

A Mixed-Up World

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A debate has been raging for some decades now in both the humanities and the social sciences over the issue of globalization and its discontents. One side argues that globalization leads to more homogeneity, while the other side holds that it results in greater heterogeneity. Within this debate, a number of processes have been identified as the agents of change, three of which are predominant in social and cultural contexts: syncretism, creolization, and hybridization. All three terms try to capture something essential about the mingling of different cultural elements increasingly brought together by globalization and the new forms that often result from their interaction.

Syncretism has been dismissed as only pertaining to religion, and hybridization has been scrutinized for its checkered use in the past, linked to discredited theories of race. This leaves us with creolization, originally a linguistic concept that referred to contact between cultures leading to newly emergent languages. The concept was subsequently extended to refer to the general creolization of cultures in certain parts of the world, such as the Caribbean. The term “creole” also has something of a checkered history: it was used by Spanish, French, and British colonialists as part of a racial schema based on purity of blood. But the concept was adopted within colonized cultures, and eventually came to be applied more broadly to processes of convergence in global culture.

This latter trend can arguably be traced back to a 1987 article by the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, in which he argued that the world was “in creolization,” meaning that everything is mixed up. Japanese youth rap, Finns tango, Americans eat sushi, and Chinese consume Big Macs. Culture, it seems, has escaped the limits of copy-

right and is now appropriated at will by whoever wishes to do so.

The authors of the book under review adopt the concept of creolization to link it with social identity formation and diasporas. This is not surprising, since Robin Cohen is a leading scholar of diasporas, having published a textbook on the subject. Here the Oxford don is joined by a younger coauthor, Olivia Sheringham, a postdoctoral scholar at the University of London.

They begin their book by offering a very broad overview of concepts of cultural mixing and how such mixing leads to identity formation. Their sweeping survey

daringly reaches back to ancient Babylon, then jumps to the German Enlightenment philosophers Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottfried von Herder. Cohen and Sheringham argue that social and cultural differentiation evolved along a threefold continuum, moving from religious exegesis to European discourses about otherness and selfhood during the age of colonialism, to finally arrive at modern debates over cultural identity. This grand sweep is covered in only nineteen pages of text, which obviously suggests huge gaps in terms of both time and space, resulting in gross overgeneralizations based on excessive reductionism.

The authors seem to feel that only a minimal amount of data is necessary to create theoretical models. Having based their key idea on a very thin layer of evidence, they follow suit in the rest of the book by squeezing a number of case studies into the preconceived model they have constructed. First they focus on “contact zones,” places where cultural change is heightened and intensified due to the coming together of different peoples for the purposes of trade and other economic transactions. Such border zones (like the well-known “Tex-Mex” one) are the contested sites of intense negotiations, where creolization becomes the law of the land, so to speak.

Encountering Difference: Diasporic Traces, Creolizing Spaces
by Robin Cohen and Olivia Sheringham
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Cohen and Sheringham next focus specifically on islands and their plantations, then ports, and finally cities as spaces of intense interaction that speed up the creolization process. Not surprisingly, their overall conclusion at this point in the book is that all social relationships are “mutually constitutive.” This is a point that anthropologists have been making at least since Fredrik Barth’s classic 1969 volume *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, though the authors fail to mention it.

CULTURAL GUMBO

The remaining chapters wander merrily through such diverse topics of cultural expression as music and carnival. The authors compare the musical innovations of Louisiana and Cape Verde, as well as the Lenten season carnival in the same locations. The comparison between two such seemingly disparate places shows us that cultures set apart by vast geographical spaces can produce new genres of music reflecting similar histories of slavery, migration, and diaspora. Similarly, although carnival takes expressive form differently throughout the world, in these regions it was about turning the world upside down to reverse the power relationships inherent in former plantation societies. Today these carnival traditions continue using dance and music as a way of critiquing social stratification and racial discrimination.

The authors also add a brief discussion of the Notting Hill Carnival, a major annual event in an area of London that was once home to many Caribbean immigrants. There, they argue that creolization and diaspora come together in a fashion described by Claude Lévi-Strauss as “*bricolage*,” a term the French anthropologist coined for the practice of using whatever means and materials are necessary to get the job done. Global culture, then, must be mixed culture, bringing together a wide variety of disparate elements into a newly amalgamated whole. Yet one might ask if there are not some who resist amalgamation and change.

Certainly “tradition,” that which is perceived to be passed down from one generation to the next unaltered, attempts to mediate between agents of change. The authors label this as “decreolization,” another linguistic term that here refers to those forces acting against creolization at moments of convergence, which is covered in a chapter on the

construction of heritage in Louisiana and Mauritius.

They also add the term “recreolization” to refer to items of heritage, such as carnival, that are subject to contestation and debate in a process they call the “activation and deactivation of diasporic pasts.” Gradually, the vested interests of all parties involved come together in a contested but creative way to create a somewhat contrived national culture promoted by politicians, as with the “unity in diversity” model that countries such as India deploy. Creole culture thus becomes national patrimony, something that belongs to all citizens regardless of ethno-linguistic background.

I have found the term “decreolization” useful in my own work on the Hosay ritual in Trinidad, if used in a precise manner, but “recreolization” makes little sense to me. Essentially what happens as a result of constant interaction and cultural negotiation is recontextualization, often as a result of state intervention. Public festivals or rituals have sometimes proven to be violent agents of change

in the past, bringing about rebellion and revolution. Banning and subsequently reinstalling them in a newly sanitized form allows for a previously volatile performance event to be presented within a new ideological context that suits the needs of

those in power, both politically and economically.

The book also deals with the important theme of cultural politics that results in multiple loyalties. Diasporic cultures, most notably island cultures, are often made up of a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups that had very little in common in the pre-contact period, which means that they must learn to live together in the post-colonial period, when the negotiation of difference is absolutely essential to any nationalist agenda. Think of the United Kingdom, for example, whose commonwealth ideals have led to a policy of multiculturalism. This can engender multiple loyalties. The authors use the example of Martinique to discuss this idea, and to develop further their contention that social identities are negotiated. But the reader may well be skeptical that the example of one tiny island can help us understand the same dynamic process elsewhere in the world.

Finally, 140 pages into the book, the authors turn to the idea of cultural difference, the most pressing of issues, given its role in driving political

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conflicts. In their concluding chapter, Cohen and Sheringham move too briskly through a dizzying amount of theoretical space, covering concepts such as transnationalism, deterritorialization, and postcolonialism. Unfortunately, the conclusion is redundant, simply reiterating much of what they pointed out earlier in their study.

Encountering Difference takes the reader on a whirlwind tour through human history in the hope of developing a grand theory to explain how human beings have dealt with and managed difference over time and space. In the end, the undertaking of such an ambitious enterprise leaves the critical reader with more questions than answers. The authors pick and choose their sources,

which results in the exclusion of a number of important—indeed, seminal—works on creolization and hybridization, not to mention syncretism. Their examples are enjoyable, but the ethnography is thin, as is the discussion of the fundamental role that power plays in such delicate cultural negotiations.

For the general reader who is interested in the ironies of culture, this is a worthwhile book, but for the specialist there is nothing really new or groundbreaking to be found. I closed the book feeling somewhat frustrated by its many broad generalizations, but perhaps that was the publisher's or the authors' intention: to provide a short textbook for the uninitiated student. ■