

A photograph of a young man with dark hair, shirtless, and wearing purple shorts. He is covered in white body paint, with some brown paint also visible on his face and chest. He is holding a silver beer can in his left hand and making a hand gesture with his right hand. The background is a reddish-brown wall with some white handprints. The text 'Cultural Hybridity' and 'Peter Burke' is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

Cultural
Hybridity
Peter Burke

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PETER BURKE

polity

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For Marco and Lara
Multi-cultural children

‘All cultures are the result of a mishmash’
(Claude Lévi-Strauss)

‘The history of all cultures is the history of
cultural borrowing’
(Edward Said)

‘Today, all cultures are frontier cultures’
(Nestor Canclini)

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This brief essay on an extensive subject has a complicated international history. In 1999 the Einstein Forum invited me to give a lecture in Berlin on a topic of contemporary relevance and I chose ‘cultural exchange’: the following year Suhrkamp Verlag of Frankfurt published a German translation of the lecture under the title *Kultureller Austausch*. A couple of years later a Brazilian publisher, Editora Unisinos of São Leopoldo, invited me to write a short book for a series of theirs, so I revised the Berlin lecture and expanded it from about thirty pages to about a hundred, adding a number of Brazilian examples. This Brazilian version, *Hibridismo cultural*, appeared in 2003.

More recently, Ediciones Akal suggested a Spanish translation, and I took advantage of this opportunity to expand the essay a little more, as well as to update the references. An Italian publisher, QuiEdit of Verona, then expressed interest, and I thought that this might also be the time for an English version to appear, once again expanded. It now weighs in at over 130 pages.

I have learned a good deal in the course of these

Preface to the English edition

attempts to revise and expand what was originally a lecture, as well as to communicate with German, Brazilian, Spanish, Italian and Anglophone readers and to find examples relevant to their different experiences. One might say that cultural globalization, a theme that is naturally discussed in the essay itself, has made its impact (if not had its revenge) on the author.

INTRODUCTION

A recent discussion of post-modernity, by the British historian Perry Anderson, describes the tendency of the period we live in to celebrate the ‘cross-over, the hybrid, the pot-pourri’.¹ More exactly, some people – like the Anglo-Indian writer Salman Rushdie, especially in his *Satanic Verses* (1988) – celebrate these phenomena, while others fear or condemn them. The condemnations are issued, it should be added, from very different political positions, since the critics of hybridity include Muslim fundamentalists, white segregationists and black separatists. The conceptual problems raised by the employment of the term ‘hybridity’, which has been described as ‘maddeningly elastic’, will be discussed in chapter 2 below.²

One sign of the intellectual climate of our age is the growing use of the term ‘essentialism’ as a way of criticizing one’s opponent in many kinds of argument. Nations, social classes, tribes and castes have all been ‘deconstructed’ in the sense of being described as false entities. An unusually sophisticated example of the trend is

a book by a French anthropologist, Jean-Loup Amselle, called *Logiques métisses* (1990). Amselle, a specialist on West Africa, argues that there is no such thing as a tribe such as the Fulani or the Bambara. There is no sharp or firm cultural frontier between groups, but rather a cultural continuum.³ Linguists have long been making a similar point about neighbouring languages such as Dutch and German. On the frontier, it is impossible to say exactly when or where Dutch stops and German begins.

A preoccupation with the topic is natural in a period like ours that is marked by increasingly frequent and intense cultural encounters of all kinds. The consequences of cultural globalization are debatable and debated. One possibility, to be discussed below, is cultural homogenization, while some scholars suggest the opposite, heterogenization. Whatever the merits of these arguments, especially where long-term consequences are concerned, it is difficult to deny that what we see, hear and experience in other ways in the short term is some kind of mix, a process of hybridization that assists economic globalization as well as being assisted by it.⁴

However we react to it, this global trend is impossible to miss, from curry and chips – recently voted the favourite dish in Britain – to Thai saunas, Zen Catholicism or Judaism, Nigerian Kung Fu, or ‘Bollywood’ films, made in Bombay-Mumbai and mixing Indian traditions

of song and dance with the conventions of Hollywood. This process is particularly obvious in the domain of music, in the case of such hybrid forms and genres as jazz, reggae, salsa or, more recently, flamenco rock and Afro-Celtic rock. New technology – including, appropriately enough, the ‘mixer’ - has obviously facilitated this kind of hybridization.⁵

No wonder, then, that a group of theorists of hybridity have made their appearance, themselves often of double or mixed cultural identity. Homi Bhabha (1949–) for instance, is an Indian who has taught in England and now lives in the USA. Stuart Hall (1932–) who was born in Jamaica of mixed parentage, has lived most of his life in England and describes himself as ‘a mongrel culturally, the absolute cultural hybrid’.⁶ Paul Gilroy (1956–), also of mixed parentage, was born in London and has worked in the USA. Ien Ang describes herself as ‘an ethnic Chinese, Indonesian-born and European-educated academic who now lives and works in Australia’.⁷ On the other hand, the late Edward Said (1935–2003), a Palestinian who grew up in Egypt and taught in the USA, described himself as ‘out of place’ wherever he was located (in similar fashion, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India after its independence, once declared that he had become ‘a queer mixture of the East and West, out of place everywhere’).⁸

Compared to these individuals, the sociologist Nestor García Canclini (1939–), who grew up in Argentina but works in Mexico, and the anthropologist Eduardo Archetti (1943–2005), an Argentinian who moved to Norway, may hardly seem to be mixtures at all. All the same, their personal experience of life in different cultures, or living between different cultures, surely underlies their concern with questions of hybridity.⁹

Indeed, Latin America has seemed to many people to be the hybrid region *par excellence*, since it has been the site of encounters, clashes, miscegenation and other interactions between the indigenous population, the European invaders, and the slaves whom the Europeans brought from Africa. Hybridity was celebrated by the Mexican José Vasconcelos (1881–1959), the Minister of Education and author of *The Cosmic Race* (1929), which presented the mestizo as the essence of the Mexican nation, and by the Brazilian sociologist-historian Gilberto Freyre (1900–87), whose *Masters and the Slaves* (1933) defined the identity of Brazilians in terms of mixing, especially between European and African cultures.¹⁰

Writers who employ the concept have also been faulted for identifying Latin American culture with hybridity and so blurring distinctions between different regions of Latin America. Uruguay, for instance, with a population that is mainly of Spanish and Italian descent, is very different