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ABROAD

D.I.Y. Culture

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Berlin

IT wasn't so many years ago that Europeans loved to moan about American culture overrunning homegrown art forms. In the 1990s and early 2000s some in Europe were arguing for regulatory barriers to hold off the New World barbarians, particularly from Hollywood. In France, President Jacques Chirac's culture minister, Jacques Toubon, warned about how the United States entertainment industry was trying "to impose domination by any means," and Régis Debray, among other French intellectuals to hop on the same bandwagon, predicted that "the American empire will pass, like the others."

"Let's at least make sure," Mr. Debray continued, "it does not leave irreparable damage to our creative abilities behind it."

That was then. The other day President Nicolas Sarkozy was reiterating the virtues of what the French call "l'exception culturelle," a modern policy of government protection and promotion of French culture, particularly the film industry. Mr. Sarkozy's poll numbers have been plummeting, and l'exception culturelle feeds into his current strategy to identify himself with whatever, in the midst of an increasingly diversified, fractious and disapproving French society, French people say makes France French.

But Sarko l'Americain, as the French used to call him, is also the friendliest French president the United States has had in a while, and in America last month he stressed that rarely in history had "the community of views been so identical" between his country and the United States. Complaints about the American cultural juggernaut still arise across Europe, of course, but their intensity doesn't seem as fierce. Something has changed, and it's not just that Barack Obama has replaced George W. Bush or, in France's case, that the film industry is doing O.K.

It's a widening realization, I think, that globalism, beyond banking, climate change and warfare, has always been a dubious concept, a misleading catchall for how the world supposedly works, to which culture, in its increasing complexity, gives the lie.

The integration of markets and the Internet have certainly brought billions of people into closer contact. Everybody has access to the same American movies and music now, and not just American, also Indian, Romanian, South African and Chinese. But far from

succumbing to some devouring juggernaut, culture — and Europe, with its different communities and nations living cheek by jowl, is a Petri dish to prove the point — has only atomized lately as a consequence of the very same globalizing forces that purportedly threaten to homogenize everything.

That's been my own subject over here for the last couple of years, and will regularly be this column's. Nationalism, regionalism and tribalism are all on the rise. Societies are splitting even as they share more common goods and attributes than ever before. Culture is increasingly an instrument to divide and differentiate communities. And the leveling pressures of globalization have at the same time provided more and more people with the technological resources to decide for themselves, culturally speaking, who they are and how they choose to be known, seen, distinguished from others.

Culture means many things in this context, but at heart it is a suite of traits we inherit and also choose to disavow or to stress. It consists in part of the arts. It is something made and consumed, in socially revealing ways. When Mats Nilsson, a Swedish product-design strategist for Ikea, not long ago told The New York Times that he loves to browse for handmade baskets in Spain, bird cages in Portugal, brushes in Japan and hardware on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, he was creating his own cultural identity out of the bric-a-brac of consumer choices made available by the globalizing forces of economic integration. Bricolage, it's called. Anyone may now pick through the marketplace of global culture.

This may sound like the essence of globalization, but the fact that everybody from Yerevan to Brasilia, Jakarta to Jerusalem, knows songs by the Black Eyed Peas or wears New York Yankees caps doesn't mean that culture is the same everywhere.

The common denominator of popular culture — which these days encompasses so many things that you could even include all sorts of high culture — seems to have just intensified the need people now feel to distinguish themselves from it. And global technology has made this easier by providing countless individuals, microcultures and larger groups and movements with cheap and convenient means to preserve and disseminate themselves. Years ago a language like Cimbrian, a Bavarian dialect today preserved by just a few hundred speakers in northern Italy, would have been doomed to extinction; now Cimbrian speakers, according to a recent German newspaper article, turn out to be getting their own online newspaper and television show. The language is being sustained by the same global forces that might promise to doom it.

Partly the problem with globalization has always been that the term, culturally speaking, is so vague. In one respect, it's another word for empire, or at least its effects are as old as empire. What's new is the power available to wide swaths of the populace, thanks above all to cheap travel and the Web, to become actors in the production and dissemination of culture, not simply consumers. A generation or more ago, aside from what people did in their home or from what's roughly called folk or outsider art, culture was generally thought of as something handed down from on high, which the public received.

Today it's made and distributed in countless different ways, giving not just governments and institutions but nearly everyone with access to the Web the means to choose and shape

his or her own culture, identity, tribal fidelities — and then spread this culture, via Youtube or whatever else, among allies (and enemies) everywhere, a democratizing process. The downside of this democratization is how every political niche and fringe group has found a culture via the Web to reinforce its already narrow views, polarizing parts of society despite the widened horizon. Neo-Nazis across borders now bond around cultural artifacts available over the Internet. Democrats and Republicans move further apart, digesting news from their own cable network shows.

There are other consequences of this democratization. Generally speaking, culture operates within the mainstreams of power. The myth of an avant-garde serves the same market forces avant-gardism pretends to overthrow. Art may challenge authority; and popular culture (this includes clownish demagogues like Glenn Beck) sometimes makes trouble for those in charge, the way Thomas Nast's cartoons did for Boss Tweed in Tammany Hall. But art doesn't actually overthrow anything except itself, and never has, not in 19th-century France or 20th-century Russia or 21st-century China or Iran. Even when it manages to tilt popular thinking, it still ends up within the bounds of existing authority, and there has never been a true "outside" that really stayed outside: public consumption, by definition, adapts to the change, co-opts and normalizes all culture.

Instead culture (often unconsciously) identifies crucial ruptures, rifts, gaps and shifts in society. It is indispensable for our understanding of the mechanics of the world in this respect, pointing us toward those things around us that are unstable, changing, that shape how we live and how we treat one another. If we're alert to it, it helps reveal who we are to ourselves, often in ways we didn't realize in places we didn't necessarily think to look.

Shortly after I moved to Berlin from New York, for example, I noticed there were bookstores all over town. They were on nearly every other street in my neighborhood. There was one just below my bedroom window, next to the high-end pet-supply store, specializing in New Age and self-help literature, and there was another one, a biography bookstore, around the corner. Shakespeare & Company (Berlin's version) was beside the church square where the neighborhood children played when the weather was warm. And I began to stop into Marga Schoeller's bookshop at Savignyplatz, which has a nice English-language section, en route to the subway, where a large art bookstore sprawls below raised tracks.

Berliners looked nonplussed when I asked them to account for all the bookshops. Along with currywurst and nude saunas, bookstores have long been such a banal fact of life here, as they are across Germany, that only an outsider might bother to think their number was remarkable. The proliferation turned out to derive from a very conscious decision after the war to restore civilization in West Germany by supporting a kind of ecosystem of small publishers and small bookstores to which, in certain small towns, trucks that delivered books to the bookstores overnight also delivered drugs to the drugstores: drugs for the body, books for the mind, a metaphor of recovery.

This was more than just a system of distribution and sales; it was a cultural as well as economic affair. It influenced civic life and social relations in ways that browsing books on Amazon or Google can't. So what was to me as a clueless foreigner an urban curiosity,

noticeable just because it wasn't my usual experience — it was for me a cultural rift or rupture — ended up suggesting some larger truth about the country's history and ambition. Culture is something we propagate but also something naturally there, existing in and around us, which makes us who we are but which may rise to the level of our consciousness only when one of those ruptures or rifts appear — when some little psychic clash happens between it and our more or less unconscious sense of the everyday world.

I also went to Gaza before the last Israeli incursion a couple of years ago. Naturally, the stories that tend to come from there revolve around one crisis or another: the rocket attacks, the border closures, clashes between Hamas and Fatah, Hamas and Israel. But what was life like, I wondered, under Hamas? What were the limits to Gazans' freedom? The effects of isolation? How did Gazans see themselves in relation to everybody else?

These seemed to me cultural questions. The people I spoke with there said that culture was not just an escape for them from the everyday hardships from deprivation and a repressive regime, but that it was essential to survival, a lifeline, their steady connection to an outside world, a glimpse of what was beyond the conflict.

It represented normalcy, in other words, a precious commodity in that place. In the garden of a restaurant in Gaza City where a sign on the front door said, "No weapons, please," I joined families of Gazans one evening watching episodes of "Friends" and a wildly popular Turkish soap opera, "Noor," on a big screen. And in a video store nearby I thumbed through shelves of pirated Jennifer Lopez CDs and copies of "You Don't Mess With the Zohan," Adam Sandler's comedy about a Mossad agent-turned-hairdresser in a New York City salon run by a Palestinian woman. There were also the predictable audiotapes extolling Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Some Gazans spoke sadly and nervously about their fears that extremists within Hamas, whose factional split was revealed by this cultural divide, had begun to crack down on local theaters and on art and the Web in Gaza, even as these same people spoke about culture being a fragile but essential link to the West. Via satellite dishes and the Internet, the West meant something to them other than guns and territory: culture was a potential bond, they suggested, through which some dialogue might yet arise.

Not incidentally, Gazans, like that Swedish Ikea designer, made their own culture from the bricolage of global choices. I thought most of what passed for art in Gaza wasn't very good, truth be told, but quality seemed beside the point. We miss much about how culture works today — including how what might be called local standards of quality vie with the global aesthetic of sensationalism and fashion — if we stick only to seeing it as critics and consumers through our own aesthetic lens.

Hollywood and Broadway, the major museums and art fairs and biennials and galleries, buildings designed by celebrity architects and the music business are all the traditional focus of big media, and they tell us a lot about ourselves. They constitute our cultural firmament, the constellation of our stars. But scientists say most of the universe is composed not of stars but of dark matter. It is the powerful but invisible force that exists everywhere and requires some leap of imagination on our part, some effort, to identify.

Most culture is dark matter.

Put another way, whether in Berlin or Gaza or New York City, there's a universe of life and death affairs beyond globalism. And culture is our window onto it.