

# SYMBOLIC POWER STRUGGLES IN INTER-CULTURAL SPACE

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On the eve of the last decade of this millennium, waves of euphoria were catapulted through invisible globalising networks with their nodal points in television satellites, old-fashioned radio transmitters, computer modems, telephones and fax machines. These waves reached places like Trinidad and the Trobriands, and engendered a widespread feeling that a new era in the history of humanity was about to begin. In some people's view, the East European revolutions marked the ultimate victory of capitalism and liberal democracy as the universal ideology of the world; some even went so far as to suggest that history had come to an end in a Hegelian sense. These points are certainly debatable, but it is doubtless true - and it is a point of departure for this essay - that a majority of humanity is by now more or less fully integrated into global systems of communication and exchange. We are forced to be citizens, and we are consumers in a market. The interfaces of modernity - the market, the state and the individual - unite very many of us in a system although we are geographically widely dispersed. Culture is being liberated, or severed, from places, and meanings flow in inter-cultural space. Although globalisation is a fact, the popular metaphor of the global village is fatally misleading: it mixes up the distinctive levels of inter-cultural space, made up by disembedded signs, and the local level, where these signs are pulled down and anchored in subjectively experienced worlds. In this talk I shall confront this contradiction in McLuhan's metaphor by indicating how the global is articulated with the local without becoming the same as the local. In doing

this, I will wrap up my examples in a series of reflections about the ways in which we think about what culture is about.

### **The problem**

A main source of inspiration for this paper, as for the present symposium as a whole, is the emerging interdisciplinary research field dealing with the globalisation of culture. Drawing on diverse empirical material, theory and earlier research efforts, many scholars in the social sciences and the humanities are currently attempting to come to terms with a social and cultural world which seems increasingly to be characterised by flux, paradox, change, lack of clear boundaries and unprecedented complexity. Facing this world, it is becoming painfully evident that many of our conventional methodological tools and analytic frames of enquiry are lamentably inadequate. This is not the place to go into these scholarly quibbles in detail, although they are important for the future of our academic disciplines and indeed for our future understanding of the world. Instead, I shall focus on one aspect of globalisation which has not, perhaps, received sufficient attention yet. I shall reflect on the power of symbols and meanings in inter-cultural space, and will thereby ask why it is that some symbols and meanings are so much more powerful and effective than others in the sense that they are being appropriated and used by millions of people all over the world.

Fifteen to twenty years ago, that is before postmodernism and the collapse of conventional Marxism, a plausible answer to this question could have been a simple one. The notion of cultural imperialism had a natural place in the conceptual toolbox of any self-respecting sociologist or anthropologist. It was more or less taken for granted that cultural domination, the colonisation of the mind in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's words, was a concomitant of economic, political and military domination. Immanuel Wallerstein succeeded in nearly convincing everybody that there is really only one world system, the capitalist world system, which consists of centre, periphery and a few fuzzy areas which could conveniently be described as semi-periphery. Many, Marxists and non-Marxists alike, assumed that the masses of the Third World were the hapless victims of ideologies spreading false consciousness, just as they were being

exploited economically by companies and governments of the North. Consumerism and careerism were regarded as evil and harmful ideologies; by implication, the individualism of Europe was considered unfit for the African, Indian and South American collectivist spirit - just as capitalism itself had been imposed from without as an alien and ultimately harmful system.

The intellectual sterility of this general approach has been shown, I think quite conclusively, by many scholars and artists who have emphasised the ways in which meaning is necessarily generated locally by people who have some notion about what they are up to. In other words: being poor and oppressed is no excuse for not thinking, reacting to the world, behaving, choosing between alternatives and occasionally enjoying a Coke, a soap opera or a pop tune. Although dependency theory in its widest, most encompassing versions may be useful at a very general and abstract level, it tells us nothing about life-experiences and how people make sense of the world in which they live the way they see it. More crucially, there is no simple functional link between economic and political circumstances on the one hand, and cultural processes on the other. When, therefore, we wish to investigate cultural power - power over thought, discourse, knowledge and meaning - it may be way off the mark to start by looking into economic and political power. In a little while, I shall try to drive this point home through a description of cultural processes in a place I know from anthropological fieldwork; first, a few words must be said about how we ought to think about culture and identity.

## **Culture**

The argument of globalisation goes approximately like this. In the post-colonial world, that is to say the world of the micro-chip, general-purpose money, linear time, the satellite dish and the jetplane, culture is no longer restricted to particular places - it has in important respects been disembedded from spatial structures. Transnational and non-localised networks of communication and exchange function alongside localised processes of modernisation and integration into nation-states, to the effect that cultural variation is forcefully being channeled through the universal interfaces of modernity. As Anthony Giddens once put it, rather bluntly: The world is

becoming a single place. However, most globalisation theorists would stress, continued diversity and diversification are indeed not opposed to globalisation; rather, they are aspects of it. The Rushdie affair from 1989 on should be a reminder of this: A book published in Britain provoked a reaction in Iran, and as a consequence, virtually half of the world's population were immediately involved in a public debate on religion and civil rights, arguing from within very different life-worlds, yet united by their shared disagreement and the channels required to make the disagreement public.

In order to grasp this kind of cultural process, a radical re-thinking of the concept of culture is necessary. In anthropology, that concept of culture which is still the most common one in the literature, especially in the United States, conceives of culture in terms of sharing and conjugates it in the plural: under normal circumstances, so to speak, the members of a given society were assumed to have the same culture - a shared way of life, language, religion, customs and so on. This notion of culture is ridden by several serious problems, and I will not go into all of them here. Suffice it to mention the problem of boundaries and the problem of variation: that the boundaries drawn between "cultures" are always more or less arbitrary, and that it is rarely accurate to claim that members of any society share a way of life. In the age of global communications and postmodern fragmentation of life-worlds and experiences, this general point cannot be overlooked in any sensible study of cultural processes.

Culture is that which makes communication and misunderstanding possible, and it is also the continuously generated result of ongoing processes of communication. It is not a fixed entity, nor can it be delimited to a community of individuals. To myself, there is no doubt that I share more in terms of culture with some of my informants from anthropological fieldwork in Mauritius and Trinidad than with my next-door neighbours in Oslo. In general, as interacting human beings we are closer than ships passing in the night, but tightly knit communities with shared values and ideas are rarer than many social scientists have been wont to think.

Furthermore, culture, seen as regular but unbounded traffic in symbols and meanings, can profitably be studied apart from macro features of the economy. The reason is that meaning is created intersubjectively, between people who are in some way or another in touch with one another, and there is no reason to assume that these processes follow the same logic, or are directly determined by, economic and political processes. I am not saying that they are independent from the latter, merely that there is no one-to-one relationship. Discursive power, the power to define the terms of discourse and to fill the social world with meaning, is not simply congruent with economic and political power. Culture is as such no scarce resource, unlike the resources competed over in economic and political life. Whereas the actors in the economic and political arenas attempt to prevent other actors from access to their resources, the actors who shuffle ideas, images and meanings around in the global market-place may rather try to share them with as many as possible.

The inter-cultural space alluded to in my title refers to that imaginary field - for these processes do not unfold in space! - where messages, discourses and meanings of diverse origins are sifted, scrutinised, confronted and selected. My special interest here concerns the articulation between globalised messages and discourses and local ones. This process always takes place locally. One could therefore say, as a rejoinder to McLuhan and his simplistic notion of the global village, that perhaps the world is a single place, but it is always created and re-created in a multitude of localities: no matter how global our networks of communication and exchange may be, in a physical and often social sense we are necessarily placebound. The general question I am asking is a Batesonian one: why do some ideas, images and meanings offered survive and gain mass appeal in many such localities, whereas others do not? Do those fragments of meaning that have a more or less global appeal have anything in common? I now turn to an elaboration of some of these claims by way of an example.

## **Mauritius**

Mauritius could easily be described as an extreme case of a culturally dependent territory - and indeed, several social scientists have approached the island in exactly this way. Situated in the Indian Ocean eight hundred kilometres east of Madagascar, the island was uninhabited when first settled by European colonisers and their slaves in the seventeenth century. Today an independent state with a population of slightly over a million, contemporary Mauritius relies on three main industries - sugar cane, manufacturing and tourism - for its economic survival. Give a series of loans to the competing textile industries of Indonesia and India, or reduce the sugar quotas to the EC through the Lomé convention, or raise the price of crude oil by a few dollars a barrel, and the Mauritian economic outlook moves from optimism to despair. Given its small size, its isolation and its great dependency on trade with the outside world, Mauritius can thus be seen as an extreme example of that interconnectedness with other places which is typical of virtually any location in the contemporary world.

Similarly, it would be easy to describe Mauritian culture as an extreme case of dependency. All that is culturally endemic to the island is, in a certain sense, the local mix of European, African and Asian influences. The vernacular of most Mauritians, Kreol, has been described as a merger of Bantu grammar with French vocabulary; Mauritian cuisine, although far from homogeneous, could similarly be described as an incongruous mix of Indian, Chinese and French cooking. Due to the island's peculiar colonial history, its legal system contains elements of the Code Napoléon as well as British law. If we were to follow these lines of reasoning, we might be able to develop a model of Mauritian culture depicting it as a more or less fixed system of practices, meanings and customs which were all but derivative. A few scholars have tried to show that the Creoles, the Mauritians of African descent, have retained important elements of "African culture"; and many local academics are concerned with the question of cultural continuity among Mauritians of Indian descent. This way of conceptualising culture, which can be politically efficient, is misleading because it builds on the assumption that culture has a transcendental existence, that it exists as a *langue*, so to speak; a priori,

outside of the acting agents. If we insist that culture is that which makes communication possible as well as being the enacted outcome of that communication, it is absolutely necessary to look more closely at the processes whereby meanings are created; namely, in the ongoing lives of people. If they consider themselves Indian, they are effectively Indian, even if their way of life does not conform to academic definitions of Indianness; and if they authentify their selves through appropriating French table manners and American accents when singing contemporary pop songs, then those very cultural elements are exactly what are required for a Mauritian to be authentic. Power and exploitation enter into these relationships only to the extent that people lose control over their own priorities, as when zealous traditionalists in the Middle East rule that liberal urban women should wear veils because to do otherwise would not be in accordance with the principles of their authentic culture.

### **Patrick**

Let me dwell for a while on an example, before making some concluding remarks. A young man in his mid-twenties, who lives in the town of Beau-Bassin in Mauritius, is called Patrick. He is a light-skinned urban Creole with a French name; most of his distant ancestors were Indian and African, but he does certainly not dream of an Indian or African name for his own part. Patrick's vernacular is Kreol, but he prefers to speak French or even English with foreigners. He thinks little of the local nationalist movement which tries to win official recognition for Kreol: according to Patrick, French is superior as a written language not only because it is an international language, but also because it is, in his view, richer and more nuanced than Kreol. Concerning music, which has an important place in his life, Patrick is fond of sentimental French chansons as well as some British and North American pop and rock'n'roll. He does not like contemporary rap, dub and house which, he contends, lack melody and feel; nor does he particularly enjoy so-called roots music such as reggae, rhythm'n'blues and 'forties jazz. When confronted with North American, African and Caribbean notions about "black culture" and the black consciousness movement, Patrick tends to shrug and say that this movement has little appeal to him; he does not believe in its politics and does

not like its aesthetic expressions. Similarly, he has no time for that Mauritian cultural radical movement which tries to replace metropolitan expressions - music, literature, language, food, clothing - with local ones. Concerning local séga music, which is very self-consciously local and rooted in local experiences, Patrick likes very little of it, because, as he says, the quality of the songs is really quite poor if one compares it with European music.

Patrick and his brothers frequently rent video films; many of them are low-budget Hong Kong kung-fu films; others are American films dubbed in French. He says that the criterion for a good film is its ability to stir the sentiments of the audience, and both violent and romantic films are in his view capable of that.

Someone infused with a traditional view of culture as a fixed, rooted or semi-metaphysical entity shared by a population would have no other choice than concluding a study of Patrick's views and priorities by stating that he suffers from a serious attack of cultural dependency and false consciousness; that he is alienated from his roots and probably despises himself. My own conclusion is nearly opposite. It is easy to see that Patrick's selection and consumption of symbols in inter-cultural space are consciously undertaken in order to help him make sense of, and enrich, his life-experiences. He has relatively little education and works as a junior clerk; his immediate chances for promotion are slim. He does not fancy Europe as a land of milk and honey and unlike many Mauritians, he does not dream of professional success in France, Canada or Australia. His life-projects are modest and local: he wants to marry his girlfriend and to improve his social standing a little; and he wants to continue to be able to enjoy himself through a lifetime of work and married life. He does not see black people as being neither superior nor inferior to white people, but as he accurately puts it, your skin colour is important for your career opportunities worldwide. Not a politically oriented man, Patrick does not think this will change easily or in the near future. There is, in a word, no reason for him to attach himself to what we middle-class intellectual Europeans may think of as national culture on the one hand, and black culture on the other hand. His life-projects and his codification of his own experiences

are congruent with - and informed by - the cultural commodities he transforms into expressions of his own identity. The authentication of the self happens in the self, not in sociological theories of oppression and authenticity.

### **Inter-cultural space: Shared codes**

Let me put this in a more general way. First, any cultural expression must be commodified in order to travel in inter-cultural space: it must be available in the market place. Secondly, people everywhere select among the available goods offered for cultural consumption those which best help them to make sense of their own experiences. If they primarily regard their experiences as those of Indians severed from the source of their culture, they may - as many Mauritians of Indian origins do - select and fetishise cultural commodities associated with Indianness. If, on the other hand, they regard themselves as modern and forward-looking, they may - as many Indo-Mauritians and others have also done - emphasise what is locally thought of as Westernness instead. Neither of the two strategies can generally be said to be more authentic than the other. For those members of urban middle classes in many countries of the world who regard some version of local or national culture as being more authentic than say, the images from Hollywood or Bombay, the main kind of life-experience may relate to colonisation.

Patrick rarely distinguishes between local and inter-cultural or global messages in his preferences. However, many Mauritians are in favour of local musical artists because they convey aspects of a life-experience that is uniquely Mauritian, described in the local idiom. These meanings, one may assume, will not travel since they are embedded locally. On the contrary, I would argue, they may - just as Jamaican reggae and Trinidadian calypso have travelled through inter-cultural space, ending up among youths in Europe and North America. The itinerary of Oriental religion towards Europe and North America has been more complex and has been marked by several transformations and processes of commodification; some aspects of Oriental religion (notably Zen buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism) are nevertheless being appropriated by thousands, perhaps millions of Europeans and North

Americans who use them to account for their experiences in the world. Certainly, some cultural commodities are unfit for international consumption, but their embeddedness in local experiences does not seem to be the only criterion. Rather, just as true art is said to possess an essence enabling it to transcend its own time, it is tautologically true that cultural products which survive in inter-cultural space contain an element that makes it possible for people elsewhere to hook themselves onto it and read their own life's story into them.

There are significant local variations as regards which messages survive and which do not; for example, the soap opera *The Young and the Restless* is extremely popular in Trinidad, whereas it enjoys only a moderate success in Malaysia. A main reason is that it deals with sex and intrigues, which is a more important topic in Trinidadian society than in Malaysian society. As regards *Dallas*, which is a soap largely focussing on the topics of power and money, the situation is the opposite. However, the variations are certainly not merely localised; they can be observed in the localities themselves. The typical Western European jazz lover is a university-educated urban man in his forties; the typical Mauritian reader of French romans-photo is a teenage girl. The patterns of bricolage whereby cultural universes are fashioned so as to make sense of the world for the subject, vary infinitely. Some of the variation may be related to regional differences; for example, the popularity of French pop music in Mauritius is not unrelated to the Mauritian population's proficiency in the French language and long history of cultural colonialisation by images of French culture. However, much of the variation is caused by differences between life-experiences which are not related to geographic differences. Both the visual arts, the popular arts and literature have a stake in the symbolic power struggles taking place in inter-cultural space; and Michael Jackson's almost global success can justly be compared to the almost universal recognition of Dostoyevsky's novels: although locally embedded, they communicate shared denominators enabling people in diverse circumstances to read them in a meaningful way.

### **Conclusion: The logic of symbolic power asymmetries**

Many artists and intellectuals, of both socialist and conservative persuasions, argue against the globalisation of culture on largely aesthetic grounds: they might say that the shared symbolic repertoire developed in inter-cultural space is flat and superficial because it glosses over and indeed obliterates the distinctiveness of those life-experiences which it unites. (Does this mean that Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky are "flattening" writers?) Others would stress the fact that the global success of Coca-Cola, Madonna, CNN Headline News, Levi's jeans and Dynasty is caused by the economic dominance of the companies spreading these products and the cultural hegemony of the ideology they convey. While both of these approaches may have something to recommend them, I would prefer to start the analysis with a phenomenological focus on the consuming subject. Only by observing how meaning is created at that level, can we fully understand why the Coca-Cola bottle has become the most familiar single object in the whole world, why European classical music is popular among the Trinidadian middle classes, why Trinidadian steelband music is popular among parts of the European middle classes and why, generally speaking, some meanings are more universally applicable than others. A main finding from my own research and that of others is that although the elements floating in inter-cultural space are disembedded and non-localised, meaning must always be localised to a subject. In other words, when Patrick of Beau-Bassin listens to Jacques Brel, he effectively interprets Brel within, and moves Brel into, a Mauritian frame of reference, anchoring him in local experiences. For every Bob Marley fan in the world, there is a unique interpretation of Marley, relating his songs to a unique, localised life-experience. What appear to be common denominators creating shared universes of meaning and flattening experiences, may upon closer investigation turn out to be multifaceted and polysemic symbols which are effectively used in extremely diverse ways by agents who continue to live in different worlds despite processes of so-called cultural homogenisation. So-called global culture is not marked by shared meanings but by shared symbols to which diverse meanings may be attributed.

Although political and economic power certainly exist in a very real way and contribute to setting the parameters for the symbolic power struggles in inter-cultural space - we notice that the Swedish telecommunications company is a sponsor of this symposium, and I know many Indians who do not have their own telephone - the ultimate kind of power in question is the power of persuasion, which connects emotions and experiences to particular symbols or cultural commodities. It could be said that these symbols convey an ideological content; perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they can be used to express sensologies (Mario Perniola's suggestion), for the senses are probably more important than ideas in the formation of identities and consumer preferences. A final remark: The resulting kind of cultural diversity cannot meaningfully be said to be either less rich or less authentic than the kinds of cultural diversity described by Victorian travellers a few generations ago, but it is different, and - to return to my initial reflections - it must provoke us to re-think the concept of culture. Preferably, culture ought to have been a verb.