**Sociology**

# Globalisation

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# Teaching Notes

As **Sklair** (1999) suggests, globalisation provides a context for understanding the relationship between societies in the contemporary world because it represents a *process* that both reflects and contributes to *change* - the idea that how nations relate to each other is different *now* compared to even the very recent past. In this respect, therefore, we need to understand what globalisation is – how it can be initially defined - before we can apply it to an understanding of changing economic, political and cultural relationships.

Although we can refer, in vague terms, to globalisation as 'a process', it's much harder to pin down a definition that's broadly recognised and accepted within the sociology of development. It is with good reason, therefore, that **Rosamond** and **Booth** (1995) refer to globalisation as a *contested concept* – one whose meaning is nebulous, fluid and hotly debated.

This position is further complicated by what **Scholte** (2000) argues are ideas that, while frequently positioned as evidence of globalising tendencies – and which clearly have global consequences - but which are not, in themselves, "globalisation". These include:

> **Internationalisation:** 'cross-border relations between countries'.

> **Liberalisation** of political and economic relationships, such as 'removing government-imposed restrictions on movements between countries'.

> **Universalisation** of cultural forms (such as television) 'in the sense of spreading various objects and experiences to people of all corners of the earth'.

> **Modernisation** involving the spread of the social structures of *modernity* (capitalism, rationalism, industrialism, and so forth) across the world.

In this respect the key to understanding globalisation is not to see it as a "thing" but rather as a *process* that *facilitates other processes*, something **Virilio** (2000) expresses when he argues:

'*The speed of light does not merely transform the world. It becomes the world.*

*Globalisation is the speed of light. And it is nothing else!*'

In other words, globalisation is a process (or, more-correctly, a set of interrelated processes) that, through the speed of its occurrence, transforms the nature of other processes (such as the transfer of capital, physical movement and the flow of information around the globe). In so doing it becomes synonymous with change – an idea we can develop by looking at four key components of globalisation.

## 1. The distanciation of time and space

**Giddens** (1990) argues a major feature of globalisation is the way concepts of time and space are increasingly "distanced" or separated from each other, an idea we can illustrate in the following way: In the past, time and space were largely inseparable in the sense that to experience "an event" at the same time as other people everyone had to be in the same physical space.

For example, when you watch a live TV broadcast in your home of your favourite band or football team *time* is *separated* from *space. A*lthough the event and your viewing occur at the same time, you don't have to be physically present at the event to view it (and if you record it for later viewing, time and space are even further separated). This feature of globalisation (in this example the *speed* at which television pictures can be transmitted and received) means communication can take place instantaneously *across the globe*, 'as if' people occupied the same physical space. This, for **Virilio,** means globalisation makes concepts of distance and physical space *irrelevant* in the contemporary world – an idea closely linked to a second feature of globalisation.

## 2. The compression of time and space

**Harvey** (1990) argues globalisation compresses time and space differences in the sense that the speed at which things can be done shortens the time required to do them because such speed effectively shrinks distances (not literally, of course). Think, for example, about the time it takes to send an email to someone on the other side of the world as opposed to sending a letter or actually visiting them.

## 3. Disembedding

**Ebeltoft** (1998) sees both *distanciation* and *compression* as representing the 'vital preconditions' for disembedding - an idea with direct consequences for our understanding of changing social relationships. If something is *embedded* it is firmly fixed in its surroundings; it is, for example, located in a particular context that gives it a particular meaning.

*Disembedding*, on the other hand, means things are separated from their original surroundings and contexts, such that there is no logical or necessary connection between the two. This can include, for example:

   **objects**, such as credit cards - disembedded from their original physical Context (coinage)
   **processes**, such as the electronic transfer of money into and out of a bank account. There is no embedded relationship here between sender and receiver, unlike where something like cash changes hands.
   **people**, in a couple of ways:

Firstly, in the sense instantaneous global communication is both possible and takes place in *indeterminate space,* such as Facebook, Skype or Twitter; that is, in a "space" that both exists (because people can talk to each other, exchange messages, photos, videos and the like) but which also doesn't "exist": Twitter, for example, doesn't exist outside of your computer.

Secondly, in the sense of physical and cultural disembedding: the former in terms of *territoriality* and its associated meanings - how people define themselves in terms of national identities, for example - and the latter in relation to the various ways cultural hybrids (the mixing of different cultures to produce something new and different) develop out of the globalisation process.

## 4. Deterritorialisation or supraterritoriality

**Scholte** (2000) suggests physical and cultural *disembedding* has important consequences for a range of economic, political and cultural relationships, particularly in the context of geographic territories. Globalisation, in this respect 'entails a reconfiguration of geography, so that social space is no longer wholly mapped in terms of territorial places, territorial distances and territorial borders'.

In other words, social interactions are no longer limited by notions of 'territory' (places that are fixed in time and space), an example being, as we've suggested, the Internet as a place where social interaction occurs in *indeterminate space*.

In addition, *deterritorialisation* also refers to the idea *political and cultural identities* are no longer necessarily and intimately tied to physical spaces (such as nation states); one can, for example, be a Muslim in a Christian country or a British citizen permanently living in Spain.

It also refers to the fact that, economically, capitalist forms of production, distribution and exchange (both manufacturing and services) operate on a global scale, cutting across national and international borders.

For **Scholte**, the significant point here is that the spread of 'supraterritorial connections' between societies, cultures and individuals 'brings to an end…"territorialism", a situation where social geography is entirely territorial. Although…territory still matters very much in our globalizing world, it no longer constitutes the whole of our geography'.

A further aspect here, according to **Giddens** (1990), is 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa'.

In other words, the processes of *disembedding* and *deterritorialisation* connect both nations and individuals in new and important ways; events on one side of the world can have significant and unforeseen consequences on the other side of the world, something we can illustrate by some simple examples:

1. The tsunami that struck Indonesia on Boxing Day 2004 was an event that attracted worldwide publicity and aid - a local event with a global economic, political and cultural significance.

2. In 2008 the financial crisis in America, triggered by the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market, led to the failure of a major banking institution (Lehmann Brothers) and a subsequent world-wide financial crisis whose effects are still being felt.

3. In 2016 the UK voted (by 52% - 48%) to leave the European Union - something that, at this juncture has unknown (but not unpredictable) consequences for the UK, European and indeed global economy…

Having identified what we might term the "essential features" of globalisation we can now turn to thinking about how this "*process* that *facilitates other processes*" can be applied, beginning with **changing economic relationships**.

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# OUT

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# 2. Changing Economic Interrelationships    5

The first dimension of globalisation we can outline and examine is the changing nature of economic relationships, based around the idea of **trade**; this involves the *production*, *distribution* and *exchange* of goods and services focused around manufacturing, financial instruments and, increasingly, knowledge industries.

In the context of globalisation, a key idea here is the concept of **mobility**, something that has two main dimensions:

*Capital mobility*, whereby companies and investments move into and out of different countries as profitability and economic policy dictates.

*Labour mobility*, where workers can move with relative freedom between nation states.

Such mobility – with the emphasis predominantly on the former – reflects the increasingly global nature of stock markets and trading blocs. These, in turn, have a number of key features:

## 1. TransNational Corporations (TNCs)

TNCs are companies that, while *based* in a specific territory (such as Britain or the USA), *operate* in a range of countries and markets across national borders. Although TNCs are a feature of *modern society* (first established in countries like the USA in the 19th century), **Smith** and **Doyle** (2002) suggest globalisation has increased their power and status in world economic terms.

## 2. Economic Trading Blocs

Trading blocs, such as the European Union or the North and South American Trading Alliance, represent a further example of the economic interconnections between societies. In these instances, nation states develop political agreements and alliances that involve things like preferential trading privileges for member nations.

## TYPES OF TRADE BLOCS

| PREFERENTIAL TRADE AREA | FREE TRADE AREA | CUSTOMS UNION | COMMON MARKET | ECONOMIC UNION | FULL INTEGRATION |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lower, but not eliminate, barriers among members. | Eliminate internal barriers, but maintain independent external barriers. *e.g., NAFTA* | Eliminate internal barriers, agree on common external barriers. *e.g., EU/Turkey, or Russia/ Kazakhstan/ Belarus (2010)* | Eliminate internal barriers, adopt common external barriers, allow free movement of resources (e.g., labor) among member countries. *e.g., Mercosur (Southern Cone Market), East African Common Market, or West African Common* | Eliminate internal barriers, adopt common external barriers, free movement of resources, AND a uniform set of economic policies. *e.g., European Union* | *e.g., the United States* |

## 3.   Virtual Trading Communities

More-recently, the development of the Internet has further complicated the nature of economic interrelationships in the sense that an increasing amount of economic activity takes place in virtual space - communities that have no physical contact, as such, but which are connected in cyberspace.



These economic networks involve the distribution and exchange of both *physical products* (such as books and electrical goods in the case of **Amazon**, the world's largest online company) and, increasingly, *financial products*, *services* and *knowledge*. The implications for the future development of virtual trading communities are enormous, given the ability for companies (both large and small) to tap into a potentially global audience and market for their goods and services.
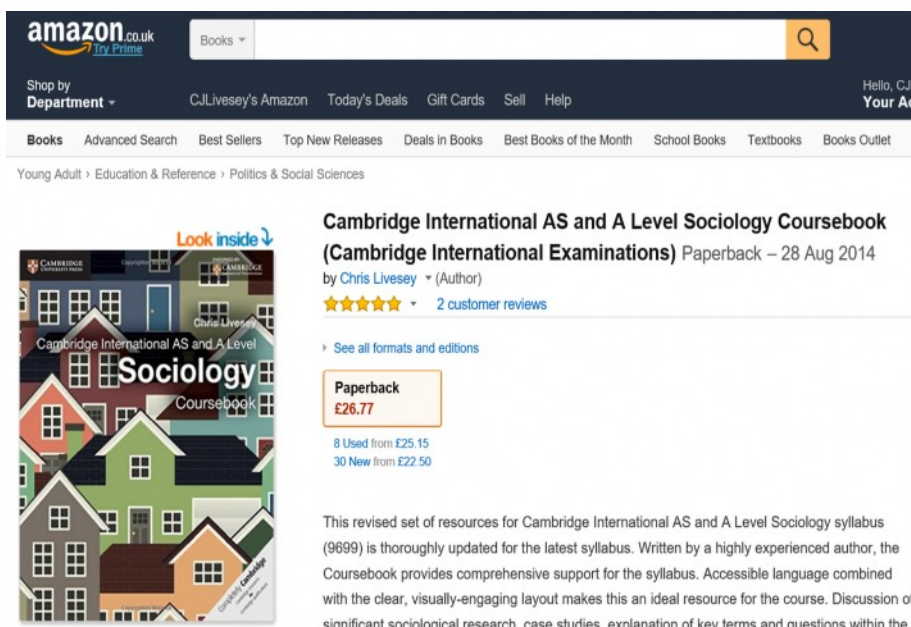
In particular, one implication is the breakdown (through the types of globalizing processes we have already noted – distanciation, compression, disembedding and deterritorialisation) of distinctions between the local, national, international and global.

**Disembedding**, for example, is both encouraged and accelerated by globalisation in areas like economic *exchange* (the development of credit cards, smart cards and the like). This process also occurs in terms of economic production and distribution.



In highly developed countries such as the UK and USA there has been a progressive *decline* in manufacturing – both *primary industrial production* (the extraction of raw materials like coal) and *secondary production* (things like car manufacture and shipbuilding), a consequent rise in service industries (such as finance and banking) and, in recent times, knowledge industries (such as computing). The production of goods hasn't stopped, of course (people still want to buy these things); rather, manufacturing has shifted to less developed countries.

## Global Commodity Chains

We can apply these ideas to an understanding of globalisation and changing economic interrelationships by initially noting **Sporer's** (2000) argument that 'Globalisation is the latest stage in the permanent process of social change that started as industrialization and modernisation in Europe but now is spreading globally', and that, in economic terms, it 'involves the process of converting separate national economies into an integrated world economy'. This involves, according to **McMichael** (2004), the development of **global commodity chains**.

The basic idea here is that in an increasingly globalised economic system, networks of production, distribution and exchange are linked across national boundaries, such that individual producers and consumers are locked into a global chain of economic events. The significance of this idea is not simply the various linkages involved (since trade across national boundaries can hardly be considered new), but the *network* of economic relationships that creates:

   **Hierarchies** - whereby highly developed countries sit atop the global commodity chain, exploiting the fact that clothes or electrical goods can be manufactured using relatively cheap labour in developing countries.

   **Dependencies**: Unequal economic relationships create a network of dependencies that is difficult to break; developing countries become a source of relatively cheap production whereas developed countries come to depend, in some respects, on the flow of (cheap) goods to maintain certain living standards.

As **McMichael** argues, the nature of global networks, complexities and dependencies can be illustrated in the following terms:

'The Japanese eat poultry fattened in Thailand with American corn, using chopsticks made with wood from Indonesian or Chilean forests. Canadians eat strawberries grown in Mexico with American fertiliser…The British and French eat green beans from Kenya, and cocoa from Ghana finds its way into Swiss chocolate'.

In this respect, **Held et al.** (1999) pinpoint three areas of economic globalisation and interrelationships:

### 1. Global trade

This involves the 'globalisation of production', whereby products can be sourced from different places and assembled in whatever country is able or willing to offer the most advantageous political and/or economic incentives.

### 2. Global finance

The flow of global production and distribution requires an extensive network of financial arrangements whereby capital can be moved around the world quickly and easily. The development of global financial institutions (such as banks) is, like international trade, not new, but the ease and *speed* by which money can be moved and managed have been increased by the development of computer technology and global networks. In addition, money has itself become a commodity traded on global markets as investors (and speculators) execute deals across global networks.

### 3. Global products

The opening up of *global marketplaces* means companies best positioned to take advantage of such developments (TNCs in particular) can sell products on a world stage. Corporations not only have access to markets and populations in different countries, they can also, as **Yip** (1995) argues, sell the *same product* (such as a car, computer game or film) across the globe with little or no alteration to the basic product.

## Globalised Capitalism

Although Corporations have operated around the world since at least the 19th century, **Castells** (1997) argues the way they operate 'in a global context' has changed. A new *form* of capitalism has developed, one related to older forms, but sufficiently different to be considered in its own right. He argues *globalised capitalism* has two key features:

**1. Information** and **knowledge:** Whereas older forms of capitalism focused on the production of *things*, newer forms focus on knowledge, information and systems.

**2. Reordering:** This isn't to say companies no longer produce things (like cars) or that information wasn't significant in the past; rather, within globalised capitalism information is now the *primary* product; as **Smith** and **Doyle** (2002) put it, "Today's most technologically advanced economies are truly knowledge-based".

## Evaluation

Although there's a general agreement that *something* is changing in terms of global economic inter-relationships, not everyone agrees about what these changes *involve*. In basic terms, therefore, we can note three *general positions* in relation to *economic globalisation*:

**1. Full** involves the changes we've just outlined, with globalisation considered the motor for a new phase of capitalist economic production, distribution and exchange - one with major consequences for the way economic interrelationships are formed and maintained.

**2. Partial** or **Regional** globalisation. The world, according to **Thompson** (2000), is divided into three major *regional economic blocs* (North and Central America, Europe and Asia), *within* which there are "globalised economic processes". Each regional blocs is, however, effectively *closed* to competition from the other. Apart from a handful of global companies, such as **Nike**, most TNCs and nations trade predominantly and substantially *within* each bloc.

**3. Mythical**: **Rugman** and **Hodgetts** (2000) note economic globalisation is often defined by 'the production and distribution of products and services of an homogeneous type and quality on a worldwide basis'. This, they argue, sees globalisation portrayed as encouraging the 'dominance of international business by giant, multinational enterprises (MNEs) selling uniform products from Cairo, Illinois to Cairo, Egypt and from Lima, Ohio to Lima, Peru'.

**Rugman** (2001), however, argues such economic globalisation is 'misunderstood – it does not, and has never, existed in terms of a single world market with free trade'. This argument, backed by a range of *empirical data* relating to where and how businesses conduct international trade, both reinforces **Thompson**'s argument and expands it by arguing that attempting to trade in 'globalised markets' does not make economic sense even for TNCs. Regional differences of language, culture, politics and so forth make it too costly for even the largest companies to operate in a truly global way.

Counter to this, perhaps, is the argument that over the past 10 -15 years we've seen a significant development in terms of globalised knowledge and services (epitomised by globe-spanning gigantic corporations such as Amazon, Facebook and Apple).

This involves both the lucrative trade in personal data and the development of "globalised products" – from mobile phones to media subscription services – that have become new and hugely-valuable global commodities.

# 3. Changing Political Interrelationships

Conventionally, political relationships operate between nation states in three general areas:



**1. Trade**: Transnational trading blocs (in North/South America, Asia and Europe) involve some measure of political interrelationship. In Europe, *economic* interrelationships have developed alongside *political* interrelationships – the European Union has an elected parliament, bureaucratic structure and single European currency, although member countries may opt out of specific parts of political agreements (the UK, for example, was not part of the single European currency).

On a global level, world trade agreements relating to the movement of goods, access to markets, etc. provide a regulatory framework for economic activity. In some instances, these agreements override national law (as in the EU provision for the free movement of labour across national boundaries).

**2. International law**: Political relationships between societies also exist at the legal level, not just in terms of trade agreements (which can be legally enforced and tested), but also in terms of areas like extradition treaties, cross-border policing, membership of the United Nations and the like.

**3. Military**: How different countries relate to one another in military terms (such as cooperation or antagonism) also represents a political dimension to the interrelationship between societies.



## Power

One of the main themes of globalization theory, as **Sporer** (2000) notes, is the idea of the 'loss of power and authority of nation states', something echoed by **Smith** and **Doyle** (2002) when they note 'a decline in the power of national governments to direct and influence their economies'. This "loss of power" thesis has a range of economic and political features and consequences:

**1. Economic**: The globalisation of trade removes from national governments the ability to control major areas of economic policy in areas like:

**Employment**, where nations experience rising or declining levels of employment depending on how capital, labour and jobs move across national borders.

**Taxation** policies relating to businesses, especially transnational corporations. If business taxation is too high, 'capital flight' may occur – TNCs, for example, choose to locate and invest elsewhere. TNCs can also export profits, making it difficult for national governments to track what profit is being made and where.

**Investment**: In a global economic climate, where TNCs can potentially locate and relocate factories and businesses in the most favourable economic areas, there is increased pressure on governments to provide environments and packages to attract corporate investment.

**2. Political**: Involvement in regional economic and political institutions (such as the European Union) further limits the decision-making powers of national governments, mainly because decisions are conditioned by things like international:

**agreements**, binding on member states and relating to areas like trading arrangements, levels of national debt, and so forth.

**laws** relating to, for example, the provision of State / government aid to industries.



## Hyper-globalisation

Those who argue that economies are locked into a global financial system that limits the ability of national governments to act are conventionally seen as advocating the idea of **hyper-globalisation** - the idea globalisation has created a world political, economic and cultural web that, as **Veseth** (1998) puts it, connects:



'…people and businesses without much attention to geography, government regulation, or anything else. High-tech, knowledge-intensive connections to the global web are the source of wealth and power…and a sort of global class system arises that is based on access to the web, much as an industrial class system based on access to capital appeared to Karl Marx'.

National governments, from this position, are 'secondary players' on the world stage, if they have a role at all: as **Ohmae** (1995) argues 'The modern nation-state itself - that artefact of the 18th and 19th centuries – has begun to crumble.'

The demise of the nation state (imminent or otherwise) has, some argue, been overstated.

**Gray** (2002), for example, is sceptical about the idea globalisation involves 'the world becoming a true single market, in which nation-states have withered away…supplanted by homeless multinational corporations'; he sees this – as do **Hirst** and **Thompson** (1996) when they refer to 'the political impact of globalisation as 'the pathology of over-diminished expectations' - as ideological wishful thinking on the part of, in the main, **new right / neo-liberal theorists**.

### New Right / Neo-liberal approaches

From this general position social *development* is related to the presence or absence of "free economic markets". That is, markets that are minimally - if at all - regulated by nation states.

Globalisation, in this respect, involves nations adjusting politically to the new demands of a globalised economy; one where the private sector is always considered the motor of development and economic growth is achieved through the adoption of free-market policies and initiatives. These include things like private ownership of:

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO TO FIND OUT ABOUT BRITISH GAS SHARES IS FILL IN A COUPON.

If you see sid tell him

Everyone can apply for a share of the shares.

British Gas

businesses
education
welfare provision
health care.

**Capitán** and **Lambie** (1994) summarise neo-liberal globalisation theories in terms of:

**economic inequality** 'as an important human incentive' in all areas of social life.
**non-intervention** by the state in economic markets that 'will maximize efficiency and economic well-being'
**international trade** between developed and developing countries being 'mutually beneficial'
**a minimalist state** - the role of governments is broadly to safeguard the ability of private enterprises to "create wealth".

Although *hyper-globalising* tendencies may, as **Veseth** (1998) argues, be over-exaggerated, this is not to say global economic developments have had no impact on political interrelationships. **Hirst** and **Thompson**, in this respect, suggest we should see nations as:

**Pivotal institutions** in terms of creating the stable political conditions under which trade and international development can continue. **Shaw** (1997) further argues we should not see nation states as being 'in opposition' to globalisation, since 'globalisation does not undermine the state but involves the transformation of state forms'.

The main problem here, therefore, is one of interpretation – where nation states play an international role (such as Britain and the USA's military involvement in countries like Iraq), do we interpret this as a changing and expanding set of political interrelationships between societies or merely the dying attempts of nation states to exert political influence in a globalised world?

# 4. Changing Cultural Interrelationships

As with their political counterpart, we need to keep in mind that cultural interrelationships are frequently related to **economic** relationships and that these, in turn, inform cultural connections and relationships. This is particularly pertinent when we talk about *culture industries* like television, film and print, where reference is often made to the **cultural hegemony** (or "leadership") of Western society and the USA in particular.

Such hegemony, it's often argued, goes hand-in-glove with the "global dominance" of the English language as a 'common cultural language', although it's perhaps pertinent to note what we might term a "*reflexive* relationship" (where one influences the other) between the hegemony of culture industries and the hegemonic status of English; that is, it's difficult to disentangle one from the other:

Does the English language dominate because of the hegemony of culture industries or does the hegemony of these industries necessitate consumers developing an understanding of English in order to consume such products?

While this is an interesting question, we need to keep in mind **Held et al's.** (1999) argument that simply because we can identify instances of one society (such as the USA) being dominant in the production and distribution of cultural products it doesn't necessarily mean it is possible to 'read off in any simple way the impact of those sales on other cultures and identities'.

Whatever the niceties of such debates, we can think about how cultural relationships are changed, or not, through the coming together of different cultural products, considered in terms of two related dimensions:

  **material culture** – our exposure to a range of cultural objects (consumer products such as cars, computers and televisions).

  **non-material culture** - the ideas and meanings embodied in cultural objects. In other words the various ways our experience of different cultural products (such as television or computers) changes both the way we live and, to some extent, our perception of other cultures.

We can consider these dimensions of culture in terms of two concepts based around ideas of difference and similarity.

## A. Cultural Diversity

**Lechner** (2001) notes cultural interrelationships are changed by *cultural diversity* in three main ways:

1. **Pluralisation**: Interactions between societies, through cultural products (such as film and television), the cultural influence of immigrants and the like can lead to the 'mixing of cultures in particular places and practices' – and this intermixing may create **cultural hybrids**, whereby something "new and different" develops as the result of the meeting and mixing of different cultural ideas and behaviours.

For example, Chicken Tikka Masala, according to the Food Service Intelligence (2001), is the most popular dish in the UK: 'Said to have originated between the 1950s and 1970s…Legend has it one obstinate diner demanded gravy on tandoori chicken. A bemused chef responded by adding tomato soup and a pinch of spices, unwittingly partaking in an early example of *fusion cookery.*'

**2. Contestation**, whereby the 'spread of ideas and images provoke reactions and resistance' within and between different cultural groups. We can note, in this respect, the concept of **glocalisation** – the meaning and impact of *global* cultural products (such as Hollywood films or McDonald's restaurants) are interpreted and used differently in different *local* contexts. In India, for example, the traditional Hollywood musical has been reinterpreted to produce a new form ('Bollywood') specific to Indian culture (although this, in turn, maybe starting to have a global cultural impact – more evidence of the reflexive nature of cultural industries).

**3. Institutionalisation** operates on two levels:

First, the cultural products of one society are accepted and incorporated wholesale – and largely unchanged – into the culture of another society.

Second, the idea of cultural diversity itself – as something to be valued and encouraged – is, **Lechner** (2001) suggests, 'promoted through international organizations, movements and nation states'.

## B. Cultural Homogenisation

While cultural globalisation may promote different types of diversity, **Lechner** cites a number of ways diversity can be *diminished*:



**1. Lifestyles**: The global reach of transnational corporations creates a particular kind of 'consumerist culture, in which standard commodities are promoted by global marketing campaigns to create similar lifestyles' – a form of *cultural hegemony* that **Lechner** calls 'Coca-*Colonisation*' (the idea that one culture is *colonised* by the cultural products and lifestyle of another culture). A related example is **Ritzer**'s (1996) concept of:

**McDonaldisation**: Contemporary corporate cultural products are *standardised*, *homogenised* and *formulaic*; everyone who buys a McDonald's hamburger, whether in London or Singapore, gets the same product made to the same standard formula. When applied to cultural relationships and experiences, homogenisation occurs because *global cultural products* are designed:

**efficiently**, using a limited range of themes around which products are created and recreated
**rationally** – all aspects of the production and consumption process are measured and evaluated to produce standard products in standard settings
**predictably** – cultural products are designed to be safe and unthreatening.There is, to use **Beck**'s (1992) concept, 'no *risk*' involved in buying and consuming a particular product – the consumer knows exactly what to expect *before* they buy it.

**2. Identity**: The things we consume 'say something' about us and our status and corporations key into - or even create - *consumer identities* and *brand loyalties* that both increase profitability and homogenise cultural behaviours within and between societies. **Bryman** (1999) suggests this idea involves the **'Disneyfication'** of cultural relationships, encompassing things like:



**Theming** – the creation of 'consumption experiences' whereby people buy in to a general, standardised lifestyle.
**De-differentiation** where consumers are locked in to a range of related products in ways that provide a seamless 'lifestyle experience' (a particular perfume, for example, is associated with a particular lifestyle, clothing, footwear and the like) – something closely related to:
**Merchandising** – by consuming cultural products people take 'themed lifestyles' into their homes and social groups.

**3. Cultural imperialism**: a situation where a particular culture or lifestyle is held up as the ideal to which other cultures should aspire. Western lifestyles, values, customs and traditions, for example, may be introduced into non-Western societies and thus destroy traditional cultural lifestyles.

## Diversity or Homogenisation?

Questions of cultural diversity and/or homogenisation frequently turn on how these concepts are defined. 'Diversity', for example, is difficult to operationalise for a couple of reasons.

1. Its meaning is not simple and straightforward: how different does something have to be to count as diversity, for example?

2. Diversity (like homogenisation) is not necessarily an *either/or* condition (*either* cultural diversity exists *or* it doesn't). It's possible for diversity to exist in some cultural relationships whereas others show the opposite – high levels of cultural homogenisation. In other words, diversity and homogenisation can *coexist* in the same *cultural space*.
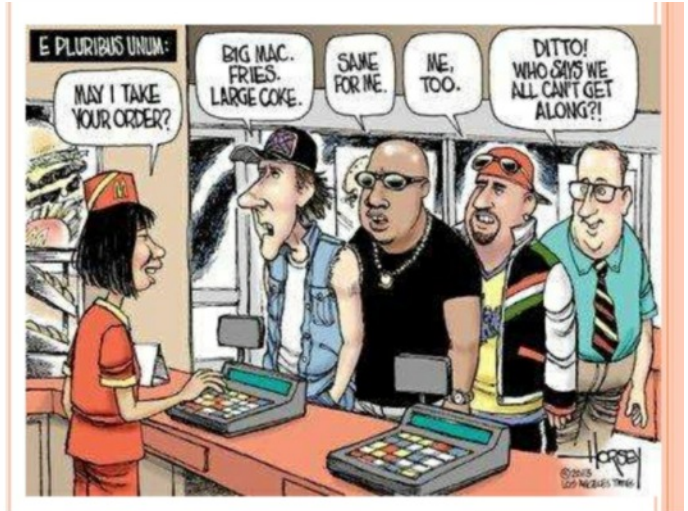
In terms of cultural homogenisation, while we shouldn't underestimate how global companies (like McDonald's) influence cultural development, we shouldn't *overstate* their influence. While McDonald's may have restaurants across the world, it doesn't necessarily follow that 'all cultures are converging' – mainly because *cultural production* and *reproduction* don't work in a simple *behaviourist* way (if we consume similar, standardised, cultural products we consequently become identical consumers). Cultural development can be both *filtered* and *changed* by the social contexts within which products are used by people in different situations.

Thus, although we might find instances of *cultural homogenisation* in different towns and cities across the world (as **Peace**, 2005 puts it, 'If for instance, one was to find oneself in a high street in Sydney, Kuala Lumpur, Rio or Johannesburg we would find the same shops, selling the same products accompanied by the same background music'), we also find *diversity* in the same places – not just in the range of different shops, but also in terms of different products.

## Cultural globalisation

Globalisation, as we've noted, is frequently considered at the *economic level*, in terms of things like the growth in world trade, the development of TNCs and their respective impact on nations and political/cultural interrelationships. However, if economic and political forms of globalisation are, at best, unsubstantiated and, at worst, as **Rugman** (2001) argues, *mythical*, cultural interrelationships promise more fruitful ground for globalisation theorists, for a couple of reasons:

**1. Cultural products** (such as films, radio and television) are not necessarily physical commodities; they can, for example, be easily transmitted across physical boundaries. This is not necessarily the case, of course, but digital cultural products are increasingly packaged and sold in this way.

The Internet, for example, is a potentially global medium for the transmission of digital products (although satellite and cable are also significant carriers of digital information). **Sklair** (1999) suggests the study of cultural interrelationships, focused around the global spread of the *mass media*, is an important area for globalisation theorists because of the ability to *empirically* demonstrate something like the 'global diffusion and increasingly concentrated ownership and control of the electronic mass media, particularly television'. **Sklair** notes that even in relatively poor countries there has been a huge and rapid growth in television (and the cultural products/ideas it carries).

Cultural products, in this respect, have both substantial economic value and political content – an idea we can briefly note in terms of:

**2. Cultural imperialism**: One argument about the relationship between politics and culture is that when we talk about something like the *globalisation of culture,* what we are actually talking about is the globalisation of *American* culture – the widespread export of US products, values and ideas around the globe. **Rice-Oxley** (2004) argues: 'America exports its culture on an unprecedented scale. From music to media, film to fast food, language to literature and sport, the American idea is spreading inexorably…today's technology flings culture to every corner of the globe with blinding speed. If it took two millenniums for Plato's *Republic* to reach North America, the latest hit from Justin Timberlake can be found in Greek (and Japanese) stores within days' (something that reflects back to the notion of *cultural homogenisation*).

### Evaluation

One problem with notions of cultural imperialism and homogenisation is that the influence is assumed to be one-way – from the producer to the consumer. This model of *cultural domination* can be questioned on two levels:

Firstly, cultural consumers are assumed to accept passively whatever cultural influences are thrown their way, but consumers may, for example, actively interpret cultural influences, customising and filtering them through their own lives and lifestyles to create new, hybrid cultural forms.

Secondly, technological developments like the Internet are changing the way people relate to cultural influences in the sense that opportunities arise for *cultural production* as well as for consumption (the producer *is* the consumer and vice versa). This occurs in areas like social media, blogs and the development of modifications ('*modding*') to computer games as well as through the exchange and sharing of online information.
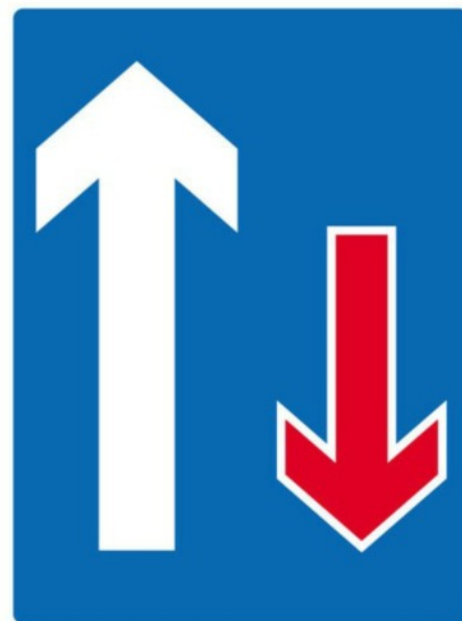
Although anecdotal evidence suggests some form of cultural homogenisation is at work (think, for example, about how American words and language use have found their way into everyday British language), there is little *empirical evidence* to support this argument.

Even in the UK, where a common language arguably lowers the barriers to US cultural influence, it is debatable whether British culture – even among the young – is overly similar to US cultures. There is also the question here of whether we can simply assume American cultural influences are homogeneous in themselves; the USA is, for example, a large, culturally diverse, society.

### Dialectics

Finally, we can note that in terms of cultural interrelationships, the ideas we've outlined suggest that tensions exist between two areas:

1. **The local** or **particular** – characterised as showing high levels of cultural diversity.

2. **The global** or **universal**, characterised in terms of its homogeneity.

# 4. Changing Cultural Interrelationships    19

While we've suggested the two can be separated, at least in theoretical terms, we've also suggested there are points and spaces where the local and global meet, and **Robertson** (1992) expresses this in terms of a:

**Dialectical relationship** (which involves thinking about how both the local and the global interact – each both *influences* and is *influenced* by the other). In this respect, as **Sklair** (1999) suggests, globalisation at the cultural level involves understanding two processes:

1. **The particularisation of universalism** – the idea that some forms of globalised cultural features are adapted and changed by particular (local) cultural behaviours (customised and changed for local consumption, for example).

2. **The universalisation of particularism** – the idea that the features of local cultures (their uniqueness, individuality, and so forth) become a feature of globalised cultures. That is, rather than seeing the globalisation



of culture as a homogenising process, we should see it in reverse: globalisation involves the spread of diverse cultural beliefs and practices across the globe in ways that create new and diverse cultural forms.

## 'Scapes?

**Appadurai** (1990) rejects the idea that cultural interrelationships flow 'from the core to the periphery' (globalised, homogeneous, cultural forms are picked up by individual cultures). Rather, we should see these interrelationships in terms of a variety of 'scapes' – imagined worlds that cut across territorial borders that can be connected in a variety of (electronic) ways:



**Ethnoscapes** that reflect how people of different cultures physically interact.
**Technoscapes** that relate to the way different forms of technology (and its cultural adaptations and uses) interact.
**Finanscapes** that refer to the interplay of economic relationships and their effect on political and social cultures.
**Mediascapes** involving the flow of information across different societies and cultures.
**Ideoscapes** that refer to the way people interact in terms of the exchange of images and ideas.

In this way, he argues, local cultural concepts spread across national boundaries, both influencing and being influenced by the cultural ideas and relationships they encounter.

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