

Smaller Societies, Globalization and Handing Down of Culture

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This chapter returns to the core questions of the colloquium and examines the possible answers to these questions in light of the presentations and discussions that took place. It focuses particularly on two general issues. First, to what extent has globalization destabilized the construction of identities by individuals and by smaller societies as collectivities? If identities are destabilized, what are the implications for the handing down of culture in such societies? Second, does the increasing commodification of cultural forms shrink the range of cultural diversity in the world? What are the possible openings for cultural creativity in such a context, particularly as they relate to smaller societies? In order to address these questions, this chapter begins with a discussion of the meaning of globalization and its relation to information and communication technologies. It then turns to examine the implications of these globalizing processes for identity and for cultural creativity and expression. The chapter ends with an assessment of what role governments might play in promoting and encouraging cultural diversity.

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1. GLOBALIZATION AND INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

With the round of protests in Seattle, Prague, Washington, Québec, and Genoa among other cities over the past years, there is little need to note that globalization is a highly contested term and phenomenon. Like many core concepts in the social sciences and humanities, it has a variety of meanings in public debates in the mass media and in the academic arena. What is more, there is a constant interaction between these public understandings of the phenomenon and what is going on in the academy. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I will work with an academic definition of the concept. In his book on globalization and culture, John Tomlinson (1999: 2) suggests that we see the phenomenon of globalization as an empirical condition of the modern world that he terms *complex connectivity*: “the rapidly developing and ever densening network of interconnections and interdependences that characterize modern social life.”

In their book on *Global Transformations*, Held and his colleagues (1999) help us understand what might be new about “complex connectivity.” This assistance is useful because human societies have always been interconnected and interdependent in various ways. They speak first of the *extensivity* of connections: to what degree do the connections between individuals and between communities extend across the whole globe? They answer that the global extensiveness of such connections has increased significantly over the past three decades. They also ask about the *intensification* of these connections: are these more globally extensive relationships isolated and random or are they regularized to the point that we can talk about a significant change in their intensity. They reply that these connections are becoming more regularized. The third question they pose concerns the speed of these connections: they may be more globally extensive and more regularized but take place slowly or quickly, one after another. The answer here too is obvious: the velocity of the global diffusion of ideas, products, capital, people and information has risen exponentially over the past two decades.

If you put together then this increase in the global extensiveness of connections, their more regularized and institutionalized character, and the speed at which they take place, we witness a growing enmeshment of the global and the local. The possibility rises that what happens locally somewhere on the globe will have a significant *impact* somewhere else. Hence, Tomlinson’s notion of complex interconnectedness is a useful idea.

Many of the presentations at the colloquium emphasized the linkage between this empirical condition and the development of information and communication technologies. Castells (1996) work on the “network society” is helpful here. He argues that some rather special things began to happen in the realm of communications and information technologies in the early 1970s. In a way that is equal to the effect of the industrial revolution, the information and communication technologies revolution is centred on four key technologies that have gradually become more refined, more powerful and more interlinked: the semiconductor transformed into the microprocessor; the computer; the move to digital transmission of information in telecommunications, facilitated by fibre optics; and biotechnology. These kinds of technological changes make the boundaries and imagination of space even more autonomous from location, and time becomes even less of an obstacle to building human relationships in these new spaces. With these technologies, individuals and the communities and organizations to which they belong are highly likely to become more conscious of this compression of space and time and thus situate themselves more in a global context.

What is important here is not only that these technologies have assisted greatly in expanding the global extensiveness of human relations, their regularity and the speed at which they take place, but also that they impose ways of thinking. As Fernand Harvey stresses in his chapter, the culture of the “written,” *culture de l’écrit*, is being supplemented if not replaced by a cyberculture based on multimedia images. As many have observed as well, we must add to this mix, the development of increasing numbers of transnational corporations interested in the global sale and production of culture. The complex interconnectedness of globalization when coupled with the onset of cyberculture makes possible the deep structuring of commodification into the cultural life of the developed world (Tomlinson, 1999: 87). This development can bring with it a distinct narrowing and convergence of cultural experience.

With these background points established, let me now turn to the questions raised about the relationship between globalization and the construction of identity.

2. IMPLICATIONS FOR IDENTITY

What do we mean when we speak of identity? Identity refers to an ongoing social and cultural practice of defining the self (Castells, 1997; Chambers, 1994). The construction of an identity involves a charting of

continuity through the chaotic, mixed events of one's life and this process of continuity-making is a kind of self-narration. People forge a continuous narrative link across their various interactions and experiences with others, seeking to produce an image of themselves that is consistent, and which, in turn, affects how they engage with others. Globalization is likely to affect this practice in several ways. It offers new opportunities for *imagining* social relationships (Appadurai, 1996). It also can disrupt identities, challenging the continuity individuals have constructed, thus forcing adaptive behaviour. By introducing turbulence into the usual processes of identity formation, it can affect society so profoundly that it alters the way in which individuals and communities define themselves.

Preliminary evidence suggests that globalization gives rise to identities that are less solid, less definite, and less continuous. Identities can be adopted and discarded more easily than in the past. Identity is formed on the move. For some persons, particularly the young, the identities adopted should not be too tight. They are chosen on the basis of "keeping the game short" and of avoiding long-term commitments. Finally, for reasons that I note below, the potential for conflicting identities may be increasing.

Iain Chambers (1994) observes that these changes in identity formation reflect changing sources of identity. He writes (1994: 19): "Our sense of belonging, our language and the myths we carry in us remain, but no longer as "origins" or signs of "authenticity" capable of guaranteeing the sense of our lives. They now linger on as traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed in with other histories, episodes, encounters." Fernand Harvey makes a similar point in his chapter: the traditional mediators for the transmission of culture and I would include identity — the family, school, civic associations, museums, public libraries — have been brought into question as new mediators — the mass media, advertising, transnational or diaspora communities with global links, the internet — have been added.

Certainly, then these sorts of changes have implications for the handing down of culture, a central question of this volume. If identities are less solid, less definite and less continuous, the capacity of individuals and communities to transmit them across generations may decline. Similarly, these new sources of identity — whether the mass media, transnational communities, or advertising — are themselves fluid and constantly changing. Journalism tends to be short-term in historical focus, often with little evidence of historical memory. Advertising lives on change, on convincing consumers to replace something they have with something new. Some aspects of culture — clothing, food, music — are less fixed today, changing ever more quickly following the logic of the global market economy. For small societies, where the

affirmation of a collective identity has been crucial to their survival in the past, these types of changes may be important, even disturbing.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR CULTURAL CREATIVITY

In his presentation, Professor Meisel quotes Northrop Frye on Canadian identity: “the question of Canadian identity, so far as it affects the creative imagination is not a “Canadian” question at all, but a regional question.” In light of the changes to identity just described, I wondered how Frye might have reformulated that quotation if he were writing today. Perhaps it would be the following: “the question of Canadian identity, so far as it affects the creative imagination, is not a “Canadian” question at all, but a series of ever-changing questions tracing plural, floating, border-crossing interactions.”

The question that follows then is whether these kinds of changes in identity formation and in the sources of identity hinder cultural creativity in smaller societies. Certainly, there are important obstacles to creative cultural expression in the current globalizing context. With the commodification of culture and its transformation into a contributor to a mass consumerist society, smaller societies face particular obstacles. The market for their products is too small sometimes to be profitable, particularly when faced with the economies of scale and productive power of transnational cultural corporations like Disney or Polygram. To compete, artists in smaller societies have to face the question: “will it sell here and abroad?” In addressing this question, they may have to place constraints on their own creativity, compromise quality and detach the artistic creation from the locality or place where it was developed.

Perhaps these economic constraints may be less important if the support for artists permits them to take advantage of the plural, floating, border-crossing identities that have become increasingly common. For example, some at the colloquium spoke of the possibility of renewing and reinforcing the Québécois identity through the multiplication of new intercultural dialogues with countries situated outside the usual economic circuits of cultural production. In speaking of the conditions for important dialogue and debate, Michael Cross suggested that the horizontal structure of the media in Italy rather than the vertical, monopolistic character found in Canada might be a crucial factor. In this vein, the Internet, particularly as broadband capacity, becomes more widely available and may make more possible these

kinds of horizontal, intercultural changes that would seem favourable to creative expression given the changing character of identity.

The question was also raised whether the way in which programmes supporting artistic creation are set up tends to reinforce creative expression along more traditional identity lines, at the expense of marginal communities, whether aboriginal or recent immigrant ones. The idea was raised that systems of peer review, longer-standing commitments to particular institutions, and unions of artists might create barriers to new artists seeking funding. To the extent to which this kind of bias might exist, it is rather disturbing given the analysis of identity that I have just reviewed. Important sources of creativity may be left unrecognized or undernourished at a time when those sources are highly needed if we are to understand well the changes in our identities. Moreover, we may be losing economic opportunities for cultural creativity in the globalizing world in which we live.

It is also important, however, not to overemphasize the dominance of consumption in the cultural field as a result of the commodification and globalization of cultural production. There are many aspects of peoples' cultural relationships and practices that resist some of the commodifying logic, whether these be personal relationships, religious affiliations, a sense of ethnic identity, or attachments to "local" practices and contexts. As Geertz (1973) has stressed, these lived cultures enacted and re-enacted in particular local contexts with their own traditions and histories produce a "thickening of cultures" that are, in turn, potentially resistant to commodification. This assessment is important because it appears consistent with another theme that emerged at the colloquium: local and regional contexts are an increasingly important site of cultural creativity. In Québec, a new emphasis on cultural development has emerged at the local level, while the provincial level has receded in importance. Some municipalities are taking greater responsibility for cultural development. This phenomenon also lends itself to horizontal linkages between cities that cross provincial and national borders, without the direct intermediation of provincial and federal governments.

4. ENCOURAGING CULTURE: THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS

Over the past half century, beginning perhaps with the recommendations of the Lévesque-Massey Royal Commission on the Development of the Arts, Letters and Sciences in Canada, the government of Can-

ada has sought to put in place programmes of support for such varied forms of cultural creation as film, television, literature and poetry, magazine publishing, theatre, and the fine arts. In Québec, similar support became increasingly systematic after the creation of the Ministère des Affaires culturelles in Québec after the Parti libéral du Québec came to power in June 1960. Since these early days of the Quiet Revolution, the Gouvernement du Québec has remained quite active in supporting and promoting cultural development in Québec.

With the growing commodification of culture and its integration into mass consumerist culture, however, these kinds of programs have come under external pressure. As cultural production comes under the “discipline” of regional trading regimes like the NAFTA or of the world trading system under the WTO and its compulsory disputes settlement mechanism, government programs have been challenged as providing discriminatory subsidies. Perhaps the most notable example is the striking down of successive attempts by the Government of Canada to support the Canadian magazine industry (Armstrong, 2000). It is increasingly clear that large transnational cultural corporations will use regional and global trading rules to force open markets to their products and to challenge the efforts of governments of smaller societies to save part of those markets for their domestic artists. The market logic has also penetrated these smaller societies in that public corporations like the CBC/SRC and the National Film Board work increasingly in partnership with private sector cultural firms. The market logic tends to dominate ever more in these partnerships.

Do these developments mean that governments are increasingly powerless in smaller states to support cultural creativity and cultural development? The various talks given at the colloquium would suggest not.

1. Governments can clearly continue many of the programs of support offered through such agencies as the Canada Council. Attention must be given, however, to the relative openness of these support programs to members of aboriginal communities and of the growing number of transnational, immigrant communities found in our major cities.
2. Second, it is important to recognize the potential role of contemporary information and communication technologies for cultural development. They are not only shaping identities, but also providing opportunities for cultural creation and the diffusion of cultural products in new ways. We have already noted the growing significance of cities and towns as supporters of cultural development. In recognition

of such developments, many emphasize the need for democratizing much further access to Internet facilities and for government supporting vigorously the widespread installation in Canada of broadband capability. Such infrastructural support by governments would seem key to successful efforts by smaller societies like Québec and Canada to keep cultural creativity flourishing.

3. Finally, international and regional trading rules have nothing to say about educating and training the artists needed for cultural vitality. In the realm of economic and industrial policy, many of the smaller European states have reacted to the disciplines of trading rules by changing policies. Rather than protecting their industries through the use of tariffs, import quotas, and export subsidies, they have turned to re-educating and training workers. In seeking to develop a highly trained work force, they have hoped to increase their productivity and competitiveness in world markets. Perhaps Canada and Québec can take a lesson from this experience. The education and training of persons in the fine arts, in creative writing, and in the use of new multimedia technologies would seem to be crucial to the future of cultural creativity. In putting an increased focus on this aspect of education, questions should also be raised about the practices of some provinces like Ontario that are reducing, if not removing, fine art and music from elementary and secondary school curriculums. Such actions would seem short-sighted and hardly conducive to artistic creativity. If we wish to have creative cultural works in our smaller societies, we cannot expect it to flourish on barren ground. The soil for creativity must be nourished from the very earliest days of the education of our children.

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