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Cultural and Religious Identities in an Era of Information and Communications Globalization

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advances in information and communication technologies coupled with the dominant overarching Neo-liberal/capitalist ideological underpinnings of the dominant Western powers have generated a momentum towards a homogeneous global village. The impact of which has been to expand World conflict and propelled many nations towards losing their national identity and traditions. This article discusses the various impacts from IT globalization and calls for a new global communication awareness.

INTRODUCTION

Today globalization has widely become one of the most powerful forces shaping the modern world, but ironically cannot be defined easily. Globalization is a complex concept that involves political, economic and socio-cultural orders and has created new global ideologies. In fact, globalization is a multifaceted word that does not refer to a single notion, but can be characterized as a systematic integration of commercial, cultural, and technological advancements. The information and communication revolution is one of the most important factors in globalization, and has changed people's relations and the relative meaning of time and space, reducing communicative distance, demolishing physical boundaries while increasing relations between people, governments and cultures. Through information and communications technologies, substantial populations on earth are exposed to foreign cultures and ideas and feel the threat of losing their national and religious identities. Because information and communications technologies have to be considered part of processes of liberal-capitalist modernity or Westernization the process of becoming modern in today's world is perceived as involving methods of the power elite, which brings old practices, cultures and religious identities into question, thus raising the potential for conflict.

In this atmosphere, globalization of cultures and religious identities becomes one of the more important impacts of information and communication technology. In fact, as social and political structures influence many of these power relations, the information and communication technology can advance the destruction of existing cultures and religious identities. The assumption of cultural globalization is that if other societies want to become civilized, they must abandon their cultures and identities. On the other hand, culture globalization with rise of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in recent years has quite possibly

contributed to accelerate a perceived uniform world culture in which democracy and its values are proceeding strongly through various aspects of life: cultural, industries, international language, music, press and media etc.

In this increasingly globalized culture, some countries feel they have little or no margin of action as they attempt to position themselves into the so-called global village. Therefore, when speaking about culture globalization by information and communications technology, it is important to understand its negative effects. The first negative of culture globalization is ideological, religious and identity conflicts at national levels that are driven by information and communication technology. In fact use of information and communication technology plays an important role in the appearance of such conflicts. Communication globalization has modified many political, economic, and social factors which have increased the basic conflict between the old cultures and the new cultures, between secularism and religion, between the West and the East.

Thus the fundamental challenge confronting humanistic and cultural studies the focus of this article is how, in an age of information and communication globalization, can we reconcile the conflict and the tension between cultural and religious identities with different (or the new) cultures and civilizations that want to be a member of the global village; without succumbing to cultural homogenization through some of these Western values and symbols.

MEANING OF GLOBALIZATION

Today globalization has widely become one of the most powerful forces shaping the modern world and cannot be defined easily. In fact, globalization is a complex concept that involves political, economic and socio-cultural orders and has created new global beliefs. In other words, globalization is a multifaceted word that does not refer to a single notion. Reviewing the literature does give some basic insight into the concept of cultural globalization and its implications.

Giddens' view of globalization is "an intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa." (Giddens, Anthony, 1990) In other words, globalization involves changes in the spatial reach of capital, financial activities, advanced producer services, and information that transcends the political state system and where, arguably, multinational corporations replace states and communities as the dominant actors in the global system. In theory, a globalized socioeconomic system would be freer, more efficient, economically rational, and unfettered by state-directed diversions of wealth into unproductive areas. As production is reorganized across time and space, industries interpenetrate across political borders, financial capital spreads across the globe, homogenized consumer goods diffuse to distant markets, and people flow to new areas of economic opportunity, the local and the global will become inextricably intertwined in a system of universal order. (Keeling, Latin 2002)

For Held and McGrew "globalization denotes the expanding scale, growing magnitude, speeding up and deepening impact of interregional flows and patterns of social interaction. It refers to a shift or transformation in the scale of human social organization that links distant communities and expands the reach of power relations across the world's major regions and continents." (Held/McGrew 2000: 2; cf. Held et. al. 1999: 16)

However, globalization is frequently associated with the liberal classical economic theory, and since the mid-1970s with neo-liberalism which has its roots in the classical economic theory. More specifically, globalization is considered a reflection of the classical economic theory's principle of comparative advantage, which promotes an open economic system and free trade in order to achieve and realize the best chances of life. In effect, the liberal school of economics today has been dominated by other spheres of life such as: culture, society, politics, arts and education. It at first became famous in Europe by Adam Smith with his book in 1776 titled *The Wealth of Nations*. He and others advocated the abolition of government intervention in economic matters. No restrictions on manufacturing, no barriers to commerce, no tariffs. He noted free trade was the best way for a nation's economy to develop. Such ideas were "liberal" in the sense of no controls. This application of individualism encouraged "free" enterprise, "free" competition which came to mean, free for the capitalists to make huge profits as they wished. But neo-liberalism emerged full force in the 1980s with the right-wing Reagan and Thatcher regimes, but its influence has since spread across the political spectrum to encompass not only centralist political parties but even much of the traditional socio-democratic left. (Martinez and Arnoldo, 2000)

Thus the ideology that has emerged at the end of the twentieth century for highlighting globalization really is neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism is a set of economic policies that have become widespread during the last 25 years or so. In fact, neo-liberalism is a political-economic paradigm in the era of globalization. The neo-liberalism idea refers to the policies and processes that goals are to maximize personal profit. However neo-liberal globalization theory is very vast and it is not only reduced to an integrated system of markets, but what we will show, is that it includes other spheres of social and political life.

Neo-Liberal Theory and Culture Globalization

The idea of a universal history of mankind was first suggested by Immanuel Kant in his *An Idea for a Universal History of Mankind*. Kant suggested that history would have an end point or a final purpose that was implied in man's current potentialities and which made the whole of history intelligible. For Kant, as for Hegel and Marx after him, this end point was the realization of human freedom, defined as the universalization of a just civic constitution. Only when all states accept such a constitution, adopting a republican form of government, and join a *Foedus Pacificum*, a pacific federation or union guaranteeing the right of a foreigner not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory, there would be an end to conflict and, therefore, perpetual peace. For Kant, belligerency was equated with the existence of tyranny – an assertion which has been resurrected in the post-Cold War period by international political theorists operating from the Liberal tradition. Kant argued in *Perpetual Peace* that if the decision to go to war was taken by the people rather than the sovereign, then the frequency of conflict would be drastically reduced.

Kant's project for a universal history of mankind was undertaken by Hegel in the generation following his death. The task of such a universal history was to provide the exhibition of Spirit in the process of working out the knowledge of that which can be. History proceeds through a continual process of conflict, wherein societies and systems of thought based upon different ideas clash and then fall apart due to their own internal contradictions. This dialectic took place between different societies as successive systems of thought are replaced by less contradictory

ones. For Hegel, the history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom. The consciousness of freedom was absent amongst the 'Orientals' living under despotic rule and first emerged amongst the Greeks.

For Marx, liberal-capitalist modernity particularized as the ideology of the bourgeoisie, while Weber explored its cultural roots in Protestant asceticism. Following Marx and Weber, liberal-capitalist modernity may be seen as encompassing a specifically *bourgeois*, Protestant worldview. In fact globalization of neo-liberals was a form of colonialism and imperialism. For Karl Marx, mission globalization of neo-liberals in Asia has been destructive and regenerating, entailing the annihilation of old Asiatic society and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia. (Barrilon, Michel, 2001)

However, today we can show that neo-liberal theory in an era of globalization determines the belief that economical, technological and cultural systems are closely connected. In fact, neo-liberal globalization refers to the process of the integration of economic, political, social and cultural relations across international boundaries. Then in this theory, it would very difficult to imagine isolation between cultural, economic, and political systems. On the other hand, in neo-liberal thought, culture globalization and realizing modernity are hidden formulas for a global civil society. Then for a discussion about situations of cultural and religious identities and the role of globalization in neo-liberal philosophy, there is a powerful paradigm that it is very important in the discourse of culture globalization or global modernity theory. Therefore in this paradigm, globalization is principally aimed at the transcendental homogenization of Western theories in political, socio-economic and cultural spheres across the globe. In fact, it can be seen as an evolution which is systematically restructuring interactive phases among global nations and civilizations by breaking down barriers in the areas of culture, commerce, communication and several other fields of endeavour.

According to this viewpoint, globalization and Westernization produce different effects in the cultural and religious identities destroying cultural diversity on a global level. It is plausible that there are positive benefits from globalization such as: the accelerating advances in science, engineering, medicine and technology resulting in increasing opportunities for wealth created from new combinations of resources and capacities, new economies of scale, and new opportunities to share the great variety this planet has to offer, emergence of a new awareness of our common humanity with a set of universal values, extending beyond traditional boundaries of nations, races, classes or religions. However, rapid technological and social change created by economic globalization, and neo-liberal thought is creating a crisis of identity in certain parts of the world and a corresponding evaporation of traditional values, often embedded in religion. For example, the non-Western world, especially the Muslim world, has yet to come to grips with the notion of globalization. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Muslim world faces many challenges, but none more formidable than the issue of how to strike a balance between maintaining cultural integrity and religious identity on the one hand, and absorbing changes associated with a globalizing world on the other. Broadly speaking, three reactions to globalization can be discerned in the Muslim world. Some Muslims view globalization as a power game from which great powers draw immense gains and to which the rest of the world is subjugated. Muslims appear confronted with two choices: either resist or be marginalized and integrated. The new era of transformation, so runs the argument, is an old wine in a new bottle. They argue that social movements, Islamic or otherwise, represent a collective form of resistance

to globalization and that they are invariably intertwined with the rise of counter-hegemonic consciousness. (Monshipouri, 2005)

Cultures and Identities Conflict in Era of Globalization of Information and Communication

In global flows of information and communication, the search for national and international identity has become a fundamental source of social and cultural conflict between Western civilizations and other civilizations. In effect, information and communication globalization is childlike and as a consequence of the modernity wants completely to become global: politically, economically, and culturally. In other words, globalization of information and communication forms the ideas of modernity wanting to brake the past and generate a homogeneous global village without historical distinctions and traditions.

In our day therefore, information and communication revolution is one of the more important instruments of liberal-capitalist modernity and globalization of Western culture. The domination of ICT is an account of economic domination via global operations of media industries and powerful multi-national corporations that control the flow of information and distribution of media products. Western media in the form of pop cultural exports a Western derived culture grounded in neo-liberal globalization.

In fact, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have changed people's relations and the meaning of time and space and have reduced distance and have demolished political boundaries while increasing interactions between people, governments and cultures. Television and especially radio now have reached to all people in the deepest rural areas of Iran, China and India. From Brazilian music in Tokyo to African films in Bangkok the focus has become global. Through information and communications technologies, the people on earth are exposed to foreign identities and ideas and face the menace of losing their national and religious identities. In fact, information and communications technologies have been considered part of the process of liberal-capitalist modernity or Westernization and involve processes of unequal power, which brings old practices and religious identities into question, thus raising the potential for conflict.

The advanced implementation of information and communication technology can be seen as being driven by neo-liberal ideology. In other words, by ICT, the philosophy of culture globalization can be summarized as an impetus to formulate a Western identity and culture. The most important feature of culture globalization is a 'global-village-ideology,' which neglects political, cultural and social borders. Thus creating an atmosphere where identities could be ignored and rendered virtually non-existent. On a cultural level, it can be stated that the Northern nations maintain their hegemonic power of its culture by way of this ideology. Thus globalization of cultures and identities has become an essential role of information and communication technology. In fact as the social and political structures create enhanced influence in the power relations, the information and communication technology can be freely advanced in destruction of the existing cultures and identities.

The assumption of culture globalization is that if other societies want to become civilized and join the global village, they must abandon their cultures and identities. In fact, in recent years culture globalization with the rise of information and communications technologies (ICT) has undoubtedly accelerated a drive towards a uniform world culture that democracy and its values are proceeding strongly through various aspects of life: cultural, industries, international language, music, press and media etc. In this increasingly globalized culture and modernity,

southern countries have little or no margin of action to position themselves into the so-called global village. Because of competition in the ICT setting and domination of Western thoughts in cultural spheres, only the richest countries are able to produce and publish their culture and identities by ICT.

When speaking about relations between ICT globalization and cultures and identities, we are confronted with its negative effects that are carried out by information and communication technologies. Then the first negative role of ICT globalization is cultural and identity conflicts at the national and international levels that are enforced and carried out by the information and communication technology. In fact use of information and communication technology play an important role in the appearance of such conflict. Communication globalization can modify or modulate political, economic, social and cultural factors, while increasing the basic conflict between the old and new cultures, between secularism and religion, between the West and the East. Hence, in this era of information and communication with ICT approaching once independent cultures and civilizations, it has become an increasing source of conflict among and within societies themselves. Today use of information and communication technology has played a central role in the domination of Western culture. In effect in the age of information and with overriding neo-liberal thought at the global level, cultures and identities that are disconnected from ICT, remain outside the system, invisible, and disempowered.

How We Must Reconcile the Conflicts Cultural and Identities in an Era of Globalization of ICT

The fundamental challenge confronting humanistic and cultural studies and modern populations in the age of information and communication globalization is how to reconcile the conflict and the tension between cultural identities with culture and civilizations that want to retain their traditions and values. In fact the globalization of information and communication is disquieting and disempowering to those outside the global village. Globalization of information and communication has been in the service of capitalism. There is a concern that by helping globalization of ICT, cultures and identities of the world are becoming fragmented leading to a foreseeable scenario of cultural homogenization through Western values and symbols.

In an era of globalization and in according the role of information and communication technologies, relationships between cultures and identities are no longer mediated primarily by states or peoples. In our day, they are submitted to market rules and to the goals of profitability and more and more oriented to the homogenization of informational products created in the few huge studios of the Western world. Today it is the media that are at the heart of issues reinforcing cultural pluralism, through their economic power and media influence.

“Technological development has made cultural exchanges continuous on an international scale level with unprecedented rapidity and amplitude. There are vast new possibilities for the enrichment of different cultures. However, these possibilities cannot be realized in an environment where the imbalance in cultural exchanges is excessively one-sided, reducing nations to find their own peripheral status. It is impossible to ignore the threat of cultural Darwinism promoted by a market controlled by a few groups operating on global levels and which have the privilege of marketization of culture and for-profit cultural products that use diversity as an exploitable resource in ways that might lead to domination by a globalizing hyper culture.” (Tardif, 2002)

The rise of cultural globalization in our world obliges us to find new responses to the fundamental cultural and religious issues of nations. In this position, there is a call to create paradigms that can redefine our vision of global change. Today countries must find new ways to manage relationships in this era of advanced information technology. These are very important matters. Indeed we know that information and communication technology can improve the capacity for genuine dialogue and understanding between people with diverse national, ethnic, and religious identities; but it is evident also that without proper safeguards, information and communication technology can dramatically increase the cultural and identity tensions between the developed world and the developing world. In effect in an era of globalization, we need to find ways to ensure balanced exchanges between societies and cultures that are equal in dignity and able to reflect critically and honestly on their values, practices and adaptation to changing world conditions.

Also, in the era of the globalization of Information and Communications Technologies, developing countries need not only develop their own information and communication abilities. A global society should be paying particular attention to the preservation and affirmation of their heritage, civilizations, history and different kinds of their own identity: national identity, social identity and cultural identity. In other words, for national and local identities, the age of communication and information technologies should be focused upon a greater opportunity to maintain their heritages and culture. Globalization of information and communication technology can also create relationships between different cultural identities and prepare opportunities for intercultural interaction between national and local identities. Such interactions often provide a new sense of communication.

In spite of the distinct differences between many cultures, an alternative approach might open new theoretical and conceptual perspectives to help nations move beyond the static confrontation and to understand processes of communication as dynamic, open and fluid. In fact "the development in communication and information technology, especially the rapid growth and exploitation of satellite and computer-mediated systems, has created opportunities for the kinds of cultural dialogue that will promote understanding. Far beyond mere images, these profound changes affect both the perception and articulation of the social, political and religious discourse which are emerging now within the ongoing globalization process." (Palmer & Gallab, 2001)

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