

GLOBALIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

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In a certain, important sense, the present human world is more tightly integrated than at any earlier point in history. In the age of the jet plane and satellite dish, the age of global capitalism, the age of ubiquitous markets and global mass media, various commentators have claimed that the world is rapidly becoming a single place. Although this slightly exaggerated description has an important point to make, a perhaps even more striking aspect of the post-cold war world is the emergence -- seemingly everywhere -- of identity politics whose explicit aim is the restoration of rooted tradition, religious fervour and/or commitment to ethnic or national identities.

It is doubtless true that globalization is a pervasive tendency influencing the lives of people everywhere -- from the Amazon rainforest to Japanese cities. The concept has recently become a fashionable one, and as a result, its meaning is becoming fuzzy. I would propose, therefore, a view of globalization as *all the sociocultural processes that contribute to making distance irrelevant*. It has important economic, political and cultural dimensions, as well as equally important ethical implications. Truly global processes affect the conditions of people living in particular localities, creating new opportunities and new forms of vulnerability. Risks are globally shared in the age of the nuclear bomb and potential ecological disasters. On the same note, the economic conditions in particular localities frequently (some would say always) depend on events taking place elsewhere in the global system. If there is an industrial boom in Taiwan, towns in the English Midlands will be

affected. If oil prices rise, this implies salvation for the oil-exporting Trinidadian economy and disaster for the oil-importing Barbadian one.

Patterns of consumption also seem to merge in certain respects; people nearly everywhere desire similar goods, from cellular phones to readymade garments. Now, naturally a precondition for this to happen is the more or less successful implementation of certain institutional dimensions of modernity, notably that of a monetary economy -- if not necessarily wagework and literacy. The ever-increasing transnational flow of commodities, be they material or immaterial, seems to create a set of common cultural denominators which threaten to eradicate local distinctions. The hot-dog (*halal* or not, as the case may be), the pizza and the hamburger (or, in India, the lamburger) are truly parts of world cuisine; identical pop songs are played at identical discotheques in Costa Rica and Thailand; the same Coca-Cola commercials are shown with minimal local variations at cinemas all over the world, and so on. Investment capital, military power and world literature are similarly being disembedded from the constraints of space; they no longer belong to a particular locality. With the development of the jet plane, the satellite dish and more recently, the Internet, distance no longer seems a limiting factor for the flow of influence, investments and cultural meaning.

Globalization is, in other words, not merely another word for the growing transnational economy. It is true that it is largely driven by technology and economic interests, but it must be kept in mind that it encompasses a wide range of processes that are not in themselves technological or economic. Take the human rights discourse, for example: In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the ideas and values associated with human rights have spread from educated elites worldwide (and not just, as some wrongly believe, in the West) to villagers and farmers in remote areas. The rapid dissemination of human rights ideas is probably one of the most spectacular successes of globalization.

At the same time, we have in recent years witnessed the growth, in very many societies in all continents, of political movements seeking to strengthen the collective sense of uniqueness, often targeting globalization processes, which are seen as a threat to local distinctiveness and self-determination. A European example with tragic consequences is the recent rise of ethnic nationalism in Croatia and Serbia, but even in the more prosperous and stable European Union, strong ethnic and nationalist movements have grown during the 1990s, ranging from Scottish separatism to the anti-immigration Front National in France. In Asia, two of the most powerful recent examples are the rise of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan and the meteoric success of the Hindu nationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, "Party of the Indian People") in India; and many African countries have also seen a strong ethnification of their politics during the last decade, as well as the rise of political Islam in the north. In the Americas, various minority movements, from indigenous groups to African Americans, have with increasing success demanded cultural recognition and equal rights. In sum, politics in the 1990s has to a great extent meant identity politics.

This new political scene, difficult to fit into the old left–right divide, is interpreted in very different ways by the many academics and journalists who have studied them. This is partly because identity politics comes in many flavours: Some are separatist nationalist movements; some represent historically oppressed minorities which demand equal rights; some are dominant groups trying to prevent minorities from gaining access to national resources; some are religious, some are ethnic, and some are regional. Many writers see identity politics in general as an anti-modern counterreaction to the individualism and freedom embodied by globalization, while others see it as the defence of the weak against foreign dominance, or even as a concealed strategy of modernization. Some emphasise the psychological dimension of identity politics, seeing it as nostalgic attempts to retain dignity and a sense of rootedness in an era of rapid change; others focus on competition for scarce resources between groups; some see identity politics as a strategy of exclusion

and an ideology of hatred, while yet others see it as the trueborn child of socialism, as an expression of the collective strivings of the underdog.

Neither of these interpretations and judgements tells the whole story, both because the concrete movements in question differ and because the phenomenon of identity politics is too complex for a simple explanation to suffice. What is clear, however, is that the centripetal or unifying forces of globalization and the centrifugal or fragmenting forces of identity politics are two sides of the same coin, two complementary tendencies which must be understood well for anyone wishing to make sense of the global scene at the turn of the millennium.

For a variety of reasons, globalization creates the conditions for *localization*, that is various kinds of attempts at creating bounded entities -- countries (nationalism or separatism), faith systems (religious revitalization), cultures (linguistic or cultural movements) or interest groups (ethnicity). For this reason, a more apt term, coined by sociologist Roland Robertson, might be *glocalization*. I shall now present some features that the "glocal" identity movements of the turn of the millennium seem to have in common.

First, identity politics always entails *competition over scarce resources*. Successful mobilisation on the basis of collective identities presupposes a widespread belief that resources are unequally distributed along group lines. "Resources" should be interpreted in the widest sense possible, and could in principle be taken to mean economic wealth or political power, recognition or symbolic power -- although what is usually primarily at stake are either economic or political resources.

Secondly, *modernisation and globalization actualize differences and trigger conflict*. When formerly discrete groups are integrated into shared economic and political systems, inequalities are made visible, since direct comparison

between the groups becomes possible. In a certain sense, ethnicity can be described as the process of making cultural differences comparable, and to that extent, it is a modern phenomenon boosted by the intensified contact entailed by globalization. You do not envy your neighbour if you are unaware of his existence.

Thirdly, *similarity overrules equality ideologically*. Ethnic nationalism, politicized religion and indigenous movements all depict the in-group as homogeneous, as people "of the same kind". Internal differences are glossed over, and for this reason, it can often be argued that identity politics serves the interests of the privileged segments of the group, even if the group as a whole is underprivileged, since it conceals internal class differences.

Fourthly, *images of past suffering and injustice are invoked*. To mention a few examples: Serbs bemoan the defeat at the hands of the Turks in Kosovo in 1389; leaders of the Hindu BJP have taken great pains to depict Mughal (Muslim) rule in India from the 1500s as bloody and authoritarian; and the African American movement draws extensively on the history of slavery. Even spokesmen for clearly privileged groups, such as anti-immigrant politicians in Western Europe, may argue along these lines.

Fifthly, *the political symbolism and rhetoric evokes personal experiences*. This is perhaps the most important ideological feature of identity politics in general. Using myths, cultural symbols and kinship terminology in addressing their supporters, promoters of identity politics try to downplay the difference between personal experiences and group history. In this way, it becomes perfectly sensible for a Serb to talk about the legendary battle of Kosovo in the first person ("We lost in 1389"), and the logic of revenge is extended to include metaphorical kin, in many cases millions of people. The intimate experiences associated with locality and family are thereby projected onto a national screen.

Sixthly, *first-comers are contrasted with invaders*. Although this ideological feature is by no means universal in identity politics, it tends to be invoked whenever possible, and in the process, historical facts are frequently stretched.

Finally, *the actual social complexity in society is reduced to a set of simple contrasts*. As Adolf Hitler already wrote in *Mein Kampf*, the truly national leader concentrates the attention of his people on one enemy at the time. Since cross-cutting ties reduce the chances of violent conflict, the collective identity must be based on relatively unambiguous criteria (such as place, religion, mother-tongue, kinship). Again, internal differences are undercommunicated in the act of delineating boundaries towards the frequently demonised Other.

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Identity politics is frequently dismissed as an anachronistic survival from a time when kinship ("blood relations"), religion or local belonging formed the basis of politics. Against this view, it has been argued many times, always correctly, that although identity politics tends to be dressed in traditional garb, beneath the surface it is a product of modernity. The strong emotions associated with a tradition, a culture or a religion can never be mobilised unless people feel that it is under siege. To put it metaphorically: A fish knows nothing of water as long as it is surrounded by it, but the moment it is pulled out into the air, it develops an intense interest in the water and nostalgia for it. Indeed, it could be said that the fish discovers the water only the moment it is removed from it.

Viewed in this way, the collective emotions identity politics depend on reveal themselves to be deeply modern emotions associated with the sense of loss

experienced in situations of rapid change. Ethnic nationalism, minority movements and politicized religion offer a larger share of the cake as well as a positive sense of self, and like it or not, these movements will remain influential in most parts of the world until something better comes along.