THE LIMITS AND CONTRADICTIONS OF ‘AMERICANIZATION’

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The United States received a rude awakening on September 11, 2001, finally realizing that it was not as loved as it had once thought it was in the post-Cold War era, especially in the Middle East. The absence of a geopolitical and ideological counterweight did not automatically mean acceptance of the remaining superpower. Out of the cauldron of 9/11 emerged a new debate in Washington, DC about American ‘soft power’ versus ‘hard power’, reflecting a new understanding of just how unpopular the US was, and how ineffective America’s supposed domination of the airwaves was in protecting it from popular opposition in the Arab-Muslim world.

The concept of soft power refers to a country’s cultural and ideological ‘appeal’, its ‘ability to get desired outcomes through attraction instead of force’, working by ensuring that ‘others want what you want’. Hard power, by contrast, refers to more tangible power resources found essentially in the economic, demographic, military, and technological spheres. Americans on the more liberal side of the ideological spectrum see soft power as the preferred way of managing America’s position in the world. As Andrew Bacevich puts it, Americans ‘count on the allure of the “American way of life” to win over doubters and subvert adversaries’, a by-product of American exceptionalism, something that ‘befits a nation founded on the conviction of its own uniqueness, [since] the American empire is like no other in history’. Even radical critics of the invasion of Iraq have seen it as intended to clear the ground for the success of soft power in the Middle East. Perry Anderson, for instance, noting that Saudi Arabia is ‘more barricaded against US cultural penetration than any country in the world after North Korea’, has argued that while it is ‘thoroughly subject to the grip of American “hard” power (funds and arms), most of the Arab world
thus forms a kind of exclusion zone for the normal operations of American “soft power”. Taking over Iraq would, he argued in 2002, give ‘Washington a large oil-rich platform in the centre of the Arab world’ leading to a role-model effect where Arab elites would finally be convinced of the ‘need to modernize their ways, and Arab masses of the invincibility of America’.4

This essay will challenge the assumption that underlies the arguments of both American liberal imperialists and their critics – the assumption that once a part of the world is opened to ‘globalization’ it can be structured, thanks to globalization, in such a way as to openly embrace American soft power. Whereas many assume that a certain synergy exists between globalization and Americanization, such that the transnational economic forces of globalization remodel the world according to American ideological and cultural specifications, my argument is that the opposite is the case. Globalization, even if it certainly means commodification of culture, does not necessarily mean Americanization. On the contrary, as disproportionately important as the American contribution is to globalization, globalization can actually weaken America’s cultural hold on the world. The world is much more immune to US influence than has been supposed.

SOFT POWER AND SEPTEMBER 11

In December 2002, Richard Haass, the State Department’s Director of Policy Planning, admitted that past administrations had allowed the Middle East to become a ‘democratic exception’ and, consequently, ‘breeding grounds for extremists and terrorists who target America for supporting the regimes under which they live’. After September 11th it was decided that it was ‘not in the US interest … or that of Muslims, for the United States to continue this exception’, as Secretary of State Colin Powell put it in his famous speech to the Heritage Foundation, talking about America’s interest in promoting democracy and development in the region, and using his address to launch the ‘US-Middle East Partnership Initiative’ (MEPI) – commonly known as the Powell Initiative – with its emphasis on education, economic reform, private sector development, women’s empowerment, and civil society promotion.5

For Powell, soft power means the use of public diplomacy to market America, quite literally, with the emphasis on ‘re-branding’ the United States to the world.6 The ‘queen of branding’, Charlotte Beers (the legendary ad executive who headed Tatham-Laird & Kudner, Ogilvy & Mather, and J. Walter Thompson), was hired to do the job, filling the post of Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs soon after 9/11. Her main task involved changing the perceptions of ‘disaffected populations’ in the Middle East and South Asia about America, countering the global image of the US, the ‘world’s only “hyper-power”’, as a “boorish bully, intimidating its allies and unable to comprehend the hatred it inflames across the Arab world”, as Ms Beers herself put it.7 She followed the dictates of consumer research with focus groups and audience segmentation, engaging in weekly meetings with American Muslims and meeting Arab opinion-formers in Britain, Egypt and Morocco. Her ideas ranged from the State
Department booklet, ‘Muslim Life in America’, to Muslim American adverts during Ramadan, to a proposed partnership with the Smithsonian Institute to build a ‘virtual reality American room where overseas looky-loos can experience a walk down an imaginary American street … [and] the local library, shopping mall or touring bus’.8

Beers resigned her post in March 2003 after only a little over a year in office. The state of her health was the official reason given, but soon after leaving office she complained that the rest of the government was uncooperative, making it impossible for her to do what she had been hired to do. An unnamed American official informed CNN that the White House ‘has been distancing itself from Charlotte since day one’.9 This certainly had something to do with the power of the superhawks in the administration. Beers was derided by the right-wing press and think tanks closely associated with the administration, who thought that treating America like a brand ‘would debase us to be “sold” like soap’.10 Although many of these critics have no qualms about Beers herself, or her techniques, which they find laughable but not too harmful in themselves, they believe that America’s negative image among Muslims is because of a ‘deficiency not merely in information but in the skills of reality-testing … The problem is not our “brand”; it is their buying habits’.11 The superhawks would rather operate through generalized ‘information warfare’, a concept (developed and popularized by Donald Rumsfeld and his advisors at the Pentagon soon after 9/11) that combines purely military techniques of disabling enemy information systems, and demoralizing its troops through traditional psychological warfare (propaganda broadcasts, leaflet dropping), with ‘public information management’ (controlling the dissemination of ‘true’ information about wars the US is conducting).12

But the petty controversies around Beers’ appointment and departure are really symptomatic of a much larger problem, namely that the US has gradually been stripped of its soft power resources by larger structural developments around the globe that are best summarized, ironically, under the label of ‘globalization’. What September 11th really raised is the question of the type of world American power operates in; the question of how resistant this world is to the causes and consequences of American unipolar dominance. As the Cold War historian Michael Cox eloquently puts it, ‘crises have the capacity to separate the conceptual wheat from the rhetorical chaff’, drawing a ‘clear line between the world as it is and the world as some imagine it to be’.13

‘GLOCALIZATION’ AND THE DILUTION OF AMERICAN CULTURE

Widely-held assumptions regarding Americanization take it that, for instance, eating at McDonald’s is a ‘political act’, an act involving cultural or identity politics whereby ‘one positions oneself socially and personally with global modernity’. When Americans eat at McDonald’s, surveys show that they place the emphasis on the speed, efficiency and rationality of the fast-food industry,
things they associate with twentieth century American life. This positions them as modern but not global. For people in the Third World one would expect the situation to be completely different. In eating at McDonald’s they would position themselves in modern and global terms, wishing to ‘consume a modernity they see as lacking in their own societies’ but found in America and its products. But while McDonald’s does offer a ‘standardized’ menu, it is adapted to ‘local’ environments. McDonald’s serves a berry-based drink in Brazil, a fruit-based shake in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, coconut, mango, and tropic mint shakes in Hong Kong, vegetarian Maharaja Macs in anti-beef India, mutton potpies in Australia, and uses Asterix instead of Ronald McDonald to promote burgers in France. According to marketing guru and international consultant Paul Herbig much the same is true, to varying degrees, of the marketing strategies of Wrigley, KFC, Burger King, Wendy’s, Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola, Marlboro, Revlon, Levi’s, and Pizza Hut. It is true that such corporations have changed the habits, tastes and mentality of customers around the world, but these homogenizing effects have not done away with local cultures. This allows non-Americans to eat fast food in a way that makes them different than before – ‘modern’ – but without thinking of themselves as Americans.

One can see evidence of similar non-Americanizing marketing processes at work in the entertainment industry. The very growth of the global market for American cultural products has exerted a ‘homogenizing feedback effect on the creative process’ in which many American movies are ‘now produced with an eye on the foreign audience and often with the help of foreign investors’. As one critic complained, such films ‘might as well come from the moon or the Cayman Islands’ as from Hollywood. Such feedback effects of globalization have already decisively made their way into the music industry. MTV is no longer split three ways between MTV America, Europe, and Asia, but now – thanks to digital technology – consists of: MTV Brazil, MTV Europe, MTV2 Europe, MTV Canada, MTV China, MTV France, MTV Germany, MTV2 Germany, MTV Holland, MTV India, MTV Italy, MTV Japan, MTV Korea, MTV Latin America, MTV Nordic, MTV Poland, MTV Russia, MTV South East Asia, MTV Spain, MTV Taiwan/Hong Kong, and MTV UK. Each segment of MTV almost exists in a world of its own, catering to the tastes of each market in its own language, using its music, arts and advertisements.

Thus American pop culture is not as all-pervasive as many think, given that the most popular television programs in most countries are nearly always local productions, while local pop groups are more than capable of competing with American bands in their home countries and even in the American market. In the Arab world, for instance, regional satellite channels dedicated to airing Arabic music videos – such as MTV Lebanon, Melody Hits TV, the Mazzika channel and Egypt’s Dream TV, among others – have flooded the airways with their produce and directed Arabic-speaking audiences away from Western channels. Moreover, not all American pop culture that reaches the Third World comes
from satellite broadcasts originating in the West. As a consequence the programs, shows, and movies broadcast through terrestrial outlets are heavily ‘filtered’ to local standards of morality. When episodes of the hit sitcom *Friends* were broadcast on Egyptian television a significant amount of material was removed, especially anything pertaining to homosexuality. Knowing how central homosexuality was to the storyline, one can imagine the amount of damage done. The censors were able to squeeze two half-hour episodes into a half-hour timeslot, with commercial breaks!

Similarly CNN, which broadcasts the ‘American world view’, is not a ‘sign-post on the road to a universal civilization’ but an ‘ephemeral artifact of America’s present lead in communications technologies’, as John Gray argues: only media companies that ‘vary their product to suit different cultures, such as MTV, may expect to remain global’. The CNN homepage does boast CNN.com Asia, CNN.com Europe, CNNenEspanol.com, CNNArabic.com, and some language services, but all of its broadcasting is in English, represents the American world view, and consists mostly of domestic news that does not interest foreign audiences. In fact, thanks to the domestic focus of CNN and the isolationist mentality of its predominantly American audience, CNN only reaches 3 per cent of the world’s population and is ‘struggling to make live global coverage its trademark’. The paradox here is that for America to get its message across it must either dilute it (as in the case of movies) or stop broadcasting that message completely (as in the case of MTV). American pop culture is being de-Americanized by the very forces of globalization that supposedly thrive on the universal appeal of American culture.

The label that encompasses this contradictory state of affairs is ‘glocalization’, a business term invented by the Japanese in order to ‘emphasize that the globalization of a product is more likely to succeed when the product or service is adapted specifically to each locality or culture it is marketed in’. Glocalization attacks the process of Americanization at its very heart because it resists all homogenizing cultural tendencies, American or otherwise. As Roland Robertson says, ‘indigenization is the other side of the coin of the homogenizing aspects of globalization’. Increasingly in this new globalized age the popularity of commodities is tied less and less to the culture of the country they originate in, and more and more to brand names. As Francis Rocca, former editor of the *American Spectator*, reminds us, how many of us know – or care – that Benetton is an Italian company, or that the Swatch logo is the flag of Switzerland, or that Nokia is Finnish? ‘Korean youngsters’, notes Rocca, are ‘joyfully surprised to find, when visiting the States, that Americans have McDonald’s, too’.

This is not a particularly new process. Pasta – the symbol of Italian cuisine – is Chinese in origin. Baseball, the all-American game, is really a version of the British game of rounders. Cultures have always absorbed the products of other cultures, stripped them of their ‘foreign’ quality, and then conveniently forgotten their origins in order to make them something distinctly and uniquely local. The only difference now is that this process is driven by global capital; the foreign
itself ‘wishes’ to become local. The structure of distribution and consumption in the global economy is ‘distinctively American’, but the ‘content of global mass culture is multinational in origin and universal in character’, robbing American goods of what is distinctively American about them. The end result is that there are ‘fewer and fewer normative American tastes, making it harder to define American identity, and harder to adopt it’. The global reach and appeal of American goods actually depends on the fact that what it exports globally is not seen to be American, or representative of any other culture for that matter. In Peterson’s terminology, goods produced by American multinationals are culturally ‘modern’ but not ‘global’ because they are localized by these multinational corporations and by the populations that buy these goods.

One of the positive by-products of globalization is that by forcing local firms to conform to global standards of management and product quality it actually helps improve the competitiveness, and so the resilience, of local cultural industries in the face of foreign competition. One of the most successful cases of Third World cultural industries taking up Western standards and out-competing Western corporations is Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel. Al-Jazeera is modelled on CNN, aiming to be the premier 24-hour news channel of the Arab world, while most of its programs and broadcasting style are modelled on the BBC World Service, whence most of its employees originate. Al-Jazeera was able to broadcast pictures from inside Afghanistan that no other network had access to, forcing the Western world to look at things from the perspective of the Taliban and al-Qa’eda, and effectively bringing to an end the ‘CNN age’ that began with the first Gulf War. And in the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, as Jonathan Alter and Martha Brant say, ‘Al-Jazeera [was] to the Iraq war what CNN was to the 1991 gulf war – the primary source of information’, almost single-handedly ruining months and months of US planning for a huge propaganda war alongside the actual war.

It is true, of course, that the multiple cultural roots of American society give the country’s culture an advantage over all other countries in the soft power game; its European component appeals to Europeans, its Latino element appeals to Latin Americans, its African-American to Africans, its Asian to Asians. But because the cultural identity of globalization is surprisingly fluid and malleable, it helps to shield consumers from the deleterious effects of American consumer and pop culture. The global marketplace is also the world of the Swatch Swiss watch, Mexican soap operas, Hong Kong Kung Fu movies and Japanese anime and computer games. The most popular game in the world is still football, a non-American sport that is finally beginning to become incorporated in the consciousness of the American population; and most people around the world still call it ‘football’, instead of the American word ‘soccer’. The largest movie industry in the world is not Hollywood but Bollywood. The Indian movie industry has not faced any problems competing on its home ground with American movies, and has been very successful abroad and among Indian migrant communities in both the Third and the First Worlds, as have Indian music
videos. In Egypt local movies are more profitable to cinemas than foreign films, and the Chinese have been so successful in exporting their brand of cinema that an increasing number of Chinese actors and directors work in Hollywood, with many American movies adopting their style of filmmaking (e.g. the Matrix movies, Mission Impossible 2).

Even at the level of language America’s cultural ascendancy is not guaranteed, as pointed out by linguist Joshua Fishman. Despite the unprecedented reach of English as the new lingua franca of the globalizing world, this does not confer much (or at least not lasting) power on the US, because English ‘actually reaches and is then utilized by only a small and atypically fortunate minority’ while the ‘kinds of interactions identified with globalization, from trade to communications, have also encouraged regionalization and with it the spread of regional languages’. The global predominance of English undoubtedly confers advantages on American firms from a marketing perspective, but its political utility as an instrument of imperialism is exaggerated. The fact that they spoke English did not prevent American colonists or the Irish from fighting and defeating their English (cultural) masters, any more than their continued usage of English has threatened their continued independence. People around the world are increasingly taught English by non-native speakers, with young people in particular developing their own slang dialectics which mix English and local languages. As Fishman reminds us, just because a great many ‘young people around the world may be able to sing along to a new Madonna song does not mean they can hold a rudimentary conversation in English or even understand what Madonna is saying’.

A relative once complained to me about how her son, who was enrolled in a foreign language school in Egypt, pronounces the world ‘circle’ as ‘kurkle’. Even though the boy knew the proper pronunciation, he had to pronounce it with a ‘k’ because that was how the teacher pronounced it – and the teacher would not change her mind when he told her the proper pronunciation. People in the Third World – I speak from my own personal experience in the Arab world – often ‘lump together’ what is American, Western, European, Northern, white, and modern. Elite groups in Egypt still insist on speaking French as a sign of being ‘developed’ and ‘modern’ (a product of Egypt’s unique affinity with all things French since the days of the Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt and Mohammad Ali’s attempt to modernize Egypt along French lines), even though English has long ousted French as the language of ‘civilization’. Young people in the Arab world do wear T-shirts carrying the logos of ‘Ralph Lauren’ and ‘Armani’, but when questioned they do not attach any fashion significance to these particular brands – all ‘Western’ T-shirts are the same to them. They are just as likely to wear T-shirts with a picture of Che Guevara on it or the words ‘JIHAD is the only solution’.

The crude kind of English that people speak in the Third World often forms a linguistic barrier to the cultural-ideological effect of Americanizing pop culture goods. People watch American movies or eat American food, but still do not get
the point, cannot grasp the totality of the American experience. They often interpret things in a selective way that reinforces their biases and prejudices, believing that it confirms what they have known all along. Pursuing the concept of glocalization to its logical conclusion does not produce a homogenizing, Americanizing world but one that is being increasingly ‘unified’ and ‘fragmented’ at the same time.27

THE COUNTER-FORCE OF RELIGION

Already in 1970 Zbigniew Brzezinski suggested that people were searching for a ‘more intimate linguistic and religious community’ to overcome the impact of living in an increasingly ‘congested, overlapping, confusing, and impersonal’ global environment, drawing inward to escape a sense of ‘global congestion’.28 One consequence of this has been the addition of ‘localization’ to the list of the forces eating away at the global dominance of English. The world is teeming with voluntary language preservation movements and governments that find linguistic diversity acceptable and even desirable. The end result is that there have never been as many standardized languages as there are today: roughly 1,200, with the development of multilingual societies around the world grounded in a ‘linguistic division of labor’ where different languages serve different social functions and so do not displace each other.29

The end result is a world that, as Brzezinski argued, is more like a ‘global city’ than McLuhan’s famous ‘global village’, because rather than ‘the personal stability, interpersonal intimacy, implicitly shared values, and traditions that were important ingredients of the primitive village’ what exists is a ‘nervous, agitated, tense, and fragmented web of interdependent relations’. As Brzezinski points out perceptively, these are the dominant features of city life (where ‘interdependence... is better characterized by interaction than by intimacy’) and not village life.30 And this interaction can be and often is violent, given that globalization generates anti-global sentiment, and often allows anti-global forces to take advantage of what globalization has to offer, reinforcing their power and their ability to send shockwaves through the world. This is because one of globalization’s boasts is that it ‘increases choice’, including the choice to ‘live life according to your own lights’. An example used by Micklethwaite and Wooldridge to prove this is a religious group – the Bruderhof – who do not approve of radio, television, feminism, and homosexuality. But, despite this they ‘established a highly successful global toy business using a mixture of Japanese management techniques and American technology’.31 This gave them all the money they needed to keep their community intact and make it successful, so that they did not have to abandon their way of life. The Zapatista movement in Mexico is not alone in having made very successful use of the Internet: even the Taliban, who banned the Internet and television in Afghanistan, had a website of their own and were surprisingly successful at using satellite television to broadcast their version of the American war to the world.

Indeed religious fundamentalism of all colours is to a considerable extent a by-
product of globalization, and at several levels. It is partly a ‘search for stable values amid alienation from the harsh economic realities and materialism of the late twentieth century’ – the revival of Christian fundamentalism in America in the wake of Reaganomics being a case in point.\textsuperscript{32} Even more than materialism, however, fundamentalism is a reaction against Americanism seen as an attack on beliefs and institutions – gender, sexuality, identity, the definitions of marriage and family – that were once thought to be fundamental and unalterable. Fundamentalism mobilizes religious sentiment in an effort to preserve what people see as normal, and often drives them to push the clock back to a time before these challenges developed.

So religious belief thrives in the ‘de-localizing’ world created by globalization. At the level of identity globalization is fundamentally a ‘process of exile’, uprooting people from locally grounded sources of personal identification, making them into ‘global citizens’ with spatially-temporally dislocated ‘portable identities’. Such dislocation is much less relevant in the religious context since religion, with its ‘appeals to the hereafter … does not recognize this post-modern dislocation, since it never, in the first place, was involved in an empirical timetable’, nor is it tied down to any geographic-social totality.\textsuperscript{33} Religions are, at least in the case of the great missionary religions like Christianity and Islam, ‘world religions’ aimed at converting the whole human race to their message, creating a uniform world religious community with few distinguishing geographic identities, other than a few holy lands and places of worship that satisfy the need for some geographic bearings.\textsuperscript{34} When the homogenizing forces of globalization are combined with the equally global but anti-materialist forces of religion, the result is a glocalizing world.

THE DARKER SIDE OF US CULTURAL EXPORTS

What is also often missed in discussions over Americanization is the fact that how America presents itself to the rest of the world is not always good. The American penchant for ‘national self-absorption and self-congratulation goes hand-in-hand with a remarkable taste for self-exposure and self-criticism’. Therefore, the ‘same satellites that beam each breathlessly awaited episode of Dallas or Beverly Hills 90210 into untold millions of households also carry live, uncensored coverage of urban riots and self-immolating religious cults’. It could very well be these negative images that ‘linger longest in the minds of external observers’.\textsuperscript{35} Also, not every breathlessly awaited American TV show is politically pro-American (see for example The X-Files), while many American movies are often explicitly radically critical of US culture or politics (see for example the work of Spike Lee and Oliver Stone). Everyone watched Clinton’s humiliating, confusing and inexplicable Monicagate ‘trial’ on CNN. Arabic and Muslim audiences in particular interpreted Clinton’s attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan as an attempt to keep the scandal under raps by distracting Congress with foreign adventures. The pervasiveness of the race issue in America was brought to the world courtesy of the riots in Los Angeles after the brutal police beating
of Rodney King, and the live coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial. The slogan of American anti-Vietnam War protestors that ‘The Whole World is Watching’ seems to have become truer today than ever before.

This is why Joseph Nye, the author of the concept of ‘soft power’, worried that America’s status in the world is ‘endangered by the growing international perception of America as a society riven by crime, violence, drug abuse, racial tension, family breakdown, fiscal irresponsibility, political gridlock, and increasingly acrimonious political discourse’.

According to the Pew Global Attitudes survey for 2002, ‘What the World Thinks in 2002 – How Global Publics View: Their Lives, Their Countries, The World, America’, America is ‘nearly universally admired for its technological achievements and people in most countries say they enjoy US movies, music and television programs’, yet at the same time the ‘spread of US ideas and customs is disliked by majorities in almost every country included in this survey’. It seems that opinions about the US are ‘complicated and contradictory’ because people ‘around the world embrace things American and, at the same time, decry US influence on their societies’.

But this hardly captures the underlying problem revealed in a recent research report of a study of 1,259 middle-class teenagers from twelve countries: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, South Korea, Mexico, China, Spain, Taiwan, Dominican Republic, Pakistan, Nigeria, Italy, and Argentina. With the exception of the Argentinians, young people in these countries saw Americans as violent, materialistic, domineering, disrespectful of people unlike them, sexually amoral (particularly women), not concerned about the poor, lacking family values, and generally prone to committing crime.

The most important aspect of these findings, however, is that almost all of this was a result of their access to movies, television and pop music made in America. Such results suggest that ‘pop-culture rather than foreign policy is the true culprit of anti-Americanism’. Moreover, globalization is implicated in this, given that teenagers have been able to form these opinions from American pop culture, even in countries where most American movies and pop arts are banned, because entrepreneurs download this material and rent or sell it on videotapes or DVDs. The study discovered that even in ‘very poor villages in Pakistan, where there is only one TV receiver’, young people gather together, drink tea and watch this contraband material and ‘discuss the evil nature of Americans’. This is the impression they got from discussions with most of the students studied, not just those in Arabic and Muslim countries. This contradicts the view of those (whether they are American liberal imperialists or their critics, such as Anderson) that the Middle East ‘excludes’ American culture. The most negative attitudes the study came across were in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabian people are not anti-American because they are culturally barricaded in by their state, but because they aren’t barricaded in enough.
AMERICANIZATION CONTRA AMERICAN HEGEMONY

Brzezinski’s concerns ran even deeper than Nye’s, seeing the end of the Cold War era as representing a metaphysical transition from the age of ‘coercive utopia’ to an age of ‘permissive cornucopia’. Too much control has been replaced by too little ‘control over personal and collective desires, sexual appetites, and social conduct’. What concerned him more than the negative image of America projected to the world by the USA’s own media outlets were the ‘corrupting effects’ of American pop culture on foreign audiences, precisely to the extent that they embraced it. James Kurth has similarly noted that the ‘ideal human type’ promoted by American popular culture is the ‘popular entertainer or sports star’, based on the qualities of ‘inherent talent, self-centeredness, energy, and aggressiveness’ which are ‘not the distinguishing qualities of a mature person’, but of an ‘adolescent’. Are such people willing to make sacrifices for a national ideal? The every-man-for-himself philosophy preached by much American pop culture is hardly capable of encouraging loyalty to anything, let alone to some far-off country that may make demands on them to oppose their own governments. These are not the idle theorizations of conservative intellectuals but very shrewd and perceptive points that bear a strong relationship to reality.

Shortly after September 11th I personally witnessed a number of highly Westernized, ‘Americanized’ Egyptian youths making jokes – of the kind found on the Internet – about the New York and Washington attacks. They were not taking a political stance against America; politics was the farthest thing from their minds. They just saw the event as funny, something akin to the (steady diet of) videogames and actions movies they grew up on. These youngsters were just as capable of enjoying American movies that demonized Islam as they were of finding pictures of the planes hitting the Twin Towers exhilarating. This ambivalent attitude to the September 11th attacks is not verifiable by extensive empirical studies but to judge from my teaching experience with the more Westernized youth in the Arab world at the American University in Cairo, this attitude does seem quite common.

Admittedly, such local responses clearly also need to be related to the effects of a pre-existing local culture of alienation. The Egyptian youth only became Americanized after the Arab nationalist-African-Third World focus of Egyptian identity, built up during the Nasserist era, fell apart under the onslaught of Camp David and Open Door economics under Sadat. But the point is that this Americanization grounded in local alienation did not produce the required pro-American results, demonstrating that Americanization and globalization, even in the absence of a rival indigenous ideology, can still be highly counterproductive to American hegemony. American pop culture is exporting its culture of indifference, cynicism and apathy, a sort of post-modern detachment of the individual from any other concerns than his/her own, with the surrounding reality turning into an unreal, entertaining freak-show. Increasingly, many young people around the world are beginning to live in the world portrayed by Oliver Stone in Natural
Born Killers, where the ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ exchange roles; a world where real violence and human tragedy become entertaining and an opportunity to make money. And, to be sure, such malaise is highly profitable.

The positive side of American pop culture, ironically, does not bode anything better for America’s global position either. This is because mass communication and education create greater expectations – ‘for which the material wealth of America provides a vague standard’ – that simply cannot be met by these societies. ‘Americanization’ thus creates, as Brzezinski saw, ‘common aspirations and highly differentiated reactions’ whereby the US ‘unifies, changes, stimulates, and challenges others – often against [America’s] own immediate interests’.43 Assuming that American pop culture promotes support for American foreign policy is like supposing that gangster rap promotes respect for the Los Angeles police force.

The export of America’s education system to the world, particularly higher education, can also be positively destructive of US foreign policy initiatives. As Robert Switzer suggests, we should not expect American educational institutions to lead to a ‘cloning of the American mind’ abroad. Insofar as they teach people how to think instead of what to think they can also liberate students abroad from foreign occupation by the thoughts and values of others’.44 The Islamic Revolution in Iran included among its militants many university students who were educated in America, some of whom later broke into the American Embassy in Tehran and took its employees hostage. The protest marches in the Arab world in support of the second Intifada, many of which were led by youths who did not witness the Arab-Israeli wars and grew up in the CNN/MTV age of the (Americanized) global village, are proof of the ineffectiveness of Americanization. And some of the most active protesters in Egypt have been students of the American University in Cairo.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to the dialectical interplay between the forces of globalization and localization, America’s presence in this world, as an economic-informational-cultural totality, makes the global system chaotic and unstable and directs the general animosity found in the world towards itself. This is an unintended product of ‘Americanization’, of America’s soft power resources. The assumption that after the fall of the Soviet Union the US dominated and managed a global village – a world that would perpetuate its message and posture with no contradictions – was false. In reality what existed was a global city, an entity that does spread American culture, values, tastes, ideals, but in a way that engenders resistance.

In such a volatile context, American double standards – over democracy, human rights, proliferation, peace – and the country’s unilateral pursuit of its interests, often in disregard of international law, let alone the interests of others, were bound to lead to a violent backlash. September 11th needs to be seen in this perspective. From a more strictly political perspective, America’s mismanagement
of the global city is rooted in its inability – so far – to construct a viable world order in the aftermath of the Cold War order. And a war on terrorism pursued unilaterally in defence of American interests and rationalised by these double standards will further destabilize the world.

It is perfectly natural for the dominant powers of the world to want to impose their values and interests on others, and it’s just as natural for everyone else to resist. But it is not enough, as Obododimma Oha puts it, that the victims of globalization merely ‘construct and narrate their own victimhood.’ Resistance must first take the form of challenging the Third World’s ‘own perceptions of … inferiority’. Those who complain about the homogenizing effect of globalization have not been able to come up with an alternative, such as trying to reconcile such foreign goods as ‘democracy’ with indigenous political practices and ideologies. The onus is now on the populations of the Third World. They have the responsibility – the system will not correct itself – to impose their values and interests onto globalization on their own home ground. The only other alternative, if globalization and Americanization are as all pervasive as some claim, is to ‘live like Unoka, the character in Chinua Achebe’s “Things Fall Apart”’, who went back to the ‘evil forest with only a useless flute in the hand and a sorry history behind’.45

There is no such thing as ‘cultural purity’ and there is nothing to fear from interacting with foreign cultures given that ‘intercultural transfer’ is not ‘primarily a politically based, one-way phenomenon – a cultural monologue rather than a dialogue’.46 As for Americanization, it is its own worst enemy; there is nothing to fear simply because it can never come to pass.

NOTES

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Mark Allen Peterson, ‘Languages of Globalization: Modernity and Authenticity’, Globalization: Blessing or Curse?, Proceedings of the Fifth Annual AUC Research Conference, 29-30 March 1998, Cairo: AUC Press, p. 119. To be fair, Peterson’s analysis of glocalization accounts for a significant degree of variability in the goods and corporations in question. Peterson shows that the recipient determines the degree of glocalization, and which culture gains more emphasis and imposes its values on the product. The customer is not a passive receiver, whereas the multinational corporation is more interested in profits than any ‘cultural project’.


gakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/global/15robertson.html/, p. 2; italics in original.


35 Friedberg, ‘The Future of American Power’, p. 16. A good example of how ineffective pop culture is as an instrument of cultural imperialism is afforded by the views of one of the new generation of pop stars, Shakira. In an interview on MTV Shakira commented, when a caller from Israel contacted the show, that she would rather talk to a ‘pig’ than to someone from Israel. It is true that her views are partly dictated by her Lebanese origins, but one would think that being immersed in an Americanizing pop culture world – being at the centre of it in her case – would have blinded her to the double
standards of US foreign policy, dulling her sense of ethnic identity and historical rootedness.


40 Melvin DeFleur, email to the author, 9 February 2003.


