

Globalization

Abstract:

Globalization is a phenomenon that has been fuelled by the end of the Cold War and the improvements in technology. America has emerged as the sole super power, pressing for free trade and has fostered improvement in the communications worldwide through technological advances and the power of its media. While Freidman (2000) and Curran and Park (2000) have highlighted the advantages of globalization and improved communications, Crane (2002) has presented several models of globalization indicating how the superimposition of culture can take place. Notable external manifestations of globalization which have been the focus of criticism are (a) cultural imperialism (b) Americanization and (c) McDonaldization. This may be noted specifically in the European countries where the cultural and linguistic diversity of this small geographical area is increasingly being made vulnerable to the dominant influence of American culture and values. Critics of globalization argue that it leads to a homogenization or hybridization of cultures, so that the rich diversity of local culture and traditions may be irretrievably lost. (Nederveen Pieterse 1995; Robertson 1995).

Introduction:

The end of the Cold War, symbolized by the disintegration of the Soviet Union has resulted in the emergence of a new global era (Meyer et al 1997, p 174) where the competition between the former super powers is being replaced by a consumer driven social, political and economic scenario. (Freidman, 2000). The bureaucratic, tightly controlled economies of the Cold War era have yielded to free trade. The Berlin wall came down and so did the trade

barriers between countries, opening up the doors to technological advancement and an age of communication where the Internet has revolutionized the availability of information, creating a knowledge based economy.(Thurow 2000, p 116). Information is the new mantra that spells success in the modern world .(Shapiro and Varian, 1999). Intellectual capital is important and the use of business worldwide webs spells power. (Lynn 2000; Bernhut 2001). The Internet has been described as “*a decentralized, global medium of communication comprising a global web of linked networks and computers.*” (Thurow, 2000, p 116). It enables instant communication across geographical boundaries and thereby has fostered the growth of an era of capitalism and consumerism, where the focus has shifted to economic interests, with political, social and cultural aspects being subordinated to the dominant capitalist trend.

This has produced the phenomenon of globalization, which is the inter-connectedness among the various nations of the world on the basis of economic ties. Friedman (2000) has supported Dean Joseph Nye Jr’s summing up of the reasons for the emergence of America as the dominant superpower – its strategy to create an open international economy in order to prevent a recurrence of the Great Depression of 1939. American policy has been directed towards the opening up of the global economy and it has been the significant player in democratization. The notable examples which Friedman (2000) explains in his book are (a) the “*Golden Straitjacket*”, signifying the neoliberal economic rules prevailing in an information age (b) Investors securing gains in financial markets through the use of computer technology, who represent the “*Electronic Hurd*” led by Wall Street and (c) the policy of “*globulation*” whereby dictatorial states are forced to democratize through pressure applied by the international community. The war in Iraq which occurred despite resistance from European

countries such as France and Germany is just one example of the Americanization of global policies.

Globalization is a phenomenon that is represented through the dissolving of boundaries between nations and the potential diffusion of one culture onto another. Friedman (2000) has highlighted some of the advantages of globalization such as the fostering of democratic systems all over the world and an unhindered flow of information and communication between nations with previous inequities of economic status and class generated during the industrial era of modernism yielding to a dissolution of class and economic distinctions through the free flow of information and consumerism. The emergence of the European Commonwealth and the framing of the EC Treaty have paved the way for a united Europe and the judicial activism of the European Court of Justice is producing an increasing subordination of policies of Member States to European law. Kellner has pointed out the emergence of the new “*techno-capitalism*” which is focused on economic interests at the expense of cultural interests and is therefore “*characterized by a decline in the power of the State and increased power of the market.*” (Kellner, 1999, p 246)

According to Curran and Park, the increased networking due to globalization makes it “*a process that is increasing international dialogue, empowering minorities and building progressive solidarity.*” (Curran and Park, 2001, p 10). However, while globalization is meant to represent a neutral culture, in practice the advances in technology and the predominance of capitalism have resulted in a culturally homogenizing process, since the less advanced nations are forced to adopt the beliefs, value systems and practices of dominant cultures in order to avoid being left behind in the new technological age. (Nederveen Pieterse 1995; Robertson 1995a). Within Europe, such trends may be noted in the countries of east Europe where

deregulation and the introduction of capitalistic modes of private enterprise have eroded the traditional socialistic framework that has existed in these countries.(Richards and French, 1996, p 41).

Definitions of Globalization:

Several definitions have been proffered for the phenomenon of globalization. According to Thomas Friedman, globalization is the “*inexorable integration of markets, nation states and technologies.....the spread of free market capitalism to virtually every country in the world.*” (Friedman, 2000, p 7-8). Robertson characterizes it as the “*compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world*” (Robertson, 1992, p 8). Waters views it as a “*social process*” in which the limitations imposed by geography are receding (Waters, 1995, p 3) while Albrow equates it to a “*historical transformation*” achieved by the dissemination of “*values, technology and other human products*” throughout the globe. (Albrow, 1996, p 88). Mittelman also refers to globalization as a historical transformation - “*a political response to the expansion of market power*” resulting in a transformation “*in the economy, of livelihoods and modes of existence*” (Mittelman, 2000, p 6) and McMichael corroborates this view, seeing the process of global integration taking place on the basis of “*market rule on a global scale*”(McMichael, 2000, p 149).

Theories of Globalization:

Held et al (1999) have postulated different schools of thought among globalization theorists and one of the first is that of the hyperglobalists who predict the end of the nation state. The world theory system of globalization also states that the capitalistic system is

currently in a crisis, therefore the “*ideological celebration of the so-called globalization is in reality the swan song of our historical system.*” (Wallerstein 1998, p 32). According to this theory, the world is a system that is comprised of “*multiple cultural systems*” (Wallerstein 1974a, p 390). Modernism resulted in Europeans who had started out with only marginal advantages increasing that power through the development of the capitalistic enterprise and protection of trade routes. However, as Wallerstein points out, America emerged as a hegemony and the economic polarization resulting from capitalism cannot be sustained. Thus Wallerstein believes that globalization is the natural response to address this economic imbalance and is the tool that will whittle down the differences and spell the demise of existing capitalistic and hegemonic power balances.

The Marxist explanation of globalization is based upon the premise that there is a reduction or simplification in the antagonism that exists between classes (Marx and Engels, 1976, p 485). Other theories view globalization as a transnational phenomenon – some of them focus on cultural aspects while others place their emphasis on the state. Waters has focused on the social arrangements that are involved in the process of conforming to the post modernist view that culture is something that is above and beyond economic or class relations between people, thereby overriding Marxism.(Waters, 1995 , p 17). According to Waters, these social exchanges of symbols, tastes and values are such that “*material exchanges localize; political exchanges internationalize; and symbolic exchanges globalize.*” (Waters 1995, p 9). Therefore Waters sees a social transformation taking place, whereby the economic and class inequalities that existed between countries and created material and power exchanges is now steadily being replaced by relationships that are based upon common symbols and values, shared tastes and preferences – a cultural transformation of social life. (Waters 1995, p 124).

Robertson analyzes globalization specifically from the cultural perspective, where nations emulate ideas - such as for example Peter the Great - (Nettl and Robertson, 1968; Robertson 1995b) from a “*global arsenal*” perspective (Robertson, 1995a, p 41). Marketers “*glocalize*” international products to suit the local market (Robertson, 1995, p 40) and global cultural images are also facilitated through the tools of religion. (Robertson, 1992, pp 1-2)

Cultural Homogeneity:

The imposition of one a dominant culture upon another as a part of the globalization process is the cultural imperialism theory that emerged in the 1960's - in direct opposition to the Marxist critiques of capitalism (Schiller 1976). According to this system, the world economy is dominated by a few developed nations while the others remain at the periphery, acceding to the controls of the dominant countries and emulating them (Tomlinson, 1991, p 37; Robertson 1995b). The beliefs, values, behavioral patterns and norms of the economically dominant nations are imposed upon the weaker ones (Salwen 1991). Such cultural domination is viewed as a particularly dangerous process because it produces a homogenization of culture in line with dominant countries such as the United States – “*the fundamental concepts of a society's national image are remodeled in the American image*” (White, 1983, p 120).

Thomas Friedman (2000) explains this hegemony through the symbolism of the five gas stations of the world – the Japanese, the European, the American, the Communist and the developing world. The Japanese, European and Communist nations have a working system that represents the social contracts that are in place to maintain some equity, therefore prices are high and services are to be paid for. The developing countries enjoy the advantage of cheap labor, but are swamped with problems of corruption and poverty. America offers the right

balance of entrepreneurship, freedom and inexpensive products, since the American system according to Friedman(2000) believes in empowering the people and letting the markets be as free as possible. According to corporate theories such as Friedman's, the solution to all problems is through increased consumption, where class is displaced by income.

A notable example of American cultural imperialism may be noted in the phenomenon that has been referred to as the "*Macdonaldization*" of global society. (Ritzer 2000). The fast food giant has implemented a bureaucratic system that focuses on predictability and efficiency, often with a dehumanizing effect, and the subculture spawned by the fast food rules have now permeated throughout the world where almost every country can boast of the ubiquitous McDonalds – a modern day phenomenon serving up a homogenous burger and coke. In European countries, where exquisite dishes and fine wines flourish, the ridiculous proliferation of Macdonalds amply illustrates cultural imperialism and the imposition of the American way of life (Salwen 1991). Similarly, the Disney theme parks present an insular world, where the theme of fun and innocence is maintained through careful corporate training of its employees, creating a culture revolving around cartoon characters – a mini world that represents a global culture that is valid and appealing anywhere in the world. According to Friedman, "*The cultural messages we transmit through Hollywood and Mc Donald's go out across the world to capture and also undermine other societies.We insist that they be like us. And of course for their own good. No wonder many feel threatened by what we represent.*" (Friedman, 2003, p 132)

However, the most notable example of such imperialism is without doubt the role of the media in promoting the hegemony of the United States, which Crane (2002) refers to as media imperialism. The United States has the economic resources to produce blockbuster films which

are the ones most likely to appeal to international audiences (Philips 1982) and they are also dominant in the area of production of television programs (Barker, 1997, p 50). McChesney (1999) has discussed the corporate sponsorship of the media and the profit making motivation that underlies media programming, so that the synergy of the corporate and media frameworks have contributed to American media dominance and influence over the world. The facility to produce expensive programs aids the United States (Hoskins and Mirus 1990) especially because globalization has improved access to satellite programming (Sinclair, 1996, pp 52-53) and it is cheaper for developing countries to import an American made program rather than producing their own local programs.(Curran 1998). Britain monopolized industrial development in the 19th century and America is dominating the age of technology in a similar way (Friedman 2003). As a result, the so called multiculturalism is little more than an American hegemonic perspective, producing homogenization of other cultures to suit the American mold. (Barker 1999).

Global music patterns indicate that MTV which has cornered the music market, promotes American and British artists to the exclusion of other European and world artists (Banks 1996). News events are presented from an American perspective (Schirato and Webb 2003) so that 9/11 became a global phenomenon – “*After this act we are all Americans*” (Colombani 2001) while attacks on other parts of the world do not generate the same hype, a phenomenon which Bourdieu(1998) refers to as the “*false universalism of the West*”.

The model of cultural imperialism is thus a one way transmission of culture from the dominant to the subordinate culture. However, Appadurai (1990) proposes the cultural flows/networks model whereby there is no distinct source from which information flows (i.e, America) rather there is a network of interconnectivity through the media, ideas, finances, etc

which produces a cultural diffusion that is unstructured and may sometimes result in contradicting flows in two directions (Couldry, 2000, p 96). Thus, the forces of globalization which appear to moot a mass move towards Westernization may produce homogeneity and heterogeneity at the same time. For example, cultural identity may be conditioned by both place and ethnicity, so that a British Muslim is a global citizen in that he is not circumscribed by the boundaries of his home country, yet retains his ethnic culture in a global framework (Eade 1977). Kwok and Low (2002) have examined how Singapore has retained its distinct cultural heritage, even as it has refashioned it for a global market. Historical sites and cultural landmarks in some cities may be “*retooled*” in order to make their cultural distinctiveness a marketable commodity in a global culture.(Zukin 1995).

Thus, Appadurai (1990) supports the position that globalization leads to cultural hybridization rather than homogenization. For example, applying this in the context of mediascapes, Marnie Carroll, an American living in Switzerland, offers the view that American television programs undergo a cultural transformation once they cross the Atlantic and are tailored to meet regional expectations (Carroll 2003; Robertson 1995). She contends that the lack of linguistic ability in English itself stands as a bar to the American cultural invasion of Europe.

Carroll’s view ascribes to the Reception Theory Model, wherein the degree of cultural homogeneity or hybridization will depend upon viewer reception of the cultural message. For example, a study by Liebes and Katz (1991) also showed that viewers across the globe decode American television programs according to the parameters of their own national culture and identity. Audiences may in fact prefer a local imitation of American culture to the original (Straubhaar, 1997, p 288).

Conclusion:

As Friedman has pointed out, American culture is spreading all over the world, threatening to erode the richness and diversity of local cultures and promote the inequalities of capitalism. Some cultures have responded to globalization with an increased focus on preservation of local cultural policies (Tomooka, Kanna and Kobayashi, 2002) while others are resorting to protectionism.(Sinclair, 1996, p 51). In France, the film industry is subsidized and there is now a requirement that 50 percent of cable channel content must be European (Hedges, 1995, p 153). Similarly, public radio stations in France are required to devote more than 50 percent of their programs to French music (Crane, 1992, p 154). Others are revising the content of media programs to suit the target country.(Bielby and Harrington 2002). The ubiquitous Big Mac for example, modifies itself according to the local culture – in the UK it's a doughnut while in Thailand it may be a samurai pork burger and in Israel it transforms into a MacShwarma. Similarly, the *Disneyfication* that takes place in Tokyo or Singapore are re-engineered and tailored to highlight the cultural images of Singapore .(Kwok and Low 2002). While American films and media programs may be accepted worldwide, their reception may not necessarily be the same all over the world, since this factor is conditioned by the local cultural framework(Liebes and Katz 1991). Moreover, the European Commission has also taken steps to limit American control over distribution of films in Europe because they do not give preference to European films. (Andrews 1998).

Globalization appears to be a two edged sword, it offers advantages at the same time as it offers disadvantages. Yet, some neighborhoods that have suffered the disadvantages of globalization are rejuvenating themselves through urban regeneration that highlights the local

culture (Lorentz 2002; Bianchini and Parkinson 2003). South Asian countries that take great pride in their arts are making efforts to preserve their cultural heritage through Government patronage of the arts (Lindsay 2002). Therefore, the threat of globalization may be in fact, unleashing a renewed interest in local culture in terms of the need to preserve it and exploit its economic potential if any.

Globalization is an inevitable phenomenon in an era of post modernism and it is unlikely that any attempts at isolationism or protectionism by individual countries will be successful in their objective, within the electronic environment of the Internet and wide accessibility of the media. Thus, it appears inevitable that local culture as it has existed hitherto will undergo modifications. But culture which has survived over generations is unlikely to be erased completely within such a short time. Thus, on this basis, it may be concluded that globalization may lead to a certain degree of homogenization of culture, but this may not necessarily erase local richness – it may produce a global hybrid version of the local culture instead.

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