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The Anthropology of Globalization

(with Notes on Neomedievalism, and the End of the
Chinese Model of the Nation-State)

David Graeber

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Contents

THREE EFFORTS TO GRASP A VERY COMPLICATED MOMENT	9
BACK TO THE MIDDLE AGES?	12
FRUSTRATION	15
REFERENCES CITED	17

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that people involved in the globalization movement (or "antiglobalization movement," as it's usually called in the corporate press: cf. Graeber 2002) have a great deal of interest in anthropology. They look to it both for an analysis of what they are up against, and also, even more, as a resource and means of analysis for the creation of alternatives. This is not surprising, really, for these are people who spend much of their time trying to create or enact consensus-based decision-making processes and nonmarket forms of exchange and conducting vast carnivalesque rituals. They have also rejected a vanguardist approach and are interested instead in learning from the logic immanent in actually existing forms of practice, wherever they might find them. In both respects, though, they tend to be disappointed. It is difficult to find anthropological essays that so much as mention the WTO, an organization that also does not appear in the index of any of the books here under review—or, for that matter, some recent volumes that actually have pictures of the Seattle protests on their cover! At the same time—in the absence of a radical anthropology that makes a serious effort to balance the (critical) Marxist tradition of radicalism with the (prefigurative) Maussian one (Graeber 2001)—activists often end up obliged through no fault of their own to rely on what is essentially the ethnographic lunatic fringe for inspiration (from Clastres [1989] at its most reputable to primitivists like Zerzan [1994] at its most outre). Let me end, then, with a call. Globalization can mean many things. As Tsing points out, it is more a collection of projects than an inexorable force. Some of these projects are pretty horrific. Some are more promising than most of us even know. It is by no means clear which visions are most likely to win out. At a moment of profound historical transformation, anthropologists could make a lot more difference in the outcome than they might be inclined to imagine.

Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001. 320 pp.

Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts. Néstor García Canclini. George Yúdice, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. 200 pp.

The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader. Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, eds. London: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. 498 pp.

For some time now, anthropologists have been struggling to figure out how we, as a discipline, should relate to the phenomenon popularly known as "globalization." It is a particular challenge for a discipline whose strongest suit has traditionally been its ability to get inside and understand small-scale communities, to comprehend local loyalties and systems of local knowledge. To some, an anthropology of globalization might seem a contradiction in terms: At best, anthropologists can write about how particular communities come into relation with "global" forces (whether the vagaries of the market, misadventures of international development agencies, or attempts by transnational corporations to set up factories or market action movies) as they come crashing in, as it were, onto previously more stable worlds. This is usually what anthropologists have done. Yet increasingly the tendency is to detach these processes from any subject entirely and to speak of the struggle of some local community to deal with what are figured as impersonal global "flows" (e.g., capital flows, flows of consumer goods or media images) treated veritably as natural phenomena. (Similarly, when members of those communities themselves relocate, one adopts implicitly the perspective of some kind of state or global bureaucrat in speaking of "flows" of people.)

As a result, the kind of "globalization" studied by anthropologists has tended to be very different than that discussed by, say, sociologists, historians, or students of international relations, let

alone politicians, IMF economists, or the sort of people who now regularly lay siege to their meetings from Rio to Genoa.

One reason for this difference, I think, is that globalization has made the political role of anthropology itself problematic, in a way perhaps even more profound than the "reflexive moment" of the eighties ever did. After all, we anthropologists are the ultimate cosmopolitans. Not only do we travel across the globe but we are also people who know how to move back and forth between symbolic universes, to negotiate and translate between different cultural worlds. Now that everyone seems to be doing it, where does that leave us? Of course, most people currently negotiating their way through different cultural worlds are doing so for very specific, practical reasons, which might be anything from increasing their company's profits to getting their family out of a war zone. So one could argue that we anthropologists are unique in that we do this from a relatively disinterested perspective, simply in the pursuit of knowledge. This is, of course, not entirely true. We do it as part of career trajectories that will ideally attach us to (increasingly global) universities, or, if not, then lead to marketing consultancies or jobs with the UN—positions, one might argue, within the very apparatus of global rule. The only real alternative is to emphasize that we are studying these processes from a political perspective, and most anthropologists do write as if it were self-evident that their work does have political implications. But what are they? It is increasingly difficult to say. What sort of politics does the practice of anthropology imply, nowadays? Something left of center, certainly, but exactly where we stand on the political spectrum is unclear. Are anthropologists anticapitalist? It is hard to think of many contemporary anthropologists of globalization with much to say in capitalism's favor (at least, those not already working for USAID); but it is not clear that many are even trying to imagine alternatives, either. Are we liberals, then? Many cannot pronounce the word without a snort of contempt. As far as I can make out, the only real fundamental political commitment running through the entire

just talking about a return to Medieval conditions. High-speed technologies now permit near instantaneous movement across the planet, allowing the emergence of a New World ruling class—a "hyperbourgeoisie," as Denis Duclos puts it (2002)—that dominates a world in which hierarchies of power seem increasingly organized around the relative speed at which people's defining activities (labor, decision making) take place (Salmon 2000). If power is being refigured in the temporal domain—to use an appropriately Medieval idiom—capitalism itself seems to be increasingly enshrined in the spiritual role once taken by the Church, that of providing the universal cosmological element, the timeless authority and unquestionable verities against which all this fragmentation of sovereignty and acceleration can take place. In a way this makes the phenomena that Comaroff and Comaroff describe (all the paranoia about occult economies and scrambling after prosperity cults) make a great deal of sense. Why should not those excluded be doing their best to figure out the new spiritual logic and see how they can get aboard?

FRUSTRATION

It is a bit unfair criticizing books largely for what they do not do; my approach (more a collection of thought experiments than a developed argument) is mainly the result of my own frustrations. Frustrations, that is, as an activist, even more than as an anthropologist. I should explain here that I am myself involved in groups like People's Global Action (PGA) (an international network originally founded by the Zapatistas, which includes indigenous groups, anarchists, radical labor unions, and direct-action groups primarily in the Global South), Direct Action Network (DAN) (which organized the Seattle actions originally called by PGA), and others. I am, in other words, one of those people who besiege the IMF and G8 at their annual meetings. This puts me in an odd position. I find

states (Verdery 1996). Everywhere, there is a process whereby elites withdraw into gated communities (or their castlelike equivalents), and whole segments of the population are simply written off from what had been nationalist projects, which once had to maintain at least the pretence of trying to extend equal protections to everyone.

It is here in which anthropologists—or others who have the tools to apply the same kind of comparative perspective—might have a lot to contribute. Take the notion of the territorial nation-state, which so excited Europeans of the 17th century: a single state embracing a single people; speaking the same colloquial language, which was also the language of high culture and a national literature; an efficient bureaucracy chosen by merit and educated in that national literature and administering a uniform system of laws. It seems to me this could best be seen as an attempt by European states to model themselves on China. The Chinese empire was, certainly, the only state that existed in the 17th century that in any way resembled this model. Surely it did far more than anything that existed in Europe at this time. It was no coincidence that Leibnitz could write that the Middle Kingdom should be sending missionaries to Europe rather than the other way around. One might argue that, until fairly recently, insofar as those national bourgeoisies who were creating modern capitalism had a political project, it was to transform their states into something resembling China, minus the emperor and claims to universality, but, instead, as a series of small, equal states organized on essentially Chinese lines. Of course, through colonialism this European version of the Chinese model ended up being imposed on pretty much every other country in the world, including—belatedly—China itself, providing the pretext for the creation of the interstate system of border controls, which is perhaps colonialism's most lasting political legacy.

If so the last few hundred years really have been something of an anomaly (though one itself born of a certain earlier phase of globalization). What, then, of the present? Obviously we are not

field is a kind of broad populism. If nothing else, we are definitely not on the side of whomever, in a given situation, is or fancies themselves to be the elite. In practice, this comes down to a ritualized declaration of disloyalty to that very global elite of which we, as academics, clearly form one (admittedly somewhat marginal) fraction. Hence, most anthropologists feel instantly uneasy with any formulation on globalization that even appears to cheerfully divide the world into those plugged in, and those not (e.g., Castells 2000; Hannerz 1990); for many even a term like *cosmopolitanism* has become inherently suspicious (Friedman 1997, 1999; viz Nederveen Pieterse 2001). We are for the little guys.

As a result, anthropologists have probably remained most comfortable with the genre of writing in which members of nonelites can be shown to be creatively resisting, appropriating, or reinterpreting some apparently homogenizing influence imposed from above (e.g., advertising, soap operas, forms of labor discipline, political ideologies, etc.). Because this is not a topic most other disciplines deal with, it gives us a niche, and a chance to send a message of hope, since—speaking as someone who has taken part in a number of public forums on such issues—issues of cultural imperialism and homogenization are the ones that seem to strike a popular chord and speak to real immediate anxieties both North and South, in ways that discussions of trade regulation or the decline of sovereignty, or even transnational social movements, rarely do. It also gives us the role of reminding everyone that the little guys still exist, a very useful function since they so often seem to be edited out of the trendier accounts of the current global condition. At the same time I cannot help but wonder whether, by doing so, we are also excluding ourselves from conversations—even movements—in which we might be able to contribute something important, not to mention that we might be putting a far more innocuous and friendly face on global capitalism than it actually deserves.

Arguments about globalization (Buell 1994; Li 2000) tend to move between two extremes. Some emphasize unity. A "global"

system is, after all, one that encompasses absolutely everything, and this does seem to be a large part of what is new here: Whether framed in Marxist terms, like Hardt and Negri's notion of a centerless, universal Empire under conditions of "real subsumption" (2000), or Robinson's embryonic global state, emerging around a new world financial ruling class (2001), or, framed in more cultural terms like sociologist Roland Robertson's sense of participating in the world as a whole, a recrystallization of "historic philosophies and theologies of ancient civilizations concerning the structure and cosmic significance of the world" (1992:77). One rather surprising result of anthropology's new role is that we have not really taken part in this discussion of cosmologies. Instead, we have gravitated toward the other pole, which holds that globalization has made any global perspective impossible. It is perhaps best exemplified in the work of Arjun Appadurai (1990, and others), who argues that not only have recent developments blown apart older "world systems" models, like the economic core-periphery relation but also any hope of grasping world processes from any single theoretical point of view at all; we have a world that is all chaos, fractures and flows and pivoting perspectives. One might almost see this as the logical conclusion of a certain strain of resistance literature: as if resistance has become so effective it has caused the thing being resisted to never have existed in the first place. As so often with grand declarations that the age of totalizing frameworks is over, the actual effect is to draw attention away from the current attempt to impose the largest and most totalizing framework in world history—the world market—on just about everything. This leaves skeptics such as me (Graeber 2001) wondering whether the ideology of the market (freedom as choice and endless fluctuation) is not being reflected in the very form of arguments that claim such universalizing systems no longer exist.

increased, overall migration rates are nothing like what they were 100 (let alone 200 or 300) years ago, and the only element that is entirely new here is the presence of the borders themselves. The modern "interstate system" that carves up the earth through thousands of highly patrolled and regulated borders was only fully completed quite recently, and, far from being eaten away by globalization, institutions like the IMF or WTO are entirely premised on it.³

This is not to say that what is going on inside those borders is not changing rapidly, but, even here, the crisis of the nation-state seems to be leading to a return to much older patterns. Historians like Patrick Geary (2002) point out that the situation in most European cities—with an essentially international elite doing its business in an international language incomprehensible to most of their countrymen, and with working-class neighborhoods full of people drawn from across the Mediterranean—is remarkably similar to what those same cities looked like in 1450, or for that matter C.E. 250. It raises the question of whether the last couple hundred years and the ideal of the uniform territorial nation-state has really been something of an anomaly. Giovanni Arrighi notes the recurrence of Early Modern features at what seems to be a moment of world-systemic transformation: the rise of commercial city states; huge chartered companies; and, in peripheral areas, effectively privatized armies and Italian Renaissance styles of war marked by "continuous, sporadic armed conflict" (1994:78–79). Others speak of Neomedievalism, a return to much older European models of dispersed and parceled sovereignty emerging in the global Internet or European Union (Anderson 1995; Kobrin 1998; Ruggie 1993). Some writing of the ex-Communist world speak of a return of feudal-style power relations, with networks of personal dependency replacing functions (including security functions) once performed by

³ The size of the U.S. border patrol has almost tripled since the signing of NAFTA.

cane forces intervening in the production of value” (p. 25). We have seen an outpouring of moral discourses about magical production: stories about witches, zombies, organ thefts, child murder (reflection of a general crisis of reproduction), endless lotteries and pyramid schemes, and new churches that promise wealth; a world in which moral panics seem increasingly to slide seamlessly into “occult economies and prosperity cults” (p. 24) and back. The chapters that follow (mostly by anthropologists, but with contributions from geography, economics, and photography, covering topics ranging from Taiwanese dog shrines to the serial murder of female factory workers in Mexico), at their best, all share something of the same spirit. It is the spirit, one might say, of someone who has just been clunked on the head and is now wobblingly trying to figure where they are, but I do not mean this as a criticism. It is one of the book’s greatest strengths to point out that this is not a feeling limited to left-leaning academics, but that, in fact, most people on earth have been feeling this way recently. This is one of neoliberalism’s most significant, and least discussed, effects, and it is one that (if casino capitalism with its “mathematics of fear” really does become institutionalized) threatens to become permanent.

BACK TO THE MIDDLE AGES?

At least old-fashioned world-systems theory à la Wolf or Wallerstein used to force us to take a long-term historical perspective. Replacing this with a rubric of globalization usually encourages the exact opposite, a kind of giddy presentism. This is unfortunate since a long-term perspective could turn a lot of the reigning popular assumptions about globalization completely on their heads. Many anthropologists, for instance, talk as if the growth of trade and migration really is making national borders increasingly irrelevant. Look at the same situation in terms of the last 500 years, and it is easy to see that while world trade has

THREE EFFORTS TO GRASP A VERY COMPLICATED MOMENT

The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader contains most of the early articles that have come to constitute the canon, as it were, along with a thoughtful sampling of essays on specific areas of concern. Insofar as the aim is to provide us with a portrait of a newly emerging subdiscipline, the editors have succeeded splendidly. After three big-picture chapters (by Hannerz, Appadurai, and Gupta and Ferguson, respectively) the volume is organized around five different sorts of “flows”: three chapters on the flow of capital and its ethnographic repercussions; three on the flow of migrants; three on the flow of commodities; three on the movements of media images; and three on the dissemination and transformation of Western ideologies. In other words, it follows Arjun Appadurai’s famous set of distinctions between financescapes, ethnoscapas, technoscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes, almost perfectly.¹ I do not mean to suggest all—or even most—of these chapters actually do treat these phenomena as impersonal flows, but the overarching framework does have its effects. For instance, the editors end the introduction by apologizing for not including a section on social movements (or, more specifically, “transnational social movements, global religious communities, global cities, and transnational pollution” [p. 271]), but somehow this absence seems almost inevitable, as a social movement is something that cannot, by any definition, be imagined as a “flow.”

The editors were wise to end the book with a chapter by Anna Tsing (“The Global Situation”), who challenges almost all the assumptions on which the book’s organization is based. Tsing invites

¹ Not quite perfectly, since Appadurai’s notion of “technoscapes” is not simply or even primarily about consumer products but about high-speed communications, so one could also argue that here technoscapes are merged into financescapes, and a new category created, however, largely inspired by an earlier Appadurai essay (1986) on the flow of commodities.

us to ask ourselves exactly what sort of political project we are signing on to when we start using the language of globalization and constructing our problems (for instance) in terms of local loyalties versus deterritorialized flows. I would take her argument even further. In academic usage, the term *flow* (*deterritorialization*, too, for that matter) traces back to Deleuze and Guattari's critique of psychoanalysis (1972), which contrasted flows of unfettered libidinal energy to every sort of repressive structure of authority. The more obvious, and more immediate, ancestor, however, is "capital flows"—which are still the only sort of "global flow" one is going to encounter in the pages of the *Economist* or *Washington Post*. In other words, we are dealing with a classic fetishized image of capital acting of its own accord, metaphorically treated as a natural phenomenon (water flows downhill...) and, simultaneously, identified with an image of the liberation of human creativity and desire. This is a very elegant way to sum up the ideology of neoliberalism, but, honestly, do we really want to be adopting this kind of idiom as a technical term? Tsing (p. 475) suggests we might do better to speak of "movements"—both in the sense of social movements and movements of people, products, and ideas—and I must say I heartily agree.²

Néstor García Canclini's *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts* is a very different sort of work. García Canclini, most famous in the United States for his work on post-colonial "hybridity," is chair of anthropology at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana de México and is clearly staking out a position in the larger Latin American left. The book is a curious mixture of brilliant musings and concrete policy suggestions, interspersed with brief, but telling, analyses on, among other topics, the consumption patterns in large cities and the marketing strategies

² Tsing ends with a call for us not to blindly accept but to investigate globalizing projects as a phenomena in themselves; her call is echoed in the work of those (Buroway 2001; Buroway et al. 2000) trying to move from ethnographies of the "consumption" of globality to its "production."

of small-scale craft producers. It is also clearly the product of a very particular historical moment. The book first appeared, in Spanish, in 1995, and the essays were written in the years before the Zapatista rebellion, which so transformed the sense of historical possibilities in Mexico and beyond. This is, then, a product of the gloomiest years of neoliberalism's triumph, and the apparent snuffing out of any notion of radical alternatives. García Canclini is at his most brilliant, perhaps, in his discussion of Hollywood (or Hong Kong) "action" movies as the dominant genre of cultural experience for the popular classes, and their role of emptying out the very notion of "action" from any relation to politics or history. *Action* instead is redefined as a kind of timeless frenetic ballet with no meaning beyond itself, in much the same way as national politics itself has in its current, televisual manifestation. While I would hardly dismiss García Canclini's central argument of the need to update our (still basically 19th-century) notion of citizenship to catch up with issues of global consumerism, I also like to think that events since these writings have shown one can realistically hope for more.

The chapters in *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, all originally published in *Public Culture*, are less about policy recommendations than trying to make some kind of radical assessment of the moment of capitalism's greatest triumph. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff kick it off with a wide-ranging chapter expanding on their earlier Gluckman Lecture (1999): They walk us through how the new global scale of capitalism has completed the job of apparently detaching value from work or class identity and lodging it in consumer identities; the broad moral validation of gambling under "casino capitalism"; scare images of alienated, feral youth as a kind of caricature of the predatory, hyperindividualistic capitalist; confusion over the relation of state and nation; and a broad hankering after former certainties in an age of generalized insecurity and violence. Most of all, "in these times—the late modernist age when, according to Weber and Marx, enchantment would wither away—more and more ordinary people see ar-