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Subject Area - Internation Relations

Global Culture

What is meant by a 'global culture' and how and why do transnational corporations seek to promote such a culture?

A global culture can be seen in one of two ways. One suggests that today's communications and technologies allow a more open spread of culture around the world – people in far corners of the globe are able to be aware of and share each others culture. It is a view that sees global culture as generally positive – something that encourages diversity and a mixing of culture and has enabled people around the world to overcome national boundaries to embrace common causes. The more common perception of global culture is that of a Western, predominantly American culture gradually imposing itself around the world, often to the detriment of long established local cultures. For analysts opposed to globalisation this type of global culture is slowly killing diversity and devastating traditional ways of life. Scholte suggests that this viewpoint is that:

“Globalisation introduces a single world culture centred on consumerism, mass media, Americana and the English language” (p23 Scholte 2000). It is this type of global culture in particular that transnational companies are linked to and are generally happy to promote.

Transnational companies have become economic superpowers as globalisation has spread and the development of a global culture is seen to benefit them economically. Certainly the potential wealth that the transnationals can offer to indigenous populations can take precedence over the upholding of local tradition and culture. The basic human desire to accumulate wealth can often override cultural, ethnic and religious factors when transnational companies set their sights on economic expansion in a particular area.

A global culture involves the spread of popular cultural icons around the globe, often diluting and overriding local cultures with the threat that the vast cultural diversity that the world offers will one day be submerged beneath a dull uniformity. Advances in technology and communications have helped propagate cultural globalisation. Digital communication, satellite television and the Internet are methods of communication that can overcome any national boundaries or government control – as Held and McGrew write:

“Many national controls over information have become ineffective. People everywhere are exposed to the values of other cultures as never before” (p17, Held and McGrew 2003).

Deregulation of media ownership along with technological advances combined in the latter decades of the twentieth century to allow the largest media companies to establish networks in many countries. This media influence gives companies the opportunity to promote their own cultural preferences and it is notable that the global media is dominated by the same eight transnational media companies that dominate the US media: General Electric, AT&T Media, Disney, Time Warner, Sony, News Corporation, Viacom & Seagram and Bertelsmann (p261 Held and McGrew 2003). These companies aggressively seek to become global players – the US market is largely developed and the global markets provide better opportunities for expansion and getting ahead of the competition – Time Warner predict that non-US

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sales will yield the majority of their revenue within the next decade.

With the global expansion of US media companies comes the global expansion of US culture. The power of Hollywood is one of the prime examples of cultural globalisation with an American agenda. A seemingly endless line of films promoting an American cultural and political agenda emanate from Hollywood and have driven independent film making in many regions either out of business or underground. Some countries such as Norway, Mexico and South Africa have seen government subsidies try to support domestic film production companies, whilst the success of the Indian 'Bollywood' film industry is one of few examples of cinema audiences resisting the spread of a global culture. The economic benefits to the transnationals can be huge. Cable and digital television channels across the globe are owned by the major transnational companies and are hugely important parts of their revenue streams. Major Hollywood studios were expecting revenue from global TV rights to their film libraries to have exceeded \$11 billion by the end of 2002 (p261 Held and McGrew 2003).

The marketing power of the transnational companies ensures that the values, brands and culture of the US are spread globally. Some of the largest brands generate money that outstrips many national economies – Coca Cola's brand for example was estimated by a brand consultancy to be worth \$68.9 billion. (p119 Legrain 2002) The continuing expansion of such brands through the development of a global culture is something certain to boost the profits of the transnationals. Writers on globalisation such as Naomi Klein in particular link brands to global culture and the influence of the transnationals. She writes:

“Power, for a brand-driven company, is not attained by collecting assets per se, but by projecting one's brand idea onto as many surfaces of the culture as possible...” (New Statesman 24 Jan 2000). This view of those opposed to globalisations suggests that propelling popular cultural icons into established cultures and forcing homogenous culture to take a back seat to Western culture is very much the aim of transnational companies. Certainly, the marginalisation and dilution of local cultures through the efforts of Western media and brand marketing is a concern. Lloyd Fernando writes ominously:

“The world is truly eclectic and simultaneous these days and Marshal McLuhan's deterministic vision of us all being plugged into one vast electrical organism like domestic animals at a trough is far too close for us to laugh at” (P111 Mittelman and Othman 2001).

The spread of the English language is another aspect of a global culture that transnational companies promote. In addition to Western films, music and media being promoted across the globe in an attempt to dominate popular culture, the ability to speak English is becoming seen as practically a necessity to get on in many of the world's poorer nations – financial and economic institutions worldwide are adopting English and it is increasingly difficult to operate in the world's markets without the language. Mandal states:

“Globalizers actively promote English as a purely functional and even neutral language that is synonymous with economic growth, technological advancement and modernity as a whole” (p120 Mittelman and Othman 2001) and it is clear that non-governmental organisations such as the IMF and World Bank largely support the transnational companies in their promotion of English as a global language. Much of their analysis of the economic crisis in South East Asia in the 1990s suggests that the countries in the region that recovered best were those that had made the most progress in introducing the English language into the culture. Across the globe, governments are accepting this aspect of global culture – in

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South Korea large scale English villages are being developed for locals to immerse themselves into the language, whilst the Mongolian government, in a country landlocked by Russia and China has announced long term plans to make English its primary second language.

One of the greatest fears of those opposed to cultural globalisation is that it offers English speaking and western culture as something to aspire to whilst abandoning traditional culture. Hirst and Thompson write that:

“National cultures that aim to be dominant over the individual that belong to them are increasingly projects of resistance to and retreat from the world” (p266 Hirst and Thompson 2000) – in effect, people and cultures that do not embrace the Western led global culture are seen as conservative, suspicious and most probably less likely to see investment from transnational companies.

Globalisation is not going to go away, neither are the huge transnational companies. Some see the growth of a global culture and the wealth and opportunity that these huge organisations can bring as something for which diversity of culture can be sacrificed. They also argue, correctly, that people wherever they live do have a choice. Whatever the power of western marketing, if people across the globe choose to maintain their own culture and reject global or western culture, they have the power to do so. Others continue to argue that cultural globalisation in itself promotes diversity and a respect for other cultures. Those opposed to globalisation remain strongly opposed to the spread of the stereotypical McDonalds and Coke culture that personifies Western and particularly American culture. For transnational companies, profits are the bottom line and continual expansion across the globe is one of the best ways to ensure that they continue to make a profit. Transnational companies, rightly or wrongly, have little concern for the protection of local culture – if a global culture will ensure that more of their products are sold, they will continue to promote it.

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