Ignorant Armies Clash by Night: Globalisation and Cultural Disorientation

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Raymond Williams, while defining his 'keywords' finds 'culture' as 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'.[1] And Stuart Hall concedes that there is 'no single unproblematic definition of culture. ... The concept remains a complex one—a site of convergent interests, rather than a logically or conceptually clarified idea'.[2] Culture is at once an abstraction and an overwhelming reality that we perceive within us and all around us. And hence, despite the complexity of the concept of culture there is no way we can avoid coming to terms with it. There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. It is that which warms the spirit in the sense that it addresses the essential human desire for mental and emotional sustenance and enrichment, the desire which makes it possible to create a whole world of arts and products which further mobilize the human spirit setting on a dynamic interaction with our environment. But the idea of culture is also fraught with a host of anxieties, if we consider it in the sense that it is a privatised and limited preserve, the possession of certain nations, classes or elite groups, and hence requires their membership to qualify for a cultural status. Unfortunately, the history of Western intellectual thought seeks to provide a gradual vindication of this exclusivity associated with the concept of culture.

It is interesting to note that the idea of culture came to be articulated since the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century in the heydays of the Western colonial expansionism and imperialism. The idea was certainly generated as a reaction to the massive changes that were taking place in the wake of industrialization and the consequent structuring of social life. But the imperialistic agenda was no less overt; culture was to be used to further and legitimate the imperialistic designs. And it did just that. Whereas culture for early anthropology provided a conceptual

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break with the dominant explanatory resources of knowledge, it introduced, in its accounts of diffusion, stratification, hierarchy and relativism, the kind of knowledge, which reinforced the prevailing prejudices. Viewed in this context, 'culture' might well have been Matthew Arnold's formula for establishing hegemony of a bourgeois social order. His *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) has a specific historical location, and was set, as Edward Said notes, in the middle of Hyde Park riots of 1867, and to serve as a deterrent to rampant social disorder – colonial, Irish, domestic.[3] What Arnold was doing was to invoke the social authority of patriotism of the Englishmen and to forge an identity for them whereby the world could be confronted defiantly and self-confidently. By extension it also seeks legitimation of the European social order. In the spirit of modernity Arnold found the rebirth of the ancient and he takes pains to legitimize it through an idealist reading of the classical Greece:

> There was an epoch in Greek life, in Pagan life, of the highest possible brevity and value. That epoch by itself goes far towards making Greece the Greece we mean when we speak of Greece.... The poetry of later paganism lived by the senses and understanding, the poetry of medieval Christianity lived by the heart and imagination. But the main element of the modern spirit's life is neither the senses and understanding, nor the heart and imagination, it is the imaginative reason.[4]

What Arnold wishes to ensure is a transition from the dissolution of old Europe to the birth of an enlightened modernity, that calls for a non-partisan unclouded outlook: 'Seeing the object as it is'. For Arnold the 'modern' is to be distinguished from the anarchy of the contemporary Britain, and the 'disinterested objectivity' of the Greeks provided the grid on which modernity was going to be placed. And then he gushes forth: we must accommodate in the cultural parameters 'the best that has been known and thought in the world'. This 'best' was to be fed by the medieval and the antiquity in Europe, but equally by the Eastern antiquities. This is the annexation that particularly appealed to the Orientalists. The Western intellectual tradition, then, created its own version of oriental cultures which it imposed upon oriental peoples and then denigrated them, thereby justifying the West's own domination of the Orient as an essentially civilizing mission—the same kind of validation that accompanied colonial expansion throughout Africa, South Asia, and much earlier, South America.[5] However, some of the ramifications of this project were also redeeming, as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* shows. Africa as the great Other could not be understood by

the Western mind. Imperialism had to contend with cultures that were too vital, too old, too powerful and too mysterious for the West, which was vindicated by the fact that the West could not maintain its foothold in Africa and Asia for long. Conrad's novel succeeds in showing that the reckless pursuit of power and wealth constitutes a process of dehumanization, and imperialism was a process of massive dehumanization and desensitization of the West which slowly eroded its moral authority. He was also able to underscore the truth that the old imperial ideas which were used to construct reality and morality were seriously challenged by alternative canons, traditions and cultures. As Edward Said remarks:

> What Foucault has called subjugated knowledges, have erupted across the field once held, so to speak, by the Judeo-Christian tradition; their influence . . . has troubled the Olympian hegemony formerly maintained by the mostly unchallenged Western citadels.[6]

The indictment of the consuming mechanism of the industrial order is earlier found in the writings of Coleridge. In his *Constitution of Church and State* (1837) he espouses a romantic vision of the capability of and necessity for mankind to pursue the goal of spiritual perfection. This goal is what he refers to as 'cultivation'. He, however, does not posit the unique and isolated self as the source of its cultivation, but considers it as the condition of the collective, or a sort of unification of individual purpose and the collective manifestation. The two realms can here be separated: the inner 'natural' state of human cultivation, gravitated towards perfection, and the external, 'material' or 'mechanical' metamorphoses that are directed by the inevitable forces of modernity that we call 'progress'. These realms are coterminous, but also antagonistic.

Coleridge further suggests the formation of an elite group within society who shall be charged with the responsibility of upholding and pursuing the necessary ideal of culture. This he refers to as 'clerisy', a secular church. He defines a new domain for culture, that of the arts. What is significant about his formulation is that culture was no longer to be conflated with civilization, which was a parallel but a different process.

Carlyle, like Coleridge, was overwhelmed by the sheer material presence of industrialism and its effect on man and environment, and referred to his era, disparagingly, as the 'Mechanical Age' bereft of philosophical or moral concerns, as human labour became routinized and was geared to the ends of speed and technology which served the pivotal role in society. The new spirit of political economy centred around

the idea of 'capital' and its accumulation, as profit became the single most motivating force for dividing and polarizing the nation. These thoughts prefigured Marx's concept of alienation.

Just as Coleridge had conceived the dualism involving culture and other achievements that constituted 'progress', Carlyle divided the sphere of man's activity into two departments; one the 'dynamic', concerning the inner life and the other, the 'mechanical', that constituted material deposition. And he believed that the contemporary preoccupation with the outer life was leading to the decline in moral sentiment, and hence eroded the founts of culture. He recommends the leadership and heroism of a literary class to uphold the 'good' and to act as a force of change and renewal in the realm of culture. He does not consider this literary elite as a class privilege but a historical necessity, consequent upon the separation of the 'cultural' from the 'social'. He voices his concern for democracy and pluralism and argues that what stands for culture should be representative of the collective life of a people, but that this collective life should comprise people unaffected by the modern industrial state. His is a plea to formulate policies to reunite labour with thought, the outside with the inside, and reinstate the dynamics of culture centrally within the 'mechanism' of the social system.

Arnold as a contemporary of Coleridge was responding to the same constraining parameters of an industrialized world, but perhaps he was more alive to the historically emerging forces of human potential. He was particularly proud of the British achievements, considering Britain as the vanguard of human progress. *Culture and Anarchy* is the culmination of his thoughts, and he was unequivocal in his views. Culture, for him, is 'high culture'. It is the best that mankind can achieve, and this excellence is not applicable to all human thoughts and production. It refers to the peak, the direction and aspiration, which, at the same time, reveals the human potential. Unfortunately, as Arnold believed, culture was in tenuous and feeble hands. The great body of population, from rich to poor, seemed incapable of registering and thus championing culture as the central quality of being. In the exposition of the class system of his time he finds no redemption. He places the complacent aristocracy, preoccupied with upholding the hierarchical system, in the category that he designates 'Barbarians', and he calls the abundant, self-seeking, entrepreneurial middle class, 'Philistines', whereas the working classes were the 'populace', either aspiring towards the goals of the Philistines or rendered without potential through drudgery and degradation. The whole of the nation seemed without

hope, prisoners of their epoch, mistakenly conflating the material and mechanical benefits of the modern age with the true purpose of being. He asks us to consider

> these people, then, their way of life, their habits, their manners, the very tone of their voices, look at them attentively; observe the literature they read, the things which give them pleasure, the words which come forth out of their mouths, the thoughts which make the furniture of their minds, would any amount of wealth be worth having with the condition that one was to become just like these people by just having it?[7]

Arnold saw that there was a clear choice between the central and eternal value of culture or the valueless disarray of anarchy. And having made the choice for culture, the way forward was through collective action. He did not place the mission of culture in the hands of a special group of guardians, like the 'clerisy' or a literary elite, nor did he see it as a private enterprise of the privileged few; he believed that culture could be transmitted and become shared through the policies of the state, and his own mission would be in establishing a new national system of general education. Arnold's ideas were perfectly in consonance with the Enlightenment project, and he assigned the cultural goal at the pinnacle of human achievements. These ideas also adopted evolutionary Darwinism, and the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan suggested hierarchical classificatory scales of human evolutionary civilization. The inevitable political fall out of it was that it provided a rationale for colonialism and the technological triumph of culture over nature. Reality was bifurcated into man and nature. As nature was abstracted and quantified for man to conquer, so man, too, became an object to be conquered. Resistance to imperialism, however, generated counter impulses so that the dominant paradigm of cultural understanding had to shift to accommodate and explain the hitherto unexamined cultures. It was a radical departure from the mainstream European thinking which now had to concede cultural 'difference'. The dominant paradigm of evolutionism, which had rested on absolutist beliefs, was replaced by one of 'historicalism' based on a commitment to relativism. Anthropology's commitment to culture was still perceived as a way of life, but emphasis shifted to the plurality of cultures, as being isolated, discrete and independently functioning.

During the imperialist phase, the mood in the West was one of cultural self-confidence as industrialization and consequent exploitation of world resources were taking great strides, and imperialism was finding ever new ways to acquire moral legitimacy and giving a new face to

capitalist modernity. But, as the rapidly spreading global environmental crisis shows, the modern society also undercuts the basis of its own moral legitimation. The prevalent mood of postmodernity or late modernity, is one of uncertainty and of paradox, of cultural indirection, which is clearly different from the mood of relative cultural confidence that informed the European projects of colonialism of the nineteenth century. Following the disappearance of imperialism, which characterized the modern period up to the 1960s, a different configuration of the global power emerged in the form of globalization. It may be distinguished from imperialism in that it is a far less coherent or culturally directed process. Imperialism at least had a specific agenda, that of spreading one social system from one center of power across the globe. The idea of globalization suggests interconnections and interdependency of all global areas, which happens in a far less purposeful way. It happens as the result of economic and cultural practices, which do not, of themselves, aim at global integration, but which nonetheless produce it. More importantly, the effects of globalization are to weaken the cultural coherence of all individual nation-states, including the economically powerful ones. It happens when the local cultures are marginalized or reoriented to support the cultural parameters of a global economy. It is, however, becoming increasingly obvious that the Western principles of unfettered economic growth, the free market, and the sovereignty of the consumer are producing awesome problems for the global environment. Since the cultural idea of the West embraces the ideal of unlimited material growth and progress, it provides the dynamics of further exponential growth even after such a convergence has been achieved. Furthermore, there is a tendency to regard the process of industrialization as a monolithic, unidirectional process of economic growth. Comparative studies, however, show that such is far from being the case. The incapacity of sovereign nation-states to deal with the material side effects of their own and others' industrial and technological practices has its parallel in the complex and anarchic interdependence of the world money markets. We may grant, that so long as the expansionistic dynamics of industrial civilization can be maintained, differences in material affluences among individuals and societies could serve some useful function in that they are reminders for greater efforts that may be necessary. But once deprived of prospects for improvement in an economy whose aggregate wealth does not keep pace with the growing population, they become a source of disruption and conflict in societies and communities of nations.

The cultural experience of people caught up in these global

processes is likely to be one of confusion, uncertainty, and the perception of powerlessness. And who is to blame? Do we blame the 'global market forces? This may not be a satisfactory answer, since it does not connect with any of the ways in which people interpret their experiences as members of a social and political community. We are here, as in Arnold's 'Dover Beach', '...on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight/ Where ignorant armies clash by night'. The relentless centralization of the big economy, the increasing political, geographical and conceptual distance between those who produce, and those who control economic decision making make it difficult to express differences of aspirations and practices. Within the present social and politico-economic framework of our nation-states there is simply no way for an individual to grapple with that, which determines his fate. We cannot vote in or out multinational corporations or market systems, and yet these seem to have more influence on our lives than the national governments we do elect. Once they are entrenched we cannot even wish them away or dislodge them as they have already exercised irreversible interrelations with our domestic markets. National governments in late modernity are less and less able to work autonomously in the political-economic sphere. All this can be viewed in terms of a cultural vacuity, which extends to the entire public domain. When people find their lives more and more controlled by forces beyond them or their national institutions, their sense of belonging to a secular culture is eroded. The experience of capitalism produces a 'global' system, which can be seen not only in the complex networks of international finance and multinational capitalist production, but also in the spatial context of cultural experience that it produces.

The reality of the networks of global technology which influence our lives can be only dimly grasped in cultural terms. This is because we none of us actually 'live' in the global space where these processes are hatched and take place; for instance, an information technology network is not really a human space. Our everyday experience is necessarily local and yet this experience is increasingly shaped by global processes. The global space only tends to diffuse the cultural identities of the nation-states to a level where they almost become unrecognizable. This is overwhelmingly realized when we find that the contemporary culture is so thoroughly saturated by the mass media that it is impossible to separate real cultural experience from that what we, for instance, experience through the flat surface of the television screen. According to Douglas Kellner, 'Cultural phenomena like the media, advertising, political spectacle, and the aestheticization of everyday life in the consumer

society play a fundamental role in the very organization and reproduction of contemporary capitalism.'[8] Stuart Hall observes about the media centrality in our lives:

> Quantitatively and qualitatively, in twentieth century advanced capitalism, the media have established a decisive and fundamental leadership in the cultural sphere. Simply in terms of economic, technical, social and cultural resources, the mass media command a qualitatively greater slice than all the older, more traditional cultural channels which survive.[9]

This is to argue that the sheer enormous material presence of the mass media has marginalized other older means of social communication in modern societies in which people live increasingly fragmented and sectionally differentiated lives. The mass media, thus, become the principal means through which people organize their experiences in an 'anomic' capitalist society.

In Hall's view the centrality of mass media is due to the fact that they have acquired a position whereby they can organize and 'pattern' people's experiences. He may, however, be overemphasizing his claim on the assumption that media have a 'managerial role' in organizing experience of people. This view is countered by those who insist on an 'active audience' who absorb or discard the media messages at their will and command. It is also contended that the media messages themselves are mediated by other modes of cultural experience. It cannot, however, be denied that media reflects the dominant representative aspect of the modern global culture, which excludes much of the 'lived' experience of our local cultures. If we think of the significance of the spread of the Western media into the cultural space of 'developing societies' it may be possible to think of this impact as a shift in the balance of forces in the 'dialectic' of culture—as lived experience and culture—as representation; of people coming to draw more on media imagery in their constructions of reality. These representations of global media do not always correspond to individual cultural objects of a nation. It is true that despite a certain sense in which we can speak of a 'national culture' there exist, within nation-states and even possibly across national boundaries, patterns of cultural identification, which are quite different from, and often in direct conflict with, the 'national culture'. If a national culture as a representative of diverse cultural patterns is hard to define, it is even more difficult to relate to the nebulous culture projected across a global space. The political effects of this may be that it lends a spurious legitimacy to whatever cultural forces can assert themselves as representative of some global power. It then succeeds in projecting a

hegemonic culture exported by corporate capitalism. The commodification of social experience by the global media invades the private space of many of the traditional societies.[10]

Advanced Western societies, despite their achievements in political democracy and economic prosperity are showing signs of stagnation and decline, and it is becoming increasingly clear that such signs of decline are, due not to an accidental configuration of factors, but rather on account of the tensions and contradictions within the ideas and values at the core of the expansionist civilization manifested in the ubiquitous trend of globalisation. It is true that we can always think of a certain cultural dimension in terms of 'an international humane enterprise',[11] but 'we must be able to think and interpret together discrepant experiences, each with its particular agenda and pace of development'[12] in order to amalgamate the aspirations of the local cultures. Even 'the arts have functioned very variously–arising from different sociological milieux within communities, manifesting fundamentally different ideologies, perceptions and mythic needs'.[13] The cultural difference[14] should also subvert the notion that the cultures living by myths are ahistorical, and representative of 'a second-rate consciousness'[15] in comparison to those that are supposed to be more mature and historical. In the face of the emergent global tensions, the 'cultural difference' is taking various forms, and as Martin Jaquees remarks: 'As power moves upwards from the nation states towards larger international units ... so there is a countervailing pressure, whose roots are various, for it to move downwards. There is a new search for identity and difference in the face of new national and ethnic demands.'[16]

These demands seem to be occurring everywhere, in the First, Second and Third Worlds. Though expressed in the language of nationalism and ethnicity,[17] these may be seen as simply the available categories in which people articulate a more general need, which includes the need for communities to formulate qualitative cultural goals, since each culture determines what counts as the optimal solution to the problem of survival and prospering according to its internal dynamics. Culture is a kind of living organism with an internal dynamism of its own, looking beyond the boundaries set by itself. As the world and our knowledge of it change, culture, too must change so as to make itself adequate to its changing and changed circumstances. Although the globalisation of culture is not the same thing as its homogenization, globalisation does involve the use of the strategies of homogenization such as advertising techniques and linguistic hegemony. The global culture that is underway may claim to be triumphantly universal and

resiliently particular, but unfortunately, the conditions of late-modern globalisation seem incapable of satisfying the particular needs of the various societies. It is likely that some forms of the discourses of cultural imperialism, particularly those articulated in terms of national or ethnic identity, will increase in the future. But the underlying problems they register are unlikely to be solved by breakaway autonomous groupings. What is required is a radical structural reorganization of the way in which human cultural goals become defined and enacted; and it may involve deconstruction of some of the global institutions of late modernity. Viewed from the perspective of our localized cultures, a cultural shift is called for. It has happened even in the case of Western capitalist countries. The character of capitalistic enterprise has gone through profound changes such that at some stage the Puritan ethics of the Western civilization was no longer found to meet the demands of imperialism, and had to be abandoned. Globalisation makes similar demands upon national cultures forcing them to redefine their goals. One hopes that these cultures have the necessary resilience.

NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, Fontana, London, 1976, p. 76.
2. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms' in Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleiffer, eds., *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, Longman, New York, 1994, p. 611.
3. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 158.
4. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (first published in 1869), rpt., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, p. 12.
5. See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, Faber and Faber, London, 1990, which examines how in colonial India the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment were used for social and political control.
6. Edward W. Said, 'Third World Intellectuals and the Metropolitan Culture', *Raritan*, 9:3, Winter, 1990, p. 28.
7. Matthew Arnold, op. cit., p. 16.
8. Douglas Kellner, 'Jameson, Marxism and Postmodernism', in Douglas Kellner, ed., *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, Maisonneuve Press, Washington, 1989, p. 27.
9. Stuart Hall, 'Culture, the Media and the "Ideological Effect"' in J. Curran, et al., eds., *Mass Communication and Society*, Arnold, London, 1977, p. 341.
10. 'Tradition' is another tricky term, but I employ here a definition by Giddens to mean by it 'the purest and most innocent mode of social reproduction' in which people act as they do in their daily life because such action is authorized by repetitions across generations and tied to consensually held moral and existential beliefs within a community. Such traditional inputs are altogether ignored in the roller-coaster ride of globalisation. See A. Ginnens, 'A Reply to Critics' in D. Held

and J. B. Thompson, *Social Theory and Modern Societies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 200.

11. Malcolm Bradbury, 'Notes Towards a Definition of International Culture' in Guy Amirthanayagam, ed., *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue*, Macmillan, Hong Kong, 1982, p. 25.
12. Edward W. Said, 'Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World', *Salmagundi*, 70-71, 1986, p. 56.
13. Malcolm Bradbury, op. cit., p. 10.
14. See Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London, 1990. Bhabha observes that 'cultural difference marks the establishment of new forms of meaning, and strategies of identification', p. 313.
15. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, p. 60.
16. M. Jacques 'Britain and Europe', in S. Hall and M. Jacques, eds., *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1989, p. 133.
17. 'Ethnicity' is often taken for the politicization of culture. 'Ethnic identity is a political identity'. See Anthony P. Cohen, 'Culture as Identity: An Anthropologist's View', *New Literary History*, 1993, 24, p. 199.