

Notes on American Cultural Imperialism

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Cultural imperialism is defined as the sum of the processes by which societies worldwide are attracted, pressured, or even forced to align their dominating institutions with the codes, practices, and structures of the dominating center of the system. Given the worldwide diffusion of American values such as democratic politics, and of American business apparatuses such as the market economy, franchises, supermarkets, shopping malls, discounters, home shopping television, cybermalls, theme parks, cruise ships, casino-hotels, to say nothing of a cornucopia of American innovations such as Coca Cola, Mickey Mouse, blue jeans, Hollywood films, popular music, NFL football, and computer operating systems, it would not be gratuitous to identify this dominating center with the United States, and to characterize the processes that work aggressively on both local cultures and national identities around the world so as to increase their receptivity to the aforementioned products, “Americanization.”¹

That the United States would be able to impose its values, products, corporations, and organizations upon various geographic areas in order to have its international power, influence, and profits grow, is no idle aspiration, but a constant endeavor, supported both by its own political rhetoric—e.g. its officials intone that America’s model for national success is not only sustainable but is also right and true for every person in every society, being “the most just, the most tolerant, the most willing to constantly reassess and improve itself, and the best model for the

¹ Works consulted: Jan Nederveen Pieterse. *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange*. New York. Rowman and Littlefield, 2004; George Ritzer. *The Globalization of Nothing*. Thousand Oaks. Pine Forge Press. 2004; Herbert Schiller. *Communication and Cultural Domination*. New York. International Arts and Sciences Press. 1976.

future”² — and by the staggering fact that its economy, being the largest in the world, gives it the leverage to energize and organize other nations to do business with it on its own terms, that is to say, in accordance with rules and policies proper to its own market economy. These rules and policies widely diffuses by means of international economic regimes such as the European Union (EU), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank that, together with its developed Western allies, that it creates and dominates. It insists, for instance, that if capital is to flow freely, a modern financial and monetary system must be put in place, disclosure rules must be uniform, settlement procedures consistent, and redress transparent; if goods are to move unimpeded, a material infrastructure comprised of roads, means of communication, and energy supply must be laid out, tariff laws must be rendered consistent, customs standards harmonized, and product safety and labeling standards brought into line; if contracts are to be agreed upon and enforced, an administrative apparatus based on the rule of law must be established.

As for advancing key political goals which are dear to it — e.g., individual liberty, respect for private property rights, real freedom of association and speech, legal systems and courts ensuring basic citizens’ rights, free and fair elections with universal suffrage, a constitution that enables the replacement of government by voters through such elections, democratization — it achieves this by exerting various types of pressure on other countries, or else by offering all sorts of incentives, to strengthen, say, human rights and carry through democratic reforms, under the impact of the conditions it attaches on lending and development assistance. In fact, in the interests of promoting political and economic goals akin to its own homegrown version of the market economy, the United States need only spur economic development around the world because, while no automatic or simple correlation exists between capitalist growth and democratization, economic development is known to produce better educated middle classes, as well as a modern and active civil society, which tend in time to organize politically to demand democracy’s most basic features.

² David Rothkopf, “In Praise of Cultural Imperialism?,” *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1997) No. 107, 38-53. Professor Rothkopf served as a senior official in the U.S. Department of Commerce during the first term of the Clinton administration.

Since one of the most important dimensions of the establishment of international cultural hegemony is the power to persuade and convince, the United States has, as a matter of policy, poured enormous resources to ensconce itself at the cutting edge of the development of evolutionary and innovative information technologies and services. Indeed, if technologies and services exist today that enable anyone anywhere to communicate instantly with anyone anywhere else, even in the absence of an established telecommunications infrastructure on the ground near either to the sender or to the recipient, it is because through these same technologies and services the United States is able to regularly expose people on opposite sides of the globe to advertising representations of the quintessential American way of life — “modern,” “chic,” “cool” — thereby altering what and how people around the world consume, and increasing America’s ability to market its exports to other nations. Cognate to this, through its media organizations, the United States has, since the 1990s, been steadily gaining control of a major part of the world’s news services. Satellites today allow over 150 million households in approximately 212 countries and territories worldwide to subscribe to CNN, a member of the world’s largest media conglomerate, the U.S.-headquartered Time Warner — a fact with staggering implications for the United States because when governments around the world allow the importation of news from this agency, they in effect are allowing the importation of a piece of America’s political frameworks. By means of its media organizations, the United States aggressively shapes both global economics and global politics.

Mention must be made as well of the technological gadgetry—Internet-ready computers, fax machines, cell phones, video cameras—the cost of the design and proliferation of which the United States (together with its Western partners) has resolutely underwritten. This accumulating gadgetry is deployed to enhance freedom, or speed up the pace of worldwide integration, understanding, tolerance by facing authoritarian governments around the world with the practical impossibility of preventing their constituencies from acquiring knowledge about human rights, democracy, the liberation of women, etc. The resulting inflow and outflow of information and ideas renders authoritarian control more expensive to operate and maintain. Anyone with a concealed handheld video camera, for instance, can record government abuses and instantly transmit his images via the Internet

in order to place international pressure on the offending regime. So for the first time in history, a majority of states around the world are either democracies or in transition to democracy.

The above considerations are some of the generalizations that could be made concerning the omnipresence of American cultural values and products. Still, the whole situation should be assessed with caution.

To take an example, notwithstanding American patronage of the global spread of its own model of democratic politics, the democratization of nations is still not occurring in an even progression, with instances even of a backlash (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq). Notwithstanding strong American sponsorship of the market economy, it remains weakly developed in many states, with credit institutions, stock exchanges, company law, supervisory authorities in the financial sector, etc., at best embryonic, and the separation between economic and political power (characteristic of capitalist states), quite negligible. Indeed, some states (e.g., Burma, North Korea), remain closed economies, while others (e.g., Vietnam, Cuba, China), seek to attract foreign capital and investment, and even allow some degree of privatization of the economy, even as they insist that the central government still own and play a key role in many industries. Still other states have discovered the hard way that the transition to the market economy carries costs. In early 2002, for example, Argentina's economic difficulties led to five governments in four weeks. These costs, as Noble Prize-winning economist J. E. Stiglitz sees it, emerge because developing countries often have little to say about the rules and regimes that govern the global economy. The World Bank, WTO, and IMF, and similar institutions, according to Stiglitz, operate a homogenizing, "one size fits all" approach that fails to take national differences into account, in consequence of which the very economic reforms which they believe developing countries need to undertake if their economic problems are to be remedied, end up exacerbating these problems.³ The resulting instabilities then provide openings for, among other things, organized crime to step into the vacuum, as could be argued is the case with Russia with the old order pulled down, and the new laws and institutions which are intended to bring the country in greater line with free market economies still being built.

³ Cf. J. E. Stiglitz. *Globalization and its Discontents*. New York. W. W. Norton. 2002.

But even when the laws and institutions are working in the manner in which they are intended to work, profound systemic problems persist. The fact became only too clear in the course of the world's efforts, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, to freeze and seize the money of terrorist organizations, that "dirty money" follows many of the same paths as "clean money." Profits from illicit activities can be hidden in legal investments, spread out in front companies, inaccurately represented bank accounts, and countless small investments spread thin across a range of industries and states. With the Internet and e-cash, the money trail can move so quickly (at a keystroke) between interdependent economies, that tracking and stopping the flow of illicit cash becomes so difficult as to be almost impossible. In other words, the same global infrastructure that is such a boon to legal businesses increases as well the opportunity and ease of conducting and concealing illicit economic activities, such as the international smuggling of narcotics and of nuclear materials.

While it may be obvious that people around the world, to a far greater extent than ever before, are consuming the same products and brands, drive the same cars, watch the same movies and TV serials, listen to the same music, eat the same fast food, and travel in like manner on charter holidays, that is because these people live and move in the better off and more educated part of the world's population. Meanwhile, 2.8 billion other people have to survive on less than two dollars per day, almost a billion do not have access to proper water supply, and 2.4 billion are bereft of basic sanitary conditions. Our world remains riven by enormous economic inequalities and disparities between people and of nations, and there is little or no likelihood that these will disappear any time soon. Even among the most highly developed industrialized countries, conspicuous differences exist, giving rise to recurrent conflicts in such matters as trade policy, between Japan, the United States, and Europe, which operate quite distinct versions of capitalism.

Finally, whenever the discourse of cultural imperialism too facilely places America, or "the West," at the centre of a world system, it fails to grasp the differences, as well as the subtleties of interaction that exist in emerging cultural markets. Truth be told, the cultural products of any nation or aggregation of nations do not have sufficient manipulative and ideological power to immediately "envelop" all that they touch. The cumulative influence of American cultural products upon indigenous

cultures does not so much subjugate or obliterate “indigenous” cultural identity in favor of cultural uniformity, as restructure local cultural practices through processes of hybridization which adapt, innovate, maneuver, integrate, and deploy materials received from elsewhere in a manner that makes them more compatible with their own cultural norms. Indeed, if locals everywhere are likely to accept American products and ideas, it is not because American culture is totally coercive, but because its products and ideas are malleable, adaptable to various local specifications. Take the worldwide McDonald’s chain of fast food restaurants, which some have taken as the emblem of the worldwide diffusion of (American) cultural values such as efficiency (rapid service), calculability (fast and inexpensive), predictability (no surprises), and efficient control and handling of labor and customers. Yet in many parts of the world, the Philippines included, instead of efficiency, one finds people queuing up for a long time, and who, once they set foot on the premises, linger for additional long hours. Instead of predictability, McDonald’s modern aesthetics and food variation (e.g., many standard menu items are not served in franchises in Manila, and substitutions made) — so markedly different from the décor and menu offerings of most local establishments — are what makes it a hit among many local constituencies such as the young, blue collar workers, and middle class families. One of the reasons why McDonald’s in Manila is so popular is that families can hold children’s birthday parties on the premises. It has metamorphosed from a place one merely “drives through,” or ducks into for a quick bite to eat, into a veritable neighborhood institution, many times removed from what, in its place of origin, it may continue to be. This, of course, only matches the argument in business studies that when corporations seek to enter foreign markets, they must first adapt themselves to conditions on the ground. They must first become insiders. But, then, upon becoming insiders, they become susceptible to transformation under the impact of local contingencies and influences, which in the case of McDonald’s in say, Asia, could be viewed in terms of its return to its point of embarkation, considering that the origins of fast food may well be in the streetside food stalls of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, rather than in the West.

And that would be just as well, considering that the complex fabric of diverse cultures around the world constitutes a fundamental and indispensable basis of humanity. It would be a shame if ancient cultural

traditions were lost instead of being kept alive where possible. In face of what homogenizing effects any appearance of cultural imperialism may have upon local cultures, strategies need to be adopted that will preserve the mental, physical, intellectual, and creative aspects of societies everywhere. These could take the form of protective legislation (e.g., zoning laws and protected-area laws); the cultivation of a middle-class and elite with enough of a cultural integrity and social activism to resist those things that are truly alien but, at the same time, to receive those things that, while different, can nevertheless be enjoyed and celebrated as different; the establishment of nongovernmental, non-capitalist “civic spaces” such as village greens, places of religious worship, or community schools, where people can be educated in their native values and traditions. Indigenous cultures — which are mixtures of people’s shared ideas, beliefs, values, knowledge, inherited traditions, art—are stronger than they sometimes are thought to be. They comprise a complex, overlapping yet disjunctive order, the constituent parts of which are capable both of embracing and of learning from elsewhere without being overwhelmed by that experience. The individuals and groups that operate within them are not archaeological curiosities that repose in a museum, but are living, pulsing, thriving entities that cast off old customs they feel are no longer relevant even as they fashion new realities and identities out of the many ideas and commodities that the apparatuses of a globalizing world deliver to them.

Of a very much similar experience involving the men and women of his own time, John Stuart Mill once so very aptly observed:

“It is hardly possible to overrate the value, for the improvement of human beings, of things which bring them into contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar ... it is indispensable to be perpetually comparing [one’s] own notions and customs with the experience and example of persons in different circumstances ... there is no nation which does not need to borrow from others.”⁴ ☞

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 1848, 581-82.