Globalization, consumption and development

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This conference explores the connection between two dominant features of the world today – globalization and consumption – and seeks to interpret their interplay from a perspective of development. Our approach is interdisciplinary, and our delegates hail from such diverse fields as the sociology of development, development economics, anthropology, history, ethnic studies, media studies, cultural studies and religious studies. The conference has an anthropological slant in that one of our aims is to understand the experiences, conceptions, actions and interactions of actors in local and regional contexts in Africa, Asia and Latin America by situating these local and regional contexts in the wider, ultimately, global context. We realize, of course, that for an understanding of that global context in itself more is required than the extrapolation of local and regional case studies, and we expect our non-anthropological delegates to help us fill in those aspects. Yet, at the same time, that global context remains an empty abstraction unless mediated and translated towards concrete settings where we can discern concrete actors.

The three catchwords of the conference make for three pairs: globalization and consumption, globalization and development, consumption and development. Each of these pairs conjures up a world of connections and images, but they are not all equally familiar and obvious. Let us first briefly define the youngest catchword among our three – globalization – as the social (including economic, political, cultural and religious) effects of dramatic advances in communication technology. Given the globular shape of the earth, even fairly rudimentary communication technologies of earlier millennia (those of the footpath, the hand-written text, the horse and camel as mounts, the sailing boat) have given rise to early forms of proto-globalization: globalizing political projects such as the Akkadian, Assyrian, Roman, Chinese empires; globalizing religious projects such as Christianity and Islam; globalizing intellectual projects such as the emergence and spread of philosophy and science. However, in the second half of the twentieth

century, communication technologies have advanced so dramatically as to reduce the costs of time and place to nearly zero. This has produced massive qualitative changes in the world at large – changes for which the term globalization in the narrower sense of the word is appropriate.

GLOBALIZATION AND CONSUMPTION

The most obvious pair of themes is probably globalization and consumption, reminding us of the fact that in the world today it is as consumers, far more than as producers, that individual actors position themselves vis-à-vis the worldwide stream of manufactured goods, information, ideas and images that the dramatic increase in means of communication (both physical and electronic) in the course of the second half of this century has made available, right down to the very peripheries of the earth. Apparently, sub-Saharan Africa with its, roughly, 60 per cent agricultural producers occupies an exceptional position in this overall set-up. Yet stagnant production has relegated more and more of Africa's poor to the status of consumers of purchased foodstuffs. Meanwhile, in the course of the last decade, the opening up of African markets under Structural Adjustment Programmes has meant, if not active and massive consumption, then at least potential and frustrated desire to consume many manufactured items besides food.

On the general issue of globalization and consumption, the essential point to explore during our conference is that this apparently global flow, this apparently unchecked play of worldwide market forces, is in fact neither ubiquitous nor unimpeded, nor does it produce sheer uniformity.

One of the most important ideas coined in the first half of the twentieth century has been that of the plurality of discrete, equivalent human cultures. This presupposes that social meaning (as distinct from individual idiosyncrasy and delusion) is created by a process of localization, in the course of which a set of people, through their converging interactions, create a collective identity underpinned by meanings peculiar to them as a social group. In the process they raise around themselves both conceptual and interactional boundaries so as to protect the locus of meaning and identity which organizes their experience and justifies their actions. In the articulation of such boundaries, *objects* tend to play a dominant role as *potential items of consumption and elements in a lifestyle*. One positions oneself – for instance, as a member of the urban middle class – by a certain type of house, furniture, clothing, etc.; one identifies – for instance, as a member of an Independent African church – by the purchase of a church uniform, by participation in particular types of services, by making particular donations, and by rejecting other specific forms of consumption (such as alcohol and tobacco, and various other taboos on food and dress).

The intrusion into this set-up of a global flow of potential consumption items in principle disrupts the loosely bounded localities of meaning and identity hitherto in existence. On first view, it may be supposed to produce chaos and meaninglessness and (by analogy to the products it brings along) a temptation towards uniformity destructive of identity. But, in actual fact, little of the sort turns out to happen. The new objects are co-opted into pre-existing, or more typically new,

identities, within which they acquire new localized meanings; thus their flow is no longer unimpeded, and instead of creating uniformity, brings about eddies of new identities hitherto unpredicted.

In many cases, the global flow of new objects is imagined rather than real anyway, since many actors, especially in the South, lack the effective means to acquire any of the globally mediated manufactured objects, and instead must creatively make shift with dreams and local imitations – with *lécher la fenêtre* (Mbembe) – impotently and insolvently staring at the shop windows.

Meanwhile we have to appreciate that the globalization process implies a trend towards commodification which is manifested, not only with respect to new manufactured products coming from the outside, but also with regard to locally available aspects of culture – whose value is increasingly defined, not by reference to time-honoured local cosmologies and social practices in the fields of ceremonial exchange, kinship, ritual, etc., but by being drawn into a market context, where all these historic (traditional) local cultural forms have to compete with the actors' increasing commitment to individual and household consumption.

Among the central research questions in this field are the organizational and conceptual conditions under which new identities emerge and consolidate themselves: the transformations which practices, conceptualizations and meanings surrounding objects undergo in the process, the ways in which this gives rise to new definitions of the person, of space and of time, new inequalities, and a dramatically widening horizon of reference, mimesis and commitment within which the person relates to the world.

GLOBALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

From a successful local strategy – initially in the North Atlantic and then in Japan – to industrialize economies and to create the affluent consumers that keep those economies going, development has primarily become a framework within which to organize North–South relations. For current development thinking, globalization means at least two things: development increasingly situates itself in a context largely determined by processes of globalization; and, as a result, development in itself has increasingly taken on globalizing features.

Development as increasingly situated within a globalizing context

In recent development thinking, the earlier hegemony of the theory of development economics has largely given way to an ideology of development in terms of neo-liberal emphasis on the market and on competition. Whereas in earlier decades developing countries had a choice between capitalist and socialist blueprints, the demise of communism is interpreted as a victory which has left neo-liberalism as the sole economic alternative. Additionally, greatly increased attention to local cultural factors in development thinking has tried to reveal how development – now conceived in terms of the free flow of market forces – can be facilitated by good governance and by the curbing of local cultural practices such as patronage. Such shifts in development objectives in recent decades, far from

being a merely fashionable rotation of paradigms, bear witness to the fact that development thinking takes place in the context of globalizing processes and their effects on the local scene in African, Asian and Latin American contexts.

The effective power of nation-states in the South and East has been surrendered to globalizing market forces (making for unprecedented flows of capital and international labour) which cannot be contained within the boundaries of the nation-state. In the face of these market forces, nation-states are increasingly incapable of preventing the demolition of the natural environment. They are equally unable to stay such ethnic and religious conflicts as are inherent in any complex society. Ethnic and religious conflicts have also internationalized and have acquired logistic and military resources in a global market, thereby dramatically enhancing the scope and intensity of their violence. As I said above, Islam and Christianity have been (proto-)globalizing projects from their outset in the first millennium CE; however, in the most recent decades the spread of Islamic and Christian fundamentalism has been greatly facilitated by advances in communication technology, in relation to which these fundamentalisms situate themselves in two further ways in the globalization process. They offer retreats within enclaves of identity and meaning against the chaotic outside of uncontrolled global flow; and they offer such retreats particularly to those who, as the urban poor, as unemployed youths, are the most conspicuous victims of the free play of global market forces. Subjected to increasing impoverishment, these victims may well experience globally mediated images of consumption, but they are more than ever frustrated from fulfilling the proffered goal of actual consumption. Meanwhile these social and political processes have changed the very texture of development thinking.

Development as an increasingly globalizing project

Since World War II, development has constituted one of the most conspicuous globalization projects in the world today – global in the sense that it sought to impose effectively upon all local peripheries the same universalist logic of incorporation, participation and rationalization that had produced the viable economies of the North Atlantic and Japan. As a movement of concern and intervention, development has spanned the globe. In doing so, it has had to make full use of a state-of-the-art technology of communication, management and control.

However, under recent conditions of globalization, in the narrower sense of the word, significant shifts have taken place in development thinking. Of course, the principal objective of poverty alleviation has not been abandoned, but the framework in which the effects desired of intervention are defined and assessed has expanded to reach worldwide dimensions. The familiar image of local development projects aiming to produce a specifically local effect of increased production (albeit through the application of universalist concepts and theories) has given way to an emphasis on worldwide objectives that are no longer predominantly formulated in production terms. Sustainable development today means nothing less than an appeal to mankind's shared stewardship of the earth as far as natural resources are concerned. This stewardship is explicitly situated in a

context of the containment of ethnic and religious conflict at a supranational, continental and intercontinental scale. Through Structural Adjustment Programmes, impediments to the free flow of global market forces are removed. Even ecological concerns may be expressed in this idiom – for instance, in terms of ecological swaps of forest conservation against a reduced debt load. In a similar conditional manner, the globalized concern for human rights is appended to North–South development discourse, as may be the staying of religious and ethnic fundamentalisms and support for cultural diversity. The interests of the entire world (and therefore, by implication, also those of the North) have come to dominate development thinking to such an extent that it is no exaggeration to speak of globalization as having captured development.

Under the sub-theme of globalization and development, therefore, obvious topics for research include: exploring the largely uncharted implications of the nature of development as a globalizing project and as an endeavour caught in globalization; and defining, on the basis of profound descriptive, historical and comparative research, recent transformations in structures of conflict, violence, the state, the market, identity, ethnicity, fundamentalism, in order to feed and to critically assess development strategies and their implementation. Broad and ambitious as this research agenda is, many of its topics do overlap within the present conference; others are pursued in other contexts in which many of our delegates also participate.

Given the convergence in topics and agendas between development planners and current academic research on globalization in Africa, Asia and Latin America, what we now need most urgently is a serious dialogue, a constructive exchange of views based on proper knowledge and appreciation of the respective positions, specific procedures and working routines, and structural constraints, on either side.

Consumption and development: implications in the cultural domain

Macro-economics (including development economics) has always concentrated on identifying the conditions for consumption and, even while glossing over distribution, has tended to consider consumption as the self-evident, relatively uninteresting, tailpiece of the economic process; as if consumption exists to attain – to the economists' relief – the condition under which production can continue. Insofar as development thinking has been dominated by economic theory, it is correspondingly hard to make meaningful pronouncements with regard to our third and final pair of concepts. However, this is somewhat easier within a development philosophy that, in the 1980s, has discovered culture, and within the framework of a conference concentrating on the effects of new modes of global consumption upon culture and identity.

From a perspective both of globalization and of current ethnicity studies, cultures are no longer to be considered as bounded, self-contained, distinct entities encompassing entire societies. Today the academic researcher of culture would raise all sorts of questions with regard to the emerging development discourse on culture. Ironically, we have become somewhat less prone to put culture on a pedestal, less inclined now than in the heyday of cultural relativism to advocate a

total, unconditional respect for the self-staged claims of identity and authenticity of vocal cultural actors in the world scene. On the contrary, we might be inclined to stress, for instance:

- the extent to which tradition is invented under elite instigation (so that what poses as time-honoured, uncompromised, authentic culture is more often than not recently remodelled optional folklore);

- the degree of contemporary cultural convergence under the impact of globally mediated models and images, and the selective nature of such convergence both in terms of cultural items and of sections of the population involved;

- the transformation (partly in emulation of, but as often in reaction to, a global trend to manufactured uniformity) of pre-existing local cultural idioms, and the emergence of new cultural idioms. These are no longer coterminous with local, regional or national societies, but are typically found in distinct subgroups in a bid to create new identities and new boundaries to stay the global flow and to create new meaning informed by transformations of both local meaning and the globally mediated meaning of a very different provenance.

CONCLUSION

As I have argued, and as the conference will elaborate, current processes of cultural reorientation in the South and East are intimately linked to consumption, including the subjective frustration of consumption. Consumption – and the attainment of income levels by specific individuals, households, and social groups that will enable them to engage in more than mere virtual or symbolic consumption (e.g. ethnic and religious fundamentalism) – is the necessary implication of a development discourse aiming to alleviate poverty. Recent anthropological work has demonstrated that an understanding of current shifts in consumption in the South and East requires the joint efforts of macro-economics, development sociology and an anthropology geared (more than was the case in the 1970s and 1980s) to symbolic processes and material culture. Our conference will explore the great extent to which shifts in consumption are relevant for development, and in this exploration will lie its particular significance to development planners.

The objective of the current series of EIDOS conferences ('The retreat from the real') has been to formulate a constructive critique of development thinking and practices by investigating patterns of sustained unreality, both in the development field, and in the South and East settings where development practices concentrate. Assessing the virtualities (but also the realities and achievements) of consumption and cultural production in the South, with a critique (but also intellectual support) of development thinking on these topics, the agenda of this conference aims to live up to the original objectives of the EIDOS series initiators, both in academia and in the planning field. Dialogue and cross-fertilization have been prominent among those objectives, and my hope on behalf of the convenors is that the present conference will play its part in extending the constructive forms of exchange that have been a feature of the series.

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