

Question: What is the 'cultural imperialism thesis' and how useful is it in explaining global cultural developments?

Answer: The increasing impact of globalisation processes raises important questions about homogenisation and differentiation of global cultural developments. Such questions become more acute as the influence of global businesses can be seen in local shopping centres where corporations such as Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Benetton, Sony and others sell their products and with them certain images and lifestyles. Increasingly, people find that their cultural experiences are pervaded by distant influences over which they seem to have little direct control. The transitional corporations may be exploiting profitable trading opportunities, but their products and technologies also promote capitalist values and (somewhat idealised) Western or American lifestyles. Even when these corporations set-up business units in developing countries and pay what to many appears to be a good wage, they are also promoting value systems which prioritise a work ethic, punctuality, thrift, conformity, a hierarchical organisational structures and other values conducive to a smooth accumulation of economic surpluses. Such surpluses are frequently exported to developed Western and/or capitalist societies. In the process, some developing economies are rendered subordinate to global capitalism and/or Western value systems. This subordination and domination is at the heart of the 'cultural imperialism thesis' (Tomlinson, 1993).

To explore the 'cultural imperialism thesis' this essay is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the 'cultural imperialism thesis'. The second part notes that the thesis has considerable currency in explaining some global relations between the developing and developed economies. However, its explanatory power in other cultural exchanges is somewhat limited. The third part concludes the essay by the summarising and discussing the arguments.

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM THESIS

The 'cultural imperialism thesis' is frequently invoked to explain the process of deterritorialization in which the relationship of culture to geographical and social territories is being increasingly reformulated by time and space compression (Negus, 1997; Robins, 1997). In this context, the thesis is a multi-layered conceptual tool for framing a complex totality of global cultural exchanges and interconnections (Tomlinson, 1997). It seeks to explain various strategies for regulation, deregulation and re-regulation on a broad global spectrum. At its heart is the claim that certain dominant cultures, primarily Western and/or American threaten to overwhelm other more vulnerable cultures (Tomlinson, 1993).

At one level the-thesis seems to suggest that some cultures are rendered subordinate to others and that -the encounters between cultures are never on equal terms. Some cultures and their value systems are privileged because of some historical circumstances. One of these relates to the processes of colonialism that enabled Western (in the historical rather than the geographical sense) cultures to impose their values on the conquered people of Asia, Africa, the Americas and many other parts of the world. The discourse of colonisation was based upon the cultural superiority of the 'West over the Rest' and the

Western notions of economic progress and liberal democracy frequently provided the benchmarks against which other cultures were supposed to measure their sense of being (Hall, 1992). Thus it could be argued that cultural imperialism has been operating at both the conscious and the unconscious level, providing images of what 'good' life means and seeking to shape people's identities (Said, 1985).

Another layer of the cultural imperialism thesis relates to the emergence of capitalism in the Western world. It often conflates Western and capitalist values, which may not necessarily be the same. There is some evidence to suggest that capitalism in Japan may be quite paternalistic compared to say capitalism in the UK. Nevertheless, it is argued that capitalism has been a major influence in ordering, structuring and regulating cultural exchanges, especially between the economically developed 'first world' and the 'developing world'. The emergence of capitalism in the 'first world', it is argued, has given the 'first world' considerable economic advantages and the capitalist classes that roam the world looking for new trading opportunities to expand their trade and profits. In pursuit of profits, the capitalist in the shape of transnational businesses rushed all over the globe, but the capitalist class could only expand its trade, wealth and power by being, settling, nestling and locating everywhere. As the bourgeoisie sought to recreate the world in its own image, it had to pay attention not only to economic but cultural aspects as well (Marx, 1977). Thus the production and consumption of goods/services is becoming increasingly unified not by choice but because of capitalist mode of production and the single way of producing commodities. Major corporations and the resulting trading relations are seen to be promoting capitalist and Western cultural values.

The third layer of the 'cultural imperialism thesis relates to the effects of American cultural exports to the rest of the world, especially after the second world war as the USA became not only a military but also an economic superpower. The American movies, television programmes, fast food (e.g. Pizza Hut McDonalds), drink (e.g. Coca-Cola) and corporations are seen to disseminate cultural products which marginalize local products and values. In particular, Americanisation has become a symbol of Western dominance. A key vehicle for this is the transnational media and communications industries which promote the ethos and values of corporate capitalism and consumerism through programmes such as *Dallas* and even comic books relating to Batman, Superman and other fictional heroes. As Barker (1989) puts it "American capitalism has to persuade the people it dominates that the "American way of life" is what they want. American superiority is natural and in everyone's best interest" (page 279).

The above historical, economic and cultural contexts also provide a backdrop to the emergence of major world institutions such as the International Monetary Funds (IMF), the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), United Nations and many of its offshoots (e.g. UNESCO). These organisations shape international relations. They promote and police Western concepts of liberal democracy. Organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank are supposed to help to secure economic stability, but it is a particular kind of economic stability. The stability which is conducive to the long-term well being of market economies.

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM: SOME EVIDENCE

The cultural imperialism thesis appears to have considerable explanatory power when applied to economic negotiations between developing nations and major Western institutions (Mosley, Harrigan and Toye, 1991; George and Sabelli, 1994). Consider the example of the way the World Bank operated in places such as Trinidad, ostensibly in the name of economic aid, but in the process profoundly shaping economic, social and global relations. On the back of the strong oil prices in the 1970s, Trinidad borrowed money to develop its economy. But during the 1980s, the oil prices declined and Trinidad had difficulty in meeting its debt obligations. It sought help from the IMF. The resulting aid was, however, not without ideological strings. The IMF required the Trinidadian government to make a number of 'structural adjustments', which amounted to a total adherence to the conditions laid down by the IMF and its major Western/American sponsors. These required the ending of public subsidies, state intervention and exchange controls, introduction of flexible labour markets and opening the local markets to global competition from Western based transnational firms. These conditions were imposed with the knowledge that Trinidadian businesses could not compete on equal terms as they did not have the same access (due to history and legacy of colonialism) to capital and technologies which are available to its Western counterparts. Thus Trinidad could produce whatever it could produce cheaply and compete in world markets. But with their historical and institutional advantages, its Western counterparts could outperform it. The World Bank aid may be responsible (intentionally or otherwise) for ensuring that places like Trinidad remain on the economic periphery and subordinate to Western capitalist values.

The explanatory power of the cultural imperialism thesis may be somewhat limited in other arenas as the influence of Western and American values are contested. Seemingly, the local and global combine to create new tensions and hybridisation. At one level much of the Western and American cultural superiority is frequently exhibited through films and television programmes. These celebrate consumerism and suggest that such a way of life is for everyone. Television programmes, such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, celebrate wealth and consumption, something which is essential to the perpetuation of capitalism and smooth accumulation of economic surpluses by transnational corporations. Indeed, through television and films, the fable of 'progress' is always told in terms of Western values where technology is usually supreme, Western rationalism triumphant and the Western hero (e.g. in James Bond films) always wins against non-Westerners who are clumsy, cruel, backward and stupid. Such fables can however be resisted. Thus countries, such as Iran, have tried to control the sale of satellite dishes and ban programmes, such as *Baywatch*, which promote Western meanings of sexuality. Some broadcasters have tried to transmit Western TV programmes to Asian cultures without tailoring them for local consumption, but the local public has resisted them. Thus cable companies, such as Zee TV, had to produce programmes which are particularly suited to the Indian market. In other places, globalisation has also encouraged local and ethnic cultures to come to the fore, as evidenced by the growth of local radios and televisions. Seemingly, the global not only hybridises, but it is also capable of giving visibility to the local experiences.

Similar tensions, resistance and hybridisation can also be found in other cultural exchanges. For example, McDonalds, well known for selling fast-food beef-burgers and hamburgers in the Western world, has opened branches in India. However, it cannot sell its usual products because cows are holy to Hindus and pigs are 'dirty' for Muslims. So McDonalds had to adapt and sells lamb, chicken and vegeburgers. This suggests that people from non- Western societies are not just passive consumers of Western and/or American cultural products. Consider another example relating to the advertising of Coca-Cola which aims to recruit new consumers by promoting glamorous examples of American life, freedom and values. In an ethnographic study of young Asians and their identification with Coca-Cola, Gillespie (1995) notes that young people preferred Coke because it made them feel American and free. For societies or groups which themselves have been marginalised, an identification with a global product creates a sense of being noted and recognised. Such appropriations of Coca-Cola may not have been written into the product but are actively made by consumers, albeit under numerous advertising and other influences. Whilst products such as Coca-Cola may be appropriated by young Asians in the UK, they can also be appropriated by people in very different circumstances. Thus Coca-Cola has come to have special significance in Trinidadian culture (Miller, 1997), possibly reflecting the Islands colonial past and its relationship with American soldiers during and after the Second World War. But Coke is now produced in Trinidad and is considered to be an ideal mixer for rum drinks. It has become a Trinidadian symbol of what it means to be modern. Similar trends can also be seen to be working in reverse i.e. Western value systems being influenced by cultures of the former colonies, as evidenced by varieties of foods (Indian, Chinese), music (reggae, rap etc.), religion (e.g. Buddhism, Islam) and philosophies which are shaping new identities.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This essay has argued that the 'cultural imperialism thesis' is complex and multi-layered. It seems to have considerable explanatory power when applied to circumstances which cannot easily be appropriated by the local context (Miller, 1997). The example of economic aid to Trinidad by the World Bank shows that much of the aid is conditional upon Trinidad (and other countries) aping capitalist and Western value systems. Economists predominantly educated in the Western world advocate neo-classical economic theories which developing countries have to comply with or wither. They seem to be saying that Western and capitalist values are the only choices available.

However in other cultural exchanges, such as food, drink, entertainment etc., it seems that the Western cultural products have to negotiate the complex local histories and traditions (Thompson, 1995). One might even argue that Western and capitalist values are not the same since capitalist economies in the Pacific-basin are courting and nurturing a different kind of capitalism which is perhaps more paternal. Another difficulty is that the cultural imperialism does not pay adequate attention to the varieties of cultural life in the Western world i.e. the Western world is assumed to be uniform and homogeneous. For example, the cultural products of France, Britain, Canada and other countries may be unique. The television soap operas, such as Eastenders and Coronation Street, may reflect a kind of kinship and community which only makes sense in a particular

social setting. They may not easily be transportable across the globe. The thesis whilst recognising the trends towards Americanisation does not give adequate recognition to various modes of resistance. It seems to assume that people passively fall prey to increasing Americanisation and Westernization. For example, it ignores the way the Canadian Broadcasting industry has sought to limit the influx of American television programmes, or the way the French government has sought to restrict the import of American films and television programmes.

At another level, it may be argued that economic development may be encouraging new hybridisation. As the McDonalds in India example shows, transnational corporations have to be sensitive to local contexts. However, from this one should not conclude that no Western, American or capitalist values are being promoted. It would appear that Western (or is it capitalist) rationalisation and calculability are implicitly being promoted by transnational corporations. Just to pursue the McDonalds or fast-food example, it compresses the time span and the effort made between a 'want' and its 'satisfaction'. It celebrates commodification, standardisation of products, deskilling, calculability, planning, costing, customer control, limiting consumer choice and so on. Thus it is argued that almost all cultural exchanges are carriers of some cultural values. Since many of the transfers are from the West, USA or advanced capitalist societies, some of their values are invariably transferred to other cultures. This is not to suggest that it is a one-way traffic since Indian, Chinese, Thai and other foods and garments and other cultural products can also be consumed in the Western world. But these exchanges themselves are predicated upon Western neo-classical economics which prioritise free trade, competition etc.

Overall, it appears that the cultural imperialism thesis is quite useful in illuminating cultural exchanges in the economic realm, but in other arenas, it may not necessarily recognise all the complexities of global relations.

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