

The Fate of Culture

by Tyler Cowen

On one thing the whole world seems to agree: Globalization is homogenizing cultures. At least a lot of countries are acting as if that's the case. In the name of containing what the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood calls "the Great Star-Spangled Them," the Canadian government subsidizes the nation's film industry and requires radio stations to devote a percentage of their airtime to home-grown music, carving out extra airplay for stars such as Celine Dion and Barenaked Ladies. Ottawa also discouraged Borders, the American book superstore, from entering the Canadian market out of fear that it would not carry enough Canadian literature. The French government spends some \$3 billion annually on culture and employs 12,000 cultural bureaucrats in an effort to preserve its vision of a uniquely French culture. Spain, South Korea, and Brazil place binding domestic-content requirements on their cinemas; France and Spain do the same for television. Until recently, India barred the sale of Coca-Cola.

The argument that markets destroy culture and diversity comes from people across the political spectrum. Liberal political scientist Benjamin Barber claims that the world is poised between Jihad, a "bloody politics of identity," and McWorld, "a bloodless economics of profit," represented by the spread of McDonald's and American popular culture. In *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (1998), the English conservative John Gray denounces globalization as a dangerous delusion, a product of the hopelessly utopian Enlightenment dream of "a single worldwide civilization in which the varied traditions and cultures of the past were superseded by a new, universal community founded in reason." Duke University's Fredric Jameson sums up the common view: "The standardization of world culture, with local popular or traditional forms driven out or dumbed down to make way for American television, American music, food, clothes, and films, has been seen by many as the very heart of globalization."

Does the growing global trade in films, music, literature, and other cultural products destroy cultural and artistic diversity or actually encourage it? Does it promise a nightmarishly homogenized McWorld or a future of artistic innovation? What will happen to cultural creativity as freedom of economic choice extends across the globe?

Critics of globalization rally around the banner of "cultural diversity," but much of the contemporary skepticism about the value of cross-cultural exchange has very little to do with diversity. Many critics simply dislike particular trends and use "diversity" as a code word for another agenda, which is often merely anti-commercial or anti-American in nature. In reality, the global exchange of cultural products is increasing diversity in ways that are seldom appreciated.



Corrupting influence or fruitful encounter? These villagers in West Papua, New Guinea, came to town to learn from TV news whether rumors they had achieved independence from Indonesia were true.

The critics tend to focus on globalization's effects on diversity across societies. Gauging diversity then becomes a matter of whether each society offers the same cultural menu, and whether societies are becoming more alike. But the concept of cultural diversity has multiple and sometimes divergent meanings. It can also refer to the variety of choices within a particular society. By that standard, globalization has brought one of the most significant increases in freedom and diversity in human history: It has liberated individuals from the tyranny of place. Growing up on an isolated farm or in a remote village, whether in the Canadian Rockies or Bangladesh, is less a limit than ever before on an individual's access to the world's cultural treasures and opportunities. No longer are one's choices completely defined by local culture. There is more cultural diversity among Canadians and Bangladeshis than ever before.

These two kinds of diversity—the *across* variety and the *within* variety—often move in opposite directions. When one society trades a new artwork to another, diversity *within* the receiving society increases (because individuals have greater choice), but diversity *across* the two societies diminishes (the two societies become more alike). The issue is not so much whether there is more or less diversity but rather *what kind* of diversity globalization brings.

In the McWorld view of things, differentiation should be visible to the naked eye—a change in the landscape, for example, as soon as we cross the border

between the United States and Mexico. It's bad enough that we have Starbucks and MTV in Cleveland; we certainly don't want to see them in Mexico City. By comparing collectives (national cultures) and by emphasizing the dimension of geographic space, this standard begs the question of which kind of diversity matters. The United States and Mexico may look more similar than they once did, but the individuals in the two countries will have greater leeway to pursue different paths and to make their own cultural choices. Mexicans have the opportunity to drink frappuccinos and contemplate pop art, while Americans can enjoy burritos and read the novels of Carlos Fuentes.

Many critics of globalization are also blind to the importance of diversity *over time*. If we value cultural diversity, then surely we also ought to value diversity over time, or cultural change. Yet for many of diversity's self-appointed defenders, change is precisely the problem. They decry the passing of cultures and implicitly hope to freeze them at particular times—as if to say that Bali reached a state of perfection in, say, 1968, and should never change.

Finally, we need to distinguish objective diversity (how much diversity there is in the world) from what we might call operative diversity (how effectively we can enjoy that diversity). In some ways the world was very diverse in 1450, but not in a way that was of any benefit to the vast majority of the world's people. Without markets that promote cross-cultural contacts, the practical value of diversity is limited.

The critics are quite right, however, to point out that the creation of a global marketplace in entertainment and culture poses another kind of threat: the rise of mass culture and entertainment pitched to the least common denominator—the pop globalism of 'N Sync and Hollywood action films—a “dumbing down” of culture. But this is only part of the story. What these critics don't recognize is that cultural homogenization and increasing heterogeneity are not mutually exclusive alternatives. In fact, the growth of markets tends to cause the two processes to operate in tandem.

“To have great poets, there must be great audiences too,” Walt Whitman once observed, and great audiences are precisely what large markets provide. It's true that they support the likes of *Survivor*, but they also supply hitherto unreachable patrons for such exotica as Navajo textiles and Cuban dance music. Instead of dying out, many local art forms are flourishing as never before in the new global marketplace, because they've been able to find so many new patrons. Although the mass audience may be “dumbed down,” over time consumers in the new niche markets sharpen their tastes and perceptions. Why does New York City have a lively, varied theater scene while the sedate small town upstate does not? For two reasons: because New York can provide an audience large and affluent enough to sustain the playhouses, and because, through long exposure, those audiences have developed sufficient discernment and taste to patronize quirky off-off Broadway productions as well as blockbuster musicals and revivals. In sim-

>TYLER COWEN is a professor of economics at George Mason University, where he is the director of the Mercatus Center and the James M. Buchanan Center for Political Economy. He is the author of several books, including *What Price Fame?* (2000) and *In Praise of Commercial Culture* (1998). This essay is adapted from *Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World's Cultures*, to be published in November by Princeton University Press. Copyright © 2002 by Tyler Cowen.

ilar fashion, consumers in the global marketplace come to support all manner of once-obscure art forms.

Around the world, growing numbers of niche consumers are pursuing a fantastic variety of cultural interests and passions, from Indonesian gamelan music to African cinema to the postcolonial fiction of Third World writers. The array of cultural choices available to a person in a single book or CD superstore would have been beyond the imagining of anybody living a century ago. The world has more experts who know more about a greater number of cultural phenomena than ever before. Even the most obscure corners of global culture have their partisans, who study and appreciate them with great fervor, often aided by the Internet and other new technologies.

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To celebrate the largely unacknowledged cultural benefits of globalization, however, is not to deny its considerable costs. Globalized culture is another example of what the great political economist Joseph Schumpeter had in mind when he envisioned capitalist production as a gale of “creative destruction.” Cultural growth, like economic development, rarely comes as a steady advance on all fronts at once: While some sectors expand rapidly, others may wither away. In the gale of cultural globalization, some poor, relatively isolated non-Western societies lose out. What they lose is the peculiar *ethos* that animates their culture and makes it distinctive—the special feel or flavor of a culture, often rooted in religious belief or in shared suppositions about the nature and importance of beauty. An ethos is what provides a culture its self-confidence, its magic. These cultures depend for their survival on the absence of the very thing that globalization promotes: internal diversity.

An ethos can help relatively small groups achieve cultural miracles. The population of Renaissance Florence, for example, did not typically exceed 80,000. But a cultural ethos can be fragile. In an attempt to keep outside influences at bay, the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan charges tourists \$200 a day for the right to visit. It has no traffic lights and no city with more than 10,000 inhabitants, and the countryside is rife with poverty and malnutrition. So far, Bhutan has been able to maintain its distinctive forms of Buddhist art and belief. The list of cultural casualties, however, is quite long. It’s difficult to argue, for example, that Polynesian culture is more vital today than it was before Europeans arrived, even though the Polynesians are now much better off in material terms. Materialism, alcohol, Western technologies, and (according to some) Christianity have all taken a toll. In Tahiti many traditional arts, such as the making of fine *tapa*, a kind of bark cloth used in clothing and textiles, have been neglected or abandoned because they proved uneconomical or lost status to Western goods.

Globalization

Is such cultural loss worth the gains? There is no simple answer to this question. Because of widespread cross-cultural exchanges, the world as a whole has a broader menu of choices, but older cultures are forced to give way to newer ones. Some regions, in return for access to the world's cultural treasures and the ability to market their products abroad, will lose their distinctiveness. *Tragedy*, that overworked and often misused word, certainly has a place in describing their fate.

Yet most Third World cultures (like Western cultures) are fundamentally hybrids to begin with—synthetic products of multiple global influences, Western and otherwise. For them, creative destruction is nothing new, and it's misleading to describe their cultures as “indigenous.” The metal knife proved a boon to many Third World sculpting and carving traditions, including those that produced the splendid totem poles of the Pacific Northwest and Papua New Guinea. South African Ndebele art uses beads as an essential material in the adornment of aprons, clothing, and textiles, but the beads are not indigenous to Africa. They were first imported, from what is now the Czech Republic, in the early 19th century. Mirrors, coral, cotton cloth, and paper—key materials in “traditional” African arts—were also acquired through contact with Europeans.

The art of cultural synthesis has a long and honorable history, so to describe today's Third World culture makers as synthesizers is hardly to denigrate them. It is, rather, the contrary emphasis on monoculture that's offensive in its implicit portrayal of non-Western artists as static, tradition-bound craftworkers, unable to embrace new influences. The ability to incorporate alien influences has long been recognized as one of the keys to creativity. The historian Herodotus ascribed the cultural vitality of the Greeks to their genius for synthesis. To varying degrees, Western cultures draw their philosophical heritage from the Greeks, their religions from the Middle East, their scientific base from the Chinese and Islamic worlds, and their core populations and languages from Europe. In other words, the foundations of the West (and of other civilizations throughout history) are also multicultural, resulting from the international exchange of goods, services, and ideas.

In historical terms, periods of cross-cultural exchange have been exciting, fruitful times. The years between 1800 and World War I, for example,





Without global markets, folk artists such as the Haitian naive painter Rousseau Denis would find many fewer patrons for their work. The painting is called Marche (Market).

saw an unprecedented increase in internationalization. The West adopted the steamship, the railroad, and the automobile to replace travel by sail or coach, and international trade, investment, and migration grew rapidly. The exchange of cultural ideas between Europe and the Americas promoted diversity and quality; it did not turn everything into homogenized pap.

The worst period of cultural decline in Western history coincided with a radical shrinking of trade frontiers. The so-called Dark Ages, which date roughly from the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century A.D. to early medieval times, around 1100, saw a massive contraction of interregional trade and investment. The Roman Empire had fostered regular contact among peoples spread over a great stretch of the ancient world. After the empire fell, these contacts all but disappeared with the withering of trade and urban life. Architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, and philosophy—reading itself—all went into decline. Medieval society and the Renaissance were, in large part, the consequence of a process of reglobalization. The West increased its contacts with the Chinese and Islamic worlds; trade fairs expanded; shipping lanes became more active; scientific ideas spread; and overland trade routes, many dormant since the time of the Romans, were re-established. This was the crucible in which modern Western culture was formed.

Cultural exchange rarely takes place on equal terms. Yet uneven as the playing field of the global economy may be, Third World arts have blossomed. The flowering of various folk arts—from Haitian naive painting to Tuvan throat singing in Mongolia—during the past few decades has been driven largely by Western demand, materials, and technologies of production. The Inuit of Canada, for example, did not practice sculpture on a large scale until an outsider introduced them to soapstone carving in 1948. Since then, sculpture has flourished among the Inuit, and they have developed other arts, enjoying an artistic and commercial success that has allowed them to maintain many of their traditional ways of life.

Despite the American pop juggernaut, music around the world is healthier and more diverse today than ever before. Hardly swamped by output from the

multinational conglomerates, local musicians have adapted international influences to their own ends. Most world music styles are of more recent origin than is commonly believed, even in supposedly “traditional” genres: The 20th century brought waves of musical innovation to most cultures, especially the large, open ones. The musical centers of the Third World—Cairo, Lagos, Rio de Janeiro—are heterogeneous and cosmopolitan cities that have welcomed new ideas and new technologies from abroad. Nonetheless, most domestic musical forms have no trouble commanding loyal audiences at home. In India, domestically produced music claims 96 percent of the market; in Egypt, 81 percent; and in Brazil, 73 percent.

Cinema offers perhaps the clearest grounds for an indictment of globalized culture because Hollywood has had so much success exporting its products. Even so, in the past 20 years Hong Kong, India, China, Denmark, Iran, and Taiwan have all produced many notable or award-winning movies. The riches of African cinema remain undiscovered treasure for most viewers, and European cinema shows signs of commercial revitalization. One reason for the domestic success of overseas filmmakers is that movies often do not translate well from culture to culture: Action, adventure, and heroism are universal languages that Hollywood speaks with great skill, but comedy, drama, and other genres usually require local accents and inflections.

For similar reasons, American books do not dominate fiction bestseller lists abroad. Even the Netherlands, with fewer than 10 million people, produces most of its own bestsellers. Yet globalization often provides local writers with an international stage, and the new era has given us notable writers who practice synthesis by wedding Western literary forms to their local traditions and concerns: Salman Rushdie of India, Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia, Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt, Pramoedya Toer of Indonesia, and many others. It’s not surprising that Third World writers have been among the strongest proponents of a cosmopolitan multiculturalism. Rushdie describes his work as celebrating hybridity, impurity, and mongrelization. Ghana-born Kwame Anthony Appiah believes that cosmopolitanism complements rather than destroys “rootedness,” and that new and innovative forms are maintaining the diversity of world culture.

It’s impossible to deny that globalization will bring the demise of some precious and irreplaceable small cultures, and for that reason we should hope that the new global cosmopolitanism does not enjoy total triumph—that places such as Bhutan will succeed not just in preserving their cultures but in sustaining cultures that continue to live and breathe.

Yet one could not hope for a world in which we all inhabited a Bhutan, or in which Bhutan was preserved merely for our own edification and amusement. One could not hope, in other words, for a world in which we lacked the chance to experience the world’s diversity, or in which another people were kept isolated and poor simply to enhance the diversity available to us. Culture is, and has always been, a process of creative destruction. We might wish for the creativity without the destruction, but in this world we don’t have that choice. □