

On globalisation and diversity

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Abstract

Mary Kalantzis's plenary address at the 2005 International Conference on the Humanities (Cambridge, U.K.) argues that globalization and diversity ground the world of our times. The article expands on this notion as Kalantzis and co-author Bill Cope describe three instantiations of globalization since the evolutionary processes of human beings began. The third globalization of which we are a part today, they argue, is characterized by layers upon layers of difference. These layers, moreover, are supported through new media and the Internet—and may indeed return us to “multilingualism, divergence, and enduringly deep diversity.”

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Globalisation and diversity are two of the grounding phenomena of our times. Are they, however, at odds?

The theory of neo-imperialism would suggest that they are. One neo-imperialist case is economic, tracing the colonisation by the commodity form of the last recesses of older material lifeworlds, from the receding havens of our domestic self-realisation to the dispossession of peoples in the depths of the Amazon when their forests are razed. Another case is cultural, clearly proven when we start a new day to find a McDonalds being built on the next corner, or as we watch the story of the world according to Fox News or CNN, or as we look at our working and personal lives through Microsoft's Windows. Still another case is political, as one nation-state, the United States, seems so easily able to dominate others—or to paraphrase its own, more delicate words, as it takes the light of freedom and democracy to those dark corners of the world it considers in need, using force where necessary.

Globalisation, in this conception, is the enemy of diversity. It is incompatible with diversity except in its most superficial and trivialised of forms—tourist kitsch, commodities with the aura of native authenticity, ethnic colour, patronising niceness.

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The purpose of this paper is to argue that diversity is deeper than that, or at least that it is becoming deeper. Perhaps it was not meant to be anything other than superficial in the modernity of our recent past which worked so hard at creating a homogenous mass—mass production, mass consumption, the mass politics of ostensibly uniform national identity. The suppressed differences of this modernity—experiential, corporeal, interpersonal—have been the subject of our research work and political activism, defending diversity against its modern assailants not for the sake of nostalgic return but with an eye to the creation of a different modernity in which the so-called “multicultural” becomes more than trite (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997; Kalantzis, 2000).

This paper takes a longer view than is possible in the everyday fray of research and activism. Its focus is the increasing recognition of diversity in our particular modernity. The case it will make is that it is becoming harder to dismiss diversity as superficial or mutable in the phase of globalisation we are now entering. In fact, we want to speculate—tentatively, suggestively, provocatively—that we might be on the verge of a new phase in our species’ global presence, the exact shape of which is not yet clear but in which diversity becomes a more fundamental dynamic than it has been within not just our living memories, but even our written, civilisational memory.

To make our case, we go back beyond our written memory. This frame of reference we call “the three globalisations.” Human beings have only ever been global creatures. From the moment we emerged as the species we are, we became the first sentient beings to fill virtually every habitat. Our first act as a symbol-making species was to walk to the ends of the earth. This may have taken as long as several 100,000 years or as little as 100. Whatever the timing, we started walking from the moment we became a species and did not stop until there was nearly no desert, no tundra, and no sea where we did not or could not make a home. This happened during the first globalisation, a process unprecedented for any species in natural history.

Then we became different because, in our supposedly primitive states with seemingly poor communications compared with the wires and waves of modernity and in the relative isolation of one tribe from another, our languages and cultures drifted in their various directions. A kind of symbolic-cultural variant of evolutionary processes set in. Having globalised, we drifted into a state of separation, and this state created difference. Or, at least, this is the conventional wisdom. We want to suggest, however, that something else happened in this first globalisation.

We want to argue that the state of difference in the first globalisation was more integral and more systematic than that. And that it was more deeply, intrinsically global than the fact of dispersal and the accident of separation. To make this case, we are going to draw on earlier work (Kalantzis, 2004) and all-too briefly for now because we want to get to the fulcrum-point of this paper, the transition from the second to a third globalisation. So we will view the first globalisation through just one symptomatic window, those forms of linguistic representation or meaning-making that make us unique in natural history, to use the phrase of Terence Deacon, the “symbolic species” (Deacon, 1997), a creature apart.

The first thing to note about diversity amongst what we will call “first languages”—the languages of the first globalisation—is that their differences are more than accidental, more than the result of evolutionary drift. They are endemic to their modes of production of meaning and the reproduction of material life that these systems of meaning support. These were not bounded

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