Disenchanting the Multicultural Utopia

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There seems to be a certain stereotype of what the future “global leader” should look like. They are the elites of our generation, aspiring diplomats and international businesspeople, leading global-scale discussions regarding world’s power dynamics. Aside of these public responsibilities as political and economic professionals, they as an individual are also idealized as sophisticated cosmopolitans, constantly in tune with the cultural diversity of the world. Appreciating cultural difference is often considered a quality necessary for leaders of today. In fact, not only the elites but also every individual are encouraged to become a globally-minded “world citizen” who can embrace multiculturalism in order to achieve an ideal world of harmony and united humanity.

One of the definitions Heywood provides for multiculturalism is the “positive endorsement, even celebration, of communal diversity, typically based on either the right of different groups to respect and recognition, or to the alleged benefits to the larger society of moral and cultural diversity” (Heywood, 2007:313). This appears to be a friendly gesture at first
glance, and therefore it is rarely challenged. However, I remain somewhat skeptical towards these simplistic clichés of multicultural ideal that are mindlessly repeated without much critical attention. My main focus of this essay is to question, from my perspective as an aspiring cultural anthropologist, this penchant for “culture” in various public discourses such as the imagination of the cosmopolitan global leader. I argue that we need to critically rethink the dynamics of cultural power, and that this seemingly positive celebration of multiculturalism may in fact, paradoxically, be inhibiting the equal power distribution of the globe.

First of all, there is a problematic tendency to separate the concept of “culture” from the institutions of politics and economics. “Power” is talked about mostly in political and economic terms, as is perhaps the case with the main focus of this symposium as well. Indeed, compared to the heated debate addressing urgent problems and suggesting practical solutions for it, discussing “cultural power” may seem rather lukewarm, neither directly relevant nor immediately helpful to the more substantial issues of the world today. Nye coined the now-famous term “soft power” suggesting the potential of cultural power as equally strong as, if not stronger than, political and economic forces. Yet, the general sentiment to trivialize cultural power compared to harder powers still persists today. Even in academic institutions, political science and economics departments tend to be the harder social science, while cultural and social studies, including anthropology, are seen as the softer ones. In a similar sense, it seems like global leaders do not approach this softer power dynamics with the same rigor as they strive for “just power” in their respective fields.

The stereotypical global leader would discuss global politics and economics on business, and display their cosmopolitan decorum during their private time. The implied separation here is that political and economic topics are debated as public business-talk, while discussions about
culture and people are reserved for less-serious settings associated with private leisure. Such mindset further encourages the trend to regard culture only as something to be celebrated and appreciated, to enjoy and praise about each other. Global citizens are supposed to be well-traveled, knowledgeable about various cultures, and boast a vast network of friendship all over the world. Indeed “culture” is heavily present in all situations, but precisely because of this ubiquity of culture and overabundance of the term, there emerges a sense of superficiality. In many cases, the awareness of culture only stops at the point where multiculturalism is simply celebrated, as if giving an obligatory nod to cultural differences is some kind of cosmopolitan etiquette.

In “Culture, Globalization, Mediation,” Mazzarella described the world after globalization as “one in which culture is everywhere, and everywhere at issue – except, it seems, in the avant-garde of anthropological theory” (Mazzarella, 2004:347). With the hype of globalization, “culture” has become an extremely popular topic in public discourses. However, superficial perception of culture prevalent in such discussions can easily fall into the trap of cultural substantialism, or essentialism. Essentialist ideas assume that there is a certain substantial difference between cultural traditions. Overreliance to cultural differences becomes a convenient excuse on many occasions; “It’s a cultural thing” – we still hear this kind of vague conclusion to explain a conflict, simply assuming that the clash of opinion stems from essentially cultural reasons. This can keep one from having a constructive negotiation over what might actually be the core issue, eventually muting other kinds of differences possibly caused by non-cultural reasons. Mazzarella also points out that “the reliance on substantialist models of culture and cultural correspondence ultimately becomes a strategy for avoiding the questions that really need to be asked,” and concludes that “celebratory discourses of hybridity often depend on
precisely the cultural substantialism that they disavow” (Mazzarella, 2004:355-356).

The term “culture” evokes a kind of authenticity of a certain nation. “Culture-mongers in commercial, nongovernmental, and state bureaucracies are desperately trying to recuperate the aura of authenticity that the word still popularly evokes,” Mazzarella writes, and continues that “even many critical academic projects…seem unable to shake the substantialist habit” (Mazzarella, 2004:347). In popular usage, people expect a certain national identity associated with the term culture. Overemphasizing culture in this way can work to draw boundaries around nations as imagined communities and enforce differences between nations when there may be none. In the next section, I relate this issue to the discourse of power and argue that this seemingly egalitarian attitude of cultural differentiation is in fact preventing the true equality of power in the global terrain. I explain this by discussing two types of power: the hegemonic soft power, and the power of a voyeuristic gaze.

First, I will go back to the idea of soft power and elaborate on its hegemonic domination. Soft power is a seemingly innocuous power that is not aggressively forceful, but rather attracts voluntary submission. This type of power can be embedded in popular culture and media which consumers willingly accept. Through the consumption of soft power, the individuals are slowly insinuated with the cultural ideology that the media convey. Such persuasive power is a form of cultural hegemony, the hierarchy in which one with more power can impose its social norm onto the subordinate masses, often times without them being fully aware of it. Many social scientists have criticized the West for dominating the rest of the world with its centrally-produced globally-circulating popular media. Under its innocuous guise, soft power is able to construct an asymmetric power dynamics between the powerful and the powerless. Soft power can be coercive without being aggressive; it establishes a hegemonic relation where consumers
worldwide willingly submit to the dominant cultural norms.

If the hegemony of soft power is a kind of force that is coercive, the other type of unjust power is a comparatively passive one that is more difficult to identify. This can happen in, say National Geographic documentaries or tourism for instance, where the viewer/tourist from the developed world looks at the subjects in the non developed world with curiosity and exoticizing gaze. Voyeuristic viewers thus exercise the “power of looking” onto the viewed. Shohat and Stam eloquently phrase such implicit power of gaze;

The cinema’s ability to “fly” spectators around the globe gave them a subject position as film’s audio-visual masters. The “spatially-mobilized visuality” of the I/eye of empire spiraled outward around the globe, creating a visceral, kinetic sense of imperial travel and conquest, transforming European spectators into armchair conquistadors, affirming their sense of power while turning the colonies into spectacle for the metropole’s voyeuristic gaze (Shohat and Stam, 1994:104).

This sentiment is not just limited to media consumption. During actual visits to a foreign country, travelers also experience nostalgia and romanticism for the rural parts of the Third World. These viewers and travelers share the tendency to regard capitalism and development as an evil corruption, lamenting over what the First World has lost with modernization. Although this is a seemingly positive sentiment, this is nothing but mere exoticization that alienates the “Others” as someone different from us.

It seems to me that these two kinds of power asymmetry are facilitated by the idealization of global citizen and the celebration of multiculturalism. Media and travel are perhaps the most significant ways in which cosmopolitan connoisseurs expose themselves to
other parts of the world and get equipped with cultural knowledge. Celebration of diversity is especially common in these contexts, but because the notion of power is rarely mentioned in regards to culture, the asymmetry of cultural power is less likely to be problematized compared to other types of power. The issue, however, is that it often implies an essentialist assumption which leads to an unnecessary Othering of people. Orientalism, as Edward Said explained, refers to the assumption of the Others as the automatic antithesis to us; they are whatever we are not. By separating the “us/familiar” with “them/exotic” the uneven postcolonial power dynamics between the traditionally powerful and powerless nations remain unchanged. One-way flow of hegemonic soft power will be perpetuated, and the voyeuristic exploitation of the exotic world will persist, as long as cultural differences are merely celebrated under the guise of positive multiculturalism as they are today.

There is the ultimate paradox that we need to deal with; the tension between our desire to live in an exciting hybrid world, and the inevitable cultural homogeneity, to a certain extent, with globalization. Nobody wishes to live in a completely homogenous world which would no doubt be insipid and monotone. We continuously attempt to differentiate ourselves from others, and vice versa, differentiate others from ourselves. While I do understand the desire for a heterogeneous, diverse globe, this becomes somewhat problematic once we fall under the trap of cultural essentialism. The first step we need to take towards an equal distribution of ‘power’ is to have more conversations on cultural power that goes beyond mere celebration of cultural diversity. We must realize that pursuing cultural difference, although seemingly positive, may be in conflict with achieving culturally “just power,” and we should strive to free our imagination from the enchantment of a utopian multicultural world.
Bibliography


