global-e

What 20th-Century Theorists Have to Say about Our World Today

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One day, way back in the 20th century, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes sat under an equatorial tree, living in their own imagined primitive past, discussing Global Studies. “What,” asked Barthes, “might the four of us contribute to a field that analyzes the world as a global system,

stitched together—as Michael Curtin deftly puts it—by trade protocols, governance covenants, and communications networks?" Lévi-Strauss checked his notes, Lacan thought introspectively, and Foucault answered complicatedly. Each spoke of the cultural schemes that inform public policy and that structure debate about contemporary life. Let me summarize their conversation—translated from French.[1]

On public issues of human rights, health, trade and transit, and environment—key foci of Global Studies—all agreed (though Lacan sat quietly) that global market integration between 1880 and 1914 and again beginning in the late 1970s drove a convergence of cultural practices that intensified human connectivity. In other words, this quartet concurred with what Suzanne Berger would later argue (2003): that 21st-century globalization had historical precedent, and that contrary to the classical idea of law as the rule of reason over human action, global norm-making is shaped by a few key ideas—including liberal-democratic ideas about resource distribution, social justice, equity, and popular sovereignty, which are themselves at the core of a few liberal democracies, including but not limited to the US, UK, France, and Germany.[2]

What threatens us right now is probably what we may call over-communication—the tendency to know exactly in one point of the world what is going on in all other parts.

This recognition that global treaties and policies articulate particular norms and values led Lévi-Strauss to reflect on the wisdom of using information-technology to advance universal structures of humanity. For he recognized that although the above-named countries dominated 20th-century politics, he also foresaw that BRICs nations increasingly would collaborate.[3] "We can easily conceive of a time when there will be only one culture and one civilization," he postulated. But he added quickly that while this is possible, this would also be a shame: "What threatens us right now is probably what we may call over-communication—the tendency to know exactly in one point of the world what is going on in all other parts." He muttered something about global-e's illusion that there is in fact a global electronic world out there, but he turned this into a positive (if self-descriptive and paradoxical) point: that to innovate and produce, to be truly creative, people must "be convinced of their originality and even, to some extent, of their superiority." He did not slam electronic media but he recognized—proudly, with neither bravado nor need for apology—his own national identity.

Foucault jumped in with a qualifying thought about power, knowledge, and the media—not that the world's wealthy nations had a responsibility to distribute resources equitably (this argument was to be popularized by Jeffery Sachs twenty-eight years after Foucault's death; and with Sachs, Foucault would in part wisely agree). Instead, Foucault argued that information-technology produced social connections around the globe, like a thread that discretely "connects points and intersects with its own skein." Foucault borrowed back an idea later taken by cultural geographers (Held 2005, Hetherington 1997): that "our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites." He wrote and spoke about national archives and cinema but foresaw that new media would become a 21st-century heterotopia: a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" and a "counter-site" that is outside of all places, like "a mirror"—a "placeless" place that makes other spaces look "absolutely real."[4] More sociological than geographic, more conceptual than localizable, new media juxtapose "several sites that are themselves incompatible." He added that Global Studies might be more up front in admitting the power-knowledge dynamics of this media and in seeing the Internet as a form of governmentality—that is, as a double-edged tool for constraining and monitoring as well as for enabling social movements. Looking forward, he agreed with a student in UW-Madison Global Studies' capstone graduate course—a former regional representative of Coca-Cola from a BRICs country who said that Twitter and Facebook facilitate surveillance and stalking; she wanted none of it.

At the mention of Coca-Cola, Barthes came to life; he had a lot to say about branding and trade protocols. After all, he had written about "Wine and Milk," "Steak and Chips" and "Ornamental Cookery" and about "the bourgeoisie as a joint-stock exchange." He began with an observation: that not only is today's wine not as good as in the past but today's world is a parody of liberalism—a point later so-articulated by Achille Mbembe (2000) and Jean and John Comaroff (2007). Instead of regulating trade and distributing wealth, nation-states sell off public services and go semi-private, he observed. The politically powerful make their own wealth appear a reflection of having access to resources by virtue of their nation-states' geology and geography instead of recognizing that they have inherited their privilege historically. This privatization and naturalization of common wealth blurs the distinction, Barthes said, between legality and illegality; it gives rise to branding, which in turn invites cloning and fuels a shadow economy that renders state sovereignty unsteady. Put simply, law is like myth in Barthes' scenario. It "transforms the products of history

into essential types.”

Analyzing this complexity of meaning and legality brings methodological challenges for Global Studies, all four agreed. The problem, they said, is to discern how public policy and lawlessness, grassroots understandings and global governance, inter-relate; to address and include but not reproduce International Relations models that examine dominant organizations’ procedural logic; and to teach about the world as a global system through an interdisciplinary lens that “married” (Lévi-Strauss’ term) critical analysis with prescriptive models.

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They had lots of ideas, first and foremost that nation-state governments return to the business of exercising the will of popular sovereignty. Global economic and environmental crises, they said, demanded a new historic compromise between capital and democracy. Whereas historically, liberal democracies had protected and regulated private wealth, governments needed to share investments and support social movements as a force for human security. Funding streams needed to finance basic research, to demonstrate commitment to public policies, and to harness the political good will of the populace in the interest of using research to inform education. In exchange, all four agreed, free enterprise was not all bad; indeed they had benefited from its history. This self-realization enacted Barthes’ point that power “constantly dresses up a reality.” Like global prospectors—financiers who had commandeered “third-world” wealth in the 20th century—these four too, they admitted, had exploited the primitive, in their case for their own intellectual capital in the academy.

Replacing grass-skirts with khakis and collared shirts of a professoriate, these seminarians returned to Jeffrey Sachs’ Millennium Research Village,[5] where they struggled mightily with colleagues from the global north and south to keep their ideas clear and pragmatic for a new 21st century.

Notes

[1] Except in this first paragraph, text placed in double quotes is taken directly from these writers' works.

[2] Halliday and Carruthers' (2007) discussion of global norm-making is one of the most insightful I have seen.

[3] Brazil, Russia, India, and China—countries whose economies grew in the 1990s and whose governments increasingly work together.

[4] Foucault failed to reference Lacan on this point about mirrors, which is perhaps why Lacan looked away, indignantly. Lacan's idea that individuals move through a stage of development in which they see themselves (as though in "a mirror") in relation to a designated "cultural other" was informed by Lévi-Strauss' idea that universal structures undergird human realities but was never taken up by Foucault or Barthes. For Lacan—the least historically prescient of the four—the radical Other was Europe's grass-skirted primitive. See Roudinesco 2003.

[5] Sachs 2008:238-241.

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