

# Clinton in *Barong* Culture and Globalization in the Time of APEC

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APEC is viewed through the lens of economic anthropology. Thus while APEC typifies consolidated and homogenized economic globalization, the same globalizing forces give rise to heterogeneous cultural expressions that are manifested in various forms of nationalism and thriving local cultures. In the end, APEC is both powerful and vulnerable; for while it shapes economies and reconfigures cultures, it is also being culturally reconfigured.

**H**OW DOES ONE RELATE ASIA PACIFIC ECONOMIC COOPERATION (APEC) to culture? APEC seems to be, for want of a better metaphor, an economic animal. We have also been told that economics has nothing to do with culture. Yet the debates around APEC do impinge around issues of culture. This essay seeks to move away from formalist definitions of economics and economic systems and to consider the possibilities of looking into economics as culture or perhaps even more radically, culture as economy and economics.

Its perspectives are drawn from economic anthropology, which views economics as being embedded in society and culture. My focus is on APEC as a transnational body formed out of divergent economic interests and on how these dynamics translate into cultural expressions, mainly globalism and nationalism.

## APEC AND THE IDEOLOGY OF GLOBALIZATION

THE main question to be addressed in this paper is: Does APEC represent globalization, and if it does, are we witnessing a case of economic globalization giving rise to cultural globalization?

To answer these questions, let us first look at an advertising supplement published in the *Far Eastern Economic Review's* 27 November 1997

issue that was meant to mark APEC's Vancouver summit. APEC is composed of 18 nations around the Pacific basin, with about 40 percent of the world's population and with activities that produce more than half of the world's gross domestic product (GDP).

It is interesting that APEC would have an advertising supplement—five full pages—in a leading Asian economic magazine. After all, APEC is not a direct producer or distributor of goods. The advertising is there because APEC needs to be. The blurbs for APEC declare its potential for a new global economic order, capitalism triumphant, linking the world together and ushering in a new millennium of peace and prosperity. The advertising supplement is in fact entitled 'Forum for the Future'.

How does culture fit in? I will argue that APEC is a proclamation of possibilities. The very vision of free trade remains challenged but here we find an instance where the cultural sphere precedes the economic. The images of APEC are starkly ideological, obstinately projecting a particular worldview. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* supplement notes, almost in passing, that there is a financial crisis in Southeast Asia, but goes on to say that the Vancouver meetings are there 'to digest recent eye-catching progress'. The worldview is of global cooperation and inevitable progress. This theme of progress permeates through all of APEC's history.

But moving away from this theme of progress and evoking other images, we think of the hastily constructed roads leading to the villas in Subic for the Asia Pacific's leaders. We see a row of men, standing side by side like fraternity brothers posing for a homecoming. Think of the preparations for the Vancouver summit in 1997, somewhat muted as Asia's tigers turn into cubs. Think of the *Newsweek* cover declaring Vancouver as the new capital of Asia. Think of media coverage, of President Clinton assuring the world that all's well with the world by going off to play golf.

APEC's representation of globalism is ideological in the way it obscures many other images. Its press releases have a limited time frame, never mentioning the many currents that have in fact linked peoples and communities for many centuries. We are made to forget the migrations—more than 40,000 years ago—from northern Asia, across the Bering Straits, into the Americas: the First Nations of Canada; the native American Indians of the United States (US); the Mayans of Central America; the Incas of South America and the many other groups, now called indigenous, that first colo-

nized the other side of the Pacific.

Ironically, it was another age of colonialism—much more rapid, much more violent—that restored the linkages around this Pacific rim. Spanish colonialism and the Acapulco trade, for example, created channels for an extensive exchange of ideas, material culture and even of genes across three continents: Europe, Central America and Asia. (Three years ago at a conference in Brazil, I met a Cuban physician who was excited about meeting a Filipino. It turned out his grandmother had been a Filipina.)

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, APEC almost seems inevitable, a convergence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a consolidation of the New Economic Order. For all intents and purposes, the consolidation is total and efficient. It assures you that the McDonald's hamburger you eat in Manila, with a little variation, will be served with the same standards in Washington DC. It assures you that you are now truly a global citizen, the Nike you wear is assembled from components and labor of at least 10 different countries around the Pacific and beyond.

The consolidation is presumed because it is often most visible in aspects of culture such as cuisine, music, cinema, fashion and the use of English as lingua franca. It is important that this image of globalization be propagated for it becomes self-fulfilling, with APEC representing a world where borders and barriers are torn down, a world united by cosmopolitan preferences.

It is this globalization, too, that is feared by many, sometimes even bringing together opponents with diverse ideologies who see globalization as an erosion of cherished values and traditions. Running through these fears, too, is that of a dominant West destroying 'Asian values'. The debates then are no longer those of economic and political ideologies but of culture. Yet, and this is an important point, political economy remains the arena in which these debates take place.

#### GLOBALIZATION IS NOT HOMOGENIZATION

WE presume that there is a homogeneity in the dominant culture, particularly that of the US, and that this dominance translates into total hegemony. We presume, too, that the dominated cultures offer no resistance. APEC reifies our fears of this global hegemony, of world tastes—and consumer-

ism—churned out of offices in New York and Tokyo.

Arjun Appadurai (1991) first described an emerging global ethnoscape, based not so much on cultural hegemony than on the complex consequences of globalization of capital and labor—one that has led to nu-

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merous diasporas and deterritorialization. As Filipinos well know, this diaspora has been going on for many years, beginning with the migration of Filipino farm labor to Hawaii and the US west coast early in this century and moving through several waves into the 1970s when the

Marcos dictatorship encouraged massive deployment of contractual overseas labor to bring in foreign exchange. In the 1980s and 1990s, much of this labor migration took place within the region, to countries like Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.

Yet it is doubtful that APEC will facilitate more of such labor movements. Unlike the European Community's provisions for free movement of labor, protectionism is apt to be more of the norm in APEC when it comes to the movement of people across borders. In fact, we already find efforts from neighboring countries like Malaysia to curtail this movement of labor. Yet we also find that, in spite of efforts to regulate them, these migratory movements continue unabated, spurred by economic hardship as well as political conflicts. With or without APEC we find hordes of the global homeless living in inhospitable countries, returning 'home' only for a brief respite.

Amidst this deterritorialization we will find the creation of new boundaries, of new localities. Look hard enough and you will find, even within the member nations of APEC, cultural loci in various stages of development, carrying old and new forms of nationalism, whether among the undocumented populations of Filipinos and Indonesians in Malaysia, or the Burmese refugee populations in Thailand. The reluctant host countries are aware of these new loci, and their inherent dangers: away from home, nationhood becomes an even more powerful concept.

Add, too, the dimension of time as we examine nascent nationalisms. What happens when the diasporas come to span several generations? Already, we see Asian-Americans emerging as potent political forces. Closer to home, we have seen how the Chinese migration at the turn of the cen-

tury from the southern Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong to several countries in Southeast Asia has become a vital factor in shaping the region's political economy, as well as its culture.

It is also curious how the movements are not unidirectional. We find young Filipino-Americans—quite often born and raised in the US and unable to speak Filipino—coming back to look for their roots. Young Vietnamese-Americans, too, have gone home to the cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, sometimes risking the wrath of their staunchly anticommunist parents who had left Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s. And then there are the businessmen of Chinese ethnicity who upon their return to China to invest, are being hailed as 'patriotic overseas Hua'. This massive inflow of capital back into China, including large amounts from the 'renegade' province of Taiwan, would not have been possible without the current wave of globalization.

The point here is that globalization is not just a movement toward homogenization. In fact, we may find greater differentiation. This differentiation does not follow the traditional distinctions between North and South or East and West. I have also tried to emphasize that globalization is not new. The temporal dimension needs to be examined, both for past trends as well as those currently being formed.

#### NEOCOLONIALISM TRANSFORMED

DOES all this mean then that we have indeed come into a postcolonial age and that perhaps talk of 'neocolonialism' has become archaic? No. In fact it may be argued that neocolonialism may even be on its second wind. The imperial forays in the form of military invasions may have ended but certainly there is reason to be concerned with the continuing skewed power relationships.

Amidst the images of prosperity and Asian versions of Horatio Alger-type success stories, the cold statistics still point to worsening economic inequality within and among nations. *The Economist* (29 September 1997) cites United Nations Conference on Trade and Development UNCTAD figures showing that, in 1965, the average income per capita of the world's wealthiest 20 percent was 31 times that of the income of the poorest 20 percent. By 1990, the wealthiest quintile's income was 60 times that of the poorest. These are cold statistics indeed. But they do not quite capture the tensions

that come with the inequality, and the continuing dynamics, of resistance.

I do not agree with Samuel Huntington's thesis (1996) of 'a clash of civilizations' mainly because he speaks of power blocs, playing on the old

divisions of East and West. I am more inclined to suggest that the 'clashes' will be less global than regional and national. The loci that I referred to earlier rise out of domestic tensions.

Global developments will undoubtedly be sig-

nificant but the crucial developments will be in the many loci of resurgent nationalisms. For instance, the fears of global Islamic fundamentalism are exaggerated but at the same time, it must be recognized that the currents of this fundamentalism will find expression in many local movements. Nationalism along lines of political, particularly class, ideology will subside. This is not to say that political ideologies are dead; they will, quite simply, assume new forms.

The new will often invoke the old. The Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico reincarnates ancient Mayan culture to rebel against a political order seen as subservient to the interests of imperial globalism (Gossen 1996). Such forms of nativism and revivalism are not new: we find them repeated over and over again in the histories of the APEC countries. Often dismissed as local revolts, they in fact move into the collective consciousness of nations, offering a counterpoint to dominant ideologies that equate modernization with progress.

The importance of recognizing new cultures, new localities, new nationalisms, comes with the fact that these new configurations carry powerful messages that identify death with integration into the New Economic Order and survival with the carving out of new niches from an ancient past. The message, too, is that resistance allowed us to survive and that resistance will continue to allow us regions of refuge (Aguirre-Beltran 1979) where, as in nature, survival hinges on the maintenance and growth of diversity. It is not 'narrow nationalism' or xenophobia that we speak of here, but of a pragmatic, critical perspective that challenges the old axiom of 'West is best'. It is particularly intriguing to look at these signs of resistance in the flow of information.

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## Cultural survival hinges on diversity.

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GLOBAL BABBLING

As many social analysts have pointed out, one distinctive characteristic of the current wave of globalism is that we see the transnational flow not only of goods but also of information. This transnational flow of information is a vital component of trade liberalization, with one of the highlights of APEC's Manila meeting being the lifting of tariffs on information technologies.

No doubt, this explosion of information takes place in the context of skewed power relations but it is useful to look at how, exactly, the information flows mirror changing relations. Video Valium (aka CNN) batters us with Ted Turner's interpretations of the world, Princess Diana and of Mother Teresa, interspersed with ads from the humanitarian agency CARE. A voice drones about how the 'proportion of humanity living in absolute poverty has declined' through the years, followed by the deceptive 'Where there's hope, there's CARE'. The CARE ads capture many aspects of global information flow: an optimistic, almost naïve, and some would say deceptive, view of global poverty, including their own role as humanitarian aid agencies in reducing that poverty. But CNN and CARE are only part of the picture.

They are products of a particular historical milieu that is marked and shaped by what Featherstone (1955) calls global babbling. Featherstone points out that this is no longer a simple matter of bringing in images of 'the distant exotic' into the homes of Americans or Europeans. Rather, we now see a global broadcasting of the 'discordant clashing of cultures', where the natives can now babble back to the masters, challenging the civilizing mission of the West. Perhaps more importantly, the West is now in the position where it knows it needs to listen, even if it continues to do so in a condescending and patronizing way. So when CNN gives special coverage to the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development or the Beijing Women's Conference, or to the Kyoto meeting on global warming, that is well and good. The messages may often become diluted and there is always the risk of cooptation, but these otherwise muted voices are now given a forum that goes beyond mere tokenism.

The Philippines perhaps offers us an interesting case study in the way we grapple with dilemmas in this information age. We want so much to be

western and are in fact considered by the rest of Asia—sometimes with scorn—as the most westernized. Yet we are known too for our nationalism, for a political culture considered radical and one forged out of a resistance to a dictatorship that was closely tied to the US. For all the talk about our being western, the West is in fact a distant entity, and messages developed from western tutelage ring hollow. From AIDS to anti-smoking campaigns, the aping of the West by our ad agencies has failed dismally. Those slick and expensive ads probably do little to shape consumer patterns. I would even say that the globalization of ‘taste’ in the Philippines has not happened at all. For instance Filipino overseas workers usually expect to find Brut cologne or Avon cosmetics in Amsterdam’s duty-free shops. Consumption may have been globalized but it is spurred and shaped by local culture or, in the case of Avon, by a local sales force.

Introductory anthropology courses teach that culture consists of what is shared, but we forget that culture exists in situ, in difference, sometimes in opposition. We are what they are not. When the differences disappear, the rationale for culture weakens, and we search for new grounds to distinguish ourselves. It should not be surprising then that our nationalism draws, increasingly, from our indigenous Filipinos. Despite the tendency towards crass commercialism, the use of ‘indigenous’ fabrics and designs for our clothes and the rise of ethnorock do reflect the new processes of localization amidst globalization. Without cultural anchors—when the moorings provided by ideology are suddenly cut off—we lowland Filipinos now turn to ‘the other’, to the ‘natives’, realizing that they have culture and that they are native because they resisted the encroachments of Western colonization. This is seen not just in the Philippines but in countries as diverse as Thailand, China, Canada, Mexico.

Such trends can sometimes be quite reactionary, specially when they invoke mythical and often romanticized or even fictitious values from the past. Take the case of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* supplement I mentioned earlier. That issue also had an advertising supplement on the Philippine Centennial. It described the features of the Philippine National Centennial Exposition or Expo Pilipino. Among others, the Expo offers this: ‘Genuine tribesmen will be living in specially built tribal villages, and visitors will be able to experience ritual dances, taste the food and see traditional arts and crafts’. The plan recalls memories of the St Louis Exposit-



tion in the US at the turn of the century, where Filipino tribespeople were put on display as a representation of the Filipino: primitive and backward and therefore justifying American occupation of the Philippines. Today's Expo Pilipino, too, has lowland Filipinos representing the tribal: ancient and timeless and genuine.

NATIONALISM AS DIFFERENCE

BUT let us return to the APEC leaders standing in a row, with Clinton towering over them and wearing that elegant *barong* made out of Philippine fabrics and silk. Does that make him more Third World, more Filipino? His wearing a batik shirt the previous year did not make him more Third World, more Indonesian. These subtle nuances in the manipulation of images call for closer attention, particularly in the way the images try to blur the differences, projecting the image of global citizens.

Yet, again, it is not all domination and hegemony and manipulation. The market has its own logic. So while the market tries to universalize taste, the tearing down of borders actually creates new problems.

We have seen that APEC has had a turbulent history, with strong opposition raised against globalization, most visibly from Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and more discreetly from ministers in countries such as Indonesia. These expressions of nationalism take many forms, spilling into other areas as in Mahathir's routinized tirades against neocolonialism and the invocation of 'Asian values' as a key to survival.

In so many ways APEC epitomizes globalization. But we should not forget that while the image-makers have decentered the world, APEC still does not include half of the world: Europe, Africa, many parts of Latin America, and the former Soviet Union. In fact, APEC is neither Pacific (it excludes many South Pacific nations) nor Asian in its exclusion of the entire subcontinent of South Asia. APEC's importance comes not just with what it is attempting to become, but also in what it is not. The Pacific basin is not, and will never be, the world.

APEC presents a case study of how human visions and fears are crystallized. It spurs us to reexamine the process of acculturation, assimilation, syncretism. APEC is not just, as the Manila People's Forum on APEC de-

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clared in 1996, four adjectives in search of a noun. APEC is a construct, still unrooted in time and in space. It is therefore all the more intriguing in the way it moves us: powerful in the way it is shaping economies and yet vulnerable in the way it is reconfiguring, as well as in the way it is being reconfigured, by culture.

NOTE

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