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# MASKING AND VEILING PROTESTS

## *Culture and Ideology in Representing Globalization*

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### ABSTRACT

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This article argues that certain representations of protests ideologically aid the hegemonic project of globalization. Using Merquior's distinction between ideology as mask and veil, it considers, first, the question of how consent to globalization's power is produced even within non-benefiting groups, and next, the related question of how and why some intellectuals produce ideological representations. It answers the first question by discussing the typical frameworks that represent protests against globalization as irrational, immoral, unnecessary, or non-existent, thus masking power and sectional interests. It answers the second through an examination of John Tomlinson's argument against 'cultural imperialism' and claims for 'cultural loss' as the real meaning of protests, and argues that the concept of 'culture' operates in his arguments in a peculiar way to veil protests. Finally, this article makes a claim for the continued relevance of the term 'cultural imperialism' to account for particular protests against globalization.

*Key Words* ◇ globalization ◇ hegemony ◇ ideology ◇ protests ◇ Tomlinson

### *Introduction: Intellectuals, Ideology, and Hegemony*

There are few themes in popular and scholarly debates of recent years that have taken up so much space as globalization. Spawning a mini industry in advertising, business, scholarship, and politics, globalization has become the hook upon which everyone can hang an argument about the cause or effect of any political, economic, or cultural phenomenon. Like all social phenomena, globalization is continually represented in public spaces in the process of reproducing itself. Intellectuals, most prominently academics, policy-makers, government spokespersons, and workers in popular media, perform the work of representation. The task of this article is to show how some representations of protests against globalization play a crucial part in

creating favorable conditions for the ongoing *hegemonic* project of globalization. I argue that such representations of protests create these conditions by propagating certain conceptions about the content and character of protests that are *ideological*. The rest of this introduction will briefly outline the particular sense in which I seek to bring together the concepts of hegemony and ideology.

The works of Antonio Gramsci have been foundational in clearly and forcefully articulating the particular tasks that intellectuals perform in the context of the reproduction of power in society. Alongside the elaboration of intellectual work, Gramsci also introduced his notion of social hegemony. Thus he speaks of ‘dominant group’ intellectuals as having the charge in society of ‘organizing social hegemony’. They achieve this precisely by constructing a representation of social reality as the ‘“spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group’ (1971: 12). Gramsci’s insights aid us in making the link between hegemony and the fact that such ‘consent’ is historically achieved through the work of intellectuals rather than ‘spontaneously erupt[ing]’.

We may also note two more points about hegemony. The first is that Gramsci always offered his conception of hegemony as encompassing and ‘moving beyond ideology’ (Williams, 1977: 109). Most recently, Kate Crehan reiterates the same point succinctly as ‘[h]egemony for Gramsci, . . . always involves “practical activity”, and the social relations that produce inequality, as well as the ideas by which that inequality is justified, explained, normalized and so on’ (2002: 174). This reminder is necessary to counter a tendency towards an idealist reading of Gramsci, which would equate ideology (the third element in the quotation) with the more complex process of hegemony.<sup>1</sup> I therefore locate ideology (itself a complex process that will be discussed below) as a constitutive moment within a larger process/project of hegemony in which there are at least two other moments—the practical activities of ordinary and powerful people, and the social relations and institutions within which they make their histories. The second point is one made by many others, following Gramsci, that the hegemonic project, of which ideological work is a part, is never complete. Its conditions of existence or possibility need to be continuously created and recreated (see, for example, Williams, 1977: 113). It is now to the term ‘consent’ (in the quotation from Gramsci) that I turn since it is this term that provides us with a segue into the concept ideology.

Towards the end of his magnum opus *Europe and the People without History* (1982), anthropologist Eric Wolf outlines his understanding of power and how it depends on his conception of ideology:

The ability to bestow meanings—to ‘name’ things, acts, and ideas—is a source of power. Control of communication allows the managers of *ideology* to lay down the categories through which reality is to be perceived. Conversely, this entails the ability to deny the

existence of alternative categories, to assign them to the realm of disorder and chaos, to render them socially and symbolically invisible. (1981: 388, my emphasis)

In his sympathetic critique of Wolf, the anthropologist Talal Asad (1987) rejects Wolf's use of the concept of ideology (and power) as unnecessarily dependent upon the ability to control the 'perceptions' of the subordinated. Instead, for Asad, ideology refers to the control over 'cultural discourses that constitute objective social conditions and thus defines forms of behavior appropriate to them' (1987: 605). He writes *contra* Wolf that

[In] the context of the question of law as power . . . the process of naming and defining relations is a modality of power; not because it confounds people's perceptions of reality but because it constructs the unequal social conditions within which groups of people are obliged to live and struggle. (1987: 606)

Unfortunately for us, Asad does not spell out in his brief essay the process by which ideology makes this possible. Nevertheless, I submit that his critique of Wolf allows me to associate ideological work more with the production of *consent* (associated with among other things, the effective control over public meanings of concepts that enable and delimit subjectivities) than with the establishment of *legitimacy* (associated with control over people's consciousness and beliefs). Such an acknowledgement of the nature of ideology as being less about beliefs than about power seems to be a good place from which to face the task set for this article. Ideological work then seeks to produce consent to globalization's power. I find J.G. Merquior's work on this aspect of ideology most useful and it is to him that I now turn.

For Merquior (1979), ideology is a social process that represents sectional interests in society, but one that is also only satisfactorily explained by reference to the social context within which it originates and operates. Thus, the key questions about ideology relate it to the interest/acceptance nexus (1979: 14). This may be posed as the twin questions: what makes ideology acceptable even to those who do not benefit by a belief in the ideological claims, and what makes ideology acceptable to the ideology producers? In tackling these questions, Merquior makes a distinction between two forms in which ideology appears in society, one as a *mask* and the other as a *veil*. Both are ideological in the sense of being connected with particular group interests (1979: 3), but they perform ideological work in different ways. Let us consider how this happens.

Ideology as mask conceals power differentials and makes sectional interests appear as universal interests. This is the most common way in which ideology has been argued to operate by many scholars (e.g. Gramsci, 1971; Lukács, 1971; Williams, 1977). For Merquior, such an understanding of ideology is akin to viewing ideology as deceiving or simply as a lie and eventually runs into difficulties with the question of 'Why do lies get believed even by those who are not obviously benefited by believing in the

ideological claims?' For it can only offer us the classical answer to this question that ends up positing the 'false-consciousness' of a gullible (or believing) majority who do not know their own interests well enough and hence succumb to ideological masks. Although I agree with Merquior that ideology as mask is unable to satisfactorily answer this question, I contend that it still leaves us room to appreciate the presence of ideological masks that frequently appear in public discourses, a presence that can (and many times does) temporarily produce some sort of consent to its claims (even among those who are not its obvious beneficiaries). To steal a phrase from E.P. Thompson, such ideological masks, although obviously not deceiving everyone, may 'acquire the fixity of popular prejudice' given certain conditions.

On the other hand, Merquior's concept of ideology as a veil starts where the mask trope leaves us. It affirms the fact that non-beneficiaries do not believe in ideological claims since they are able to see them clearly as masks placed over reality by a manipulating elite! Instead, ideology as veil refers to the producers of ideological representations, and is offered as a possible explanation for the belief of the ruling classes in their own ideologies. Such a seemingly confusing task is important for Merquior and others in order to show that ideologies do spring from structural social relations and not simply from the minds of the ideologues. In other words, the veil makes ideologies socially determined, rather than 'conspiratorial' (1979: 13). Thus Merquior writes:

All in all, one general conclusion seems to forcefully emerge: *as far as belief is concerned, ideological legitimacy is chiefly, though not exclusively, for internal consumption.* Its function is really to act as a catalyst for the mind of the group whose interests it sublimates into a justificatory set of ideals. In so doing, the catalytic sublimation veils, rather than consciously masks, the realities of sectional interests. (1979: 29; emphasis in original)

In light of my earlier discussion on consent and legitimacy in which I associated the former with control over discursive concepts and only the latter with control over beliefs, Merquior's veil seems to be clearly leaning towards the latter. Thus Merquior seems to argue that the producers of ideological claims themselves believe in the legitimacy of their claims, and therefore that they are not being ideological at all. But, such an attribution of legitimacy to the ideological veil seems unfounded and even unnecessary (given Asad's argument above). Therefore I propose the alternative possibility that ideological veils may only produce the same kind of consent (to the claims) from the ideological producers as they hope to do from the general population. In other words, we do not need to go into the beliefs and consciousness of intellectuals (one of the primary class of ideology producers) to see the operation of veils. In the context of representation of protests against globalization, an ideological veil may be said to exist over intellectuals when their use of particular concepts aimed ostensibly to aid

the representation of genuine protests against globalization ironically contributes to producing an aura of consent to globalization even among its protesters. I will take the use of 'culture' by the cultural and media theorist John Tomlinson and his representation of protests as 'cultural loss' as an example to illustrate this kind of ideological veiling.

The next section will outline four key ways in which representations of protest end up masking those protests. This is not meant to be a comprehensive survey of the literature on globalization and its protests, but rather is aimed to serve as an analytical framework to help capture some influential forms that representations of protest take. I conclude this part with a discussion of an advertisement on Indian television which I will argue epitomizes ideology as mask. The next section discusses how representations of protest may work as an ideological veil. Here the concept of culture that John Tomlinson favors is the main focus. I will argue that this mode of representation operates as an ideological veil since Tomlinson's view of protests as 'cultural loss' rather than 'cultural imperialism' uses an overly existential and mentalist sense of culture, and consequently empties protests of their political and economic contents. In the final section, I briefly show how the force of the argument for globalization as 'cultural imperialism' may still be applicable to many cases of protest, despite the strong claims made by Tomlinson against its utility in a globalizing world. In other words, all kinds of ideological maskings and veilings of globalization's content and the character of its protests do not seem to produce a social hegemonic position for globalization. This is primarily due to the existence of alternative narratives, strategies, and relations in the practical activities of the social world.

### *Representing Globalization's 'Other': The Masking of Protest*

In their book *Varieties of Environmentalism* Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Allier offer the term 'vocabularies of protest' as an alternative to Charles Tilly's 'repertoire of contention' as an apt phrase to capture the varieties of social protest and dissent. They justify their preference for the new term in the following manner.

... techniques of direct action have at the same time an utilitarian and an expressive dimension. In adopting a particular strategy, social protesters are both trying to defend their interests *and* passing judgment on the prevailing social arrangements. The latter, so to say, ideological dimension of social protest needs to be inferred even when it is not formally articulated—the fact that protesting peasants do not distribute a printed manifesto does not mean that they do not have developed notions of right and wrong. ... the term 'vocabulary of protest' ... helps to clarify the notion that most forms of direct action ... are both statements of purpose and belief. In the act of doing, protesters are saying something too. (Guha and Martinez-Allier, 1997: 13; emphasis in original)

The project of recovering the meanings of social action, in this case, actions of dissent and protest, has a long history predating the modern birth of globalization around the 1970s. Social history, subaltern history, and anthropologically informed historiography have thus given rise to a wide range of possible narratives and even explanations of protest.

Yet, when we turn to the debates surrounding globalization, we do not witness such nuanced treatments of protest. To borrow a phrase from Homi Bhabha, the debates here simply polarize in order to polemicize (1994: 19). Consequently the ideological content of such representations is quite clearly discernible. One could redirect the insights of Guha and Martinez-Allier previously mentioned to the representations of protests against globalization. Thus, we may say that 'an ideological dimension to *representations of social protest* needs to be inferred even when it is not formally articulated . . . . In the act of doing, the *representators* of protesters are saying something too'. They not only make claims about what protests are all about; they also 'pass judgments on the prevailing social arrangements'. It is necessary to identify the ideological nature of such representations in order to show how globalization requires these claims to be made on its behalf for reproducing its own cultural legitimacy.

I will broadly classify most of the hegemonic representations within scholarly and journalistic writings and television commentaries or advertisements into four groups with respect to the ways in which they portray protests against globalization. These I term as representing: (a) protest as irrational; (b) protest as immoral; (c) protest as unnecessary; and (d) protest as non-existent. Not surprisingly, the images, descriptions, narratives, and arguments that emerge in each of these groups are produced by some of the most open votaries of globalization, its most vocal proponents as can be found in business school literature, financial weeklies and journals, and 'professional' economists (using Paul Krugman's term for those economists who appear most often on television), and advertisements from multinational agencies doing business for multinational capital (or ascendant national capital all over the world): in short, institutions and individuals in powerful positions in societies. Let us consider some examples from each group.

The exemplars of representations of 'protest as irrational' are especially prominent in descriptions of the Seattle protests in 1999 over the World Trade Organization meetings. They characterize those protests as anarchic, misguided, or romantic. Such representations totally disregard the wide range of non-anarchist views that were on display in Seattle—the somewhat loose coalition of forces such as students against sweatshops, labor unions from advanced capitalist countries, coalitions of small producers from Third World countries, and ordinary people whose politics were simply against an iniquitous global order symbolized there (rather than any positively articulated vision such as anarchy). According to these representations, the

iniquitous 'order' of the WTO was to be eminently preferred over the 'chaos' of the protests. There was no question of analysis of the conflict situation in terms of power differentials, class or other kinds of sectional interests, or of the kinds of democratic practices that were possible. Such representations of the alternatives to globalization, its Other, have been popularized by Thomas Friedman's powerful metaphoric contrast of *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (2000), a text that has become hugely popular in university courses on globalization. The way this representation fits into this group is through representing the Other—the olive tree—in contrast to the Self or globalization's mascot—the Lexus car. Thus one is immobile while the other hugely mobile, one is agrarian of the small producer variety while the other industrial, one is the way things have been done for so long—tradition for a particular group—while the other is the new kid on the block—modernity for all. All the firsts in each pair are represented as irrational and inflexible while the seconds are to be aspired to by all with reason on their side.

Another example of this kind of representation of protests, this time from India, would be popular representations of the movement against the building of a huge dam along the Narmada river. Most often representations portray this movement as 'anti-development' or irrational and 'anti-progressive', instead of addressing the complex and contentious issue raised by that movement regarding *national* development, its purported and actual beneficiaries, and the terms of development itself.<sup>3</sup> The fallout of all such representations seems to be that anyone who protests globalization's impacts is also represented as being against reason. Thus globalization comes to stand in for the rationalism of 21st-century Enlightenment. What gets masked here is the fact that this reasoning belongs to the interests of particular sections of the population, sectional interests that are often held to be universal through the cynical use of power and state repressive mechanisms.

Representations of 'protest as immoral' are based upon arguing that globalization is morally good. Thus Martin Peter writes in the *Financial Times* that '[t]he anti-globalization argument is, I believe, profoundly immoral' (in Lechner and Boli, 2001: 12). Again, Peter's entire case for the morality of globalization in that article is based upon an easy contrast drawn between the purported riches and freedom that globalization brings and the poverty and unfreedom that its opposite—according to him, some form of statism—would bring. However, such contrasts can be easily contested as being simplistic, biased, or outright wrong. Witness the recent debates on the contentious and tenuous nature of the correlation between trade liberalization and reduction of poverty (Rodrik Dani vs T.N. Srinivasan, Jagdish Bhagwati and the World Bank: see Dani, 2001). What is interesting is that despite such ongoing debates we still see cases being made (typically by government officials and policy-makers) about the economic morality of free markets based upon assumptions about how trade liberalization reduces



poverty. This, despite the fact that the goal of trade is ostensibly to develop commodity exchange and markets, and not to reduce poverty. It seems that every policy of liberalization (the face that globalization assumes in all Third World countries) is morally justified by government spokespersons precisely *in the face of protests against those policies*. The reasoning is that protests against globalization are immoral as well as irrational.

Another key trope of representation of protests is 'protest as unnecessary'. This is dependent on a reading and representation of globalization as inevitable or natural. James Petras (2001) usefully characterizes this position as the 'anthropomorphization' of technology, markets, and capital—the three 'natural' engines of globalization according to its main votaries. As the arguments here go, one has to globalize due to the pressures of technology, markets, and capital—as if they had lives of their own. Such representations are usually to be found in business-school manuals and teaching guides, management visions of firms, and financial weeklies and magazines. Here one takes globalization as a given and focuses on ways and means to become part of the winning side, usually by manipulating its unevenness. Thus the race to the bottom in which all Third World countries that seem to have cheap labor as their comparative advantage engage is not questioned as a historically offered choice. The point is to get competitive and this means to exploit this 'flexibility' of production and move to wherever labor is cheaper and environmental laws are lax or not applicable. In the ultimate analysis, representations in this group actually get subsumed in the two groups above since they assume that one does not have to fight globalization *given that it is ultimately rational and good for all*.

Finally, we have the most remarkable of representations of protest, those that treat 'protest as non-existent'. In such representations, protests simply become invisible. Let us consider an example in some detail. In the summer of 2001, television channels in India ran an advertisement for a particular brand of bath soap. In the ad is a young woman, possibly in her late twenties, driving a car—one of the foreign cars that have made their presence felt over the last 10 years in Indian cities—a convertible with the top down. She wears large sunglasses, her scarf flying in the wind, a tank top and shorts, and has music blaring from the player in the car. The setting is rural India, and the woman is seemingly making a long trip somewhere. The sun burns down on her as the car passes some women walking with pots of water on their heads. The women are dressed in what look like 'designer-traditional' clothes, perhaps ones made authentic by the fashion designers of Indian chic, who have seen an increase in popularity after the successful number of beauty queens that India has churned out with predictability over the last few years.

As the woman in the car passes by the women with the pots, she gets an idea, screeches the car to a halt, gets out, comes running back to the women with the pots and gestures to them. No words are spoken throughout the

ad. The woman's wild gestures do not seem to make sense to the rural women; they just stare in puzzlement at her for a few seconds. They also seem to be making fun (or speaking with hushed admiration, but with coy gestures) of the strangely dressed woman gesticulating wildly. Finally, in frustration, the woman in the shorts and tank top walks up to one rural woman and takes her pot of water from her head and throws it all over herself—to relieve herself of perspiration and heat. Taking this as a cue, all the other rural women instantly take their pots from their heads and throw their water all over the city woman's body to help cool and freshen her. The background music begins, and we are treated to some scenes of the woman using the soap to freshen up on the roads of rural India, while the rural women scream with pleasure, ostensibly from watching the urban woman's body undulating in pleasure and, perhaps more importantly, from the pure joy of giving and participation.

Much research has been done on what is known as 'reception' theory and I wish to firmly acknowledge the importance of these works that caution us against implying passive 'readership' of an accepting audience, especially a media audience that many times watches as a group (for a good discussion of this point see Tomlinson, 1991 chapter 2). What I wish to offer here as an analysis of the above ad is a 'reading' which could show how this ad works as a mask of the highest order by erasing all traces of power and sectional interests operating to sustain it. It is not at all my intention to claim that such a 'reading' is the hegemonic one. In fact, I reproduce below an alternate 'reading' sent to me by a teenage cousin in India, a 'reading' that only shows to me the perhaps banal fact that globalization has not at all gained any hegemonic roots in India. Commenting on this ad (at my prompting) my cousin wrote this email:

The urban girl is in Rajasthan in peak summer and naturally she is in need of water to freshen up. Due to summer drought, water is a rare commodity in Rajasthan. The village girls seen in the ad bring water from a long distance and would not like to part with even a drop of it. Therefore the urban girl thinks of a good idea so that she could get this water. So she does some gestures which irritate the village girls and so they pour the water on the urban girl. (email communication with author, February 15, 2002)

There is no hint of power relations (at least in the sense of an exploitative relation) in this 'reading.' Neither is there any attempt to see the ad as ideological in the sense of representing sectional interests as universal interests. Nevertheless, another possible 'reading' exists that could reasonably show the operation of a masking tendency in this ad. Throughout this alternative 'reading' that I present below, I have tried to show that I realize that we are speaking about a narrative that emerges from characters who are performing scripted roles on television.

Let us first consider the context that makes the ad. Its mildly absurd humor notwithstanding, the ad had all the ingredients of what has been called 'multinational' or 'late capitalism' or simply 'globalization', packaged

wonderfully within its 20-second lifetime—the coming together of multinational capital, markets, and communicative technologies that shape consumption. Thus we have the *multinational* company whose product is being sold<sup>4</sup> through careful selection of *markets* using expert knowledge,<sup>5</sup> and *cable television* producing consuming citizens in India with the latest digital technologies. Further, even in such an obviously crafted image, we get to see the *unevenness* of globalization; it was always the urban woman who displayed the key subjectivity for the citizen of a globalized world—the *consuming* subject. In this ad, the subject is imbued with independence (traveling alone as a woman in India still contrasts with the lives of most rural women), mobility (the car), and commodity choice (the choice of a particular soap from a range of options). Finally, we can even detect the erasure of national boundaries to some degree. The urban woman may very well have been a foreigner. She surely was made to appear like one—very light skinned, strange language skills unknown to more obvious ‘natives’, and dressed in clothes that would in most parts of India be viewed as not being of Indian origin and perhaps as ‘Western’.<sup>6</sup>

Further, the ad spends most of its time in displaying many more consumer products linked to an upwardly mobile global consuming citizen’s dreams than the soap itself. In fact, there was nothing in the content of the ad that helped a potential customer to choose this soap over other contenders. For example, there was no comparison to other brands in terms of cost, chemical content, or special need satisfaction for particular kinds of skin or fragrance. One can then say with some justification that, although the ad is ostensibly for the soap, it is not the soap that is being sold here<sup>7</sup> as much as globalization itself and its accoutrements including key ‘commodities’ such as the car (signifying mobility and wealth) and an image of ‘womanhood’ available for ‘reading’ through the contrasting images of the women in the ad (single urban vs collective rural, independent vs dependent, free vs unfree, and finally leisure vs labor).

In all this, what is particularly poignant is the manner in which the ad portrayed the ease of participation of the rural women in serving the needs of the urban woman. They were shown as *non-coercively participating* in what can be called ‘a few globalized moments’, even though they did not ostensibly benefit (in the ad) from the products of globalization mentioned above.<sup>8</sup> There is no question of any protest in this *ad for globalization*, only fully assenting participation of all actors in the globalized drama.<sup>9</sup> As a viewer fully caught up in the moment, I was left with the question: why did the rural women throw the water from their pots so that the urban woman could freshen herself on the roads of rural India? Since the answer to such a question either does not exist anywhere or exists only in the minds of scriptwriters somewhere, I wish to turn to the more interesting and related question of ‘What purpose does such an ad serve in discursively framing the phenomenon of globalization?’

Social realities are not as devoid of protest as the ad depicts (if the ad is indeed, even only subtly, about selling globalization through telling a story about it). The history of globalization (the short version dated from the emergence of multinational capital, or the long version dated from the emergence of a one-world system) is filled with protests of all kinds, from the earlier ones, like those in Dickens' novels through the ages of colonialism and imperialism, to the latest ones in Prague, Davos, Seattle, Bangalore, Porto Alegre, and La Paz. In such an historic epoch, representations of globalization as non-coercive—that is, representations of protests as irrational, immoral, futile, or non-existent even among obviously non-benefiting populations—are ideological in that they reproduce power by *naturalizing* it. This is clearest in the case of the ad, but it can be arguably said to operate in the other cases too. The naturalization of power is accomplished in two simultaneous moments in the ad. One disguises power by representing particular *values* (such as independence, mobility, commodity choice) as general human values available (and desirable) to all, and thus concealing the power relations (and its history) between the haves and the have-nots. The other makes adoption of those values (what is really 'power-in-disguise') appear inevitable or natural (non-coercive, non-imposed, and deriving from laws of human progress), so that any protest or resistance to them will appear doomed to failure or simply irrational, immoral, or unnecessary. Who will protest such a naturally and reasonably good thing?

As Lukes (1974) has shown in his study of power, ideology operates through a mechanics of power that in turn operates through a 'mobilization of bias' designed to socialize people, even non-benefiting groups. This is the ultimate fantasy that the advertisement helps create—producing the necessary ideological *mask* that has achieved the perfect synthesis of the science of politics and the art of marketing in the perfect world of globalization's managers. Of course, I remind myself that this is just an ad. However, ads are also ultimate fantasies that express the desires of their creators who are critical players in shaping the content of globalization. As Bourdieu put it long ago, '[t]he most successful ideological efforts are those which have no need for words, and ask no more than complicitous silence' (1978: 188). Tellingly, this particular ad had no need for words. On the other hand, in the case of the protests in the other three groups, such a 'mobilization of bias' has not yet occurred, but it is amply clear that, according to those doing the representations, the protesters are not aware that they are acting irrationally, immorally, or in an unnecessarily futile way.

In this section we have seen how ideology operates as a mask that helps conceal the sectionality of interests that parade as universals, and the power that underlies consent. The next section will focus on how ideology may operate as a veil. Unlike all the representations in this section, there are some scholars who consider protests seriously but are concerned with identifying the referent of the protests. What are the protests protesting

about? One such shaper of our perceptions of protests in a globalizing world is the cultural media theorist John Tomlinson. It is to his contributions that I now turn.

*From Cultural Imperialism to Cultural Loss: The Veiling of Protest*

One of the most intense and earliest debates within the literature on globalization has been around the theme of cultural homogenization. The most articulate thesis on this theme has been the one woven around the charge of globalization as *cultural imperialism*—the idea that globalization is accompanied by a homogenization of people's cultures with the most powerful cultures (such as American capitalist culture) slowly or quickly gaining hegemonic status as the global culture. Many of the claims of cultural imperialism have been made in media and communication studies by scholars who use the spread of television soaps such as *Dallas*, consumer products such as Coca-Cola and Levis jeans, and organization of space such as super-malls and Disney-like entertainment complexes, to make their argument about the imperialistic nature of globalization (examples include Herman and McChesney, 1997; Ritzer, 1993; Schiller, 1985).

While the cultural imperialism thesis has drawn just criticism for its lack of an empirical data base, facile generalizations, and lack of attention to the presence of 'active audiences', I will focus in this section on the contributions to this debate by the media and communications theorist, John Tomlinson who explicitly debunks this thesis on two grounds—the first dealing with the charge of 'imperialism' and the second dealing with the assumption of 'homogenization' of cultures. Let me briefly outline both these arguments here.

First, Tomlinson points out that for something to be imperialistic there must be some form of coercion. In his now classic book *Cultural Imperialism*, Tomlinson focuses on the language used to speak of globalization, especially through protests. By carefully analyzing the contexts in which the term 'cultural imperialism' is used as a mark of protest, Tomlinson shows how each of its many different senses *assumes* the existence of an imposition or a coercive power relation. But such a case cannot be made for the cultural products being consumed since no one forces people to watch *Dallas*, wear Levis jeans, drink Coca-Cola or go to Disneyland and malls. Therefore, arguing against the use of such a language of imperialism he says:

However, these protests are often formulated in an inappropriate language of domination, a language of cultural imposition which draws its imagery from the age of high imperialism and colonialism. Such images . . . invoke an idea of cultural imposition by *coercion* . . . What dogs the critique of cultural imperialism is the problem of explaining how a cultural practice can be imposed in a context which is no longer actually coercive. (1991: 7)

Second, drawing upon many empirical studies that focus on 'reception' or 'active-audience' and meaning-making among ordinary people who are also consumers of metropolitan cultural products, Tomlinson makes a point that proponents of cultural imperialism make the mistake of assuming that the simple consumption of cultural products also penetrates the phenomenological aspects of living, the dimension with which culture, as Tomlinson views it, is most intimately concerned (1999: 83). He quotes approvingly from a famous study of the reception of Coca-Cola by Howes (1996) in which it is shown that people construct all kinds of meanings around that drink, meanings that even contradict and sometimes challenge the hegemony of the metropolitan culture of its origins—the phenomenon now known as 'indigenization' or more commonly 'hybridization'. Consequently, such evidence of cultural creativity and diversity of meaning-making at local levels effectively questions the basis for the claim of cultural homogenization.

Tomlinson's arguments above (widely used by many scholars and policy-makers) rest on a peculiar understanding of the concept of *culture* and explicating this becomes critical to grasp the ideological dimension of his representations of protest. Early in his work on cultural imperialism, Tomlinson uses the term culture to refer to 'the *context* within which people give meanings to their actions and experiences, and make sense of their lives' (1991: 7; my emphasis). There he also clearly distinguishes cultural practices in this sense from economic practices that deal with the satisfaction of material needs and political practices that deal with the distribution of, and struggle over, power. Again in another work he refines his use of culture in the following way:

Culture for my purposes refers to all these mundane practices that directly contribute to people's ongoing 'life-narratives': the stories by which we chronically, interpret our existence in what Heidegger calls the 'thrownness' of the human situation. (1999: 20)

Here he includes mundane activities such as going to the restaurant, the supermarket or the sport club, and street corner. Finally, Tomlinson acknowledges his own affinities to Serge Latouche's existential view of culture as a 'response to the problem of being' (1999: 90). At this point one may remark on the rather broad view of the 'problem of being' employed by Tomlinson, if a trip to the supermarket were to qualify as a cultural activity. We may also note that it is possible to question the distinction between the realms of culture, politics and economics that Tomlinson consistently makes in his writings. In the rest of this section I will show how such an understanding of culture operates to veil protests against globalization.

Although Tomlinson rejects the use of the term cultural imperialism, he does not reject the existence of genuine protests against globalization. He acknowledges the fact of the commodification of culture as something that

leads to 'counter-cultural movements' and 'localizing resistance to the globalizing moment of capitalism' (1999: 88). But, he chooses to explain these protests as something other than reactions to cultural imperialism. According to him, protests against globalization's perceived effects are better expressed in the language of 'cultural loss'. Thus he says, '[t]he cultural impact of capitalist modernity can be seen in terms of *loss* than of *imposition*' (1991: 164). Further along the lines of Anthony Giddens and the idea of the lack of 'moral legitimacy' of capitalist modernity (Giddens, 1991, quoted in Tomlinson, 1991: 174), Tomlinson argues that this cultural loss is itself due to the 'cultural weakness' of capitalist modernity; a weakness that is unable to solve the problems that the material effects of capitalism bring in their wake. He expresses his point thus:

But if one central theme runs through them all [referring to the various senses of the discourses of 'cultural imperialism'] it is the claim that people need something modernity has not properly provided. This is a need *not for material well-being, or political emancipation*, but a specifically *cultural* need: to be able to decide how we will live collectively in the widest possible sense—what we will value, what we will believe in, what sense we will make of our everyday lives. (1991: 169; emphasis mine)<sup>10</sup>

Further, Tomlinson locates the cause of cultural weakness of modernity in the lack of 'cultural coherence' that characterizes the ways in which people experience globalization. Thus '[t]he cultural experience of people caught up in these processes [of globalization] is likely to be one of confusion, uncertainty and the perception of powerlessness' (1991: 176). Cultural incoherence is implied in the fact that 'global cultures . . . face the same problem of the failure of a collective will to generate shared narratives of meaning and orientation' (1991: 165). Simply put, unlike imperialism, which was at least a coherent ideological project, globalization is incoherent, at least for Tomlinson.<sup>11</sup> He argues that globalization's effects are unintended, which in turn creates 'cultural confusion'.

Tomlinson thus presents a neat series of discursive effects that tell us what protests against globalization are all about. The first is that protests are about *cultural* loss—the loss of contexts for making sense of lives, or the loss of life-narratives (see his definition of culture, already quoted). The second is that such a loss of context (i.e. culture) takes place through the *spread* of institutions of modernity,<sup>12</sup> and hence is not a result of coercion. The third claim is that protests are expressions of people for the 'need for viable communities of cultural judgment' (1991: 178). This is primarily because 'people's experiences are shaped by processes that operate on a global level—and this level is beyond our present powers of imagination' (1991: 177, quoting Jameson). Unlike imagined national communities and identities, it is not possible to imagine global identities simply because there are no narratives available to us at present that speak to such a level of identity. Tomlinson's arguments thus present protests against globalization as ultimately referring to a 'cultural loss'—an existential loss of narratives

for making sense.<sup>13</sup> The rest of this section and the next one argue that this existential understanding of culture and loss does not capture the most compelling protests against globalization which can be argued to be about loss of entire contexts of politics, economics, and culture.

The Merriam–Webster dictionary gives many meanings for loss that include loss as *accidental* (losing a possession by misplacing it; losing one's way), loss as *choice* (losing a pursuer), loss as *natural* (hair loss), and loss as *personal responsibility* (losing one's temper).<sup>14</sup> All these senses seem to fit with Tomlinson's use of the term cultural loss. But there are two additional senses that the dictionary gives, neither of which are considered by Tomlinson. One is the sense of loss as *derived from rules* (loss according to the rules of a game), and the other is a sense of loss as a *consequence of destruction*. The latter is buried within the Old English sense of loss and the Greek sense of loss, *lyein*. Both these senses highlight the operation of a particular kind of power—that used to define and control the rules of a game in the former sense, and to be the agent of destruction in the latter sense.<sup>15</sup> One can say then that Tomlinson's concept of loss ends up veiling power due to its overtly mentalist and voluntarist sense. It in fact ends up *culturalizing* protests—making protests *denote* the cultural but only after emptying culture of politics (making culture purely existential) and economy (making culture immaterial).

This effect can be traced to Tomlinson's concept of culture, a concept that he very clearly seeks to offer as a definition for scholarly consideration. If culture is the *context* within which people produce meanings to make sense of their life experiences, then what is it that produces the context? In other words, is there a difference between viewing culture as 'the context within which meanings are made', and culture as 'meaning making within contexts' (contexts that are themselves produced by economic, political, and cultural practices/processes)? I argue that this distinction is crucial to understanding the power of ideology at work in Tomlinson's use of *culture as context*. His usage leaves culture as an idealized object or matrix of objects, not unlike the codes that cognitive and ethnomethodologist anthropologists reveal as a people's culture. If instead, culture were *meaning-making within context*, then culture appears as a sensuous and interactive practice of people making meaning (cultural dimension) within contexts (economic, political, and cultural). Such a distinction allows an analysis of the numerous actual statements of protest against globalization, which do not seem to clearly distinguish loss of meaning-making capabilities from material needs and power in the way that Tomlinson does. Tomlinson's understanding of culture as 'context for meaning production' rather than 'meaning production in context' seems to fatally isolate narratives of meaning from their political economy, and enable a veiling of the coercion that is ever-present within globalization.

At the start of his work Tomlinson perceptively remarks, 'What we need



to understand is not what culture is, but how people *use the term* in contemporary discourse' (Tomlinson, 1991: 5). If we apply this insight to Tomlinson's own use of the term 'culture' we can argue that his usage operates as an ideological veil (to him) and as an ideological mask (to readers) for globalization's coercive character precisely because he passes off a particular class experience of globalization as universal. Thus, the peculiarly post-modern sense of 'cultural loss' of legitimating narratives experienced by particular privileged classes (mostly mobile managerial classes whom Frederick Buell calls the 'decentered core' of globalization, Buell, 1994) as characterizing the experiences of globalization by all classes of people including its protestors. In particular, I am interested in showing the existence of another kind of protest that is far more common, and which can be described as a modern, but an underdeveloped, sense of loss. The loss is produced by destruction of the political, economic, and cultural context and resources to *sustain* life. This kind of protest mostly occurs in, but is not restricted to, the so-called Third World. It is true that the 'global' is everywhere, and the works of scholars such as Wallerstein (1999), Wolf (1981, 1990), Stavrianos (1981), and others from the 'invention of tradition' school of thought show how the 'global' may indeed have produced the local for much of history; but it is also useful to remember that its effects are not the same everywhere.

### *Re-Representing Protests in the Cultural Economy of Globalization*

This final section gives some examples of protest from India to highlight alternative senses that the term 'context' means for protestors or their interlocutors. These protests are not, as Tomlinson suggests, expressing global angst about cultural loss against the cultural fate of modernity's victims. They are instead, better spoken of as expressions of globally produced local anger at globally produced destructions of globally produced local contexts. It is important to speak of global productions of the local, locality, and localness, in order to avoid some of the pitfalls of opposing an innocent local to a hegemonic global. The context of culture, or meaning production, in each of these protests may be seen to refer to a number of political-economic aspects of living: the local environment that protestors live in, the ecology of the region, the working conditions for the protestors, their diminishing access to sustainable livelihoods, and finally, the very bodies of the protestors.

In fact, we must argue here for understanding that protests are based upon views of the economic, political, and cultural as three dimensions of social reality. Therefore, any attempt to portray only one of these dimensions as representing all of the reality of protests is unnecessarily partial. Additionally, I argue that protests against globalization derive from

people's *ability* rather than their *inability* to make sense of their lives. Such a conclusion may also be derived from the works of scholars including Tomlinson who argue that globalization has also heightened or intensified a 'feeling or knowledge' about the existence of a 'global'.<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising, then, that many contemporary protests address global powers and links even when they are located far away from metropolitan nodes of power. The streets of Seattle in late 1999 were only the most dramatic of such protests because of their prominent location. Many of my references for the protests examined come from internet-based publications. This is itself an indication of the increasingly networked nature of protests, and their immense fund of information and knowledge of globalized contexts.

Take the case of a popular multinational today, Unilever. Unilever, in its Indian avatar of Hindustan Lever Ltd, was caught dumping toxic mercury waste from a thermometer factory in southern India early in 2002.<sup>17</sup> More than 400 residents of Kodaikanal (the locale of the factory and scrapyard) marched to the factory gates in protest. Unilever imports all the mercury and glass for the thermometers from the United States, and exports all the finished thermometers to the US-based Faichney Medical Company. From there, the thermometers find their way into markets in the US, UK, Canada, Australia, Germany, and Spain. At least for the people of Kodaikanal's Lever factory, they are employees of a global enterprise.

The workers of this factory demanded that their health records, maintained within the company, be handed over to an independent assessment agency to determine the impact of mercury exposure on their health. The workers spoke of Unilever's casual attitude towards the toxic mercury at the shop floor.

'When I worked there, they used to suck up the mercury from the floor using a vacuum cleaner once a day. In another section, where they heat thermometers in an oven, workers are exposed to gusts of mercury vapor every time the oven door is opened,' says Mahendra Babu, an ex-worker who has been active in organizing the workers against the company's lax occupational safety practices. A local doctor who spoke on condition of anonymity says, 'Most of those working there [at Unilever] get affected, mainly in the kidneys. I advise all of them that the only cure is to quit their jobs, and many do. Others suffer stomach pains, burning sensation while passing urine.' Mercury exposure is known to cause kidney disorders. (available at <http://www.corpwatchindia.org/issues>)

From these statements, we may deduce that what is being protested is a loss of context in the sense of working conditions, health, ecology (since the factory is also located on the slopes of one of India's forest ecosystem and major watersheds), and *trust*, as evinced by the following statement from Minoo Awari, a long-time resident of Kodaikanal: 'It's been a learning experience that a reputed multinational could behave this way. As a host community we feel cheated.' Nowhere do the protesters mention cultural confusion or a loss of an understanding of what is happening to them. The

last statement on being cheated is itself an indication of ability to make sense of one's life.

Or consider the case of the Norwegian company Norsk Hydro, which along with Alcan (a Canadian multinational) and Hindalco (an Indian company) planned to mine bauxite in Orissa from tribal lands through a joint venture with another Indian company, Utkal Alumina Industries Ltd. When it came to light in 1994 that the tribals, whose lands were supposed to be protected from appropriation by non-tribals under Indian law, were protesting, the companies made numerous attempts to coerce them into ceding their lands for monetary compensation. In this context, one of the convenors of the Orissa Tribal People's Forum said in protest: 'We are not interested in the compensation offered by the bauxite companies; we want to continue as farmers on this land which has sustained us for centuries.' (available at <http://www.corpwatchindia.org/issues>) Clearly the context within which protesters here 'make sense of their lives' incorporates issues of their political rights to a livelihood, their economic preference of particular forms of livelihood (signified by the violence that ensued in this case), and the culturally meaningful ways in which they view their relationship to occupation, land, and ancestors. It is not simply a protest against a loss of legitimating narratives as Tomlinson's thesis would represent it.

Similar arguments may be made for the burning of copies of the Andhra Pradesh State Government's New Agricultural Policy and the Land Reform Amendment Act by activists and farmers in this southern Indian state. The protests, above all else, were aimed at the introduction of genetically modified seeds and insurance policies that left farmers more vulnerable than before. These copies were burnt in the context of the mass suicides of cotton farmers and handloom weavers, who killed themselves by consuming pesticides. The protest campaign against the multinational seed company Monsanto ran under the following slogans: stop genetic engineering, no patents on life, cremate Monsanto, and bury the World Trade Organization. There is also a more specific message directed at all those who had invested in Monsanto: 'You should take your money out before we reduce it to ashes' (<http://www.ethicalinvesting.com/monsanto/news/10023.htm>). These actions were the start of a direct action campaign by farmers against biotechnology, called Operation Cremation Monsanto. Surely, such protests refer to the loss as destruction of livelihood and control over one's life and family by the changing economic and political rules of the game.

What we can learn from the protests in India is that protests are not simply protests against cultural loss in the sense of a loss of narratives of meanings or the loss of context for making meaning. Instead, protests seem to be very capably articulating meaning by pointing to the process of the loss (through destruction deriving from the rules of the globalization game) of the material and political basis of contexts within which community and

meaning can be imagined and built. Protesters make meaning within contexts even as they protest the destruction of those contexts.

This is why we must admit that globalization is not hegemonic, not built upon consent (though always backed by force). We can see this in the strange phenomenon of force and destruction existing simultaneously with the rise in the hiring of management consultants in PR firms to control opinion and public image of globalization. Thus we have the UN's Global Compact (signed by Unilever and Norsk Hydro),<sup>18</sup> and firms like Enron (sued for human rights violations and now large-scale financial pillage) hiring PR firms.<sup>19</sup> In keeping with a long tradition in history, consent is bought as a commodity, producing the image of the dream world portrayed in the ad. Perhaps that is why even the Davos Economic Conference had its foremost speakers address the need to have 'globalization with a human face'. This is, of course, felt as necessary simply because it does not exist at present.

## NOTES

1. I prefer to retain this distinction instead of speaking mainly of the contrast between dominance and hegemony (the best example of this kind of work drawing upon Gramsci being Ranajit Guha, 1997), for the reason that use of the *term hegemony many times veils the fact that hegemony is itself achieved ideologically*. Thus, while I agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty's observation on Göran Therborn (1981): 'I may mention that I find Göran Therborn's attempt to do away with this distinction [between ideology and culture] rather unhelpful' (Chakrabarty, 1989: 153 n. 156), I find Chakrabarty's own framework guilty of using a concept of culture which seems to do away with the notion of ideology instead, although he firmly looks at class, power, and other divisions in society.
2. Hegemony-seeking is used here to refer to practices that aid the reproduction of power. Thus, particular economic writings, policy-shaping writing, mass-opinion-forming representations fall in this group.
3. One could extend this in the Indian context to the typical pro-liberalization representation of 40 years of Nehruvian 'socialism' that does not acknowledge the latter's contributions to the creation of the very infrastructural and manufacturing base that has made it possible for the coming into existence of Indian multinationals; nor do the representations of license Raj in India acknowledge the poverty of the 'socialism' which did nothing to private property and very little to land reforms—it has become a huge and easy target to portray as globalization's (read: so-called free market's) Other (see Byres, 1997, for an attempt to address this bias).
4. From Hindustan Levers Homepage at <http://www.hll.com/>:

The company in India, Hindustan Levers, has its parent company, Unilever, which holds 51% of the equity. A Fortune 500 transnational, Unilever sells foods and home and personal care brands through 300 subsidiary companies in eighty-eight countries worldwide with products on sale in a further seventy. Unilever's foods,

and home and personal care brands are chosen by individual consumers 150 million times a day.

5. From *US Dept of State FY2000 Country Commercial Guide*:

India, with a population of nearly a billion people, is a country of contrasts. India's urban population is the main engine that fuels the demand for various cosmetic products. Although Indians are strongly attached and committed to their traditions and culture, the advent of television and the awareness of the western world is changing the tastes and customs of India. The *morphing* of India is subtle, and the changes are not visible for the first time visitor. However, the market liberalization process that began in 1991, along with the crowning of three Indians as Miss World and Miss Universe during the past four years, have made Indian women conscious of their appearance. Consequently, the cosmetic consumption patterns of Indian women have changed, and this trend is fueling growth in the cosmetic sector.

6. The erasing of national identities is a major theme of globalization. It remains to be seen if this is also an evolving possibility of people grouping along social class lines rather than national cultural lines, as Fredric Jameson (1984) hopes. It is, nevertheless, quite true that elites have begun to look and live alike across nations.
7. Rural Indian women had access to soaps (many of them made locally) long before the current phase of capitalism, i.e. globalization, arrived. Of course, it is also important to note the 'impurity' of local traditions. Local soaps were produced by global forces (India provided raw materials for soaps made in England during the heydays of colonialism and industrialization, and English soaps model as inspiration for soaps made in India, albeit of lower quality befitting underdeveloped countries).
8. This is interesting apart from the possible fact that the ad was made using waged professional actors or by paying actual rural women to act in the ad.
9. In this context, a reader appropriately asked upon reading my paper, 'How, in an ad for soap, are actors expected to protest the ongoing immiseration of much of the world by global forces?' The answer which I hope will satisfy some as being serious enough is: 'Of course, this ad is not for the soap'.
10. In making the claim that protests against globalization are about *culture* although not about 'cultural imperialism', Tomlinson shares a platform with scholars such as Samuel Huntington who are quite unlike him on many counts, but who also speak in cultural *as opposed to* economic and political terms. Compare Tomlinson's above statement with Huntington's classic statement on future conflict in his *Clash of Civilizations*:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological [Huntington uses this term to refer to the political] or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. . . . The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. (1993)

11. On this issue, Tomlinson builds upon the work of economists Lash and Urry (1987, 1994) who themselves build upon the work of Jameson (1984).
12. In his more recent book, Tomlinson (1999) builds upon his earlier work and

expresses his ideas on the relationship between globalization and modernity along the lines of both Featherstone's 'global modernity' and Giddens's globalization as the consequence of modernity. However, the need to preserve the idea of globalization as an incoherent and non-directed process, along the lines of Lash and Urry's 'globalization as a disorganized process' (see n. 11), gives rise to an understanding of globalization as inevitable and a naturalized phenomenon best captured by the descriptive (rather than analytic) term 'spread'.

13. It needs to be mentioned here that characterizing globalization's impacts as resulting in 'cultural loss' of life-narratives may actually be a very good way to capture the experiences of the new 'transnational capitalist classes'. This entity is composed of transnational corporation executives and their local affiliates, globalizing state bureaucrats, capitalist-inspired politicians and professionals, and consumerist elites (see Sklair, 1995: 59–63). All these individuals seem to demonstrate an increasing tendency to look towards 'spiritual' gurus and other avenues for mental and inner peace to offset the tensions arising from an increasingly frenetic work pace, incredible mobility across national and cultural boundaries, and falling rates of profit expressed as issues of financial instability. The 'loss' here is truly 'cultural', and emptied of economic and political content, since these classes are willing consumers of the economic and political fruits of globalization. If this is the case, then Tomlinson's project may be seen to be representing sectional interests/experiences as universal.
14. Online Merriam-Webster dictionary at <http://www.m-w.com/>
15. Eric Wolf captures both these senses in his concept of 'structural power' as a mode of power that 'not only operates within settings or domains, but . . . also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and . . . specifies the distribution and direction of energy flows' (1990: 586).
16. See e.g. Robertson, 1992; Waters, 1995.
17. At <http://www.corpwatchindia.org/issues/PHI.jsp>
18. The Global Compact is a UN-sponsored initiative launched in July 2000 that seeks to improve corporate practices in the arenas of human rights, environment, and labor practices. It is currently purely voluntary and has led to charges of co-optation of the UN by corporations seeking legitimacy (for more information on the strengths and weaknesses of this compact see [www.unglobalcompact.org](http://www.unglobalcompact.org), and [www.corpwatch.org](http://www.corpwatch.org)).
19. Appearing before the US House Committee on Appropriations in 1995, Enron employee Linda Powers stated that Enron spent a hefty US\$20 million in 'educating' India's politicians, bureaucrats and authorities on the project (quoted in Mehta, 1999: 121).

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