

# the nation as babbitt: how countries conform

*Countries vary greatly in resources and culture, but many pressures force them to adopt common principles to maintain good standing in the global community. This imitation often reeks of hypocrisy, but real practices, as well as appearances, are changing as a result.*



Photo by Mike DuBose, United Methodist News Service

**Delegates from around the world attend the 1996 General Conference of the United Methodist Church. An extensive network of cross-national, nongovernmental associations shape modern conceptions of the proper nation.**

In a rural school in sub-Saharan Africa, a language teacher was giving a lesson. She was the only teacher present. It was Friday, and none of the other teachers had bothered to come. The instructor was only semi-literate, and not a single one of her sixth-graders could read the simplest sentence. The Ministry of Education official accompanying us seemed not to notice. He turned to me and said improved textbooks and instruction in science were really needed: "After all, our children have to compete in the global economy."

This excerpt from my field research in sub-Saharan Africa illustrates the process of globalization that is homogenizing countries of enormously different cultural traditions and wealth. Rather than responding to obvious problems in the local situation, the Ministry official was thinking in terms of world educational fashions. A science education reform move-

ment developed in America in the 1980s as a response, however unrealistic, to the threat of Japanese competition. It spread around the world as a wave and had recently come to Africa, running through Ministerial policies as an eagerly adopted fashion, quite out of touch with local problems and realities. National policies vary much less than common sense—or many experts—would predict, and this is but one example. The leading nations, global institutions like the World Bank, and social movements like human rights campaigns encourage standardized social arrangements around the world. Although there is no world government, national governments turn out nonetheless to be conformists. Their official conformity is often superficial and hypocritical, with much unimplemented policy. But sometimes their practices imitate world models, whether or not the official policies are in place. A global culture of national policy is emerging, with both positive and negative consequences.

*Contexts*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, pp. 42-47, ISSN 1536-5042 electronic ISSN 153-6052 © 2004 by the American Sociological Association. All rights reserved. Send requests for permission to reprint to: Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center Street, Suite 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.

This global homogeneity has a historical parallel: the cultural conformity that arose in American society when it had a weak national government. Many critics predicted that such a society would collapse into anarchy. In his 1832 book *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that American society cohered, despite weak central authority, because informal associations and democratic loyalty made Americans at least pretend to be alike and to posture as good, participatory citizens. Tocqueville saw public virtues in this, as did later American sociologists who stressed the importance of informal group pressure in controlling individuals. Political scientist Robert Putnam, in his recent book *Bowling Alone*, takes the same view and laments what he sees as the decline since the 1950s in Americans' involvement in such civic associations.

American writers such as H.L. Mencken, Mark Twain, and Sinclair Lewis took a much more critical view of the same intense group activity and conformism. Lewis' book *Main Street* pilloried these qualities in small-town America. His character Babbitt, from the 1922 novel of the same name, illustrated the same conformist culture in a bigger city. Lewis depicted Babbitt as a middle-aged businessman, an active joiner and conformist, who ran into trouble when he tried to take his own direction. Lewis hit a nerve, and the word 'babbitry' entered the English language as a sarcastic term for the middle-class posturing, conformity and hypocrisy many critics saw in American democracy.

### the fashion of being good

As in Babbitt's America, modern world society and unfettered media frees countries to adopt standardized rights and responsibilities internationally and at home. They press countries to conform to notions of the "proper" nation, with principles such as economic efficiency, peaceful cooperation, democracy and human rights. Constitutions provide one example. Almost all countries codify their sovereignty and dignity with constitutions, which copy each other word for word. Also, governments generate huge volumes of economic, social and cultural data, but in very standard formats. And, like Babbitt, their various statements of purpose invoke good citizenship in the wider world community. Ministries of War are now commonly called instead Ministries of Defense. The proper nation is a good neighbor.

At home, countries also feel pressure to appear as "nice guys." Gone are the days when rulers claimed authority in the name of a dynasty, a religion or a tribal mission. The proper government now claims—however hypocritically—to serve its people, and to promote their collective and individual welfare.

All modern countries set themselves the goal of national progress. And national progress is measured the same way everywhere, as Gross National Product per capita. Since the



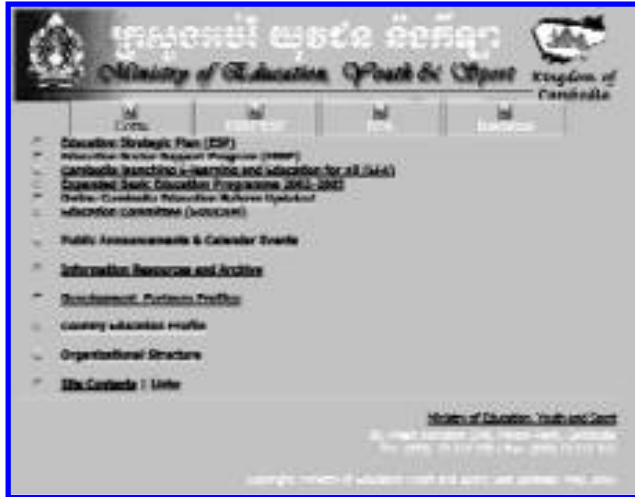
Image courtesy of the United Methodist News Service and avert.org

**Cross-national social movements and nongovernmental organizations draw attention to issues that subsequently appear in the policies of many different nations.**

goal and its measures are shared around the world, governments are susceptible to every new fashionable means to achieve this growth. Professionals and consultants purvey techniques to achieve progress, much like the snake-oil salesmen peddling elixirs in Babbitt's America. For example, policies to achieve growth through central state management swept through the world in the 1950s and 1960s. Many countries adopted centrally directed economic plans. Since the 1990s, neo-liberal policies have become fashionable. They emphasize open domestic and international markets, deregulation, and privatization and they decry central planning. National plans have essentially disappeared.

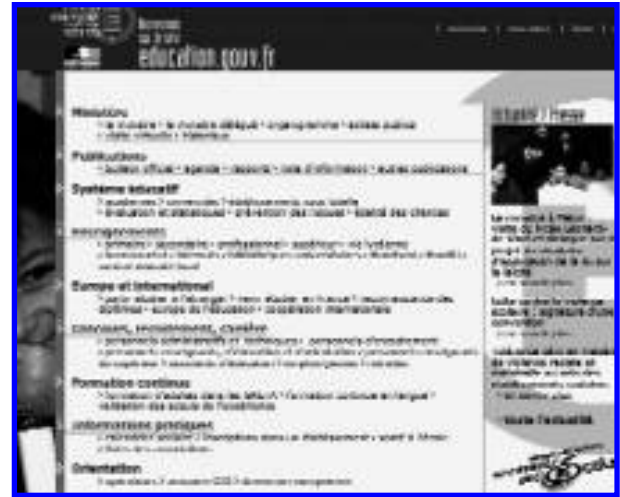
Specific policies spread in similar ways. Researchers have examined the rise and spread of the idea that planned scientific development—establishing science institutes, for example—could stimulate national growth. This notion took off after World War II, encouraged by international organizations like the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO). The number of countries with science ministries or national science boards went from a handful to more than 100. The scheme reflects international fashion more than pragmatic local experience. Research shows that countries with expanded science planning and activity do not have faster growing economies than those without them.

Governments follow fashions even more in serving their people as individuals. Formal rules prohibiting racial, ethnic and religious diversity have almost disappeared. Proclamations and programs to protect the status of women and children surged around the globe, followed by policies protecting the rights of groups such as gays and lesbians, the handicapped and the elderly. In each of these cases, policies supporting individual development, rights, and equality were promoted irrespective of the particular resources, needs, or cultures of the countries involved. For example, despite some resistance on religious or cultural grounds, most Islamic countries have now ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of



Ministry of Education, Cambodia

Internet home page for the Ministry of Education of Cambodia.



Ministry of Education, France

Internet home page for the Ministry of Education of France.

All Forms of Discrimination against Women (albeit sometimes with qualifying phrases).

National and individual progress come together everywhere in the pursuit of more education—and very standardized education at that. Schools, which many assert reflect (and ought to reflect) each nation’s unique cultural and economic needs, turn out to be strikingly similar across the world. Enrollments from primary schools to universities expand at similar rates in different types of countries. Today, a typical developing nation has a higher proportion of its youth enrolled in a university than Britain, France or Germany did in 1955. In all sorts of countries, the enrollment of women has expanded rapidly. Curricula are similar, too, and change in similar ways. For example, one study shows that the American trend of shifting elementary and middle school courses from history (too nationalistic) to ‘social studies’ (more universalistic) has been copied in many national educational systems.

In short, a whole array of modern programs, policies, organizations and agencies flows around the world. Standardized objectives such as “universal public education” and “health for all” become official catchphrases both globally and in individual nations.

### hypocrisy

Global pressures to conform to standard models of the modern nation breed hypocrisy. Just as Babbitt’s contemporaries parodied hypocritical conformity to the principles of good American citizenship, many policies adopted by countries around the world go unimplemented in practice. Researchers frequently find that a nation’s adoption of a policy, or subscription to a worldwide declaration, has no measurable effect on the relevant practices. For example, one study found that whether or not countries subscribed to the

International Labor Organization’s resolution against child labor made no difference to their actual levels of using child labor. Elizabeth McEneaney and I have found no connection between nations’ rules for compulsory education and their actual school enrollments. Findings such as these sometimes lead commentators to imagine that all the virtuous policies around the world have little practical significance.

This is a mistake. It ignores a century-old insight of the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Collective principles, ceremonies, and agreements influence individual and national behavior, despite their specific intentions and often beyond their conscious awareness. As models such as educational systems spread globally, they influence national beliefs and practices of individuals whether their country formally adopts these practices as policy or not.

Karen Bradley and Francisco Ramirez found that the number of women enrolled in universities around the world rose greatly in the past half-century. During the same period, there was a strong trend around the world for establishing women’s rights. But countries taking stronger policy positions on behalf of women were no more likely to have dramatic expansions in the enrollment of women than nations that did not. This does not mean that championing women’s rights has no effect. Rather, the wave of formal policies promoting women’s rights reflects global cultural pressures. These are the same pressures that shape practices—such as college admissions—in all sorts of countries, regardless of whether the countries actively promote the policies. Saudi Arabia, for example, prohibits women from driving, working in most occupations, or appearing in public without a male companion. But it has high levels of female enrollment in its (segregated, naturally) universities.

What creates this global convergence in actual behavior and practice? The pronouncements of prime ministers and education ministers—often unaccompanied by any budget-



Ministry of Education, Bahrain

Internet home page for the Ministry of Education of Bahrain.



Ministry of Education, Turkey

Internet home page for the Ministry of Education of Turkey.

ary allocations—in themselves have little effect. The real consequence occurs at other levels of society, from the decision making of individual parents and young women to the attitudes and expectations of teachers and professors. These individuals respond much more dramatically to the worldwide picture of how women should live and be educated—which they learn from media, school, and modern urban life—than to the posturing of local officials. In any case, the outcome is clear: researchers find that female school enrollment is rising at about the same rate in Islamic countries that are reluctant to officially subscribe to global women’s rights principles as in other types of countries. Researchers find parallel trends in other realms, as well, including child labor, as noted earlier. Child labor is declining rapidly in all types of countries, whether official policies prohibit it or not.

In short, establishing something as a worldwide virtue has effects. One effect is hypocritical conformity in policy pronouncements. Another tends to be conformity in practice, independent of policy pronouncements. Worldwide standards penetrate national societies creating social expectations and practices whether or not appropriate government action occurs.

### who writes the scripts for conformity?

Observers often assume that politically and economically powerful countries write the rules for the rest of the world, and do so in their own interest. There are cases where this is so. For example, the rules of the World Trade Organization strongly defer to the interests of the United States, other developed countries, and major banks and economic organizations.

But there are also many exceptions. The rise and spread of human rights standards is one example. The modern rights

movement was given impetus by the Atlantic Charter—a dramatic joint wartime (1941) statement of universal human rights by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill. This statement reflected Anglo-American ideals (though not American racism nor British imperialism). But when World War II was safely won, both governments, joined by Stalin’s Soviet Union, resisted incorporating a human rights declaration in the emerging United Nations charter. It happened anyway. The subsequent elaborations of the ideals in later declarations rarely had strong support from dominant states, but seemed to have lives of their own. Which great power made the interests of gays and lesbians its own? None did, but studies show that such rights expanded and spread around the world regardless. Similarly, one study shows that the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women—a principle with strong American cultural roots—has been ratified around the world despite the refusal of the United States government to sign it.

Many ideals of the global society reflect the cultures of its most powerful members. However, the spread of these ideals does not necessarily reflect the interests of the strongest nations. The environmental movement, like the international human rights movement, has an American cultural flavor and strong American participation. Environmentalism has created a worldwide set of rules, organizations and practices, but it has received little support from the biggest governments. Indeed, the American government tends to be a laggard (it refuses to sign the Kyoto accord, for instance).

In Babbitt’s America, many of the cultural standards that defined proper middle-class Americanism were displayed and promoted by a wide range of mostly non governmental associations, such as churches, clubs, civic-improvement groups and chambers of commerce. Similarly, modern examples of the proper nation are generated and promulgated by a great network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as

Amnesty International or labor unions, and social movements, such as the women's movement. Several researchers have shown that these NGOs and movements, which advocate the ideals of modern life, have grown exponentially in number and importance in recent years. These associations promote principles of human rights, environmental protection, educational development and national economic policy. The aspiring nation and its elites, like Babbitts, can learn about every aspect of proper, modern conduct by attending the meetings of these organizations.

Intergovernmental organizations—particularly those affiliated with the United Nations and those linked to the World Bank—also play a defining role. For example, it was UNESCO leaders who promoted the emphasis on science education as a route to economic development.

Scientists and professional experts, whose own global networks have expanded exponentially, have multiplied the influence of international associations by endorsing their ideas. The experts' authority reaches into every domain of national policy and influences different countries' policies in a common, global direction. Conforming national elites do not even have to attend meetings; the high truths come to them from their own experts or from the itinerant consultants who jetset around the globe. Elizabeth Boyle has shown the key role important medical and legal professionals play in spreading the prohibition of female genital circumcision. Other studies point to the influence of cosmopolitan experts in spreading standards of financial accounting, and the use of parks and preserves to conserve natural resources.

All the modernizing associations, professionals, and scientists are sensitive to what appears to be successful. Policies associated with successful economies and societies tend to spread. For example, Japanese forms of business organization were seen as curiosities and were not copied in the early post-World War II decades. But when the Japanese economy later took off, many professional and scientific analysts and associations supported their imitation. Now that the Japanese economy has stalled, discussion of the Japanese model has almost disappeared.

Throughout the last half of the "American century," American models in various fields have been fashionable. Squadrons of professional interpreters distill basic principles from the messy realities of American practices, and consultants



**The logo of the World Health Organization. Intergovernmental organizations have increasingly articulated principles relating to the environment, health and equality that have been subsequently adopted by many different nations.**

*Image courtesy of the World Health Organization*

diffuse them around the world. So American business-school principles of transparent accounting spread as ideal standards around the world, not the actual practices of Enron. American ideals of participatory education diffuse, not the actual disorder of the secondary schools. And when the American university is held up as an ideal, the implicit model is likely to be more like Princeton than the average state school.

Sometimes, though, American models are in disrepute, and other countries serve as exemplars. In matters of social welfare, Sweden has been seen as the "high form" for decades, and few inter-

preters see America's programs as worthwhile standards. It is practically compulsory for welfare policy experts and researchers to pay visits to Sweden and to claim familiarity with Swedish social arrangements.

Overall, the models and ideals that influence global policy and practice do not simply reflect those of the leading countries, let alone their national interests. There is a great deal of editing, analyzing and interpreting. The preferred models now define the good country as an active citizen-participant in an imagined world society. There is little celebration these days of the actual countries of the last 500 years, by turns grubby and murderous. Instead of honoring political and military dominance, global leaders honor the good citizens of a highly edited version of the global culture, one in which nice guys finish first, not last. The Nobel Peace Prize winner—not Napoleon—is the modern world's role model.

## teaching harmony, increasing conflict

One way to see the emerging global culture is to look in the schools where this culture is presented to youth. School curricula have become remarkably alike around the world, so what kind of world do they depict?

First, school curricula increasingly emphasize scientific and ecological principles depicted as universal. They apply scientific ideas to a very wide range of issues. Coursework stresses that all people can understand such principles in the same way. So students are more likely to learn general principles about evaporation, clouds, rainfall, rivers, and the associated agriculture than anything about the particularities of the Nile or the Mississippi and the people who farm along them.

A second theme is that we are all similar with universal rights and capacities. Cultural differences among us are insignificant—

matters of dress, food, music and dance. These unique characteristics do not entail fundamental and conflicting ultimate values. The dramatized folk cultures that were celebrated in the high period of the nation-state, during the first half the 20th century, are now muted (see “How Countries Are Made: The Cultural Construction of European Nations,” *Contexts*, Spring 2003). School curricula now describe all cultures as similar. Everyone is equal; nobody is inferior. It would be rare to find the old-style textbook that arrayed human societies on a developmental sequence from primitive to civilized. And all cultures are fundamentally good, although they occasionally err. Explanations of national errors in terms of evil have been replaced by explanations pointing to ignorance, or distortions produced by poverty or difficult transitions to modernity.

The obvious effort by all the social movements, international organizations, and global professionals is to tame unruly nations, making them good citizens of a world in which cooperation is the norm. As in Babbitt’s America, leaders draw a picture of a homogeneous and harmonious world that is at sharp odds with realities of difference, inequality and conflict. Given the vast inequalities in the real world, the curricular emphasis on equality seems ill-conceived. Indeed, creating a global picture of common rights and duties and of equal citizenship may increase conflict. The extreme inequalities between countries, which are much greater than the inequality within any one country, come to be seen, in this new viewpoint, as injustices requiring redress. Cultural differences come into much more direct conflict with each other under assumptions of equality than in a world where difference is taken for granted.

## conclusion

Global forces are pushing the jumble of very different countries and cultures toward both an appearance of homogeneity despite reality and a reality of homogeneity despite their appearance. Fashionable policies, institutions and practices spread rapidly around the world, and the ones that spread promote the model of a country that is fit to be a good global citizen—a nice guy, much like George Babbitt in the idealized America of Lewis’ novel. The sub-Saharan Ministry of Education official I sat with was just trying to make his country a well-liked, assimilated, successful member of the new global community. ■

## recommended resources

Berkovitch, Nitza. *From Motherhood to Citizenship: Women’s Rights and International Organizations*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999. Berkovitch traces the 20th century shift in women’s rights to principles of women’s equality that emerged after World War II and their effect on national policies around the world.



Photo by Mike DuBose, courtesy of the United Methodist News Service

**The flags of some 20 countries fly over the campus of Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe. School curricula have become remarkably alike around the world in emphasizing science, ecology and the ideal of human equality.**

Boli, John, and George Thomas, eds. *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organizations Since 1875*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999. This book presents studies of the extraordinary expansion in international associational life since World War II.

Boyle, Elizabeth Heger. *Female Genital Cutting: Cultural Conflict in the Global Community*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. Boyle analyzes professional and organizational efforts to restrict female circumcision, a traditional practice in some African countries.

Bradley, Karen, and Francisco O. Ramirez. “World Polity Promotion of Gender Parity: Women’s Share of Higher Education, 1965-85.” *Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization* 11 (1996): 63-91. This study describes the dramatic expansion, worldwide, in female enrollments in higher education and how that expansion did not vary among types of countries.

Drori, Gili S., John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez, and Evan Schofer. *Science in the Modern World Polity: Institutionalization and Globalization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. The authors analyze the expansion in the authority of science, and emphasize how it imposes a discipline on national societies.

McEneaney, Elizabeth, and John W. Meyer. “The Content of the Curriculum: An Institutional Perspective.” In *Handbook of Sociology of Education*, ed. Maureen Hallinan. New York: Plenum, 2000. This article reviews recent cross-national research on educational curricula, emphasizing their surprising similarities.