

Culture in Globalization: Challenges and Prospects



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Introduction

The collapse of the gigantic axis of ideological confrontation between the two superpowers made the erstwhile binary view impossible. Today “the local” and “the global», “the particular” and “the universal” enter much more complicated relationships than simple mutual negation. The multidirectional “air currents” currently blowing over our planet fall into two powerful streams. The centrifugal stream depends on the authority of narrowly interpreted nationalisms, religions, and ethnic self-identifications. The centripetal one, operating in a subtler manner, draws us together by the power of financial corporations, the Internet, Hollywood thrillers and hamburgers — all of which take no heed of national borders. Is there a meaningful place for culture (human and/or national) in this “wind-tunnel?” Or is it nothing more than “a ripple on the ocean of economic globalization,” in one scholar’s poetic expression¹?

The term “globalization” — a household term since the 1960s — is mostly associated with easy electronic capital flows; with infinite information to every nook on the globe; with the predatory raging of free markets; with widening gaps between the haves and the have-nots — and with marchers on TV screens protesting against all this. Globalization’s cultural dimension is more often than not viewed as depersonalization, the “face” of national cultures supplanted by a uniform mask. Not a very cheerful prospect. No wonder many countries are doing their best to avoid it. But is it really true that culture can only be “planetary,” through erasure of all particularities? Or is this process as multivectoral, pluralistic and polyvalent as most developments in our postmodern world?

If globalization is defined as integration on a global scale, then how new is it — especially in reference to culture? Most scholars agree that the rather recently-coined term is indicative rather of the phenomenon’s current scope and intensity than of its radical difference from the processes that have accompanied humankind throughout history. Many claim that the “compression” of geo-

graphical space coupled with the broadening of the known world dates back to the early modern period or even to the Renaissance. According to another point of view (held, for instance, by historians William McNeill and Marshall Hodgson), globalization is about two millennia old, coterminous with the emergence of the Afro-European civilization zone stretching from the Atlantic shores to the Pacific². No matter what frame of reference we adhere to, there is no way to deny the role played by intertribal — interethnic — international contacts in the formation of what we call culture (in every meaning of this highly polysemantic word) at any stage in human development. Written literature is of special significance here due to the relative simplicity of its “relocation” from one cultural context to another. In the words of Stephen Greenblatt, letters are “virtually inevitably the agents of globalization³.” Their nature refutes any claims to pure “pedigree” and positions any national literature — through continuous circulation, “mutual pollination,” reverberations and echoes — as a cultural “mulatto.” Recognizing this model as natural and age-old, we nevertheless see the new millennium subjects national cultures to exceedingly strenuous overloads, jeopardizing their very survivals. What kind of future is envisaged for culture as a universal category and for national cultures in our swiftly globalizing world?

Globalization = McDonaldization?

Is cultural globalization a blessing or a curse? Given understandable discrepancies in opinions held not only by people in the street, but also by professionals — sociologists, cultural historians, literary scholars, — it seems safe to argue that anxiety predominates in their responses. Publications in this field share two key features. The first moves culture to the forefront in current futurological forecasts by substituting it for ideology as the source of imminent cataclysms. The second attempts to predict, or rather design, the best possible local-global configurations that underlie debates around globalization.

Benjamin Barber suggested an eye-catching phrase to identify the central controversy of our (potentially) bleak future — “Jihad vs. McWorld.” The former personifies narrow-minded and blood-thirsty fanaticism championing exclusively “local” interests; the latter signifies a technologically-communicatively-financially globalized world of “fast music, fast computers, and fast food.” The scholar’s prophesy is far from optimistic: “If the global future is to pit Jihad’s centrifugal whirlwind against McWorld’s centripetal black hole, the outcome is unlikely to be democratic.” His guess is that globalist tendencies backed up by material interests will ultimately prevail; in which case today’s Jihad outbursts are no more than the last agony before McWorld’s “eternal yawn⁴.”

In the very first page of his sensational article “The Clash of Civilizations?” (1993), later developed into the 1996 book of the same title (without the question mark, however), Samuel Huntington argued that in the modern world politics and economy are not chief conflict generators. “The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural,” he claims, while the battle lines of the future will be the fault lines between civilizations. Huntington argued that the West needs to achieve better understanding of other cultures, and to look for elements of commonality in different civilization models⁵.

Francis Fukuyama offered an even darker view of humanity’s cultural prospects in his much-talked-of concept of “the end of history” (which he has since discarded). “In the post-historical period,” he wrote at the turn of the 1990s, “there will be neither art, nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history». It is but natural that the thought made him feel, on the threshold of ages filled with intolerable boredom, the nostalgia for the times when history (together with its companion culture) still existed⁶.

Cultural historian Morris Berman does not believe in the end of history. But in his book demonstratively titled *The Twilight of American Culture* (2000) he paints a no less depressing picture, suggesting at the same time his own panacea. The road to salvation he champions is not new: disillusioned about organized, institutionalized opposition to illiteracy, cultural negativism and kitsch, Berman places his only hope in a modern equivalent of early Middle Ages monastic orders. Like the elect individuals who

during the demise of the Roman Empire and Barbarian raids hid in the convents and preserved, albeit in fragments, precious treasures of Greco-Roman culture that ultimately made the Renaissance possible, contemporary “monks” should salvage the West’s high culture. Their task is “to resist the spin and hype of the global corporate world order; he or she knows the difference between reality and theme parks, integrity and commercial promotion⁷.” Berman alludes to himself as a “realistic optimist,” keeping faith in that his “monks” and “nuns,” not unlike Ray Bradbury’s outlaws in Fahrenheit 451°, will succeed in carrying the torch of culture through the Dark Ages.

Global academic community speaks the same language

On the other hand, there are very different — cheerful and even joyful — responses to ubiquitous signs of cultural globalization. The optimists believe that leveling out cultural differences will bring about better mutual understanding and will reduce the probability of social and political conflicts. David Rothkopf, for one, assumes that globalization will remove cultural barriers, as well many of the negative dimensions of culture, marking a “vital step towards both a more stable world and better lives for the people in it⁸.” D.Hervieu-Leger discusses the emergence of the “ecumenism of human rights,” and expresses the hope that “a world in which there would be a greater consensus on human rights would also be a more peaceful world” (Peter Berger)⁹. The same scholar, however, voices his premonitions that the world’s cultural treasure-trove will be reduced to primitive “airport culture” in which “the rich diversity of human civilizations will be homogenized and vulgarized.”

After all, the question itself — is cultural globalization good or evil? — does not seem correct, for it first brings us back to a lower level of binary oppositions (“black — white”), and secondly, whatever we think of it, globalization is already a fact. Therefore, the most viable approach seems to be pragmatic, that is, how we can make the most of its advantages while minimizing its disadvantages.

Models of cultural globalization: a local perspective

Berger’s model of cultural globalization is of interest in this context, because it focuses on whether it works under our

conditions and if so, what the consequences might be. According to this scholar, cultural globalization proceeds along four concurrent and interrelated lines.

The first correlates to the so-called “Davos culture” named after the Swiss luxury resort hosting annual world economic summits. It is the culture of the world business elite. At the same time, its sphere of application “spills over” into its practitioners’ lifestyle and value hierarchy. This type of “global” culture is gradually taking roots in Ukraine, too, which seems at this stage a positive development. No matter how boring and “yuppie-ised” the polite young men and women

wearing tailored suits and smiling standard smiles might look as they more and more frequently greet us at Ukrainian banks, shops and agencies, they signal progress when compared to the unwarranted rudeness that was the “trade-mark” of business Soviet style.

The second version of transculturalization, Berger calls “faculty club international,” meaning an ever increasing interaction among Western intelligentsia, and the most remote spots on the globe, as well as the formation — through all sorts of foundations, non-governmental organizations and academic networks — of the global academic community that speaks the same conceptual language. After the Iron Curtain fell, it is this international “club” that became more open to academics from the former USSR. Many of my colleagues will agree that, due to obvious reasons, differences in “language” in particular in humanitarian fields of study were at first striking. But the next generation of historians, literary scholars, philosophers, and other humanities scholars, who obtained access early in their academic careers to new ideas and for whom a trip to the U.S. or Great Britain, France was an ordinary occurrence can feel truly at ease in this club. The question nevertheless arises as to whether it is worthwhile to accept all its “ground rules” without reservations when entering the global scholarly community, mastering its academic jargon, strictly following its rapidly changing intellectual vogues. Should one readily renounce other forms of knowledge acquired elsewhere? Might not one’s scholarship, presented to public scrutiny, reveal a

parochial or simply outdated nature? Academic discourse, after all, is one of the most sensitive areas in terms of the delicate balance between the local and the global.

What follows as the third aspect of Berger's view, is popular culture defined by Barber's term "McWorld:" standardized tastes (what to eat, to wear and to say, to see and to listen); the triumph (at least, on the surface) of American-style mass culture that leads to the complete "resettlement" of a considerable portion of young people into "dot.com" virtual space. Examples jump at you from everywhere, both in public and private life. It is this global culture that is, first and foremost, stigmatized with the bad word "Westernization" (sometimes even more specifically — "Americanization)," with expressive synonyms invented daily — "McDonaldization," "Rambification," and so forth. The critics of "cultural imperialism" are especially worried that the diffusion of popular culture is not just a matter of outward behavior. Indeed, McStyle subtly smuggles in a set of ideas of life as a whole, not only what music to dance to or what brand of jeans to wear. The correlation between McCulture and traditional culture varies by regions in accordance with the latter's quantitative (how strong it is) and qualitative (how original it is) parameters. Concurrently, lack of agreement with respect to "mass" lifestyle adds new dimensions to age-old generation gaps, since the watershed lies more often than not between age groups. The most discomfiting feature of McCulture is its orientation towards standardized desires and attitudes that inevitably entail conformism. Added to this is its demonstrative scorn of "high" culture, which our generation has been taught to worship since childhood. Unfortunately, it is the spread of this lower version of globalized culture that is rapidly gaining momentum in Ukraine. This is due, I believe, not solely to its universal attractiveness, but also to decades of eradicating national culture that might have, albeit only to a degree, rebuffed the invasive quasi-culture.

"Protestant ethic" disseminates North American values

Finally, Berger's fourth route of cultural globalization consists of (somewhat unexpectedly for us) intensive expansion of evangelical Protestantism to the regions in which it has historically been

alien — Latin America, East Asia, South Africa (the list can be complemented by post-Soviet space). Bearing elements of Weber's "protestant ethic," this confession disseminates primarily North American values (though different from those inherent in McCulture). The situation is not unfamiliar to us — in the first years following the Soviet Union's disintegration a flow of missionaries rushed to its former republics, Ukraine included, enlisting potential converts through the novelty of Christianity's different facet to films, shows and rock-concerts. A segment of the population has accepted the spiritual "victuals" offered in the midst of the fall of empire. What specific denomination can provide comfort for the soul depends not only upon historical tradition, but on the skills of its earthly proponents. Having recovered from initial confusion, however, Orthodoxy resisted the intrusion to its historical territory, imposing constraints upon the expansion of Protestantism. Changes in the beliefs and worldview caused by the "export of religions" have yet to be addressed as a phenomenon in its own right.

All the globalization channels discussed above operate concurrently, with varied proportional strength — some places experience more Hollywood action films, others more evangelical preachers. All four channels share at least one thing in common — their Western provenance. If we are to regard dialogue between cultures as an antidote against the loss of cultural identity, we need to study not solely the relations between these "invaders" and "aboriginal" cultures, but also the interface between the channels themselves. In that case, instead of Huntington's binary dialogue between "the West and the rest," a much more complicated and, hopefully, more productive paradigm might emerge.

Our goal — "glocalization?"

Recognizing the increasingly transnational nature of modern culture and calling upon academics to keep this fact in mind while studying and teaching it, many theorists still deem it necessary to

take action aimed at preventing the erasure of cultural differences. They argue that one possible way to establish the optimum correlation between the global and the local — is to have the two function

if not in harmony, then at least in dynamic equilibrium. Voices are heard urging to spread the Green Party's motto — "Think global, act local" — to the whole realm of culture. These considerations brought to life a telescopic word "glocal," the sheer awkwardness of which, R.E. Livingston believes, "should slow down its assimilation to more familiar positional schemes"¹⁰. The truth is that globalization, largely facilitating the entrance into the wide world of the particular and the individual, by no means guarantees the world's attention to it, while most certainly subjecting the local to the danger of losing its uniqueness. The problem is how this balance can be achieved. No doubt, every action engenders counteraction, and cultural supranational aspirations are opposed by national and even subnational local ones. Proceeding from his definition of societal culture as one that "provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities ... encompassing both public and private spheres"¹¹, Will Kymlicka argues that, despite dramatic changes, most people in the contemporary world still want to feel a belonging to their own culture. Drawing from the practices of many countries, he arrives at a seemingly paradoxical conclusion — on the one hand, modernization and liberalization of culture naturally results in the blurring of national cultural identity through having "fewer commonalities within each of the national cultures, and greater commonalities across these cultures." Yet, these processes have gone hand in hand "with an increased sense of nationhood"¹². The Canadian political scientist identifies the reasons for this powerful drive to one's native culture as very deep and associated with the ways people as cultural beings make sense of their world. A full explanation of this phenomenon would have to be interdisciplinary and involve aspects of psychology, sociology, linguistics, and so forth.

In his book addressing cultural globalization issues Arjun Appadurai, the influential American sociologist and anthropologist, devotes a section to the possibility of locality production in the "deterritorialized world"¹³, admitting that the model of relations between the global, the national and the local has not been developed so far. The scholar sets out to grasp the meaning of locality in the situation when nation-states experience transnational destabilization. What he means by locality is primarily not a spatial, but a relative and contextual concept that is implement-

