

Globalization as Americanization? Beyond the Conspiracy Theory

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I. Introduction

Globalization and its major engines (growing human capital, free markets, increasing cross-border interaction) have created a new world order that has incited passionate debate, pro and con. In recent culture studies, one of the foremost explorations concerns the influence globalization has upon culture. In fact, one of the most common criticisms we hear about the globalization of today's world is that it is producing mainly one culture, it is destroying diversity, and it is bringing everyone into the same global culture. Actually, much of the sociological hype about cultural globalization, defined as the diffusion of cultural values and ideas across national borders, sees it as synonymous with homogenization. Cultural globalization is, thus, one of the major concerns of academics, journalists, political activists and leaders of "cultural preservation" movements who despise what they see as the trend toward cultural uniformity. They usually regard global culture and American culture as synonymous and, thus, express serious concerns about their cultural distinctiveness.

The United States dominates the current global traffic in information and ideas. American music, American movies, American television, and American software are so dominant, so sought after, and so visible that they are now available literally everywhere on Earth. They influence the tastes, lives, and aspirations of virtually every nation. But how "American" is American culture? Has not the US been as much a consumer of foreign cultural influences as it has been a shaper of the world's entertainment and taste? Has not the US been a recipient as much as an exporter of global culture?

The impact of globalization on culture and the impact of culture on globalization deserve discussion. Therefore, this article tries to assess the global impact of American culture. It addresses the following issues: How "American" is globalization? How real is the Americanization of global culture? And, most importantly, has the American mass culture transformed the world into a replica of the US or has America's dependence on foreign cultures made the US a duplication of the world?

II. Homogenized Culture: "The Americanized Village"

A. Americanization: How are we being Americanized?

With the development of the satellite dish and more recently, the Internet, distance no longer seems a limiting factor for the flow of culture. Common global norms about conduct, consumption standards and cultural practices are spreading everywhere. This globalized package has been challenged by several intellectuals who despise what they see as the trend toward cultural uniformity. They regard global culture and American culture as one and the same. In fact, in the dark shadow of globalization, the most widely held description of culture is that of homogenization; the convergence toward a common set of cultural traits and practices. Those who consider culture to be persistently directed toward homogenization hold the belief that the so-called global culture follows the global economy, and this has led to such phrases as "Coca-colonization" and "McDonaldization". The notion of "McDonaldization" refers to the worldwide homogenization of societies through the impact of multinational corporations. McDonaldization is viewed as Americanization of the entire globe.¹ Essentially, uncomfortable with the global impact of American culture, critics insist that Hollywood, McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Coca-Cola, Nike, Levis, Disneyland and, more recently, Yahoo!, Microsoft, Google, and Motorola are eradicating regional and local eccentricities.

Anti-globalism activists often depict the McDonald's, Disney, and Coca-Cola corporations as agents of globalism or cultural imperialism. According to this view of world power the control of culture is seen as far more important than the control of political and geographic borders. Due to the perceived threat of Americanization and that of the transnational corporation, fears exist that a homogenization will wipe out national distinctiveness. Accordingly, Europeans, Latin Americans, and Arabs, left-wingers and right dread that local cultures and national identities are dissolving into an unsound American consumerism. These critics maintain that globalization is nothing more than the imposition of American culture on the entire world.

The argument that globalization is destroying culture comes from people across the political spectrum, liberals and conservatives. Even globalization supporters like Thomas Friedman see it. Friedman, a famous

¹ www.globalization.about.com.

columnist for *The New York Times*, believes that globalization is "globalizing American culture and American cultural icons".² In a post-9/11 column explaining why terrorists hate the United States, Friedman put it thus:

*Globalization has a distinctly American face: It wears Mickey Mouse ears, it eats Big Macs, it drinks Coke or Pepsi and it does its computing on an IBM or Apple laptop, using Windows 98[...]. In most societies, people cannot distinguish any more between American power, American exports, American cultural assaults, American cultural exports and plain vanilla globalization. They are now all wrapped into one. Many societies around the world can't get enough of it, but others see it as a fundamental threat.*³

In May 2000, *Le Monde Diplomatique* described the new face of "US Imperialism" as follows:

*US hegemony also embraces culture and ideology. [...] Its mastery extends to the symbolic level, lending it what Max Weber calls "charismatic domination". [...] Wielding the might of information and technology, the US thus establishes, with the passive complicity of the people it dominates, what may be seen as "affable oppression" or "delightful despotism". And this is all the more effective as its control of the culture industries lets it capture our imagination. [...] The American empire has become a master of symbols and seduction. Offering unlimited leisure and endless distraction, its hypnotic charm enters our minds and installs ideas that were not ours. America no longer seeks our submission by force, but by incantation. It has no need to issue orders, for we have given our consent. No need for threats, as it bets on our thirst for pleasure.*⁴

America's primacy is hardly surprising. Superpowers have, throughout the ages, sought to perpetuate their way of life: from the philosophy and mythology of the Greeks to the law and language of the Romans; from the art and architecture of the Renaissance Italy, to the sports and systems of government of the British. "Most empires think their own point of view is the only correct point of view," says Robert Young, an expert in postcolonial cultural theory at Oxford University. "It's the certainty they get because of the power they have, and they expect to impose it on everyone else".⁵ So, as the unrivaled global superpower, America exports its culture on an unprecedented scale. From music to media, film to fast food, language to literature and sport, the American idea is spreading inevitably, not unlike the influence of empires that preceded it. The difference is that today's technology flings culture to every corner of the globe with blinding speed and, thus, in a far more efficient way.

B. The Rise of cultural preservation movements

Concerns that local cultural and national identities are dissolving into a cross-cultural American consumerism are widespread. In fact, a large number of international voices has joined in denunciations of the American culture; a culture that they charge is pushing out all others and taking over the world. They lament the loss of local language, local habits, and local social life in the global rush to be just like the United States.

Fearing globalization and cultural imperialism, many countries have created protectionist policies to maintain control over local cultural content and to foster a type of "nationalism" among their own entertainment producers. French producer Martin Karmitz noted that "sound and pictures have always been used for propaganda, and the real battle at the moment is over who is going to be allowed to control the world's images, and so sell a certain lifestyle, a certain culture, certain products, certain ideas".⁶ Many nations, mainly in Europe, having concluded that their native producers face an uphill struggle, now subsidize filmmaking, and many place quotas on the importation of foreign films, especially American ones.

It is France that provides the most revealing case of cultural protectionism. France has not only built a bureaucratic barrier against American culture, it has constructed a notorious intellectual case against it as well. For the French cultural and intellectual elite the issue is not just a matter of who watches which films, but rather

² Cited in Philippe Legrain, "Cultural Globalization Is Not Americanization", *op.cit.*, p.1.

³ Thomas Friedman, "Commentary: Why Those Angry Men Want to Kill America", *The New York Times*, Aug. 25, 1998, p. 7.

⁴ Ignacio Ramonet, "The Control of Pleasure", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2000, pp.8-9.

⁵ Cited in Mark Rice-Oxley, "In 2,000 Years, Will the World Remember Disney or Plato?", *Christian Science Monitor*, January 15, 2004, p. 8.

⁶ Cited in Johanna Blakley, "Entertainment Goes Global: Mass Culture in a Transforming World", *The Norman Lear Center Publications*, January 2001, p. 13.

it is that Hollywood is a Trojan horse bringing with it Disneyland Paris, fast-food chains and free advertising for American products from clothes to rock music. In *Les cartes de la France à l'heure de la mondialisation* ("France's Assets in the Era of Globalization"), former French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine denounced the United States as a "hyperpower" that promotes "uniformity" and "unilateralism." Speaking for the French intelligentsia, he argued that France should take the lead in building a "multipolar world."⁷ France's commitment to film protectionism became an international issue in the spring of 1994, during the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) talks. The world's leading trading nations negotiated widespread tariff reductions on goods and services. American negotiators promised to remove many trade barriers against European goods, but they asked in return that the Europeans -especially the French- extend impartial treatment to American movies and remove the special taxes and quotas. The French refused. Indeed, keeping out American films became one of the most important French national policies. The well-known French film-director Claude Berri reflected a popular attitude when he warned that "if the GATT deal goes through as proposed, European culture is finished."⁸ The French government even promised to veto any GATT agreement that did not preserve its protectionist policies toward the film industry. Despite the protestations of Hollywood, the Americans backed down and acceded to the wishes of the French government. After the French won the GATT battle, French director Jean Jacques Annaud claimed, "We removed the threat that European culture would be completely eliminated."⁹

In a certain sense, the present human world is more tightly integrated than at any earlier point in history. In the age of the satellite dish, the age of global capitalism, the age of omnipresent markets and global mass media, various commentators have claimed that the world is rapidly becoming a single place. Although this slightly exaggerated description has an important point to make, a perhaps even more striking aspect of the post-Cold War world is the emergence of identity politics whose explicit aim is the restoration of rooted tradition, religious fervor and/or commitment to ethnic or national identities. For a variety of reasons, then, globalization creates the conditions for *localization*, that is various kinds of attempts at creating bounded entities -countries (nationalism or separatism), faith systems (religious revitalization), cultures (linguistic or cultural movements) or interest groups (ethnicity).

III. How "American" is American Culture?

A. The Cosmopolitan nature of American culture

The cosmopolitan nature of American culture explains its universal appeal. In fact, Globalization is not a one-way street. The cultural relationship between the United States and the rest of the world has not been one-sided. On the contrary, the United States was, and continues to be, as much a consumer of foreign intellectual and artistic influences as it has been a shaper of the world's entertainment and lifestyles. As a nation of immigrants, the United States has been a recipient as much as an exporter of global culture. Indeed, the influence of immigrants on the United States explains why its culture has been so popular for so long in so many places. American culture has spread throughout the world because it has incorporated foreign styles and ideas. What Americans have done brilliantly is repackaging the cultural products they receive from abroad and then retransmitting them to the rest of the planet. That is why a global mass culture has come to be identified, perhaps simplistically, with the United States.¹⁰

So, it is most likely a myth that globalization involves the imposition of Americanized uniformity, rather than an explosion of cultural exchange. Americans, after all, did not invent fast food, amusement parks, or cinema. Before the Big Mac, there were fish and chips. Before Disneyland, there was Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens (which Walt Disney used as a prototype for his first theme park in Anaheim, California). And in the first two decades of the 20th century, the two largest exporters of movies around the world were France and Italy.¹¹ Many other representative "American" products are not as all-American as they seem. Levi Strauss, a German immigrant, invented jeans by combining denim cloth (or "serge de Nîmes," because it was traditionally woven in the French town) with Genes, a style of trousers worn by Genoese sailors. So Levi's jeans are in fact an American twist on a European hybrid.¹²

What's more, even quintessential American exports are often customized to local tastes and have thus conformed to local cultures. MTV in Asia promotes Thai pop stars and plays rock music sung in Mandarin. CNN en Español offers a Latin American take on world news. McDonalds also commonly alters its regional menus to conform to local tastes. McDonalds in Egypt, for example, serve a McFefafel. Indian McDonalds don't serve beef at all. And some French McDonalds serve rabbit.

⁷ Hubert Vedrine, *Les cartes de la France à l'heure de la mondialisation* (Paris: Editions Fayard, 2000).

⁸ Cited in Tyler Cowen, "French Kiss-Off: How protectionism has hurt French films", *Reason Magazine*, July 1998, p. 10.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Richard Pell, "American Culture Goes Global, or Does It?", *The Chronicle Review*, April 12, 2002, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 14.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 14.

American culture is an amalgam of influences and approaches from around the world. It is melded into a social medium that allows individual freedoms and cultures to thrive. In effect, one important way that the American media have succeeded in transcending internal social divisions, national borders, language barriers, and distinctive cultures is by mixing up cultural styles. Given the U.S. demographic makeup, it comes as no surprise that the country has been very receptive to external cultural influences, which have, then, become incorporated into the fabric of U.S. culture. The contributions of various foreign cultures have often mixed to create powerful hybrids. U.S. popular culture evolves constantly, fermenting new forms and expressions. So a key factor behind the universal attractiveness of American culture concerns the international features of the American audience. The heterogeneity of America's population -its regional, ethnic, religious, and racial diversity -forced the media, from the early years of the 20th century, to experiment with messages, images, and story lines that had a broad multicultural appeal. The Hollywood studios, mass-circulation magazines, and the television networks have had to learn how to speak to a variety of groups and classes at home. This has given them the techniques to appeal to an equally diverse audience abroad. For instance, an art form as essentially American as Jazz evolved during the 20th century into an amalgam of African, Caribbean, Latin American, and modernist European music. This blending of forms in America's mass culture has enhanced its appeal to multiethnic domestic and international audiences by capturing their different experiences and tastes.

Nowhere are foreign influences more clearly identifiable than in the American movie industry. Hollywood became, in the 20th century, the cultural capital of the modern world. But it was never an exclusively American capital. Like past cultural centers (Florence, Paris, Vienna), Hollywood has functioned as an international community drawing on the talents of actors, directors, writers, cinematographers, editors, composers, and costume and set designers from all over the world. Ever since Charlie Chaplin crossed over from Britain, foreigners have flocked to California to try to become global stars: Just look at Penelope Cruz, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Ewan McGregor.¹³ Top directors are also often from outside America: Think of Ridley Scott or the late Stanley Kubrick. Some studios are foreign-owned: Japan's Sony owns Columbia Pictures, Vivendi Universal is French. Two of AOL Time Warner's biggest recent hit franchises, *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*, are both based on British books, have largely British casts, and, in the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, a Kiwi director.¹⁴ To some extent, then, Hollywood approaches film making as a cosmopolitan art that transcends national boundaries.

B. Additional Reasons for the ascendancy of American culture

In addition to the key features of American culture dealt with above (multiculturalism, the broad multicultural appeal, the heterogeneity of America's population, and the international complexion of American audience), there are further reasons for the ascendancy of American mass culture. U.S. firms have always enjoyed a comparative advantage in the global media and popular culture industries because of a huge domestic market that offers economies of scale, ensuring that cultural exports can be sold at rates well below the cost of production for smaller nations. U.S. firms also have the advantage of profiting from cultural exchange programs that bring large numbers of foreign students, academics, and other professionals to the United States who continue to consume U.S. cultural products when they return home.

The U.S. government has also played an important role in promoting cultural exports, not only as a source of export income but also as a means of exporting beliefs, values, and practices that inherently favor U.S.-based corporate capitalism. The U.S. government backs its film and television industries whenever foreign governments try to restrain the flow of U.S. audiovisual products abroad. It has contributed enormously to the development of communications infrastructures, such as satellites. The United States also uses diplomatic means to reduce or remove barriers to its media exports. Furthermore, the U.S. government created a number of organizations and programs, such as the United States Information Agency and the Fulbright exchange program, which promoted the transmission of information on American culture.

The effectiveness of English as a language of mass communications has also been essential to the acceptance of American culture. The simple structure and grammar of English, along with its tendency to use shorter, less abstract words and more concise sentences, are all beneficial for the composers of song lyrics, ad slogans, cartoon captions, newspaper headlines, and movie and TV dialogue. English is thus a language exceptionally well suited to the demands and spread of American mass culture.

IV. How real is Americanization of Global Culture? (How American is cultural globalization?)

Several crucial research questions arise when we focus our attention on the study of globalization and the entertainment dimension of contemporary culture. Chief among them is the need for a theoretical framework

¹³ Philippe Legrain, "Cultural Globalization Is Not Americanization", *op.cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

for the study of something we might call “cultural blending”: How do people respond to the layered levels of culture to which they are constantly confronted in entertainment media? Is the local level more powerfully felt than the regional, national or global? How do these different levels compete for attention (which is the *modus operandi* of entertainment)? What effects do they have on cultural identity? Does this American presence mean the insidiousness of cultural imperialism? Are we oppressed by Americanization? Does the American Theme Park become a carrier of ideology, history, myth and beliefs that roll-over the consumers and replace their own value systems? By going to McDonalds or buying a Dr Pepper or wearing a Nike jacket or visiting Euro Disney, is one embracing American values and being 'colonized' in mind and body by them?

Viewing the interrelationship of globalization and culture as ever-evolving toward a monolithic global culture has its limitations and is open to critique. Globalization is a far more complex set of phenomena than is suggested by the stereotype of American imperialism. While a global culture heavily influenced by US values is indeed emerging, it is not directed exclusively by the US; many non-US cultures are contributing to other sub-globalization processes. Despite the belief that the United States dominates foreign countries, the practical effects of "Americanization" amount to less than one might suppose. American culture is not the only dominant culture; many other cultures export their products.

Furthermore, there are limitations to the ability of American culture to replace other cultures. Local cultures are inherently resilient and local languages, eating habits, education systems, and other social patterns determine the extent to which American culture is imported and adapted to native needs. People are not only consuming hamburgers and Coke. Britain's favorite takeaway is a curry, not a burger.¹⁵ Indian restaurants there outnumber McDonald's six to one.¹⁶ For all the concerns about American fast food trashing, France's gastronomic traditions, France imported a mere \$620-million in food from the United States in 2000, while exporting to America three times that.¹⁷ Worldwide, pizzas are more popular than burgers, Chinese restaurants seem to sprout up everywhere, and sushi is spreading fast.¹⁸

Nor are Americans the only players in the global media industry. Of the seven market leaders that have their fingers in nearly every pie, four are American (AOL Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, and News Corporation), one is German (Bertelsmann), one is French (Vivendi), and one Japanese (Sony). What they distribute comes from all quarters: Bertelsmann publishes books by American writers; News Corporation broadcasts Asian news; Sony sells Brazilian music.¹⁹

It remains difficult to argue that the globalization of technologies is making the world everywhere the same. A cultural phenomenon does not convey the same meaning everywhere. The ‘sameness’ hypothesis is only sustainable if one ignores the internal meanings that people assign to cultural innovations. Even though American consumer culture is widespread, its significance is often exaggerated. You can choose to drink Coke and eat at McDonald's without becoming American in any meaningful sense. People's culture -in the sense of their shared ideas, beliefs, knowledge, inherited traditions, and art -may hardly be eroded by mere commercial artifacts that embody at best flimsy values. In this vein Francis Fukuyama, one of the most remarkable thinkers of the era challenges the homogenization view as follows:

I think that there is a global consumer culture that is spread by companies like McDonald's and Coca Cola. However, if you look beneath the surface and ask people in different countries where their loyalties lie, how they regard their families, and how they regard authority, there will be enormous differences. When people examine a culture, they pay too much attention to aspects like the kinds of consumer goods that people buy. That's the most superficial aspect of culture. A culture really consists of deeper moral norms that affect how people link together. [...]. What bothers me about the recent discussions of globalization is that people seem to think globalization is going to be much more homogenizing than it really is. In fact, I think that it will have the opposite effect.²⁰

Critics of globalization argue that the process will lead to a stripping away of identity and to a uniform world. On a planet of about 6 billion people, this is, of course, an impossibility. Local culture remains a powerful influence in daily life. People are tied to places, and those places continue to shape particular norms and values. The fact that residents of Cairo, Paris, and New Delhi occasionally eat at McDonald's, watch

¹⁵ Philippe Legrain, “Cultural Globalization Is Not Americanization”, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1995).

Hollywood films, and wear Nike athletic shoes does not necessarily make them “global.” People everywhere show a desire to share the fruits of globalization, but they just as sincerely want to celebrate the distinctiveness of their own cultures. Natural cultures are much stronger than people seem to think. They can embrace some foreign influences and resist others. Foreign influences can rapidly become domesticated, changing national culture, but not destroying it.

In many ways, thus, the idea of “American cultural imperialism” is inadequate. Cross-border cultural exchange increases diversity within societies -but at the expense of making them more alike. The decline of cultural distinctions may be a measure of the progress of civilization, a substantial sign of enhanced communications and understanding. People everywhere have more choice, but they often opt for similar choices.

Globalization has brought one of the most significant increases in freedom and diversity in human history: it has liberated individuals from the tyranny of place. Today, one has the possibility to enjoy the best the world has to offer. Growing up on an isolated farm or in a remote village is less a limit than ever before on an individual’s access to the world’s cultural treasures and opportunities. No longer are one’s choices completely defined by local culture. Just because someone was born in Italy does not mean he can only aspire to speak Italian, eat Italian food, read Italian books, visit museums in Italy, and so on. An Italian -or an American, for that matter- can take holidays in Ibiza or Sousse, eat sushi or couscous for dinner, drink Coke or Orangina, watch a Hollywood blockbuster or an Almodóvar, listen to Rai or rap and have friends from around the world. That we are increasingly free to choose our cultural experiences enriches our lives considerably.

V. Conclusion

The relationship between the United States and the rest of the world has never been one-sided. On the contrary, the United States has been as much a consumer of foreign intellectual and artistic influences as it has been a shaper of the world’s cultures. America’s mass culture has often been pushy, as its critics have always complained. But American culture has never felt all that foreign to foreigners. At its best, it has transformed what it received from others into a culture everyone, everywhere, could embrace—a culture that is both emotionally and, on occasion, artistically compelling for millions of people throughout the world. So, despite the current resurgence of anti-Americanism, it is important to recognize that America’s movies, television shows, and theme parks have been less “imperialistic” than cosmopolitan. In the end, American mass culture has not transformed the world into a replica of the United States. Instead, America’s dependence on foreign cultures has made the United States a replica of the world.

Americanization then should be the story of an American cultural language traveling and of other people acquiring that language. What they actually see in it, it is a different story altogether.

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