

# Cultural Imperialism: An American Tradition

by Julia Galeota

**Travel almost anywhere** in the world today and, whether you suffer from habitual Big Mac cravings or cringe at the thought of missing the newest episode of MTV's *The Real World*, your American tastes can be satisfied practically everywhere. This proliferation of American products across the globe is more than mere accident. As a byproduct of globalization, it is part of a larger trend in the conscious dissemination of American attitudes and values that is often referred to as *cultural imperialism*. In his 1976 work *Communication and Cultural Domination*, Herbert Schiller defines cultural imperialism as:

the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system, and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even to promote, the values and structures of the dominant center of the system.

Thus, cultural imperialism involves much more than simple consumer goods; it involves the dissemination of ostensibly American principles, such as freedom and democracy. Though this process might sound appealing on the surface, it masks a frightening truth: many cultures around the world are gradually disappearing due to the overwhelming influence of corporate and cultural America.

The motivations behind American cultural imperialism parallel the justifications for U.S. imperialism throughout history: the desire for access to foreign markets and the belief in the superiority of American culture. Though the United States does boast the world's largest, most powerful economy, no business is completely satisfied with controlling only the American market; American corporations want to control the other 95 percent of the world's consumers as well. Many industries are incredibly successful in that venture. According to the *Guardian*, American films accounted for approximately 80 percent of global box office revenue in January 2003. And who can forget good old Micky D's? With over 30,000 restaurants in over one hundred countries, the ubiquitous golden arches of McDonald's are now, according to Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*,

"more widely recognized than the Christian cross." Such American domination inevitably hurts local markets, as the majority of foreign industries are unable to compete with the economic strength of U.S. industry. Because it serves American economic interests, corporations conveniently ignore the detrimental impact of American control of foreign markets.

Corporations don't harbor qualms about the detrimental effects of "Americanization" of foreign cultures, as most corporations have ostensibly convinced themselves that American culture is superior and therefore its influence is beneficial to other, "lesser" cultures. Unfortunately, this American belief in the superiority of U.S. culture is anything but new; it is as old as the culture itself. This attitude was manifest in the actions of settlers when they first arrived on this continent and massacred or assimilated essentially the entire "savage" Native American population. This attitude also reflects that of the late nineteenth-century age of imperialism, during which the jingoists attempted to fulfill what they believed to be the divinely ordained "manifest destiny" of American expansion. Jingoists strongly believe in the concept of social Darwinism: the stronger, "superior" cultures will overtake the weaker, "inferior" cultures in a "survival of the fittest." It is this arrogant belief in the incomparability of American culture that characterizes many of our economic and political strategies today.

It is easy enough to convince Americans of the superiority of their culture, but how does one convince the rest of the world of the superiority of American culture? The answer is simple: marketing. Whether attempting to sell an item, a brand, or an entire culture, marketers have always been able to successfully associate American products with modernity in the minds of consumers worldwide. While corporations seem to simply sell Nike shoes or Gap jeans (both, ironically, manufactured *outside* of the United States), they are also selling the image of America as the land of "cool." This indissoluble association causes consumers all over the globe to clamor ceaselessly for the same American products.

Twenty years ago, in his essay "The Globalization of Markets," Harvard business professor Theodore Levitt

declared, “The world’s needs and desires have been irrevocably homogenized.” Levitt held that corporations that were willing to bend to local tastes and habits were inevitably doomed to failure. He drew a distinction between weak multinational corporations that operate differently in each country and strong global corporations that handle an entire world of business with the same agenda.

In recent years, American corporations have developed an even more successful global strategy: instead of advertising American conformity with blonde-haired, blue-eyed, stereotypical Americans, they pitch diversity. These campaigns—such as McDonald’s new international “I’m lovin’ it” campaign—work by drawing on the United State’s history as an ethnically integrated nation composed of essentially every culture in the world. An early example of this global marketing tactic was found in a Coca Cola commercial from 1971 featuring children from many different countries innocently singing, “I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony/I’d like to buy the world a Coke to keep it company.” This commercial illustrates an attempt to portray a U.S. goods as a product capable of transcending political, ethnic, religious, social, and economic differences to unite the world (according to the Coca-Cola Company, we can achieve world peace through consumerism).

More recently, Viacom’s MTV has successfully adapted this strategy by integrating many different Americanized cultures into one unbelievably influential American network (with over 280 million subscribers worldwide). According to a 1996 “New World Teen Study” conducted by DMB&B’s BrainWaves division, of the 26,700 middle-class teens in forty-five countries surveyed, 85 percent watch MTV every day. These teens absorb what MTV intends to show as a diverse mix of cultural influences but is really nothing more than manufactured stars singing in English to appeal to American popular taste.

If the strength of these diverse “American” images is not powerful enough to move products, American corporations also appropriate local cultures into their advertising abroad. Unlike Levitt’s weak multinationals, these corporations don’t bend to local tastes; they merely insert indigenous celebrities or trends to present the facade of a customized advertisement. MTV has spawned over twenty networks specific to certain geographical areas such as Brazil and Japan. These specialized networks further spread the association between American and modernity under the pretense of catering to local taste. Similarly, commercials in India in 2000 featured Bollywood stars Hrithik Roshan promoting Coke and Shahrukh Khan promoting Pepsi (Sanjeev Srivastava, “Cola Row in India.” BBC News

Online). By using popular local icons in their advertisements, U.S. corporations successfully associate what is fashionable in local cultures with what is fashionable in America. America essentially samples the world’s cultures, repackages them with the American trademark of materialism, and resells them to the world.

Critics of the theory of American cultural imperialism argue that foreign consumers don’t passively absorb the images America bombards upon them. In fact, foreign consumers do play an active role in the reciprocal relationship between buyer and seller. For example, according to Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*, American cultural imperialism has inspired a “slow food movement” in Italy and a demonstration involving the burning of chickens outside of the first Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in India. Though there have been countless other conspicuous and inconspicuous acts of resistance, the intense, unrelenting barrage of American cultural influence continues ceaselessly.

Compounding the influence of commercial images are the media and information industries, which present both explicit and implicit messages about the very real military and economic hegemony of the United States. Ironically, the industry that claims to be the source for “fair and balanced” information plays a large role in the propagation of American influence around the world. The concentration of media ownership during the 1990s enabled both American and British media organizations to gain control of the majority of the world’s news services. Satellites allow over 150 million households in approximately 212 countries and territories worldwide to subscribe to CNN, a member of Time Warner, the world’s largest media conglomerate. In the words of British sociologist Jeremy Tunstall, “When a government allows news importation, it is in effect importing a piece of another country’s politics—which is true of no other import.” In addition to politics and commercials, networks like CNN also present foreign countries with unabashed accounts of the military and economic superiority of the United States.

The Internet acts as another vehicle for the worldwide propagation of American influence. Interestingly, some commentators cite the new “information economy” as proof that American cultural imperialism is in decline. They argue that the global accessibility of this decentralized medium has decreased the relevance of the “core and periphery” theory of global influence. This theory describes an inherent imbalance in the primarily outward flow of information and influence from the stronger, more powerful “core” nations such as the United States. Additionally, such critics argue, unlike consumers of other types of

media, Internet users must actively seek out information; users can consciously choose to avoid all messages of American culture. While these arguments are valid, they ignore their converse: if one so desires, anyone can access a wealth of information about American culture possibly unavailable through previous channels. Thus, the Internet can dramatically increase exposure to American culture for those who desire it.

Fear of the cultural upheaval that could result from this exposure to new information has driven governments in communist China and Cuba to strictly monitor and regulate their citizens' access to websites (these protectionist policies aren't totally effective, however, because they are difficult to implement and maintain). Paradoxically, limiting access to the Internet nearly ensures that countries will remain largely the recipients, rather than the contributors, of information on the Internet.

Not all social critics see the Americanization of the world as a negative phenomenon. Proponents of cultural imperialism, such as David Rothkopf, a former senior official in Clinton's Department of Commerce, argue that American cultural imperialism is in the interest not only of the United States but also of the world at large. Rothkopf cites Samuel Huntington's theory from *The Clash of Civilizations and the Beginning of the World Order* that, the greater the cultural disparities in the world, the more likely it is that conflict will occur. Rothkopf argues that the removal of cultural barriers through U.S. cultural imperialism will promote a more stable world, one in which American culture reigns supreme as "the most just, the most tolerant, the most willing to constantly reassess and improve itself, and the best model for the future." Rothkopf is correct in one sense: Americans are on the way to establishing a global society with minimal cultural barriers. However, one must question whether this projected society is truly beneficial for all involved. Is it worth sacrificing countless indigenous cultures for the unlikely promise of a world without conflict?

Around the world, the answer is an overwhelming "No!" Disregarding the fact that a world of homogenized culture would not necessarily guarantee a world without conflict, the complex fabric of diverse cultures around the world is a fundamental and indispensable basis of humanity. Throughout the course of human existence, millions have died to preserve their indigenous culture. It is a fundamental right of humanity to be allowed to preserve the mental, physical, intellectual, and creative aspects of one's society. A single "global culture" would be nothing more than a shallow, artificial "culture" of materialism reliant on

technology. Thankfully, it would be nearly impossible to create one bland culture in a world of over six billion people. And nor should we want to. Contrary to Rothkopf's (and George W. Bush's) belief that, "Good and evil, better and worse coexist in this world," there are no such absolutes in this world. The United States should not be able to relentlessly force other nations to accept its definition of what is "good" and "just" or even "modern."

Fortunately, many victims of American cultural imperialism aren't blind to the subversion of their cultures. Unfortunately, these nations are often too weak to fight the strength of the United States and subsequently to preserve their native cultures. Some countries—such as France, China, Cuba, Canada, and Iran—have attempted to quell America's cultural influence by limiting or prohibiting access to American cultural programming through satellites and the Internet. However, according to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is a basic right of all people to "seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Governments shouldn't have to restrict their citizens' access to information in order to preserve their native cultures. We as a world must find ways to defend local cultures in a manner that does not compromise the rights of indigenous people.

The prevalent proposed solutions to the problem of American cultural imperialism are a mix of defense and compromise measures on behalf of the endangered cultures. In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman advocates the use of protective legislation such as zoning laws and protected area laws, as well as the appointment of politicians with cultural integrity, such as those in agricultural, culturally pure Southern France. However, many other nations have no voice in the nomination of their leadership, so those countries need a middle-class and elite committed to social activism. If it is utterly impossible to maintain the cultural purity of a country through legislation, Friedman suggests the country attempt to "glocalize," that is:

to absorb influences that naturally fit into and can enrich [a] culture, to resist those things that are truly alien and to compartmentalize those things that, while different, can nevertheless be enjoyed and celebrated as different.

These types of protective filters should help to maintain the integrity of a culture in the face of cultural imperialism. In *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Benjamin Barber calls for the resuscitation of nongovernmental, noncapitalist spaces—

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human beings to seek to establish a global society where things like economic servitude and human rights violations don't exist, and where each person is free to live out the course of his or her life without these limitations. As such, we can't be content with employing only economic means.

Hence, the alternative I propose is to concentrate on neither boycotting goods nor purchasing them but rather in appealing to the U.S. government to pass laws prohibiting companies which sell products in American markets from violating human rights in the production of their goods. The best way to bring about lasting change is legally. Americans abroad are prohibited from committing certain acts that, while legal abroad are illegal at home. This prohibition stems from moral scruples. For instance, an American in a Middle Eastern brothel is prohibited from purchasing a child prostitute. Why can't we use the same reasoning and logic to prohibit corporations from employing labor practices abroad which don't conform to American standards of

workplace safety and human rights? After all, one of the key goals of American foreign policy is the protection of human rights. Thus we should prevent corporations which violate such rights from doing business in the United States.

As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, it is necessary to maintain our principles. We can't allow ourselves to be satisfied with empty gestures that make us feel better about ourselves without eliciting any actual change. Empathy is an important part of the process, but empathy is useless without action. To say that helping workers abroad is done by taking small steps at home is a wonderful way to garner publicity, but without a coherent, organized movement that ultimately culminates in legal change, it is impossible to guarantee all people the human dignity to which they ultimately have a birthright.

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Anna Yesilevsky, a student at Harvard University, is twenty-two years old. This essay placed second in the eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old age category of the 2004 *Humanist* Essay Contest for Young Women and Men of North America.

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ensure, in the words of William Faulkner, "that the indomitable human spirit...will not merely endure, but prevail."

The international courts of today are a good start, for at the least they have the potential to reduce needless human suffering. But beyond this basic role they serve a grander purpose: to test the limits of our imagination. An ever-expanding body of international humanitarian law, if followed to its natural conclusion, will relegate ideologies of power and fear to history's dustbin. To carry this torch of human progress from strength to strength is a charge we gladly accept. For this, in essence, is humanity in action.

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to the "civic spaces"—such as village greens, places of religious worship, or community schools. It is also equally important to focus on the education of youth in their native values and traditions. Teens especially need a counterbalance images of American consumerism they absorb from the media. Even if individuals or countries consciously choose to become "Americanized" or "modernized," their choice should be made freely and independently of the coercion and influence of American cultural imperialism.

The responsibility for preserving cultures shouldn't fall entirely on those at risk. The United States must also recognize that what is good for its economy isn't necessarily good for the world at large. We must learn to put people before profits. The corporate and political leaders of the United States would be well advised to heed these words of Gandhi:

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

The United States must acknowledge that no one culture can or should reign supreme, for the death of diverse cultures can only further harm future generations.

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Julia Galeota of McLean, Virginia, is seventeen years old. This essay placed first in the thirteen-to-seventeen-year-old age category of the 2004 *Humanist* Essay Contest for Young Women and Men of North America.