Bernie, a middle-aged businesswoman travels the world as part of her job. She is certainly well travelled, having visited all seven continents, in her ten-year long career. However, all Bernie gets to see in each country is the insides of meeting rooms, hotel rooms, and taxis. She also spends a large proportion of her time in airports; in the past month alone Bernie has flown into the following airports: Kuala Lumpur, Beijing, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Brussels and Gatwick. While waiting to board a plane in Terminal 3 of Heathrow airport, Bernie reflects on these airports, noting that all the airports seem particularly similar. This ‘homogenisation’ of airports across the globe, visible to Bernie can be seen as an evident part of ‘contemporary society’. As she looks around her, Bernie reflects on the different examples of this contemporary society pervading the airport.

The homogenisation of airports around the world can arguably be seen as a result of globalisation. Bernie sees the same shops, such as Nike and Mac make up, and the same food outlets – McDonalds and Starbucks in all the airports she visits. Globalisation, ‘the growing interdependence between different peoples, regions, and countries in the world’ (Giddens, 2009) or ‘increased global connectedness’ (Held, 2004) is a fundamental element of contemporary society. Advancements in information and communications technology, including the wide availability of long-haul travel and an information society means that we are no longer bound by space and time as Harvey (1989) contends, that we once were. Such advances in technological innovations have made it easier and faster than ever for transnational corporations to ‘stretch across national borders, influencing global production processes and the international distribution of labour’ (Giddens, 2009, p126). Globalisation is an economic phenomenon, which is predominantly under the control of a few powerful national countries including the USA and Japan; yet Brennan (2003, cited in Kumar, 2005, p10) argues that ‘the development of globalisation is unequal and uneven and unleashes poisons not just in the poor but also in affluent societies in the West - the driving force of the globalisation process’.

Globalisation is also a cultural phenomenon which pervades in contemporary societies around the world, particularly in Western societies which have become increasingly hybridised, but also in the populations of the rest of the world, where the Western culture has had and continues to have enormous appeal (Kumar, 2005). Bernie notes the wide selection of world foods available in the food court of the airport including Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, Danish and Swedish. Ohmae (1989, cited in Browning, Halcli & Webster, 2000) states that this ‘borderless world’ of cultural common denominators, from cuisine, music, films and arts all pass for signifiers of a global culture. An opposing view to that of the world becoming a global village is Giddens who argues that globalising tendencies in fact
promote heterogeneity, and Axford (2000:239, quoted in Kumar, 2005, p13) contends that “the world may be becoming one space, but not one place”. However, Wilk (cited in Kumar, 2005) claims that cultural homogenisation creates neither homogenisation nor difference, but forms structures of common difference, i.e. the same ways of portraying our differences.

Looking around, Bernie sees people of different ages, ethnicities, religions, from all over the world, waiting for flights to different parts of the world, and she considers international migration, as a distinct element of contemporary societies. Bernie, herself a migrant from Ireland, has lived in various European countries including the Netherlands and France, before migrating to her current home in the North of England, and sees the airport as a main hub for international migration. As a voluntary migrant, Bernie made free choices to migrate, seeking better employment, life opportunities and life experiences; however, many are forced into leaving their country of origin for other reasons. Neo-classical economic explanations argue that people are driven by economic ‘push-pull’ factors (Castles & Miller, 2009). For example, people may be ‘pushed’ from their country of origin because of low standards of living, political repression or a lack of economic opportunities; on the other hand, ‘pull’ factors for host countries may include a demand for labour, political freedom and good economic opportunities (Castles & Miller, 2009).

Another significant component of contemporary society Bernie notices is surveillance; airports can be seen to be one of the most surveyed places in the world. Bernie knows too well how surveillance can be found at every step of the travelling process in airports in all countries; from booking and paying for the flight via the internet, to checking-in (with passport), going through security, being watched on CCTV around various areas of the airport and boarding the aeroplane. Lyon (1994) refers to contemporary society as a ‘surveillance society’, and surveillance can be seen as a means of social control or governance. Today we are more surveyed than ever; with increasing numbers of 24 hour CCTVs (particularly in modern cities), electronic databases and other developments in surveillance technologies, arguably ‘surveillance is part of the way we run the world in the twenty-first century’ (Lyon, 2008, p1).

Although migration is not by any means a new phenomenon, globalisation forces, new space-time flexibilities and different patterns of production have led to an increase in global movements in recent years, with an estimated 213 million people (more than 3% of the worldwide population) in 2010 thought to be an international migrant (UN DESA). Migrants in modern societies often face discrimination and hostility from the host population who can accuse migrant workers of stealing jobs and scrounging off the welfare state (Castles & Miller, 2009). However, Stalker (2011) among others argues that migrants in fact take the jobs that others do not want; the majority of immigrants are in fact likely to want to work, pay taxes and send money home (to their families in their home countries). Bernie reflects on her own workplace, where most of the migrant workers are those at the bottom of the hierarchy employed in the lower-skilled jobs such as cleaners. This can also be seen within the airport itself; as many migrant workers are employed there to fill the more routine, monotonous jobs.

As ever more things are becoming electronically managed and more of our information and data is stored electronically, we essentially leave an electronic footprint wherever we go and whatever we do. Bernie considers the times she could have potentially been surveyed today; withdrawing cash in Kings Cross train station, buying her ticket to the airport on her credit card; shopping around various shops in the airport, making phone calls, sending emails, ‘checking-in’ on Facebook and sending messages to friends on Twitter. Bauman (2006) claims that in this surveillance society, we are becoming fascinated with surveillance and monitoring. This is evident in contemporary society with the explosion of social networking sites such as Facebook, in which we self-survey ourselves by updating statuses and photographs, for example, as well as observing others.
Bernie lands in Moscow airport later that night. Immediately feeling familiar with the airport surroundings, although this is her first visit to Russia, Bernie can again see aspects of contemporary society pervading this airport which are prominent in everyday modern life. Globalisation, ‘the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness’ (Kumar, 2005, p9) and surveillance - just some of the theories that are characteristics of what we call contemporary society. This innovative ‘contemporary society’ is spreading across borders noticeably in airports, but also infiltrating other civilisations across the world. Although Giddens, among others maintains that this is by no means leading to the production of a single global culture, others including Lesley Sklair would argue that this process of globalisation is ‘disastrous’ (Kumar, 2005).

Bibliography


Picture 1:

Picture 2: