global-e

Re-locating the U.S. Global Identity in the Post-9/11 World

June 18, 2010 | Volume 4 | Issue 4
Waleed Mahdi

In “The local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” Stuart Hall identifies two forms of globes: “an older, corporate, enclosed, increasingly defensive one which has to go back to nationalism and national cultural identity in a highly defensive way, and to try to build barriers around it before it is eroded;” and a “global post-

modern” one, “trying to live with, and…overcome, sublate, get hold of, and incorporate difference.”[1] The first globe, a product of modernity, created a globalization that thrived through the European/English colonial project, which wrestled with the question of nationalism in its attempt to infiltrate various geopolitical boundaries and gain access to other nation’s natural resources and cheap, if not free, labor; hence, adopting a homogenous approach that discards cultural variation and renders other nations into mini-English models.

With the waning of the English/European power and the rising struggle of the ‘marginal’ for independence in the post-World War II, and by the time Soviet Union collapsed leading to the ascendancy of the United States to the global scale as the only supreme power, a new form of globalization has been adopted. Hall locates this globalization in a post-modern globe defined by a loosening process of the ‘nation-state’ and a subsequent weakening of the ‘national cultural identity’, augmented by an accelerated international interdependence.

Ignited by the Fordist economics of mass production and consumption, and encouraged by an almost global embrace of the free market system, corporations (and often governments) have sought several ways to maximizing their profit, mainly through searching for cheap labor (relocating, outsourcing, franchising, etc.),

and appealing for a global market. Faced with the challenging factor of cultural variation, the new form of globalization has accommodated the paradoxical mechanism of being ‘multi-national’ yet ‘decentralized’; capitalist institutions, consequently, would be less homogenous, and more adaptive to incorporating cultural differences.

Faced with the challenging factor of cultural variation, the new form of globalization has accommodated the paradoxical mechanism of being ‘multi-national’ yet ‘decentralized’; capitalist institutions, consequently, would be less homogenous, and more adaptive to incorporating cultural differences.

As opposed to the English-model globalization, the American-model, according to Hall, “is not attempting to produce…little versions of Americanness,” but is rather seeking “to recognize and absorb those differences within the larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world.” Such a framework can be understood as a U.S. attempt to construct a global identity that markets pluralism as a commodity for both domestic and global consumption. Thus, the early association of globalization with Americanization, which has paradoxically generated both monetary revenues, e.g. Oprahfication, McDonaldization, and Disneyfication, and discursive formations of cultural and political anti-Americanism, would later be shaken as the U.S. embraced and marketed an American global identity. Meanwhile, the 1990’s witnessed a parallel domestic move to construct a global identity through celebrating the U.S. as a multicultural society, and presenting it as the micro-version of the multi-cultural globe. The twenty-first century U.S. identity, it had been speculated, was on its way be ‘global’.

9/11 & U.S. Global Identity

Two days after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the editor of the French newspaper Le Monde, Jean-Marie Colombani, published an editorial titled Nous sommes tous Américains (We are all Americans). The title of his editorial for May 14, 2004 asks the question Tous non-Américains? (Are We All Un-American?). The dramatic transformation in Colombani’s editorials has become an iconic citation of the international community’s reaction to the post-9/11 change in the nature of the U.S. global identity. A heightened discourse of nationalism has hyped the terror invoked by the attacks to declare a state of emergency and prohibited criticism that

may potentially undermine the nation. The U.S. has been strictly defined in terms of a timeful constructed national landscape that needed to, not only retaliate through waging a war in Afghanistan and in a preventive measure in Iraq – let alone holding suspects indefinitely without charging them and endorsing interrogation torture techniques in the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo facilities – but also alienate Arab/Muslim Americans from this landscape and subject them to racial profiling as a measure to fight 'homegrown terrorism'. In her reflections on the post-9/11 U.S. state, Judith Butler stresses, "It was my sense in the fall of 2001 that the United States was missing an opportunity to redefine itself as part of a global community when, instead, it heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights, and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship."[2] All this has been packaged, as Dana Heller would put it, into a commodity named '9/11' that the United States has managed to sell a re-branded vision of the nation, marketed domestically and globally through the good vs. bad and you are with us or with the terrorists paradigms.[3]

The post-9/11 transition in the U.S. global identity – from an attempt to utilize its global superpower status as a means to transcend geopolitical boundaries in favor of reaching a global audience to a heightened discourse of bourgeois nationalism that positions the U.S. nation in a dangerous world; and from a celebration of multiculturalism as a part of an imagined American community to a racial exclusion of Arab/Muslim Americans – cannot be located within the second form of globalization that Hall identifies. It rather corresponds with a third form that overlaps the two globes, i.e. the modern and the post-modern. "The global post-modern," Hall stresses, "is not a unitary regime because it is still in tension within itself with an older, embattled, more corporate, more unitary, more homogenous conception of its own identity."

"Is globalization nothing but the triumph and closure of history by the West?"

The United States current global role cannot, therefore, be simply conceived through a stark contrast with the English colonialist role; it can rather be understood to exhibit a paradoxical lens that depicts the U.S. as a culturally appropriating imperialist project. This paradox serves as a critical tool to understand the complexity of the U.S. post-9/11 global identity, which accounts for the contradiction in the well-reception and organized rejection of its economic, political, and cultural

products. Colombani's equivocal identification with and rejection of Americanness, for instance, resonates with a global embrace and rejection of the '9/11' product. The global mediation of the images reflecting the collapse of the World Twin Towers, the rising number of innocent victims, the horror-stricken families, and the chaotic state of New York City has won the world's consolidation with Americans and their values of freedom and democracy; yet the global mediation of images mirroring the ramifications of a unilateral nationalist sense of revenge, an emblemic of which has been the released photos of the inhumane torture of Iraqis in 'Abu Ghraib', has generated anger and depreciation of what the United States has come to represent.

Conclusion

The problematic contrasting of the two forms of globalization through an emphasis on a post-modern U.S. global identity and a modern English colonial identity is also conducive to theorizing for the triumph of the former and, subsequently, empties the U.S. global identity from its complexity, mostly defined along the interplay between the domestic and the global. In this regard, Hall raises a critical question: "Is globalization nothing but the triumph and closure of history by the West?" His suggestion not to "resolve the question too quickly" and his vision that this is not the ultimate triumph but rather another face of the triumph of the West can be regarded, not only as an early response to Francis Fukuyama's vision charted in his 1989 essay "The End of History" which celebrates the Western Liberal democracy as the end of humanity's socio-cultural evolution, but also as a critical observation of the dynamics of the post-modern globe that would fluctuate the U.S. global identity between an extension into universalism and a contraction to nationalism, or, as Hall aptly locates it, between the 'global' and the 'local'.

Notes

[1] The article was first published in 1991.

[2] See *Precarious Life: The Powers of Morning and Violence*. Verso, London, 2004

[3] Read Dana Heller's "Consuming 9/11," in *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005: 1-26.

Tags

colonialism

global studies

Waleed Mahdi is a Ph.D. Candidate in American Studies at The University of Minnesota.

View PDF