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On globalisation and diversity

Mary Kalantzis^{a,*}, Bill Cope^b

^a *College of Education, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, United States*

^b *Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Illinois,
Urbana-Champaign, United States*

Abstract

Mary Kalantzis's plenary address at the 2005 International Conference on the Humanities (Cambridge, U.K.) argues that globalization and diversity ground the world of our times. The article expands on this notion as Kalantzis and co-author Bill Cope describe three instantiations of globalization since the evolutionary processes of human beings began. The third globalization of which we are a part today, they argue, is characterized by layers upon layers of difference. These layers, moreover, are supported through new media and the Internet—and may indeed return us to “multilingualism, divergence, and enduringly deep diversity.”

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Globalisation and diversity are two of the grounding phenomena of our times. Are they, however, at odds?

The theory of neo-imperialism would suggest that they are. One neo-imperialist case is economic, tracing the colonisation by the commodity form of the last recesses of older material lifeworlds, from the receding havens of our domestic self-realisation to the dispossession of peoples in the depths of the Amazon when their forests are razed. Another case is cultural, clearly proven when we start a new day to find a McDonalds being built on the next corner, or as we watch the story of the world according to Fox News or CNN, or as we look at our working and personal lives through Microsoft's Windows. Still another case is political, as one nation-state, the United States, seems so easily able to dominate others—or to paraphrase its own, more delicate words, as it takes the light of freedom and democracy to those dark corners of the world it considers in need, using force where necessary.

Globalisation, in this conception, is the enemy of diversity. It is incompatible with diversity except in its most superficial and trivialised of forms—tourist kitsch, commodities with the aura of native authenticity, ethnic colour, patronising niceness.

* Corresponding author.

Email addresses: kalantzi@uiuc.edu (M. Kalantzis), billcope@uiuc.edu (B. Cope).

The purpose of this paper is to argue that diversity is deeper than that, or at least that it is becoming deeper. Perhaps it was not meant to be anything other than superficial in the modernity of our recent past which worked so hard at creating a homogenous mass—mass production, mass consumption, the mass politics of ostensibly uniform national identity. The suppressed differences of this modernity—experiential, corporeal, interpersonal—have been the subject of our research work and political activism, defending diversity against its modern assailants not for the sake of nostalgic return but with an eye to the creation of a different modernity in which the so-called “multicultural” becomes more than trite (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997; Kalantzis, 2000).

This paper takes a longer view than is possible in the everyday fray of research and activism. Its focus is the increasing recognition of diversity in our particular modernity. The case it will make is that it is becoming harder to dismiss diversity as superficial or mutable in the phase of globalisation we are now entering. In fact, we want to speculate—tentatively, suggestively, provocatively—that we might be on the verge of a new phase in our species’ global presence, the exact shape of which is not yet clear but in which diversity becomes a more fundamental dynamic than it has been within not just our living memories, but even our written, civilisational memory.

To make our case, we go back beyond our written memory. This frame of reference we call “the three globalisations.” Human beings have only ever been global creatures. From the moment we emerged as the species we are, we became the first sentient beings to fill virtually every habitat. Our first act as a symbol-making species was to walk to the ends of the earth. This may have taken as long as several 100,000 years or as little as 100. Whatever the timing, we started walking from the moment we became a species and did not stop until there was nearly no desert, no tundra, and no sea where we did not or could not make a home. This happened during the first globalisation, a process unprecedented for any species in natural history.

Then we became different because, in our supposedly primitive states with seemingly poor communications compared with the wires and waves of modernity and in the relative isolation of one tribe from another, our languages and cultures drifted in their various directions. A kind of symbolic-cultural variant of evolutionary processes set in. Having globalised, we drifted into a state of separation, and this state created difference. Or, at least, this is the conventional wisdom. We want to suggest, however, that something else happened in this first globalisation.

We want to argue that the state of difference in the first globalisation was more integral and more systematic than that. And that it was more deeply, intrinsically global than the fact of dispersal and the accident of separation. To make this case, we are going to draw on earlier work (Kalantzis, 2004) and all-too briefly for now because we want to get to the fulcrum-point of this paper, the transition from the second to a third globalisation. So we will view the first globalisation through just one symptomatic window, those forms of linguistic representation or meaning-making that make us unique in natural history, to use the phrase of Terence Deacon, the “symbolic species” (Deacon, 1997), a creature apart.

The first thing to note about diversity amongst what we will call “first languages”—the languages of the first globalisation—is that their differences are more than accidental, more than the result of evolutionary drift. They are endemic to their modes of production of meaning and the reproduction of material life that these systems of meaning support. These were not bounded

tribal spaces but worlds of overlapping affinities, sovereignties even. The marker of one's relation to a place or a group or creature or totem was on the peculiarity of one's representation of it. There was a deep logic of representational divergence on many dimensions—geospatial, interpersonal and iconic-symbolic. This could be on the basis of group membership—families, clans, tribes, peoples—and even these terms oversimplify the layering of affinity groups. Or it could be on the basis of age groups, or gender, or elders defined by their access to arcane metaphysical knowledges.

The result was that this peculiarly symbolic species ended up covering the globe, but covering it with perhaps 10,000 incommensurate symbol systems if one takes that most distinctive species-characteristic, language, as the measure, but many, many more than this if one takes into account, as one must, the seemingly wanton peculiarities of dialect and register.

This cosmos of symbolic divergence had little to do with evolutionary drift and nothing to do with isolation. People did not live in isolated groups, and meanings were transmitted over very long distances and quite rapidly despite the differences between symbol systems. The peoples of the first globalisation dealt with difference by being hugely multilingual and developing interlanguages. What emerges is an integrated globalism with the dynamics of diversity, or active processes for making and then negotiating symbolic differences, at its core.

The result also was the emergence of a species that could make and constantly remake its representations of the world and by remaking these meanings remake itself. Divergence here is an active and temporal thing whereas difference is a merely found object at a moment in time. Divergence is done by people, and its effect over time is the making of difference. In this regard, the symbol systems of the peoples of the first globalisation had a fluidity and a dynamism the depth and extent of which is hard to grasp today. Not only were they deeply different, they were deeply diverging as a consequence of the constant renegotiation of meanings. The world was forever being renamed, resung, reconceived, at times of law and ritual, and at times of song, story and poetry (Cope, 1998). In this process of invention and reinvention, there was a rough balance of subjectivities. The political economy of negotiated meanings was such that, over a lifetime at least, every person had a more or less equal chance to have their voice included in the making or remaking of meanings.

And then came a second globalisation. One of its manifestations was the global spread of farming. Revealingly for our case regarding the world-integrated nature of the first globalisation, this happens independently in five different places over a span of just 6000 years (Diamond, 1999). Another is the emergence of writing, which happens independently in four different places over several thousand years—in Mesopotamia about 5000 years ago and then in India, China, and Mesoamerica.

With these new material and symbolic modes came material inequalities of a type never experienced in the first globalisation. Farming brings the possibility of accumulating material wealth and the application of surpluses to the unnecessary projects of “civilisation,” which stand both as a testament to, and overwhelming reminder of, the scale of that inequality. To take another touchstone of transition, Jacky Goody would remind us that writing from the start was used as an instrument of elite control, a medium for maintaining inventories of ownership, an instrument of bureaucracy and for siphoning off surpluses, and as a font of religious obfuscation that rationalised an unequal social order (Goody, 1977). The relative simultaneity of these developments suggests that the peoples of the first globalisation were

talking and that the transition from the first to the second globalisation was a global event, not a series of isolated events.

A measure of the progress of the second globalisation is the mass displacement of the languages of the first globalisation by Indo-European languages across a span from Europe to central India, by Bantu languages across Africa, by the languages of the Maya, the Aztecs, the Olmecs, and the Incas in Mesoamerica, and by the Chinese languages and their derivatives in East Asia. The few spoken languages of those who had started farming displaced the many languages of the first globalisation. Then writing cemented their supremacy. This process has only been accelerated by modern imperialism and nationalism once explicit programs of linguistic assimilation were put in place. In first languages, systems, and cultural processes of meaning were fluidly divergent, and endemically so. In the societies of the second globalisation, be they agricultural societies dominated by literate elites or the modern societies of mass literacy, systems of meaning are homogenised, stabilised, standardised, and generalised.

This second globalisation occurs on a global basis, and remarkably quickly. It brings not just the sameness that is to be found within large language groups, “world religions” and “civilisations.” There is also a sameness across and between these groups: the handful of domesticable plants and animals that spread like wildfire right across the globe; the religions which even share common ancestral figures, such as the Abraham of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims; and the inventions that are so quickly swapped and copied such as the plough, the wheel, monumental architecture, and writing. There are nuances, to be sure, and these are the stuff of tourist awe and foreboding about the apparently always-imminent “clash of civilisations,” to use [Samuel Huntington’s now over-used expression \(1998\)](#). In the larger scale of things, however, these differences are small. And that scale is the differences between the peoples of the first globalisation, which, on the measure of variability between their representational systems alone, were simply enormous, so enormous in fact that these first languages can throw into question the Chomskian claim that there is a universal grammar in a way that the languages of the various civilisations of the second globalisation do not. By comparison with scope and scale of difference in the first globalisation, there is a remarkable homology between the civilisations of the second. Their differences are things of subtlety rather than substance. The stuff we call “history” is too narrowly referenced to this scale of difference to be able to see the deep samenesses—indeed an underlying dynamic towards sameness—during the short period of our written species-memory.

Modernity arrives near the end of this second globalisation and at first intensifies the processes of civilisation. On four new continents, most people become speakers of a European language, as a lingua franca if not as a first language—the two Americas, Australia, and Africa. This is just one telling consequence of the past few centuries of imperialism, achieved through a series of relentlessly thorough processes of economic, cultural, and geopolitical incorporation and homogenisation.

High modernity takes these processes of homogenisation and standardisation to an extreme. Modern production reduces labour to raw human capacity, mass producing products for a homogenous public. “Any colour you like, as long as it is black,” said the enlightened Henry Ford ([Cope & Kalantzis, 1997](#)). The modern state assimilates outsiders, the indigenous peoples or migrant workers who need to be able to speak a common language to assume substitutable roles in the larger social machine ([Kalantzis, 2000](#)). In moments of reform, it imagines the uni-

versal individual and, on the measure of their needs, provides welfare. And modern lifeworlds place people in mass audiences, mass markets, mass culture.

What did this second globalisation mean for the political economy of subjectivity? The answer is a huge unbalancing in which the agency of the few habitually dominates the agency of the many. In the modern workplace, Henry Ford tells his engineers what he wants, they draw it up, pass memos down the line, and then the middle managers tell the supervisors, and the supervisors bark out their orders to the workers. The modern state reflects its leaders' paternalistic conception of the universal homogenous individual, or at least this is what happens in its more benign moments of welfarism. In less benign moments, Fascist or Leninist vanguards take it upon themselves to project their self-understandings of modernity on a quiescent multitude. And in modern lifeworlds, people learn to take in received truths. The ideal learner in the classroom of modern, mass-institutional education quietly absorbed received facts and disciplinary truths. The ideal wife and the ideal child subjected themselves to the discipline of the head of the household. The ideally cultured person sat appreciatively in the mass audiences of the stadia or mass media of modernity. Such was the predisposition toward sameness of the command society with its production by command, politics by command, and culture by command.

And now, the pivot point in this paper. Are we on the verge of another kind of globalisation? Of course we are not because modernity steams on, replete with all its predictable wonders and terrors. But there are some signs that this modernity is beginning to do difference in ways that appear contrary to the underlying dynamics of the second globalisation. Indeed, in this respect alone, changing modernity is beginning to look a little more like the first globalisation than the second.

We want to begin our case first by examining today's state and then today's productive life and today's lifeworlds. To start with the state: Around the world, the creation of new states is throwing up an interesting phenomenon. In East Timor, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, actions to secure regime change have not produced what the nationalist intentions in each place imagined. In each of these places, the U.N. or the U.S. administration thought it would be relatively easy to replace malevolent powers with new, resilient states that would be democratic and in their own image.

But things have not turned out this way. Strong central states have not emerged in any of these new sites. Instead, what has emerged is a civil society with two facets—one, a civil society made up of doctors and teachers and local government officials who just want to do their jobs and live their lives. These people have simply got on with governing themselves. The central state is barely to be seen. The other aspect of some of these civil societies, in Iraq and Afghanistan particularly, is ongoing violent resistance not just from local forces but thrown up also by the grievances of a transnational civil society.

Meanwhile, the U.S., the world's most powerful country and the last military power with serious aspirations beyond its own borders, has found it difficult to pacify just two small countries—Iraq and Afghanistan. This is the same country that won the Second World War, developed the Marshall Plan, and for the duration of the Cold War invested hugely to support a global network of sympathetic states. Today, the financial costs of even small scale adventures are crippling. This is as much as anything because the U.S. state has itself shrunk, as small-government conservatives have cut taxes and the capacity to support programs, from welfare

funding to the U.S. military. This is why what was achieved on a global scale as recently as 50 years ago is so punishingly difficult today, even in two small countries.

In fact, in almost every country of the world, the central state is getting smaller or is under attack. Communities are filling the gap by taking matters into their own hands. The society of self-regulating community—civil society—is becoming a more significant locus of action and decision. Everywhere we look, this story is being replicated. One might even be so bold as to point to a gradual withering away of the modern state. Compare any state in the world today with the same state 30 or 70 years ago, capitalist or communist alike.

Whether it is for the better or for the worse and whatever the root causes—small government conservatism, today’s globalisation, or the new dynamics of a post cold-war world—the realities of this change are everywhere to be felt. There is no alternative to creating governance structures within the communities of practice of civil society. The Internet is governed not by any state but through the community of experts and interested parties that is the World Wide Web Consortium. Diasporic communities are governed not by home governments but by highly distributed community organisations whose points of connection are common cultural principles rather than chains of command. As the state withers, a certain kind of society disappears, too, and a certain kind of politics. When a greater capacity to decide and act is devolved to civil society, a higher level of participation and reflexivity is required of citizens. This is fertile ground for a new globalisation of cultural divergence.

Meanwhile, at work, crude command structures are replaced by a more sophisticated cultural co-option—the co-option of team work, vision and mission, and corporate culture in which everyone is supposed to personify the enterprise, to think and will and act the enterprise. Today, there can be no entrepreneurial heroism of the kind expressed by Henry Ford because the customer is always right and products and services need to be customised to mesh with the multiple subjectivities of niche markets—the big SUVs, the smart sports cars, the spacious family cars, the micro cars for crowded cities, cars of any hue and trim—so many permutations, in fact, that sometimes an individual order has to be placed before a vehicle is manufactured. Fordist mass production is displaced by today’s mass customisation—fertile ground again, for a new globalisation of cultural divergence.

In everyday family and community life, things are radically changing, too. Take the narratives of gaming, which have also become a bigger business than Hollywood. From the most impressionable of ages, children of Nintendo, PlayStation, and X-Box have become inured to the idea that they can be characters in narratives, capable of determining or at least influencing the story’s end. They are content with being no less than actors rather than audiences, players rather than spectators, agents rather than voyeurs, users rather than readers of narrative (Gee, 2003, 2005). Not content with programmed radio, they build their own playlists on their iPods. Not satisfied with programmed television, they read the narratives of DVD and Internet streamed video at varying depth (the movie, the documentary about the making of the movie) and dip into “chapters” at will. Not content with the singular vision of sports telecasting of mass television, they choose their own angles, replays, and statistical analyses on interactive digital TV. And here we have fertile ground for cultural divergence once again—no two video games are played the same way, players inserting and recreating their identities in ways that are never precisely replicated from one person to the next; no two iPods have the same playlist; no two digital television programs are watched in quite the same way.

Whether it be in the domains of governance, work, or cultural life, the command society is giving way to the society of reflexivity. We are in the midst of a transformation that is creating new forms of subjectivity and new kinds of personality. These interconnected developments can be viewed both from within a systems perspective and beyond it. From a systems point of view, these are the kinds of governance structures, the kinds of organisations, and the kinds of people required today for the most conservative, small government and pro-enterprise points of view. We hear these points of view expressed in the public rhetoric of innovation and creativity, the knowledge economy, and individual autonomy, and responsibility. Notwithstanding the high-sounding rhetoric, these transformations may only legitimate and even exacerbate systemic inequities—iniquities, indeed.

History, however, is more open-ended than that. Inevitably, human systems are so complex that they allow possibilities outside the scope anticipated by their progenitors and apologists. For every moment when the ideologues of small government succeed in shrinking the state, there is another moment in which people learn the civilities of self-government in their various communities of practice; for every moment when command structures in workplaces are replaced by collaborationist structures, there is another moment in which people acquire the collaborative competencies of socially directed work; for every moment when compliant personalities are replaced by the ego-centrism of the consumer-individual, there is another moment in which new relationships of co-dependence and mutual reliance are created and the bonds of sociability are extended and deepened. Whatever the domain, there is a shift in the balance of power and in the moral economy of agency which favours egalitarianism and liberty. And this despite and beyond prevailing systems and structures of power. Something genuinely new could emerge.

Even from a conservative point of view, the workplace of the near future will simply be uncompetitive if their workers do not contribute their all, from their creative potential to their ability to maintain relationships of supple reflexivity across the myriad of niched customers and affiliates. The cultures of the near future will ossify if they fail to leave space for the “readers” to follow their own proclivities and shape their own cultural ends. The Nintendo generation will simply walk up the wall if the pedagogy served up to them by institutionalised schooling does not engage every fibre of their subjectivity. Meanwhile, the auto-creative potentials of the digital media have only just been opened with phenomena such as blogging. These potentials create new economies of cultural scale, geographies of distribution, and balances of power.

The minute one allows so much scope for agency, however, one finds oneself facing layers upon layers of difference. One discovers actually existing agencies in the massively plural and not the fabrications and falsifications of the command society with its one-people, one-state nationalism, of the regime of mass production and mass consumption, and of the pretensions to cultural homogeneity of the society of mass media and mass culture. The differences are material (class, locale), corporeal (race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability), and circumstantial (culture, life experience, interest, affinity). We can perform neat demographic metrics on this diversity and build programs to suit. Or we may think we can until we encounter the deeper diversity in the interstices of these demographics or even solidly in the middle of each demographic—and these are the increasingly variable dispositions and sensibilities. The more we take agency for real, the more multifarious its manifestations become.

In fact, more than this, divergence and diversity become endemic. To illustrate this point and end by coming back to the subject of represented meaning, let us consider English for the moment. After an era of standardisation, homogenisation, and assimilation, even the global-imperial language of *Pax Americana* is diverging internally at a pace which seems to be picking up in reverse correlation to its imperial adventurism and successful plantation of fast food franchises in every corner of the earth. The social languages of subcultures, peer cultures, communities of fashion and fad and fetish, diasporic communities of second-language speakers and local and regional dialects—all of these forms of English are becoming less mutually intelligible rather than more. They are spoken through the seemingly endless television channels, streamed radio, Web communities, and person-to-person meeting points of the new cosmopolis. Underneath this is a new logic of identity, not to mention senses of belonging and sovereignty that increasingly defy the neatly homogenising efforts of the nation-state. We are returning to a deep logic of divergence and diversity not witnessed since we spoke the languages of the first globalisation.

And who needs English, anyway? As expansive as the imperial pretensions of global English may be, the new representational means also paradoxically create the conditions for a return to radical multilingualism: the call centres that run in tens—and why not hundreds or thousands?—of languages; the possibilities of machine translation that remove the language-boundedness of a particular meaning; the universal scripting system Unicode that is entirely agnostic about alphabetical and ideographic meanings and small or large character sets because are all manufactured of the same stuff and rendered to the same media. Ironically, these techniques, developed in the world city of global English, make the maintenance and revival of peripheral languages which have managed to survive the second globalisation an easier and more achievable task (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, 2004).

Finally, the new media are more accessible than the printing presses of the era of print literacy—cheaper to access and more manipulable by amateurs. And insofar as many are victims of the new digital divide, the same metropolitan powers that attempt to make intellectual property a new form of private property have in the heart of their system people of genius who are committed to access through the activist politics of “open source” technologies and to the preservation of a “creative commons” for intellectual property (Lessig, 2001; Stallman, 2002). Defying the logic of the second globalisation, the means of production and distribution of meaning are either tending toward free in the case of electronic meanings or flat economies of scale in the case of physical media such as digital print. In a manufacturing sense, this latter reality makes small cultures and narrow meanings just as viable—albeit not so profitable—as mass cultures and homogenising meanings.

So here we are, 5000 years after the beginning of the transition from the first globalisation to the second. The next globalisation may not be at odds with diversity to the same extent that the second one was. Indeed, diversity may be intrinsic to it. The historical narrative of this paper has, all too schematically perhaps, suggested an at least partial return to multilingualism, divergence, and enduringly deep diversity. It also tells of a shift back to balance in the political economy of agency. In this transition, we may hear echoes of the diversity of the first globalisation, the moment of our original humanity. But a third globalisation could never simply be a return. The future will be incomparably different to any of our pasts.

Mary Kalantzis is Dean of the College of Education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA. Until recently, she was Dean of the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, and President of the Australian Council of Deans of Education. She has been a Board Member of Teaching Australia: The National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership, a Commissioner of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Chair of the Queensland Ethnic Affairs Ministerial Advisory Committee, and a member of the Australia Council's Community Cultural Development Board. With Bill Cope, she is co-author of a number of books, including *The Powers of Literacy* (Falmer Press, London, 1993), *Productive Diversity* (Pluto Press, Sydney, 1997), *A Place in the Sun: Re-Creating the Australian Way of Life* (HarperCollins, Sydney, 2000), and *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* (Routledge, London, 2000).

Bill Cope is a Research Professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA. He is a former First Assistant Secretary in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and Director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs in the Australian Federal Government. He has also worked in or with a number of Australian universities, including the University of Wollongong, the University of Technology, Sydney, James Cook University of North Queensland, and RMIT University in Melbourne. He has a PhD in history, and his current research interests include population and community diversity, theories and practices of pedagogy, and new technologies of representation and communication, including the "semantic web."

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