

Globalization and Terror

by HELENA HORBERG-HODGE
The Ecologist, volume 31, no. 10

December 2001/January 2002

It did not take long for the horrifying images of September 11 to mutate into a spectacle of high-tech, stage-managed warfare, complete with cruise missiles, laser-guided bombs, and remote satellite imagery of further death and destruction. So little time was devoted to considering how we arrived at this pass that we are likely to revisit it again and again. The knee-jerk retaliation by the U.S. and British governments will only lead to heightened rivalries and friction between local ethnic groups (already happening in Afghanistan and Israel), the undermining of regional governments (already happening in Pakistan), and further anger and resentment aimed at Westerners in general and Americans in particular (already happening in Indonesia and elsewhere in the Islamic world). By bombing a war-torn, defenceless country we are pouring oil instead of water on the fire. How many Afghans who have watched innocent children killed will be willing to sacrifice their lives to avenge these deaths?

Long before September 11, anger and violence were on the increase. According to the Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity (INCORE), ethnic conflicts are under way in at least 43 countries around the world. Most of us have remained oblivious to this frightening trend. We are only dimly aware, if at all, of the ethnic conflicts that simmer and periodically boil over into acts of terror and warfare in Sri Lanka, Eritrea, Bhutan, Turkey, Guatemala, Kashmir, and many other regions, including Afghanistan. These conflicts are generally most “newsworthy” when they are uncomfortably close to Western industrial countries—Chechnya and Bosnia, for example—or when they

make exciting TV, as was the case in Rwanda. But unbeknownst to most Westerners, fanaticism, fundamentalism, and ethnic conflict have been growing for many decades—and not just in the Islamic world.

Failure to recognize this trend can lead to the belief that terrorism will end if we stamp out Osama Bin Laden and his network. Unfortunately the reality is far more complex, and we urgently need to move beyond the symptoms, to address the underlying causes of terrorism. If we do so the prospects for a more peaceful and secure future may not be so elusive.

To really understand the rise in religious fundamentalism and ethnic conflict we need to look at the deep impacts of what might be described as the jihad of the global consumer culture against the diversity of living cultures on the planet. Doing so not only allows us to better understand the September 11 tragedy, but to see a way forward that lessens violence on all sides.

My perspective comes from experiences in numerous cultures in both the “North” and “South” over the past 35 years. I studied in Austria, in 1966, when the Tyrol conflict was raging; I was a resident in Spain in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Basque separatist group ETA was active, as they still are today; I am now a resident of England, where I’ve seen the effects of the IRA’s long-running battles with the UK government; I’ve also worked for a quarter-century on the Indian subcontinent, where I’ve seen terrorist acts in Nepal, as well as ethnic tensions and open conflict in India and Bhutan.

Most important of all, since 1975, I have been witness to the emergence

of tensions between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minority in Ladakh, or “Little Tibet,” in the western Himalayas. For more than 600 years these two groups lived side by side with no recorded instance of conflict. They helped each other at harvest time, attended one another’s religious festivals, even intermarried. But within a decade of the imposition of Western-style “development,” Buddhists and Muslims were engaged in pitched battles—including the bombing of each other’s homes. Even mild-mannered grandmothers who, a decade earlier, had been drinking tea and laughing with their Muslim neighbours, told me, “We have to kill all the Muslims or they will finish us off.”

How did relations between these two ethnic groups change so quickly and completely? The transformation is unfathomable unless one understands the complex interrelated effects of globalization on individuals and communities worldwide.

Creating Scarcity and Competition

Development in Ladakh, as elsewhere in the world, meant that external investments were used to build up an energy and transport infrastructure that shifted economic and political life from a multitude of villages into one urban centre. Suddenly, villages that had previously provided food, energy, medicine, and skills born of generations of local knowledge were threatened with extinction. They were no longer able to compete with the city, where subsidized imported food, petroleum, pharmaceuticals, and designer clothes were available for the lucky few. The destruction of the local economy and culture by the global economy also created what can best be

(continued)

described as a cultural inferiority complex.

When I first arrived in Ladakh 25 years ago, there was no indication that people thought of themselves as poor or inferior. Instead they regularly described themselves as having enough and being content with their lives. Though natural resources were scarce and hard to obtain, the Ladakhis had, in fact, a remarkably high standard of living. Most of the region's farmers only really worked four months of the year, and poverty and unemployment were alien concepts.

In one of my first years in Ladakh, I was shown around a remote village by a young Ladakhi named Tsewang. Since all the houses I saw seemed especially large and beautiful, I asked Tsewang to show me the houses where the poor lived. He looked perplexed for a moment, then replied: "We don't have any poor people here."

In part, the Ladakhis' confidence and sense of having enough emanated from a deep sense of community: people knew they could depend on each other. But in 1975—the year Tsewang showed me his village—the region was fully opened up to the process of "development," and life began to change rapidly. Within a few years Ladakhis were exposed to television, Western movies, advertising, and a seasonal flood of foreign tourists. Subsidized food and consumer goods—from Michael Jackson CDs and plastic toys to Rambo videos and pornography—poured in on the new roads the development brought. Ladakh's local economy was being swallowed up by the global economy, and its traditional culture displaced by the consumer monoculture.

A new form of competition began to separate the Ladakhis from one another. As the "cheap" subsidized goods from outside destroyed the local economy, Ladakhis were forced to fight for the scarce jobs of the new money economy.

Competition also increased for political power. In the past, most Ladakhis wielded real influence and power within their own economy. Now Ladakhis were absorbed into a national economy of 800 million, and a global economy of six billion. Their influence and power were reduced almost to zero. The little political power that remained was funnelled through highly centralized institutions and bureaucracies, dominated by the Muslims in Kashmir.

Competitive pressures increased further as development replaced plentiful local materials with the scarce materials of the global monoculture: thus stone gave way to concrete and steel; wool to imported cotton and polyester; and local wheat and milk to imported wheat and milk. The result was artificial scarcity: people who had managed well for centuries on local materials were now, in effect, in fierce competition with everyone else on the planet.

Psychological Pressures

In Ladakh and elsewhere in the South, these economic pressures are reinforced by the media and advertising, whose images consistently portray the rich and the beautiful living an exciting and glamorous version of the American Dream. Satellite television now brings shows such as *Baywatch* to the most remote parts of the world, making village life seem primitive, inefficient, and boring by contrast. Young people in particular are made to feel ashamed of their own culture. The psychological impact on Ladakh was sudden and stark: eight years after telling me his village had no poor people, I overheard Tsewang saying to some tourists: "If you could only help us Ladakhis, we're so poor." This undermining of self-esteem is actually a stated goal of advertisers, who promote their own brands by imparting a sense of shame about local products. A U.S. advertising executive in Beijing admitted that the message being

drummed into Third World populations today is: "Imported equals good, local equals crap."

But it is not just local products that are denigrated by advertising and media images: it is local people as well. In Ladakh and around the world, the one-dimensional media stereotypes are invariably based on an urban, Western consumer model: blond, blue-eyed, and clean. If you are a farmer or are dark-skinned, you are made to feel primitive, backward, inferior. Thus, advertisements in Thailand and South America urge people to "correct" their dark eye colour with blue contact lenses: "Have the colour of eyes you wish you were born with!" For the same reason, women in the South use dangerous chemicals to lighten their skin and hair, and some Asian women even have operations to make their eyes look "Western." These are profound statements of self-rejection—of shame at being who you are.

Few in the South have been able to withstand this assault on their cultural and individual self-esteem. A few years ago I visited the most remote part of Kenya's Masailand, where, I was told, people had withstood the pressures of the consumer monoculture, and still retained an untarnished dignity and pride. So I was horrified when a beautiful young Masai leader introduced me to his father saying, "Helena is working in the Himalayas with people who are even more primitive than we are." The old man replied: "That is not possible: no one could be more primitive than us."

The Rise of Fundamentalism

In the past, Ladakhis would rarely identify themselves as Buddhists or Muslims, instead referring to their household or village. But with the heightened competition brought by "development," that began to change. Political power, formerly dispersed throughout the villages, became concentrated in bureaucracies controlled

(continued)

by the Muslim-dominated state of Kashmir, of which Ladakh was part. In most countries the group in power tends to favour its own kind, while the rest often suffer discrimination. Ladakh was no exception. Political representation and government jobs—virtually the only jobs available to formally schooled Ladakhis—disproportionately went to Muslims. Thus ethnic and religious differences—once largely ignored—began to take on a political dimension, causing bitterness and enmity on a scale previously unknown.

Young Ladakhis, for whom religion had been just another part of daily life, took exaggerated steps to demonstrate their religious affiliation and devotion. Muslims began requiring their wives and daughters to cover their heads with scarves. Buddhists in the capital began broadcasting their prayers over loudspeakers, so as to compete with the Muslim prayer call. Religious ceremonies that were once celebrated by the whole community—Buddhist and Muslim alike—became instead occasions to flaunt one's wealth and strength. Within a few years, tensions between the two groups exploded into violence. This is a place where there had been no group conflict in living memory.

It was clear to me that the young men who were ready to kill people in the name of Islam or Buddhism had not had much exposure to the traditional teachings of their respective religions. Instead, they tended to be those who had studiously modelled themselves on Rambo and James Bond, and who were the most psychologically insecure. On the other hand, those who had managed to maintain their deeper connections to the community and their spiritual roots were psychologically strong enough to remain gentle and tolerant.

The Ladakhis most prone to violence were generally those with exposure to Western-style schooling. This feature of “development”—usually

seen as an unequivocal good—pulled the young away from the skills and values that prepared them for life on the Tibetan plateau, substituting instead an education suited to a consumer lifestyle that will lie forever beyond the reach of the majority. Betrayed by the implicit promise of Western-style schooling and battered by the impossible dreams foisted on them by media and advertising, many ended up unwanted, frustrated, and angry.

Same Story, North and South

As in Ladakh, the rise of divisions, violence, and civil disorder around the world are a predictable effect of the attempt to force diverse cultures and peoples into a consumer monoculture. The problem is particularly acute in the South, where people from many differing ethnic backgrounds are pulled into cities where they are cut off from their communities and cultural moorings, and face ruthless competition for jobs and the basic necessities of life. In the intensely demoralizing and competitive situation they face, differences of any kind become increasingly significant, and tension between differing ethnic or religious groups can easily flare into violence.

Since the North's own rural communities and local economies are being ripped apart by many of the same destructive forces at work in the South, it should be no surprise that the effects are similar even here. Christian fundamentalism, for example, has taken root in the rural heartland of the U.S., as have increasing levels of hostility toward immigrants, African-Americans, Jews, and other ethnic minorities. And the domestic terrorist attack on Oklahoma City in 1996 ultimately sprang from the same source as the attack on New York and Washington.

Despite the clear connection between the spread of the global monoculture and ethnic conflict, many in the West place responsibility at the feet of tradition rather than modernity, blaming “ancient hatreds” that have

smouldered beneath the surface for centuries. Certainly ethnic friction is a phenomenon that predates colonialism and modernisation. But after a quarter-century of firsthand experience on the Indian subcontinent, I am convinced that “development” and its modern incarnation “globalization” not only exacerbate existing tensions but in many cases actually create them. They break down human-scale structures, destroy bonds of reciprocity and mutual dependence, and pressure the young to substitute their own culture and values with the artificial values of advertising and the media. In effect this means rejecting one's own identity, rejecting one's self. In the case of Ladakh it is clear that “ancient hatreds” never existed, and cannot account for the sudden appearance of violence.

Stopping the Violence

If we wish to prevent the spread of ethnic and religious violence, fanaticism, and terror, the first place to start is by reversing the policies that now promote growth-at-any-cost development. Today “free trade” treaties, in the name of globalization, are pressuring governments to invest in ever larger-scale infrastructures and to subsidize giant mobile corporations to the detriment of millions of smaller local and national enterprises.

The attempt to create a global monoculture in the image of the West has proven disastrous on many counts, none more important than the violence it does to cultures that must be pulled apart to accommodate the process. When that violence spins out of control, finally reaching us in the West as it did on September 11, it should remind us of the heavy cost of levelling the world's diverse multitude of social and economic systems, many of them much better at sustainably meeting people's needs than the system that aims to replace it.

Until relatively recently, those diverse cultures were a product of a

(continued)

dialogue between humans and a particular place, growing and evolving from the “bottom up” in response to local conditions. Though cultures have always absorbed and responded to outside influences like trade, what has happened since the end of World War II is something new. Today, speculative investment and transnational corporations are transforming every aspect of life—people’s language, their music, their buildings, their agriculture, the way they see the world. That “top down” form of cultural change works against diversity, against the very fabric of life.

In any case, the Western model that is being pushed on the world is not replicable. The one-eyed economists who look at electronic signals to tell them whether economies are “healthy” or “growing fast enough” never do the arithmetic needed to see if the earth has enough resources for their abstract models to work. It is little more than a cruel hoax to promise the poor of the world that “development” and “free trade” will enable them to live like Americans or Europeans, who consume ten times their fair share of resources. The American Dream is a physical impossibility. No wonder then that increased poverty and breakdown leads to rising resentment of Westerners—particularly Americans, who are seen as the main proponents and beneficiaries of the global economy.

It is vital that we in the West shift to a decentralized, less resource-intensive economic model immediately. But equally urgent and easier to implement is a shift in “development” policies for the less industrialized, less oil-dependent South. This means looking critically even at those well-meaning proposals for further “aid” to the South to alleviate poverty (a presumed cause of terrorism). The elimination of

poverty is certainly a worthy goal, but our current “aid” actually creates more real poverty while tying people more tightly to a global economy over which they have no control. It undermines the ability of communities and whole nations to produce for their own needs, maintain their own culture, and determine their own future. It cannot prevent either poverty or terrorism. Like further trade deregulation or globalization—also claimed by some to be the solution to terrorism—most development aid primarily enables global corporations to exploit labour, resources, and markets worldwide.

Would a shift in policy—away from the costly effort to create a global consumer monoculture, toward support for diversity through stronger local and regional economies—help reduce fundamentalism, ethnic conflict, and terrorism? Our experiences in Ladakh show that ethnic tensions can diminish when people are able to maintain respect for their own culture and economy. This has been among the goals of many years work in Ladakh by ISEC and its predecessor, the Ladakh Project. Those efforts have aimed at deglamorizing the consumer culture by painting a fuller picture of modern urban life. This includes information about the serious problems of crime, unemployment, loneliness, and alienation in the West. It also describes the various movements that seek to strengthen community, regenerate healthier agriculture, and foster a deeper connection to the living world. All of this in turn has helped to reinstate respect for Ladakh’s culture.

Paradoxically, these efforts have involved a closer connection between Ladakhis and Westerners: we have sponsored Ladakhis to come on Reality Tours to the West, while enabling Westerners to experience tra-

ditional village life through our Farm Project in Ladakh. The interest and involvement of these Westerners in farming, in turn, is helping to restore Ladakhi self-respect.

Maintaining cultural diversity means decentralizing development to adapt it to local conditions. In Ladakh the introduction of simple technologies that make use of locally available, renewable energy—solar, wind, and water power—limit the need to sacrifice local independence for an improved material standard of living. And giving voice to women—the keepers of tradition—through the formation of an indigenous Women’s Alliance, which has now become the most powerful movement in Ladakh, has strengthened Ladakh’s spiritual and ecological roots.

Reclaiming the Future

These efforts have contributed to a growing sense that Ladakh’s future should be in the hands of the Ladakhis themselves, helping to revitalise both cultural and individual self-esteem. This change is apparent even among young Ladakhis, the most vulnerable to the psychological impact of “development.” Today, tensions between Buddhists and Muslims have subsided and religious fundamentalism has ebbed. The likelihood of civil war or “ethnic cleansing” in Ladakh appears remote, and the future looks peaceful.

Our political leaders need to recognize that smart bombs and cruise missiles can only breed further desperation and fanaticism among people who already feel betrayed and disenfranchised. Instead, if we shift our economic policies to support local and national economies rather than subsidizing global trade and speculation, maybe the “next” wave of terrorism can be avoided.