



Rethinking Marxism

A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society

ISSN: 0893-5696 (Print) 1475-8059 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrmx20>

Curators' Introduction

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To cite this article: Susan Jahoda & Grady Gerbracht (2003) Curators' Introduction, Rethinking Marxism, 15:3, 313-315, DOI: [10.1080/0893569032000131604](https://doi.org/10.1080/0893569032000131604)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0893569032000131604>



Published online: 04 Jun 2010.



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“The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries).”¹

—Arjun Appadurai

Curators' Introduction

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Until 1991, the Soviet bloc seemed to represent the last serious obstacle to the hegemony of neo-liberal capitalist democracies. With the dissolution of the USSR, its only viable competitor, the United States, as the single remaining super power, began expanding its influence, implementing an agenda that has been termed Empire.² Presuming a model of international relations based on notions of center and periphery, the U.S. assumed as its “duty” to dictate and manage the logic of the new global market and police this territory by strategies of “containment.” Since the end of World War II, Americans have worked to export their own brand of culture, politics, and economy, often with the assistance of political or commercial establishments. A perfect example is the Museum of Modern Art’s *Family of Man*³ exhibition, which traveled the globe promoting Western family values—with partial funding from the Central Intelligence Agency. Illusions of universality and global control were shattered near the turn of the century, however, as the West’s shortsighted worldview did not account for the perverse reiterations of its own cultural exports that returned to haunt it (universal human rights, democracy and technology, for example). Postcolonial thought, coupled with the end of the new economic boom and the events of September 11, 2001, triggered a shift in neo-liberal hegemonic practice. The Other, presumed to be elsewhere, was much closer than imagined.

Global Priority explores the development of various practices by which artists and curators are responding to the accelerating hybridization of identities in the context of dispersed international flows of economic and cultural values that characterize the past decade and the present historical moment. As such, it invites audiences to

1. Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Public Culture*, Volume 2 (Spring 1990).
2. Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
3. *The Family of Man* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1955).

think about globalization in relation to multiple, scattered identities bound up with citizenship and locality. It also suggests an interrogation of hegemonic priorities in response to global economic and cultural dispersion. Projects in the exhibition include architecture, performance, photography, sculpture, video and web sites by an international group of individual artists and artists' collaboratives.

The title of the exhibition refers to one of the standard services of the U.S. Postal Service, which was for us emblematic of the United States' power to set the priorities of global management. It exports its goods, information, and values, assuming a universal culture in which the receiver and the sender share a common understanding. Once an envelope has left the reach of the U.S. Postal Service, however, there is no guarantee that it will reach its destination on time, or at all. Similarly, a subject being hailed may not recognize that he/she is being hailed, or may refuse to respond. Individuals or groups may refuse to respond due to the various possible identities that have been fostered by, and also emerged in resistance to, attempts at "global hegemony." A quick internet search for Global Priority via google.com turns up the Global Priority Network (GPNNet), which is designed to link local churches to the International Mission Board (IMB), whose imperative is to "give priority to the taking of the gospel to the ends of the earth." One wonders who is at the receiving end of this missionary imperative. Doesn't the very term "Global Priority" hegemonize the various meanings and goals that it could possibly purport to encompass?

As we write this essay, George W. Bush is on prime-time television, issuing a forty-eight hour ultimatum to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and his family to leave their country. He states that he knows this is being translated and directly addresses the Iraqi people, urging them, "Do not fight for a dying regime. Do not destroy oil wells." He assumes that the global audience receives his words in the same way that he intends them.

Musical Chairs: Multiple Positionalities and Collaborative Efforts

Today, one may find oneself a curator of one project and an artist in another, and sometimes both at the same time. These positionalities have more to do with the overall conceptual project than with individual authorship. It seems useful today, as it has for various historical avant-gardes, to work in shifting, collaborative constellations. However, there appears to be an increase in recent times in the complexity of those constellations—a hybridization of identities that responds to the flows of international economic and cultural values associated with globalization.

In 2002, we were invited by the editors of *RETHINKING MARXISM* to curate an exhibition that would coincide with the international conference "Marxism and the World Stage." Having collaborated previously on an exhibition titled *Back and Forth*⁴ (a series of projects involving commutes and itineraries, systematic travels, real and imagined, over distances great and small, relating to labor, tourism and exploration), we chose to investigate further a number of the ideas implicit in works from that exhibition. Collaborating as both artists and curators on *Global Priority*, we found

4. See www.de-tour.org/backandforth.

the opportunity to challenge each other while extending our studio practices by interacting with people working across a wide range of disciplines.

While preparing this exhibition, we requested a work from artist William Kentridge. In response, his assistant informed us that he was already participating in *Global Priority*. We were puzzled. Through e-mail correspondence we eventually discovered that an exhibition of the same name was already scheduled to open in New York in October 2002. We wrote to the curators, Gordon Knox and Heng-Gil Han, and in our discussions we determined that both exhibitions were approaching similar content, though from different perspectives. Opting for the possibilities of collaboration over competitive duplication, we launched a joint but separate venture: it was decided that the two *Global Priority* exhibitions would merge and travel the globe as one, continuing to re-invent itself in response to each local context. Future manifestations will continue to address symptoms of globalization and combine our emphasis on hybridization with Gordon and Heng-Gil's focus on social networks, translation, and mobility.

It is an ironic coincidence—and the happiest of circumstances—that a misunderstanding regarding the participation of a single artist in one exhibition could lead to such a productive collaboration, and it only re-affirms the relevance of the new, collaborative approaches to cultural production that we wish to articulate with this very exhibition.