

FLC 301/Fall 2001

Instructor: H. Kurthen

Minutes of 10/10/2001

Processes of Global Identity Formation

by

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1. Guest Lecture

The presentation by Professor Khan on processes of global identity formation stuck closely to the assigned readings. The lecture began with a brief discussion of a cartoon taken from the *New Yorker* magazine, cleverly depicting a certain level of ignorance and apathy on the part of the American consumer. The latter purchase commodities with which they identify because they supposedly define them as distinctive individuals. But the workers who manufacture these clothes in less developed countries under squalid conditions are “hyper-exploited” and receive only a tiny fraction of the value of their product. In other words: consumers who view themselves as caring persons inadvertently base their “identity” on an exploitative system and unjust global distribution of wealth.

After this brief introduction of how the global processes and identities are intertwined (though their true character may be hidden), we discussed the workings of the global division of labor, consumption, and distribution of wealth.. Globalization is characterized by an intricate system of massive transborder movements of capital, people, and commodities. With the movement of people from location to location, identities, lifestyles and values are transported too. For example, some migrants develop a diaspora identity where they remain loyal to their homeland even if they haven't been there for a long time.

The lecture continued with the explanation of how we all are shaped by both global and local structures of power, status, and class. Global relations are relations among regions with different access to resources and standards of living, for example, the “Global North” versus the “Global South.” And macro-level policies setting inflation, prices, currency exchange rates, and investment levels affect not only countries but also individual households and families. For example, international organizations such as the IMF or the World Bank, heavily influenced by the “Global North”, use *Structural Adjustment Policies* (SAP) to dictate terms of economic interaction, trade, consumption levels, and the distribution of wealth in the “Global South”. The “Global South's” debt-burden in particular makes them susceptible to foreign influence and interference into domestic affairs. International institutions open the “Global South” to foreign investment (i.e., the import of corporations) who are mostly interested in cheap labor and tax breaks. This is often described as “more bleeding out than giving back.”

Next we discussed gender identity issues as presented in Freeman's article *Designing Women: Corporate Discipline and Barbados' Off-Shore Pink Collar Sector* as well as Bolles' *Gender and the Process of Globalization*. We learned how corporate policies mold their female employees into docile feminine workers, and how the liberating

effects of female employment are counteracted by their exploitation and instrumentalization for corporate objectives.

During the presentation, we also encountered a number of new terms, such as "enclave" = an ethnic concentration; "diaspora" = a migration pattern concerning the maintenance of ties and loyalties; "Structural Adjustment Policy" = economic reorganization, making cuts in social programs and redirecting national resources and policies; "essentialism" = the belief that certain things are quasi natural and cannot be changed. Often people believe in essentialist "truths" for lack of knowledge/ignorance, vested interests, or inability to control and make changes (Example: women are the "weaker" gender) .

2. Discussion

What is the relationship between economic independence and freedom to decide over one's own destiny and identity? This question was answered by discussing the concept of "freedom" in comparison with "fate." If we are our own masters, we have a greater potential to control our destiny up to a certain point. Freedom to choose our identity is not only a matter of our own capabilities but is also related to the societal, economic and cultural system that we are born into and our access to resources. Money, for example, can be helpful for the organization of cultural activities, such as setting up religious institutions, invite missionaries, lobby politicians, provide media coverage to make one's voice heard, etc.

How did the structure of families and gender identities change in Latin America and the Caribbean as a result of globalization? Professor Kahn answered this question by dispelling the myth that traditional women stayed at home. In reality, their participation in the economy was always very important for the survival of the family, particularly among the poor (the majority). Women took on the role of both mother and worker. The isolated housewife is a myth derived from the experience of middle and upper class women who tended to stay home and care for house and children only. Perhaps the most important change resulting from globalization is the distance women now travel to work and the number of networks they have to maintain.

Why did the reading focus on women? This is because Caribbean women are significantly influenced by SAP's and the employment policies of global corporations. The latter hire the most docile and least demanding workers, i.e., young women. They don't have to tend to children, they have little education, they are in need of income, and will not likely unionize. They are the prime material of global economic exploitation.

Conclusion: In this informative lecture on globalization we learned a lot about how new forms of global capitalism impact gender identity. The cartoon from the *New Yorker* magazine illustrated the relationship between global consumption and production relationships. Consumers purchase items that supposedly define them, corporations produce these commodities through cheap labor in less developed countries. This relationship is also described in the *Designing Women* article about how young Barbadian women take on "pink-collar" jobs and are exploited in the process. Global

identity was also a major theme of the lecture. The formation of identities applies not only to individuals but also to cultures and countries, meaning whoever has power and high status can control the lives of people and their identities. According to Professor Khan, identity can be classified as the relationship between a person's self-perception and one's societal environment. Individuals with low status will be more susceptible to oppression or exploitation--similarly less developed countries will always be more subject to foreign and corporate influence.