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CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF
CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL CULTURE

FREDERICK BUELL

In 1969, Herbert Schiller wrote that “the cultural homogenization that has been underway for years threatens to overtake the globe” (112). “The new cultural-ideological structures of the emergent nation,” he went on, “are no less vulnerable to the glittering socio-cultural products of the already developed world than the new industries of the aspiring states are to the giant corporations of the industrialized west” (120). Concerned specifically with the development of global media, he advocated a kind of electronic delinking to prevent the eradication of vulnerable cultures. His sense of urgency was fueled by the conviction that “mistakes and failures in agriculture and industry, if momentarily disastrous, are still remediable. Culture patterns, once established, are endlessly persistent” (110).

Liberal Jeremiads against homogenization are commonplace. Implied in most is the notion that the world is a patchwork of primordially separate, bounded cultural units, and that these units enter the geo-political arena via the structures of emerging nations. According to the ideology of the nation-state, a distinctive culture legitimizes the emerging state, which then reciprocally protects that culture.

Recently though, laments about homogenization have been sounding, paradoxically, more like celebrations of the opposite. For William Roseberry, “Americanization” in Latin America evokes the following associations:

we think of office buildings for local outlets of multinationals, of McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken, of Exxon and Coca Cola signs, of television stations carrying Spanish language versions of “Dallas” or “Dynasty,” of mass-market magazines carrying translations of articles from People, of stores selling plastic pumpkins and Halloween costumes and children going door to door saying Trick or Treat, Trick or Treat, Tiene dulces para mi? (81)
Roseberry's comments are less lament than a stylish recreation of a too-familiar genre: Roseberry intends this effect, as he goes on to argue that many of the premises for traditional fears about homogenization in Latin America are false. They are based on a belief in distinctive primordial cultural units, which is historically inaccurate, and they omit consideration of important, non-monolithic mechanisms by which local cultures interiorize and indigenize outside influences, rather than swallow them whole hog.

A still more striking revision of the usual lament can be found throughout Pico Iyer's *Video Nights in Kathmandu*. Typical of the travelogue through an Asia transformed by American popular culture is his chapter on Bali:

I had come into town the previous afternoon watching video reruns of *Dance Fever* on the local bus. As I wandered around, looking for a place to stay, I noted down the names of a few of the stores: the Hey Shop. The Hello Shop. Easy Rider Travel Service. T.G.I. Friday restaurant. After checking into a modest guesthouse where Vivaldi was pumping out of an enormous ghetto blaster, I had gone out in search of a meal. I ran across a pizzaria, a sushi bar, a steak house, a Swiss restaurant and a slew of stylish Mexican cafes. (29)

Lament has utterly disappeared; it has been transformed into a carnival-like celebration of hybridism and heterogeneity. When American popular culture is grafted onto Eastern locations, the effect is not assimilation but the creation of startling, boundary-violating artifice everywhere. Iyer makes clear that the process of absorption of American popular culture is complex: with a few exceptions, people have consciously taken it over and deployed it in transformative ways, rather than making themselves over in its image as a part of the process of their domination.

Changes in this micro-genre are related to changes in what is a vastly more significant discourse, one that Roland Robertson has called "a vital ingredient of global-political culture," the "discourse of [global] mapping" (25). To show the full significance of these shifts in rhetoric about homogenization, I shall analyze a series of these underlying attempts to map the globe, focusing on how they describe global cultural relationships differently and how they define and deploy the term "culture" in different ways.

One of the most influential refigurations of the world according to Schiller has occurred in World Systems thought. In Imman-
Wallerstein's work, the supposedly separate cultures that, since the 1955 Bandung Conference, were grouped into first, second, and third worlds were revealed as having been, all along, parts of a single system—not parts that simply made up a larger system, but parts that had actually been made by that larger system. True, first, second, and third world were reborn in Wallerstein's concepts of core, semi-periphery, and periphery; nonetheless, they were not autonomous entities, but creations of the overarching system. If Wallerstein, in economics, destroyed the developmentalist's fiction of independently trackable, separate cultures, Eric Wolf, to whose analysis Roseberry was indebted, attacked the anthropologist's notion of separate, bounded, primordial cultures, by showing how societies people had taken as primordial were in fact created by the expanding colonial world system. As he wrote in *Europe and the People Without History*, "the more ethnohistory we know, the more clearly 'their' history and 'our' history emerge as parts of the same history" (19).

In a recent article, "Culture as the Ideological Battleground," Wallerstein applies to the world system Marx's famous distinction between base and superstructure, between "the material transformations of the economic conditions of production" and the "ideological ... forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out" (Marx, 12). To do this, Wallerstein isolates two different definitions of the word "culture": "culture," meaning what distinguishes groups, like nations, from each other, and "culture" meaning what creates distinctions within groups. Peoples have particular "cultures"; within one people, some, the elite, have "culture." These two usages, Wallerstein argues, have no objective, material reality, but are "the consequence of the historical development of [the capitalist world] system and reflect its guiding logic" (32). They serve to mystify people about the real nature of the system's contradictions and thereby help keep it firmly in place. Wallerstein then shows how this process operates by charting the way two particular ideologies, the "ideologies of universalism and of racism-sexism," work in the world system. These ideologies use the two notions of culture to keep the underlying system intact. On the one hand, universalism serves as a "palliative and deception" to mask the "hierarchy of states within the interstate system and a hierarchy of citizens within each sovereign state" (43);
at the same time it holds out the false promise of equality for all, it justifies those at the top of the hierarchy as the possessors of the "universal" culture. Correspondingly, racism-sexism legitimizes inequality and hierarchy by creating invidious group distinctions on the interstate and intrastate levels.

To these purely system-created differences, Wallerstein adds another order of system-created difference: that of "antisystemic movements" which are "at the same time a product of the system" (51). These are, he feels, too ambivalent and compromised to be effective at present. For our purposes, such uncertainty is not important; what is crucial is that Wallerstein conceptualizes the world as a single system which does not homogenize, but produces, systematically, a number of orders of cultural difference. Wallerstein thus lays the cornerstone for contemporary thought about global culture not as the effacement of separate cultures by an homogenizing hegemony, but as the manufacture of new orders of cultural difference by a system that has already included everyone.

Compared to positions we shall entertain shortly, Wallerstein's theory is conservative in a number of ways. First, his conceptualization of the world system is hierarchical and centrist; movement between core, semi-periphery, and periphery is hard to achieve. Second, his concept of culture lags behind that of much recent Marxist cultural criticism; culture is merely a handmaiden of the system, masking its contradictions. Wallerstein's theory denies culture the oppositional role Gramsci allows for, and it does not engage itself with recent theory, like structural Marxism, that would privilege the analysis of culture equally with economics as an analysis of power, thereby discovering more relationships between the two realms than one finds in Wallerstein. Finally, Wallerstein's thought stays firmly within the model of the nation state. More radical conceptions of system-created cultural difference will argue, as Wallerstein does, that nation-states are essentially fictional creations of the world system, but they will go on to chart the emergence of a more fragmented, post-national global system. Equally important, they will see that system as decentered rather than centric; and they will give cultural production a more important, even formative role in it. In the course of these changes, orders of cultural difference created by a single world system will
be multiplied, and the carnival of hybridism we found in Pico Iyer will seem normative, not eccentric.

The Marxist literary critic Frederic Jameson conducts a far richer investigation of the relations between culture and the world system than Wallerstein. Jameson theorizes that a close analysis of cultural products can make explicit the political unconscious of an age. For Jameson, postmodern art, literature, architecture, and media reveal the fact that we are in a new phase of capitalism. Following Ernest Mandel Jameson describes this new stage as follows: it is

the moment of the multinational network, or what Mandel calls "late capitalism," a moment in which not merely the older city but even the nation-state itself has ceased to play a functional and formal role in a process that has in a new quantum leap of capital prodigiously expanded beyond them, leaving them behind as ruined and archaic remains of earlier stages in the development of this new mode of production. (1988: 350)

This new stage of capitalism is accompanied by a sea-change in literary representation, the development of postmodernist style. Jameson describes its peculiarities as

symptoms and expressions of a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself. Not even Einsteinian relativity, or the multiple subjective worlds of the older modernists, is capable of giving any kind of adequate figuration to this process which in lived experience makes itself felt by the so-called death of the subject, or, more exactly, the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion of this last which can no longer even serve the function of the Jamesian reverberator or "point of view." (1988: 351)

In postmodern style, then, the "unimaginable decentering of global capital" is visible; the post-national, globalizing world system produces a fragmented, heterogeneous cultural style, one that circulates decontextualized cultural fragments drawn from around the world and throughout history. This circulation is driven by the mechanism of consumer society, because postmodern culture is commercial, not oppositional. Jameson's position is thus oddly, distantly, related to conceptions of the new global culture as a kind of "third" culture, one that is seen as built above, or built
against national cultures. What Jameson sees as decentering selves and national cultures, these theorists describe, with more permissive, less catastrophic rhetoric, as the basis for the construction of new selves and a new culture—the new selves and culture of the culturally-decontextualized and cosmopolitan. Anthony Smith, for example, argues that today's cultural imperialisms are "ostensibly non-national," replacing the national imperialisms of colonial times and the more recent "supranatural" imperialisms of capitalism and socialism. Summarizing the argument for the creation of a new global culture on this basis—an argument he only partially agrees with—Smith notes that it will "wear a uniformly streamlined packaging" and take its contents in part from "traditional, folk or national motifs and styles in fashion, furnishings, music and the arts, lifted out of their original contexts and anaesthetized" (176). This global culture will be ultimately "context-less, a true melange of disparate components drawn from everywhere and nowhere, borne on the modern chariots of global telecommunications systems" (177).

Scott Lash and John Urry, in their book The End of Organized Capitalism, draw heavily on and also revise Jameson's and Jean Baudrillard's concepts of postmodern culture. The most important revision for our purposes is the fact that Lash and Urry give Jamesonian postmodernism a specific class location, rather than take it as a privileged window on the underlying structures of late capitalism; correspondingly, they see the current stage of capitalism as a disorganization of the Marxian system, rather than a transformation that extends it into a new period. Postmodern culture is thus attached to one particular component of this disorganized system: Lash and Urry argue that the "developing service class [is] the consumer par excellence of post-modern cultural products" (292). The rise of postmodern culture represents that class' attempt at cultural hegemony and helps show how that class is constituted so as to make "the decentered identity which fosters the reception of such post-modern cultural goods" (292). Lash and Urry make a bias of Jameson's system clear: the postmodern culture Jameson describes is structurally a first-world phenomenon. A similar first-world centrism is built into the theories of global commercial culture that Anthony Smith cited. In all these theories, the core is culturally fragmented and globalized. The periph-
ery, however, lags behind, caught in the quaint backwater of the ideology of the nation state and the stage of industrial capital.

Post-structuralism has given rise to a variety of cultural theories that argue for a more radical, worldwide form of system-created heterogeneity. In these, the nation-state model is abandoned completely, both core and periphery are pluralized, and hierarchical relationships between the two are undone. In a wide variety of disciplines, culture has been analyzed neither as the expression of authentic primordial units, nor as the tool of power that remains in the economic base, but as an effective form of power—of power that is reconceived as widely diffused, or, better, dispersed throughout sociocultural life. Cultural studies investigate how hegemonic social formations are constructed simultaneously—yet heterogeneously—in culture, knowledge, and social, political, and economic institutions.

Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have been, of course, dominant influences in many of these enterprises. Derrida's influence is evident in attempts to expose the imperfectly-concealed illegitimacy of centered textual and social structures, by showing the multiplicity they really involve but try to exclude; indebtedness to Foucault is shown in an anti-Marxian resistance to retotalizing knowledge about culture and power in either an Euclidian “world system” or a clear evolutionary narrative. Clearly, when such techniques of analysis are applied to the Wallerstinián world system, they are disruptive: the notion of a single system is shown to be much more complex than anyone thought. Systemic unity and singularity are decomposed into an interactive, yet interruptive, contradictory multiplicity; as the world becomes increasingly systematically interconnected, it grows paradoxically more complex, heterogenous, and impossible to grasp in a synthetic whole.

From a variety of positions, then, Herbert Schiller's assumptions about primordial cultures have been even more thoroughly exposed as motivated, fictional constructions than they were by Wallerstein and Wolf; the fiction of separate cultures was created not just by the operation of a single economic system, but by a multitude of related, but not wholly unifiable, colonial discourses. Thus, to pick a very few examples, Edward Said's Orientalism unmasked the Western concept of the “Orient” and “oriental culture” as an interdisciplinary construction of Imperialist power
and knowledge; Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm called attention to a fascinating variety of “invented traditions,” deployed by capitalist society at home and colonial powers abroad in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, traditions that were supposedly primordial but were outrageous, even fantastic constructions. Sally Price analyzed the neo-colonial construction by anthropologists and art historians of the categories “primitive culture” and “primitive art”; James Clifford has seen cultural relativism as a last ditch attempt to contain the upsettingly interrelated multiplicity of the postcolonial world, a “response to a pervasive modern feeling, linking the Irishman Yeats to the Nigerian Achebe, that “things fall apart.” (65) Perhaps most devastatingly, Benedict Anderson has analyzed the rise of nationalism and its notion of national cultures as the emergence, in history, of a peculiar sort of “cultural artefact,” one which was created, in part, by cultural means. These means include the novel and the newspaper, which helped to construct their readers as citizens of a nation, and a variety of linguistic, historical, and cultural research, which produced—even invented—national traditions. Once created, the “artefact” was disseminated “modularly” throughout the world, most recently when it was adopted by colonized peoples in their struggles for incorporation and liberation.

These analyses show how the world is constructed in a wide variety of internationally-disseminated discourses. Crucial to this multiplicity is the intimation that what has been so plurally constructed can be also deconstructed, even reconstructed: there is a sense of much greater dispersion and fluidity of power than was available in the Marxist model, along with a sense that theory, cultural criticism, and cultural production can still have, as they formerly did have, considerable impact on the structuring of the world.

Such an empowerment of culture is obvious in contemporary literary and cultural studies. A wide variety of intellectual movements have sprung up, from a renewed ethnic studies, to Imperial discourse theory, post-colonial literary and cultural studies, literary feminism, neo-marxist cultural studies, literary deconstructionism, and so on. Also, in the case of the canon dispute in North America, debate has been extremely public and political. The debate is too various to summarize here; I shall pick one example
from the realm of post-colonial cultural studies. Timothy Brennan describes, from his perspective in the English "core," how, in cultural production and analysis, dissolution of the coherence of the core goes hand in hand with disruption of the hierarchy between core and periphery:

the wave of successful anti-colonial struggles from China to Zimbabwe has contributed to the forced attention now being given in the English-speaking world to the point of view of the colonized—and yet it is a point of view that must increasingly be seen as part of English speaking culture. It is a situation, as the Indo-English author Salman Rushdie points out, in which English, 'no longer an English language, now grows from many roots; and those whom it once colonized are carving out large territories within the language for themselves.' ... [T]urn, such voices from afar give attention to the volatile cultural pluralism at home. The Chilean expatriate, Ariel Dorfman, has written that 'there may be no better way for a country to know itself than to examine the myths and popular symbols that it exports to its economic and military dominions.' (48)

Disruption of global hierarchies, by empowering the perspectives of former colonies, works in sync with pluralization of the core. The process of global empowerment is particularly interestingly expressed: Rushdie's well-chosen metaphors about the English language—that it now grows from many roots, and former colonials are carving out large territories in it—suggest that, in the post-colonial world, English is no longer the possession of the English, and that, once deterritorialized, it is being pluralized by being colonized, in reverse, by those it once dominated. For example, as post-colonial literary theory argues, there are now a number of different Shakespeares—Shakespeares read from a number of different hermeneutic positions. One can chart, for example, a large number of post-colonial interpretations of The Tempest, from George Lamming to Houston Baker. Thus a single discourse—like the single world system which it helps constitute—is being pluralized by contending viewpoints. Dorfman's comment then suggests further how systematically interconnected and interactive that pluralism is, in that he can meaningfully argue that the key to the self-knowledge of the core lies now in the experience of the periphery.

Such positions become especially challenging when one realizes that what is true for the discourse of "English" literature can
be applied to all the other discourses exported from core to former colonies: discourses that range from historiography, as analyzed by Gyan Prakesh, to anthropology, as theorized by James Clifford. In anthropology, for example, theoretical dispute has been fueled by examination of issues such as the power relations involved in the relationship between investigator and the people he/she studies, how those power relations affect cultural representation, and what happens as the role of the native informant becomes enlarged, or when those who formerly might have been native informants become the ethnographers. The abyss between this self-reflexive methodological inquiry and a cultural relativist position should be clear: we are not dealing with a struggle between different ethno-discourses, but with contests for mastery of a common discourse, which, however, have the effect of radically pluralizing it.

What Wallerstein, Wolf, Jameson, Lash, Urry, and these approaches all share is an emphasis on studying the world as an interconnected system. They insist on seeing the relevance of global factors to what were formerly local studies. Thus, the discourses of specific disciplines like anthropology, for example, are reconceived in the context of worldwide colonial power relations, and supposedly national literary traditions are reinterpreted as traditions constructed out of international power relations. The new orders of heterogeneity created by contesting western-originated discourses are very different, however, from the postmodernist cultural fragmentation Jameson, Lash, and Urry described—which, as we have seen, was at variance with the notion of cultural difference in Wallerstein. First, both core and periphery, and the relations between them, are pluralized. Second, this sort of heterogeneity privileges minority and third world positions, not the first world service class. Finally, the new differences produced are produced as part of a process of contest and active agency; they see themselves as oppositional to dominant commercial culture, not a product of it. Once again, then, an increasing perception of world-interconnectedness produces new orders of differentiation.

Arjun Appadurai's remarkable article, "Difference and Disjunction in the Global Cultural Economy," carries the paradoxical fragmentation of an increasingly interactive world system to the farthest extreme of any theory I know. He fuses post-structuralism
with World Systems thought, drawing especially heavily on the sociology of nationalism of Benedict Anderson. Appadurai’s world system is so complexly interactive it no longer has a core and a periphery or, for that matter, a visualizable, Euclidian structure. It is composed of five different kinds of flow, each of which he images as a “fluid and irregular,” rapidly shifting landscape. Privileging culture equally with economics, Appadurai singles out “five dimensions of global flow”: “(a) ethnoscapes, (b) mediascapes, (c) technoscapes, (d) finanscapes, and (e) ideoscapes” (6-7). Presumably, in a centered world, each of these -scapes would be anchored in the core: population would flow there for work, media would emanate from there, technology, investment, and ideology likewise. Now, however, these different -scapes are not centered in any core, and they also operate separately from each other; further, relations between them are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but... are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national groupings and movements (whether religious, political or economic) and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighbourhoods and families. (7)

In this “many-worlds” interpretation of the single global system, the relations between the -scapes (i.e. the plural system) look and are different from every social, cultural, and ideological site, as well as every place throughout the world. The same global system is differently constructed according to whether you are in Lahore or London, and also whether you are a Pakistani in London or an Anglican in London, or a Pakistani who sees herself as a representative of a nation-state or one who feels himself a part of a religious diaspora; indeed, given the social complexity of a world in which everyone is a member of a number of “imagined communities,” you are inevitably not just one, but two, three, four, or more different figures. For the number of imagined communities has multiplied exponentially in the contemporary world. If Benedict Anderson based his notion of the imagined national community on the development of print capitalism, Appadurai uses the development of electronic media to argue for the existence of a new system, a vastly more complex, fundamentally post-national net-
work of imagined communities. When Appadurai speculates about how to construct a general theory of so fragmented and plural a system, he makes it clear, following Lyotard, that the system is so pluralized, it is not totalizable, and it can only be conceptualized in non-Euclidean terms. Thus, Appadurai, like Janet Abu-Lughod at the end of Before European Hegemony, resorts to contemporary science for concepts and terminology: cultural forms are “fractally-shaped” and “polythetically overlapping,” and their dynamics can only be described by something like “chaos theory.”

With Appadurai, we move to a theory that privileges the sort of celebration of syncretic difference we found in Pico Iyer: in this fragmented world system, imagined communities are not erased by homogenization, but exponentially proliferate as global communications draw the world together, increasing thereby its interactivity. This position seems the natural extension of the poststructural critique of the centered global system: it is the ultimate in decentering. At the same time, it has jettisoned one of the key assumptions of that critique, and, in doing so, become, like Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition and like some postmodern thought in other areas, as oddly conservative as the other was radical. In Appadurai, Wallerstein’s hierarchy and the narrative of colonial domination have been so thoroughly deconstructed, they are no longer driving forces of history and, therefore, sources for radical position-taking. Appadurai does not subversively decenter an illegitimately-centered system; he describes a system which is already decentered. The centered past remains only as part of the contextual information we need to have to chart the perspectival complexity of the new, plural, interactive global system. This is, if you will pardon the phrase, a post-post-colonial world system.

Appadurai’s global system finds its closest equivalent in fiction in the work of another East Indian-American writer, Bharati Mukherjee. Mukherjee sees her immigrant characters as multi-situated actors, negotiating a global system of bafflingly decentered heterogeneity. In her memorable story, “Nostalgia,” Mukherjee chronicles a day in the life of an East Indian-American psychiatrist, Manny Patel. At the opening of the story, he has just subdued, with the help of an African-American guard, several Jamaican nurses, and a Korean colleague, a mental patient, who is the descendent of Eastern European Jews, and who imitates, in his
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madness, Noel Coward, calling Patel in an exquisite English accent “Paki scum,” an epithet distinctly British, but not taken from the language of the class Coward depicted. In such a milieu, globalization of culture has produced not homogenization, but a precise heterogeneity of cultural reference.

In a recent *New York Times Book Review* piece, Mukherjee wrote of her legacy as a post-colonial writer:

from childhood, we learned how to be two things simultaneously; to be the dispossessed as well as the dispossessor. In textbooks, we read of “our” great empire and triumphs (meaning British), “our” great achievements in the arts (meaning the Moslem Moguls) and “our” treachery in the Sepoy Mutiny (meaning “native” troops). History forced us to see ourselves as both the “we” and the “other,” and our language reflected our simultaneity. In time, after independence, the Mutiny became the first great patriot uprising, a war of liberation. Mahatma Gandhi, always suspect in the Bengal of my childhood, was simultaneously the Great Soul beloved of the West and the scruffy low-caste politician who permitted the dismemberment of India. (It’s the privilege of the once-ruled to change their history and nomenclature. There are no absolutes, only correct contexts). Perhaps it is this history-mandated training in seeing myself as “the other” that now heaps on me a fluid set of identities denied to most of my mainstream American counterparts. (29)

Like Appadurai, Mukherjee moves, startlingly, from a clear-cut identification with the position of the marginalized writer struggling to pluralize an illegitimately centered system to that of a still more fragmented figure inhabiting an already-pluralized world system. By interpreting herself as both dispossessed and dispossessor, she additionally fractures her identity and empowers herself more thoroughly as person and writer according to the logic of the radical critique of centered systems: she is in a position to reveal still further sorts of multiplicities concealed behind this system than those who are merely dispossessed. At the same time, with that very step “forward,” a gulf opens up between her and the radical position from which she started: she places herself on both sides of the political fence and presents a world in which the centered system of colonial domination has been so dispersed it is no longer available for radical position-taking. She sees instead a world in which there are “no absolutes, only correct contexts,” one in which the narrative of domination has lost its determinative force and survives instead as information. Appadurai and
Mukherjee present worlds so complex and interrelated that they cannot be totalized: action becomes a local possibility only as the overall system becomes more fractal, polythetic, specularly complex.

Such post-post-colonial positions will appear to some, of course, as more mystifications behind which the oppressive forces of late capitalism carry out their dark work. They will seem to be the contemporary substitute for the notions of universalism and national culture that allowed nation-state capitalism to control its labor force: this sort of multiculturalism may appear to be a means of reproducing an exploitable labor force for the era of multinationals. Others, however, may find that the force of the radical critique of centered structures is realized in them at last: that the world system has been fully decentered in both core and periphery and a new, media-created, information-based technology has given birth to a culturally richer, post-national society. In such an era, Sally Falk Moore’s description of the problematic pluralization of the word “culture,” once it is detached from national and ethnic structures, might no longer seem to be problematic:

at what point do we say the density of differences of values, symbols, or practices in any setting constitute ‘cultural’ differences? Why are there differences between a Japanese factory and a British factory producing the same objects? Is there an American Air Force ‘culture’ that is different from an American Navy ‘culture’? Is the ‘culture’ of a physics laboratory different from the ‘culture’ of a machine shop? If it is reasonable to speak of the culture and ethnicity as Ahmed does of the North-West frontier of Pakistan, what do we mean by culture and ethnicity? (39)

However one regards the political implications of Appadurai’s and Mukherjee’s positions, the socio-cultural world they describe appears to be a _ne plus ultra_ in the series of conceptualizations of the world I have been presenting. In all of these different versions of the world system, the spectre of homogenization is a fiction. All theories entail notions of system-created difference. As the systems described, moreover, become more and more decentered, this system-created difference multiplies; indeed, it multiplies to the point that non-Euclidean, non-synthetic, interruptively plural world systems need be invented. Perhaps, to lay homogenization triply to rest, we need to accept the fact that we can no longer easily speak of “the” modern world system, but need to master an arche-
ology of changing conceptualizations of it, all of which have relevance to the present. Thus, to the cultural differences created by the world system itself, we must add the different concepts of culture created by an increasingly complex, layered growth of world systems.

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