Cultural Politics in a Global Age
Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation
Edited by David Held and Henrietta L. Moore
CULTURAL POLITICS IN A GLOBAL AGE
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Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation

Edited by
David Held and Henrietta L. Moore
with Kevin Young
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David Held
Henrietta L. Moore
The essays collected here provide an account of culture as a major force in social, economic and political transformations. They examine how culture is contesting, amplifying, and altering the nature, direction and understandings of globalisation processes, and they discuss these processes from the perspective of diverse audiences, including the academy, business, policy makers, cultural institutions and community activists. The aim of this collection is to change the terms of debate, and to suggest new ways of conceptualising and theorising the links between culture and economic and social well-being by combining critical thinking from a broad range of philosophical and geo-political perspectives.

In the context of contemporary globalisation, culture – in its broadest senses, from the anthropological notion of culture as a system of meanings, values and symbols through to popular views of culture as religion, ethnicity, nationality and politics, and narrower senses, as business practices, elite cultures and art – is a cause of concern. There are those who talk of irremediable differences of world view, even a ‘clash of civilisations’, whilst others fear the erosion of values and life ways, an overall homogenisation of cultural understandings and products. Many contemporary analysts of globalisation characterise it as a process folded over on itself, simultaneously producing difference and homogenisation. The character, scale and scope of globalisation and its historical antecedents are the subject of much debate. What seems more evident is that an interconnected set of institutions, technologies and products are affecting lives everywhere in the world. People’s values, aspirations and expectations are changing; their symbols, life ways and ideals are altering; and their identities, self-understandings and perspectives are being transformed. Cultures have never been static, but the scale of change, its interconnected and media mediated nature are new (see Tomlinson, this volume). Culture has become a focal point both for consumerism and for conflict. However, most
contemporary critiques are based on an analysis of the impact of globalisation on culture, there is very little theoretical or empirical work that examines how culture is shaping social, economic and political transformations now or how it will propel them over the coming decades. This project takes an innovative approach in that it explores culture not as the ‘victim’ of globalisation, but as one of its major drivers: culture as a major force for change in the world. It identifies and analyses case studies that show how culture is driving globalisation, how cultural innovations and developments are related to processes of inclusion and exclusion, new forms of identity and their interpretation, and new forms of network, cohesion and co-operation.

FORMS OF THOUGHT

The larger question of culture – arguments about definition notwithstanding – is bound up with how we think about society, with what we believe to be the nature of the social and the character of the good life. Views of society clearly differ, and they provide not just models for the functioning of the economy, the analysis of geopolitical systems and the governance of nations, but also, and perhaps more importantly, they provide the concepts that structure the ways individuals think about and act in the world (see Appadurai, Bhabha, this volume). Without a notion of society, for example, there would be little point in devising policies for the betterment of society and the international arena, and the conduct of nations would be very different if there was no concept of human rights. Historical transformations cannot be driven by ideas – concepts, forms of thought, ways of speaking – alone, but there is an increasing urgency to understand the conditions of their production, transformation and durability. The social sciences are the source of many ideas about the character and functioning of society, but they do not just arise de nouveau out of the feverish imaginations of social scientists. They are always the product of a complex interplay between the professional social science imagination and the everyday experiences and practices of ordinary individuals, as well as the management, development and transformation of institutions and markets by governments, business, elites, policy makers and others.

Individuals and groups are motivated by complex interrelations between their ideas and the ideas of others, between their experiences, emotions and practices and the ethos of the day, the reigning ideas of any particular historical moment. Governments, multinationals, corporations and civil society organisations as well as academics are involved both in collecting empirical data on
which to base policies, interventions and strategies, and in devising theories to explain how and why the world works the way it does. Research is now a definitive part of the world it describes. In the globalised world we live in if we do not acknowledge, criticise and analyse the way social, economic and political theories are tied up in processes of globalisation, in global networks of ideas, images, markets and capital transfers we will simply find that we do not have the tools to analyse globalisation at all. This is what makes new ways of conceptualising and theorising the role of culture in driving social, economic and political transformation an urgent one.

Human beings are motivated in complex ways by ideas, and by all that ideas entail in terms of interests, emotions, habits and aspirations. Ideas, however, rest on the interplay between the public and the private. Ideas that arise in the public domain influence personal understandings, relationships and self-conceptualisations. Research activities – whether conducted by academics, governments, corporations, civil society institutions and cultural think tanks – produce the categories through which individuals, groups and institutions think and act. For example, the concept of gender has had a definitive impact on the work of international, national and civil society institutions in the arena of social development, and has redefined social policy objectives within welfare states. Such ideas and the conceptualisations and categories to which they give rise do not act alone; they are part of circuits of knowledge and asset transfer that are bound up with the changing nature of the family, work and leisure, the work of civil society institutions and international bodies to mention only the most obvious. And yet they influence individual ideas, aspirations, emotions and practices which in turn shape issues of governance, policy making, markets and the development of civil society. One could point to the way corporations concern themselves with preferences, desires and consumer choice, or to the interface of ideologies and religious belief with questions of security and governance. Our private pleasures are very often matters of public concern, and the other way around.

Two concepts that have had a very major impact on the way individuals, governments, civil society organisations and business have thought about the world and acted upon it are ‘the West’ and ‘globalisation’. Both of these are of particular concern when we think about our futures because how we understand them will have a defining impact on how we shape the future. In 2020, the world will look different, not only because it will be different, but because we will look at it differently. What will the world look like in 2020? One possibility is that the concept of the West with all that it has entailed through the twentieth century will be of minimal philosophical or practical value. The West that we have
known is largely the product of the post World War II era. At the beginning of the twentieth century there was no coherent category to which those who later became part of the NATO alliance clung and in terms of which they defined their relation to the rest of the world. The West that emerged through NATO took on a particular cast in relation to the Cold War and what was then seen as the socialist menace. Since the end of the Cold War there has been much that is threatening to dissolve the entity known as the West. There are cultural, economic, political and even religious factors pushing the USA and Europe apart. There are many who argue that the USA deserves gratitude for safeguarding the freedom of Europe, but many Europeans of a younger generation simply resent the culture and the influence of the superpower. The French voted no to the EU constitution and when asked why a good number said because they are against free trade and American capitalism, as well as the fact that they wanted to send a message to M. Chirac. The divisions of the world into blocks: the West versus Asia, the north versus the south are increasingly meaningless in a world where the US and Western Europe are divided over sovereignty and multilateralism, and where dominant patterns of influence on the world scene are altering rapidly. The expected rise of India and China is the potential engine for further decisive change. In 2020, the entrenched inequalities between north and south of trade and resources will persist, but India and China will no longer be part of the south, nor will they be developing or emerging nations. They will be winners.

New alignments among nations are emerging. Inequalities between many countries are sharpening, and with economic growth comes exclusion from the global economy for some. The result could be an increased number of failed states from Africa to the Middle East, to Central Asia and South East Asia. Economics is not the only thing dividing us. We know full well that inequalities sharpen conflicts of values. Among the sharpest of these are the divisions of faith. There was a moment in the twentieth century when modernity and secularism seemed indissoluble, and yet in the twenty-first century faith is of increasing importance to people around the world. Exposure to the successes of consumerism, and its perceived assault on values, have heighten the perceived need for spiritualism. The relationship between religion and identity is once again taking on a geo-political character (see Ahmed, Rose, this volume). For many societies, divisions between and within religious groups may become boundaries that are as significant or even more significant than national borders. Splits within the Muslim world between Shia and Sunni communities, Christian-Muslim divides in Southeast Asia and Europe, conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, schisms in the Anglican community world wide, and Jewish-Muslim disputes in the Middle East all have the potential to
ferment potential religious and/or ethnic disaffection which could threaten economic and political stability. Under these circumstances, new alignments will arise and they are likely to be between those countries, regions and cities that are integrating into the global future and those that are not. The question then of how we think about and map that global future in the academy, business, government, civil society and cultural institutions will be of paramount importance.

Weber argued that human beings are motivated both by ideal and material interests: ‘Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the “world images” that have been created by “ideas” have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest’ (Weber, 1946: 280). Interests are the engine of action, but it is ideas that define the courses of action. Ideas in this context are not, of course, abstract constructions, but the product of direct historical engagement with the world. Weber’s famous treatise on the importance of culture and human action sought to explain rational, capitalist economic behaviour with reference to the Protestant ethic, and the question of how ideas and values influence actions is an old one (Weber, 2002 [1905]). From an anthropological point of view, people do not build up lines of action from scratch, choosing each one as the most efficient means to an end. Instead, people build up broad-based strategies for action, and cultural values influence the form and content of those strategies. Culture does not just influence action through end values, so that people will hold fast in changing circumstances to their preferred ends, but simply alter their strategies for attaining them. Rather, culture also provides the means through which people construct lines of action, and thus the styles or strategies of action that people deploy can be much more long running than the ends they seek to attain (Bourdieu, 1977).

However, cultures change. Far from maintaining continuity, changing ideas and values have driven the transformations that societies have sought especially in the modern period. Explicitly formulated and articulated cultural models play a powerful role in organising and transforming social life. Thus, cultures are involved both in sustaining strategies of action and in developing new ones. While this is true, analysts have frequently drawn a distinction between ideologies and cultural traditions, between explicit life projects and tacit or taken for granted beliefs and practices. Ideologies battle to take over the world views, assumptions and habits of people, and to a significant extent the success of ideological transformation depends on the balance between transforming habits and values, and appropriating, absorbing and building on them.

Ideas, however, and most particularly those that are involved in conceiving and managing social transformation are about imagining what is possible and
desirable. Much of the literature in the social sciences has historically focused on nation states and their role in imagining and guiding social transformation. Much political thought is centred on the same entity; in one way or another, political thinkers posit that ‘the good’ inheres in the state. From such a perspective, modernity is pre-eminently a state project. This gives a particular role to political elites and sometimes also to intellectual elites, and it effectively ties the project of modernity to nation building and nationalism. However, the distinction between ideologies and cultures is in many ways eroding in the contemporary moment. Important projects of transformation have taken effective shape through such things as the emergence of neoliberalism and its impact on markets, corporate governance and financial institutions, and through the ideologies of human rights, feminism and environmentalism and their links to governmental and intergovernmental agencies, civil society institutions, popular movements, foundations and academic networks. These projects of transformation and the ideas that underpin them cannot be clearly labelled cultures – in the sense of the beliefs, values and lifeways of distinct and identifiable groupings – nor ideologies – in the determinate sense of communism or anarchism for example. However, they do represent beliefs and values that structure and shape the practices and lifestyles of ordinary individuals in their everyday existence. Such individuals will have a multifaceted and complex relationship to different sets of values, beliefs and identities, being perhaps an Indian, Hindu, graduate of Yale, software technician, working for an international environmental NGO. Here circuits of knowledge and asset transfer link many individuals into networks of shared and yet differentiated value systems. Consumer protection, environmental sustainability and feminism are all global movements whose members retain strong and differentiated relationships to cultural identities, values and beliefs connected to definitive social and national groupings.

From this perspective, it seems possible to speak of international, perhaps global cultures, that are neither cultures in the traditional sense nor ideologies, but coherent and widely shared values and beliefs that govern practices and actions. They would include such diverse things as market neoliberalism and its social entailments, corporate management culture, New Age ideas and the Moonies. Cultural affiliations are no longer geographically localised, and neither are they based on single sets of affiliations, or on forms of identification, communication and interaction that operate on a single analytical level (see Casely-Hayford, Rose, this volume). In other words, our affiliations may be multiple, but they are not all multiple in the same way. In certain times, places and contexts, some affiliations are more important than others.
This vision of cultural identity is regularly criticised for being elitist and Western, a form of individualism of choice that only applies to a small minority of the world’s population. It is also a vision of culture and of the global that is viscerally contested by those who see culture as increasingly connected to local areas, to a politics of anti-Americanism and anti-globalisation, to popular movements for self-determination and to specific understandings of cultural identity. What is evident is that something is happening to the contours of people’s sense of belonging and that culture is the terrain on which this contestation is being played out. This is true not just of elites in certain parts of the world, but of workers, entrepreneurs, consumers and ordinary people of different ages and backgrounds across the globe. This cultural transformation in the sense of belonging is the major form assumed by contemporary modernity. State projects of modernity, wherever they occur in the world, are concerned with the production of national subjects, but alternative projects of modernity are seeking to constitute and celebrate subjects of a different kind. Major points of tension can thus arise between nations and their subjects, as well as between national cultures. We may characterise these ideas as definitive of the ethos of the day, as providing the switches which channel action along certain courses, but each has its origins in different ways of imagining the nation state and affiliation to it, and of imagining transnational communities and cultures and traditional values. What is clear is that both those who see cultures and identities as multiple, and those who view them as intrinsically constructed and unchanging are speaking of modern cultures, contemporary values, modern modes of belonging.

TECHNOLOGIES OF REPRESENTATION

Mass media and digital technologies increasingly frame our understanding of the world we live in. Religious progressives, indigenous organisations, governments, corporations and many others are determined to take advantage of new technologies. Their actions are often framed by a world audience of news agencies, newspapers, media outlets, websites, weblogs and so on. Image and information management are the new arbiters of truth and authenticity, and the media plays a powerful political role in setting the terms of the debate (see Schecter, this volume). There are many who see new information technologies and the media – and in particular film and television – as responsible for the death of culture, as eroding distinctiveness and leading to homogenisation, if not Americanisation by the back door. There is little evidence for such a view, and the presumption that ‘media’, ‘modernity’, or ‘Western culture’ as
unspecified and monolithic entities are dissolving ‘cultures’ and ‘traditions’ around the world is clearly based on a reified notion of cultures as static traditions that cannot respond with innovation and creativity to new challenges, new economic and political circumstances, changed aspirations (see Appiah, Slater, this volume).

What media technologies do offer is an expanded domain of symbolic production, new forms and powers of representation and transmission that have an impact on how we envision ourselves, our connections and our communities. New technologies of representation create new structures, institutions and subjects (see Castells, 2001; Orbach, this volume). The process is not itself new. Habermas, Anderson and others have discussed transformations in self-understandings from the eighteenth century onwards with regard to print media which offered both new narratives of the self and self development, and also new ways of reflecting on and constructing those narratives from an individual point of view (see Habermas, 1992 [1962]; Anderson, 1991). One consequence was the emergence of a distinction between the public and the private which was to have a profound effect on political cultures and institutions, and on the development of the nation as a form of imagined community. The internet is clearly having an impact of a comparable scale, allowing diverse individuals to bind together around shared and specific interests, linking diasporic communities, re-forging the bonds of allegiance and faith in established religions and newly established communities of observance, recentring communities around cities and regions, and connecting the members of popular movements and civil society organisations (see Casley-Hayford, this volume).

It is arguable that the old distinction between public and private is shifting its ground, if not dissolving under the influence of new technologies of representation and communication. Our private pleasures are still matters of public concern, but in new ways. The kinds of communities we make are linked to the manner in which we imagine them, and in the world of mediated connection the imagination expands to generate new forms of connection, solidarity and dependency: new forms of belonging that are made possible by and through the material mechanisms we use to forge and imagine them.

A number of authors in this volume discuss the new forms of representation and of symbolic production that are emerging through new ways of imagining the world, many of them explicitly mediated by various technological, media, scientific and market structures (see Kapila, Ahmed, Yang, Hutnyk, this volume). One issue is the degree to which the nature of symbolic production – the means through which we achieve it and the contexts of its social production – has an impact on how we imagine ourselves and others. This is a question
John Tomlinson (this volume) struggles with directly in trying to determine whether the speed and proximity of symbolic production is changing the way we perceive not only the boundary between work and leisure, but between ourselves and others. Is the nature of labour and the experience of embodiment beginning to be refigured in forms that fundamentally alter the way we think of time and place? And yet, to pose the question in this way is to already underplay the scale of cultural transformation digital mediation makes possible. As Augustus Casely-Hayford points out, the internet is a medium for selective social interaction and symbolic belonging. It is the very selectivity and symbolic malleability of the internet, and of other digitally mediated cultural forms, that makes them a potentially unstable basis for political action where intention and irony are difficult to disentangle and where the nature of participation and of community activism as politics works at a tangent to the main political and economic determinants of political power (see also Hutnyk, this volume). The critical edge of politics is thus potentially displaced into networking, critique, art, even play without altering the enframing representational, economic and political structures (see Schecter and Hutnyk, this volume). Political participation may be possible on a much greater scale than ever before and no longer confined to the structures of the nation state, but it is equally and simultaneously much more effectively deflected, absorbed by the ecology of the representational and symbolic systems.

With changes in the imagined nature of belonging, in forms of participation, and in forms of symbolic production come corresponding shifts in the nature of political power, and its relationship to nations, regions and markets. It is evident that not all these changes – not even perhaps the preponderance of them – can be laid at the door of new technologies of mediation, information and communication. Such important determinants as increasing social inequality within states, environmental degradation, asset transfers, armed conflict, failed states, poverty and immiseration have their origins elsewhere in proximate and long-running structural relations. However, the changing nature of modes of belonging, the discourses and ideas of the local and the global, the indigenous and the transnational are all the product of a re-imagining of connections, identities and locations that owe much to the cultural forms and structures within which they are possible. The current phase of globalisation – contrary to the views of many critics – does much to promote nationalism because of the manner in which neoliberal discourses underpinning strategies for economic growth figure the nation as a competitive player in a world market, seeking to establish the best possible climate for doing business. Cultural nationalism is an important part of a global struggle for position (Harvey, 2005: 84–86;