Media and Glocal Change

Rethinking Communication
for Development

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Chapter 1

How can the global be local?

Islam, the West and the globalisation of identity politics

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

In an 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, an even more striking development 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, majoritarian and minoritarian. As I write from my home in Oslo, Norway has just celebrated its Constitution Day (17 May), and never before has there been as many folk costumes in town as this year. More than 90% of the population celebrate 17 May, and more than half of the women wear folk dresses (*bunader*). The number of men, although much lower, is also on the rise. In my childhood, three decades ago, which unfolded in a less intensely globalised world, folk dresses were rarely seen in the urban centres of south-eastern Norway. Now, consider the fact that only a few months earlier, Norwegians had, like other West Europeans, been debating the question of whether or not to legislate against the use of headscarves (*hijabs*) among Muslim immigrant women. Again, a couple of decades ago, *hijabs* were hardly ever seen among Muslim immigrant women in Europe. Even today, many young Muslim women wear the *hijab* against their father's wish.

In all likelihood, few of the very many women (and men) sporting neo-traditionalist garb on Constitution Day would have reflected on the parallel

between the rise of visible identity markers among minorities and in the majority. And one would have to be a social scientist interested in globalisation to see these markers of difference not as a "natural" expression of a "natural" identity, nor as a simple reaction against globalisation, but as *one of its most common forms*. If anything, globalisation at the level of social identity is tantamount to a re-negotiation of social identities, their boundaries and symbolic content. Nobody is quite certain as to what it means to be a Berliner, a Malaysian or a Norwegian any more, but this does not necessarily mean that these identities are going away. Some of them are in fact strengthened, with new or old symbolic content; some wane to the benefit of others; some are enlarged or shrunk as to social compass. Just as a fish is totally uninterested in water as long as it swims happily around –it is even unlikely to be aware of the existence of water– most people don't think twice about those of their identities that can be taken for granted. But the moment you drag the poor creature out of the sea, be it on a hook or in a net, it immediately develops an intense interest in water; what the water means to it, how it is essential for its survival, and –not least– the peculiar nature of water. Had fish been equipped with an ability to ponder, a great number of short-lived (and doubtless post-structuralist) theories about water would have been sketched in haste, in maritime surroundings, every day. In the case of humans, not only are the national, regional and local identities contested and challenged, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to defend absolutist views of gender and kinship identities as well. Place, that is to say a fixed, stable, meaningful space, is becoming a scarce and flexible resource. Maintaining a predictable and secure group identity is hard work these days.

Globalisation as annihilation of distance

It cannot be contested that globalisation in all its forms –political, cultural, economic, military...– 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 in social and cultural studies, and as a result, its meaning has become fuzzy. I would propose, therefore, a view of globalisation 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 era of the nuclear bomb, transnational terrorism 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, that means salvation for the oil-exporting Trinidadian economy and disaster for the oil-importing, neighbouring Barbadian one.

Patterns of consumption also seem to merge in certain respects; people nearly everywhere desire similar goods, from cellphones to readymade gar-

ments. Now, 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 evenly distributed wagework and literacy. The ever-increasing transnational flow of commodities, be they material or immaterial, creates a set of common cultural denominators which appear 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 in identical discotheques in Costa Rica and Thailand; the same Coca-Cola commercials are shown with minimal local variations at cinemas all over the world, Harry Potter volumes are ubiquitous wherever books are sold, and so on. Investment capital, military power and world literature are 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.

Globalisation 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 regular events 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 in the West) to villagers and farmers in areas which until recently seemed both remote and exotic to the Western eye. The rapid dissemination of human rights ideas is, in fact, probably one of the most spectacular successes of globalisation.

Identity politics as globalisation

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 globalisation processes, which are seen as a threat to local distinctiveness and self-determination. A European example with tragic consequences is the rise of ethnic nationalism in Croatia and Serbia from the 1980s, but even in the more prosperous and stable European Union strong ethnic and nationalist movements grew during the 1990s, ranging from Scottish separatism to the anti-immigration Front National in France and nationalist populism in countries like Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands. In Asia, two of the most powerful examples from recent history were 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-and-a-half, as well as the rise of political Islam in the Sahel and 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 around the turn of the millennium 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 globalisation, while others see it as the defence of the weak against foreign dominance, or even as a concealed strategy of modernisation. Some emphasize 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 true-born child of socialism, as an expression of the collective strivings of the underdog.

Neither of these interpretations and judgments 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 globalisation 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, globalisation creates the conditions for *localisation*, that is various kinds of attempts at creating bounded entities –countries (nationalism or separatism), faith systems (religious revitalisation), cultures (linguistic or cultural movements) or interest groups (ethnicity). For this reason, a more apt term, coined by Roland Robertson (1992), could be *glocalisation*. Let me now move to a general description of some features that the "glocal" identity movements of the turn of the millennium seem to have in common –the rudiments of a grammar of identity politics[1].

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. What is at stake can be economic or political resources, but the *recognition of others* has been an underestimated, scarce resource, as well as meaningful social attachments where one is in command of one's own life to an acceptable degree.

1 For a fuller analysis, see Eriksen, T. H.; "Ethnic identity, national identity and intergroup conflict: The significance of personal experiences" in Ashmore et al (2001).

Secondly, *modernisation and globalisation 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. Friction occurs frequently. 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 globalisation. 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: in the 1990s, Serbs bemoaned 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 demonized Other.

Identity politics is a true-born child of globalisation. The more similar we become, the more different we try to be. Paradoxically, however, the more dif-

ferent we try to be, the more similar we become –since most of us try to be different in roughly the same ways worldwide, as I have suggested.

Against the view that identity politics is somehow anachronistic, it has been argued many times, always correctly, that although it tends to be dressed in traditional garb, beneath the surface it is a product of modernity and its associated dilemmas of identity. The strong emotions associated with a tradition, a culture or a religion can never be mobilized unless people feel that it is under siege. We are, in this sense, like fish.

Viewed in this way, the collective emotions that identity politics depend on reveal themselves to be deeply modern emotions associated with the sense of loss experienced in situations of rapid change. The need for security, belonging and enduring social ties based on trust is universal and cannot be wished away. 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.

The case of "the West" and "Islam"

The single most discussed field of tension involving identity politics is doubtless the relationship between "the West" and "Islam". Since the Salman Rushdie affair from 1988, but especially after 11 September 2001, this presumed opposition has been subject to an enormous amount of attention, both among secularised North Atlantic peoples, Muslims and everybody else. Drawing on the presupposition that identity politics, which is often antagonistic in nature, is a main form of globalisation, I now proceed to analysing some aspects of this assumed conflict as a trueborn child of globalisation. But first, a short detour.

The perhaps most influential organic intellectuals of the current regime in Washington are Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. Both are authors of widely distributed books about the "new world order", and both are keenly listened to in circles near the White House. However, they seem to be saying opposite things. Fukuyama (1993) has argued that Western democracy is the only game in town worthy of the name, and that global politics nowadays simply consists in attempts, by the less unfortunate nations, to achieve the same levels of consumption and liberal rights as those enjoyed by Americans. In this context, he also argues that the quest for recognition is fundamental and accounts for various forms of identity politics. Huntington (1996), on the other hand, has argued that current and future conflicts take place not between ideologies, but between "civilisations", that is related clusters of cultures, such as the West, Islam, Hinduism and Eastern Christianity. Both Fukuyama and Huntington have been severely criticised by academics and other intellectuals, and this is not the place to repeat all the criticisms. On the contrary, I would argue that they are both partly right. Fukuyama is right to assume that recognition by others is a notoriously scarce resource in the contemporary world, but he is wrong in believing that

recognition can only be achieved through the successful adoption of Western values and ways of life. Huntington is correct in saying that cultural differences are important, but he is hopelessly off the mark when he tries to map out those differences –his concept of civilisations is theoretically inconsistent and empirically misleading– and there is also no reason to assume that such differences necessarily lead to conflict. In fact, it has been shown that *none* of the armed conflicts of the 1990s conformed with Huntington's predictions[2].

We must nonetheless concede that these conservative American thinkers correctly claim that recognition and respect are important, and that cultural differences matter. Where does this lead us?

It seems to lead us in the general direction of postcolonial theory. According to writers such as Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Edward Said, the most difficult form of decolonisation consists in decolonising the mind; in developing a self, and an identity, and a self-consciousness which is not based on the categories of the colonisers. In giving the people of the world the choice of being either with the US or with the terrorists (as he did in a speech delivered in autumn 2001), Bush II refuses to acknowledge any position which is developed out of other concerns than the US–"terrorists" axis.

Human rights and the means of communication

In the context of the current crisis, this starting-point implies certain preliminary conclusions: effective human rights activism requires at least a minimal knowledge about local contexts and, particularly, about local conflicts. For poor countries to give wholehearted support to notions of the inalienable rights of the individual, more is required than decisions to cut aid to countries which are not yet committed to a free press and multi-party parliamentary democracy. What is needed are social reforms which give people increased control over their own existence –literacy programmes, land reforms, new job opportunities and so on. As an implication, a global policy is needed where both big power (state, geopolitics) and small power (family, community) are more equitably distributed. This struggle, moreover, is as much about the means of communication as about the means of production. As the late Algerian author Rachid Mimouni put it, what ought to be required of the Europeans is "rather an attempt to understand than material aid. What can democracy mean in a country like Ethiopia, where dozens die of starvation every day?" (1992: 156). There are, in other words, serious problems which are not solved by a formulaic introduction of human rights, and there are people who for perfectly understandable reasons see talk about the freedom of expression as a diversion from the real issues. One may by all means argue that Muslim men should give their wives the same rights and opportunities as, say, Scandinavian women have (opinions are free), but it would

2 Fox, Jonathan, "Clash of Civilizations or Clash of Religions: Which is a More Important Determinant of Ethnic Conflict?", *Ethnicities*, 1(3): 295-366.

be silly to assume that they think in the same way as we do. If one does so –promoting human rights with the subtlety of a bulldozer– one implicitly says, as missionaries and foreign aid aristocrats have done for years, that the experiences of others have no value, and that the others had better become like ourselves before we bother to listen to them. One actually says that they *do not exist* until they have become similar to ourselves. Respecting other life-worlds is, it must be emphasised, not the same as ethical relativism, but on the contrary a recognition of the need for a dialogue to go both ways, since the alternative is monologue or worse: the sound from one hand clapping[3].

The very conceptual pair "The West" and "Islam" is deeply problematic. "The West" is a vague geographic term, including the EU, the USA and their richest satellites (Canada, Norway, etc.), as well as two of the easternmost countries in the world, Australia and New Zealand. Islam is a universalistic religion with adherents in every country, including all the Western ones. Could "The West and the East" have been used instead, as a more consistent dichotomy, or perhaps "Christianity and Islam" as in the old days? Hardly. All such dichotomies are Trojan horses concealing the hidden agenda of overstating the importance of one particular boundary at the expense of neglecting all the others.

There is little to indicate that religion as such can be a source of conflict. A Christian fundamentalist has more in common with a Muslim fundamentalist, at the level of basic values, than each of them has with non-religious persons. The forms of religiosity and the expressions of respect for al-Lah (or God, as we say in English), are similar in both cases. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of European Muslims have discovered this and have thus joined Christian Democratic parties. Moreover, there are important ecumenical dialogues taking place across "religious divides" in many places, including a major Islamic conference in Cairo in 1995, where central Muslim leaders condemned all forms of terrorism on Islamic grounds, calling for extensive dialogue with the other monotheistic religions originating in West Asia. At a more everyday level, it is easy to see that folk religiosity on either side of the Mediterranean, for example, has many similarities –saints, prayers, beliefs in the evil eye, and so on. Following the attacks of 11 September, one should also keep in mind, all Muslim heads of state except Saddam Hussain and the Taliban condemned the mass murder. Already on the same evening, the *Tehran Times* stated that Islam forbids suicide and that a murder of an innocent, according to the Koran, is tantamount to a murder of all humanity.

Malaysia's then prime minister Mahathir offered to negotiate between the USA and its adversaries in the autumn of 2001, and this might have been a fruitful move: Malaysia is an overwhelmingly Muslim country, but it is also committed to Western notions of modernity. The USA did not take the offer up, and

3 An excellent contribution to this dialogue was the volume *Pour Rushdie*, co-edited by a Jew and a Muslim (both women and both anonymous), including texts by a hundred Arab and Muslim intellectuals (Paris: La Découverte, 1993).

during a visit a month after the bombing had begun, I heard of no Malays who defended the terrorist attacks, but a lot of them seemed to admire Osama. Wrong address, no doubt, but the Castro effect no less.

If Malaysia's "moderate Islam" had been granted its place in the sun, fewer Malays would have looked up to Osama bin Laden, and more Westerners would have discovered the similarities between the three great West Asian religions. Seen from a Hindu or East Asian point of view, the three religions appear as virtually identical. Even from the inside, the parallels are striking. The Muslims who have joined Christian Democratic parties in European countries have done so because Christians and Muslims have shared interests in fighting phenomena such as religious slackness, secularisation, birth control and divorces. During another Cairo conference, in the autumn of 1994, the Catholic Church and Muslim clerics joined forces to make a joint statement condemning abortion. Moreover, many –anthropologists, journalists and others– relentlessly show the absurdity of lumping together Indonesian rice farmers with Turkish merchants under the umbrella of "Islam"; just as intellectuals in Muslim countries are perfectly well aware that "the West" contains something close to a billion individuals with a variety of values, societies and ways of life.

Polarisation

The current trend is that of growing polarisation. The relationship between the West and Islam, as it has developed since the Gulf War, is beginning to resemble the armaments race between the USA and the Soviet Union –a schismogenetic process par excellence. In the end, both superpowers had enough nuclear weapons to annihilate humanity many times over. These days, self-proclaimed representatives of both Islam and the West compete –not over the number of warheads, but over the souls of unattached individuals, in rhetorical attacks on each other. In research on ethnic relations, this kind of mechanism is sometimes called *dichotomisation*, that is the mutual defining of the other as the opposite of oneself –as that which one does not want to be. Enemy images always depend on this kind of simplistic, stereotypical depictions of the other. Realistic, nuanced descriptions contain too many shades of grey and too much complexity to be of ideological use in creating hatred and implacability. Seen from the north-west, Muslims, or "Islam", may thus appear as undemocratic, sexist, illiberal, underdeveloped, brutal and culturally stagnated. The enemy image, incidentally, is adjusted as its proponents change historically. While the generalised Muslim woman today is depicted as an oppressed, intimidated and powerless person, it was common in Victorian times to depict her as a profoundly erotic, mystical and seductive character.

Seen from the south-east, the Europeans, or the people of the West, may appear as cold individualists, as normless, immoral, arrogant, brutal, decadent and insensitive. These dichotomisations owe little to objective differences between Islam and Christianity, but to power relations feeding into assumptions

about cultural differences. Roughly the same stereotypes that are now commonly used about Muslims have been used variously to describe South Europeans, North Norwegians, blacks and "Hindoos" in the past. They are responses to a need in the population where the stereotypes are formed rather than expressions of characteristics in the stereotyped population.

Muslim stereotypes of "the West" would themselves have been worthy of a book-length treatment[4]; suffice it here to say that they are no less simplistic and no less antithetical to openness and dialogue than the Western images of Islam and Muslims. For a recent example, it has been shown how the Pakistani press, in the months following the attacks, contributed to strengthening mutual stereotyping through portraying the "clash of civilizations" perspective as the only Western view of the matter (Ali, 2002).

Beyond cultural stereotypes is the language of undiluted bigotry and chauvinism, as in certain forms of war reporting. During the Gulf War, the Western press wrote of the US-led forces as "lionhearts, professional, heroes, daring, loyal, resolute, brave", while Iraqi soldiers were described as "brainwashed, paper tigers, cowardlike, desperate, the bastards from Baghdad, mad dogs, unscrupulous, fanatical"[5]. More recently, Bush II spoke of the suicide pilots of 11 September notoriously as "cowards". As Susan Sontag pointed out shortly afterwards[6], many strong words may be used to describe these madmen (such as, for example, brainwashed or psychotic), but cowards they were definitely not. Similarly, it is difficult to say that the US pilots, who dropped their cluster bombs on Afghanistan from a comfortable height before returning for breakfast, were exceptionally courageous.

Important things are at stake. If the perverse idea of a civilizational conflict between the West and Islam catches on, which it may well do notwithstanding the insistence to the contrary by Western leaders, the result is likely to be escalating violence on both sides. In Gregory Bateson's system theory, this kind of self-reinforcing process is known as *schismogenesis*[7]. Bateson, a versatile and original thinker, applied the concept of schismogenesis to as diverse phenomena as alcoholism, gang violence and arms races. Convinced that the cause of schismogenesis was an error in the dominant Western mode of thought –the error of individualism– Bateson wrote that if, for example, boasting is an element in the relationship between group A and group B, then "it is likely, if boasting is a response to boasting, that each group will drive the other to an exaggerated emphasis on this pattern, a process which –if it is not checked– only can lead to more and more extreme rivalry and, in the final instance, to enmity and break-

4 See, however, Lewis, Bernard (1982) *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson) and Carrier, James, ed. (1995) *Occidentalism: Images of the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) for two very different approaches to this subject.

5 Quoted from Ottosen, Rune (1994) *Mediestrategier og fiendebilder i internasjonale konflikter* (Media strategies and enemy images in international conflicts). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, p. 42.

6 *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 15 September 2001.

7 "Culture contact and schismogenesis" (1935), reprinted in Bateson (1972).

down in the entire system" (Bateson, 1972:68). In his model of schismogenesis, moreover, the only way the self-reinforcing circuits could be changed would be through the interference of a third agent (or network node) leading to a new framing of the issue. Translated into poststructuralist language, the discursive hegemony putting "the West" against "Islam" in a deadly embrace can only be broken through the intrusion of one or several counterdiscourses framing the world in different terms. These counterdiscourses have been abundantly available both before and after 11 September. However, politicians and a majority of influential media commentators seem to accept that the conflict has something to do with the West and Islam, even if they usually concede that Islam is complex and that most Muslims are naturally peaceful. In the Muslim part of the world, where the media are less liberal and the political leadership by and large less attuned to the population, the situation has been different. While the political leaders have supported the US against the Taliban/Al-Qaeda, the media have generally not offered a very nuanced picture of the West, portraying the "clash of civilizations" view as representative of "Westerners" (Ali, 2002). In spite of important cracks in the mutual enemy images, therefore, there are clear indications that they have been strengthened after 11 September. The anti-immigrant new right in the politics of several European countries experienced a healthy growth after the attacks, and in countries like the Netherlands and Denmark they currently have considerable political power. Public debates about minorities in several European countries have been redefined from a dominant focus on discrimination and labour market issues to a less charitable focus on enforced marriages, sexual mutilation and *hijabs*. Condolezza Rice is on record as having explained to a concerned citizen that the reason "they" hate "us" so much is that "we elect our leaders" and that "you and I [meaning women] are allowed to work". In Muslim countries, Gilles Kepel quotes religious leaders who worry that the attacks have led to a deep setback in the ongoing, and in many ways progressing intellectual dialogue between Muslims and Westerners (Kepel, 2002).

There are some exceptions. A few influential commentators and politicians saw the terrorist attacks and the retaliation of the USA in the same light. In an address to the summit of the Organisation of Islamic Countries in February 2002, Malaysia's prime minister Mahathir defined a terrorist as "someone who attacks civilians", thereby seeing the suicide pilots and the US Air Force over Afghanistan as the same kind of actors.

Single horrors such as the deliberate bombing of the Mazar-i-Sharaf prison and the accidental killing of more than forty Afghanis on their way to a wedding in 2002, or new routine forms of punishment witnessed in the provisional, but already long-standing Guantanamo prison where inmates are neither considered criminals nor prisoners of war and therefore deprived of all their rights, would have raised an international storm of protest had the perpetrator been any other country than the post-11 September USA. The complacent and indifferent reactions from the White House, even after the violent transgressions

in the Abu-Ghraib prison in Iraq (2004) can only be understood as an indication that the regime in the USA sees it as necessary to bracket democratic rights, at least temporarily. The recent withdrawal of the USA from various forms of international cooperation, including international courts of justice and environmental treaties, suggests that global dialogue may have to proceed without the participation of the USA in the near future.

The postcolonial perspective and global identity politics

Arguments involving respect of others and recognition of cultural differences tend to lead to accusations of cultural and moral relativism. Let us therefore consider these objections. On the one hand, practically every intellectual and politician in the rich countries supports a set of universal values ratified by the United Nations (particularly the *Universal Charter* of 1948); that all individuals should have the same rights and liberties. On the other hand, nobody can deny that these rights and liberties are unevenly distributed in the world, that many are denied rights deemed essential in the West; and moreover, that people who live in different social environments inevitably experience and interpret the world in different ways.

Many historians and social scientists have in recent years shown how both past and present change according to shifting circumstances[8]. The history of India will not be the same if it is written in New Delhi as if it is written in London: both versions may be true, but historical truth is always partial. Similarly, both women and ethnic minorities have in recent decades demanded that their versions of past and present should be granted their rightful place in education and public spheres, so that e.g. metropolitan French children learn about slavery just as Guadeloupean children learn about the Gauls, or that American children learn about the brutality of the European invasion of North America just as they learn about George Washington and the cherry tree.

It is difficult to contest the assumption that such a relativisation of the past makes it possible to tell historical narratives with improved accuracy. It has nevertheless also been said that this kind of relativism, perhaps particularly in the field of literature, can also degenerate into "political correctness" and downright nihilism, where the classic values of truth, beauty and virtue are not produced through a shared process of evaluation, but through political decisions based on ideas of equity between groups. Conservative thinkers like Alain Finkielkraut (1987) and Fukuyama's mentor Allan Bloom (1987) warned against these tendencies in the 1980s and both defended universal (or, it might be objected, hegemonic) criteria for aesthetic and moral norms. Not surprisingly, both were accused of acting as spokesmen for a kind of white man's burden which by default would consider all non-European cultural expressions as inferior, since the standards were set by the likes of Plato and Shakespeare. There is no easy response to this objection.

8 See e.g. Fernandez-Armesto (1996) or Wallerstein (1991).

Already in the 16th century, Michel de Montaigne ventured to suggest that cannibalism might be no less rational than customs taken for granted by his French countrymen. A century later, another famous Frenchman, Blaise Pascal, wrote that truth is another on the other side of the Pyrenees. Both accepted the relativity of truth and value as a fact which could not easily be overcome. In the 18th century, the founder of the early Romantic *Sturm und Drang* movement in Germany, Johann Gottlieb von Herder, wrote somewhat more systematically on cultural differences. He insisted, against the Enlightenment philosophers, on each people's right to its distinct cultural and linguistic identity. The so-called universalism of the likes of Voltaire he discarded as a form of provincialism: Voltaire might believe that he sought to disseminate a universal form of civilization, but what he was really engaged in was –to use a more recent term– French cultural imperialism. The role of France in 18th century Europe may in some respects be compared to the role of the USA in the contemporary world. French language, manners and fashions were *à la mode* from St. Petersburg to Boston, and it was not surprising that the strongest anti-French reactions came from their closest neighbours and oldest enemies, the Germans. The parallel with the contemporary situation confronting the USA with Muslims is tempting to draw.

Respect and fascination for the customs of other peoples has in practice been easy (and completely free of charge) so long as they were far away. Tensions develop more easily in the contemporary world. Thanks to accelerated globalisation and migration, we now live in a truly global society where everyone is in the same boat in terms of ecology, military power, economics and politics. We have all been brought closer to each other in this stage of modernity, and the problem of relativism has moved from the confines of literary speculation and academic research to the forefront of politics. Although globalisation clearly reduces cultural differences –the monetary economy, mass media, human rights thinking and state interventions are everywhere, to mention a few examples– it has increased the attention given to cultural differences many times over. Partly this is simply a result of increased contact: it is through contact with others that one becomes aware of oneself, and the presence of others may seem a threat to one's own culture and customs. Partly the intensified interest in cultural difference is a product of nostalgia and alienation: identity politics tends to glorify a mythical past when "our way of life" was still intact and undisturbed by the disruptive forces of global modernity; it draws much of its emotional energy from a sense of loss caused by change. It could thus be said, as a general principle, that the more similar people become, the more different they try to be.

In this kind of situation, cultural rights become a coveted resource and a feature of political life that needs to be taken seriously. American Indians are no longer far away in their reservations, and they cannot simply be assimilated into the melting-pot of US modernity: they demand both territory, compensation, quotas in the educational system and influence over reading lists. Muslims are no longer colonised peoples under European military control, but highly articulate

and audible voices in the global public sphere –whether they are based in Bradford or in Peshawar– and they demand respect and equity. After 11 September, the violence is no longer even mainly unilateral. As Osama bin Laden said in his famous al-Jazeera interview, he wishes to make it clear that Americans can no longer sleep safely in their beds.

Dangerous cultural relativism?

Minority rights issues and political Islam cannot simply be lumped together; there are important differences. But they have one thing in common, as do all identity politics, namely the demand for a more democratic, more just global regime of communication. Although the methods of fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden are frightening, their demands are perfectly comprehensible and even, to many, reasonable. It would be ridiculous to claim, as certain extreme relativists do, that alien perspectives on the world are impossible to fathom. To anyone but autists, psychopaths and brainwashed fanatics, it is perfectly possible to understand, for example, ecological, religious, neoliberal or ethnic fundamentalism, but such an understanding requires that one makes an effort to put oneself in the other's place. Doing this does not necessarily mean that you "lose yourself". As Clifford Geertz (1983) puts it: "You don't have to be one to know one". Making an effort to understand the local experiences and cultural judgements that underpin practices such as female circumcision, arranged marriages, Premier League football or sati (widow-burning) is not the same as lending support to them. If one is to understand a text, one has to be aware of one's own pre-understanding and one's own prejudices to give it justice. This also applies to meetings between people with different values, experiences and horizons.

If understanding across boundaries and translation between cultural worlds is possible, then, it may also perhaps be argued that it is possible to establish shared standards of beauty, truth and virtue. This is probably true, but it will not happen through authoritarian imposition of values from a hegemonic power; only through equitable dialogue and mutual empathy. In such an ideal situation of communication (which the world has not seen), it cannot be taken for granted that Beethoven will be judged superior to Indian ragas. This position, which posits the essential unity of humanity, differs from the multiculturalist position, which takes as its premiss that cultures are bounded, and assumes that the best one can hope for is coexistence side by side.

An important distinction has to be made between cultural relativism as *method* (in order to understand) and as *world-view* (in order to act and make judgements). The first variety is the only alternative to crude and authoritarian dismissals of alternative views, while the second variety is a recipe for confusion and nihilism. Cultural relativist method is a necessity (everything has to be understood within its proper context), while cultural relativist morals are a tragedy. Understanding is not the same as defending.

In a truly dialogic democracy, participants would have to demonstrate knowledge of others before moving on to critical or condescending statements about them. Having established the necessary knowledge, each individual would be free to choose his or her side, for one does not necessarily become a Nazi by reading and understanding *Mein Kampf*. It would, in other words, not be acceptable to oppose Islam without knowing what Islam is. If this simple principle had been established in public debate and politics, it would have improved the quality of many interventions considerably.

If, instead of dialogic democracy, one chooses ignorance since understanding the other ostensibly leads to dangerous relativism, there are only three alternatives: violence, silence or the language of power.

Dialogue is more urgently needed today than in earlier periods, when non-white, non-Christian peoples were forcibly muted and Europeans largely dealt with them as servants, negative cultural stereotypes and research objects. "The others" have in every way homed in on us. Thanks to the globalisation of information flows, a statement made in Tehran may in a matter of few moments lead to a heightened temperature in Trinidad; and a sudden catastrophe in Manhattan may immediately put the entire world on an edge.

Advice to the new hegemons

Allow me to end this chapter with some personal reflections of a general character, which have nothing to do with Islam as such, but which concern the role of "the West", and particularly the USA, in global society. Europeans and North Americans of predominantly European origin have now dominated the world for more than five hundred years. It may perhaps be about time that this long hegemony comes to an end, whether it happens indirectly through migration, violently through self-destructive entrenchment against a foe which is generated from within (terrorism), or simply through shifts in the dynamic of the global economy[9]. One may only hope, if this happens in the century that has just begun, that the new hegemons will continue to absorb, renew and develop the genuine contributions of European and North American society to global civilization, such as the respect (at least in principle) for human life and integrity, impartial bureaucracy and, especially, the capacity for doubt and ambivalence which has been a trademark quality of European culture (if not of European power politics) since the Renaissance. It may also be hoped that the new hegemons are able to learn the right lessons from the mistakes of Europe and the West: the fanatical technological optimism, the lack of community and solidarity, the class divisions and indifference, the fundamentalist arrogance in relation to others, the stressful way of life under careerist regimes of work, growing street crime, racism and discrimination, the lack of consideration for the environment... Looking back on the last

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9 It is time and again argued that the economic powerhouse of the world moved from the Atlantic to the Pacific basin decades ago, but that most Europeans still have not caught up with this.

40 | centuries –let us say the period that began with Columbus' landing on 12 October 1492 and the subsequent expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain a few weeks later– the chances are good that the networked, decentralised world which may now be emerging, can turn out to be more humane than five hundred years of European hegemony have been. It will not happen with the help of Osama bin Laden and Taliban-like networks, but it won't happen with the help of American bomber planes either. One has to be blind and deaf in order to believe that this is the "best of all possible worlds", a world where every person has the same values and where opportunities are equally distributed. The currencies of the global society are dollars and bombs, and this society speaks business English with an American accent. Nobody ought to be surprised if some of those who are overwhelmed, or overrun, by this power react like greenhouse plants are supposed to react to heavy metal: by rolling up into small, hard balls.

No matter where power and dominance may be concentrated –now and in twenty years– this period, when the world is probably about to be re-moulded, is a good period for a renewal of world-views. The old, dominant world-view presented a hierarchical world composed of peoples, civilizations and nations that were clearly delineated in relation to each other, geographically and culturally speaking; they had their own history, their own values and their own customs, as it were. Europe and the West, according to this view, represented reason and progress, even if others had also contributed bits and pieces. This image is now about to be replaced by a world characterised by exile, flows, intensified contacts, creolisation, hybridisation and all forms of mixing; where no boundaries are absolute notwithstanding attempts to build ever taller walls; but where people continue to have different experiences because they live under varying circumstances. Territorial power is faltering and is being challenged everywhere –Microsoft to al-Qaeda– by the more flexible power of networks. If the demands for justice, respect and recognition from Muslims and others are not now met by another response than condescending arrogance, this world will almost certainly catch fire. In the old world, injustice and rage could be "contained". Not so in the network world.

This is a world of impurities, grey zones, uncertainties and ambiguities, where the belief in progress is being replaced by ambivalence, where self-confidence is being replaced by anxiety, where trust is threatened by suspicion, and where the ability to listen has become a more important faculty than ever before in history.

Chapter 2

New complexities of transnational media cultures

Kevin Robins & Asu Aksoy

Until quite recently, what prevailed in European media culture was the system | **41** of public service broadcasting, involving the provision of mixed programming –with strict controls on the amount of foreign material shown– on national channels available to all. The principle that governed the regulation of broadcasting was that of national 'public interest'. Broadcasting should contribute to the political and cultural life of the nation –it was intended to help in constructing a sense of national unity. Thus, in Britain, during the earliest days of the BBC, the medium of radio was consciously employed "to forge a link between the dispersed and disparate listeners and the symbolic heartland of national life" (Cardiff and Scannell, 1987: 157). And, in the postwar years, as the media historian, Paddy Scannell, has demonstrated, both radio and television "brought into being a culture in common to whole populations and a shared public life of a quite new kind" (Scannell, 1989: 138). Historically, then, broadcasting assumed a dual role, serving both as the public sphere of the nation state and as the focus for national cultural identification. We can say that broadcasting has been one of the key institutions through which people –as listeners and viewers– have come to imagine themselves as members of the national community.

Over the past twenty years or so, however, things have changed, and changed in quite significant ways. From the mid-1980s, dramatic upheavals took place in the media industries, laying the basis for what must be seen as a new kind of media order. Two factors have been identified as being particularly significant in this transformation. First was the decisive shift in media regulatory princi-