

BOOKS

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Culture, Globalization, and U.S. Foreign Policy

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Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World

Peter L. Berger and Samuel P. Huntington, eds.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress

Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, eds.

New York: Basic Books, 2000.

When George W. Bush declared in the aftermath of September 11 that “America will lead the world to peace,” did he really mean what he said?¹ Did the president’s statement derive from a careful assessment of overall trends in international politics? Or was it merely an offhand expression of personal opinion? Are such views his alone? Or do they reflect the collective wisdom of his foreign policy advisers? And what exactly does President Bush mean by world peace?

Although it may be difficult to answer such questions definitively, this much we can say with some confidence: such sentiments do not surface in presidential speeches by accident. Nor are they inserted simply as innocuous applause lines. Rather, they serve an important purpose, affirming the speaker’s recognition and acceptance of fundamental assumptions regarding America’s historical purpose.

A promise by the president of France to lead the world to peace would elicit gales of derisive laughter. A similar promise by leaders of Germany, Japan, or Russia would likely be viewed as evidence of resurgent megalomania. But the notion of history anointing the United States to be the agent

of global peace strikes most Americans as not only unremarkable but perhaps even self-evident.

By publicly endorsing this notion, President Bush signals his allegiance to the tradition of Woodrow Wilson, an approach to statecraft that combines vaulting ambition with boundless confidence in the efficacy of American power. In that regard Bush is hardly alone: the Wilsonian tradition is one to which all recent occupants of the Oval Office, regardless of party, have adhered. That the United States has it within its power to transform the global order—and that Providence summons Americans to do so—is a proposition to which presidents as dissimilar as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton enthusiastically subscribed. Indeed, for a would-be national leader to express a contrary view—to suggest that American influence might have limits or that peace might be a chimera—would be tantamount to declaring himself unfit for high office.

In formulating policies to affect that transformation, successive presidents—to include Bush in the aftermath of September 11—have demonstrated remarkable

consistency. The strategy that they have followed has two distinctive but mutually supporting components. The aspect attracting the lion's share of public attention concerns military power. Having over the course of a century risen at great cost to a position of military preeminence, the United States has no intention of forfeiting the advantages it derives therefrom. Indeed, when it comes to the use of force, U.S. policymakers today exercise astonishingly wide prerogatives, wielding American armed might to restore or maintain order, deter would-be challengers, and punish miscreants—even to do so preemptively.

Yet if the United States counts on its military dominance to foster conditions conducive to the Wilsonian project, presidents have seldom viewed military power per se as the actual agent of transformation. In this regard, the second, or ideological, component of U.S. strategy may capture fewer headlines, but is the more important.

This second aspect rests on four basic convictions, accepted without reservation by members of the American political elite. First, for any nation aspiring to develop economically, to modernize, and to prosper, there is no practical alternative to capitalism (understood implicitly to mean American-style capitalism). Second, as the basis for long-term political legitimacy, there is no practical alternative to democracy (understood implicitly to be American-style liberal democracy). Third, liberal democratic capitalism responds to the aspirations of all humanity and is everywhere applicable, if not today then in the not-so-distant future. Fourth, the United States can fully guarantee *its own* security, prosperity, and continued preeminence—that being the decoded meaning of “world peace” as understood within the foreign policy establishment—only by insuring universal adherence to this American (or Western) model of political economy.

To be sure, given the exigencies of politics in the real world, the United States fre-

quently acts in ways seemingly at variance with these four convictions—by way of a recent example, consider the Bush administration's warm embrace of Pakistan's corrupt, nuke-toting, terror-sponsoring military dictatorship. Critics mistakenly decry actions such as the U.S. cozying up to Gen. Pervez Musharraf as proof of American hypocrisy; in fact, such episodes simply illustrate a knack for tactical flexibility to serve strategic ends.

In evaluating statecraft, the proper measure of merit is not consistency but effectiveness. For U.S. policymakers, the road to world peace (as they define peace) is littered with obstacles. To plow straight ahead is to invite exhaustion. Better to pick a path that circumvents those obstacles even if doing so occasionally places one in unsavory company. Such relationships are expedient, but also expendable. Does anyone doubt that the United States will wash its hands of General Musharraf once he has outlived his usefulness? Or that it will do so while expressing pious expectations that the time is now ripe for democratic capitalism to boost poor benighted Pakistanis to their rightful place in the modern world? After all, at the end of the day, the people of Pakistan are (Washington assumes) basically no different from people anywhere else. They will—must, in their own interests but also in the interests of world peace—eventually adopt our proven model of political economy. As the history of the twentieth century demonstrated once and for all, viable alternatives simply do not exist.

Endowing such expectations with a veneer of plausibility—and helping to conceal (at least from ourselves) the profoundly arrogant assumptions on which they rest—is the phenomenon of globalization. In his best-selling book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman designated globalization as *the* international system of the twenty-first century, “The One Big Thing” of our age.² It is a thesis tailor-made for reviving Wilsonian dreams.

According to its boosters, globalization opens up the world and brings it together. It removes divisions and softens differences. It makes available vast new opportunities for the creation of wealth. It establishes clear-cut rules, the violation of which leads invariably to failure—for firms, bankruptcy and collapse, for nations, stagnation and backwardness. In a globalized world, popular rule and free enterprise will prevail. Thus has globalization become in our time the preferred medium through which America conveys Wilson's message to the world: "Come: be like us."

Granted, in certain quarters, that message induces a backlash from groups unwilling to accept the inevitability of a world in which American tastes and American values enjoy pride of place. But as the system's chief engine (and foremost beneficiary), the United States is obliged to quash that resistance, preferably through suasion or seduction, but if need be by using armed force. Ultimately, globalization promises to bring world peace within reach. Globalization makes Wilson plausible. Or does it?

Culture Counts

The essays in these two richly textured collections cast serious doubt on the prospects of the United States enjoying anything resembling peace anytime soon. They suggest instead that even if the Bush administration destroys al-Qaeda and brings the "axis of evil" to heel the underlying causes of violence and instability—grievances allowed to fester and yearnings left unfulfilled, the sheer clash of competing interests—will survive in ample supply. Although globalization may be a real and powerful force, it points not to convergence and harmony under American auspices but to a more complex and potentially problematic international order. To preserve the Pax Americana, the United States will find itself obliged to shoulder many disagreeable burdens.

The common preoccupation of the two books is culture, a subject that in the world

of policy typically qualifies as at best an afterthought, as when Secretary of State Colin Powell charges successful advertising executive Charlotte Beers with burnishing America's image in the Islamic world. But as these two books make clear, in the post-Cold War game of international politics, culture has become trump.

The editors of *Culture Matters* take as their point of departure a remark by Daniel Patrick Moynihan: "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself." The essays that follow, including contributions from such luminaries as David Landes, Francis Fukuyama, Seymour Martin Lipset, Nathan Glazer, Orlando Patterson, and Tu Wei-Ming, explore those twin propositions.

Nothing that qualifies as a unified point of view emerges as a result. To the extent that a rough consensus can be discerned, it offers a curious blend of conservative tough-mindedness and liberal optimism. On the one hand, the contributors (with a handful of exceptions) evince an admirable willingness to disregard the canons of political correctness. On the other hand, they remain incorrigible in their certainty as to the feasibility of engineering remedies to intractable human problems.

Chief among the unpalatable truths that several of the essayists confront is that when it comes to development all cultures are not created equal. Thus, David Landes, professor emeritus at Harvard University, launches his essay with the forthright declaration that "Weber was right. If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes almost all the difference." The reality is that some cultures are conducive to modernity. Others are not. As a result, when it comes to the standard measures of progress they tend to lag behind. Acknowledging that fact does not amount to "blaming the victim."

In short, economic development is not just a matter of adhering to prescriptions laid down by the International Monetary Fund. Nor is political development achieved simply by promulgating constitutions and scheduling elections. Culture *does* count.

Furthermore, the values and attitudes prevailing across large swaths of the planet—notably in much of the Islamic world and Africa—are not especially friendly to modernity. Absent what Daniel Etounga-Manguelle, president of the Société Africaine d'Étude d'Exploitation et de Gestion (SADEG), calls a “cultural adjustment program,” these regions will likely remain mired in poverty and awash with instability. In many cases, they will also become breeding grounds for frustration and hatred, creating new cadres ready to follow Osama bin Laden's example in venting their anger on the affluent and powerful, to wit, the United States and its closest allies.

Here's where the optimism kicks in: checklists in hand, several of the contributors to *Culture Matters* stand ready to prescribe just what such a cultural adjustment program might look like. Mariano Grondona, professor of government at the National University of Buenos Aires, offers a catalog of 20 factors. Etounga-Manguelle's list has 9 items. Michael Fairbanks, a member of the World Bank's Committee on Social Development, also lists 9, none overlapping with Etounga-Manguelle's. Lawrence Harrison, a long-time official with the U.S. Agency for International Development, ticks off 10 “mind-sets” distinguishing progressive cultures from static ones. (At a conference earlier this year, Harrison expanded his list to 13).³ Suggestions range from the grand (“Create a Sense of Urgency”; “Create a Compelling Vision”) to the bland (“The Value of Work”; “The Importance of Utility”).

The competing lists reflect an enthusiasm for formulating what Harrison describes as “a new culture-centered paradigm of de-

velopment [and] of human progress.” Perhaps he and his colleagues will succeed in identifying such a paradigm, thereby speeding the arrival of all peoples into the modern world. But those familiar with past pronouncements by social scientists claiming to have cracked the code of development may be permitted a bit of skepticism.

Yes, culture does matter. Even a skeptic will acknowledge that cultures can and do change. But whether or not even the best intentioned outsiders can refashion culture to serve specific ends would seem to be an iffy, if not a potentially dangerous, proposition.

For architects of U.S. foreign policy, the message of *Culture Matters* is not that they should hasten to establish a new Bureau of Cultural Adjustment. Rather it is to warn against excessive expectations regarding the prospective triumph of liberal democracy and free enterprise. However much they might wish otherwise, in many parts of the world culture is likely to remain stubbornly resistant to the imperatives of the Wilsonian project.

An Identifiable Global Culture

An equally provocative volume, *Many Globalizations* reports the findings of a three-year effort sponsored by Boston University's Institute for the Study of Economic Culture to evaluate the impact of globalization on ten different countries around the world: in Asia, China, Taiwan, Japan, and India; in Europe, Germany and Hungary; from the “periphery,” Chile, South Africa, and Turkey; and, of course, at the center of the action, in the United States. (From a post-September 11 vantage point, one notes with regret the absence of a case study focusing on an “Islamicist” stronghold such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Iran).

A typology devised by project codirector Peter Berger provided participants with a common frame of analysis. According to Berger, globalization advances by means of four different vehicles: a well-heeled “yuppie

internationale” drawn from the business elite—the sort of people who attend (or yearn to attend) the annual World Economic Forum at Davos; a “faculty club culture” that includes members of the globalized intelligentsia; an international commercialized pop culture—the so-called McWorld; and finally, various popular movements that transcend national boundaries, among them feminism, environmentalism, and, of particular note, evangelical Protestantism.

Taken together, the trenchant, well-written essays included in this collection provide indisputable evidence that an identifiable global culture is indeed emerging. Contributors also show that this global culture is overwhelmingly American in origins and content. As such, it is individualistic, materialistic, and frequently vulgar. But it is also innovative, energetic, and pragmatic. And it is built on core values that emphasize freedom and tolerance.

Having said that, to view globalization simply as one nation after another bowing inexorably to the juggernaut of Americanization is a vast oversimplification. The contributors to *Many Globalizations* show that the process and the results of globalization vary widely. If in some quarters American tastes and values gain widespread acceptance, elsewhere they incite sharp resistance. Perhaps more interesting, the contributors find evidence of concerted efforts to adapt global culture to meet specific local needs or to synthesize foreign and indigenous cultural traits into distinctive hybrids. Thus, the software engineers in Bangalore who drape their computers with garlands of flowers in Hindu rituals and the so-called African indigenous churches that blend Christianity with traditional religion.

Moreover, the contributors show that globalization is by no means a one-way street. The process is highly interactive. Thus, cultural “emissions” from abroad take root in the United States, in some instances hinting at alternative, that is, non-American, models of modernity. Consider for ex-

ample the persistent popularity of New Age beliefs imported from Asia.

Nor is the impact of cultural globalization in every case necessarily global in scope. Transnational influences that lack true global reach nonetheless have important regional effects—think here of how “Europeanization” is amalgamating the once distinctive cultures of that continent. But there are other examples as well: the diffusion of African-American styles to South Africa, of Mexican soap operas throughout Latin America and among Spanish-speakers in the United States, and of movies produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan marketed throughout China and Southeast Asia. As Berger observes in his introduction, “the idea of a mindless global homogenization greatly underestimates the capacity of human beings to be creative and innovative in the face of cultural challenges.”

Here too the implications for U.S. foreign policy and its Wilsonian project are noteworthy. Among other things, *Many Globalizations* calls into question expectations of globalization pointing toward the demise of nationalism and thus of an international politics based on contending national interests. Citing the example of the Chinese students who protested the U.S. bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade in 1999 shouting “down with American imperialism” while guzzling Coca-Cola, Yunxiang Yan argues persuasively that nationalism and globalization can coexist. Being like us poses no essential barrier to disliking us or to viewing the United States as an adversary or threat. There is no inherent contradiction between loving America’s Big Macs and loathing America as the Great Satan.

Of course, Americans are quick to reject the charge that the United States has become some sort of globe-strangling cultural anaconda. By our own lights, we are merely out to make a buck, have a good time, or advance a worthy cause. Yet from the perspective of those on the receiving end, the

charge of U.S. imperialism takes on a certain plausibility. As Berger notes, American English—the lingua franca of the global age—is freighted with norms far more radical in their implications and more threatening to the traditional order than anything that Disney studios are likely devise: concepts like “sexual orientation” and “religious preference,” to cite just two explosive examples.

None of this means that Americans ought to don sackcloth and ashes to make amends for having polluted the world with the excretions of our popular culture. To condemn cultural globalization as inherently bad is as mindless as praising it as invariably good. As Berger writes, the real picture is actually “quite complicated. It resists easy summation, except for the not unimportant conclusion that cultural globalization is neither a single great promise nor a single great threat.”

When applied to U.S. foreign policy, this not unimportant conclusion should caution against expectations that a one-size-fits-all model of political economy is likely to work anytime soon. The Wilsonians will need to be patient—and resolute. World peace is likely to be a long time coming. ●

Notes

1. George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at the Citadel,” December 11, 2001, Charleston, South Carolina.

2. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Newly Updated and Expanded Edition (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), p. xxi.

3. “Cultural Globalization and U.S. Foreign Policy” (conference sponsored by Boston University’s Institute for the Study of Economic Culture, held in Washington, D.C., April 18–19, 2002).