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Three Village Tales: Global Localities in Goethe’s Hermann und Dorothea (1797), Kafka’s Das Schloß (1922), and Leutenegger’s Kontinent (1985)

Given the emblematic status of the global village in current debate, three village tales, Goethe's Hermann und Dorothea (1796), Kafka's Das Schloß (1922/3) and Gertrud Leutenegger's Kontinent (1985) serve to explore the discourse of change at different times, looking for global intimations and for continuities or breaks. Topics adapted from globalisation theory include: the representation of space and time and of boundaries and borders; the interplay of sameness and difference, of universal humanity and cultural diversity; signifiers of modernity and the value set on modernisation; materially changing gender roles and the symbolic values set upon sexual difference.

The term globalisation began to emerge in the 1960s, and in keeping with the phenomenon it designates, has circled the globe to become a dominant discourse of our times. Like the arguments over the difference between modernism and postmodernism or late modernism, so too the relationship between modernisation and globalisation is unclear. Is it a facet of modernisation or is there a postmodern break? When did globalisation begin and can it be periodised? Does globalisation designate a relatively recent qualitative change or epochal shift, or was global spread always implicated in modernisation, as sceptics suggest? Does globalisation get going with oil crisis and neo-liberal economics in the 1970s or with agricultural settlement and the invention of the wheel? If territoriality enables the complex economic and cultural production which fuels trade and mobility, then the history of globalisation is perhaps co-extensive with the universal history of mankind’s journey from primitive nomadism through territoriality to global nomadism. For sceptical cultural theorists the new electronic media merely continue a history of communications which began with printing or even with script, whereas proponents of globalisation theory see a step change in such phenomena as the domination in 2000 of just 10 conglomerates in a $275 billion dollar communications industry.¹ Likewise for sceptical
political theorists, today’s American dominance merely continues a millennial history of empire stretching from Egypt or Babylon through Roman, Chinese, Mongol, Ottoman or Habsburg empires to European colonialism, then American hegemony.\(^2\) Nationalism has led to the break up of political or colonial empires, but some globalists see nation states as a modern hiccup between pre-modern political empire and post-modern capitalist globalisation. On this view, globalisation brings not American but transnational corporate dominance to which the USA, like any other country, is subject.\(^3\) Thus the end of the Cold War may signal the waning both of political empire and of nation states which, dwarfed by capitalist conglomerates, are disappearing into an unaccountable transnational McWorld and imploding into warring fragments.

Along with such diachronic questions of periodisation, globalisation theory is an arena of synchronic arguments over methodology, whether economic, political or cultural analysis is called for, and how the multiple facets of a complex phenomenon interact. A proponent of cultural explanation – ‘popular culture driven by expansionist commerce’ – is Benjamin Barber.\(^4\) His provocative title, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, signals a negative dialectic between difference and sameness. Barber posits a deadly symbiosis between particularist tribal identity and consumerist homogenisation. Osama bin Laden’s hybrid image – traditional Arab dress but Timex watch and Kalashnikov – is seen to symbolise such a symbiosis, which found its most striking expression in the prime-timed televisual spectacle of the collapsing twin towers. Set against this negative dialectic of capitalism versus tribalism is the positive utopian vision which blends mutual recognition of cultural diversity with shared humanity to be enabled by a global spread of democratic civil society. But since civil society requires governance, political analysts argue over levels of subsidiarity between locality, nation, supra-national regions, international bodies and world government. At issue are: the continuing relevance or the growing powerlessness of the nation state; the hope of increasing prosperity or the threat to democratic accountability presented by supranational associations; the necessity for or the impotence of world bodies to ensure peace and mediate between competing interests. Optimists argue for a rational distribution of powers and responsibilities between these different levels. Pessimists perceive political impotence and failure to combat