

Globalization and Culture

Critics of globalization contend that, even if increased trade promotes material prosperity, it comes with a high spiritual and cultural cost, running roughshod over the world's distinctive cultures and threatening to turn the globe into one big, tawdry strip mall. George Mason University economist and *Cato* adjunct scholar Tyler Cowen has for years been one of the most insightful and incisive debunkers of that view. At a recent *Cato* Book Forum, Cowen discussed his newest book, *Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World's Cultures*. Cowen squared off against political theorist Benjamin Barber of the University of Maryland, one of the most prominent skeptics of globalization and author of the best-selling *Jihad vs. McWorld*.

Tyler Cowen: The core message of my last few books is that markets support diversity and freedom of choice, that trade gives artists a greater opportunity to express their creative inspiration. The preconditions for successful artistic creativity tend to be things like markets, physical materials, ideas, and inspiration. When two cultures trade with each other they tend to expand the opportunities available to individual artists. My book *Creative Destruction* outlines the logic of what I call a "gains from trade" model, and much of the book is devoted to a series of examples. I go back in history and look at some examples of poorer or Third World countries that have been very creative, and I find that trade played an important role in those artistic revolutions.

So if we look, for instance, at Cuban music or reggae music, we find that Cuban music was produced largely for American tourists who went to nightclubs in Cuba in the 1950s. Persian carpets started being produced in large numbers again in the 19th century, largely to sell to European buyers who sold to North American buyers. The blossoming of world literature—writers from Mahfouz to Marquez—the bookstore, the printing press, the advent of cinema around the globe are all cases in which trade has made different countries, different regions, more creative, given us more diversity. Countries do look more alike, but they look more alike in the sense

of offering some commonly diverse choices. So today you can buy sushi in either France or Germany. This makes France and Germany more alike, yet in my view this is closer to being an increase in diversity than a decline in diversity.

If we think of societies that have very well developed markets—for example the United States—what we find happening is not that everyone, for instance, buys or listens to the same kind of music. As markets have allowed suppliers to deliver products to consumers, we've seen a blossoming of different genres of music. In the 20th century the United States evolved rock and roll, rhythm and blues, Motown, Cajun



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music, many different kinds of jazz—ragtime, swing, stomp—heavy metal, rap. The list goes on. When I look at the empirical evidence from societies with well-developed market economies, I find that what people want to buy is not fixed or biologically constructed. When the cost of supplying products goes down, people tend to use culture to differentiate themselves from other people, to pursue niche interests, to pursue hobbies. It's the poorer or more primitive societies in which people specialize in one type of consumption. If you go to pygmy society in the Congo, for

instance, the pygmies produce splendid music; it's truly beautiful. But the pygmies really have just one kind of music, and the richer societies with more markets have given us more diversity, more competing kinds of music.

What globalization tends to do is increase difference, but it liberates difference from geography. We're used to a certain pattern or model of difference. Different peoples are different, and they live in different places. So there's what Tibet looks like, there's what Mexico looks like, and there's what Indiana looks like. We rapidly identify difference with locale. But that's only one kind of difference. Another kind of difference shows up in the paths we choose to take through our lives, and I believe that individuals will always wish to choose different paths for their lives. It may be the case 300 years from now, if the world globalizes enough, that Mexico, Tibet, the United States, and Thailand won't necessarily be so geographically distinct. Crossing a border may be less of a shock than it is today. But I think we will still find other kinds of differences that are liberated from geography, that are differences among individuals. And those, I think, will be even more vital than they are today.

Benjamin Barber: One of the problems of globalization and cultural borrowing and cultural mimicry is that they depend, not on isolated cultures, but on authentic cultures. And I quite agree that the "authentic" culture is itself a cultural product of earlier cultural interactions, so it's not the fixed item that critics sometimes suggest. Nonetheless, we all know the difference between getting crêpes in Dijon and getting them in a New York place called Les Halles. Even though you do get something like the original product, there's a real difference between those crêpes. When we borrow across cultures, we are, as Plato would suggest, on a second or even a third level of reality, so we're distancing ourselves. That's OK, that's always going to happen, obviously. When you come back to the States and have an Indian tandoori experience in Arlington, it's not going to be the same as you might have in Bombay, but it is still a kind of tandoori experi-

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ence and will remain such as long as in Bombay there's the authentic tandoori experience. But when Bombay, like Arlington, is simply a theme park of world cultures in which everyone is roughly alike, in that they have the same diversity of offerings, that diversity becomes increasingly simulated, and the authenticity from which those experiences come essentially disappears.

EuroDisney, outside Paris, now gets more visitors than Paris does every year. I'm sure that, among other things, people go to the French theme park at EuroDisney to sample French culture along with Danish and German and other cultures that are there. Some might think they'd do better to travel the 17 kilometers into Paris.

In effect, the “theme-parking” of culture, which is part of globalization and part of the theme-parking of our world is, yes, a kind of diversity, but it is the diversity of the theme park. It is increasingly synthetic; it's increasingly distanced from the authentic origin. Increasingly, it takes a toll on that authentic origin, as when an American crêpe maker ends up back in Paris selling the American version of crêpes to people in Paris who don't make them anymore because there's a much cheaper global product they can get in place of what they've had. Globalization has a tendency to move that process forward at alarmingly dispiriting rates.

A second argument has to do with standardization and homogenization. I've got a nice quote here from an executive at Bayer aspirin, who says: “A lie has been perpetuated for years and years. The lie is that people are different! Yes, there are differences between cultures. But a headache is a headache, and aspirin is aspirin.” And, of course, Bayer aspirin is Bayer aspirin, which is even better. I think Tyler makes some very wise, culturally based arguments to show that, in fact, this kind of uniformity and homogenization, at least on the aesthetic level, isn't always as alarming and as extensive as it might seem. But the focus on the aesthetic dimensions of diversity misses the essence of what global homogenization is about. It's perfectly true that there's probably far more diversity today than there was a hundred years ago in London, where the availability of Indian and

Chinese and Japanese and Indonesian and French food is much greater than it was when all you had were places where you could get roast beef and pudding, or pubs where you could get some sausages with your beer. In that sense, you could say that the English are much better off than they were. But this is to misunderstand, for example, the influence of fast food. Many people argue that fast food actually increases diversity, in that it caters to different tastes. And *aesthetically*, that's true, but it misses what fast food does to homogenize and, indeed, what fast food is about.



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Fast food isn't about the food. It's about *fast*, and *fast* is an assault on how we live. It's an assault on social behavior. It's an assault, for example, in Europe, on the three-hour Mediterranean meal for which the family comes home—mom and dad come home from work, the kids come home from school—and sit together for three hours. It's an assault on the idea of food as a social ritual, with which you have extended conversations. It's an assault even on the French idea of the café as a place to sit and read the paper. It's not, by the way, that you *can't* sit in a Paris McDonald's and read the paper and drink wine, because McDonald's does in fact make those local adjustments. But

that goes very much against what fast food is about. What it's about is fast volume, individuals customers coming in, eating, and getting out. In fact, McDonald's low prices depend on volume, and volume depends on turnover.

Fast food is the perfect food for a busy industrial economy, where you don't really want people to take three hours off. A lot of businesspeople complained about Spain and Italy and France in the old days, how hard it was for them to adjust to the modern economy. Three-hour meals (followed in some of those cultures by a long siesta) took the heart out of the workday. Fast food puts the heart back into the workday by turning food back into a fueling-up ritual. That's fine if consumption is what you're looking for, but if the social values, the religious values, the familial values of food are what you're about, then fast food is a disaster whether it's fast burgers, fast fries, or fast tandoori. The vaunted diversity is a superficial diversity under which lies a homogenizing culture of productive work and consumption. The work of shopping, the work of making goods to buy, is the homogenizing factor that is right below the surface, that we miss when we talk about the quality of the food and whether McDonald's offers only burgers or, as they're beginning to do now, various other kinds of food.

There's a third issue that goes to the heart of our topic. Tyler makes the mistake that all you market folks make of assuming that somehow markets, if not perfect, are nearly perfect, that there are no inequalities, that monopolies are just sort of accidents and can be avoided, and that power doesn't really affect the market's reciprocal relations. The problem is that when America meets another culture, it's not, as you might imagine here, just two guys in the woods. It's not an American wearin' his Nikes and eatin' his burgers meeting up with a Nigerian who's singing a different kind of music, and they have a little exchange, and when it's done the American's a little different—a little more Nigerian—and the Nigerian's a little different—a little more American—and we're all the better off for it. Rather, you've got to imag-

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ine the American armed, sort of like the soldiers in Iraq are armed, with all of the goods and brands of modern technology, modern commerce, hard and soft power, hegemonic economic power over the globe, hegemonic military power over the globe. That's the culture that's meeting up with some little Third World culture that's got some Navajo blankets or some fusion music that we'd kind of like to collect.

Finally, let me just say a word about values. My book was called, not just *McWorld*, but *Jihad vs. McWorld*. It may be that, to many of us, Westernization, globalization, Americanization, the spread of McWorld

nothing to do with globalization, also does have something to do with globalization. It has to do with what is seen as the monolithic, secularist, materialist homogenization of cultures in ways that imperil and endanger the special values—not aesthetic, but religious and moral values—that people hold dear. Unfortunately, some people are willing to kill to try to preserve what they have. If we are insensitive to those people or simply persuade ourselves that they are wrong to think that globalization is homogenization or a peril to values, we will be engaged, not in an argument, but in a series of unending and devastating wars. And that's why I think that these arguments are of much more than just academic concern.

Cowen: Professor Barber offered four major points of criticism. For the first, authenticity, the two examples were tandoori and crêpes. The red dye in tandoori comes from European culture, the yogurt comes from elsewhere, and many of the spices in Indian food come from the New World. I've heard many Indians argue that Indian food in tandoori is better in London or in Singapore than it is anywhere in India. Also, today is the best time ever in the history of the world for eating crêpes, wherever you live. We find these kinds of food flourishing rather than going away. I think there is no such thing, really, as authenticity. Everything is a blend. Our dining options, if we look at them overall, are richer than ever before, and they're not systematically being destroyed.

The second point of criticism had to do with, among other things, fast food and the fastness of fast food. I also hate McDonald's, and let me note that there's no company that in the last year has taken a harder hit, because consumers simply are not as interested in McDonald's anymore. That is commonly attributed to a growing interest in ethnic food and to a growing interest in better food. People do often like food to be fast. I like my food to be fast often, though I don't like “fast food,” but it's because I want to get home to spend time on my art collection, on my writings, on listening to music. So the fastness of food is no necessary enemy of culture.

I think it's focusing too much on the

negative and not enough on the positive to say that all meals are faster. In fact, you now have more opportunities for slow meals than ever before. It's not the case that there are one or two slow restaurants left in Paris or the United States. You pick up a Michelin guide and it's thicker than ever before, it's better than ever before. The modern restaurant is, in fact, a quite new invention, dating from only the 19th century. The existence of restaurants is commonly attributed to the fact that there were travelers, a form of globalization. Now if you want to sit down to a slow meal, be it in the United States, Paris, or virtually anywhere in the world, your opportunities to do that, your ability to afford it, your ability to have the leisure time, your ability to afford the travel to get to the slow restaurant are all greater than ever before. So I think Professor Barber is focusing too much on one set of products he doesn't like, fast food, when in fact you have more opportunities for fast dining *and* you have more opportunities for slow dining. Fast dining is not destroying slow dining; in fact, the two are growing together as the size of the market increases, which is simply an illustration of Adam Smith's dictum that division of labor is limited by the extent of the market.

Now, on the mythology of markets and power: there are many, many American or Western products that flop miserably. Most American TV shows have not been exported very successfully. American soap operas have failed around the globe. American popular music does very well in some places, very poorly in other places. Look at countries like Haiti and Jamaica. They're poor, they're small, they're right next to the United States; but American music doesn't do well there. Those countries do better selling their music to us than vice-versa. It's not the case that their cultures have been overwhelmed. If ever there were a case of power relations, it's the United States' treatment of the Caribbean, which in my mind is often inexcusable, but again, if we look at the cultures of the Caribbean, we find that in the last 50 or 60 years they've flourished. They have had a profound and immense influence on Western culture—

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Benjamin Barber and Tyler Cowen discuss the impact of globalization on world cultures at a Cato Book Forum for Cowen's book *Creative Destruction*.

look like the spread of diversity. Apparently, for a lot of other people around the world—especially people living in fundamentalist Islamic cultures, in fundamentalist Judaic cultures, in fundamentalist Hindu cultures, and, indeed, in fundamentalist Protestant cultures here in the United States—McWorld appears an aggressive, secularist, materialist attack on their values and what they care about for their children. And their response is, not to write a bad review of Tyler's book, but to pick up a bomb or a gun and go to war with us. I would argue that terrorism today, though it has lots of motives that have

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Patrick Buchanan on the right and Jeremy Rifkin on the left have united to oppose free trade, immigration, and high-tech innovation. Fundamentalists and radical feminists joined forces in an effort to outlaw pornography. And some conservative intellectuals, like Richard John Neuhaus, editor of the conservative *First Things*, have welcomed the postmodern critique of objectivity: “[Relativists’] rebellion against the pretentious certitudes of Enlightenment rationalism, often defined as modernity, is in large part warranted, and that is the kernel of truth in ‘postmodernism.’”

Who Speaks for Modernity?

The values of modernity still animate much of American life. A commitment to reason is still the operating principle of many intellectuals, especially in the sciences. It is the operating principle in engineering, medicine, and other professions. It is the source of the extraordinary technological advances in computers, telecommunications, and pharmaceuticals, among many other fields. It is the source of new business techniques for financial management and streamlining production. In most areas of our working lives, faith has no voice and tradition is continually overturned.

In the realm of personal life and aspirations, the anti-modern cultures have more sway. Over a third of the populace, to judge by various surveys, look to religious faith as their main source of moral guidance; they believe in the literal truth of the Bible, the immediate presence of God in their lives, and the conservative ethic of duty and virtue. A smaller but more prominent and vocal segment seeks salvation in postmodern values: New Age spirituality, environmental activism, anti-globalization protests. But that leaves a sizable portion whose main concern is personal happiness. Those are the people whose demand for secular moral guidance has fueled a booming industry of self-help books and seminars. In many best-selling works, like those of Philip McGraw and Nathaniel Branden, the message is neither hedonism nor duty but rather a discipline

for pursuing happiness through achievement, commitment, rationality, integrity, and courage.

Who speaks for those values? Who provides the intellectual defense? Who carries the banner of modernity in the culture wars? Among popular writers, Ayn Rand was far and away the most articulate advocate. At the center of her Objectivist philosophy, which she explicitly aligned with the Enlightenment, was a morality of rational individualism. Milton Friedman and other free-market economists who, with Rand, inspired the rebirth of classical liberalism also spoke from the standpoint of modernity. In academia, organizations such as the National Association of Scholars and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education have been formed to defend objective research and academic freedom against the oppressive regime of postmodernism. Individual scholars such as philosopher John Searle and historian Alan Kors have been prominent defenders of what postmoderns dismiss as “the Enlightenment project.” Scientists such as Richard Dawkins, Edward O. Wilson, and Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg have spoken out for the integrity of science against its detractors on the premodern right and postmodern left.

What is still missing, however, is the awareness of modernity itself as a cause

that needs an organized defense, a public identity in cultural debates. Among conservatives, a network of organizations, alliances, and publications has created a shared sense of mission, a kind of party of the cultural right. Whatever specific issues they are concerned with, conservatives know who their allies are. Their cause has a public name and face. The same is true on the left. But as yet there is no party of modernity.

We had a fleeting glimpse of such a party in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when the terrorist threat to the values of modernity was denounced by commentators across the political spectrum, from Aryeh Neier to Charles Krauthammer, from the *New Republic* to the *Weekly Standard*. An enduring version of that consensus is possible. And it is vital for the future of our civilization.

It is especially important for those who have committed themselves to the political cause of liberty, individual rights, limited government, and capitalism. We are more likely to find allies and converts among those who value reason, happiness, individualism, and progress than among those whose values are premodern or postmodern. It was the Enlightenment that gave us liberty as a moral ideal and a practical system. The culture of modernity is still liberty’s natural home. ■

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reggae music being one example—and they haven’t dwindled away. In spite of all kinds of real hegemony and power, the creative human spirit in those poor countries has managed to do well.

The point about terrorism is an important one. I’m not for all forms of globalization: I’m not for the globalization of attack tactics and weapons. But if we look at the countries from which the terrorists come, we find one very common element. There are very important strands of globalization that those countries have very fiercely resisted. Parts of the Islamic world have fiercely resisted democratization, they have fiercely resisted a market economy,

they have corrupt governments. Saudi Arabia, obviously an important place for terrorism, tries harder than just about anyone else to keep out Western influences, to keep out the idea of gender equality, to keep out a well-functioning labor market, to have censorship, to monitor what’s sent in over the Internet, and so on. I think there is arguably a problem with a kind of halfway globalization that gives some people enough ideas to do some nasty things but not enough of the good part of globalization to have healthy societies. From my point of view, if there’s going to be a solution for the problems in the Islamic world, that solution will be more globalization, not less. ■