

The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies

Cultural Imperialism

Contributors: Chris Barker

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Cultural imperialism is said to involve the domination of one culture by another and is usually thought of as a set of processes involving the ascendancy of one nation and/or the global domination of consumer capitalism. This argument stresses a loss of cultural autonomy for the 'dominated' nation and the worldwide growth of cultural homogeneity or 'sameness'. The principal agents of cultural synchronization are commonly said to be transnational corporations and particularly those of US origin. Consequently, cultural imperialism as domination is regarded as the outcome of a set of economic and cultural processes implicated in the reproduction of global capitalism.

Herbert Schiller, one of the leading proponents of the cultural imperialism thesis since the late 1960s, has argued that US-controlled corporations dominate the global communications industries. He points to the interlocking network that connects US television, defence subcontractors and the Federal government. Schiller's case is that the mass media fit into the world capitalist system by providing ideological support for capitalism in general and transnational corporations in particular. That is, they are said to act as vehicles for corporate marketing along with a general 'ideological effect' that purportedly produces and reinforces local attachment to US capitalism.

There are three central difficulties with the cultural imperialism thesis under contemporary conditions. First, it is no longer the case, if it ever was, that the global flows of cultural discourses are constituted as one-way traffic. Second, in so far as the predominant flow of cultural discourse remains from West to East and North to South, this is not *necessarily* a form of domination. Third, it is unclear that the current period of globalization represents a simple process of homogenization since the forces of fragmentation and hybridity are equally as strong.

There can be little doubt that the first waves of economic, military and cultural globalization were part of the dynamic spread of Western-originated capitalist modernity. The early phases of globalization certainly involved Western interrogation of the non-Western 'Other', while colonial control manifested itself as military dominance, cultural ascendancy and the origins of economic dependency. However, though the economies of the world are integrated into a world economic order in which developing nations occupy a subordinate position, it is not clear that cultural homogenization is the inevitable consequence.

While the values and meanings attached to place remain significant, we are increasingly involved in networks that extend far beyond our immediate physical locations. Though we are not yet part of a world-state or unitary world culture, we can identify global cultural processes, of cultural integration and disintegration, which are independent of inter-state relations. Here metaphors of uncertainty, contingency and chaos are replacing those of order, stability and systemacity so that global cultural flows cannot be understood through neat sets of linear determinations but are better comprehended as a series of overlapping, over-determined, complex and chaotic conditions. Indeed, for a number of cultural studies writers the disjunctive cultural flows that mark globalization are best characterized in terms of the emergence of cultural hybridity rather than of homogenization and cultural imperialism.

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