

'National Cultures are still very important'. Evaluate this view of the globalization of culture.

To evaluate the above assertion, it is necessary to establish what is meant by 'the globalisation of culture'. Globalisation is a much used, some might say overused term which depending on sociological outlook can be a good thing, a dreadful inevitability, something to be treated circumspectly or nothing new and therefore relatively unimportant in terms of national values. Overall though, there is broad agreement that globalisation represents boundaries between individual nation states becoming blurred as cultural, technological, economic and political links are established on a worldwide scale, transcending national boundaries to create what Ohmae called "a borderless world" (Held, 2004, p17). This occurs through the migration of peoples and the transfer of ideas, information and commodities. I will be looking first at a more specific description of globalization. Thereafter, I will consider the claims associated with the three main theories on globalisation: the Globalist, both 'Positive' and 'Pessimistic'; the Transformationalist; and finally the Internationalist perspective, from which the assertion in the title of the essay originates. I will then consider the validity of the inter-nationalist argument in terms of the globalization of culture. To evaluate this, I will consider the empirical adequacy of the theory, its coherence and its comprehensiveness. My conclusion will show, that while all three main theories have persuasive elements to them, overall the Internationalist view would seem to be the most robust when examined closely. We will look first at globalization.

Globalization is characterised by four key factors. 'Stretched social relations' created by networks of connection across the world in politics, economics and cultural spheres. The second factor is 'intensification of flows' transcending national barriers across all areas of cultural 'goods' including television and radio, cinema, music, and printed matter. Thirdly, globalization is associated with 'increased interpenetration' of economic and social methodologies and finally, the existence of a 'Global Infrastructure', economically and politically. The first theory of globalization to consider then is the Globalist.

The Globalist perspective is that globalization is a structurally based inevitability which is unstoppable. The theory divides sharply, however, into those who regard it as a good thing; the Positive Globalists, and those who do not; the Pessimistic Globalists. It is these two views which we will examine first.

Positive Globalists subscribe to Marshall McLuhan's vision of a 'global village' (Held, 2004, p55). They see only the benefits of globalizing influences and welcome them. Positive Globalists believe that from the stretched social relations will come unity between peoples and an improved quality of life for all. 'World music' is one aspect to emerge from the sharing of cultures. The new technological revolution; the internet, mobile phones and satellite communications will enable every voice to be heard freely. Howard Rheingold (Held, 2004.p55) talked about the progressive possibilities of the Internet enabling freer speech and greater diversity.

Pessimistic Globalists however, while they subscribe to the same fundamental view of the inevitability of globalization, regard it as a negative force sounding the death knell of national cultures. They see it spreading epidemic-like across geographical and political borders. Pessimistic Globalists see the world becoming more homogenous resulting in the loss of diversity and individuality. They regard the dominance of major economies and multi-national corporations as a significant threat to individual nations' sovereignty. Further, Pessimistic Globalists, because of unequal access to the new technological innovations such as the internet, regard globalization as widening the gap between the wealthier nations and the third world, rather than creating a means to share culture, with women and unskilled workers especially becoming increasingly marginalised in the globalization lottery. They see cultural flows as unbalanced; English becoming the accepted global language of the internet and air traffic control, for example. One of the main theories Pessimistic Globalists site is Cultural Imperialism, sometimes interpreted as 'Americanisation' whereby the Western world, The United States in particular, swamp the rest of the world's cultures. The preponderance of, for example, McDonald's outlets, would appear to support this viewpoint. The Cultural Imperialism theory involves more than the absorption of minority cultures by the west, however, having serious implications for the economy. Multi-national corporations and their Western shareholders, say Pessimistic Globalists, will be the ones to benefit by global expansion. Transformationalism is the next theory to consider.

Transformationalists agree with Globalists that Globalization is occurring, but question the importance and significance of it. They tend to see the effects of Globalization as exaggerated, a view which is shared by Inter-Nationalists. They do, however, feel that it is important to acknowledge globalization and its potential effects, which they regard as unpredictable and therefore, a cause for concern. Transformationalists, unlike the Globalists, do not see Globalization as inevitable and feel that the results of it could be reversed. Transformationalists view the control of the economy, defence and politics as still being under the control of the nation-state and while accepting global and regional influences, feel that nation-states should retain this ultimate authority. The last of the viewpoints we will consider is that of the Inter-Nationalist. It is this view which agrees that 'national cultures are still very important', and for that reason is the theory we will evaluate.

The Inter-Nationalist view of the importance of globalization is that it is greatly exaggerated. There is a sceptical view, essentially agency-based, which maintains that the nation-state remains the defining factor that determines culture and remains powerful. Moreover, in using history to support its argument, it claims that globalization represents nothing new. Rather than the internet revolutionising global communications, Inter-nationalists point out that the invention of the telegraph exceeded it in significance. Further, the Romans had an advanced postal system, and printing in the 15th century also had wide implications for global communication and spread of culture. Hence, the increased flows of information and stretched social relations happening now are merely a continuation of established patterns and don't represent a global

revolution. Inter-nationalists regard economical developments as regional as opposed to global, for example the European Union. Anthony Smith, who has written about nationalism (Held, 2004, p65) points out that national culture is built on the continuity of history and collective national experience. This is not something individual cultures will relinquish. Inter-nationalists also point to the dominance of the national in terms of press and television. How, then, can we evaluate the Inter-nationalist theory to ascertain whether national cultures remain important?

The formal sociological means of establishing how sound a theory is, are to consider empirical adequacy: in quantitative terms; does it add up? The coherence of the argument; whether it makes sense, is logical and plausible. Finally, the comprehensiveness of the theory should be considered, taking into account a wide range of factors and cases.

Taking empirical adequacy first, quantitative data may support theories about the impact of the global media, although as sociologists we should be mindful that opposing theorists can frequently look at the same data and draw very different conclusions from it. Evidence suggests that while there has been a dramatic increase in the exporting of American television programmes to the rest of the world, the programmes are watched far less than indigenously produced ones which are of greater importance to the local population. Similarly the press remains predominantly nationally produced, although news gathering tends to occur on a global scale. Inter-nationalists provide evidence that public service broadcasting remains strong. For example in the UK in

1997 (Held, 2004, p66) the estimated audience share for the BBC was 44% overall and still 31.1% in households with access to satellite and cable TV. The 'global' channels barely register a score. We can see then that empirically the Inter-nationalist argument stands up although critics of the theory would criticise its tendency to misinterpret the significance of global economic events such as the East Asian crisis, which had damaging repercussions in many parts of the world. In terms of coherence, we may look to Hugh MacKay's investigation of the importance of the telegraph in transforming lives and creating a global culture, to help us understand the true impact of the internet. The Inter-nationalist argument was that human agency was underestimated and expectations of the technological impact, overblown. Finally in terms of comprehensiveness, in addition to the historical claims of the Inter-nationalist theory which are persuasive, I would like to look particularly at sporting loyalties as a means of understanding the significance of national culture.

The cries heard across the terraces at Euro 2004 two months ago of 'England' combined with a sea of white and red shirts may lead the Inter-nationalist to 'rest his case'. Sporting loyalties are a strong indicator of the importance of national culture even when favourite players change teams. David Beckham's move to a Spanish football team did not diminish his status as a British sporting hero. His adoptive new country also supports him because he is representing a Spanish team. Be it tennis and our support of Tim Henman, Rugby, and Johnny Wilkinson or the soon to unfold 2004 Olympics, St. George flags will continue to fly from many a car aerial in support of national cultural icons. Our national cultures are an important collective identity.

In conclusion then, are we still organised by the Westphalian structure of politically separate nations or are we part of a new global cultural community? The positive Globalist would have us believe that we can all live in 'coca cola' harmony with the entire world's children all singing the same song. The pessimistic Globalists would see this as homogeny rather than harmony. Globalization may divide rather than unite the world as countries such as Iran and Iraq have shown in rejecting the western values that they see as threatening their cultures. The Transformationalists meanwhile, would keep a watching brief. Ultimately, this essay has shown, it is the Inter-nationalists who have the most accurate view; while the world will continue to develop, share information and establish links, national cultures will remain very important.

(1633 words)

References

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