Unpacking Cultural Divides

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Abstract

This text is based on an introductory Keynote delivered by the author for a Plenary panel of Nordic researchers that took place during the 2008 'Media and Global Divides' conference. Designed to provide an international stage-setting context for a range of Nordic perspectives, the text first deconstructs the notions of 'global' and 'divide'. It then takes up 'global divides' that are cultural in nature, referring principally to 'divide'-related notions analyzed by various contributors to the two published volumes of the *Cultures and Globalization Series*, of which the author is co-editor. Finally, it seeks to displace the 'divide' metaphor, by attending to the complex relations of competition and collaboration that link different centres of cultural production, e.g., the spatial dynamics of film and television production as explored by Michael Curtin in the recently published second volume of the *Series* entitled *The Cultural Economy*.

Keywords: cultural conflict; identity politics; cultural and media imperialism; film and television; media capital.

Introduction

As a preliminary to this introductory exploration of the notion of 'cultural' divides, I propose to briefly unpack the terms of debate. At this conference – 'Media and Global Divides' – the master term is 'global divides'. How might we parse this double-headed expression? What is the '*global*'? Does the term refer simply to phenomena encountered everywhere in the world? Or to phenomena that dominate the planet specifically because of the time-space compression that we call globalization? Or is the 'global' a higher level of overarching organization and process, a new whole at the planetary level that is more than the sum of its parts, endowed with an entelechy of its own?

And what do we mean by 'divides'? Are these, as in the original etymological meaning of the word, mere dividing points or lines? Or watersheds? Or disjunctures? Is a 'divide' something more than that: a disagreement, a conflict of interests, a schism? Or does the term connote a gross imbalance of power, a major asymmetry of access, a marked pattern of injustice, a glaring inequality of means? Should we perhaps, as Cees Hamelink read it in his James Halloran Memorial lecture, see the notion in a totally different frame of reference, as a deeply rooted dichotomy of mind-sets: between, as he put it, the spirit of absolutism and that of self-reflexivity?

We tend to deploy all of these senses, and more, depending on the context and the situation. Perhaps we do this simply because both 'global' and 'divide' have joined the ranks of those floating signifiers that are now rife in the discourses of the social sciences

and the humanities. But in fact there is also a polysemy of meanings that is inherent in the issues involved; different disciplines and problematics may well have their own preferred meanings.

Unfortunately, this state of affairs advances neither analytical rigour nor trans-disciplinary communication… Be that as it may, for the purposes of the *Cultures and Globalization Series* we read the notion of a 'divide' in the following two ways:

1. As a predicament common to all societies, whether it obtains within nation-states or between groups of societies thought to belong to particular geocultural regions or thought to display patterns of commonality or sameness.

2. As oppositions or asymmetries at the level of the global ecumene, e.g. North-South, East-West, Islam-the West…

In both cases, our work for the *Series* strongly suggests that we ought to conceptualize the 'divides' in more complex and nuanced ways than has tended to be the case so far.

That said by way of introduction, I shall now briefly describe the project and review some divide-relevant issues that emerged from the 2007 volume on *Conflicts and Tensions* and the 2008 volume on *The Cultural Economy* (Anheier and Isar 2007; 2008).

The 'Cultures and Globalization' Series

Our point of departure of the project was that culture, its forms of creation, presentation and preservation, are broadly and deeply affected by globalization and in turn impact upon it — but in ways that are inadequately understood. Mapping the interactions between culture and globalization is the principal object of the *Series*.[1] Our purpose in so doing is threefold: i) to *analyze* cultural transformations and their economic, social and political implications (and vice-versa); ii) to provide a *platform* for new perspectives in accessible, policy-relevant ways and iii) to substantiate these new perspectives empirically and *quantitative data* thereon in innovative ways. The project is academy-based, but also welcomes journalists, artists, and public intellectuals as contributors; its scope is truly international and multi-disciplinary; it calls on established as well as younger scholars; and it is entirely foundation-supported, notably by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, the Compagnia di San Paolo, the J. Paul Getty Trust, the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

Each volume consists of *overview essays* resulting from fresh research on key issues and trends, followed by *analytical chapters* and *case studies* on particular regions, topics, or fields. A distinct and major segment of each volume is the data section of *indicator suites* on cultural phenomena, trends, events, etc. all presented through very sophisticated and user-friendly information graphic methods. Each volume is also prepared in the light of a conceptual framework, a set of lines of inquiry that are proposed to contributors in advance; the latter are also brought together at an 'authors' meeting' organized midway through the writing process with a view to achieving a degree of coherence and cross-fertilisation rare in most collective volumes.

Conflicts and Tensions

The conflicts and tensions that underly the 'divide' notion in the cultural realm were

the focus of the inaugural volume of the *Series* published in 2007. Strong anxieties lurk behind much of the present-day concern for culture understood in its multiple senses, but particularly in the ways of life or 'culture as identity' meaning (Eagleton 2000) in relation to globalization. The specter of conflict is ever-present: the cultural dimensions of conflict on the one hand, and the conflictual dimensions of culture on the other or, to put it differently, how any kind of group conflict can be 'culturalized' and how culture itself can become a party to the confrontation between particularisms. This connection between the two is a corollary of Appadurai's 'culturalism': "the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics" (1996, p. 15) – by different agents and agencies, by ideologues of many different types and persuasion. This applies in particular to the question of cultural identities, both individual and collective, and to their forms of expression, maintenance, representation, recognition, and renewal.

In this sense, then, the volume is about the interplay between globalization and 'identity politics' in both local and global arenas. Understandably, several contributors address the issues against the now unavoidable backdrop of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis, which sees cultural difference as the principal ground for divergences that will lead inevitably, if not addressed, to violent conflict. 'Globalization' was the second term of our binomial.[2] We therefore asked contributors to foreground the interactions between the forces of globalization and conflicts or tensions that they could understand as being 'cultural' in one way or another, or at least linked to cultural factors, whether these conflicts or tensions are global or trans-national in their scope, cutting across geo-cultural regions, or whether they arise within nations – while bearing in mind our preference for the global or transnational articulation of these phenomena. We also invited our authors to examine two particular facets of culture-related conflict: i) how conflicts generated by globalization in other areas come to occupy a 'cultural' terrain and ii) how and why the cultural dimension itself may have its own inbuilt conflict and tension dynamics that might be either amplified or suppressed by globalization processes. Having set out the above conceptual framework and lines of inquiry, the more specific questions we asked contributors to address included the following. When is conflict 'cultural'? Is culture agent or pawn in a range of conflictual situations? When and how do economic and/or political conflicts occupy a 'cultural' terrain? When does the cultural dimension itself have its own inbuilt conflict dynamics? How are conflicts and tensions either amplified or mitigated by globalization processes?

Now obviously the 40 different authors approached these issues in hugely different ways; the point here is not to capture this variegation but to share a selection of findings that speak to the notion of cultural conflicts as 'divides'. In that spirit, one could cite the way in which the processes of liberalization ('state shrinking') accompanying globalization are weakening the capacity of public institutions to head off and/or manage culture-related conflicts in multi-ethnic societies. There are winners and losers, as different ethnic groups suffer or gain disproportionately; those with grievances (real or imagined) are easily instrumentalized here by 'cultural entrepreneurs' (Crawford 2007), in other words individuals or agencies that politicize cultural identity for political or economic gain.

I could also cite a range of 'fault lines' explored. For example, the asymmetric relationships between 'North' and 'South' that implicitly favor the universalization of

western paradigms, stifle local production of culture, language, and memory, and thereby create considerable conflict potential. Or the divide between the 'West' and the 'Arab World', based upon still largely unaddressed historical traumas that become increasingly vulnerable to memory wars, reinforced by double standards on both sides. Or the fault lines with Islam, generated by conflict-saturated discourse about the meaning and practice of the religion itself that has in turn led to acute tensions both within the Islamic *umma* and with the belief structures of other religions…

Are cultural conflicts really 'cultural', we asked as well? Culture has its own dynamic, yet is embedded in economic, social and power relations; the 'cultural' is deployed in varying combinations with other societal dynamics, and what matters is the nature of these combinations, how they are nurtured or misused… Needless to say, the 'clash of civilization' thesis is also tackled in the volume, as the paradigmatic instance of a divide constructed at the global level. Our critique confirms the judgment already made by others such as Said that the thesis reifies and essentializes an abstract concept: 'civilization'. In point of fact, most culture-related conflicts occur *within* rather than *between* civilizations. Yet the 'clash' paradigm has enjoyed far greater currency than it deserves; after 9/11 it has been resuscitated and politicized.

The Cultural Economy

In the 2008 volume, some 46 authors from 21 different countries explore the 'cultural economy', understood as the manifold forms of economic activity that produce outputs with significant aesthetic or semiotic content, or symbolic outputs. And they tackle framing questions such as the following. How does globalization affect the production, distribution and consumption of cultural goods and services? How does commodification impact upon notions of cultural value? How are the relationships between cultural creators, producers and consumers being modified? How vibrant is the cultural economy in different countries and regions of the world? What are the policy challenges that societies face in this arena? While answering such questions, several contributors have explored 'divides' of ownership, agency and voice – divides that are at once 'global' because they occur between world regions such as North and South, or East and West, and 'local', by which I mean within regions or nations. While globalization has vastly extended the market reach and power of cultural producers in many cases, it has reduced them in many others.

Hence the vigorous international debate on trade in cultural goods and services. Hence also the advocacy of such protocols as Open Knowledge, Open Archives, Open Access, Open Source. But given the power and reach of private interests in global capitalism, however, this advocacy is unlikely to be translated into practice. Instead, what may be expected is a continuing proliferation of small and micro-enterprises with the capacity to contest diverse markets through the enabling powers of new production and distribution technologies (Scott 2008). This is unlikely to challenge the power of large multinational corporations in the cultural economy, but these entities will find themselves to an ever increasing degree embedded in a long-tailed distribution made up of myriad small-scale niche producers.

We have a predilection for the analytical insights of cultural and economic and cultural geography; for this reason, patterns of *spatial concentration and dispersion* in

cultural production, as explored by Michael Curtin, Andy Pratt and Allen Scott (2008) are foregrounded in the volume. These authors have studied the ways in which a growing number of cultural-products agglomerations is accompanied by a growing differentiation of outputs, as individual centers struggle to mobilize their place-specific competitive advantages and as they build up reputations for particular kinds of product designs and forms of semiotic expression. And in this context there are two key factors – the geographic diversification of productive efforts and the socio-spatial fragmentation of demand – that both seem to resist the processes through which certain producers and/or agglomerations establish monopoly powers in certain global market segments. Hence, for Allen Scott,

> globalization appears less and less to be resulting in a pattern of mass cultural uniformity. To the contrary, we seem to entering an era where cultural production is becoming increasingly polycentric and polysemic. The most evident expression of this state of affairs is the steady emergence of a world-wide mosaic of cultural production centers tied together in complex relations of competition and collaboration. (2008: 321)

Film and Television: The Persisting Spatial Dynamics

These 'complex relations of competition and collaboration' are a force field in which the 'divide' metaphor necessarily has less purchase. They oblige us also to look afresh at the old 'media imperialism' critique, whose explanatory value has already been challenged on several counts. Because it failed to account for the diverse ways in which audiences make use of foreign media. Because it overlooked the growing influence of domestic media producers and failed to acknowledge the increasing prominence of transnational media production centers in cities such as Mumbai, Hong Kong, São Paulo or Lagos. Because it focused on national cinemas and national broadcasting systems, paying little attention to the increasingly complex and trans-border circulations of popular media. Because it privileged the United States as a central and organizing actor in the international media economy.

Instead of dominant power emanating from a single source, we see complex and contingent forces and flows at work in a multi-centric cultural economy, as the number of media producers, distributors, and consumers has grown dramatically, first in Europe and then in Asia, with China and India together adding almost two billion new viewers. These trends have been particularly well analyzed by Michael Curtin in his chapter entitled 'Spatial Dynamics of Film and Television' (2008: 215-226), and therefore I should like now to dip extensively into his analysis.

Although powerful global media conglomerates were active contributors to these forces and flows, Curtin observes, local, national, and regional media firms expanded rapidly as well. In India, Rupert Murdoch's Star TV presumed to displace the government's television monopoly but found itself beleaguered in turn by dozens of new indigenous competitors, many of them telecasting in one of the many sub-continental languages, all of them commercially driven. As a result, Star TV was forced to localize its programming and institutional practices, so as to adapt to competitive forces on the ground. In many other instances, global media corporations have had to adapt to local

conditions at the very same time that local film and television enterprises have become more globalized in their perspectives and practices. Rather than exhibiting patterns of domination and subordination, media institutions now appear to be responding to the push-pull dynamic of globalization, as increasing connectivity inspires significant changes in textual and institutional practices.

Hence the turn away from the idea of Western hegemony and towards the ways in which a larger set of processes operate trans-locally and interactively. In other words, rather than being an arena of centralized power, the world's increasingly interconnected media environment is more and more the outcome of messy and complicated interactions. These processes, observes Curtin, have led to the use of such adjectives as fractal, disjunctive, or rhizomatic to characterize a complex terrain of textual circulation, reception, and appropriation. Yet even though these adjectives connote ruptures, screen industries have nevertheless followed fairly consistent patterns of operation for almost a century. The amount of production may have increased dramatically and the patterns of circulation may have grown much more complex, but the *spatial dynamics of media capital* have remained fairly consistent. Michael Curtin has catalogued three features of these dynamics: 1) the logic of accumulation; 2) trajectories of creative migration and 3) forces of socio-cultural variation. It is to these that I now turn.

The Logic of Accumulation

The logic of accumulation presents at one and the same time the *centripetal* tendencies in the sphere of production and the *centrifugal* tendencies in distribution that Marx had in mind when he predicted that capital must 'annihilate space with time' if it is to overcome barriers to accumulation. Even though a film or TV company may be founded with the aim of serving particular national cultures or local markets, it must at some point re-deploy its creative resources and reshape its terrain of operations if it is to survive competition and enhance profitability. The well-known history of the American cinema provides an instructive example of these tendencies. Similar patterns emerged in India, where big studios emerged in the Bombay area in the 1930s. In Chinese cinema as well, transnational cinema circuits were firmly in place by the thirties, but the mode of production was initially more dispersed. During the post-World War II era, as prosperity returned to the industry, both Cathay and Shaw Brothers established integrated production operations in Hong Kong that rivaled the scope and productivity of their American counterparts. This capital-intensive factory model prevailed across the world, but unlike the auto or steel industries, filmmaking was in the business of distinctive *prototypes* rather than producing batches of products with interchangeable parts. Each commodity was relatively unique, even if production routines grew increasingly standardized and even if the films were intended for mass audiences.

Trajectories of Creative Migration

The second feature of these spatial dynamics, argues Curtin, is made up of trajectories of *creative migration:* audiovisual industries are especially reliant on creativity as a core resource. Recurring demand for new prototypes requires pools of labor that are self-consciously motivated by aesthetic innovation as well as market considerations. Attracting and managing talent is one of the most difficult challenges that screen pro-

ducers confront and they must also maintain access to reservoirs of specialized labor that replenish themselves on a regular basis. While media companies tend to cluster in particular cities, it is not just market forces, but also patterns of *creative migration* that come into at play – as centripetal tendencies that accentuate the centripetal logic of production.

Why do Hollywood, Mumbai, and Hong Kong continue to act as magnets for cultural labor, asks Curtin? He finds the answer in the way the Post-Fordist mode of production encourages and sustains the agglomeration of creative labor because constant changes in product output require frequent transactions between contractors, subcontractors, and creative talent. This encourages studios to employ *local* subcontractors and talent because proximity allows directors and managers to oversee outsourced creative labor and to make changes more easily and more frequently. As for the workers, for obvious reasons they cluster where studios and subcontracting firms are based. What seems to be distinctive today is the ways in which the centripetal logic of capitalist production has been married to the equally centripetal trajectories of creative migration, engendering the rise of several competing media capitals that are centers of creative migration in their own right.

Forces of Socio-Cultural Variation

Because cities such as Hollywood, Mumbai, and Hong Kong lie across significant cultural divides from each other, producers have been able to sustain distinctive product lines and survive the onslaught of distant competitors thanks to *forces of socio-cultural variation.* National and local institutions have been and remain significant actors despite the spatial tendencies of production and distribution. The early years of cinema were an exception because the logic of media capital unfolded relatively unimpeded by national regulation, but as the popularity of Hollywood narratives increased, many countries established policies to counter the growing influence of this new commodity form. By the 1920s, opinion leaders and politicians across the world began to grow wary of Hollywood and cultural critics began to clamor for regulation. Many countries imposed import quotas and content regulations on Hollywood films and some set up national film boards to subsidize cinema productions with national themes and talent. And at the same time, state-subsidized radio broadcasting began to provide various forms of insulation – the BBC has been the model and template here – accentuating national contours of difference in opposition to media capital's need to operate on a smooth plane of market relations worldwide. Despite a very varied and uneven record across the world, regulation of the airwaves has provided an effective way for governments to refigure the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of a capitalist regime of accumulation.

But self-conscious state policies are not the only forces that exploit socio-cultural variation. As Curtin observes, the media industries in Mumbai, Cairo, São Paulo, Bogotá or Hong Kong have also taken full advantage of social and cultural differences in their production and distribution practices. Operating across deep divides in terms of cultural inspiration and content from Hollywood et al., they have employed creative talent and cultural forms that resonate distinctively with their specific audiences. They have also made use of social networks and insider information to secure market advantages. Cultural and national pride have always been invoked in their promotional campaigns.

Conclusion

So rather than a landscape of stark divides, the spatial distribution of film and television production, together with the other developments including those I have briefly explored as well, present a multi-polar picture of success and failure, of inclusion and exclusion. And yet, while this state of affairs would tend to invalidate the simplicities of the cultural homogenization thesis, it would be wrong to conclude that globalization is bound to operate in ways that remove or reduce inequities and asymmetries. Many real divides remain. As Andy Pratt observes, *for example, "they* take on an unsurprising pattern dominated by corporate control in the North, and in cities, and a clustering around market places where consumers have high and growing disposable income' (2008: 47). These gate keeping functions include controls over (or surrender of) intellectual property rights, and distribution rights and, despite certain exceptions, seriously limit the possibility of using the developing world's strength of ownership and innovation of creative ideas. Clearly, purely market driven system of cultural supply cannot transcend these predicaments. Instead, as Scott puts it, "an energetic but still in important respects prospective cultural politics (in the sense of self-conscious contestation of the symbolic content of economic outputs) is one of the necessary conditions of enhanced democratic order in the modern world" (2008: 321).

Notes

1. Annabelle Sreberny noted perceptively in Stockholm that I chose not to unpack the term 'culture', the quintessential floating signifier. No doubt I shied away from doing so because the concept is even more entangled terminologically than the notion of 'divide' is. 'Culture' is replete with myriad differences, overlaps and nuances in meaning, as various disciplines appropriate it as their 'terrain' and in the process effectively turning into 'silos' that discourage cross-disciplinary dialogue. So let me repair that omission here. The operating definition we are using for the *Series* sees 'culture' as:

   the social construction, articulation and reception of meaning. Culture is the lived and creative experience for individuals and *a body of artifacts, symbols, texts and objects. Culture involves enactment and representation. It embraces art and art discourse, the symbolic world of meanings, the commodified output of the cultural industries as well as the spontaneous or enacted, organized or unorganized cultural expressions of everyday life, including social relations. It is constitutive of both collective and individual identity* (Anheier and Isar, 2008: 3).

2. The notion of *globalization* itself, almost as frustratingly as 'culture'' is the object of multiple theories and definitions. In the *Series*, we use the term to refer to the worldwide interconnections and interdependencies that all have deep origins in world history but today are being increasingly and ever more rapidly brought about through the movement of objects (goods, services, finance and other resources, etc.), meanings (language, symbols, knowledge) and people across regions and intercontinental space. This notion of globalization as 'time and space compression' is not a normative concept: it is neither a business buzzword, nor a tool for miracle growth, nor the result of an evil plot (Chanda 2007), but simply the global connectivity that characterizes the way we live ever more closely 'bound together' in the world.

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