

Philippe Legrain, "Cultural Globalization is not Americanization" (2003)

Fears that globalization is imposing a deadening cultural uniformity are as ubiquitous as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Mickey Mouse. Europeans and Latin Americans, left-wingers and right, rich and poor -- all of them dread that local cultures and national identities are dissolving into a crass all-American consumerism. That cultural imperialism is said to impose American values as well as products, promote the commercial at the expense of the authentic, and substitute shallow gratification for deeper satisfaction...

If critics of globalization were less obsessed with "Coca-colonization," they might notice a rich feast of cultural mixing that belies fears about Americanized uniformity. Algerians in Paris practice Thai boxing; Asian rappers in London snack on Turkish pizza; Salman Rushdie delights readers everywhere with his Anglo-Indian tales. Although -- as with any change -- there can be downsides to cultural globalization, this cross-fertilization is overwhelmingly a force for good.

The beauty of globalization is that it can free people from the tyranny of geography. Just because someone was born in France does not mean they can only aspire to speak French, eat French food, read French books, visit museums in France, and so on. A Frenchman -- or an American, for that matter -- can take holidays in Spain or Florida, eat sushi or spaghetti for dinner, drink Coke or Chilean wine, watch a Hollywood blockbuster or an Almodóvar, listen to bhangra or rap, practice yoga or kickboxing, read *Elle* or *The Economist*, and have friends from around the world. That we are increasingly free to choose our cultural experiences enriches our lives immeasurably. We could not always enjoy the best the world has to offer.

Globalization not only increases individual freedom, but also revitalizes cultures and cultural artifacts through foreign influences, technologies, and markets. Thriving cultures are not set in stone. They are forever changing from within and without. Each generation challenges the previous one; science and technology alter the way we see ourselves and the world; fashions come and go; experience and events influence our beliefs; outsiders affect us for good and ill.

Many of the best things come from cultures mixing: V.S. Naipaul's Anglo-Indo-Caribbean writing, Paul Gauguin painting in Polynesia, or the African rhythms in rock 'n' roll. Behold the great British curry. Admire the many-colored faces of France's World Cup-winning soccer team, the ferment of ideas that came from Eastern Europe's Jewish diaspora, and the cosmopolitan cities of London and New York. Western numbers are actually Arabic; zero comes most recently from India; Icelandic, French, and Sanskrit stem from a common root.

John Stuart Mill was right: "The economical benefits of commerce are surpassed in importance by those of its effects which are intellectual and moral. It is hardly possible to overrate the value, for the improvement of human beings, of things which bring them into contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar. ... It is indispensable to be perpetually comparing [one's] own notions and customs with the experience and example of persons in different circumstances. ... There is no nation which does not need to borrow from others."

It is a myth that globalization involves the imposition of Americanized uniformity, rather than an explosion of cultural exchange. For a start, many archetypal “American” products are not as all-American as they seem. Levi Strauss, a German immigrant, invented jeans by combining denim cloth (or “serge de Nîmes,” because it was traditionally woven in the French town) with Genes, a style of trousers worn by Genoese sailors. So Levi’s jeans are in fact an American twist on a European hybrid. Even quintessentially American exports are often tailored to local tastes. MTV in Asia promotes Thai pop stars and plays rock music sung in Mandarin. CNN en Español offers a Latin American take on world news. McDonald’s sells beer in France, lamb in India, and chili in Mexico.

In some ways, America is an outlier, not a global leader. Most of the world has adopted the metric system born from the French Revolution; America persists with antiquated measurements inherited from its British-colonial past. Most developed countries have become intensely secular, but many Americans burn with fundamentalist fervor -- like Muslims in the Middle East. Where else in the developed world could there be a serious debate about teaching kids Bible-inspired “creationism” instead of Darwinist evolution?

America’s tastes in sports are often idiosyncratic, too. Baseball and American football have not traveled well, although basketball has fared rather better... People are not only guzzling hamburgers and Coke. Despite Coke’s ambition of displacing water as the world’s drink of choice, it accounts for less than 2 of the 64 fluid ounces that the typical person drinks a day. Britain’s favorite takeaway is a curry, not a burger: Indian restaurants there outnumber McDonald’s six to one...

In pop music, American crooners do not have the stage to themselves. The three artists who featured most widely in national Top Ten album charts in 2000 were America’s Britney Spears, closely followed by Mexico’s Carlos Santana and the British Beatles. Even tiny Iceland has produced a global star: Björk. Popular opera’s biggest singers are Italy’s Luciano Pavarotti, Spain’s José Carreras, and the Spanish-Mexican Plácido Domingo. Latin American salsa, Brazilian lambada, and African music have all carved out global niches for themselves. In most countries, local artists still top the charts... One of the most famous living writers is a Colombian, Gabriel García Márquez, author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Paulo Coelho, another writer who has notched up tens of millions of global sales with *The Alchemist* and other books, is Brazilian. The evidence is overwhelming. Fears about Americanized uniformity are over-blown: American cultural products are not uniquely dominant; local ones are alive and well...

Moreover, some losses of diversity are a good thing. In 1850, some countries banned slavery, while others maintained it in various forms. Who laments that the world is now almost universally rid of it? More generally, Western ideas are reshaping the way people everywhere view themselves and the world. Like nationalism and socialism before it, liberalism -- political ideas about individual liberty, the rule of law, democracy, and universal human rights, as well as economic ones about the importance of private property rights, markets, and consumer choice -- is a European philosophy that has swept the world. Even people who resist liberal ideas, in the name of religion (Islamic and Christian fundamentalists), group identity (communitarians), authoritarianism (advocates of “Asian values”) or tradition (cultural conservatives), now define themselves partly by their opposition to them.

Faith in science and technology is even more widespread. Even those who hate the West make use of its technologies. Osama bin Laden plots terrorism on a cellphone and crashes planes into skyscrapers. Antiglobalization protesters organize by e-mail and over the Internet. José Bové manipulates 21st-century media in his bid to return French farming to the Middle Ages. China no longer turns its nose up at Western technology: It tries to beat the West at its own game.

True, many people reject Western culture. (Or, more accurately, “cultures”: Europeans and Americans disagree bitterly over the death penalty, for instance; they hardly see eye to eye over the role of the state, either.) Samuel Huntington, a professor of international politics at Harvard University, even predicts a “clash of civilizations” that will divide the 21st-century world. Yet Francis Fukuyama, a professor of international political economy at the Johns Hopkins University, is nearer the mark when he talks about the “end of history.” Some cultures have local appeal, but only liberalism appeals everywhere (if not to all) -- although radical environmentalism may one day challenge its hegemony. Islamic fundamentalism poses a threat to our lives but not to our beliefs. Unlike communism, it is not an alternative to liberal capitalism for Westerners or other non-Muslims.

Yet for all the spread of Western ideas to the developing world, globalization is not a one-way street. Although Europe’s former colonial powers have left their stamp on much of the world, the recent flow of migration has been in the opposite direction. There are Algerian suburbs in Paris, but not French ones in Algiers; Pakistani parts of London, but not British ones of Lahore. Whereas Muslims are a growing minority in Europe, Christians are a disappearing one in the Middle East.

Foreigners are changing America even as they adopt its ways. A million or so immigrants arrive each year (700,000 legally, 300,000 illegally), most of them Latino or Asian. Since 1990, the number of foreign-born American residents has risen by 6 million to just over 25 million, the biggest immigration wave since the turn of the 20th century. English may be all-conquering outside America, but in some parts of the United States, it is now second to Spanish. Half of the 50 million new inhabitants expected in America in the next 25 years will be immigrants or the children of immigrants.

The upshot of all this change is that national cultures are fragmenting into a kaleidoscope of different ones. New hybrid cultures are emerging. In “Amexica” people speak Spanglish. Regional cultures are reviving. Repressed under Franco, Catalans, Basques, Gallegos, and others assert their identity in Spain. The Scots and Welsh break with British monoculture. Estonia is reborn from the Soviet Union. Voices that were silent dare to speak again.

Individuals are forming new communities, linked by shared interests and passions, that cut across national borders. Friendships with foreigners met on holiday. Scientists sharing ideas over the Internet. Environmentalists campaigning together using e-mail. House-music lovers swapping tracks online. Greater individualism does not spell the end of community. The new communities are simply chosen rather than coerced, unlike the older ones that communitarians hark back to.

Does that mean national identity is dead? Hardly. People who speak the same language, were born and live near each other, face similar problems, have a common experience, and vote in the same elections still have plenty of things in common. For all our awareness of the world as a

single place, we are not citizens of the world but citizens of a state. But if people now wear the bonds of nationality more loosely, is that such a bad thing? People may lament the passing of old ways. Indeed, many of the worries about globalization echo age-old fears about decline, a lost golden age, and so on. But by and large, people choose the new ways because they are more relevant to their current needs and offer new opportunities that the old ones did not.

The truth is that we increasingly define ourselves rather than let others define us. Being British or American does not define who you are: It is part of who you are. You can like foreign things and still have strong bonds to your fellow citizens. As Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian author, has written: "Seeking to impose a cultural identity on a people is equivalent to locking them in a prison and denying them the most precious of liberties -- that of choosing what, how, and who they want to be."