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World-System Analysis:

Contemporary Research and Directions

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MULTI-DIMENSIONALITY, MUTUAL CONSTITUTION  
AND THE NATURE OF SYSTEMNESS: THE IMPORTANCE  
OF THE CULTURAL TURN IN THE STUDY OF GLOBAL  
SYSTEMS

*Barrie Axford*

*Abstract*

*In this article I will address the critical question of the constitution of global systems and the part played in such processes by what is often summarized as culture. I examine the important distinction between culture and globalization and culture as constitutive of global social relations. The need to cleave to a systemic treatment of globality is put, while noting the dangers that lie in one-dimensional accounts of global system constitution. To offset any such tendency I explore the constitution of global systemness from a structurationist perspective. I outline the nature and significance of culture in the study of global systems, drawing attention to different literatures. Finally I underscore the importance of the cultural turn in the study of global systems and what has to be done to take full advantage of it.*

*In what follows I will address the critical question of the constitution of global systems and the part played in such processes by what is conveniently – if sometimes unhelpfully – summarized as “culture”. By global systems I mean networks of interaction and meaning that transcend both societal and national frames of reference. I want to shift the emphasis away from an under-theorized focus on cultural globalization to a consideration of global systems as enacted in part through cultural processes. In other words, I do not want to conflate the conjunctural features of contemporary (cultural) globalization with culture as the realm of lived experience integral to the enactment of all social-systemic relations. In some respects this approach may be seen as part of a shift – perhaps a paradigm shift – in how we understand the space of the social, and in how, or whether, we construe the global as the constitutive of all social relations (Beck 2003; Shaw 2003). I will begin with a mild polemic against a well-known systemic account of world-making forces that highlights some of these issues.*

Re-reading the text of an interview given by Immanuel Wallerstein a few years back (Kumar and Welz 2000), I was again struck by his insistence that, when explaining how the social is constituted, reproduced and

transformed, “culture” should not be made to play second fiddle to economics and politics. Of course many of the world-systems persuasion came in for criticism precisely on the grounds that they were using culture as a convenient way of rounding out a gaunt economism. Perchance Wallerstein was always open to the idea that culture matters, and meant by this something more than advocating strategic voluntarism while clinging to a robust theoretical essentialism. Certainly there are some grounds for making this claim. By far the strongest is the main burden of world-systems analysis: its attempt to redirect the analytical focus of social theory from the societal to the world level. On this Wallerstein was never coy, believing that the conceptual structures and epistemologies of social science need to be reworked to account for the global nature of social reproduction (Friedman 2000: 637). National societies must not, indeed cannot, be analyzed without recourse to the manner in which they are linked to and conditioned by extra and trans-societal networks of exchanges called world-systems (Robertson 1992; Friedman 2000; Shaw 2003).

Whether or not you subscribe to an exchangist model of world-system constitution, the main contention is sound, although still outside the purview of much usual science where “methodological nationalism” is remarkably tenacious regardless of the discipline (Friedman 2000; Beck 2003; Shaw 2003). Of course, the message has not been lost, but it is often taken as read, without thought to its profound implications for social analysis and the reconfiguration of social knowledge (Albrow 1996). In debates about the nature and effects of current globalization, it has been parlayed into the language of ritual dispute between “hyper-globalisers” and various strains of globalization sceptics, including denizens of the broad church of International Political Economy (Held et al. 1999; Rosamond 2003; Shaw 2003).

Such cavalier treatment is possible only because much research and commentary is transfixed by the current intensive phase of globalization, rather than with the making, reproduction, and transformation of global systems – with globality as a “constitutive framework” for all social relations (Friedman 2000; Keohane and Nye 2000; Shaw 2003: 35; Urry 2003). This is a key distinction and I will take it up below. For now, let me return to Wallerstein and his treatment of culture.

Any revisionist tendency, where meaning counts, must confront his actual use of culture. For Wallerstein culture is the “ideas system” of the

modern world-system, revealed in the dominant ideology of liberalism, with its (false) universalizing credos. Such an account is not vulgar Marxism, because culture is not treated as the ideological superstructure of the capitalist world-system (1991). Wallerstein is able to argue thus primarily because he rejects conventional wisdom that culture (civil society/agency) is a domain separate from politics and economics, so that the question of which sphere dominates does not even arise. To that extent, but only to that extent, his is a multi-dimensional account of world-system construction. Indeed, in his words, all three are “implicated and integrated”. This formulation appears rounded enough, but, as always, the devil lies both in what is meant by “implicated and integrated”, and in the detail of how he actually depicts cultural phenomena, and thus agency. Implicated is a weasel word, and in Wallerstein’s corpus obviously culture is “implicated” in the reproduction and possible transformation of the modern world-system. As the ideas system of world capitalism, culture is functional for the reproduction of that system in much the same way as states are crucial to maintaining the competitive dynamic essential to the survival of the world-economy.

At the same time, cultural phenomena in the shape of a variety of anti-systemic groups and movements have become the site of both intellectual and actual struggles to deconstruct the false totality and universalist pretensions of global liberalism. Here we have a reworking of the familiar structure-agency dualism, with the cultural system of global liberalism challenged by agency in the guise of counter-cultural forces such as social movements, local resisters and so on. The upshot is that culture is both system-integrative and – admittedly in particularistic and local forms (agency) – anti-systemic. In accounts of global hegemony influenced by Gramsci, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses also compete for the ideational closure of the global system.

Moreover, in much of the anti-globalization rhetoric of the late 1990s, players from an eponymous “global civil society” appear as both opponents of “top-down” globalization and avatars of a more benign globality. Instead of anti-systemic forces (agency) just kicking against the pricks of a global geo-culture, they demonstrate attributes of a more “innovative and variegated type of politics” (Falk 1999). Such actions also intimate an ethical ideal of social order where life-world (agency) is first rescued and then reinvigorated (Seligman 1995). Set against the over-determined cast of world-systems analysis this is a much more permissive,

if still under-theorized, treatment of what is often summarized as global civil society. Thus, success or failure for the global justice movement is held to be contingent on the availability of adequate resources, a serendipitous upturn in the issue-attention cycle, and on other vagaries which beset the mobilization of collective agency. On the face of it, this is a much more pluralist environment in which to traffic contentious politics, one in which agency is not only visible, but potent. In world-systems analysis, the world-system is already configured by the needs of historical capitalism and agency is left as a residual category, more often than not constrained by the dominant cultural system of ideas. So that while Wallerstein is right to stress the need to abjure conventional “levels” of analysis in the study of world-systems, and rejects the tendency to analyse phenomena in terms of discrete categories and through a-priori reasoning, it is by no means obvious that he practices what he preaches.

Indeed, for all the talk of “integration”, Wallerstein’s analysis of culture stops some way short of a considered treatment of relationality (where that refers to both relations between zones of existence and between agency and structure). It is clearly a long way short of the concept of mutual constitution of the social, although this is understandable. Wallerstein is hardly a closet structurationist, and even from within that canon it is hard to move beyond the intuitive plausibility of the concept. But as I will argue later, questions of relationality between zones of existence and between agents and structures must be addressed directly, even if we favor the idea of the mutual constitution of social life, or a more radical formulation of socially constitutive relations.

Wallerstein’s corpus does draw attention to the ease with which important questions about relationality, mutual constitution and systemness can be glossed over to make a compelling case for a one-dimensional account of world-system constitution. The significance of the cultural turn in the analysis of social (global) systems is that such cavalier treatment is more difficult to sustain. Does that mean that we are all culturalists now? In the rest of the paper I will examine the treatment of cultural phenomena and of culture in the study of globalization and the constitution of global systems. I do so in part to clarify usage and in order to point up the important distinction between culture and globalization and culture as constitutive of global social relations. Then I will explore the constitution of global systemness from a structurationist per-

spective. Finally, I will outline the significance of the cultural turn in the study of global systems and what has to be done to take full advantage of it.

## Globalization or Globality?

Primarily this refers to a disjunction between what Martin Shaw usefully labels the conjunctural and processual features of the current phase of globalization, and the structural or systemic features of an enacted globality (2003: 35). The former requires only a set of empirical referents as indicators of more-or-less intensive globalization (Kearney 2003). It can also accommodate a little ideological commitment either way (is globalization good or bad? destructive of the local? protective of thick identities? and so on). Where it is not simply a perspective on, or convenient shorthand for, the intensification of current or even long term trends, globalization is presented as a process corrosive of existing modalities, sometimes causing disjunctures with past practice, but more often possessing an evolutionary or teleological dynamic.

None of this is reprehensible; indeed it adds considerably to the contested sum of what we know about the vagaries of globalization. At the same time, it has detracted from what may be thought a more compelling, if less newsworthy, focus on the properties of dynamic systems, revealed in the embedding of world-wide social relations. In much of the globalization discourse, the global “level” is taken for granted (Urry 2003) and globalization is depicted as the force through which sub-global actors (of all varieties) come to identify with the global. As a result globalization becomes a kind of reified structure, with individuals, groups, localities, regions, and so on, also reified as agents; with the whole often underpinning a simple domination-resistance motif of global relations.

By contrast, a focus on global systems, to quote Friedman again, entails “a theoretical framework within which the institutional structures of the world are themselves generated and reproduced through global processes” (2000: 638). These institutional structures and processes tend to generate a systemic dynamic because the totality of global flows, networks, interactions and connections reveals a structural shift in the organization of human affairs, in the exercise of power, and in the sites at which power is employed or immanent (Held et al. 1999). It also directs

attention to the changing meanings attached to spaces and places, and thus to the realm of culture. This latter point is important because while we are often drawn to the ideal of “thick” local cultures as the site at which consciousness of and meanings attached to the world are reproduced or transformed, the global system focus abjures the powerful mythology that culture is just a signifier of place. By adopting such a perspective, methodological nationalism is already weakened and culture, as well as ways of talking about it, commute from being only a property of place, to being the result of “world-making practices” sometimes tied to place, sometimes not.

Now, I realize that all this may reek of abstract principles rather than the “muck-raking” sociology of events, crises and brute numbers, but it is a necessary distinction. Unless we can locate globalizing processes in general, and processes of cultural globalization in particular, in a wider treatment of global system construction of globality, we run the risk of succumbing either to journalism (usually without the panache) or crude empiricism, with neither tied to theory. We also miss, or misinterpret the importance of the cultural turn.

But the shift in emphasis is not without risk. For one thing, the legacy of much systems-analytic work is a hard burden to bear when dealing with fluid global configurations (Albrow 1996). The examples offered by heavily systemic, but utilitarian and functionalist accounts from strains of world-system analysis are not auspicious, for all their devotion to world-level constraints. In these, culture remains a convenient equation filler when all else fails. More promising, if highly abstract, is John Urry’s recent exegesis on complexity theory applied to global systemness. Urry is rightly critical of much of the social science of globalization. His solution is to argue for globality as a theory of connections, in which phenomena such as “local”, “global”, “identity”, and “technology”, have to be recast as a set of complex, reflexive systems and self-organizing exchanges and transactions linked to both narrower and wider systems of power and influence (Hand and Sandywell 2002). This approach certainly avoids the implication that interactions between a stable global system (steering) and any number of derivative or theoretically subordinate local and networked recipients (culture, life-world) are in any way over-determined. Instead, world-making practices have a powerful emergent quality revealed in the imbrications of local and global, through the interplay of global scapes and contingent glocal actors

and through various networks, fluids and governance institutions (Urry 2003: 103; Appadurai 1990, 1996).

Urry’s formulation may be a brand of system-lite, but it syncs with the indeterminate and open nature of current globality. However, there are complaints that complexity theory merely caricatures the social carry weight and there remains some ambiguity about the place of agency in such accounts (Fuchs 2001). Urry insists that “there is no agency, no micro and macro levels and no system and no life-world” (2003: 122). While this strikes me as very problematic with respect to agency, it is clear that he is trying to abrogate the simplicity of approaches which presume entities with separate and distinct essences that are brought into external juxtaposition with each other. As such, he evinces a proper regard for relationality in the making of the social and over the ways in which domains of collective existence influence, affect and constitute each other. As I will make clear, my position is that relationality in the matter of global systemness relies on the dynamic of mutual constitution (Giddens 1984, 1990) of reflexive engagement between agents and the conditions of action. Because of this, Urry is wrong to neglect agency, whose dynamic and visceral qualities are integral to any theory of global system construction. To be fair, he recognizes as much when he says that relationality is brought about through a wide array of networked or circulating relationships that are implicated within increasingly overlapping and convergent material worlds.

## Making Global Systems

Of course, treating global social relations as systemic addresses only one part of the problem. True, we get away from the idea of globalization as a process detached from history, resources and culture, but often at some cost. The most obvious cost is that one-dimensional accounts of global system construction abound. These vary in provenance, but they all privilege one zone of experience as expressing system identity. In the literature on global systems this has tended to be the economic sphere and, in terms of recent globalizations, the practice and ideology of the market. The global system is thus reduced to the structures of capitalist relations, including the ideological ones. We could offer much the same critique of one-dimensional theories that privilege, not economics, but political/

strategic and, yes, cultural structures as the key organizational principles of the global system. Of course, essentialist accounts are of a significantly different order to those which acknowledge the “fundamental singularity of social space” (Shaw 2003: 36), but still recognize the conjunctural impact of market forces, cultural trends and geo-strategic factors in shaping basically integrative, global pressures in world politics, economy and culture. Sometimes essentialism and voluntarism are inadvertently combined.

As a case in point, consider a recent piece on the limits of global civil society (GCS) by Neera Chandhoke (2002). Chandhoke rehearses some key weaknesses of the concept, among which is that it suffers from a tendency found in much social-scientific analysis, namely the propensity to analyze phenomena (areas of collective life) in terms of discrete categories. Thus, national civil society is often depicted as a normative moral order diametrically opposed to the state and the economy. In like vein, GCS as a putative or actual “third sector” is not only distinguished from, but seen as a self-conscious alternative to the current architecture of state-centric world politics especially in its “thin, anarchical” form (Booth 1991). It also provides an uncontaminated, popular and thus “thicker” counterweight to the instrumental geo-culture of neo liberalism.

Now, at this point in reading Chandhoke’s interesting paper, I thought that she would either treat GCS as constitutive of the global condition, or reject its usage. However, she does not, or rather she does a little of both, but in a way that simply reposes the problems of relationality between elements of the social and thus how we construe the global condition (Robertson 1992). She notes that GCS actors are not autonomous of the “other institutions of international (sic) politics” and that GCS probably reflects the power constellations of existing institutions (Chandhoke 2002: 37). At one level, this is perfectly acceptable, since it remains an empirical question as to whether such actors have widened the agenda of world politics, enlarged the scope of agency and successfully challenged the world-views and practices of existing institutions of global governance, or just increased the number of players. It goes without saying there are different positions on this question (compare Brown 2001 and Florini 2001).

At another level, and certainly for my purposes, it is an opportunity missed. Chandhoke wants to emphasize the ways in which domains of collective existence (2002: 35) influence, affect and even constitute each

other. In this regard her formulation tends usefully towards the systemic. The problem is that while she is concerned with “life-world” issues (agency), seeing GCS as a realm of social integration, there is a strong suspicion that she cleaves to a “core identity” for the global system, to be found in states and especially in markets – the structures of steering and of system integration. People may acquire and reinvent political agency and different forms of selfhood in the spaces opened up by transnational collective action, but pace Wallerstein, they are merely counter-cultural or anti-systemic and thus contingent upon shifts in the dominant culture of world politics and economics to call them into being and to sustain or destroy them (Axford 1995).

This is a version of globality that misses out on the key feature of global systemness, that is, its mutual constitution through reflexive engagements between actors and the conditions of action (Giddens 1991, 1993; and, with a different gloss, Urry 2003). Thus Chandhoke’s is a failure to comprehend how global systems are constituted, and both reproduced or transformed through routine and distanced interventions by actors, and perhaps through what Urry calls “iterative social interactions” (2003: 46). Recognizing GCS as a zone of agency appears initially to address this question, but bracketing off the reflexivities of life-world from system does not capture the messiness and the complexity of globalization processes, wherein actors routinely cross the boundaries between the everyday and the systemic (Axford 2001).

We are now firmly in the territory of the mutual constitution of social systems. Elsewhere, I have criticized both system-centered and actor-centered theories of social life from a variety of perspectives (Axford 1995). But in the structurationist project (Giddens 1984) the conventional distinction between structure (rules) and agency (individual and collective) is abjured in favor of a “duality of structure” which underlines the recursive nature of social life. Structure is not external to what actors think and do (and this applies to what might conventionally be seen as the “structures” of globalization) but instantiated in social practice. Thus, what are known as structures or institutions are “the medium for and the outcome of the contingently accomplished activities of situated actors” (1984: 25). Structures both constrain and enable action because they supply rules and resources which generate action, and are the outcome (intended and unintended) of a myriad of recursive actions by knowledgeable agents. In turn, rules “validate the ontological status of

actors by providing the broad cultural frameworks for the sort of social arrangements that are possible" (Barrett 1992).

All this puts agency center-stage in the business of world-making practices, but without the postmodern conceit that institutions are simply extensions of self and collective identities. At the same time, while structures codify rules and supply resources for action, they are instantiated, reproduced, and changed only through action. Global cultural products, while not empty of meaning until they are drawn upon or enacted by subjects, have no "objective" quality which immunizes them from interpretation and appropriation.

In an interesting gloss on this argument, John Urry (2003) insists that structuration theory fails to appreciate the "complex" character of structure-agency duality. He argues that such relationality is better understood as a complex of iterative social interactions, wherein change is generated by countless iterations of routine actions and their (un)intended consequences, rather than through the deliberate intervention of agents. In other words, complex change occurs because of the emergent qualities of the system. While this has to be true some of the time, the idea of change simply being the outcome of happenstance underplays the importance of consciousness and intent. In charting the twists of a contested globality, we should acknowledge a power for agency that goes beyond the fact that it is implicated in great and small events just through being there.

In the real world, of course, questions of access, resource pools and the vagaries of the issue-attention cycle must bear on the quality of intervention. I want to avoid the intuitively pleasing, but simplistic idea that through their everyday practices agents connect to global outcomes, in the sense that what a person eats, or smokes or drives, is linked to structures of global ecology consciousness, let alone to rules or cultural scripts which regulate or constitute that issue-area. Rather, I am suggesting a way of grasping how (conscious) agency draws upon rules and resources supplied by system structures to instantiate and change the conditions for action and the contexts which supply meaning. This is a fruitful way to understand the constitution of global systems and of cultural processes and structures as constitutive of such systems.

One final word about relationality, which is the key to understanding global systemness. It is easy to prescribe a relaxed approach to the imbrication of economics, politics and culture and the value of a multi-dimen-

sional treatment of systemness. Unfortunately this is harder to deliver, unless all that is meant is a convenient division of the social universe denoting typical features, which can be described and classified. If we take the idea of global systemness seriously the relationality between zones of experience is more difficult to theorize, especially if we accept the claim that with the universalization of capitalism, the distinction between culture and economics has dissolved. As Wernick says, culture in the guise of market ideology now seeps into everything, and everything is subject to the cultural logic of commodification (1992). And to up the ante somewhat, consider the proposition that postmodernity makes the cultural economic at the same time as it turns the economic into myriad forms of culture. But should we worry about all of this?

If we cleave to a broadly structurationist position on the duality of structures, the problem recedes, since structures, regardless of their provenance, are the outcome of practice, and agency relies on rules and resources to substantiate its ontology. As long as we are clear that the dynamic and often open nature of global systems is subject to more than one trend or force, careful empirical research should do the rest. Singularity in explanation beggars global complexity. As Martin Shaw notes, "while pre-existing trends towards the commodification of social life continue ... political changes have made this possible" (2003: 36). He might have added that in the seminal changes taking place in global modernity, cultural factors and aesthetics too have assumed a growing significance, not only in matters of political display, but as registers of power and interest. Because of this, it must be understood that the complex and contradictory relations of economics, politics and culture require the observer to unravel the inter-twinings of an economic system dependent on the principle of commodification and cultural terrains which are both determined by and yet still manage to elude or subvert that principle.

### Culture in/and the Study of Global Systems

Culture is an intriguing zone of analysis for students of globalizations and global systems, in part because of its relative neglect by researchers of all persuasions (for an account see Tomlinson 1999). Recent interest in

cultural phenomena reflects a reworking of disciplinary paradigms and a growing realization that a frenetic search for appropriate indicators of globalization cannot be confined to economic or narrowly conceived governance phenomena. As I have tried to indicate, the ever stronger sense that we have to analyze social relations in terms of global constraints is late to this feast, but does signal a sea change in how to think about the constitution of the world.

Attention to the soft features of globalization and global systems – and here I refer largely to cultural and motivational phenomena – has enriched our understanding of global processes and their impacts on situated actors. Of course, past literatures often reveal a penchant for treating cultural phenomena as either avatars of “thin” (though often oppressive) global homogeneity or the expression of “thick” local identities. On the credit side, this does help to distinguish between the role of cultural factors in promoting or resisting globalization processes on the one hand, and the impact of globalization on received notions of culture on the other (Tomlinson 1999). As to the downside, we are drawn, yet again, into the intuitively appealing, but caricatured depiction of globalization processes as playing out a simple domination-resistance model. Either this, or else we admit that globalization (cultural globalization) is either a slide into nihilism or nothingness (Ritzer 2003) or a corrosive dialectic in which a hegemonic global consumer culture spawns primitivism and/or fanaticism (Barber 1996). Yet in principle, the inclusion of cultural factors in the analysis of world-making practices should produce a more nuanced and credible picture of global complexity.

And so it proves, at least in part. Roland Robertson offers a wonderfully rich historical weave of global complexity in which the “concrete structuration” of the world takes place through the relationships between universal and particular and local and global (1992: 102). His is both a voluntaristic and a multi-dimensional theory of global system construction quite at odds with the foundationalism of over-systematized accounts and the anti-categorical credos of postmodernism. Of course, for Robertson, it is only “convenient” to talk about a global “system” (1992: 13), because that implies homogeneity and closure, whereas the cultural state of the world predicates heterogeneity and disorder. That said, we need to retain the concept of system, or rather of global systems. While the idea of the world is not “exhausted by its systemic qualities” (Robertson 1992: 13), the sense of it being “made” is possible only by

acknowledging (and then unraveling) the systematic duality of agency-structure.

The cultural complexity of global systems and the contradictory nature of globalization processes receives further endorsement from many sources, only a few of which can be reprised here. For example, Appadurai’s fluid global scapes and contingent “glocal” subjects remind us that order and disorder are emergent properties of global systemness rather than as contradictory states vying for the core identity of the system (1990, 1996). This reflection underlines the sense that global systems, indeed all social systems, consist of a surface appearance of stability set in an energy or flux (Axford 1995). The idea of a system as a scape, a flow or an energy rather than an order allows for relationships within it to be generative and degenerative, as the identities of actors and institutions are reproduced through processes of cultural enactment, autopoietic self-reflection and reflexivity, without loss of systemic energy.

Much new research from diasporic cultural studies and from global communications challenges the conventional wisdom about the cultural reproduction of identity in transnational spaces. The very notion of identity is redolent with the mentality of imagined communities and cultures that are rooted in national experience (Aksoy and Robins 2002). The upshot is that new forms of transnational modality are often judged through the lens (and with the moral purview) of the national imaginary (Aksoy and Robins 2002: 3). The reality is a lot more complex. Thinking about transnational communications in the context of diasporic cultural studies, Aksoy and Robins argue that Turkish migrants who routinely watch transnational satellite television are not simply reproducing “Turkishness” as members of a diasporic audience, but enacting new kinds of “transnational mobilities” that may redefine the migrant experience and ways of thinking about it. Their research underlines the analytical necessity and the emotional sense of treating new media cultures and especially digital media as part of a cultural shift in the tenor of life in post-historical societies under global constraints, rather than as instrumentalities tacked onto a real world of politics and social relations. The results of this shift could be modalities which may, but may not, reproduce conventionally “thin” or “thick” identities and imaginaries (Kellner 2001; Dahlgren 2001; Luke 1998; Aksoy and Robins 2002).

On a different tack, attempts to rework cosmopolitanism “for another age” (Held 2002: 12) cleave to a more informal and strongly “cultural”

version that rounds out the parsimony of liberal internationalism. To the lexicon of good governance and the rule of law extended across territories, cultural cosmopolitanism adds “slow-fooders”, contingent identities forged across (cyber) space and any number of coalitions of the willing. In particular, Held calls for “recognition ... of the increasing interconnectedness of political communities in diverse domains, and the development of an understanding of overlapping “collective fortunes” which require collective solutions – locally, nationally, regionally and globally” (2002: 12). Urry’s references to a “cosmopolitan fluidity” visible in the creation of global audiences for media events (the death of Diana, the Iraq war, and the SARS outbreak) and in the increasing and often voluntary movement of people around the globe, fall into the same vein of reflection (2003: 137).

By embracing a “new” cosmopolitanism for the global age, these are welcome interpretations. They seem to discard the strait-jacket cut from ethical universalism and to admit the kind of routine or informal cosmopolitanism noted by many cultural anthropologists (Vertovec 2001). Unlike some treatments of global civil society, this informal cosmopolitanism embraces a pretty catholic range of actors, actions, motivations and mobilizing factors. “Davos Man” is there, along with his doppelganger in the Trans-National Capitalist Class (Berger 2003; Sklair 2000), but so are networks of computer hackers, Socrates exchange students, and human rights activists.

Finally, intimations of a “networked globality” (Axford 2005) draw heavily on the notion that culture as the realm of meaning and context for identity formation, can be seen as a property of networks of interaction – transterritorial and global – as well as being an attribute of place. Such a take is at odds with the reified concept of culture found in positivist and functionalist sociology, and with the treatment of “authentic” sources of culture as shared meaning previously found, and to some extent still visible, in what Friedman calls “globalized Anthropology” (2000: 641). For students of global structuration, the issue of the production of shared meaning, not tied to place, particular history, and so on, is critical. For example, claims to discern a systematic transnationality, even a global civil society, are given short shrift by many commentators. One of the primary obstacles bruited by students of collective action is the alleged difficulty of extending social networks of trust, reciprocity and shared meaning across borders. As a corollary, the “embeddedness” of

identities in particular social networks and cultural scripts may also inhibit the creation of “detached” or purposive identities that can traffic across borders, mobilizing and uniting disparate activists (Melucci 1996; McAdam et al. 2000).

Of course, culture has always had a problematic status in sociological explanations of action or stability, let alone in globalization studies (Robertson 1992). In explanations of stability and change, cultural variables have usually assumed dependent status. In much of this discourse, which is either broadly or explicitly functionalist, the assumption is that culture functions as a general value system for society. As a kind of social cement culture both holds the collectivity together by providing shared meanings, and also serves to delineate insiders from outsiders, through embodying and exemplifying the “reality of a particular past” (Wallerstein, 1991: 190).

Forms of methodological individualism need the explanatory power of socialization processes to ensure that some kind of social order is produced from the preferences of rational individuals (Meyer et al. 1997). The same obsession with functionality is found in neo-Marxist analyses, and these, along with other broadly realist positions, need some kind of semi-autonomous ideological dynamic to soften compelling material realities. Even those arguments that display a more obvious “cultural turn” pace Gramsci, often end up in obfuscation over degrees of allowable autonomy and the tendency either to conflate cultural structures and the interpretative practices of agents, or else to ignore the latter.

The key lesson for attempts to comprehend the construction of global systems is that culture must be understood as the contextual expression of interpretative practices by agents (Kunda 1992). Cultures do not exist outside their making, they are constituted in action. Once this is accepted the idea of the mutual constitution of global systems can be comprehended as a theoretical possibility and a project accessible through empirical research.

## The Importance of the Cultural Turn

Let me reiterate. By stressing the importance of the cultural turn for the study of global systems, I am not suggesting something as a brief fling with postmodernism pace Jameson or Kellner, or even with less sophis-

licated advocates of the end of grand narratives. Still less am I advocating a form of cultural reductionism where culture takes precedence over economics and politics. The visibility and the vitality of cultural studies have alerted students of the global to the significance of meaning structures, of shared meanings, in the making of the social and provided a rich seam of illustration. As to the latter, let me repeat my concern that we treat culture as more than shorthand for some exotic conjunctural features of current globalization, and examine cultural phenomena as part of a description of new forms of sociality constituted through global processes (Axford 1995; Friedman 2000). In the latter guise, culture becomes the realm of shared meanings and purposive action in systemic relationships constitutive of and dependent on larger processes of the global system. If we are seeking a systematic understanding of the social as constituted through global process, we can proceed in no other way.

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