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The Roots of Cultural Backlash in Contemporary Processes of Globalization

GRACIA CLARK*

INTRODUCTION

The complex set of economic and political trends, or forces, often referred to as “globalization” has a contradictory, even paradoxical, character that lends itself to both positive and negative interpretations. Contemporary political movements around the world are active participants in these interpretations as they develop proactive and reactionary responses to these new global conditions. Globalization, and the energetic efforts of activists to take advantage of it, have had serious consequences for human autonomy and security. Globalization defines effective ideological space when it is invoked to legitimize universalist initiatives, and also when it is demonized to legitimize loyalties and values defended as localized alternatives to it. Both political practices have shown potential for providing positive opportunities for empowerment and networking, and also have shown potential for justifying horrific abuses of human life and dignity. This Article seeks to explain why it remains so easy for abusive regimes to use the scapegoat of globalization to rally support for their continued existence, and also why it is comparatively difficult for international human rights activists to use global institutions to protect against such abuses.

On one hand, these contemporary transformations caused by globalization seem to be decentralizing the sources of economic and political power. The imperial or national capital no longer monopolizes the economic life of those within its territorial jurisdiction. The decision-making centers seem dispersed among a number of cities in different continents, each with its own array of stock exchanges, currency markets, and corporate headquarters. Authoritarian commands have increasingly been replaced by depersonalized technical advice, supposedly available to all and binding on none.

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On the other hand, global inequalities in power and material resources are clearly growing rather than shrinking. Polarization of every sort is reported to be growing rapidly. The gaps between poor and rich countries and between high and low earners are widening at an accelerating pace. Citizens of former colonial nations find themselves with less independence in national policy formulation and implementation, not more. National governments are more vulnerable to international pressures and institutions, but their ability or capacity to repress their own citizens remains unimpaired. The technical recommendations, presented as neutral and abstract, consistently work in practice to reinforce and intensify this political and economic hierarchy. The higher reaches of control are no weaker for being harder to identify. This confusing situation calls for a close study of the newer processes of domination to see more precisely how they are configured, intensified, and perpetuated across national boundaries.

I. GLOBALIZATION AND STRATEGIC SITES

Saskia Sassen, a world systems theorist working from within urban planning, has identified and studied in depth several “strategic sites” closely identified with the process of globalization.¹ Contrary to the rootless image of global economic processes, the tight geographic boundaries of these “strategic sites” turn out to be an important aspect of why they function as they do. The highly concentrated central business district of the “global city” makes its power reach beyond national boundaries.² Another important “strategic site” is the “free trade zone,” whose marginality is heightened by exemption from territorial regulation and taxation. Sassen’s generally sympathetic portrayal of “strategic sites” nonetheless draws attention to the comprehensive process of cultural, social, and economic production of these unmarked, deterritorialized spaces that are deemed global. This Article turns a critical ethnographer’s eye on Sassen’s descriptions of the economic processes she attaches to these locations. The cultural processes that construct and maintain these specialized locations enable them to continue functioning as anchors and generators of broader globalization processes.

Sassen first considers what distinguishes a global city, such as New York, London, or Tokyo, from other very large cities without their international dominance. She singles out what she calls the “command functions” of

1. See SASKIA SASSEN, *GLOBALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS* (1998).

2. See SASKIA SASSEN, *THE GLOBAL CITY: NEW YORK, LONDON, TOKYO* (1991).

decisionmaking and dealmaking carried out by an international elite of top executives and management consultants. Her detailed attention to the specifics of the labor process of these command functions gives important insights about their articulation within the geography and culture of this elite group.

In fact, she reveals a kind of informal sector at the top of the global city as well as at its bottom. Sassen pays particular attention to financial services, the fastest growing and currently dominant sector in the global economy. This sector features complex collaborative relationships, financial negotiations, and mergers, which require a very specific type of neighborhood or locale. These functions only take root in cities that provide a tightly bounded downtown business district where all the significant actors work within easy walking distance of each other. Through repeated, loosely structured, and face-to-face interactions, members of the managerial elite build the shared high trust and information levels needed for mutual confidence. To sustain its status as a global city, this downtown business district must also include appropriate "professional amenities," such as restaurants and health clubs, where such interactions take place.

The labor process Sassen describes for financial services explains a great deal about the gender and ethnic dynamics at these highest levels. A large part of the work of managers and consultants consists of making subjective judgments about who is reliable, important, interesting, or has the potential for growth. Interactions in boardrooms and offices providing collaborative consulting services merge seamlessly in style and content with those in supposedly more social or recreational locations. Studies of affirmative action at many less exalted economic levels consistently show that personal relationships and opinions formed in such informal venues and activities give free rein to gender, racial, and ethnic assumptions in forms especially hard to eradicate. The distinction between Sassen's command functions and the more routine managerial functions delegated to lower-level executives in the suburban company offices is congruent to the "glass ceiling" in corporate advancement faced by women and minorities.

The task of impressing and bonding with potential collaborators is clearly a highly gendered and cultured performance, whether it takes place in the boardroom, nightclub, golf course, or squash court. Even those with the expected white male appearance must continually prove or at least display their natural right to command. Individual women and minorities can break through the glass ceiling to the extent that they can replicate this performative

gender and racial identity by decontextualizing themselves, denying or removing their own markers, to match the unmarked category. In practice, this requires the collaboration of others, on or off stage. Some candidates may be unable or unwilling to detach themselves from their social context, such as their families, to that extent. Others are persistently restored to their social context by constant remarks that they are either exceptional or typical of their marked category.

Looking at management and control as a concrete labor process reveals with surprising force that it is both an illusion and a work of art. In fact, unremarked support workers play as essential a part in enabling this performance as do fellow members of the accredited elite. As Sassen points out, the managerial elite are extremely dependent upon the support workers in their midst to create and maintain the rarified environment they need. The communications infrastructure and office facilities needed to exercise command globally require constant and unremitting effort by cleaners, personal secretaries, security guards, repairers, and deliverers. Along with the hotel, restaurant, sex, and entertainment workers who contribute an essential aspect to professional amenities, support workers meticulously remove and absorb all traces of the actual physical and social location. This can mean solving quite different concrete problems depending on local circumstances, ranging from political hostility to intermittent water and electricity supplies. Support workers carefully replicate the culture and facilities of the Intercontinental Hotel worldwide, often after intensive training in the new norms by their supervisors. These disciplined support systems make it possible for the globetrotting executive to believe that he is a culturally-neutral technocrat. He can walk into equivalent facilities in any part of the world and function as if he were at home, rather than just feel at home.

The mirror image of the unmarked global elite is the strong gender and ethnic marking characteristic of these service occupations. Secretaries, waiters, and exotic dancers, for example, not only disproportionately include members of marked gender and racial or ethnic categories, but frequently enact exaggerated gender and ethnic roles in dress, voice, or behavior as part of performing or keeping their jobs. Informal sector workers, often even more strongly marked by gender or ethnicity, provide the lower-priced food, clothing, housing, and services that permit and subsidize the continued presence of these support workers—yielding informal workers even lower incomes. Sassen emphasizes that these categories of workers are not evicted from the global city, but are devalued or made invisible within it. Their

continued presence is actually an integral part of the successful overvaluation of command functions that are equally gender- and culture-specific. This decontextualization process lays the groundwork for two conceptual pillars central to the hegemony necessary for the global command elite to function as such. First, their decisions and conditionalities enter the policy arena as technical expertise, rather than as products of a specific cultural and political process. This status renders the judgments of the global command elite apparently neutral, thereby giving them virtually absolute authority on that basis. Through abstraction and quantification, they appropriate parts of an overlapping but not identical history, through which science itself constructed its status as a neutral authority. The intricate and continuing process through which the actual cultural and political roots of science have been stripped away, denied, and concealed by its practitioners and apologists, has attracted substantial analysis over recent decades by feminists and others. Numerical data and universal conclusions, the apparent hallmarks of scientific method and truth, are also characteristics of expert advice on economics, health, agriculture, and a wide range of development topics. Questionable assumptions or other analytical weaknesses often fail to undermine the credibility of expert recommendations if they take a clearly quantitative and abstract form.

A second form of decontextualization necessary to the continuing dominance of the elite is the establishment of evaluative separation between technical recommendations and their sometimes contradictory or disastrous consequences. Transnational agents and agencies can avoid taking responsibility for the consequences of their decisions because abstract principles like the free market are considered more important than concrete local results. This teflon quality of technocratic authority based on abstract rules needs constant polishing, just as individuals need continual decontextualization. The moral or religious tone of defenses of free market policies in institutions such as the World Bank has been widely noted by both its critics and champions. This argument effectively blames unfortunate results on a lack of sincerity, energy, or courage in national authorities.

The distinction between moral arguments that base their validity on abstract correctness and detachment rather than on actual results and relatedness has been explored in depth by Carol Gilligan.³ She presents this distinction as a contrast between male and female moral reasoning, in which

3. CAROL GILLIGAN, IN *A DIFFERENT VOICE: PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT* (1982).

the analytical credibility of male morality depends on a cultural process remarkably parallel to those processes Sassen describes as maintaining the global elite. Both the dominant ideological framework and the social division of labor divert responsibility toward women for the adjustments and compensations necessary to allow adherence to abstract principles by men. Some critics suggest that the extreme irresponsibility for consequences, which Gilligan labels as a male trait, in fact specifically characterizes the privileged middle and upper classes of white men. This is plausible precisely because these men alone can truly count on others to clear away those messy consequences.

II. OVERVALORIZING AND DEVALORIZING CERTAIN GROUPS OF WORKERS

Globalized spaces, such as the downtown business districts, could not exist if they excluded rather than devalored non-elite categories of workers. Women, minorities, and immigrants are not absent from global cities, but are positioned within them very differently from the managerial elite. Immigration laws, for example, while notably unsuccessful in keeping immigrants from arriving bodily in global cities, have in fact been very successful in keeping them illegal. Their status as illegal aliens positions them outside legal regulations of wages, hours, and safety and labor relations as effectively as declaring them exempted in a free trade zone. Part-time, temporary, and subcontracting work, all hallmarks of globalization, also can accomplish this repositioning and devalorization.

Overvalorizing the managerial elite requires devalorizing support workers in these ways, both to provide the concrete services the elite need to function as such and to provide the constant symbolic confirmation of their status needed to maintain command. Sassen emphasizes the hidden vulnerability of the elite created by their acute dependence on invisible support workers. Her analysis also explains why much apparently promising, informal sector activity around the world becomes a frustrating dead-end in practice. The necessarily subordinate relationship of the informal sector activity to more powerful sectors accomplishes this impasse, not any inherent or pre-existing characteristics of the work or the workers themselves.

Sassen's analytical principles also apply to a wider range of social groups whose devalorization sustains the continued overvaluation of the managerial elite. She begins this extension with reference to offshore banking havens and free trade zones. These artificially detached spaces, almost always in

peripheral geographical locations, reflect a parallel process of invisible but fierce protection of privileged space for the global elite. This space is especially designed for facilitating their high-level financial transactions. Rather than springing up spontaneously whenever artificial constraints on economic activity are removed, these spaces must be actively separated from a local context that implies recognizing historically established entitlements and responsibilities, such as labor and environmental regulations. Breaking these bonds in the free market is easier where they are already weaker for historical reasons, such as in the impoverished periphery. This is another form of decontextualization that must be accomplished in economic, social, and cultural terms that simultaneously erect, bridge, and reinforce the gap between the more standardized global spaces and the infinitely variable shapes of local politics and culture. Paradoxically, creating and defending these international locations usually requires heavy state intervention and a significant recurrent investment in vigilance against, and repression of, counter-initiatives such as unions.

For underdeveloped nations, the policy regime called structural adjustment has been a primary instrument in establishing such global space across an entire country. Negotiations over loan conditions for renewal of financial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank provide a unified ideological and fiscal discipline highly effective with financially desperate governments. Amicable conclusions to joint IMF and World Bank negotiations act as a gatekeeping “seal of approval” for access to other multilateral and bilateral assistance and commercial credit. National governments must show enthusiasm, not just a grudging agreement, for dismantling regulatory controls and customs barriers in order to create a “favorable climate for investment” in harmony with multinational operating norms. Public subsidies should be reduced for education, health, and utilities, and should be restricted more tightly to building transport and communications infrastructure for exports and providing tax holidays for investors.

These efforts to facilitate the movement of capital along global transnational circuits are more successful than corresponding efforts to restrict the movement of labor through immigration. While invoking the name of the free market, States intervene directly and forcefully to restrain local wages and credit access in order to restrict consumer demand, reduce local buying power, and prevent inflation. Enacting these restraints and dismantling hard-won labor protections replicates, as much as possible, the employment conditions

of the free trade zone within the country at large, and in many cases, requires a comparable level of repression to maintain this condition.

The reciprocal policy imperatives to free capital and freeze labor only dramatize, on a broader scale, a dynamic of overvalorization and undervalorization that echoes the dynamic present within a global city. The economic policy regime of structural adjustment provides human and natural resources to international actors at a discount, because it explicitly ignores or undervalues local costs and benefits. The central concept used in sectoral planning is comparative advantage in tradeables, or potential exports, which already undervalues alternative production for local markets. The process of calculating comparative advantage favors products or industries with low local wages and resource prices, since these are counted as costs, not benefits.

These low local costs often result from particularly monopolistic or otherwise disadvantageous marketing arrangements from labor recruitment practices, or from a legacy of natural resource confiscation subsidized by the past use of military force during conquest. In light of these histories, the military repression sometimes required to ensure continued access to resources on the same devalored terms only maintains such a tradition. Export diversification supported in Africa by the World Bank emphasizes fresh flowers, green vegetables, shrimp, and other luxuries, as well as perishables for European consumers. The prices for these high-risk crops move very rapidly because they are associated with extremely centralized marketing networks. Multinationals resort extensively to contract farming, so they can easily stop buying and move out, leaving local citizens to absorb the costs of changing production.

Decontextualization processes also contribute to the devaluation of local factors by making local consequences invisible or irrelevant in calculations of economic advantage. This analytical shift is congruent with the growing dominance of financial services, which, Sassen remarks, make it possible to divorce profit from jobs almost completely. Economic liberalization is sometimes presented as reducing the risks and costs of transactions, but this claim only becomes credible to the extent that local communities become invisible. Far from being reduced, the risks and costs of globalized production are simply displaced onto local communities. Allowing more flexible hiring and layoffs means less risk of commitment for the corporation, but more risk of abrupt unemployment to be absorbed by the employees. Floating exchange rates for local currencies, with rapid devaluation and fluctuation, continue to devastate local real incomes; but because this risk no longer threatens the

corporate profits, now easily converted and expatriated, it no longer exists. Environmental and safety controls designed to reduce immediate or future health risks also vanish in the name of flexibility and in the stark face of competition from more permissive locations.

The lack of accountability for concrete local results, while unfortunately widespread throughout the development industry, is also particularly marked in the framework of structural adjustment. World Bank and IMF publications and reports repeatedly extend the timelines for achieving basic development goals they first predicted or promised, through following their policy recommendations, into an indefinite and receding future horizon. As the documentation of negative effects on incomes and living conditions among the poor accumulated (most dramatically in sub-Saharan Africa), demands for strict adherence to free market principles continued unabated. Programs to mitigate the "social costs of adjustment" multiplied but remained voluntary and under-funded, while the African experience was declared a success on the basis of gross national product and finance-based indicators. In comments at a recent academic conference, a World Bank official openly disavowed any development goals beyond financial stabilization.⁴

As a direct result of such policy shifts, much broader populations than the urban informal sector or service sector contribute, however unwillingly, to the overvaluation of the global managerial elite by absorbing more than their share of human and financial costs. Openly or tacitly, their acquiescence or defeat confirms the legitimacy or inevitability of command by this global elite. The presumption of their unbalanced responsibility for adjustment to global economic fluctuations underscores and permits the continued irresponsibility of the elite for the consequences of their decisions and recommendations worldwide. By feeding into the overvaluation of the elite, each devalued group thus participates not only in its own devaluation, but in that of other marginalized groups who may be positioned very differently in terms of gender, nationality, race, and other distinguishing characteristics.

The central importance of decontextualization to devalorization illuminates some particularly devastating implications of a subtle historical shift in the parameters of the devalued category. "Women, minorities, and immigrants" are now the marked "others" of corporate hiring demography, increasingly replacing the previous formula of "women and children," which replaced the still earlier legal phrase "women, children, and the insane." The

4. American Anthropological Association annual meeting, November, 1997.

newest phrase narrows the range of corporate accountability even further by referring only to a set of potential, if undervalued, employees. Children and other dependents are no longer mentioned, displacing both biological and sociocultural reproduction beyond the identified margins to a location completely off the map. “Women, minorities, and immigrants” emerge onto the uneven playing field from invisible doors in the homelands, slums, or suburbs. Biological and social reproduction need not enter value calculations at all, and can remain unacknowledged, even as a negative cost. In much the same vein, structural adjustment programs explicitly predict that the informal sector will, under the guise of entrepreneurship, absorb those left unemployed by formal sector restructuring and shoulder their subsistence and reproductive responsibilities with minimal disruption and no additional resources.

Like the urban informal sector staffed by immigrants, these reproductive activities do not disappear, but become more effectively devalored by this conceptualization. The resources and labor hours needed for reproduction are assumed to be cost-free, yet this very assumption strips them of value. Not coincidentally, those same “women, minorities, and immigrants” carry out the actual work of social and physical reproduction within the same local contexts from which they cannot escape. Since there is no place for these unacknowledged responsibilities in the logic of value, they also serve to mark more strongly people who are unable to shed them, with stigmatized identities as women and people of color, and to constrain them more sharply. The invisibility of childcare, healthcare, and community welfare delegitimizes the claims of these individuals on resources either through public services or through a living wage. Consequently, budget-balancing exercises, in industrial and underdeveloped nations alike, treat expenditures on these sectors as wasteful or even self-indulgent under conditions of austerity. Devaluing local or personal standards of living in favor of competitiveness, translated as efficient service of needs defined by the global elite, becomes a mark of moral virtue in the new economic order.

Through social and cultural processes such as those discussed above, the abstract concepts of undervalorization and decontextualization have material effects on the daily lives of the global citizens interviewed by anthropologists. Wages can fall below subsistence levels for individuals, let alone families, because competitiveness, rather than social reproduction, is the standard for getting the wages right. Government budget-balancing exercises can reduce expenditures on health and education or raise medical and school fees without considering the effects on family budgets. Such measures are called cost-

cutting measures because their costs, in higher fees or greater demands for unpaid family labor, do not count as costs. Fundamentally, they are costs to people who do not count. Political debates aimed at making decisionmakers take account of the losses in standards of living to lower-status categories lack legitimacy to the extent that processes of decontextualization are successful and hegemonic. Where virtue depends on ignoring or defying the human consequences of applying abstract principles of correctness, it is hardly much of a leap to condone or ignore the repression or inhibition of initiatives that would create more accountability for those consequences by expanding the arena of policy debate to include such issues.

CONCLUSION

Taking local loyalties and consequences seriously in formulating and carrying out international human rights activities will contribute directly to their future effectiveness. First, it will help to forestall the frequent accusations of cultural imperialism that have so effectively hindered these activities from enjoying more widespread public and official support in many countries. The historical and continuing experiences of many populations with similar universalist channels used to devalue their costs or dismiss their cultural heritages give great plausibility to suspicions about the motivations and results of human rights campaigns. Approaches and tactics that clearly distinguish contemporary activism from these historical precedents need to incorporate both symbolic and practical gestures.

Second, such initiatives will help to turn around the widespread hostility towards externally focused economic and cultural institutions, including Western media and corporations, international financial and commodity markets, and other organizations with a concrete presence in many peripheral countries. Very real pains of economic deprivation and social disruption make this a powerful source of political motivations on the ideological level and in the organization of grassroots activities. Communal sentiments and networks have proven to have strong roots as adversaries to human rights work, and they often seem ineradicable in their negative manifestations, such as ethnic cleansing. Such sentiments and networks could make equally formidable allies, if successfully recruited in support of positive alternatives to the status quo. Tapping these deep wells of resentment requires acknowledging how the status quo is both precious and terrifying to many. The constant replenishment of this outrage through the small and large humiliations of daily

life experience then strengthens rather than undermines activist commitment to humanist goals.