

# Worlds apart

Protesters at the G8 summit in Genoa will be pitching culture against commerce

[Special report: globalisation](#)

**Jeremy Rifkin**  
**Tuesday July 3, 2001**  
[The Guardian](#)

George Bush will be meeting the heads of state of the other leading industrial nations at the G8 conference in Genoa later this month. Tens of thousands of protesters from around the world are expected to converge on the city and take to the streets with their own agenda.

The protests are becoming a familiar part of world political and economic forums. While the media generally focus on the small number of increasingly violent protesters at these gatherings, the larger message being carried by the vast majority of peaceful demonstrators often gets lost in the fray.

We are witnessing the first stirrings of a cultural backlash to globalisation whose effects are likely to be as significant and far-reaching as were the revolutionary movements for political democracy and market capitalism at the end of the 18th century.

Local cultures are reawakening everywhere in the world. In India, consumers recently trashed McDonald's restaurants for violating Hindu dietary laws. In Germany, the public is engaged in a heated debate over what is German culture in the era of globalisation. The centre left is worried that any talk of resurrecting a German Leit culture - or guiding culture - will spawn a resurgence of fascist sentiment, but the centre right asks how long Germany can deny its cultural heritage. In France, angry farmers uprooted Monsanto's genetically engineered crops, claiming that they are a threat to French cultural sovereignty over food production. In Canada, local communities are fighting to keep out the giant Wal-Mart chain for fear it will destroy neighbourhood businesses and replace traditional small town culture with suburban super malls.

Globalisation is changing the cultural landscape in other fundamental ways. In Europe native languages are giving way to English and observers predict an English speaking continent from Calais to Moscow by the end of the present century. In Los Angeles it is a very different story. Seventy per cent of the students attending LA schools are now Spanish-speaking Latino immigrants and Census Bureau officials tell us that a majority of Americans will be people of colour in less than 40 years.

The globalisation of commerce and trade and the increasing disparity between the "haves" and the "have nots" is forcing a great human migration from east to west and from south to north. The migrations, in turn, are resulting in a clash of cultures in various countries as people wrestle with how to preserve their cultural identities in an increasingly borderless commercial world.

A new generation of cultural activists is taking its causes on to the world stage. Although activists take on global economic and political issues, their affiliations, allegiances and loyalties are bound up in local communities. The official agenda being readied for the G8 summit makes little mention of this emerging cultural activism, and herein lies the core of the problem.

The post second world war era has been dominated by the presence of commerce and government on the global scene. Now, a third player is beginning to call for an equal role in the international arena. Organisations representing diverse cultural interests - the environment, species preservation, rural life, health, food and cuisine, religion, human rights, the family, women's issues, ethnic heritage, the arts and other quality of life issues - are pounding on the doors at world economic and political forums, demanding entrance to the corridors of power and a seat at the table. They represent the birth of a new "civil society politics" and an antidote to the forces pushing for globalisation.

Many of the new cultural activists expected to descend on Genoa oppose what they perceive as the colonisation of culture by global companies such as Monsanto, AOL-Time Warner, and McDonald's. If the G8 leaders are united in their support of global commerce and trade, the activists are just as committed to the idea of preserving local identity and enriching both biological and cultural diversity. It is these clashing visions of the future that have led to ugly confrontations on the streets of Seattle, Washington, Prague, Nice, Davos, Quebec City, Gothenburg and Salzburg over the past year and a half.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with an acknowledgement that Tony Blair's third way politics is too narrowly materialist in its orientation to embrace the full range of interests represented by the civil society movement. Its premise, that a robust global economy is a prerequisite for healthy local societies needs to be rethought.

Both capitalist and socialist theoreticians have traditionally found common ground in the belief that material conditions are primary and give rise to cultural and social structures, forms and values. Certainly, the advocates of globalisation would argue that free and open trade and an expansion of commercial relationships and activities of all kinds are the key to a brighter future for all. The flaw in this premise lies in the misguided assumption that commerce conditions culture when, in fact, the opposite is more often the case.

The new civil society activists would argue that there is not an example in history where people first create commercial relations and then later establish a culture. Commerce and government are secondary, not primary, institutions. They are derivative of the culture, not the progenitors of it. Only when cultures are well developed is there enough social trust to support commercial and governmental institutions. That is because the culture is the wellspring from which agreed behavioural norms are generated. It is those behavioural norms, in turn, that create a trusting environment within which commerce and trade can take place. When the commercial sphere begins to devour the cultural

sphere, it threatens to destroy the social foundations that give rise to commercial relations.

Unfortunately, the cultural sector exists in a kind of neo-colonial limbo. It has been stripped of its separate identity and made dependent on the market and government for its survival. Only by making local culture a coherent, self-aware political force will it be possible to re-establish its critical role in the scheme of human society once again. It may be time to entertain the idea of establishing a World Cultural Organisation to represent the interests of the diverse cultures around the globe and give it equal footing with the World Trade Organisation in international affairs.

A word of caution is, however, in order. Restoring culture can just as easily lead to a new and virulent form of fundamentalism as to a revival of cultural diversity. All around the world today political and religious fundamentalist movements are on the rise. Ultra-nationalist political parties, separatist groups, ethnic cleansing movements and religious revivals represent an extreme counter-reaction to the anxieties and insecurities caused by globalisation. Fundamentalist movements are an attempt to close off communication with a world thought to be sick and sinful. The sensibilities of fundamentalist movements put them at odds with most social organisations which also favour restoration of local culture but are sensitive to and respectful of the rights of other cultures. The adage "think globally, act locally", while a bit of a cliché after so many years of overuse, still reflects their thinking.

Many observers are worried that a resurgent interest in local cultures must inevitably lead to xenophobia and ultra-nationalist sentiment. That doesn't have to be so. If people everywhere come to think of their own cultural resources not as possessions to defend but, rather, as gifts to exchange with one another, then the great human migrations of the 21st century could spawn a cultural renaissance and create the conditions for a truly humane globalisation of commerce and trade.

- Jeremy Rifkin is the author of *The Age of Access* (Penguin) and president of the Foundation on Economic Trends, Washington, DC