

Notes On Cultural Globalisation

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Starting with the 70's, the word 'globalisation' has become one of the most used concepts in social analysis. The popularity of the term and its utilization, unfortunately excessive, is due probably to the fact that, apart from many of the social sciences concepts, this one seems to have a clear, unambiguous signification. Conform to Albrow's definition (1990, cf. Pieterse, 1995) globalisation 'refers to all those processes by which the people of the world are incorporated into a single world society, in the global society'. So, globalisation is a useful concept for analysis of any dimension of the social field: economy, politics, culture, . . . The problem is that the notion of globalisation as used in analysis of these dimensions has often different significations. This thing is obvious when we try to answer the question: what exactly means 'a single world society?' Has this expression identical meaning when its references are the culture and the economy, for example? I do not think so, considering that the ambiguities come from two sources.

- 1) When we say 'society', in spite of using the singular, our cognitive reference frame is most often the plural: societies. The label of the singular is not so much the result of a theoretical adherence to the holistic paradigm, but a comfortable communicational and pragmatic option as regards the analysed.
- 2) When we talk about 'the global society, a single world society' we have the possibility to operate with two criteria: the criterion of interdependence and the criterion of similarity.

Usually when references are made to economic globalisation, the main criterion used to motivate the idea of the 'one single world economy' is that of the interdependence. Otherwise the economic interdependencies are so huge at this moment that the concept of global economy is totally overshadowed in spite of the structural differences, which exist among the economies that compose the 'global society'. The more powerful the interdependence is, the more structured is the relation among the system elements and is more justified to speak about 'a single system'.

When references are made to cultural globalisation, the main criterion used is that of similarity. Although we implicitly accept the existence of a reciprocal influence, cultural globalisation is most often defined in terms of identity similarity. While economic globalisation is evaluated on a continuum of interaction, having as its extremes autarchy and reciprocal dependence. On the other hand, cultural globalisation is evaluated on a continuum of similarity having as its extremes homogeneity and specificity.

If economic globalisation can be more or less clear defined and understood, with regards to cultural globalisation the perspectives are extremely different. Different aspects of the same reality are selected and opposite interpretations are proposed. This is added proof that in the

social sciences the Aristotelian criterion of the truth as ‘it is white what is white’ does not totally work.

There are two major tendencies involving the cultural globalisation analysis. These can be synthesised as ‘McWorld’ and ‘Jihad World’, according to Barber's terminology. An equivalent label for McWorld could be ‘homogeneity’ and for Jihad World, ‘specificity’¹. But these are not overlapping. The symbols McWorld and Jihad World synthesise the defining features of the present world reality, while homogeneity and specificity represent theoretical positions relative to the empirical reality. The distinction becomes clear if we make a contingency table between the ‘World Evolution’ and ‘World Cultures Evolution’ trends (Table 1). The intersection fields represent a combination between one option of empirical selection-- which are the defining characteristics of the contemporary reality? What is going on?—and a theoretical option—which are the significations of empirical reality? The four resulting situations represent at the same time different approaches of the cultural globalisation process and scenarios of world evolution from the cultural dimension point of view.

Table 1

World Culture Evolution	World Evolution	
	McWorld; McDonald/Coca Cola World	Jihad World Balkanisation
Homogenisation	1	3
Specification	2	4

Approach – Scenario 1: McWorld/ Cultural Homogeneity

Globalisation is materialised in terms of economic interdependency and subsequently gives rise to cultural homogenisation. From this perspective, cultural globalisation means similarity. The sentence, ‘Men who get the same things, share the same culture’, expresses this paradigm. Hamburger and Coca Cola are more than food; they have become cultural items. The core assumption of this approach is that if we see the same movies, wear the same clothes and buy the same things we are identical. Those who make the same things and spend their time in the same way, have the same culture. The uniformity trend is positivist motivated: the same economic structures and consumption opportunities define cultural similarities. Modernity means uniformity. In conclusion, the expansion of western civilisation is accompanied by the domination of western culture.

¹ I prefer the dichotomy: homogeneity - specificity instead of that proposed by Robertson, homogeneity-heterogeneity, due to the fact that interculturality, which also defines heterogeneity, is not far enough in meaning from homogeneity.

Approach – Scenario 2: McDonald World – Cultural Diversity

Globalisation is unquestionably real, but the similarities are superficial. It is true that we buy the same things, but our cultural identity does not lie in our shopping. This approach is grounded on the assumption of the dichotomy of civilisation-culture. Civilisation refers to the artefacts field while culture to the beliefs field (Malita, 1999). Globalisation includes only the civilisation dimension and it is evaluated in terms of similarity.

The approach seems to have empirical consistency. As Friedman says: 'in order for globalisation to be homogenizing it is also necessary for the frames of attribution of meaning to belong to the same frame as the place where 'the thing was first produced ... The prerequisite for strong globalisation is the homogenisation of local contexts, so that subjects in different positions in the system have a disposition to attribute the same meaning to the same globalised objects, images, representations'. (1999, p.77)

The emergence of a unique world civilisation does not affect cultural diversity, because local cultural determination particularise the meanings of the items which compound global structural similarities.

If the first approach is theoretically grounded in Marxist materialism, the second approach seemingly adheres to the phenomenological paradigm: the institutional items are not really very important, the significations shared by the participants who interact are crucial. These significations could be extremely different even if the institutional realities are the same. This assertion is partially true. I remember the opening of the first Mc Donald's in Romania. For many customers, Mc Donald's was not just a fast food (for some, it was not even a fast food), but a space to legitimise one's social status. These customers put on their Sunday clothes before eating a hamburger and considered the frequency of visiting this fast food establishment as a sign of prestige reflective of their behaviour.

The supporters of the first scenario will assert that beyond the localisation of the meaning, the real fact is that almost everywhere in the world people drink Coca Cola and eat Mc Donald's hamburgers. And this behaviour has a cultural signification. Hunger and thirst are biological needs, but conforming to Malinowski, the institutionalised ways to satisfy biological needs belong to the culture. It is true that civilisation satisfies our physiological demands, but these demands have a cultural determinant. So, it is difficult to agree that civilization satisfies only physiological demands, and culture only spiritual demands, because physiological and spiritual needs are finally interrelated. So, despite the localisation of the meaning, everytime someone eats a McDonald hamburger he/she can not stay away from the McDonald's philosophy and that he/ she inherently adheres to this philosophy: eat fast and go.

On the other hand, the second approach is theoretically extremely vulnerable. The postulate of civilisational uniformity under conditions of cultural diversity maintenance asserts a relation of independence between culture and civilisation. In other words there is a cleavage between the values of a society and its institutional structure. This situation cannot be found in reality but only as a transition situation. The possible relationships between civilization defined as the artefacts field and culture defined as the ideational field are either of causal determination

(materialism of culturalism) or of interdependence. We cannot speak about a 'single world society with a single civilisation and thousands of cultures because that means a world where all that is included in the field of 'ways of doing' (economic structures and behaviours, artefacts, institutions, and so on) is modifying and becomes similar but all that is included in the field of 'ways of thinking' (beliefs, attitudes, values and so on) remains different.

In conclusion, the postulate of a radical dichotomy between civilisation and culture is useful, first of all ideologically, because it allows us to agree with an undeniable reality: civilisational globalisation, and to reject that which cannot be feasible: cultural uniformity. The future world can be a world with a unique décor, but not a world with identical characters.

Approach – Scenario 3: Jihad World – Homogenisation

At first sight, it represents a contradiction, a theoretical impossibility. The Jihad world is identical with Balkanisation and means by definition, the localism burst, the open assumption of the minority identity, the refusal of homogenisation and specificity. Balkanisation as an expression of localism domination is the opposite of homogenisation.

The contingency between an empirical reality characterised by fragmentation and individualisation and a uniformised cultural trend is based on the following:

- 1) The localism explosion represents a consequence of globalisation, a reaction to the homogenisation trend. Globalisation blew up the space, getting us off our comfortable proximity to a relatively alike 'the other' and throwing us to the proximity of many different 'the others'. The awareness of 'the others' has influenced the process of defining our self-identities. On the other hand, globalisation has also changed the minority status. From the global point of view, all of us are minorities and now it becomes normal, more desirable and even gainful to assume a status that was previously often avoided because of the perceived threat of being stigmatized.
- 2) As Friedman said, quoting Robertson: 'The local is itself a global product, the particular is an aspect of globalisation rather than its complementary opposite. A whole series of local and localising phenomena - ethnicity, nationalism, and indigenous movements can be understood as global products.
- 3) Balkanisation is only an intermediary stage of the globalisation process. It is required to make distinction between globality as a state of fact and globalisation as an unfolding process with globality as a final end. Seemingly this distinction belongs to common sense, so it is obvious and futile. But an important part of the debates concerning globalisation ignores it. For example, the denial of the cultural globalisation process, which is taking place now on the basis of present cultural diversity. We cannot analyse globalisation if we are not taking temporal references. I agree with Robertson's idea of privileging space over temporality, but it means something else than just ignoring time as a core analysis frame. If it is taking count of the temporal, frame reference as a good part of the localism supporters' reason becomes obviously false. A good example is the use Japanese attendance at Shintoist temples in supporting the idea of tradition maintenance

in Japanese society. This example could be otherwise generalised because in any society the attendance in church is an unreliable indicator of traditionalism. This indicator has no validity if it is not compared with the frequency of the behaviour and the subjective importance granted by believers to it in a 'traditional' pre-industrial society and in an industrial or post-industrial society. The fact that Japan has kept in a large measure its cultural specificity is undeniable. But the statement is only half true. To be complete, the answer must be given to the question: at the end of the century, will the Japanese still find themselves at the same cultural distance from Europeans and Americans as in the beginning of the century?

In conclusion, for the third scenario, localism is real but not sustainable. It represents a transition stage on a road which has as its terminal point, cultural homogeneity.

Approach- Scenario 4: Jihad World – Cultural Diversity

This situation represents either a globalisation denial, or the postulate of a very strict cultural determinism. The identical institutional structures generated by modernity are locally contextualized by cultures.

The fourth approach is the opposite of the first approach. It considers that at the global level similarities are superficial, and the world is a space of diversity. Globalisation in spite of the spatial distance's cancelling does not alter the identities' distances. The "other's" proximity does not change the way of defining our self-identities and the post-globalisation world remains the same with the world before globalisation. The only difference consists in the fact that now we are all aware of each other.

Like the second scenario, the fourth scenario is rather the output of an ideological option than an objective approach of reality.

Therefore, if the second and fourth approaches are ideological, and the third approach is a transitory stage from the first approach, does it mean that cultural globalisation is equivalent with cultural homogenisation?

Over the long term I think the answer is "yes". But this does not necessarily mean the loss of cultural diversity.

Homogeneity does not cancel diversity. A unique identical global culture is equally as likely as the existence of unique national cultures. In fact, cultures are conglomerates of subcultures (the term has no evaluative connotations). Belonging to a given culture, for example Romanian culture, is less relevant in defining personal behaviours and values than the actual belonging to a given social class. What differentiates a group of Romanian lawyers from a group of Romanian farmers is more important than what brings them together due to their affiliation to the same national culture.

Even when uniformized, the global culture of global society can not be only a conglomerate of diversity, but certainly a different diversity than the one existing before globalisation.

One of the main functions of the culture is to provide social identity. It constitutes a pervasive effect of cultural globalisation, the fact that the more the cultures' interactions increase the more generalised is the need of assuming a distinct, personalised cultural identity. The great danger of cultural globalisation is not the decrease of cultural identity diversity, but a difference in superficialisation among these identities. I do not refer to the fact that migration flows associated to globalisation, the space cancelling as interaction barrier and the communication revolution blow out the borders among cultures. The disappearance of the difference, which were delimits the borders changes the way in which we define ourselves and the ones next to us. But, even in a global world, a Chinese will still think of himself as Chinese and he still has the same consciousness of his ethnic affiliation.

The difference in superficialization is debt to the generalisation of a common values core. Economic globalisation does not only mean interdependence, but also the spread of capitalism as a dominant economic model, a capitalism grounded on a consumption culture. Contemporary capitalism has as its defining feature the concept of benefit maximisation which means a ceaseless increase in consumption.

Finally, it does not matter who is right in the debate concerning the relationships between the institutional structure and the values of a given society: Marx or Weber. The really important thing is the complementary relationships which are developed between these two dimensions of the social field. The globalisation of the market economy means the spreading of the cultures' consumption. In consequence the actual trend for the cultural globalisation process is to generalise at the global level the crux value of "to have". But nowadays "to have" is very different from the original Protestant ethic of "to have" which assumed an almost ascetic character. Protestant wealthiness proved that individuals were good Christians, God-blessed persons. The core values in Protestantism, which were hard work and accumulation, also originated capitalism. However, the individual in contemporary capitalism does not accumulate any more. He spends. "To have" is now hedonistic. For a Protestant "to have" was only a means to fulfil his main goal: "to be". For a consumption culture "to have" becomes an end.

This is therefore the main problem of the actual trend of cultural globalisation. The crux values of the cultural global system are increasingly becoming "to consume" and hedonism. But a global society made up around these values cannot be something else than a self-destroying society.

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