

Chapter 5

The cultural dimension of globalization

As our opening discussion of the 2014 FIFA World Cup has shown, even a *very short* introduction to globalization would be woefully inadequate without an examination of its cultural dimension. Cultural globalization refers to the intensification and expansion of cultural flows across the globe. Obviously, 'culture' is a very broad concept; it is frequently used to describe the whole of human experience. In order to avoid the ensuing problem of overgeneralization, it is important to make analytical distinctions between various aspects of social life. For example, we associate the adjective 'economic' with the production, exchange, and consumption of commodities. If we are discussing the 'political', we mean practices related to the generation and distribution of power in societies. If we are talking about the 'cultural', we are concerned with the symbolic construction, articulation, and dissemination of meaning. Given that language, music, and images constitute the major forms of symbolic expression, they assume special significance in the sphere of culture.

The exploding network of cultural interconnections and interdependencies in the last decades has led some commentators to suggest that cultural practices lie at the very heart of contemporary globalization. Yet, cultural globalization did not start with the worldwide dissemination of rock 'n' roll, Coca-Cola, or football. As noted in Chapter 2, expansive civilizational

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exchanges are much older than modernity. Still, the volume and extent of cultural transmissions in the 21st century have far exceeded those of earlier times. Facilitated by the Internet and our proliferating mobile digital devices, the dominant symbolic systems of meaning of our age—such as individualism, consumerism, and various religious discourses—circulate more freely and widely than ever before. As images and ideas can be more easily and rapidly transmitted from one place to another, they profoundly impact the way people experience their everyday lives. Today, cultural practices have escaped the prison of fixed localities such as town and nation, eventually acquiring new meanings in interaction with dominant global themes.

The thematic landscape traversed by scholars of cultural globalization is vast and the questions they raise are too numerous to be fleshed out in this short introduction. Rather than offering a long laundry list of relevant topics, this chapter will focus on three important themes: the tension between sameness and difference in the emerging global culture; the crucial role of transnational media corporations in disseminating popular culture; and the globalization of languages.

Global culture: sameness or difference?

Does globalization make people around the world more alike or more different? This is the question most frequently raised in discussions on the subject of cultural globalization. A group of commentators we might call 'pessimistic' globalizers argue in favour of the former. They suggest that we are not moving towards a cultural rainbow that reflects the diversity of the world's existing populations. Rather, we are witnessing the rise of an increasingly homogenized popular culture underwritten by a Western 'culture industry' based in New York, Hollywood, London, Paris, and Milan. As evidence for their interpretation, these commentators point to Amazonian Indians wearing Nike sneakers; denizens of the Southern Sahara purchasing Yankees baseball caps; and

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Palestinian youths proudly displaying their Golden State Warriors basketball singlets in downtown Ramallah. Referring to the diffusion of Anglo-American values and consumer goods as the 'Americanization of the world', the proponents of this cultural homogenization thesis argue that Western norms and lifestyles are overwhelming more vulnerable cultures. Although there have been serious attempts by some countries to resist these forces of cultural imperialism—for example, a ban on satellite dishes in Iran, and the French imposition of tariffs and quotas on imported films and television programmes—the spread of American popular culture seems to be unstoppable.

But these manifestations of sameness are also evident inside the dominant countries of the global North. American sociologist George Ritzer coined the term 'McDonaldization' to describe the wide-ranging sociocultural processes by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world. On the surface, these principles appear to be rational in their attempts to offer efficient and predictable ways of serving people's needs. However, looking behind the façade of repetitive TV commercials that claim to 'love to see you smile', we can identify a number of serious problems. For one, the generally low nutritional value of fast-food meals—and particularly their high fat content—has been implicated in the rise of serious health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and juvenile obesity. Moreover, the impersonal, routine operations of 'rational' fast-service establishments actually undermine expressions of forms of cultural diversity. In the long run, the McDonaldization of the world amounts to the imposition of uniform standards that eclipse human creativity and dehumanize social relations (see Figure I).

One particular thoughtful analyst in this group of pessimistic globalizers is American political theorist Benjamin Barber. In his popular book *Consumed* (2007), he warns his readers against

an 'ethos of infantilization' that sustains global capitalism, turning adults into children through dumbed-down advertising and consumer goods while also targeting children as consumers. This ethos is premised on the recognition that there is not an endless market for consumerist goods as was once thought. Global inequality contributes to stifling the growth of markets and of capitalism. In order to expand markets and make a profit, global capitalists are developing homogeneous global products targeting the young and wealthy throughout the world, as well as turning children into consumers. Thus, global consumerism becomes increasingly soulless and unethical in its pursuit of profit.

Optimistic globalizers agree with their pessimistic colleagues that cultural globalization generates more sameness, but they consider this outcome to be a good thing. For example, American social theorist Francis Fukuyama explicitly welcomes the global spread of Anglo-American values and lifestyles, equating the Americanization of the world with the expansion of democracy and free markets (see Illustration 12). But optimistic globalizers do not just come in the form of American nationalists who apply the old theme of manifest destiny to the global arena. Some representatives of this camp consider themselves staunch cosmopolitans who celebrate the Internet and the latest digital devices as the harbinger of a homogenized 'techno-culture'. Others are free-market enthusiasts who embrace the values of global consumer capitalism.

It is one thing to acknowledge the existence of powerful homogenizing tendencies in the world, but it is quite another to assert that the cultural diversity existing on our planet is destined to vanish. In fact, several influential commentators offer a contrary assessment that links globalization to new forms of cultural expression. Sociologist Roland Robertson, for example, contends that global cultural flows often reinvigorate local cultural niches.

282 minutes	Average time Americans spend watching TV per day (2017)
46 minutes	Average time Americans spend socializing and face-to-face communicating per day (2014)
14 minutes and 15 seconds	Advertising content shown per one hour of prime time TV (2013)
16,000	Number of advertisements, logos and labels seen by the average American every day
\$78 billion	Money spent by TV advertisers on commercials per year (2013)
34.9%	Percentage of adult Americans who are obese (2012)
25%	The percentage of the average American's daily 'vegetable' intake that is made up of French fries
100 kg (5 kg)	Average annual intake of meat in the USA (vs India)
55-1,082	Average number of cows in a single fast-food hamburger patty
3	Average number of hamburgers eaten in the US per week (2012)
3.6-6.1 kg CO ₂	Carbon dioxide produced to make one hamburger
65,250,000 metric tons CO ₂	Carbon dioxide produced by the American hamburger consumption annually (more than Hungary's national CO ₂ output)

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I. The American way of life.

5	The number of other countries that contribute ingredients to the average American meal
256 million	The number of cars registered in the USA (2013)
254 million tonnes	Amount of rubbish produced by Americans (2013)
287 million tonnes	Total mass of living humans on Earth (2012)
46%	Percentage of Americans who believe that God created humans in their present form less than 10,000 years ago (2012)

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Sources: Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, 2003, 'Checking the food odometer: Comparing food miles for local versus conventional produce sales to Iowa institutions'; <http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/sites/default/files/pubs-and-papers/2003-07-checking-food-odometer-comparing-food-miles-local-versus-conventional-produce-sales-iowa-institution.pdf>; Centre for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>; Jamais Cascio, *The Cheeseburger Footprint*, 2012: http://www.openhethfuture.com/cheeseburger_CF.html; Statista: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/271380/average-viewing-time-in-north-america/>; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm>; Dharna Singh Khalsa, *Brain Longevity*, Grand Central Publishing, p. 29; Norman Herr, *The Sourcebook for Teaching Science*, 2012: <http://www.usun.edu/science/health/docs/vkhealth.html>; Statista: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/183505/number-of-vehicles-in-the-united-states-since-1990/>; Statista: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/189527/daily-time-spent-on-socializing-and-communicating-in-the-us-since-2009/>; Gallup Poll, Evolution, Creationism, Intelligent Design, 2012: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/21814/evolution-creationism-intelligent-design.aspx>; TV Week: <http://www.tvweek.com/vbzwire/2014/05/how-many-minutes-of-commercial/>; Environmental Protection Agency: <https://www.epa.gov/smm/advancing-sustainable-materials-management-facts-and-figures>; Michael Marshall, 'Humanity weighs in at 287 million tonnes.html' <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn21945-humans-weighs-in-at-287-million-tonnes.html>

framework characterized by a less stable sense of identity, place, and knowledge.

Given the complexity of global cultural flows, one would actually expect to see uneven and contradictory effects. In certain contexts, these flows might change traditional manifestations of national identity in the direction of a popular culture characterized by sameness; in others they might foster new expressions of cultural particularism; in still others they might encourage forms of cultural hybridity. Those commentators who summarily denounce the homogenizing effects of Americanization must not forget that hardly any society in the world today possesses an 'authentic', self-contained culture. Those who despair at the flourishing of cultural hybridity ought to listen to exciting Bollywood pop songs, admire the intricacy of several variations of Hawaiian pidgin, or enjoy the culinary delights of Cuban-Chinese cuisine. Finally, those who applaud the spread of consumerist capitalism need to pay attention to its negative consequences, such as the dramatic decline of traditional communal sentiments as well as the commodification of society and nature.

The role of the media

To a large extent, the global cultural flows of our time are generated and directed by global media empires that rely on powerful communication technologies to spread their message. Saturating global cultural reality with formulaic TV shows and mindless advertisements, these corporations increasingly shape people's identities and the structure of desires around the world. The rise of the global imaginary is inextricably connected to the rise of the global media. During the last two decades, a small group of very large TNCs have come to dominate the global market for entertainment, news, television, and film. In 2014, the eight largest media conglomerates—Comcast, Google, Disney, News Corporation, DirecTV, Viacom, Time Warner, and SONY—accounted for more than two-thirds of the \$1.5 trillion in annual

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12. Jihad vs McWorld: selling fast food in Indonesia.

Hence, rather than being totally obliterated by the Western consumerist forces of sameness, local difference and particularity still play an important role in creating unique cultural constellations. Arguing that cultural globalization always takes place in local contexts, Robertson rejects the cultural homogenization thesis and speaks instead of glocalization—the complex globalization dynamic involving the interaction of the global and local. The resulting expressions of cultural 'hybridity' cannot be reduced to clear-cut manifestations of 'sameness' or 'difference'. As we noted in our discussion of Lionel Messi and J. Lo in Chapter 1, such processes of hybridization have become most visible in fashion, music, dance, film, food, sports, and language.

But the respective arguments of globalizers and sceptics are not necessarily incompatible. The contemporary experience of living and acting across cultural borders means both the loss of traditional meanings and the creation of new symbolic expressions. Reconstructed feelings of belonging coexist in uneasy tension with a sense of placelessness. Indeed, some commentators have argued that modernity is slowly giving way to a new 'postmodern'

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worldwide revenues generated by the global telecommunications industry.

As recently as fifteen years ago, many of the giant corporations that dominate what Benjamin Barber has appropriately called the 'infotainment telescope' did not exist in their present form as a media company. Today, most media analysts concede that the emergence of a global commercial-media market amounts to the creation of a global oligopoly similar to that of the oil and automotive industries in the early part of the 20th century. The crucial cultural innovators of earlier decades—small, independent record labels, radio stations, movie theatres, newspapers, and book publishers—have become virtually extinct as they found themselves incapable of competing with the media giants.

The commercial values disseminated by transnational media enterprises not only secure the undisputed cultural hegemony of popular culture, but also lead to the depoliticization of social reality and the weakening of civic bonds. One of the most glaring developments of the last two decades has been the transformation of news broadcasts and educational programmes into shallow entertainment shows—many of them ironically touted as 'reality shows'. Given that news is less than half as profitable as entertainment, media firms are increasingly tempted to pursue higher profits by ignoring journalism's much vaunted separation of newsroom practices and business decisions. Partnerships and alliances between news and entertainment companies are fast becoming the norm, making it more common for publishing executives to press journalists to cooperate with their newspapers' business operations. A sustained attack on the professional autonomy of journalism is, therefore, also part of cultural globalization.

The globalization of languages

One direct method of measuring and evaluating cultural changes brought about by globalization is to study the shifting global

patterns of language use. The globalization of languages can be viewed as a process by which some languages are increasingly used in international communication while others lose their prominence and even disappear for lack of speakers. Researchers at the Globalization Research Center at the University of Hawaii have identified five key variables that influence the globalization of languages:

1. *Number of languages:* The declining number of languages in different parts of the world points to the strengthening of homogenizing cultural forces.
2. *Movements of people:* People carry their languages with them when they migrate and travel. Migration patterns affect the spread of languages.
3. *Foreign language learning and tourism:* Foreign language learning and tourism facilitate the spread of languages beyond national or cultural boundaries.
4. *Internet languages:* The Internet has become a global medium for instant communication and quick access to information. Language use on the Internet is a key factor in the analysis of the dominance and variety of languages in international communication.
5. *International scientific publications:* International scientific publications contain the languages of global intellectual discourse, thus critically impacting intellectual communities involved in the production, reproduction, and circulation of knowledge around the world.

Given these highly complex interactions, research in this area frequently yields contradictory conclusions. Unable to reach a general agreement, experts in the field have developed several different hypotheses. One model posits a clear correlation between the growing global significance of a few languages—particularly English, Chinese, and Spanish—and the declining number of other languages around the world. Another model suggests that

the globalization of language does not necessarily mean that our descendants are destined to utilize only a few tongues. Still another thesis emphasizes the power of the Anglo-American culture industry to make English—or what some commentators call ‘Globish’—the global lingua franca of the 21st century.

To be sure, the rising significance of the English language has a long history, reaching back to the birth of British colonialism in the late 16th century. At that time, only approximately seven million people used English as their mother tongue. By the 1990s, this number had swollen to over 350 million native speakers, with 400 million more using English as a second language. Today, more than 80 per cent of the content posted on the Internet is in English. Almost half of the world’s growing population of foreign students is enrolled at institutions in Anglo-American countries.

At the same time, however, the number of spoken languages in the world has dropped from about 14,500 in 1500 to about 6,400 in 2016 (see Figure J). Given the current rate of decline, some linguists predict that 50–90 per cent of the currently existing languages will have disappeared by the end of the 21st century. But the world’s languages are not the only entities threatened with extinction. The spread of consumerist values and materialist lifestyles has endangered the ecological health of our planet as well.

J. The declining number of languages around the world, 1500–2000. Source: Globalization Research Center at the University of Hawai‘i–Manoa.

Continents	Early 16th Century	Early 17th Century	Early 18th Century	Early 19th Century	Early 20th Century	Late 20th Century
Americas	2,175	2,025	1,800	1,500	1,125	1,005
Africa	4,350	4,050	3,600	3,000	2,250	2,011
Europe	435	405	360	300	225	201
Asia	4,785	4,455	3,960	3,300	2,475	2,212
Pacific	2,755	2,565	2,280	1,900	1,425	1,274
World	14,500	13,500	12,000	10,000	7,500	6,703