in one place, it would be better to eat in Manhattan, Paris or London than in Calcutta or Delhi.

On the other hand, societies of the periphery have *always* been open to Western cultural influences and are now more so. The idea that these are 'closed' places — ethnically pure, culturally traditional, undisturbed until yesterday by the ruptures of modernity — is a Western fantasy about 'otherness': a 'colonial fantasy' maintained *about* the periphery *by* the West, which tends to like its natives 'pure' and its exotic places 'untouched'. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that globalization is impacting everywhere, including the West, and the 'periphery' is experiencing its pluralizing impact too, though at a slower, more uneven pace.



The global post-modern

5.1 'THE REST' IN 'THE WEST'

The preceding pages have presented three qualifications to the first of the three possible consequences of globalization: i.e. the homogenization of global identities. These are that:

- (a) Globalization can go hand in hand with a strengthening of local identities, though this is still within the logic of time-space compression;
- (b) Globalization is an uneven process and has its own 'power geometry';
- (c) Globalization retains some aspects of Western global domination, but cultural identities everywhere are being relativized by the impact of time-space compression.

Perhaps the most striking example of this third point is the phenomenon of migration. After World War II, the decolonizing European powers thought they could pull out of their colonial spheres of influence, leaving the consequences of imperialism behind them. But global interdependence now works both ways. The movements of Western styles, images, commodities and consumer identities outwards has been matched by a momentous movement of peoples from the peripheries to the centre in one of the largest and most sustained periods of 'unplanned' migration in recent history. Driven by poverty, drought, famine, economic undevelopment and crop failure, civil war and political unrest, regional conflict and arbitrary changes of political regime, the accumulating foreign indebtedness of their governments to Western banks, very large numbers of the poorer peoples of the globe have taken the 'message' of global consumerism at face value, and moved towards the places where 'the goodies' come from and where the

chances of survival are higher. In the era of global communications, the West is only a one-way airline charter ticket away.

There have been continuous, large-scale, legal and 'illegal' migrations into the US from many poor countries of Latin America, and the Caribbean basin (Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, the islands of the British Caribbean), as well as substantial numbers of 'economic migrants' and political refugees from South-East Asia and the Far East — Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Indians, Pakistanis, Japanese. Canada has a substantial minority Caribbean population. One consequence is a dramatic shift in the 'ethnic mix' of the US population — the first since the mass migrations of the early part of this century. In 1980, one in every five Americans came from an African-American, Asian-American or American-Indian background. In 1990, the figure was one in four. In many major cities (including Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and Miami), whites are now a minority. In the 1980s, the population of California grew by 5.6 million, 43 per cent of which were people of colour — that is, including Hispanics and Asians, as well as African-Americans (compared to 33 per cent in 1980) — and one-fifth is foreign born. By 1995 one-third of American public school students are expected to be 'non-white' (US Census, 1991, quoted in Platt, 1991).

Over the same period, there has been a parallel 'migration' into Europe of Arabs from the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia), and Africans from Senegal and Zaire into France and Belgium; of Turks and North Africans into Germany; of Asians from the ex-Dutch East and West Indies and Surinam into the Netherlands; of North Africans into Italy; and, of course, of people from the Caribbean and from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kenya, Uganda and Sri Lanka into the UK. There are political refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, the Sudan and Sri Lanka and other places in small numbers everywhere.

This formation of ethnic-minority 'enclaves' within the nation-states of the West has led to a 'pluralization' of national cultures and national identities.

5.2 THE DIALECTIC OF IDENTITIES

How has this situation played itself out in Britain in terms of identity? The first effect has been to contest the settled contours of national identity, and to expose its closures to the pressures of difference, 'otherness' and cultural diversity. This is happening, to different degrees, in all the Western national cultures and as a consequence it has brought the whole issue of national identity and the cultural 'centredness' of the West into the open.

Older certainties and hierarchies of British identity have been called into question in a world of dissolving boundaries and disrupted continuities. In a country that it is now a container of

African and Asian cultures, the sense of what it is to be British can never again have the old confidence and surety. Other sources of identity are no less fragile. What does it mean to be European in a continent coloured not only by the cultures of its former colonies, but also by American and now Japanese cultures? Is not the very category of identity itself problematical? Is it at all possible, in global times, to regain a coherent and integral sense of identity? Continuity and historicity of identity are challenged by the immediacy and intensity of global cultural confrontations. The comforts of Tradition are fundamentally challenged by the imperative to forge a new self-interpretation based upon the responsibilities of cultural Translation.

(Robins, 1991, p.41)

Another effect has been to trigger a widening of the field of identities, and a proliferation of new identity-positions together with a degree of polarization amongst and between them. These developments constitute the second and third possible consequences of globalization I referred to earlier (Section 4) — the possibility that globalization might lead to a *strengthening* of local identities, or to the production of *new identities*.

The strengthening of local identities can be seen in the strong defensive reaction of those members of dominant ethnic groups who feel threatened by the presence of other cultures. In the UK, for example, such defensiveness has produced a revamped Englishness, an aggressive little Englandism, and a retreat to ethnic absolutism in an attempt to shore up the nation and rebuild 'an identity that coheres, is unified and filters out threats in social experience' (Sennett, 1971, p.15). This is often grounded in what I have earlier called 'cultural racism', and is evident now in legitimate political parties of both Left and Right, and in more extremist political movements throughout Western Europe.

It is sometimes matched by a strategic retreat to more defensive identities amongst the minority communities themselves in response to the experience of cultural racism and exclusion. Such strategies include re-identification with cultures of origin (in the Caribbean, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan); the construction of strong counter-ethnicities — as in the symbolic identification of second-generation Afro-Caribbean youth, through the symbols and motifs of Rastafarianism, with their African origin and heritage; or the revival of cultural traditionalism, religious orthodoxy and political separatism, for example, amongst *some* sections of the Muslim community.

There is also some evidence of the third possible consequences of globalization — the production of *new identities*. A good example is those new identities which have emerged in the 1970s, grouped around the signifier 'black', which in the British context provides a new focus of identification for *both* Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities. What these communities have in common, which they represent through taking on the 'black' identity, is not that they are culturally, ethnically, linguistically or even physically the same, but that they are seen and treated as 'the same' (i.e. non-white, 'other') by the dominant culture. It

is their exclusion which provides what Laclau and Mouffe call the common 'axis of equivalence' of this new identity. However, despite the fact that efforts are made to give this 'black' identity a single or unified content, it continues to exist as an identity *alongside a wide range of other differences*. Afro-Caribbean and Indian people continue to maintain different cultural traditions. 'Black' is thus an example, not only of the *political* character of new identities — i.e. their *positional* and *conjunctural* character (their formation in and for specific times and places) — but also of the way identity and difference are inextricably articulated or knitted together in different identities, the one never wholly obliterating the other.

As a tentative conclusion it would appear then that globalization *does* have the effect of contesting and dislocating the centred and 'closed' identities of a national culture. It does have a pluralizing impact on identities, producing a variety of possibilities and new positions of identification, and making identities more positional, more political, more plural and diverse; less fixed, unified or trans-historical. However, its general impact remains contradictory. Some identities gravitate towards what Robins calls 'Tradition', attempting to restore their former purity and recover the unities and certainties which are felt as being lost. Others accept that identity is subject to the play of history, politics, representation and difference, so that they are unlikely ever again to be unitary or 'pure'; and these consequently gravitate towards what Robins (following Homi Bhabha) calls 'Translation'.

Section 6 will now briefly sketch this contradictory movement between Tradition and Translation on a wider, global canvas and ask what it tells us about the way identities need to be conceptualized in relation to modernity's futures.



Asian cultural identities maintained in a European context