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River of No Return
For a Dialectics of Cultural Modernization

The relationship between cultural-symbolic work and globalization is full of contradictions. Individuals involved in the production of cultural symbols currently find themselves in the midst of precarious and turbulent circumstances that are occasionally characterized as a hybrid state. They have to come to terms with these prevailing conditions if they wish to survive in their chosen fields instead of being overwhelmed and losing themselves in the maelstrom.

If one attempts to carry on the process of modernization into the future without thereby giving up what has already been accomplished—that is to say, to reconcile tradition and modernization—then one finds hardly any points of departure (in the conventional sense of this expression). After all, a starting point from which to launch such an endeavor would require points of stability, a solid foundation upon which an argument could be elaborated further and which could support the construction of a system of (political) practice.

Rapidly changing and highly complex circumstances are nothing new; indeed, they constitute an inherent characteristic of times of transition and are associated with the absence of a generally agreed-upon narrative. The current segue from Information Societies to Knowledge Societies is also being accompanied by battles over the allocation of the profits yielded by modernization. The tactics being employed by individuals and groups waging these distribution and modernization struggles are characterized by their efforts to preserve the mandatory validity of their respective experiences and to maintain their living standards and secure their properties.

In these times of copyright wars, spam attacks and domain hijacks, the portents of the "fluidification" of circumstances are impossible to overlook. It has become undeniable that structures that have appeared up to now to be firmly established have long since begun to morph into "liquid structures," and time-honored, generally accepted differentiations and areas of demarcation must now rather be conceived as "liquid frontiers." Accordingly, the dynamics that have emerged in such overall social states can best be comprehended in terms of hydrodynamics and aerodynamics, and can be depicted most evocatively in images of rivers or raging torrents, oceanic currents or anabatic (upward) and katabatic (downward) winds.

If, under such prevailing currents, one seeks an appropriate way of dealing with the omnipresent contradictions mentioned at the start of this essay, then one immediately encounters phenomena like jam-ups and turbulence, flow failure and eddies in the international cultural debate. We would like to introduce into this debate about modernization's "river of no return" elements of a dynamic representation of this process as transient landmarks to aid orientation. And we will also take the liberty of making a few suggestions as to what action ought to be taken under such circumstances as well as where such action could profitably begin and allies might hopefully be found.

Dialectical Thinking Instead of Metaphors of Hybridity

It is high time to get to work on the core of these emerging contradictions, and to do so not only theoretically but, above all, in actual political practice. The time to reintroduce the two meanings of the term "dialectics" into the debate also seems to have arrived. The participants in this international discussion would do well to once again have increasing recourse to "the art of philosophical disputation" instead of the unfortunate mixture of tactical media soundbites and testimony by bought-and-paid-for experts that currently predominates. On the other hand, fiddling around with sets of metaphors—like hybrids, for

example—could, in this situation, easily stand being replaced or at least supplemented by dialectical thought processes that use Hegelian methodology as their starting point.

But, of course, in actual practice, one single method is never appropriate in all cases; rather, a brief look at the multiply fractured dichotomies that concern us here makes apparent the necessity of utilizing a variety of different descriptive models. The contradictory scenarios include the "dual character of cultural goods and services" as conjured up in countless documents published worldwide, as well as the polarization tendencies between, on one hand, the demands for international solidarity and the call to do more to nurture national identities—a struggle that has by now been pumped up to a "clash of cultures"—or, on the other hand, closing or at least bridging the Digital Divide between North and South, which, it is said, must take place in conjunction with a new hegemony characterized by the primacy of Homo economicus and which carries on the history of "colonialism by other means."

The wooden clogs that Luddite protestors threw into the works of English textile machinery were hardly in a position to stanch the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, and protectionist reflexes are no less impotent to prevent regressive forms of globalization and their impact on cultures all over the world. Protectionism, which itself bears regressive traits, is incapable of furthering emancipatory progress or of guaranteeing cultural diversity.

Before the backdrop of this landscape teeming with contradictions and problematic issues, it is incumbent upon precisely the intellectuals, digerati and knowledge workers mentioned at the outset of this essay to face the challenge of intervening themselves in what is happening, and getting personally involved in ongoing international political processes in the form of concrete deeds that go beyond the symbol production of their everyday occupational lives.

The Janus-Headed Character of Cultural Goods

When there is talk of cultural diversity or solidarity in international debates, then what is meant thereby is the allocation of funds. The Janus-headed form of cultural goods, the so-called "dual character" of cultural goods and services, is often left out of consideration by the debate participants. Nevertheless, it is precisely the non-economic side of cultural output that makes it possible to differentiate it from other negotiable spheres, that is so difficult to grasp and, at the same time, is so easily abused. Consequently, no really heavyweight advocates have taken up this cause in the debate.

That dual character of cultural goods and services produces a contradiction in the cultural object itself, an object that finds itself—just like the emerging Knowledge-Based Societies-in a transitional phase. This inherent contradiction plays right into the hands of precisely those traditional forces who want to reduce that which is cultural to its economic dimension—something that has become patently clear in conjunction with the GATS negotiations and the activities of the WTO—in order to remove all impediments to its being fully negotiable (in all senses of the word).

Possibilities seldom have advocates. The protagonists of the field who had chosen to get actively involved in ongoing processes usually did so on the basis of motivation provided by the dreams of possibilities of a present that has long since become the concluded past.

For a Critique of Regressive Globalization

At a moment in time when a well-founded, trenchant and subtly differentiated critique of the regressive forms of globalization would be called for, the field of discourse continues to be dominated by diffuse and reflexive anti-globalization. This effect, however, is much less attributable to the globalization critics themselves than it is to a way of thinking being pushed by the political camp that advocates economic liberalism. Such thought

fosters artificial polarization in order to completely nip in the bud any and all real alternatives to an economic model that is merely apparently triumphant and purportedly unrivaled. In processes such as those being described here, what are manifesting themselves are, in our opinion, dialectical patterns rather than hybrid forms. Thinking in terms of hybrids runs the risk, at least in this context, of making it rather more difficult to scrutinize circumstances from a political perspective.

For a Global Culture of Remembrance Instead of a Cult of Cultural Heritage

In a situation of flux and liquidity, the concept of cultural heritage as put forth by UNESCO among others turns out to be a stone that is being eroded by the currents. The task at hand here is to make the transition to a far more dynamic concept of "cultural memory" and a "global culture of remembrance" that places value upon "passing on the flame" and dispenses with raking the ashes that have been left behind. Memory—in a dialectic with forgetting—flows with the stream of modernization and has much higher chances of "continued existence via transformation" than the only somewhat flexible concept of cultural heritage and its conservation imperative.

Policies of Difference Instead of Identity Politics as a Means of Achieving Vibrant Cultural Diversity

As everyone knows, it's impossible to wade into the same river twice. So, in this sense, concepts of "cultural identity" are ill-suited to the process of modernization and its reconciliation with remembrance. Identity politics pursued by nation-states and ethnic groups degenerate all too easily into vehicles for their inherent demonization of the Other. The search for collective identity may indeed appear understandable on the part of human beings existing under liquid circumstances that are difficult for them to grasp and thus make them feel insecure, but this is dialectically connected in a highly problematic way with the debasement of other collectives.

The accentuation and investigation of cultural "difference" that would be welcome under these circumstances would be much more conducive to a dynamic understanding of the situation of the world's cultures. Attributing high esteem to cultural difference promotes a culture of global acceptance and tolerance and thus works to counteract the cult of identity. Cultural difference also deserves to be regarded as an essential factor contributing to prosperity and human development, even including—as well as harnessing—the egotistical motives of peoples' dealings with one another. Another aspect of this approach is to juxtapose an image of vibrant diversity to the current decline of cultural diversity.

Eddies in the Stream—Turbulent Standstill

The direction in which the current of modernization flows is by no means as inevitable as it might appear at times; planning and implementing its design are essential human tasks. There are occasional whirlpools in this stream, spots at which the flow of energy is transformed into a turbulent standstill, and where regressive forms of globalization have currently gotten the upper hand. As a matter of fact, though, struggles for emancipation are raging and their outcome is as yet undecided.

Hegemony Wars in the Internet

If one acknowledges the fact that the emergence of global media realities constitute the core innovation of what is widely referred to as globalization—a process whose

international flows of people and wares already go back several centuries—then the Internet is the quintessential battleground of the previously mentioned hegemonic struggles. The development of the Internet has proceeded along a remarkable path. A product of military R&D, it initially developed in the scientific domain from which the general public was excluded. Ultimately, the Internet did conquer the commercial marketplace and the public sphere and, indeed, has had a powerful impact upon both of them. At the same time, though, neo-liberal accumulation of capital has massively co-opted and nearly destroyed it. It has only been in the wake of the disillusionment resulting from the collapse of pie-in-the-sky commercial fantasies that what has come to be commonly referred to as the "socially responsible reconquest of the Internet" has been able to take place and offer new opportunities and fields of activity to protagonists of a nascent global civil society. And this is happening just as governments and international organizations are, for their part, getting ready to finally bring the medium under their control.

With this, the development of the Internet and its current state have become tri-sectoral in exemplary fashion, although this is, in an equally exemplary way, characterized by hegemonic struggles among the three sectors in which the recurrent configuration is an often problematic alliance of government and big business facing off against to the protagonists of civil society. Thus, the Internet, whose character, as anchored in its fundamental technical protocols, has been designed to be open and unbounded, has entered an awkward hybrid state in which regimented and unregimented zones exist side by side. This is a precarious, regressive situation in which, to a certain extent, the system "cannot make the decision" to reach the next level of complexity.

Crisis of Democracy—Everybody's Living in a Glass House

Blockades manifest themselves in other domains as well when the next task on the developmental agenda is reaching the next level of complexity. The model of representative democracy, the perennial export hit transporting Western endeavors to achieve hegemony, displays certain manifestations of crisis that become especially apparent in the system's up-close-and-personal relations with its subjects. The resulting legitimacy deficiencies also dovetail with issues that have emerged in relations between nation-states, which are also ultimately based upon democratic legitimacy. Thus, despite numerous commendable efforts, global civil society is still only marginally integrated into international processes. Its involvement in the corresponding initiatives—from the process of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to work by UNESCO on a "Convention for the Protection of Cultural Diversity"—continues to constitute a token concession for purposes of perceived legitimacy rather than real participation by all stakeholders, each endowed with equal rights. Its representatives have been granted seats "in the back of the bus" at best and its delegations often accorded only a precious few minutes at the podium in order to get in a few words edgewise, in symbolic fashion at least, among the lengthy communiqués of the nation-states' spokespersons.

To be sure, it also remains the responsibility of the ombudsmen of civil society to actively involve themselves in these processes, to insist upon being included in decision-making and, at the same time, to maintain lines of communication to provide feedback to stakeholders and the grass roots.

The organizational, social and political challenges posed by steering the currents of globalization necessitate, first of all, acknowledgment of the deficiencies of all previously implemented systems. After all, all the protagonists are living in glass houses. The liturgy being preached by conservative as well as neo-liberal elements—the organizing function of the

market's "invisible hand" and the progress generated by the network effects of individuals pursuing their own self-interest—has turned out to be a flop. Theoretically, it has proven to be untenable; practically, it is highly susceptible to abuse—just consider examples like Enron—and it is pernicious in a wide variety of ways—for example, environmental destruction on a massive scale as acceptable collateral damage. Over the long term, this system tends toward regression; its opposite pole at the moment is the political-public system, one that, indeed, continues to be tangled up in conventional nation—state patterns and struggling with the above—mentioned legitimacy problems and functional failures of representative democracies. The democratic decision-making process within the context of this monopoly of authority is characterized by a number of different manifestations of erosion, and not the least of the ways in which this is apparent are the destabilization effects that can rear their ugly heads as an upshot of fundamentalist, radical rightist or xenophobic positions.

The complex of nation-states exists in a precarious relationship with, on one hand, the international system and, on the other hand, multinational corporations. This is made clear by the fact that, of the world's hundred richest organizational entities, 50 are polities and *50* are private enterprises.

Independent NGOs and institutions of civil society—many of which have emerged as a result of the initiative of single individuals or small groups—are, in turn, confronted by the problem of having to act without actual legitimation and, for the most part, being financially dependent upon the other two sectors. In their by no means always unsuccessful struggle against marginalization, they have to face the challenge of achieving a balance of power in favor of participation and co-determination.

The ongoing development of democracy thus becomes an important objective in shaping the processes of modernity, since democracy that fails to reach the next level of complexity, in turn, threatens to squander some of this system's essential achievements—in particular, the international system of human rights—through the failure to promote complexity through, for example, the reconciliation of universality and cultural contingency.

What to Do? A Call to Intervene

The angel of history, that proverbial figure—somewhat out of fashion lately—that Walter Benjamin glimpsed in the painting by Paul Klee, might be in utter disarray and peering down upon a catastrophe, but the wind of progress continues unabated to blow him and us into the future. Political commitment—beyond the "radical chic" that has come back in style in recent years—is, in this phase of transition to the second stage of modernity, by no means outdated but rather in greater demand than ever. With our participatory observations, we have attempted to portray the hegemonic struggles currently raging in the political arena. Their side-effects and their outcome will have a massive impact upon all symbolic-affective and cultural workers and, ultimately, all of mankind. We would especially like to call upon all men and women active in the cultural field to take sides in these struggles. There are numerous opportunities and forums for such intervention.

One such globally oriented forum has arisen as a result of the work of the World Culture Forum Alliance (WCFA) and its partner institutions like Ars Electronica. With its tri-sectoral architecture, the WCFA—positioned as a node of intersection between the civil-society antipodes of the World Social Forum (WSF) and the World Economic Forum (WEF)—is actively campaigning to achieve the objective of the true collaboration of all groups on the design of the emerging Knowledge Societies. It amplifies the voice of culture in international processes, makes a special effort to build bridges among various different processes that are often operating in isolation, and takes a stand in international debates on behalf of concerns like the preservation of cultural human rights and the nurturance of the diversity of cultures. A concrete upcoming opportunity to get actively involved is the Second Phase of the World Summit on the Information Society that will be held in November 2005 in Tunis. Another presents itself in connection with the activities of the WCFA *(http://www.wcfalliance.org)*.

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald