The myths of cultural globalization

Two powerful scenarios dominate the public discourse about the cultural consequences of globalization. The one very common scenario represents globalization as cultural homogenization (for example Benjamin Barbers McWorld vs. Jihad). In this scenario the culturally distinct societies of the world are being overrun by globally available goods, media, ideas and institutions. In a world where people from Vienna to Sidney eat BigMacs, wear Benetton clothes, watch MTV or CNN, talk about human rights and work on their IBM computers cultural characteristics are endangered. As these commodities and ideas are mostly of western origin, globalization is perceived as westernization in disguise. The other scenario is that of cultural fragmentation and intercultural conflict (encapsulated in Huntington's *Clash of civilizations* and most recently "confirmed" by the ethnocides in Yugoslavia).

But can we really reduce the processes of cultural globalization (i.e. the process of world-wide interconnections) to these two stereotypes? What about the meaning that local people attach to globally distributed goods and ideas? Why do people drink Coca-Cola and what sense do they make of the soap operas they watch? Do they really trade in their century-old lifeworlds for the kinds of Madonna and Bill Gates? And how does the homogenization scenario fit with its rival, the imminent cultural fragmentation?

In order to gain a clearer picture of contemporary global cultural changes, we have to study cultural practices worldwide. Objectively measurable figures concerning death rates, intercultural marriages and market-shares have to be understood in their wider social context. They have to be related to specific worldviews, gender relations and the local meaning of death and wealth.

An ethnographic approach to globalization

But how does one study these intersubjective aspects of life? Many of the writings on the cultural aspects of globalization generalize from experiences gained in the West to other parts of the world. What we need instead are decentralized perspectives, ethnographic "deep descriptions" (Geertz) from local communities all over the world and combine them with the predominantly quantitative data obtained through the perspectives of economists, political scientists and others. What people say and what they actually do or mean is often a very different matter.

Good ethnography combines detailed empirical research with larger political and philosophical questions. The anthropologist, who goes into the field for an extended period of time (on average 12-18 months), attempts to take the perspective of the people he/she studies and represent his/her findings to a wider audience. The resulting ethnography is a translation, shifting between the perspective of the cultural insider and the cultural outsider (the latter will most often coincide with the scientist and his/her audience). Anthropology tries to take a holistic approach to the society in question, i.e. to overcome the artificial separation of analytical categories (such as politics, culture and economy) common to other disciplines. Single phenomena are studied in their social context and the interpenetration of different aspects of human life, of, let's say, legal propositions, worldviews, rituals and social structure are of central concern.

To gain a better understanding of the cultural aspects of globalization, some findings of the anthropological record will be introduced in the following four hypotheses.

Four hypotheses

1. Different peoples interpret globalized goods, ideas and institutions in highly diverse ways and integrate them in various ways into their own lives.

Societies don't passively give in to foreign and global influences. Instead, anthropological research has stressed the ability of societies to incorporate what might be expected to threaten them. Various strategies of dealing with foreign influences have been identified. The most prominent of these are resistance and appropriation.

Regarding resistance: The state often tries to prohibit foreign influences to enter its territory. The Iranian state doesn't allow its citizens to own satellite-dishes, France tries to protect the French language from being Anglicized and invents new French words for fast food and the internet (formule rapide and entre-reseau). But imported goods, institutions and ideas also meet resistance from social movements or certain sections of society (ranging from protest against the Miss World beauty contest in Bangalore to the "net-war" of the Zapatistas in Chaipas).

But more often than offering resistance, people incorporate and appropriate foreign influences into their lives. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has written that people often use foreign goods and ideas to become more like themselves. We see in the current anthropological literature a great variety of case studies, which demonstrate this process of appropriation.

Let's take McDonald's. McDonald's certainly is a very globalized institution, popular in over 100 countries, serving 30 million customers a day. Sociologist George Ritzer has even named a homogenization-theory after this fast-food giant: The "McDonaldization" of the world. But when you look at ethnographic studies (1) of McDonald's in East Asia or Russia, the scenario of a global homogenization looses credibility. Yes, some aspects of the rational, fast and standardized McDonald's system has been accepted in most societies and the chain has affected small but influential changes in dietary patterns. But what comes out of the field-research is that the meaning of McDonald's has been changed enormously by its various customers. Businessmen in Beijing are able to circumvent a typical Chinese dilemma: banquets in Chinese restaurants are highly competitive. People try to outdo one another by offering the most expensive dishes and beverages. It is typical for a host at a banquet to worry that customers at neighbouring tables might be enjoying better dishes, thus causing him or her to loose face. Such competition does not exist at McDonald's, where the menu is limited and the food standardized. For people without a lot of money McDonald's has become the best alternative to host a meal.

Often the success of a global good has unexpected reasons. One reason which very many people gave for eating at McDonald's were the clean and spacious toilets, which since have raised the general sanitary standards in East Asian restaurants.

Western fast-food chains have pushed a number of more traditional snack vendors out of business, but instead of leading to an Americanization of taste, it has initiated a boom of local fast-foods. In Beijing the local chain called Fast-food company has opened over 1000 outlets, which serve Chinese meals like roasted duck and dumplings. And in Moscow the Ruskoje Bistros, which sell the traditional Pirozhki as a take-away snack, draw more customers than its model and rival McDonald's.

The appropriation of global goods and ideas can be demonstrated in various spheres, from western concepts like sustainable development and Human Rights to media technology and media content. The same point applies to all these instances: the intentions of the producers (of goods or ideas) are changed by the people consuming them. This doesn't mean that people are not affected in very deep ways by imports,

they are, but it means we can't be sure in which way.

2. Globalization leads to a new cultural diversity

As a result of the increasing cultural contact a number of traditional practices, whole ways of life and worldviews disappear. Special fishing techniques of the Inuit are forgotten and it is estimated that just 10% of over 6.500 languages spoken today will survive. At the same time globality leads to the emergence of new cultural forms - a process that was coined by writers as "the periphery talks back" and points out that everywhere cultural traditions mix and create new practices and worldviews. Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz(2) uses the term creolization, connotating the creativity and richness of expression of these "cultural bastards". The term refers to cultural expressions, which don't have historical roots, but is the result of global interconnections.

More and more Individuals stress their multicultural biographies, from writers like Salman Rushdie to Tiger Woods, shooting star of the international golf sport, who calls himself "Cablinasian" to point out his ancestry in black, Indian and Asian cultures. Writers with a multicultural biography were among the first to express those changes called creolization: Authors like Hanif Kureishi, Keri Hulme or Emine Sevgi Özdamer mix languages and express in their writing the diversity and richness of their cultural influences as well as the conflicts that form part of this creolization process.

In the shadow of the much discussed "Gastarbeiter" generation, new communities like the Latinos or Afro-Germans have emerged in Germany. There is an estimated number of 400,000 Germans with black and white ancestry, who identify themselves as Afro-Germans. Latin-American born residents marry, work and mix with Germans. Ecuadorian women share their flats with German homosexual men (not to be imagined in their place of origins) or make Germans fly to Brazil to get introduced to Daime-Rituals in the amazons forest. Germans change their lifestyle equally: they get inspired by Eduardo Galliano, learn Salsa dancing and study Spanish. The Latino Community has no or very little political impact, but it is changing the German society in a fundamental and subtle way.Above that locality itself looses its importance. New transnational communities come into being. They are bound together by common interest, profession or social and cultural similarities rather than by origin or geographical closeness. The more privileged among them are businessmen or scientists, the majority is made of migrants, exile communities and refugees, who set up long-distance communication or economic links, send self-recorded tapes and commodities back and forth.

Both processes, the creolization of local societies and the formation of transnational communities, demonstrate the inadequacy of our concept of cultures as bounded and fairly static units. As a consequence of this image we often conceive of cultural change as loss. But "culture is not an attribute to be gained or lost, but (...) a process or struggle by which all peoples of the world attempt to make sense of the world."(3) The image of the world as a mosaic, consisting of clearly defined and separated single stones (the cultures) has to give way to the idea of culture as flow. The metaphor of cultural flow allows for acknowledging cultural similarities and differences irrespective of origin and geographical place.

3. The emerging Global Culture is a reference system, which organizes cultural diversity worldwide.

The emerging global culture consists of universal categories and standards by which

cultural differences become mutually intelligible and compatible. Societies all over the world are becoming on the one hand more similar to one another, on the other hand more different. Anthropologist Richard Wilk has called this new reference system "structures of common difference". By this term he refers to a new global hegemony, which is a hegemony of structure, not of contents. Global structures organize diversity. While different cultures continue to be quite distinct and varied, they are becoming different in very uniform ways. Most of the global categories and standards circulating today originate in the West, but spread because people everywhere appropriate them and use them to express themselves and fight for their own ends. In the process, the hegemonic structures themselves are transformed. Certain ideas, stories and histories (including such diverse things as the institutionalization of Human Rights, the death of Lady Diana or the demise of the Apartheid regime in South Africa) are available to an increasing number of people in most parts of the world. They get distributed mainly through the media and the millions of people on the move, like migrants, refugees, tourists and businessmen. Media and people on the move force people to reflect their own way of life in the mirror of other ways of life. Consequently, very many people develop a "comparative consciousness".This has the potential of creating common ground, a kind of lingua franca for very different people all over the world.
But it's very important to keep in mind that global culture doesn't exist in a power vacuum. Most of the structures and standards circulating today originate in the West and the West makes a sustained effort to assure their survival.
But 1. not only do other countries challenge this dominance (like Southeast Asian politicians and intellectuals) and
2. the diffusion of many western ideas and institutions is a fact. But after a successful appropriation the origin of concepts and ideas is increasingly unimportant. 3. The dialogue about cultural differences and similarities is forced upon western societies (as they themselves undergo an immense internal process of pluralization and become more and more multicultural. Identity politics and cultural differences are no longer problems somewhere else, but in our own neighbourhoods, so cultural differences have to be confronted head on and dialogue and new forms of conflict resolution are inevitable. It's unlikely that the structures of the global culture will be unchanged after a sustained dialogue).

4. Culture is one of the most prominent global concepts and gets appropriated in highly diverse ways.
From 1970 to 1980 the number of North-American Indians has increased from 700,000 to 1,400,000. This is not the result of a population explosion but reflects the rapidly growing number of North Americans who acknowledge their Indian ancestry and their cultural roots openly. Over the last 20 years a "culture of cultures" (Marshall Sahlins) has emerged, representing an important frame of reference for communities worldwide. Indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, transnational alliances like "black people" but also interest groups like homosexuals or businessmen. They all call a specific "culture" their own, even though originally some indigenous peoples like the Hopi or Kapayo Indians didn't have a term in their mother tongue and had to borrow the word from one of the colonial languages.
The culture concept is used by groups to fight for recognition, financial support or economic and political rights. In order to succeed, many of those ‚cultural activists' have realized that they have to pronounce their demands on global level. They seek support from the growing number of transnational organizations that are dedicating

their work to the preservation of cultural rights. Non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International or the World Council of Indigenous people act as informational mirror sites and present powerful transnational pressure for groups against national governments or companies.

In order to be heard, national minorities or indigenous peoples fighting for acknowledgement and rights have to adapt to the global reference system. This requires that cultural characteristics are presented in a standardized manner. The categories of what we introduced earlier as "structure of common difference" include language, life-style, worldview or rituals. Only by using those standardized categories Brazilian Indios are able to correspond with Penan in Borneo or Dutch workers take sides with Penan against the international timber-trade. The spectrum of the use of the culture-concept is broad: Depending on time and context cultural identities are expressed stronger or weaker. In Germany we are Bavarians, in France we are Germans and in South Africa we are simply "from overseas". In minority communities in Britain's largest Asian metrople "Southall" the Asian-British youth refer to their ethnic or religious identity as Hindi, Muslim or Sikh more openly after incidents of racial attacks. Around Christmas time Germans develop a deep sense of German-ness by performing "typical German traditions." Being adjusted to the various contexts culture is manipulated in flexible ways.

Up to a mere decade ago, most minorities felt either inferior towards the majority population and most societies just took their own way of life as unquestionable state-of-affairs. Living in a globalized world goes hand in hand with a newly arising consciousness for one's own cultural characteristics. By stressing cultural difference as fundamental characteristics, a number of ethnic groups and national cultures manipulate the idea of culture to legitimize exclusion and racism.

Most groups however - from the Dalit in India to Native Hawaiians instrumentalize the culture concept not for exclusion but to gain recognition and protection of rights. The Ainu, known to be the first tribe settling on Hokkaido, fought for a long time to be officially recognized as ethnic group in Japan, a state that proclaims officially to be a homogenous nation-state. Using the interest of the growing number of tourists in Japan, the Ainu started to build traditional villages, schools and information centers, where tourists could experience "traditional culture." By deciding which cultural aspects to live and which ones to drop, the Ainu identity is reconstructed in a selective way that is far from being authentic in a strict historical sense. To forge their identity Maori, Maya and other indigenous groups have used the same strategy and put themselves on the market.

In South Mexico's Chiapas region the Mam-speaking Indians (4) have created a market niche by re-invention of the principles of their traditional social organization and agricultural methods. In the past, the Mam never used to define themselves as a single ethnic group. They are spread over two countries and on the Mexican side, they were fairly acculturated and had only few Mam speakers left. Though having small plots (ejidos) for subsistence farming, nearly all Mam worked as farm-labourers on large commercial farms. At the beginning of the '80s the NAFTA agreement was signed and the Mexican government started to support a change towards an export-driven agricultural production. Soon many farms were hit by the negative consequences of the "crops for greater value" policy: the overall profit decreased while the amount of imported food had to be increased, health problems arose that were seen as a result of the pesticides and chemical fertilizers, the food quality worsened and due to growing debts, there was a sharp rise of poverty in rural communities.

Facing this development, the Mam decided to return to traditional methods of farming. Exploring the past, they 'discovered' that their "old ways" of farming are reflected in organic farming (farming without pesticides and living in harmony with their environment). Values such as reciprocity and collective action were found to be close to the principles of 19th-century-based British cooperatives A re-invention of tradition combined with a consciously defined identity as "the last descendents of the Mayan people" provides a lucrative niche in the global market. Searching for markets the cooperative ISMAM turned to Native-American businesspeople for advice on marketing, production and the formulation of a corporate image. The annual profit of 7 million US $ secures the communities a sound economic base. Further, 80 Mam communities are involved in a joint-venture agreement with North American Indian investors to build an eco-tourism facility on the Chiapas Coast.

Conclusion: the dialectics of cultural globalization

Let us summarize some of the dynamics of cultural globalization as they emerge from the anthropological record. Cultural globalization is a highly dialectic process, in which globalization and localization, homogenization and fragmentation, centralization and decentralization, conflict and creolization are not excluding opposites, but inseparable sides of the same coin. Cultural change is not only a story of loss and destruction, but also of gain and creativity: as a result of increasing interconnection, old forms of diversity do vanish, but at the same time a new cultural diversity comes into existence.

Certain concepts and structures of the modern world are being diffused globally. Every country has its national anthem, bureaucracy and school system. People everywhere in Bolivia, Switzerland or China discuss the relevance of human rights. At the same time cultural peculiarities take on harsher edges, as their different practices and worldviews are compared to and compete with one another. It’s in light of this process that identity politics (as described in the 4. proposition) gain in importance.

Different worldviews and lifestyles come in touch with one another and can lead to an increase in stereotypes and conflicts. At the same time these different lifestyles and orientations mix, leading to a creolization of ideas, goods and institutions. German school authorities have to deal with Turkish clothing regimes and gender relations and solve resulting intercultural conflicts. At the same time the Popmüzik of young German-born Turks (which combines elements from Western and Arabic musical traditions) is highly popular with youngsters in Berlin and Istanbul alike.

Globalization leads to new transnational public spheres, to new communities which often transcend national and regional boundaries (global Hinduism, Latino communities, youth cultures, the professional cultures of businessmen or artists - to name just a few). At the same time national communities are increasingly pluralized and fragmentized, in the course of which less people in a neighbourhood share the same cultural inventory: fight for the same values and speak the same language. Globalization and localization are - from this perspective - one process. The local is increasingly a spin-off and part of the global. Cultural peculiarities, e.g. the national cultures of Singapore and Germany, Trinidadian or Swedish economic practice, Italian fashion and Californian cuisine have been and are being what they are because of their participation in a global world system and can’t be understood outside this global context. If globalization gets looked by an individual point of view, it again appears as a double edged sword: the availability to compare one's own life

with many other
possible lives can put the individual misery in an even sharper light, lead to discontentment, insecurity and make people vulnerable for the gruesome practices of urban warfare and ethnic cleansing. On the other hand: the availability of many different worldviews and lifestyles can lead to a fruitful dialogue and be experienced as an enormous chance for self-realization and the enrichment of society.