Globalization: Identity, Ethics, and the Pursuit of Cultural Citizenship

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December 14, 2008
With the changing political and cultural landscape worldwide, it has been argued that globalization is the phenomenon most deserving of the attention of critical theorists (Lamp, 2006). I will investigate the impact of globalization on issues of identity and ethics, as evidenced by the work of scholars such as Edward Said (1978, 1993) and Kwame Appiah (2005, 2006). A critical consideration of identity necessitates a new understanding of ethical obligation, resulting in the notion of a globalized cultural citizenship. The critical theorist, emphasizing participation and responsibility, plays a crucial role in determining the shape of this re-envisioned citizenship.

First, it must be established that globalization falls under the parameters of critical theory as a topic requiring consideration. In the entry for “Critical Theory” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, globalization is understood as a process that is experienced differently depending on one’s context and point of view, making it “exemplary for pluralist and multiperspectival social inquiry” (Bohman, 2005). Globalization introduces a host of new problems and complications that demand practical, feasible solutions. This requires a critical theory approach that takes into account cultural considerations for global citizenship.

There is neither a single accepted definition of globalization nor one that is able to address the myriad of issues involved. It is a term invoked by a wide array of academic disciplines with both negative and positive connotations. Instead of attempting a comprehensive description of this phenomenon - or rather, series of phenomena that are loosely grouped together under the umbrella of globalization - I will limit its use to refer to two interrelated trends. First, globalization suggests increased interaction with, and dependence upon, former “others.” This includes a newly vested interest in the actions and well-being of people around the globe, based on the realization that identity is co-constitutive and increasingly pluralist. Secondly,
following a new understanding of interactively-constituted identity, ethics becomes a crucial consideration for critical theorists. Globalization is not a trend that will reverse, however, the effects of globalization can either be beneficial or detrimental to society at large. An ethical system and corresponding sense of responsibility emerge from a changed understanding of identity, allowing critical theorists to advance a model of globalization that aims at reducing marginalizing tendencies and combating inequalities. An understanding of globalization as comprised of identity and ethics both necessitates and contributes to a participatory model of cultural global citizenship.

Identity and ethics are overlapping considerations. New ideas about identity construction bring about new ethical considerations; at the same time, a changing ethical system introduces forces that shape identity. Identity and ethics are both negotiated processes, and must be considered together. At the core of meaningful human existence is our ability to express and embody a meaningful social identity. The “success” of this identity is based on the choices that we make. In an increasingly globalized world, there are many forces competing for the ability to determine our decision-making capabilities. Traditional social, political, or religious institutions that used to be sources of determining identity are no longer adequate. “Today, in a global era, identity has become even more complex because we are now exposed to the demands of a myriad of choices and pressures that go far beyond those previously limited to our more confined cultural and physical milieus” (Marsella, 2007).

It is clear to any astute observer that the dynamics of interaction are changing in the world. Technological advances and improvement in transportation are examples of how people who would have previously existed in relatively exclusive spaces now co-exist. Encountering “otherness” is by no means a new phenomenon, however, there are examples throughout history
of different cultural and ethnic groups interacting. Yet the speed and extent to which this is now occurring demands particular attention. Identity, properly understood, is the pursuit of meaning and purpose. “We are part of something more than ourselves, and if we reject or ignore this essential truth, we face risks of isolation, disharmony, and conflict” (Marsella, 2007). Edward Said was a groundbreaking theorist who studied identity construction, in particular between regions he referred to as the Occident and the Orient. Since colonial times, social science had been responsible for “homogenizing vastly different peoples, places, cultures, and histories” (Roman, 2006, p. 361). In his seminal book, Orientalism (1978), Said first introduced the notion of co-constructed identities. He saw Western “experts” as depicting a homogeneous image of the East, solidifying a system of representation that served the interests of West. The “us versus them” mentality reinforced power relationships. Said’s work has been prescient, given the “clash-of-civilizations” rhetoric that has proliferated in the post-9/11 world, perpetuating an uncritical stance toward non-Western peoples, ideas, and cultures.

According to Said, globalization was set in motion by imperialism. In Culture and Imperialism (1993), Said expands his ideas about identity and calls for “contrapuntal reading” that juxtaposes the ideas and attitudes of the colonizers and colonized. The technique of contrapuntal reading is helpful for understanding the relationship between the imperialists and subjugated and exploited peoples; the existence of each is constituted by and dependent upon the presence and actions of the other. The traditional “us versus them” mentality, with its strong ties to the nation state, potentially engenders xenophobia. What we call “culture” becomes a combative source of identity. In Said’s work, the terms culture and identity are virtually interchangeable. “Culture” is how we refer to the conglomerate of behaviors, practices, customs, and beliefs that determine who we are. Said identifies a tempting return to older traditional
practices that “accompany rigorous codes of intellectual and moral behavior that are opposed to the permissiveness associated with the relatively liberal philosophies such as multiculturalism and hybridity” (p. xiii). This is unhelpful, even dangerous, because our ability to create a meaningful existence depends on our understanding of cultural identity. One of the paradoxical legacies of imperialism was that, in addition to bringing previously exclusive people together, it also allowed them

…to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness…Survival in fact is about the connections between things. (p. 336)

The objectivist tradition within social sciences contributed to a political system based on unitary identities. This understanding of identity is contested by critical theorists because any assumed unitary identity is necessarily exclusionary contrary to the overall emancipatory goal.

Emancipation “means liberating people from whatever causes them to suffer unnecessarily…the ways in which social, political and economic structures create, reproduce or exacerbate inequalities between groups of people” (O’Neill, 2005, p. 120). The fundamental reality of the world is that it is pluralistic and that it became and remains this way due to the ongoing presence of the “other.” The “other” ceases to be a separate entity and is brought in and made part of the center. This shift is the way to curb the perpetuation of inequality.

We create our own social fabric, and in turn are created by it. The “I” cannot be separated from the “other.” Identity negotiation is a fluid process of co-constitution between the self and
alterity, between the individual and the collective. Culture (and therefore identity) is not homogeneous; any attempt at making it so will be detrimental. “All cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (Said, 1993, p. xxv). For Said, it was imperialism that ushered in the process we now call globalization, because it “consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale” (p. 336). This has made it impossible to label people as “purely” one thing, because cultural purity is a myth in the era of globalization. “Labels…are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind” (p. 336).

Appiah (2005) also discusses the ineffectiveness, and even danger, of labeling people. Labels have a dramatic social and psychological effect because of their ability to mold processes of identification. The construction of an identity takes place according to what is deemed “appropriate” within the confines of a particular label, which then has consequences for conduct and decision making. In their respective works, Appiah and Said are both actually arguing the same point: the necessity of recognizing our society as increasingly pluralistic and constituted by otherness. Both scholars push their ideas into the realm of ethics. The two are undeniably linked and it is helpful to treat their ideas simultaneously. The job facing the cultural intellectual is therefore not to accept the politics of identity as given, but expose the forces behind representations and show how they provide a rationale for inclusion or exclusion. (Said, 1993, p. 314)

Appiah, a Ghanaian-American, and Said, an Arab-American, both locate themselves personally within their scholarship. They have experienced firsthand the tug-of-war that happens between different languages, cultures, and ethical systems. Having a dual identity, particularly
the ability to identify with marginalized groups, gives rise to a consideration for the ethical dimension of responsibility.

Although he rejects the term “globalization,” Appiah defines new global identity – his and ours - as being cosmopolitan, a term that parallels the definition of globalization given for the purposes of this paper. Cosmopolitanism also, by its very nature, lacks a clear, precise definition; like globalization, it refers to a range of phenomena that provide commentary on the changing nature of the world. This understanding of identity is a shift away from national exclusivity and traditional boundaries and is not based upon previous gendered and racial thinking.

Cosmopolitan identity pushes humanity into the moral realm. A cosmopolitan world is culturally pluralistic and characterized by an increased vested interest in the “other,” resulting in the need for global responsibility. Globalization has made it impossible to consider the relationship between distinct groups, yet these connections open up the possibility of increased exploitation. Moving away from the falsely dichotomous “us and them” model, it becomes possible to develop an ethical system that is fair to and representative of all. The sphere of “others,” once very small, is now growing as a result of increased communication and mobility. There is ample evidence of the extent to which decision-making by some impacts all. Decisions made about regulating carbon emissions or subsidizing agricultural production, for example, have global ramifications. We are undeniably constituted by and dependent upon our interaction with others. What does this imply about our ethical responsibility to them?

Said and Appiah, both implicitly and explicitly, work within the framework of moral philosophy. A discussion of culture, or cultures, necessarily has ethical implications. Historically, the two extremes have been ethical universalism or moral relativism. Both are overly simplistic,
but the question is a valid one: How can an ethical system based on an appropriate understanding of cultural identity speak pragmatically to our current reality? Furthermore, if we accept Appiah’s notion of “cosmopolitanism,” what is a good model of cultural citizenship? The more that society is understood as an enormous diverse web, the more urgently we need to locate specific ways to give meaning to our lives. Appiah’s recommended ethical guidelines are rather loose, likely because he recognizes that positing a stringent moral system would undercut his point about cosmopolitanism. Therefore, Appiah believes that some universal values hold firm for everyone, but that there are also many local and specific values that are adapted accordingly, and that our understanding of ethics must allow for this. When it comes to morality there is no single truth. His analogy of a conversation is helpful, referring not only to “literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others…Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another” (Appiah, 2006, p. 85).

In the introduction to this paper I asserted that a correct understanding of contemporary identity and ethics should ideally result in global cultural citizenship. Many hesitate to use the term “global governance” because of the negative associations it conjures – anything from ambitious totalitarian regimes to American economic and military exploitation around the globe. That is, obviously, not what is under consideration here. World citizenship (not governance) is already implicit, due to the co-constitution of identity and interconnectedness of our decision-making. Since it is already a reality, the need to determine what it should look like is urgent.

Any notion of global citizenship must link concern for social justice and human rights with cultural respect and equal opportunity of expression and participation. Following Said, a history of citizenship can look like dominant groups trying to justify their superiority. “The aim
here is to subvert the ways that ideas of citizenship have sought to mask and normalize cultured difference” (Stevenson, 2003, p. 337). Previous concepts of global citizenship are inadequate, because they fail to sufficiently take otherness into account. Perhaps something like Said’s notion of contrapuntal reading can be applied to citizenship. “To write a history of citizenship from the point of view of alterity is to ask who is currently favored and protected by its current constructions and who is excluded” (Stevenson, 2003, p. 337). Unmasking relationships of power and dominance is the first thing necessary for (re)imagining global citizenship.

Why add the modifier “cultural” to “global citizenship”? For critical theorists, who work at the intersection points between many academic disciplines, it is not enough to focus solely on traditional rights of citizenship. Formal rights of civic society, such as the right to vote, are certainly necessary. But combating disenfranchisement requires a much wider concern for social and cultural inclusion and effective community development and expression. Full inclusion must take into consideration symbolic dimensions that contribute to people’s sense of worth, belonging, and self-esteem. “Cultural versions of citizenship need to ask who is silenced, marginalized, stereotyped and rendered invisible” (Stevenson, 2003, p. 336). Notions of inclusion and empowerment are at the heart of cultural citizenship and critical theory alike, they are analogous pursuits.

In my opinion, a paradigm shift is required in order to bring about cultural global citizenship. The old way of thinking about identity and ethics must be transcended, giving way to a re-imagined global mandate. The old paradigm is nationalistic, imperialist, patriarchal, conformist, militaristic, homogeneous, exploitative, and ideologically hegemonic. The new paradigm must transcend these former characterizations by being universally empowering,
emancipatory, diverse, creative, peaceful, and based on principles of equitable resource distribution and concern for quality of life.

In order to bring about this paradigm shift, education is essential. This is where critical theory can be most helpful: educating for critical consciousness. There are two fundamental concerns that have emerged from globalization that need to be cultivated through education - responsibility and participation. This is the culmination of the scholarship under consideration in this paper. Said and Appiah have convincingly portrayed globalization as a phenomenon occurring in the space of overlap between contemporary identity issues and ethical concerns. The necessary outcome, then, is to combine their theory with praxis – in developing a sense of responsibility toward others, and then making a commitment to increased participation.

Postcolonial, cosmopolitan identity, as heterogeneous and co-constituted, should result in a participatory cultural citizenship. Likewise, any identity born out of recognition of the influence of alterity necessitates an ethical system that transcends the old paradigm. Moving beyond traditional concepts of citizenship into an understanding that encompasses cultural considerations of inclusion is the only way to achieve these goals. Educating global citizens in critical theory is the first step toward changing the global reality.
References


