



Global Culture

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Teaching Notes

Global Culture

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Nature and Extent

Although the idea of global influences on local and national cultural behaviours is not particularly new (different cultural practices and products have influenced “British culture” for many hundreds of years) what is new is the *scope* and *speed* of cultural diversity and change - processes hastened by technological developments such as cheap air travel in the mid-20th century and the Internet of the 21st century.



While postmodernists are generally agreed that such changes are *accelerating*, there is not a similar level of agreement about the direction of change – something we can briefly outline in terms of three general views about the nature and extent of global culture.

1. Coca-Colonisation: Convergence and Homogenisation

This strand argues the general trend is for cultural differences to gradually disappear as all societies start to adopt ideas and attitudes that are broadly similar in style and content. The main cause here is the behaviour and influence of global corporations, media and advertising. **Plumb** (1995), in this respect, suggests culture has become a **commodity** where:

“Knowledge, ideas and other cultural elements are no longer generated to meet broadly shared human interests, but for a multitude of specific purchasers to buy”.



In terms of the *commodification of culture* **Lechner** (2001) suggests the economic behaviour and power of global companies (such as Coca-Cola, Nike and McDonalds) creates a **consumer culture** where standard commodities are promoted by global marketing campaigns” to “create similar lifestyles”.

“**Coca-Colonisation**”, as he terms it, is related to **Ritzer’s** (1996) concept of **McDonaldisation** - the idea that contemporary corporate cultural products are:

standardised
homogenised *and*
formulaic.

Everyone who buys a McDonald’s hamburger - wherever they are in the world - gets the same basic product made to the same standard formula. Cultural products are therefore, increasingly:

predictable
safe *and*
Unthreatening.

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Along similar lines, **Berger** (1997) characterises this strand as:

McWorld Culture, a reference to the idea that global (popular) culture is increasingly Americanised:

“Young people throughout the world dance to American music...wearing T-shirts with messages...about American universities and other consumer items. Older people watch American sitcoms on television and go to American movies. Everyone, young and old, grows taller and fatter on American fast foods”.



2. Diversity and Heterogeneity

This strand emphasises more or less opposite ideas about global cultural developments; the ebb-and-flow of different cultural ideas and influences creates *hybrid cultural forms* that represent “new forms of difference”.

From this position “culture” is not something that’s simply “given” to or imposed on people (in the sense of *mass* or *consumer* cultures) but something that is actively constructed and reconstructed.

Globalised culture, therefore, refers to the way local or national cultural developments can spread across the globe; to be picked-up, shaped and changed to suit the needs of different groups across and within different societies. This idea is sometimes expressed as a *form of glocalisation*, one where broad cultural developments in one society are picked-up and modified to suit the cultural requirements of another society.

However, where **glocalisation** involves *global* cultural processes being mediated through *local* cultural processes - an interesting example here is the opening of a [Disney theme park in Shanghai](#) China, described by Disney's Chief Executive as:



“instantly recognisable not only as authentically Disney but as distinctly Chinese” -

globalised culture involves greater diversity and difference. This process has arguably been shaped and accelerated by the development of the Internet.

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Social networking sites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook* or *Twitter*, for example, represent **social spaces** and communities actively constructed and reconstructed by the people who use them (to share videos, pictures or information).

An interesting aspect of this development is the way the idea of *culture as a commodity* fits with the idea of freeing individuals to both produce and consume cultural ideas and products.

While global commercial enterprises may provide the *tools* through which cultural ideas and products can be exchanged, it is the millions - and in some cases *billions* - of individuals around the world who use these tools to provide the *content* that makes such virtual spaces vibrant and attractive (to both users and advertisers).



3. Homogeneity and Diversity

The third stand is one that, in some ways, combines the previous two in that it argues for:

convergence and homogeneity *within* global cultural groups
diversity and heterogeneity *between* such groups.

In other words, groups of like-minded individuals share certain cultural similarities across national boundaries, but these groups are potentially many and varied. **Berger** (1997), for example, illustrates this idea by noting two distinct “faces of global culture”:

a. **Business cultures** in which

“Participants...know how to deal with computers, cellular phones, airline schedules, currency exchange, and the like. But they also dress alike, exhibit the same amicable informality, relieve tensions by similar attempts at humor (sic), and of course most of them interact in English”



b. Academic cultures involving, for example, Western intellectuals, their “*values and ideologies*”. As **Berger** puts it, if business cultures try “*to sell computer systems in India*”, academic cultures try “*to promote feminism or environmentalism there*”.

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This strand, therefore, argues for a range of points and spaces where the local and global meet - **Sklair** (1999), for example, suggests understanding global cultures involves thinking about two processes:

1. The Particularization of Universalism

This involves the idea that some forms of globalised cultural features are adapted and changed by particular (local) cultural behaviours. **Regev** (2003) cites the example of “rock music” – a global product of Anglo-American construction consumed and filtered through many different cultures and cultural influences. As **Rumford** (2003) puts it, *rock music*:



“is easily domesticated into 'authentic' local musical forms. Consequently, when we hear rock music produced from within other cultures it can appear both strange and familiar at the same time”.

2. The Universalisation of Particularism

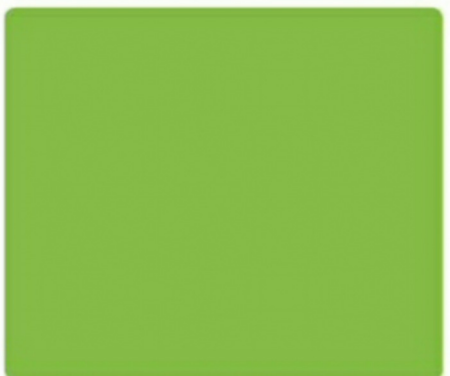
This involves the idea that the features of local cultures (their uniqueness, individuality and so forth) become a feature of globalised cultures.

That is, rather than seeing the globalisation of culture as an 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 different cultural forms.



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