

Globalized Culture, Consumption and Identity

Ruediger John

»Culture is a collective process of ascribing values generated by cognition. When we behold a thing or idea, we do nothing less than construct an image of it in our minds that is in tune with our way of seeing things. The supposed appreciation of the world around us is always simultaneously a display of our ignorance.« (D. Granosalis)

Searching for identity through consumption

The modern search for identity is based to a great extent on the acquisition of cultural codes. Due to a surge in the global supply of symbols that serve as substituting signifiers and are reinforced by the constant stimulation of our affects through the media, the consumer creates for him or herself a patchwork identity, made up of fragments stemming from a host of differing cultures. And yet decorating the self with code elements does not mean that culture-specific societal references have been internalized to the point of us feeling a commitment to a given culture. One example is the recent trend in our latitudes of marking the body with so-called „tribal tattoos.“ Such a tattoo does not bring us any closer to the Maori culture, or any other culture, for that matter. Instead, such a tattoo expresses our desire of returning to the archaic and the unconditional.

One does not simply become an integral part of a given culture, but rather trends and fads decide on the validity of a person and give proof that one is capable of becoming integrated as an individual. At first glance, this seems to be the more agreeable option. Who wants to cling, or even feel dependent on one thing or idea in our fast-paced, resilient world: even if we truly are dependent. In fact, we are recipients, members of consumer target groups, who perform quasi-religious acts of substitution in the name of cultural self-conception.

At the same time, the very act of searching for identity has turned into one of pseudo-individualizing

in the desperate attempt of being special and unique. And this, in spite of the fact that all participants in the markets have the exact same palette of products and symbols to choose from. This is where dynamism and resilience come into play, serving as important differentiating and eligibility markers. Forecasting trends, or even setting them, or discovering something exotic is more important than recognizing their levels of meaning and significance within a given social context. Affluent societies produce pseudo-hybrids: style nomads. Also the so-called counter-culture (especially popular culture) which serves us with its many antitheses and is marked by non-conformist behavior, functions as an engine with a mediating nature in regard to identity formation within the economic realm. And it is through this phenomenon that the consumer has internalized a crucial part of the neoliberal value framework, as well as simultaneously seriously maimed the late 18th century revolutionary cry for personal freedom.

Postindustrial societies are characterized by their mode of production: it has gone from one based on need to an economy based on want. That is to say that their economies are no longer optimized to fulfill existential needs, but rather to efficiently detect, produce and satisfy consumer wants, since the basic needs of their citizens have already been met. Having taken this approach, economic strategies have gained a special influence on cultural change, role playing patterns and rituals, as well as on how meaning and significance are ascribed. The fetish nature of brands and logos is a telling example of this.

Internationalization

At the same time, economic internationalization exports these standards, which are equal to that of a cultural imperialism, especially to nations and cultures that have already been hurt by colonialism. This often causes even greater dependence, since it, on the one hand, leads to an asymmetry in the markets and, on the other hand, because rigid power relations set in: a neocolonial process, so to speak. Big development projects, for instance, such as those coordinated by the World Bank are often nothing more but a diversion of the subsidies granted to receiving countries to the benefit of the economies of the giving countries. They fail to take the specific dynamics of the countries on the receiving end into account, or assess the kind of impact they have on them. Really sustaining developmental aid to support the domestic economic development, such as granting micro-loans, is rare: this kind of aid would actually help lead the receiving countries to independence.

Free Trade

The doctrine which asserts that free trade ultimately will lead to wealth from which everyone will benefit, fails to contend that only a cohesive, secure and legal framework -- which is based on social development -- is capable, under the control of law, of equalizing power relations. Furthermore, emerging markets and economically weak nations have never been able to develop by immediately switching to a free market. It is ensued only through balanced protectionist policies and through the strengthening of their domestic markets. The United States and China have done this, and continue to do so. As have Ireland, in Europe, and up into the 1980s, this was to a great extent the case in Japan.

Economized Globalization

Globalized competition is not open and not equal. The national trade barriers set by powerful nations deny emerging nations market access, especially those countries whose chief commodities are agricultural or raw-materials. The sweatshop conditions that can be seen in the textile industry in Bangladesh, for example, are a result of one-sided developmental aid

to this industry, coupled with cost-efficient-oriented outsourcing projects initialized by Western corporations. And in China, the devastating effects on the environment, and the lacking labor protection laws persist because the commodities produced there for export are not subject to the same environmental and ethical codes which are enforced in central Europe. The early capitalistic feudal structures that can be seen in India are supported by two fatal supplements: the caste system and an elite that has been educated internationally.

Since legal order within societies is defined on a state level, multinational corporations use their mobility to evade balancing legal and ethical responsibilities. In addition, international trade transactions are not regulated in a way so that many or even everyone can participate equally, but rather are governed by processes of monopoly formation, a phenomenon which Adam Smith and John Maynard Keynes, often misappropriated as leaders of neoliberal aims, have called great dangers and „an evil“. Companies and persons that are mobile and less anchored to a nation state make greater (short-term) profits than those with fixed locations of business. Under such circumstances, capital has the greatest degree of mobility and its flow requires the least amount of self-liability in regard to ensuring economic and ecologic sustainability and social responsibility. This is also due to the fact that capital is perceived as dematerialized property and productive force *sui generis*. Shareholders do not feel like property owners with obligations, but like capital lenders in a permanent state of transit.

Globalization and Community

The process of globalization does not induce development and security of personal freedom and safety, nor does not define its value system nationally, yet still remain binding. It also does not promote the sanctioning power of international law to govern human behavior. On the contrary, those developments which are shaped by culture and need to be addressed politically lag behind those of an economical and technological nature.

The lack of decisive collaboration within large political cultural areas and nation-states in regard to their obligation to represent the interests within a given community blocks the pursuit of beneficial outcomes along three dimensions: economic, social

and environmental parameters (triple bottom line), and hinders the creation of a foundation upon which sustainable and resource-conscious assessments can be made. The involvement of political and economic decision-making structures supports the short-term-oriented and one-sidedness of growth paradigms, since it takes a reductionistic view of economic actions.

At the same time, consumer behavior focused on the particular interests of each individual, following the ideology that everyone has the right to own without being required to integrate, hinders that value-based conduct can become a principle within a cultural context. Commercial interests emphasize that each and every consumer is particular and autonomous, but at the same time suggests just how powerless the individual is and how limited his or her freedom of choice is: despite the fact that humanity once set out to achieve freedom. More often than not, this type of dependence is not perceived as such, since people are conditioned to be content with conforming to cultural codes as a means of expressing their socially compatible roles.

When, for instance, an investment banker participating in the World Economic Forum announces, »If you have four good friends and like what you do, it doesn't matter where you live«, he expresses, first and foremost, just how limited his neoliberal understanding of community and culture really is, although his own identity has been shaped by an intact community with collective memory and traditions, such as a legal and educational system, from which he has benefited. If everyone were to draw solely on his or her circle of friends and never develop a feeling of responsibility for his or her social environment, content with merely personal business successes, there would be no modern, innovative, society balancing the individual risks and a division of labor serving as a cultural community: at best, clan-like structures with ever-changing loyalties would evolve.

Cultural crisis

Globalization is not the problem as such, in the same way that capitalistic patterns of practice are not either. The real problem is that cultures lack the strength to cultivate and enforce values outside of economic norms and widen their transnational scope successfully. Globalization enhances a cultural crisis. „Culture“ is not referred to here as a mere cultural

branch, which offers an array of entertainment from pure spectacle to modern free time pleasures. Simply put, culture is a society-dependent, tradition-based, cognitive and value-building ritual and reflection canon. It creates a commitment (in attitude and behavior) to values as *conditio sine qua non* in regards to ethics and morals, and laws and regulations ensue. In individuals, it also creates the cognitive ability in dealing with complexity, which is essential to the existential and personal search for identity and freedom: both are crucial requirements for democracy.

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