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**Clinton in Barong: Reflections on Culture,
Nationalism and Globalization in a Time of APEC**

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Clinton in Barong: Reflections on Culture, Nationalism and Globalization in a Time of APEC

Michael L. Tan*

How does one relate APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) to culture? Neither flora nor fauna; neither human nor machine, APEC seems to be, for want of a better metaphor, an economic animal, and we have been told, constantly, that economics has nothing to do with culture.

Yet, the debates around APEC do impinge around issues of nationalism and culture. The task, then, of this paper, is to try to move away from formalist definitions of economics and economic systems and to consider the possibilities of looking into economics as culture, or, perhaps even more radically, culture as economy and economics.

I write using perspectives drawn from economic anthropology, which views economics as being embedded in society and culture. This is not meant as treatise in political economy, which would emphasize social relations that develop in the context of economic activities. My focus is on APEC as a transnational body formed out of divergent economic interests and to look at how these dynamics translate into cultural expressions, mainly globalism and nationalism.

As the title suggests, this paper consists of reflections. I will offer you no formulas, no questions, no answers. Let's consider this a preliminary exercise, an exploration of possibilities.

Deconstructing APEC

It would be useful if we first understood how APEC came about: how it was conceived, birthed, nurtured. To do this, I draw largely from the work of the Manila People's Forum on APEC (Bello and Chavez-Malaluan, 1996), which presents a most comprehensive account tracing APEC's evolution. Reviewing APEC's evolution allows us to identify the major stakeholders here and, by extension, the dynamics involved.

It was the Japanese who first proposed a forum for technical cooperation on economic issues in the late 1980s, an attempt to bring the United States' gaze back to Asia. Like a spurned lover, Asians were worried about the United States' focus on Europe. The Cold War was ending and the European Community was shaping up.

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Australia, ever so enthusiastic in trying to become part of Asia, took up the Japanese challenge and went beyond technical cooperation to propose a free trade area. APEC was born in 1989 in Canberra and nurtured through a panel of Eminent Persons' Group of free-trade advocates. The EPG crafted a vision of a "community of free-trading nations" and brought this to the first APEC summit in 1993, held in Blake Island, Seattle. It was not a shared vision. Malaysia's Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir boycotted the first APEC Summit, ever cautious of Canberra and Washington's interference.

But the second APEC summit held in Bogor in 1994 found more a more hospitable environment for the idea of a free-trade zone, with a 2020 Plan calling for trade barriers to be torn down by that year. And while the Plan drew on medical metaphors of perfect vision, it was still clearly vision that remained blurred and unfocused. More importantly, it was a vision that drew opposition from various sectors: Malaysia's Mahathir; the Japanese government leery of American-Australian partnership, and nationalists within the different governments including that of the APEC summit host country itself, Indonesia.

Japan had its chance to attempt to refocus when it hosted the next APEC summit in 1995 with Yohei Kono, the Foreign Minister, drawing attention to APEC's three "equally important pillars": trade liberalization, trade facilitation and economic cooperation.

It would be tedious to go into all the other developments, including the United States' displeasure with Japan's challenging of the Bogor vision. The Philippines lived up to its reputation of being the United States' client state when it hosted the 1996 APEC summit, providing another hospitable environment for discussions of free trade. By 1997, however, issues of free trade took a backseat to the Asian financial crisis, with the lackluster APEC meeting in Vancouver rhetorical recognition of the crisis and the need for bail-out plans. The theme of free trade remained an important backdrop, with the implicit message that free trade remained Asia's (if not the world's) hope for the future.

This brief sociohistorical review shows then that APEC is itself a product of a particular historical segment. I use the term "segment" rather than "epoch," mindful that there is an even larger backdrop to APEC. I refer here to the specific character of "globalization" in the post World War II era, one which needs to be broken down into several segments. The current one dates from the 1980s, very much linked to the so-called fall of socialism. The end of the Cold War actually made life more complicated as old dichotomies of East and West, of "democracy" and "communism", fell apart. APEC's turbulent history reflects this new and complex realpolitik, and poses new challenges for social, political and cultural analysis.

APEC and the Ideology of Globalization

We can now move then to the main questions I will address in this paper: does APEC represent globalization and if it does, are we witnessing a case of economic globalization giving rise to cultural globalization?

To answer these questions, let us first look at some of the numbers that are touted in relation to APEC. An advertising supplement in Far Eastern Economic Review's November 27, 1997 issue to mark APEC's Vancouver summit gives some statistics. APEC is 18 nations around the Pacific lake, with about 40 percent of the world's population and with activities that produce more than half of the world's Gross Domestic Product.

It is interesting that APEC would have an advertising supplement – five full pages – in a leading Asian economic magazine. After all, APEC is not a direct producer or distributor of goods. The advertising is there because APEC needs “to be.” The blurbs for APEC declare its potentials, of a new global economic order, capitalism triumphant, linking the world together and ushering in a new millenium of peace and prosperity. The advertising supplement is in fact entitled “Forum for the Future”.

How does culture fit in? I will repeat that APEC is a proclamation of possibilities. The very vision of free-trade remains challenged but here we find an instance where the cultural sphere precedes the economic. The images of APEC are starkly ideological, obstinate in projecting a particular worldview. The Far Eastern Economic Review supplement notes, almost in passing, that there is a financial crisis in Southeast Asia, but goes on to say that the Vancouver meetings are there “to digest recent eye-catching progress.” The worldview is of global cooperation and inevitable progress. This theme of progress permeates through all of APEC's history. Think now of the Philippine government's propaganda spiels in 1996, including the children's chorus singing an ode of praise to how APEC will bring progress to the country.

But let us move away now from this theme of progress and evoke other images. Think, now, of the hastily constructed villas and roads leading to the villas in Subic for the world's leaders. Do not think yet of Clinton, only of a row of men, note men, standing side by side like fraternity brods posing for a homecoming.

Think of the preparations for the Vancouver summit in 1997, somewhat muted as Asia's tigers turn into cubs. Think of the Newsweek cover declaring Vancouver as the new capital of Asia. Think of media coverage, of Clinton assuring the world all's well... by going off to golf.

APEC's representation of globalism is ideological in the way it obscures many other images. Its press releases have a limited time frame, never mentioning the many currents that have in fact linked peoples and communities for many centuries. We forget the migrations – more than 40,000 years ago -- from northern Asia, across the Bering Straits, into the Americas: the First Nations of Canada; the native American Indians of the United States; the Mayans of central America; the Incas of south America and the many other groups, now called indigenous, that first colonized the other side of the Pacific. Through the centuries, each group developed its own identity, self-subsistent, sometimes even growing into empires.

Ironically, it was another age of colonialism -- much more rapid, much more violent -- that restored the linkages around this Pacific rim. Spanish colonialism and Acapulco trade, for example, created channels for a massive exchange of ideas,

material culture and even of genes across three continents: Europe, central America, and Asia. Three years ago, attending a conference in Brazil, I met a Cuban physician who was excited about meeting a Filipino. It turned out his grandmother had been a Filipina. No one knows how she got to Cuba, but everyone was certain she was from that other remote part of the Spanish empire, one which was soon to be ceded to the United States together with Puerto Rica and Cuba, marking the 20th century's first major colonial foray and the emergence of the United States as an imperial power.

In this the last decade of the 20th century, APEC seems almost inevitable, a convergence of ASEAN and of NAFTA, a consolidation of the New Economic Order. For all intents and purposes, the consolidation is presumed to be total. . . and efficient. It assures you that the McDonald's hamburger you eat in Manila, with a little variation, will be served with the same standards as it would be in Washington, D.C. It assures you that you are now truly a global citizen, the Nike you wear assembled from components and labor of at least 10 different countries around the Pacific lake and beyond.

The consolidation is presumed because it is often most visible in aspects of culture such as cuisine, music, cinema, fashion and the use of English as lingua franca. It is important that this image of globalization be propagated for it becomes self-fulfilling, APEC representing a world where borders and barriers are torn down, a world united by cosmopolitan preferences.

It is interesting how in fact APEC tries to represent itself as non-ideological, epitomizing the end of the Age of Ideology. The Far Eastern Economic Review supplement notes, significantly, that the 1993 Seattle APEC meeting "was the first face-to-face contact by U.S. and Chinese leaders after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989." That one phrase is actually multivocal: Tiananmen was a massacre, but that can be put aside now in an era of rapprochement, for after all, China has become one with the world in trade liberalization.

These images do not go unchallenged. It is this globalization, too, that is feared by many, sometimes even bringing together opponents with diverse ideologies who see globalization as an erosion of cherished values and traditions. Running through these fears, too, is that of a dominant West destroying "Asian values." The debates then are no longer those of economic and political ideologies but of culture. Yet, and this is an important point, political economy remains the arena in which these debates take place.

Globalization is Not Homogenization

We presume that there is a homogeneity in the dominant culture, particularly that of the United States, and that this dominance translates into total hegemony. We presume, too, that the dominated cultures offer no resistance. APEC reifies our fears of this global hegemony, of world tastes – and consumerism – carved out of offices in New York and Tokyo.

I concur with writers such as Arjun Appadurai (1991) who, several years ago, first described an emerging global ethnoscape, not so much based on cultural hegemony than on the complex consequences of globalization of capital and labor,

one that has led to numerous diasporas and deterritorialization. As Filipinos well know, this diaspora has been going on for many years, beginning with the migrations of Filipino farm laborers to Hawaii and the west coast of the United States early in this century and moving through several waves into the 1970s when the Marcos dictatorship encouraged massive deployment of contractual overseas labor to bring in foreign exchange. In the 1980s and 1990s, much of this labor migration has in fact taken place within the region, to countries like Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.

All this happened long before APEC. Curiously, it is unlikely that APEC will facilitate more of such labor movements. Unlike the European Community's provisions for free movement of labor, protectionism is likely to be more of the norm in APEC when it comes to movement of people. In fact, we already find efforts from neighboring countries like Malaysia to curtail this movement of labor. Yet, we find too that in spite of efforts to regulate migratory movements, these continue unabated, spurred by economic hardship as well as political conflicts. Increasingly, we find – with or without APEC – hordes of the global homeless, living in inhospitable countries for years at a time and returning “home” only for a brief respite.

Amid this deterritorialization we will find the creation of new boundaries, of new localities. Look hard enough and you will find, even within the member nations of APEC, cultural loci in various stages of development, carrying old and new forms of nationalism, whether among the undocumented populations of Filipinos and Indonesians in Malaysia, or the Burmese refugee populations in Thailand. The reluctant host countries are aware of these new loci, and the inherent dangers. Away from home, nationhood becomes an even more powerful concept.

Add, too, the dimension of time here as we examine nascent nationalisms. What happens when the diasporas come to span several generations? Already, we see Asian-Americans emerging as potent political forces, the term of course itself being deceptive for “Asian-American” is as yet an artificial construct. Chinese-American yes, as with Filipino- and Korean- and Vietnamese-American. Time is essential here for even when we speak of Japanese-American, there are distinctions made of the first generation, now all nearly deceased, from the second, third and even fourth generations.

Closer to home, we have seen how the Chinese diaspora – turn-of-the-century migration from the southern Chinese provinces of Fujian and Canton to several countries in southeast Asia -- has become a vital factor in shaping the region's political economy as well as culture.

It is curious, too, how the movements are not unidirectional. We find young Filipino-Americans – quite often born and raised in the United States and unable to speak Filipino – coming back to look for their roots. Young Vietnamese-Americans, too, have gone home to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, sometimes risking the wrath of their staunchly anti-communist parents who had left Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s. And then, too, there are the businessmen of Chinese ethnicity – now based in southeast Asian countries – who return to China to invest, hailed as “patriotic overseas Hua,” Hua referring to a Chinese identity. This massive inflow of capital back into China,

including large amounts from the “renegade” province of Taiwan, would not have been possible without the current wave of globalization.

The point here is that globalization is not just a movement toward homogenization. In fact, we may find greater differentiation and fragmentation and that this differentiation does not follow the traditional distinctions between North and South or East and West. I have also tried to emphasize that globalization is not new. The temporal dimension needs to be examined, both for past trends, as well as those currently in formation.

Neocolonialism Transformed

Does all this mean then that we have indeed come into a post-colonial age and that perhaps talk of “neocolonialism” has become archaic? No. In fact, I would argue that neocolonialism may have even picked up second wind. The imperial forays in the form of military invasions may have ended (I say may, because I seriously doubt that we have seen the end of that form of imperialism) but certainly, there is reason to be concerned with the continuing skewed power relationships.

Recall, again, the image of APEC’s leaders standing in a row. It is not accidental that Clinton should so dwarf the other leaders: it is not just a matter of genetics here. There is a historical background that makes Clinton much taller than he really is, so that even Japan’s Prime Minister, despite representing one of the world’s most powerful economies, remains dwarfed. These skewed power relationships can and do distort cultures, destroying and reconfiguring identities. There is reason for fear, especially when the distortion comes from the strange alchemy of politics and economics.

Amid the images of prosperity and Asian versions of Horatio Alger-type success stories, the cold statistics still point to worsening economic inequality within and among nations. The Economist (September 29, 1997) cites UNCTAD figures showing that in 1965, the average income per capita of the world’s wealthiest 20 percent was 31 times that of the income of the poorest 20 percent. By 1990, the wealthiest quintile’s income was 60 times that of the poorest.

They are cold statistics indeed. But they do not quite capture the tensions that come with the inequality, and the continuing dynamics of resistance, one which draws from an historical context. This is where, once again, cultures become powerful, where nationalisms thrive as expressions of resistance. And in line with this historical perspective, it is important to recognize that nationalisms take on and will develop along many new axes in the years to come, including but not limited to ethnicity and religion.

I must qualify that I do not agree with Samuel Huntington’s thesis (1996) of “a clash of civilizations” mainly because he speaks of power blocs, playing on the old divisions of East and West. I am more inclined to suggest that the “clashes” will be less global than regional or national. The loci that I referred to earlier rise out of domestic tensions. No doubt, global developments will be significant but the crucial developments will be in the many loci of resurgent nationalisms. To elaborate, I feel that the fears of global Islamic fundamentalism are exaggerated but at the same time, I

recognize that the currents of this fundamentalism will find expression in many local movements that weave in religious and political sentiments.

Nationalism along lines of political, particularly class, ideology will subside, substituted by the rhetoric of these two new dominant axes. I am not saying that political ideologies are dead: they will, quite simply, be assumed into new forms.

Let me quickly qualify, too, that new will often invoke the old. As a journal article title went about the Zapatista rebel movement in Chiapas, Mexico, we will see an invoking of the ancient future (Gossen 1996). I mention the Zapatista movement to remind readers that APEC is not just about Asia but about the other side of the Pacific as well and the developments in Mexico offer us rich insights into the processes of globalization. The Zapatista movement reincarnates ancient Mayan culture to rebel against a political order seen as subservient to the interests of imperial globalism. Note again that such forms of nativism and revivalism are not new: we find them repeated over and over again in the histories of the APEC countries. Often dismissed as local revolts, they in fact move into the collective consciousness of nations, offering a counterpoint to dominant ideologies that equate modernization with progress.

The importance of recognizing new cultures, new localities, new nationalisms, comes with the fact that these new configurations carry powerful messages, that identifies death with integration into the New Global Economic Order and survival with the carving out of new niches from an ancient past. The message, too, is that resistance allowed us to survive, and resistance will continue to allow us regions of refuge (Aguirre-Beltran 1979) where, as in nature, survival hinges on the maintenance of, and growth of diversity.

Global Babbling

It is not “narrow nationalism” or xenophobia that we speak of here, but of a pragmatic, almost hard-nosed, perspective that takes on a more critical perspective, that challenges the old axiom of “west is best.” It is particularly intriguing to look at these signs of resistance in the flow of information.

As many social analysts have pointed out, one distinctive characteristic of the current wave of globalism is that we see now only the transnational flow of goods – one certainly of an unprecedented scale given trade liberalization – but also of information. This transnational flow of information is a vital component of trade liberalization, with one of the highlights of the Manila APEC meeting being the lifting of tariffs on information technologies.

No doubt, this explosion of information takes place in the context of skewed power relations but it is useful to look at how, exactly, the information flows mirror changing relations. Video Valium, a.k.a. CNN, batters us with Ted Turner’s interpretations of the world, of Princess Diane and of Mother Teresa, interspersed with ads from the humanitarian agency CARE. A voice drones about the “proportion of humanity living in absolute poverty has declined” through the years, followed by the deceptive “Where there’s hope, there’s CARE”. I mention the CARE ads because it captures many aspects of global information flow: an optimistic, almost naïve and

some would say deceptive view of global poverty, including their own role as humanitarian aid agencies in reducing that poverty. But CNN and CARE are only part of the picture, products of historical realities. One could argue that Ted Turner himself is a product of a particular historical milieu, again marked by many juxtaposed images: Vietnam; China's opening to the world; Jane Fonda.

It is a milieu marked and shaped by what Featherstone (1995:13) calls global babbling. Featherstone points out that this is no longer a simple matter of bringing in images of "the distant exotic" into the homes of Americans or Europeans. Rather, we see now a global broadcasting of the "discordant clashing of cultures", where the "natives" can now babble back to the masters, challenging the "civilizational mission" of the "west." Perhaps more importantly, the "west" is now in the position where it knows it needs to listen, even if it continues to do so in a condescending and patronizing way. So when Ted Turner gives special coverage to the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development or the Beijing Women's Conference, or to the Kyoto meeting on global warming, that is well and good to bring to the fore issues such as reproductive rights and environmental protection. The messages often become diluted and there is always the risk of co-optation, but otherwise muted voices are now given forum that goes beyond tokenism.

The Philippines perhaps offers us an interesting case study in how we grapple with dilemmas, with conundrums in this information age. We want so much to be western, and are in fact considered by the rest of Asia – sometimes with scorn – as the most westernized; yet we are known too, for our nationalism, for a political culture considered radical by most standards, and that one forged out of a resistance to a dictatorship that was closely tied to the United States.

For all the talk about our being western, I know from working in the area of health that so much waste goes on precisely because the "west" is in fact a distant entity, and that messages developed from western tutelage ring hollow. From AIDS to anti-smoking campaigns, our NGOs and ad agencies' aping of the west have failed dismally. I would extend this to many other spheres of our cultural life and suggest that even those slick and expensive ads probably do little to shape consumer patterns. Quite simply, local cultures flourish in spite of globalization.

I would in fact even say that the globalization of "taste" in the Philippines has not happened at all. I thought about this watching Filipino seafarers shopping in the duty-free shops of Amsterdam, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok. I would like to do more research here but tentatively, I would suggest that the buying patterns build not so much from the slick advertising of Madison Avenue than from Filipino social networks and "traditions." I remain amused, for example, by the number of times I have heard Filipino seafarers asking sales clerks in Amsterdam's airport if they have Brut cologne (and, occasionally, Champion cigarettes) while women overseas workers ask for Avon cosmetics. I am sure the same ritual is repeated over and over again, the Filipino puzzled that such a sophisticated airport would not carry such well known brands that used to be considered prestige items in the Philippines.

In fact, the preferred brands endure time: Marlboro cigarettes, for example and Johnny Walkers and Avon cosmetics, not the other brand names promoted in postmodern hyped ads. Consumption may have been globalized but it is spurred and

shaped by local culture or, in the case of Avon, by a local sales force. The ads that sell products are locally produced ones featuring local celebrities. “Taste” is contextualized even within countries, embedded as it is in local social organization. Note, for example, how the shopping expeditions of our overseas workers are often guided by an older dominant male who shape the younger males’ future buying habits. Note, too, how advertising is segmented at another level even within countries thus allowing popular Filipino movie actor Richard Gomez to endorse, on one hand, a multinational product, Squibb Vitamin E, for the stress- and cholesterol-battered hearts of Filipino executives and, on the other, a local product, Mark Cigarettes, to the Filipino masses, followed quickly by warnings inspired by American legislation: Warning: Cigarette Smoking Can be Dangerous to Your Health.

In fretting over global consumerism, we forget too the other currents of localization and globalization that have tremendous impact on people’s lives. I refer, for example, to the clandestine drug trade that is part of globalization as well: the countries around the Golden Triangle in Asia, as well as Central American countries that are now becoming transshipment points as well as markets for the South American drug trade. These developments form counterpoints in the processes of globalization, often becoming overarching factors that shape regional geopolitics and political culture, from an expansion of Interpol to the globalization of political corruption.

Nationalism as Difference

Culture, quite simply, is too complex to reduce to a matter of APEC and slick advertisements. In that same vein, I would urge caution when we think of how much weight our talking back does. Let us return to the APEC leaders standing in a row, Clinton towering. Zoom in now and see him in that elegant barong, crafted out of Philippine fabrics and silk. Does that make him more Third World, more Filipino?

I doubt it. His wearing batik the previous year did not make him more Third World, more Indonesian. But the natives – that’s us – need to be entertained. These more subtle nuances in the manipulation of images is where I would urge closer attention, particularly in the way the images try to blur the differences, projecting the image of global citizens, of universal man (not even, incidentally, of universal woman).

Yet, again, it is not all domination and hegemony and manipulation. The market has its own logic, if you can pardon my lapse with reification here. So while the market tries to universalize taste, the tearing down of borders actually creates new problems.

Let me be more specific. Our long standing love hate relationship with the United States is, for example, sustained because our social networks hold us hostage: the relative living in California, at once representing the best and the worst of another world. What happens, though, when PX disappears, when the much-coveted goods suddenly become freely available? What happens when goods like Brut cologne and Champion cigarettes, are no longer contraband or “blue seal”?

Today, “Stateside” goods are sold in government-controlled Duty Free Shops, as well as in stores with Amerasian clerks to give you the feel that you’re in the United States. Enter one of the stores and indeed you are transported to the United States... but the irony is, that just like in the United States, some of the Stateside goods too, are made in China.

We teach in introductory anthropology courses that culture consists of what is shared, but we forget that culture exists in situ, in difference, sometimes in opposition to. We are what they are not. When the differences disappear, the rationale for culture weakens and we search for new grounds to distinguish ourselves. What happens when PX, that icon of privilege associated with American military bases, comes to Megamall? What happens when Clinton wears the barong?

It should not be surprising that our nationalism draws, increasingly, from our indigenous Filipinos. Despite the tendency toward crass commercialism, the use of “indigenous” fabrics and designs for our clothes and the rise of ethnorock do reflect the new processes of localization amid globalization. Without cultural anchors – the moorings provided by ideology suddenly cut off -- we lowland Filipinos turn now to “the other,” to the “natives,” realizing that they have culture and that they are native because they resisted the encroachments of the western colonizers. I see this not just in the Philippines but in countries as diverse as Thailand, China, Canada, Mexico.

I will warn here that such trends can sometimes be quite reactionary, especially when they invoke mythical and often romanticized or even fictitious values from the past. Let us return to the issue of Far Eastern Economic Review that I mentioned earlier in this article. Quite coincidentally, that issue of the Review (November 27, 1997) also had an advertising supplement on the Philippine Centennial. The supplement describes the proposed Philippine National Centennial Exposition or Expo Pilipino. Among its features will be the “Ancient Island” which supposedly brings together “highlights of the Philippines’ precolonial history and tradition seen through the architecture and lifestyle of the four major indigenous tribes: the Sama, Maranao, Ifugao and the Tiboli”.

Most significantly, the advertising supplement offers this: “Genuine tribesmen will be living in specially built tribal villages, and visitors will be able to experience ritual dances, taste the food and see traditional arts and crafts.” The plan brings back memories of the St. Louis Exposition in the United States at the turn of the century, where Filipino tribespeople were put on display, a representation of the Filipino as primitive and backward and therefore justifying the United States’ occupation of the Philippines. Expo Pilipino, too, has lowland Filipinos representing the tribal: ancient and timeless and “genuine”, there to establish some kind of continuity with another section of the exposition, the Global City, which in the advertising supplement can only dangle, at this point, “a dynamic and unique multimedia visitor experience” .

Globalization is about power relations among countries as well as within countries. Expo Pilipino only represents one aspect of the tensions between globalization and localization. There are other currents, of globalization sometimes leading to a more cosmopolitan resistance that draws from numerous and diverse local sources. Curiously, APEC just might exert its “globalizing” influence through a fostering of the encounters of nationalisms as, for example, in the rediscovery, by

Latin America, of Filipinos, their Latin brothers and sisters who ended up on the wrong side of the Pacific. Whenever I do encounter Latin Americans, I find them enthralled by our experiences under Marcos, under Cory, and under Fidel. It is not just a fascination with their Hispanic names but by what they represent of a distant, yet kindred, culture. . .as well as this love-hate relationship with the Gringo culture to their north.

The ties will not just be of estranged Latins. We have seen that APEC has had a turbulent history, with strong opposition raised against globalization, most visibly from Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and more discreetly from ministers in countries such as Indonesia. These expressions of nationalism take many forms, spilling into other playing fields as in Prime Minister Mahathir's frequent tirades against neocolonialism and the invoking of "Asian values" as a key to survival.

The old ideological dichotomies of good and evil fall apart now. How does one "read", for example, a half page ad appearing in the International Herald Tribune, one of global capital's newspapers, with bold letters, "Free Muchtar Pakpahan!?" The political ad appeared on November 25, 1997, timed right before the beginning of the APEC Vancouver summit. The ad was sponsored by groups as diverse as Amnesty International of Canada as well as Dutch, French, Belgian and Canadian trade unions. To use a term that seems to have become unfashionable, there is a pervasive dialectic in the ways cultures develop, and this dialectic will become all the more dramatic, rather than subdued, in this era of globalization.

APEC is of concern because in so many ways it epitomizes globalization. But we should not forget that while the image-makers have decentered the world, APEC still does not include half of the world: Europe, Africa, many parts of Latin America, and the former Soviet Union. In fact, APEC is neither Pacific – it excludes many South Pacific nations – nor Asian, in its exclusion of the entire subcontinent of South Asia. APEC's importance comes not just with what it is attempting to become, but also in what it is not. The Pacific Lake is not, and will never be, the world.

For better or for worse, APEC is here to stay. APEC presents a case study of how human visions and fears are crystallized. It spurs us to reexamine the processes of acculturation, assimilation, syncretism. APEC is not just, as the Manila People's Forum on APEC declared in 1996, four adjectives in search of a noun. APEC is a construct, still unrooted in time and in space. It is therefore all the more intriguing in the way it moves us, powerful in the way it is shaping economies, yet vulnerable in the way it is culturally reconfiguring, as well as in the ways it is being culturally reconfigured.

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