Culture in the Context of Globalization: A Sociological Interpretation

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Abstract: The world today is said to be a "global village". However, this village is, rather than a culturally homogeneous community, a world of diverse cultures. In this globalized world, how different cultures interact with each other and with globalizing forces in general is crucial to their survival and to their reinvention. This essay is intended to provide a critical examination of various existing cultural phenomena, such as ethnocentrism (in forms of religious fundamentalism and cultural imperialism) and cultural relativism (multiculturalism, post-colonialism), from a sociological perspective. It will further attempt to theorize a possible mechanism of coexistence and symbiosis of different cultures in the context of globalization by relating the local to the global, the traditional to the post-traditional, the particular to the universal, and the cultural sphere to the social world.

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The term "globalization" has rapidly become a buzzword in recent years among both scholars and laypeople. Of course, behind this linguistic fad is the growing importance of globalization in human affairs. Obviously, both our everyday life and the social world at large are increasingly shaped by the sweeping process of globalization, which itself occurs in an accelerating and intensifying manner. Globalization, to put it simply, is a process by which humans and human creations move around the globe; in this process, people from different cultures are connected and interact with each other. Globalization so defined is not unfamiliar to humanity – it is part of human history even in premodern times, and it goes hand in hand with modernity. Still, there are good reasons for globalization to become a focus of attention today. The process of globalization since the end of World War II, especially since the end of the Cold War, has been unprecedented in many ways. In fact, globalization in its contemporary manifestation is a multithreaded, multifaceted, and omnipresent process that links different parts of the human world. As a result, all individuals have to conduct their life in a shrunk and interrelated world, and all individuals have more or less become global citizens. The popular catchphrase, "global village", coined by the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan in the early 1960s and widely adopted afterwards, expresses the sociological imagination of globalization only too well.

However, one may wonder, exactly in what sense the world is now a "global village"? Apparently, at the technical level, there is no lack of transportation and communication tools to facilitate globalization. Thanks to the ever renovated technology, the world is compressed into a much smaller one: in the real world, nowadays a trip to the furthest city on earth can be completed within one day; in the virtual world, instant and "fact-to-face" connection on the internet makes the physical distance between any two individuals meaningless. Thus, the human experience of time and space is fundamentally transformed, and the world is literally a global village (for those who have access to necessary equipments). Nevertheless, the role of technology is limited. Technology can be used to connect different parts and different people in the world, but it does not make the world integrated automatically. After all, the medium is not, as claimed by McLuhan, message – it is only instrumental for conveying message. Non-technological factors, the sender, the receiver, and the contents of the message, are also relevant. Moreover, technology itself does not determine its ownership. Despite the rapid growth and worldwide facade of the internet, only of small portion of the human population are internet users. The "digital divide" between those who have access to the internet and those who don't only adds a new dimension to the gap between the rich and the poor.

In the economic sphere, with the collapse of the Soviet empire and the ending of the Cold War, market economy becomes the universal norm around the world: the "Iron Curtain" or the "Great Wall" no longer exists, (neo)liberalism is explicitly or implicitly embraced worldwide, and the world is now a world for free trade (despite the remaining and potential protectionist obstacles). Thus, the frequent flow of goods, services, capital, information, technology, natural resources, and human resources in the global market makes the world substantially deterritorialized. There is no doubt that economic globalization provides the best evidence for the globalization argument: The universal adoption of market economy creates a truly global market. However, the global market in its current fashion, while integrating economic operations worldwide, functions to enlarge the gap between the rich (people, countries) and the poor. As a result, in terms of the

distribution of wealth, the world is more differentiated than ever. In other words, at the economic level, the world is a global village – a village in the hands of the rich.

The case for globalization in the political sphere is even more worrisome. Whereas global governance is in high demand (for reasons concerning all humanity, such as arms control, ecological issues, poverty and poverty-related problems, international terrorism and crimes, global financial crises, etc.), there is no legitimate global authority to respond to the demand effectively. The UN, the only organization to represent the whole world, is often strong in words but weak in deeds. Other international organizations, especially nongovernmental organizations, can be even more radical in theory but less competent in practice. Therefore, world politics continues to be determined largely by relations among regional forces and nation-states, and cosmopolitanism still sounds too utopian. In fact, in our political life, global awareness coexists with localism (regionalism, nationalism, etc.), global governance remains underdeveloped, and the world is far from being borderless. The slogan "Think Globally, Act Locally" points to the irony of globalization: the dissonance between thinking and action in global politics.

Finally, in the cultural sphere, the idea of globalization is more problematic and perplexing. The theme of "civilizational clash", as formulated by Samuel P. Huntington, is not a self-fulfilling prophecy that predicts the 9/11 attack and subsequent anti-terrorist war(s) – it is a timely reflection, however overstating, of a world still deeply divided by cultural traditions. The "global village" inhabited by us is, rather than a culturally homogeneous community, a world of cultural diversity. On the other hand, there are certainly globalized or globalizing cultural elements, which are often related to Western/American "cultural imperialism". For instance, many products that are originated in the West/US and somehow carry Western values (especially cultural products, such as pop music, TV programs, Hollywood movies, books, magazines and newspapers, etc.) are consumed globally on a daily base. Thus, in the context of globalization, we seem to face a cultural dilemma: either civilizational clash or cultural imperialism. What can we make of this conflicting cultural scenario? Or do we really have to choose between the West and the rest? In addition, cultural relativism has gained wide currency in recent years both within nation-states (mainly in the West) and internationally: within nation-states, cultural relativism is practiced under the policy of multiculturalism and theorized as the "politics of recognition"; internationally, cultural relativism is related to "postcolonialism", which is simply the aftermath of the ending of the era of Western colonialism, or rather, the ending of the cultural hegemony of the West over the world in modern times. Cultural relativism makes sense by emphasizing the unique or relative values of different cultures. However, when all cultures are in frequent contacts with one another because of globalization, can the unique values of different cultures be self-sustainable? Or are all cultures really in equal positions in the context of globalization?

Therefore, under more careful scrutiny, not all spheres of our social life are globalized equally: despite its all-pervasiveness, globalization is an uneven, differentiated, and asymmetrical process. In other words, globalization as a social phenomenon, or a cluster of social phenomena, is much more complicated than the expression "globalization" may ordinarily suggest. This essay will focus on a specific area, i.e., culture, or culture in the context of globalization. It will attempt to offer a sociological interpretation of how culture is related to globalization.

Human beings are not only political animals (Aristotle) and economic animals (Marx), but also cultural animals. The renowned American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz once observed, "We are,... incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture – and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it" (Geertz, 1973: 49).

Indeed, human beings are defined by their culture – culture both separates human beings from other kinds of existence and distinguishes human beings among themselves. In other words, human beings are unique in the universe because of their humanly unique culture (or culture in general), and human beings are different from each other because of their locally unique culture (their particular group culture). Of course, what is more interesting to humans is not how they are different from animals, but how they are different from each other. In other words, it is the cultural differences among different groups of people, rather than the differences between humans and animals, that would seem more meaningful to humans.

Culture is, needless to say, always a local invention, and it is always embedded in a specific society. However, in its "self-consciousness", a culture is local only when it is connected to and compared with other cultures. A totally isolated culture would conceive itself to be the only culture, hence the universal culture, on earth. When a culture is connected to and compared with other cultures, interactions among cultures will occur (in peace or war). The consequence of their interactions can be cultural exchange, cultural diffusion, cultural assimilation, cultural conflict, or, in some cases, cultural extinction. The ongoing process of globalization makes all cultures "local", meanwhile it exposes all cultures to global influences: because of globalization, all cultures have to identify themselves in relation to other cultures, and all cultures are in interactions with one another. Therefore, in the context of globalization, all cultures will have to reposition themselves in the diversity of cultures. In its relation to or interactions with other cultures, a culture may become traditionalistic, hence religious fundamentalism or cultural conservatism; it may adopt an aggressive and expansionist approach (which is often but not necessarily violent), hence cultural imperialism; or it may simply seek peaceful coexistence with other cultures and recognize their relative values, hence multiculturalism and postcolonialism. Another and more constructive possibility is that a culture may be open to the influence of other cultures, learn from other cultures, and reinvent itself in its interactions with other cultures.

As all cultures are connected among themselves in the context of globalization, and therefore no culture is immune to the impact of global forces today, we have to ask: What factors determines a culture's relation with other cultures? Or how should a culture relate itself to other cultures? Does a culture have to be traditionalistic in order to be sustainable? Or does a culture have to globalize its existence in order to exist? How does multiculturalism institutionalize the relative values of different cultures within a nation-state? Are we really living in a postcolonial culture? Is there or will there be a global culture in this increasingly globalized world? These are some of the issues to be explored in this essay.

2. Ethnocentrism and Its Manifestations

The world is, as always has been, a world of multiple cultures. All cultures are relatively self-contained, but no culture is totally isolated. The process of globalization is by definition cross-cultural. When a culture encounters another culture, how would it react to the differences between them? Or how would it respond to possible challenges from other cultures? The answer to these questions is crucial not only for the culture to maintain its own integrity and legitimacy, but also for the relations between the two cultures. There are two kinds of extreme and yet recurrent reactions that can be easily discerned from cross-cultural experiences in human history: one is ethnocentrism, and the other, cultural relativism. This section will explicate the rationale of ethnocentrism, and the next one will discuss cultural relativism.

Ethnocentrism is a tendency to evaluate the culture of others in terms of one's own culture. People with this tendency believe that outsiders (people in other cultures) are less civilized, or morally and mentally (if not physically at the same time) inferior. Ethnocentrism is an essential element of all cultures, or all cultures are to a certain extent ethnocentric – for both epistemological and sociological reasons. Epistemologically, ethnocentrism has its roots in anthropocentrism, which is the belief that human beings are the most significant or perhaps the only meaningful existence in the universe. Human civilization (culture writ large) functions to identify or idealize the position of human existence in the universe. It is only natural that human beings (as all humanity, nations, groups or individuals) would ontologically centralize their position. The Greek aphorism "Know thyself" is the categorical imperative for humans in all cultures. Of course, self-understanding is what distinguishes humanity from other forms of existence, and self-understanding implies self-affirmation. In the final analysis, even the belief in God/gods and the worship of nature by humans are rooted in humans' self-understanding and self-affirmation, and they make sense only in the human context. Why does anthropocentrism have anything to do with ethnocentrism? Due to geographical and other obstacles, or simply because of social expediency, human beings live in separated groups. Each group has its own culture. When people from a certain group are exposed to differences between their culture and others' culture, they tend to think of themselves as the "centre" (reads: the civilized or the more civilized). In other words, when one culture meets another, people in each culture, lacking proper mutual understanding, are more than ready to conceive their counterparts as culturally insignificant or inferior. As a result, anthropocentrism is translated into ethnocentrism. In this sense, there is an inner link between ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism: ethnocentrism derives from the anthropocentric tendency of human beings to centralize their position in the universe, or rather, in the world known to them – in their geographically or ideologically limited world.

Ethnocentrism exists also for sociological reasons. According to the functionalist school in sociology, culture is the key to the normal functioning of society or to the maintenance of a minimum social order. Culture is important in the sense that it integrates individuals into a community, real or imagined. Culture is, among other things, a system of belief, or a system of values and norms. When a group of people share the same culture, this culture constitutes a sociolinguistic context for them to develop mutual understanding and cultivate social trust among themselves. Therefore, the shared culture provides a sense of social belonging or a common identity for the corresponding group members, which is crucial to their ontological security and psychological wellbeing. When the culture lasts long enough and evolves to a certain point, as it often does, it becomes a tradition, i.e., something people in the corresponding group often take for granted or something they simply follow without too much reflection. Once a tradition is established, it is difficult for individual members in the tradition to change it, and most members would even feel obliged to defend it. In other words, a tradition is to be socially revered and followed. Moreover, a tradition tends to persist even when it is challenged – whether by internal oppositions or by external forces or by both. The reason is simple: culture (as tradition) is a convenient and effective source of moral consensus on which social stability and group solidarity is based. Changing a tradition fundamentally would seem more costly than most members in the tradition can bear. Therefore, when one culture meets another, it is only natural for people in both cultures to be ethnocentric – at least in the initial stage (when both cultures are still unfamiliar to each other) and quite possibly for a long time.

Small wonder, then, ethnocentrism prevails in all cultures. Or, in anthropological parlance, ethnocentrism is a cultural universal. Eurocentrism, the European version of ethnocentrism, has become familiar to the whole world and needs no interpretation. And Europe is not alone in being "self-centred". Mencius, the second most influential Confucian thinker in Chinese history, was speaking for all Chinese when he wrote: "I have heard of the Chinese converting barbarians to their ways, but not of their being converted to barbarian ways" (*Mencius*: 3A.4). When comparing the European and Chinese culture, Julia Ching states that "For thousands of years, Europe and China each thought of itself as the centre of its known and inhabited world" (Ching, 1993: 1). The validity of this remark can be easily extended to other regions or peoples in the world: There are not only various forms of Orientalism, as perceived by Edward Said, but also many types of "Occidentalism", when similarly defined.

Ethnocentrism in different cultures may manifest itself differently, more or less depending on the position of a culture in its relation with other cultures. In general, there seem to be two kinds of ethnocentrism, i.e., inward ethnocentrism (e.g., xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, and, more generally, cultural conservatism) and outward ethnocentrism (racism, chauvinism, imperialism). The current expression of inward ethnocentrism is mainly religious fundamentalism, while that of outward ethnocentrism is cultural imperialism.

Interactions between any two cultures may have different consequences for them. Sometimes their encounter can be detrimental or even destructive to one culture, while strengthening and empowering to the other. When a culture "feels" vulnerable or is threatened in its encounter with other cultures, it may justify its continuous existence by resorting to its own resources, thus resulting in inward ethnocentrism, as demonstrated in various kinds of religious fundamentalism. The motto "Back to Basics" reveals the essence of religious fundamentalism. The revival of Islamic fundamentalism in recent years, which is conventionally portrayed as conducive or related to terrorism, may make some people mistakenly believe that religious fundamentalism is aggressive and even violent. Nevertheless, one should not forget that the extreme measures taken by some Islamic fundamentalists, such as suicidal attack, are just the last resort for them in defending their tradition (however reinterpreted) under the invasive and overwhelming dominance of (Western) modernity. As a matter of fact, Islam is not alone in the battle against modernity, a new type of civilization that happened to originate in the West. All traditions, including the Christian tradition, have been more or less disrupted or eroded by the forces of modernity. Therefore, religious fundamentalism or cultural conservatism exists in all traditional cultures (cf. Marty and Appleby, 1991; 1993). In general, ethnocentrism in the form of religious fundamentalism or cultural conservatism is defensive, retrogressive, exclusive, and close-minded, rather than offensive, progressive, inclusive, and open-minded. This kind of ethnocentrism, as pointed out by Anthony Giddens, "tends to accentuate the purity of a given set of doctrines, not only because it wishes to set them off from other traditions, but because it is a rejection of a model of truth linked to a dialogic engagement of ideas in a public space" (Giddens, 1994: 6).

Another kind of ethnocentrism is cultural imperialism. A culture that is outwardly ethnocentric not only considers itself superior to its surrounding cultures, but also put this kind of thinking into practice – it tends to impose its values and norms upon other cultures, either by peaceful expansion or, if necessary and feasible, by violent invasion. Cultural imperialism is a particular form of imperialism, and it has existed historically in empires. Western imperialism in modern times, for example, implies an all-encompassing dominance over the colonized places. Hence Eurocentrism. Therefore, together with modern/Western ideologies, the

"gospel" of the Christian evangelists always followed the footsteps of the military victory of Western forces. Interestingly, military might and cultural power do not always match in history. In fact, all too often, the conqueror on the horseback becomes the conquered on the ground. The Romans were eventually Christianized, and later the barbarian Germans who defeated Romans became cultured under the Roman civilization. In China, first the Mongols and then the Manchurians, the two ethnic groups that ever successfully invaded and ruled the Central Kingdom, eventually preferred the Chinese culture to their own. Today, cultural imperialism is mainly associated with the hegemony of the Western culture, especially the American culture, in the world (Tomlinson, 1991; 1999). The formation of the Western/American cultural empire in the contemporary world results mainly from the diffusion of Western/American goods or goods with Western/American brands at the global scale. How the diffusion of certain goods in the worlds is related to cultural imperialism is to be explained by the nature of commodities. According to Jean Baudrillard, a commodity not only has use value and exchange value, as conceptualized by Marx, but also has symbolic value. Therefore, various commodities constitute a symbolic system, or a system of signification (Baudrillard, 1981). In this sense, commodities as symbols are carriers of culture, and the diffusion of certain commodities from one place to another implies the transmission of the corresponding culture. At this point of history, as the world of commodities is largely dominated by goods produced or originated from the West/US, global consumerism becomes tacitly instrumental for Western/American cultural imperialism. Unlike religious fundamentalism or cultural conservatism, cultural imperialism, blatant or subtle, knows no boundary in expanding its territory. On the other hand, like religious fundamentalism or cultural conservatism, cultural imperialism would reject any possible equal and dialogic relations among different cultures.

3. Cultural Relativism and Its Manifestations

An antithesis of ethnocentrism is cultural relativism. In opposition to ethnocentrism, cultural relativism acknowledges the relative values of different cultures, and it places a priority on understanding other cultures. Theoretically, there is nothing new in cultural relativism – it is simply a logical extension of philosophical relativism in the social world. In today's world affairs, cultural relativism is both an intellectual trend and a more or less institutionalized practice. As a recent intellectual trend, cultural relativism is articulated mainly by the postmodernist movement in general and the poststructuralist philosophy in particular. Jacques Derrida's anti-Platonic "grammatology", for instance, reads the world as infinite Text, in which the meaning of the present is relational or relative to the absent, and there is no absolute centre. In his view, everything in this textualized world is subject to the principle of *différance* ("deferred difference" or trace or writing), and the proper approach to this world is deconstruction (deconstructing the presence of meaning and playing what is deferred). Similarly, J.-F. Lyotard dismisses the relevance of metanarratives (God, Reason, Revolution, Progress, etc.) to the postmodern condition: "This is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their linguistic practice and communication interaction" (1984: 41). To put it in another way: "There is no reason, only reasons" (cf. van Reijen and Veerman 1988). Obviously, what lies behind Derrida and Lyotard's arguments is the idea that everything is relative, and therefore there are no absolute meanings, truths, values, or essence. Indeed, a key

idea in contemporary cultural relativism is "decentralization" (decentralizing everything that has been centralized) or deconstruction (deconstructing everything that is constructed as absolute, universal, or essential), and its now popular slogan is "Anything Goes!" In general, all poststructuralist/postmodern theories point to the existence of one thing: the Other, or what is different. In conventional Western thinking, the Other means the lesser or insignificant party in various binary oppositions. Depending on its context, the Other can be phenomenon (vs. essence), nothing (vs. being), emotion or instinct (vs. reason), the body (vs. the soul or the mind), humanity (vs. God), nature (vs. humanity), the ruled (vs. the ruler), the poor (vs. the rich), females (vs. males), the minorities (vs. the majority), children (vs. adults), the mentally or physically ill (vs. the healthy), and the East (vs. the West), etc. Obviously, the Other is not represented in culture (the dominant or mainstream culture in a given society), or there is no real place for the Other in culture: it is the absent, the repressed, the ignored, the silent, the marginal, or simply the different. In other words, the Other is not a real or autonomous counterpart of its opposite – it does not exist in or for itself; it exists because of or for the sake of its opposite. When the idea of the Other is applied to culture, it means the cultures of minority groups or subjugated people (vs. the culture of the mainstream society or the dominant group). In the modern world, the West has established and maintained its cultural hegemony over other cultures for hundreds of years. As a result, other cultures have become the Other in their relation to the West. Said's conception of "Orientalism" reveals how other cultures are conceived as the Other by Westerners. This is, of course, not how cultural relativism understands the Other. From the perspective of cultural relativism, the Other exists not to affirm its opposite or for the sake of it, but to relativize or decentralize it; the Other has its own values, and its own values are also relative – relative to anything that is related to and yet different from it. In light of this reasoning, other cultures are not necessarily inferior to Western culture, and all existing cultures may have their relative values.

Cultural relativism pertains to relations among different cultures in a society. To be more specific, when different cultures coexist peacefully in a society, they are in a condition of cultural relativism. Different cultures may coexist at two levels: domestic and global. In the contemporary world, cultural relativism at the domestic level is exemplified in what is called the "politics of recognition" or multiculturalism. On the other hand, cultural relativism at the global level is a consequence of decolonization – a process in which Western colonialism declines and the world moves into the postcolonial era. Cultural relativism at the domestic level and that at the global level are similar to one another in the sense that both acknowledge no superiority of any particular culture. But they are also quite different: cultural relativism at the domestic level is more or less institutionalized, while that at the global level remains largely a theoretical reflection of the reality in the post-Cold War world.

Cultural relativism at the domestic level is mainly associated with the practice of multiculturalism, a policy initiated in Canada in the early 1970s and quickly adopted by most Western countries. The rationale of multiculturalism is, as theorized by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, the politics of recognition, or the political recognition of the relative values of different cultures within a nation-state under the liberal democratic framework (Taylor, 1994). Because of globalization (to be more specific, colonization and immigration), no countries today consist of a single culturally homogeneous group, or no countries are really monocultural nation-states. In some countries the population of the majority group is much higher than that of all minority groups combined, in some countries there is a substantial amount of ethnic minorities, and all countries are now countries of multi-ethnic groups. As different ethnic groups have their own ethnic cultures, all countries are de facto a cultural mosaic. Therefore, how different cultures can coexist within a nation-state is a fundamental issue for all countries.

The issue, if not properly handled, can be a source of ethnic conflicts or even national disintegration. Indeed, ethnicity can be and sometimes is mobilized for the sake of nationalism, and the thin line between the quest for ethnic identity and the pursuit of political separation can sometimes become blurred, as grasped in expressions such as "ethnic nationalism" and "ethnonationalism" (Smith, 1988, 1995; Connor, 1993). Multiculturalism is designed to provide a social space for the coexistence of different cultures within a country. In practicing multiculturalism, the government of the country will do some or all of the following: 1) supporting operations of mass media in minority languages; 2) supporting celebrations of festivals, holidays of ethnic groups; 3) supporting music, arts, and literature from minority cultures; 4) accepting traditional and religious dress in public places; 5) financing programs that encourage minority representation in education, politics, and workforce; and 6) recognizing multiple citizenship. Therefore, under the policy of multiculturalism, different cultures can certainly somehow coexist and can find ways to express themselves. In other words, because of the practice of multiculturalism, the relative values of different cultures are more or less politically recognized.

Nevertheless, how multiculturalism embodies the spirit of cultural relativism is questionable. As a matter of fact, multiculturalism does not immediately imply the mutual recognition of different cultures among themselves. It is governments in the form of liberal democracy that officially recognize the relative values of different cultures in their society. In other words, multiculturalism functions within the framework of liberal democracy. By creating a social space for different cultures to express themselves as well as to coexist, liberal democracy reaffirms its own legitimacy among people from different culture. In the end, multiculturalism serves the wellbeing of liberal democracy: behind the relative values of different cultures is the absolute order of liberal democracy, or the particularism of different cultures now coexists with the universalism of liberal democracy. Of course, multiculturalism is not really a stranger to liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is by definition multiculturalistic. One of the key tenets of liberal democracy is the freedom of belief, which in practice would lead to the recognition of the relative values of different cultures, hence multiculturalism. Multiculturalism cannot go too far under the umbrella of liberal democracy: while recognizing and institutionalizing the coexistence of different cultures within a society, liberal democracy will not tolerate any claim for political independence based on cultural uniqueness of any particular ethnic group. In other words, ethnic nationalism or ethnonationalism is out of the question under liberal democracy. In this sense, multiculturalism is functional for liberal democracy to prevent cultural differences in society from developing into national disintegration. In addition, multiculturalism does not mean that all cultures are left intact. A government under liberal democracy would be quite selective as to what elements in a particular culture are to be preserved and supported. The bottom line is that human rights are not to be infringed by cultural rights. Moreover, multiculturalism pertains mainly to minority cultures. Side by side with multiculturalism is the implicit existence of the mainstream culture, which has its roots in Western traditions, the ancestor of liberal democracy. In the US, for instance, the culture of the "WASPs" occupies the central position in the cultural diversity of American society. Therefore, the term "multiculturalism" is somewhat misleading. It should read as: multiple abridged cultures plus the mainstream culture under liberal democracy. Thus conceived, the recognition of the relative values of different cultures by the policy of multiculturalism is more symbolic than substantial.

Cultural relativism at the global level has something to do with "postcolonialism", which depicts cultural consequences of the decolonization process in the post-war era, particularly its post-Cold War stage. The termination

of World War II is also the end of Western imperialism and, together with it, the end of Eurocentrism. Even during the heyday of the Cold War, when the US and the USSR were attempting to establish and maintain their global hegemony (including cultural hegemony) on the two sides of the "Iron Curtain", few Third-World countries ceased to pursue their independence – independence not only from old and blatant colonialism, but also from new imperialism under the masquerade of revolutionary ideologies. In the wake of the Cold War, those "metanarratives" or ideologies that are originated in Western modernity seem to have become disillusioned. To paraphrase Francis Fukuyama, the "end of history" means the end of Western cultural hegemony as well as the beginning for non-Western people to rediscover or reinvent their indigenous culture and integrate it into their national identity. For the newly-born nation-states in the non-Western world, political independence is incomplete without cultural independence (economic independence is really not an option for any country today, for all countries are now economically interdependent). Therefore, in the postcolonial world or in a world without (Western) cultural hegemony, cultural reconstruction on the bases of local traditions is among the first priority of all non-Western countries, including some former members of the Soviet Union or the Soviet Bloc, on their nation-building agenda. Nationalism, a modern Western invention, becomes a universal norm, which is paradoxically used against Western imperialism or imperialism of any kinds. Of course, behind the nationalist quest of non-Western countries is their own imagination of their nation. In their nation building, it is only natural for these countries to resort to their own history and tradition to reconstruct their national identity. Western cultural elements, especially various modern ideologies, remain influential worldwide, but they now have to coexist with indigenous cultures in the non-Western world. After all, it is indigenous cultures that define the distinction of non-Western countries as nation-states. Thus, the postcolonial world is a world of cultural diversity or cultural relativism.

Indigenous cultures remain relevant in non-Western countries not only because they can be used to serve the purpose of nationalism and nation-building in political terms, but also because they are, in some cases or to certain degrees, affinitive with or even conducive to the progress of modernity in general. The conventional Weberian thesis that indigenous cultures are impedimental to the development of modern capitalism in the non-Western world is a sociological myth, which excludes any possible relevance of non-Western traditions to modernity. In fact, many non-Western traditions have more or less survived the vicissitudes in modern times, and some of them have even proved quite compatible in one way or another with the local development toward modernization. In modern East Asia, for instance, the surviving Confucian tradition (the so-called "post-Confucian values") plays an important part in shaping a different and yet comparable model of modern capitalism or modernity (Xia, 2005). It is not difficult to demonstrate that some other traditions (or their residual elements) may also be favourable to and somehow define the corresponding local development. In Giddens's observation, "For most of its history, modernity has rebuilt tradition as it has dissolved it." He also points out that "the continuing influence of tradition within modernity remained obscure so long as 'modern' meant 'Western'" (Giddens, 1994: 56-7). Therefore, because of the role of local traditions in the modern world, modernity is not exclusively Western – or there can be different models of modernity. Needless to say, the existence or possibility of multiple models of modernity in the world lends further support for cultural relativism at the global level.

Ethnocentrism and cultural relativism have one thing in common: they both reject democratic and rational dialogues among cultures, and therefore they both exclude the possibility of a universal or global culture based on the dialogues among existing cultures. Ethnocentrism makes people believe that their culture, in comparison with other cultures, is of absolute or even universal values. People with this belief tend to defend the purity or authenticity of their culture (inward ethnocentrism) and, when feasible, impose their culture upon others (outward ethnocentrism). For ethnocentric people, their culture represents civilization per se or the most civilized part of human civilization, and therefore there is no need for them to dialogue with people in other cultures. On the other hand, cultural relativism emphasizes relative values of different cultures. From the perspective of cultural relativism, a culture is meaningful only within its local setting, and no culture can justifiably claim to be superior to other cultures. Cultural relativism relates one culture to another and even compares them – it does so only to identify and to affirm the uniqueness or particularity of different cultures. Therefore, for cultural relativists, the relative values of different cultures have to be recognized, but there is no common ground for substantial dialogue to take place among them.

Let it be reminded that ethnocentrism exists for good reasons. Culture, or any particular culture, provides people with some kind of collective identity or sense of belonging as well as meanings or purposes of their life. By doing so, a culture delineates the boundary of the physical and spiritual world of people who inhabit the culture. According to evolutionary theory, one must adapt to one's environment in order to survive. Apparently, human beings adapt to their environment through culture, and more importantly they must first adapt to their particular culture as part of their environment. Thus conceived, ethnocentrism is simply a surviving strategy for human beings. Moreover, given the fragility and uncertainty of individual human life, it is important or even necessary for people to see themselves as part of a larger group and to believe what others in the group believe. For better or for worse, individuals conform to their group. Therefore, ethnocentrism is a function of group conformism – it is a convenient way for people to link their individual life to a group of people. For all its significance, however, ethnocentrism can lead human beings astray when it goes to the extreme. We should be able to learn more than enough from the first half of the 20th century about how far ethnocentrism, once politically mobilized, could go in an inhuman direction: in the two world wars, ethnocentrism was translated from geographically limited human wisdom to politically excessive human absurdity, and from local cultural self-affirmation to global violent self-destruction. Indeed, all too often, ethnocentrism is a major factor causing various kinds of group conflicts, from everyday prejudice to institutionalized discrimination, from ethnic cleansing to holocaust. A most recent example of ethnocentrism-related conflicts is the "jihad" against Western/American civilization (as perceived by Muslim fundamentalists) or the "anti-terrorist war" (as defined by the US). Of course, when human lives are sacrificed at a massive scale for ethnocentrism, ethnocentrism becomes malfunctional – it no longer serves human interests properly.

Cultural relativism seems to be a preferable alternative to ethnocentrism. Ideally, in the condition of cultural relativism, all existing cultures are equally recognized, each culture has its relatively independent position in relation to other cultures, and therefore there is no reason for conflicts among people from different cultures. However, cultural relativism is problematic even in theoretical terms. Theoretically what results from cultural relativism is at best pluralism and

at worst nihilism. Or, to put it strongly, cultural relativism is pluralism without principle and nihilism in principle – it justifies everything and therefore nothing. Without a common ground, cultural relativism can hardly sustain itself. With a common ground, cultural relativism contradicts itself. Therefore, one may wonder, exactly in what sense has cultural relativism been practiced? Or to what extent is it practical? In fact, cultural relativism largely remains an ideal, or its application in the real world is far from ideal. As discussed previously, cultural relativism at the domestic level (in Western countries) is practiced under the policy of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism works within the framework of liberal democracy, or it is part of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy both necessitates multiculturalism and sets the tone for it – under liberal democracy, the political recognition of different cultures is only symbolic. On the other hand, cultural relativism at the global level, or postcolonialism, is mainly associated with the principle of self-determination and the system of nation-states. However, a nation-state is more than a cultural entity – it is also, and more importantly, an economic entity, which further determines its political position among nation-states. With differentiated economic capacities, different nation-states exert different cultural influences in international affairs. As a result, cultural relativism has to coexist with religious fundamentalism and cultural imperialism. "Human rights precede national sovereignty" – this new slogan in Western diplomacy tells much about cultural relativism in practice.

Ethnocentrism and cultural relativism make no sense to completely isolated cultures. They make sense only when different cultures encounter one another. In the age of globalization, cultural interactions are part of our daily life. Frequent contacts among cultures both expose each of them to the influences of foreign cultures and make them more reflexive and self-conscious than ever. Meanwhile, globalizing forces (such as the global market armed with unceasingly modernized transportation and communication facilities) constantly test the legitimacy, flexibility, and sustainability of all cultures. Under this circumstance, how would a culture cope with challenges from other cultures as well as from global forces? For reasons explained before, any particular culture is by definition ethnocentric in its relation to other cultures. Therefore, ethnocentrism will persist in existing cultures as long as there are differences among themselves. Ethnocentrism becomes inadequate and negative when it goes to the extreme, as in the ongoing Civilizational clash (the "jihad" or the "anti-terrorist war", depending on the cultural context in which it is read). Cultural relativism seems to be a necessary antidote to extreme ethnocentrism: at the domestic level, cultural relativism in the form of the "politics of recognition" or multiculturalism institutionalizes the political recognition of relative values of multiple cultures within a society (or nation-state), hence their peaceful coexistence; globally, cultural relativism provides a guiding ideal for different cultures to appreciate each other's values in the postcolonial world, or in a world with no absolute cultural centre. However, cultural relativism has its limits: domestically, multiculturalism does not really challenge the dominant culture of the mainstream society, and it has to accept the legitimacy of liberal democracy before it is recognized by liberal democracy; globally, as cultures reside in nation-states, the integrity of a particular culture becomes problematic when the sovereignty of the corresponding nation-state is encroached for economic or political reasons. Therefore, cultural relativism does not by itself guarantee the peaceful coexistence of different values – whether at the domestic level or at the global level, let alone their dialogue and symbiosis.

5. Conclusion: Toward a Global Culture, a Culture for Coexistence, Dialogue, and Symbiosis

The ongoing process of globalization has changed or extended the meaning of "society". According to the Wikipedia, a society is a group of individuals, which is characterized by common interests and may have distinctive culture and institutions. In sociological conventions, "society" mainly refers to the nation-state. Apparently, in consequence of globalization, a global society is in the making. Globalization not only connects people from different cultures or nations in the world, but also makes them aware that they share, among other things, the increasingly visible limits of this planet. Therefore, various international NGOs have emerged to address issues concerning all humanity, and many governmental organizations have joined their efforts. A global civil sphere is on the rise from all parts of the world, and global governance is gradually substantiated or institutionalized in world affairs. A further development of the global society requires a truly cosmopolitan or global culture. What, then, would be the global culture like? Or what is fundamental to the formation of the global culture?

The global culture cannot be constructed from nowhere or from pure theoretical meditations – it has its roots in existing cultures. Existing cultures are particular cultures. How can they transcend themselves to reach something that is of universal relevance? In the context of globalization, all existing cultures are exposed to the differences (as well as similarities) among cultures, and all cultures are in interactions with each other and with global forces. In their interactions, some cultures at some point may achieve a dominant position, while other cultures may become marginalized. Dominant cultures readily avail themselves of (outward) ethnocentrism to expand their influence, while marginal(ilzed) cultures often resort to (inward) ethnocentrism to resist foreign penetration. Hence cultural conflicts or civilizational clashes. Cultural conflicts or civilizational clashes are not inevitable consequences of globalization, and they are certainly not the desirable choice for people in any culture. To avoid cultural conflicts or civilizational clashes, different cultures have to learn to coexist peacefully with one another. Peaceful coexistence among cultures embodies the spirit of cultural relativism – in their peaceful coexistence, the relative values of different cultures are recognized explicitly (as in the case of multiculturalism) or implicitly (postcolonialism). But the truce among cultures does not lead to a global culture automatically – it is only the first step toward the formation of a global culture. In their coexistence, different cultures may perceive their own limits, dialogue with each other, and learn from other cultures. From this kind of interactions a symbiosis of different cultures will develop, and a global culture will be cultivated. In other words, only in their coexistence, dialogue, and symbiosis can elements from different cultures be integrated into a global culture. Obviously, both ethnocentrism (however "natural" or essential) and cultural relativism (however historically important) exclude the possibility for a global culture: ethnocentrism makes people either reject influence from other cultures (inward ethnocentrism) or impose their own culture onto others (outward ethnocentrism), while cultural relativism acknowledges no universal or global values. A global culture is conceivable only when ethnocentrism does not go to the extremes – whether in its inward or outward direction, and when cultural relativism does not blind people to universal values.

What, then, would be the basic elements of this global culture? Or, how would we identify them? The global culture would consist of two parts: elements in various cultures that can survive impacts from other cultures and global forces in the age of globalization, and elements in particular cultures that have universal or global values.

A culture is a tradition in the sense that it is both enduring and changeable. Or rather, as a tradition, a culture is enduring because it is changeable. Once invented in a specific social context, a tradition tends to last and function to maintain its social order; but when its specific social context or its larger environment changes, the tradition is expected to adjust and accommodate to new conditions or even to promote further changes in society where it resides. Culture changes as society changes. To be more specific, reasons for possible cultural change in a given society lie in its economic and political life. Indeed, a culture or a tradition has to reinvent itself constantly in order to cope with the economic and political change in society at large. In this process, some elements of the culture may become irrelevant to the changing society and may eventually vanish from the scene, while others may prove sustainable. Indeed, the evolutionary principle of "the survival of the fittest" also applies to cultures: many cultures disappeared or exist only in museums, whereas the real world is for traditions or cultures that are vigorous and flexible enough to sustain themselves. When elements from any culture are sustainable in the context of globalization, they are part of the global culture. The misconception that modernity is Western, which has its origins in Western sociology, particularly the Weberian understanding of modernity (or modern capitalism), excludes the relevance of both Western traditions and other traditions to modernity. Modernity and tradition are not mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, because of the continuous functioning of surviving traditions, modernity has many faces or models. For example, the so-called "post-Confucian values", or the remaining elements of the Confucian tradition in modern East Asia, have been a defining factor that has shaped the distinction of East Asian modernity (vs. Western modernity). Needless to say, similar post-traditional values also exist in other cultures, and they are all part of the global culture.

The global culture would also include cultural elements that have global relevance, or norms and values that are shared by all cultures. Shared values and norms are not transcendental – they are articulated and embedded in particular cultures. The particularities of different local cultures often make universal elements in them less than visible. They become visible only when different local cultures develop mutual understandings in their interactions. Indeed, it is a philosophical fallacy, a fallacy theorized in the Platonic tradition, to separate the particular from the universal and the local from the global. Globalization provides a social context in which different local cultures can be compared, and their shared values and norms can be identified. After all, cultures not only differ, but also overlap. It is the overlapping elements of all cultures that constitute the core of the global culture. In this sense, all existing cultures have potentials to become more or less globalized and therefore can contribute to the development of the global culture. An essential part of this global culture is some basic value universalism, which affirms values of global relevance, such as economic security, political dignity, physical/psychological health, as well as cultural grace. On the other hand, together with this basic value universalism, there should also be some moral rules or norms that can apply to all humanity. It is, for instance, no surprise that the ethic of reciprocity or "The Golden Rule" is a principle found in virtually all major cultures. Cultural sensitivity requires us to be sensitive not only to the uniqueness of any particular culture, but also to universal elements shared by different cultures. With this kind of cultural sensitivity, we can be even more open-minded to and tolerant of cultural differences. Of course, let us not forget that there are always ideologies that essentialize differences among cultures and pronounce them unbridgeable, and there are also ideologies that tend to universalize some particularistic elements from local cultures and make them globally relevant.

Globalization is incomplete without the formation of a global society, and it will not produce a global society until a global culture is in sight. The mechanism for developing a global culture lies in the coexistence, dialogue, and symbiosis of existing cultures. Only when existing cultures have learned to coexist and dialogue with one another, will it be possible for a global culture to be created. In the history of thought, there is no lack of imagination of a cosmopolitan world or a world of "Great Unity". However, the global culture in the real world will not be based on a set of abstract and utopian ideas – it will be rooted in existing cultures, or it will be a synthesis of trans-historical and universal elements from existing cultures. Needless to say, the real test for the vitality and validity of the global culture (as well as local cultures) comes from the ever-changing social reality of the increasingly globalized world. It remains to be seen whether the culturally divided humanity will be integrated by a global culture in the looming global society.

6. References

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