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Globalization, Embodiment, Identity

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Globalization, Embodiment, Identity

“First theory, then statistics. Only then, chaos!” (Dennis 1964: 63)

The papers in this collection attempt, in their various ways, to link together three very big and very vague concepts – globalization, embodiment, identity. By so doing, they are representative of a larger movement in anthropological theory and practice. In this very short introduction, I will consider why this conjunction has occurred and what it may signify.

As everyone knows, globalization is notoriously difficult to define, but all commentators seem to agree that it is a result of the relentless expansion of capitalism and the flow of people and information associated with that expansion. In the wake of the never-ending search for profit, both physical and cultural distances between peoples appear to have melted away, though certainly my neighbors in rural New Hampshire do not experience the erosion of distance and difference in the same way as do my globe-trotting colleagues in urban Cambridge. Whether this is a new phenomenon or just the most recent version of an ancient cycle is not a matter I can discuss here.ⁱ What is evident is that the consequences of globalization are far more complex than the simple reduction of all the world’s

peoples to mindless lackeys of hegemonic Western imperialism. Instead, globalization is both an integrative and disintegrative force. While bringing people into contact across territorial, ethnic, national, and cultural boundaries and thereby expanding reciprocal knowledge and understanding, globalization also dissolves previously taken-for-granted identities and collectives.

This process can be both exhilarating and dismaying, depending on circumstances. As this collection of essays testifies, international ballroom dancers, Muslim bankers and spiritual seekers find globalization to be an experience that unites them into communities transcending the local. Even impoverished slum dwellers in Brazil benefit, so it seems, from the re-evaluation of rights that has been promoted by global efforts at land reform. From these ethnographic accounts, globalization is good – or at least not terrible. This a welcome contrast to the old anthropological assumption that entrance into the international marketplace always necessitates a destructive suppression (or, at best, commodification) of vital local differences and a loss of cultural integrity. Instead, these accounts show that empowering alternative communities and unifying ideologies exist which can be accessed through participation in global networks.

However, despite the examples given herein, it is undeniable that many persons affected by globalization are not pleased with the results. Zygmunt Bauman's comparison of the tourist (the maligned worldly cousin to the anthropological high priest) and the vagabond is an apt example of the archetypal positive and negative experiences of globalization. Both require disconnection from traditional ties, but the first "is lived through as postmodern freedom. The second

may feel rather uncannily like the postmodern version of slavery... The tourists stay or move at their hearts' desire. They abandon a site when new untried opportunities beckon elsewhere. The vagabonds know they won't stay in a place for long, however strongly they wish to, since nowhere they stop are they likely to be welcome. The tourists move because they find the world with their (global) reach irresistibly *attractive* - the vagabonds move because they find the world within their (local) reach unbearably *inhospitable*" (Bauman 1998: 92-3).

Yet Bauman's antimony is too simple. Today, it is not only the refugee who is displaced. Indeed, many of those who are welcome in the centers of power and wealth nonetheless believe themselves to be spiritually, if not physically, without a home to call their own. In fact, the peripheral and the excluded may have a stronger sense of their own cultural reality and personal significance than do those who are ostensibly in authority. For the marginal, a sense of primordial connection is likely to be based on taken-for-granted notions (not necessarily accurate) of shared blood and common traditions, ratified by isolation and nurtured by memories of collective suffering at the hands of the powerful. The struggle for survival also makes the lives of the excluded and oppressed existentially significant, as the brute reality of misery, hunger and pain, and the bruising engagement with recalcitrant materiality provides an inescapable awareness of the tragedy of human existence.

In contrast, the rulers of the universe can keep suffering at bay – at least for a while - with the push of a button and the flash of a credit card. As prosthetic gods,ⁱⁱ empowered by technology to chase the seemingly unending and constantly multiplying pleasures of consumption, they can avoid confronting existential limits,

but only at the cost of disconnection and displacement.ⁱⁱⁱ In a cycle of intensification, desire is driven by the urge to deny insubstantiality and increased by the unlimited number of things to be consumed, which leads to more desire, which leads to more feelings of disengagement, which leads to more craving, more compulsive consumption, and so on. This restless state, in which there is no accepted constraint or resting place, only never-ending yearning, is sociologically defined as anomie (Durkheim 1966)

So, while a proportion of tourists may be happily exercising their unlimited postmodern freedom, others are looking for “things that are elemental and ancestral; forces of the landscape and nature rather than artifices of the city and the self” (Thomas 1994: 28). For the same reasons, modern thrill-seekers purposely go where “the immediate demands of the situation filter out much of the reflexive, social aspect of the self” leaving only the immediate, reactive, and intuitive (Lois 2005: 121). Or, as one skydiver says: “Free fall is much more real than everyday life” (le Breton 2000: 3). In other words, these tourists and adventurers are struggling to *escape from* an empty postmodern freedom that has no vitalizing energy or transcendent content.^{iv}

There are further ironies implicit in the global pas de deux between the homogenizing center and the differentiating periphery. For example, as Ronald Niezen has shown (Niezen 2003, 2003), local peoples struggling for autonomy must express themselves in ways that can elicit sympathy and guilt from members of the encompassing power structure. Trying to maintain distinction, they become the same, at least in terms of their discourse with the outside world. Furthermore, to

avoid being absorbed into the nation-state, locals must imitate its bureaucratic procedures and embrace instrumental rationalization. Thus, to be successful in their struggles, the various peripheral groups inevitably come to resemble one another, and also become more like the metropolitan systems they are resisting.^v So, by engaging in a battle to protect their distinctiveness against the forces of globalization, local groups are likely to experience exactly the homogenization and rationalization they feared, and join the postmodern march toward anomie. As a result, the 'natives' may become tourists hungrily consuming idealized versions of their own history and culture.

These paradoxes give credence to the fears voiced by many commentators that, despite some positive effects, a pervasive feeling of inauthenticity is indeed corroding the heart of the modern world, leaving actors with no transcendently authorized role to play and no essence to refer to. As the novelist Nigel Denis wrote in his prescient novel Cards of Identity: "the old days are over – the days when you could take your identity for granted. Nowadays, all the old means of self-recognition have been swept away, leaving even the best people in a state of personal dubiety" (Denis: 73-4). Because of this alienating situation,^{vi} modern individuals may be moved by a powerful desire to (re)create a world that has been lost. As noted above, this can give rise to essentializing nationalistic, ethnic, or religious identities, manufacturing a romanticized tribalism in resistance to globalizing homogeneity. The impulse to primordialism is active not only among deracinated 'natives' nostalgic for a lost paradise. It is also characteristic of many nationalist and irredentist political parties.

For example, consider the rhetoric of Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the National Front in France, who tells his followers that France is plagued by “borders that disappear, local and cultural specificities that blur to the advantage of an universal culture.” In the despotic and characterless new world, “men and women will be sacrificed to Humanity and the self-appointed experts will define and organize their happiness. This happiness will be the same on all the continents” (Jean Marie Le Pen quoted in Zúquete 2004: 50, 53). Only a religious crusade aimed at creating a France for the French alone, based on blood and belonging, can avoid this dire outcome. Nor is the rhetoric of antagonistic retribalization the exclusive property of the right. Equivalent cries are heard worldwide, as various collectives make claims to political authority based on notions of shared blood and belonging, which often implies the exclusion or erasure of those who do not fit in.

For anthropologists, understanding the contemporary tendency toward ethnic cleansing and essentialist ideology requires formulating new psychological and cultural premises about the nature of the human experience of identity, the self, and the collective, as well as exploration of the implications of cultural and social rootlessness and fragmentation. But before such ambitious plans can be realized, anthropology has to provide ethnographies – like those of this collection – which detail the actual effects of globalization. This effort requires focusing on aspects that are most salient for those involved – and also most salient for the researchers who are attempting to conduct a meaningful analysis. After all, anthropologists reflect as well as investigate the world they share with their subjects. Both are necessarily

effected – though at different rates and in different ways - by the winds of change sweeping away old orders of commitment and community.

In fact, one could argue that anthropologists are the scholarly class that is most conscious of and challenged by the ubiquitous processes of global transformation. This is partly because of the obvious fact that our disciplinary mandate obliges us to search the world for evidence of change and to confront and seek to understand the experiences of others very distant from ourselves. As Lévi-Strauss long ago pointed out, anthropologists are the contemporary exemplars of a Western spiritual tradition that aims to discover essential reality through investigating the worlds of others (Lévi-Strauss 1974). Yet, at the same time (and not accidentally) anthropologists are prophets without honor in their own houses, as indicated by the fact that they are among the most marginal and worst paid of the professoriate, despite the excessive length of their apprenticeship (the average doctorate, I am told, takes ten years to earn, and the average age at graduation is forty).

Why this should be in a long story, but part of it is the aura of exotic and the mythic that clings to the discipline, which is both romanticized and marginalized by a dominant scholarly meta-narrative that links Western cultural centrality with the authority of the objectively verifiable. As explorers and interpreters of the cultural alternatives to this paradigm, anthropologists are neither hard scientists nor romantic poets, neither respectable insiders nor exotic outsiders. Instead, they are ambiguous figures, both to the community at large and to themselves. As a result, we are professionally (and personally) attuned to the relationship between

difference, marginalization, and status. This precarious attunement has been heightened by the postmodern challenge, which undermines all categories and so threatens the discipline's very right to exist. After all, if there is only multiplicity, contingency, and the infinite flux of power relations, what is the study of 'culture' except an implausible and reactionary reification? And if the notion of culture is in question, then what security is there for the student of culture, who is already thrust to the perimeter of the academic merry-go-round?

So, in a real sense, 'we are the Indians' ^{vii} insofar as ethnographers share with those they study the experience of marginality and an increasing loss of certainty. But while the natives can escape into primordialist fantasies by producing idealized touristic images of themselves for themselves, that option is not available for the anthropologist – at least not for most of us. This is where embodiment comes in. It has moved to the center of anthropological inquiry of late, and for one very compelling reason. In the absence of any overarching paradigm for the sacred, or even for significance, the physicality of the body appears as the source of the irreducibly true and actual.

This can be seen as a disciplinary response to the same vacuum of meaning that draws Western tourists toward experiences of adventure and risk. When engaged in dangerous activities or exploring exotic locales, these seekers know, without doubt, that they are indeed experiencing the really real. In parallel fashion, anthropologists, confronted with a collapse of previous theoretical paradigms that could serve to construct a framework for inquiry have taken refuge in the phenomenological and the physical. Theory rooted in the body temporarily offsets

uncertainty, since it refers to irrefutable physical pains and pleasures, to the undeniable transience of the corporeal, and to the range of bodily impulses, capacities and excesses. Embodiment can provide a nexus, and perhaps even a direction, for the construction of plausible human paradigms when others have collapsed.

From this perspective, the body is taken to be "simultaneously a physical and symbolic artifact, as both naturally and culturally produced, and as securely anchored in a particular historical moment" (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987: 7). In other words, the body exists in at least three different realms of representation and practice: as phenomenologically experienced, as a cultural symbol marking social relations and as regulated by political and legal restrictions. By expanding out from perception and sensual experience into the realm of symbol and authority, anthropologists have turned the body into a pliable framework (I am tempted to say skeleton) upon which to hang ethnographic material and develop theory from it.

Not surprisingly, that theory is very often concerned with identity (for example Csordas 1994). Of the three vague terms conjoined here, identity is probably the vaguest and yet the most emotionally fraught. Generally it answers the question 'who am I' by referring to the unique characteristics that make a person recognizable to herself and to others as a particular individual. Identity, it is assumed, has continuity; it remains for life, and provides the core of an integrated and grounded self. Yet, as we have seen, contemporary multiplicity and fluidity undermines the assumed coherence and solidity of the individual. Some lucky cosmopolitans may enjoy blurring boundaries and exploring their multiple floating

selves. But for others – perhaps for most - a loss or erosion of the boundaries of the self is a source of great anxiety. If identity has no intrinsic essence or nature, but is wholly a contingent and shifting flux of influences within a universe of infinite plausible worlds, then people may begin to appear ghostlike to themselves, without substance, direction or limit. Again, this is the classical definition of anomie.

Of course, bodies are the opposite: undeniably real, they are the building blocks without which no human narrative, however contingent and fluid, can be constructed. The resolutely concrete signified (body) then can then serve as a ground for the wholly abstract floating signifier (identity) borne away in the flood tide of the eroding medium (globalization). The combination of these three aspects is characteristic of contemporary anthropological discourse, which – due to the highly destabilized position of practitioners – is deeply concerned with reconciling the ineluctable tension between physical solidity and spiritual transience. As Nigel Denis concludes, because “this is not a defined age... we who live in it must be all the more definite if we are going to achieve any kind of stability. That is why we have so many forms to fill out, why all the questions seem to have been chosen as a challenge to our ingenuity, and why the world has suddenly become overrun with experts who devote their lives exclusively to defining the indefinable” (Denis 1964: 155).

Anthropologists are foremost among the experts who, seeking their own disciplinary grounding, strive but fail to define the indefinable, nor can we resolve the tensions between identity and embodiment that arise due to the evolution of the global economy. But we can write ethnography that reveals, in detail, how people

struggle to achieve livable accommodations under these challenging circumstances.

To my mind, working toward that modest goal goes a long way toward transcending our own disciplinary hubris.

ⁱ See Jonathan Friedman 1994 Cultural Identity and Global Process London: Sage Publications.

ⁱⁱ The term prosthetic gods is borrowed from Sigmund Freud 1962 Civilization and its Discontents. Boston: Norton: 39.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is one of Hegel's main arguments in the famous 'master and slave' section of Phenomenology. G.W.F. Hegel 1967 (original publication 1807) The Phenomenology of Mind New York: Harper and Row.

^{iv} The reference is to Erich Fromm 1941 Escape from Freedom New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

^v For an early statement of this principle, see Morton Fried 1967 The Evolution of Political Society. New York: Random House.

^{vi} Peter Berger (1969 The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. Garden City: Doubleday) defines alienation as a delusory meaning system erected as a defense against anomie.

^{vii} This phrase is from Roberto Kant de Lima 1992 "The Anthropology of the Academy: When We Are the Indians" Knowledge and Society: The Anthropology of Science and Technology. 9: 191-222.