FROM TRIBALISM TO GLOBALIZATION: SOME PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

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In this article, we discuss the profound changes in the permeability of cultural boundaries that are occurring due to the explosive increase in the pace, scope and variety of cultural exchange and the global diffusion of technologies which can be at once culturally homogenizing or hybridizing. The changing links between culture and territory and the continued capacity of ethno-cultural groups and national states to provide a sense of place and belonging are discussed.

Neste artigo, discute-se as alterações na permeabilidade das fronteiras culturais emergentes, resultantes da tremenda aceleração, do âmbito e da variedade dos contactos culturais. Também é abordada a difusão de tecnologias que tendem uma homogeneização e hibridação cultural. As relações entre cultura e território e, bem assim, a capacidade de grupos etno-culturais para criarem um sentimento de pertença são, aqui, igualmente tratados.

In order to make sense of ethnicity and culture contacts in the contemporary world one must take into consideration increasing cultural complexity, growing heterogeneity and the emergence of cultural forces which can be at once homogenizing and hybridizing. Complex pluralism at the societal level and a growing interconnectedness of peoples and cultures at the global level have led to hilarious situations of the type portrayed by Clifford (1988:14): "Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the end of the world".

To understand how these major elements of change are affecting cultures, a first important task is to characterize specific cultures as they were when relatively isolated. It is also essential to understand the nature and circumstances of the contact situation as well as the demographic variables at play. In contrast to today's multiple and socially differentiated points of contact previous eras featured only a few points and types; for instance, missionaries and traders, and involvement of only one gender. Thus a distorted impression of basic practices and roles of both the colonizer and the colonized appeared. Colonialism created important social dysfunctions, and this took place in the context of directed forced acculturation. This contrasts to the explosive increase in the pace, scope and varieties of cultural exchange witnessed in the post-colonial period. Digital cellular phones and satellite telecommunications render the rest of the world accessible to the most isolated societies; even very low literacy levels are not major barriers to accessing modern information technology.

These technologies can also be used to reinforce and preserve important dimensions of culture and elements of the environment, which gave rise to these cultural traits. An interesting example is the involvement of the Kalahari! Kung Bushmen in tracking and recording information about a large number of plants and animals through the use of hand-held computers linked to satellite positioning systems. Icons designed with Bushman input enable hand-held computers to be used without there being the requirement of literacy. Up to 250 observations per day per Bushman equipped with these computers are used to create maps and charts of animal's movements and feeding habits (Houlder 1998). The application of this technology acts not only to preserve traditional tracking skills, which have been in sharp decline, but to protect the

environment which gave rise to these skills and in which they continue to be useful. This is illustrative of the specific kinds of successful adaptations cultures have the potential to make in a more interconnected world in which tribal, ethnic, and national cultural boundaries have become more permeable. That such adaptations transform cultures and their boundaries is inarguable. Failure to adapt to change in a way that preserves cultural traits and the environment in which these traits are useful may result in cultural transformation over which the group may have much less control, and whose outcome may be less advantageous. In an interdependent world, in which cultural boundaries are more penetrable, technology can be used both to transform and sustain all kinds of cultural groupings.

The profound changes in the permeability of cultures to outside influences and the compression of time and space, which has accompanied technological change, call into question the usefulness of classical definitions of culture, such as that put forth by Sir Edward Tylor. (1) No one definition of culture has prevailed in the past and is even less likely to do so today. For our purposes it is important to note that culture includes various states of awareness and experience. In the contemporary world, these have expanded considerably beyond traditional cultural boundaries due to growing cultural, social and economic interdependence (Miller 1998:307). Personal idiosyncratic culture can be said to be comprised of everything you are aware of and have experienced. With increasing cultural complexity, the individual "holds a smaller fraction of the whole" (Hannerz 1992:9). This seems central to the "fragmentation of meaning" of which much is made in contemporary post-modernist writing. With growing cultural complexity, and as individuals are left with a more fragmentary grasp of broader cultural patterns of meaning, there is an "increasing split between everyday life and large-scale systemic integration" (Calhoun 1991:96). Homogenizing factors such as television can play a recontextualizing role. Miller's study of Yucatan Mayas (1998) describes how television viewing allows recontextualization of external cultural contents into expressions of self and community "with some community members embracing the global sphere, while others reaffirm ties to local identity and established patterns of behaviors" (Miller 1998:308).

Changes in awareness and experience involve for a substantial proportion of inhabitants of the planet the following significant patterns: a move from a phenomenal world characterized largely by relatively stable and face-to-face primary relationships linked mostly to kinship structures, to a shrinking circle of primary relationships; these relationships have become much less stable and less associated with kinship structures; secondary and tertiary (i.e. mediated) relationships continue to expand in number and proportion. The way in which mediated relationships can open new horizons for individuals and potentially transform cultures is illustrated by Internet usages within very conservative societies. For example, Kuwaiti teenagers are bypassing proscriptions against open and public interactions between genders by engaging in encounters with the opposite sex in cyberspace using their keyboards as

vehicles for kisses and other expressions of "intimacy" (Wheeler 1998:363). This technology can also enable veiled Muslim women to perform real world activities in cyberspace which are strongly discouraged in other social spaces: "a designer could talk with a café owner about his advertising needs. Sample home pages were loaded as files and exchanged between the two in real time...without the two ever formally meeting" (Wheeler 1998:372).

The foregoing example is illustrative of the way in which cultural complexity is related to the linkages between the individual and in-groups. Triandis (1989; 1995) has described these relationships by types of society as follows: in extremely simple societies, any individual is closely related to the others and has considerable freedom to act independently (e.g. Kalahari Bushmen); in the middle range of cultural complexity (Romans, Chinese) the individual relates to a few very important ingroups (nuclear family, extended family, clan, city, state) and control exercised by those ingroups is higher even than in more complex societies; in extremely complex cultures (e.g. modern industrial cultures) there are a larger number of potential ingroups than in collective cultures and there is both independence and emotional distance from ingroups. As the number of potential relationships increases, and with it the number of potential ingroups, loyalty to any one group tends to diminish. The individual is then able to place a higher priority on the pursuit of personal as opposed to group-oriented activities (Triandis 1989). The growing opportunities to engage in mediated relationships of all kinds greatly amplifies this process.

Further, potential ingroups tend more and more to be territorially diversified or not even be rooted in any specific territory. In fact, Ulf Hannerz (1990:237) maintains that a "world culture is being created through the increasing connectedness of varied local cultures, as well as through the development of cultures without a clear anchorage in any one territory". He argues that culture is primarily based on interactions and social relationships. There is no necessary link between culture and territory, and culture can therefore be created just as readily by transnational networks as by territory. Cultures now associated with specific territories may cease to exist because of the disembedding effects of interconnectedness. In the case of the Chiapas Lacandon, a preliterate society in which culture is transmitted orally from one generation to the next, children interact less and less with elders and model more of their social behavior on what they watch on television. Jon McGee (in Luhnow 1999: B12), an anthropologist who has studied the Lacandon since 1980, claims that "the biological population will be there in a hundred years, but in a few decades they may no longer have a distinct cultural identity". Another example in which the link between culture and territory is being transformed is the growth and proliferation of transnational networks which generate occupational sub-cultures linked to transnational job markets -- those of intellectuals, bureaucrats, politicians, and business people, sports and entertainment performers.

Boundaries are said to adapt to new cultural and environmental realities, and even if cultural and/or ethnic identities are in flux they

nonetheless maintain themselves quite well (Barth 1969). Boundary shifts occur due to a number of factors, in particular changes in group composition reflecting assimilation, migration, generational succession, and major systemic change. The speed with which boundaries change and adapt may well be accelerating in most parts of the world. One explanation for the apparent increase in volatility of ethnic identities might be, as Alba (1990:302) maintains with regard to American Whites, that "the cultural stuff of ethnicity continues to wither" and ethnic identities while continuing to persist have become less salient. It is perhaps for these reasons that Hobsbawm (1992:5) can point to the ease with which identities can be changed and to the rapid emergence of some ethnic identities "which had no political or even existential significance until yesterday".

Even language boundaries may no longer have the same solidity that they have had in the past when these boundaries usually coincided with broader cultural ones. Gellner (1983:118) maintained that if modes of production and technology result in the same types of activities and hierarchies everywhere, the social uses of languages and the meanings available in them would be similar and styles of thought would not be different as one changes from one language to the other. In other words, bilingualism would become merely a matter of vocabulary and grammar. He offers the example of well-trained members of occupational subcultures linked to transnational job markets who do not have to undergo considerable adjustment when temporarily in each others milieus, despite language barriers. The point he tries to make is that the failure of language to continue to reflect more profound cultural differences presages the decline in identification with groups such as the nation, which rely on these boundaries, among others, to confer identity. Previously, Max Weber (1964:138-139) had pointed out that "feeling of community" between speakers of the same language arises only when consciousness emerges of differences from others speaking another language.

Nonetheless, even in those contexts where cultural differences between language groupings have been decreasing, there have been instances of intensified intergroup conflict primarily rooted in language differences. Hobsbawm (1992) in referring to Quebec as having undergone "social disorientation" in the wake of "the forty most revolutionary years in the history of human society"; cites Hroch as follows: "language acts as a substitute for factors of integration in a disintegrating society" (in Hobsbawm 1992:6). Identification with language, even in a context of cultural convergence, may confer not only significant psychological and symbolic advantages but material ones as well. Moreover, culture, from language to folklore, can be nurtured and planned with the same modern technologies that have made cultural boundaries more porous. As Richmond (1984) usefully points out, modern technologies facilitate denser, more intense interactions between members of communities who share cultural characteristics, especially language. Elkins (1997) goes further in a similar vein: he argues that some *mass-media* are being replaced by more highly focused media catering to more specialized and more homogeneous audiences; this allows

ethnic communities to help their diasporas to maintain their language and culture.

The ethnic group, no matter how "imaginary", "reconstructed", or transformed will continue to remain important in terms of its capacity to provide a basis for identity and a sense of continued belonging. Even in a world of constructed and commoditized identities, ethnic identification has its advantages. After all: "You don't have to do anything to belong to it. You can't be thrown out" (Hobsbawm 1992:7). The main competition, in terms of identity conferral, is the nation state. Smith (1995: 155-157) argues that the nation is "the modern heir and transformation of the much older and commoner 'ethnie'". It is the nation, which provides "the sole basis for such social cohesion and political action as modern societies, with their often heterogeneous social and ethnic composition and varied aims, can muster". Whatever the relationship between ethnicity and modernity, the capacity of national states to provide the primary focus identity is being weakened by the forces of globalization, acting from above, and those of pluralism, acting from below. Not to worry, nationalism, it is claimed, has a "chameleon-like ability to transmute itself according to the perceptions and needs of different communities" (Smith 1995:13).

In conclusion, both cultural groups and national states may continue to provide a sense of belonging and the "promise of collective but terrestrial immortality" (Smith 1995:160). Both also may continue to provide a sense of place, as space becomes more and more compressed and barriers to cultural exchanges of all kinds crumble. The real dilemma for students of contemporary ethnic relations is that ethnic and national identities are becoming less central and less encompassing as the processes of individual differentiation and the diversification of cultural configurations continues worldwide.

(1) - We refer to the 1871 definition given by Sir Edward Tylor: "Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society".

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