

CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF GLOBALIZATION. MAJOR CONTEMPORARY THEORIES ON THE GLOBAL- LOCAL INTERFERENCE

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ABSTRACT: *The paper approaches the phenomenon of globalization from the perspective of the theories set forth by two leading 21st century figures in the field of global studies, namely Roland Robertson and Geoge Ritzer. By bringing together theoretical concepts and concrete examples from contemporary reality, this study attempts to point out that, depending on the relation between its driving forces, globalization can be either an integrative process, based on understanding, respecting and embracing diversity, or an act of leveling colonization.*

KEY WORDS: *globalization, ‘glocalization’, ‘grobalization’, ‘McDonaldization’, homogeneity, diversity.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *Z13.*

1. GLOBAL-LOCAL INTERFERENCES IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD.

1.1. Economic, Social and Cultural Implications of Globalization

In the past fifteen years, the controversy over globalization has reached dimensions proportional to the disruptive impact the phenomenon has on the lives of nations and individuals alike. Fostered by recent history, as well as by a massive body of literature produced by social theorists (Bauman, 1998), globalization has evolved rapidly from a debatable topic to a sore issue of the contemporary world, with profound implications in virtually every area of social life, from business to technology and politics. Given the complexity of the phenomenon and its multiple ramifications, globalization was defined as: “the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organization of social life on a global scale, and growth of a

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global shared consciousness” (Lechner, 2004, p.453). By bringing together terms like *diffusion*, *expansion* and *shared consciousness*, this definition reveals the inherent ambiguity of transnational processes, governed at the same by openness to diversity and a tendency towards homogeneity. This quandary reaches as far as the essence of globalization, since the balance between the diversity and homogeneity is the one that preserves the thin line between inclusion and colonization.

Therefore, if in economy globalization is equated with the emergence of global markets, in politics it is associated with issues of international governance and democracy, and in the field of technology it is synonymous with the digital era, things are far from being as clear in terms of its cultural implications. As we know, the patterns of thought and behaviour are probably the most solid structures in a society, less prone to sudden change, and sometimes lasting long after the vanishing of the context that shaped them. Consequently, cultural shifts are less measurable and obvious than the changes in the other areas of economic and social life. Moreover, cultural issues such as the global-local relationship are further complicated by the sense of national identity in opposition with the fascination of diversity and expansionist tendencies, all of which urge nations to stay within their borders and go beyond them at the same time.

Actually, this dilemma may have prompted sociologist Roland Robertson to state that the three interrelated issues of globalization are:”Does global change involve increasing homogeneity or increasing heterogeneity or a mixture of both?”, “What is the relationship between the local and the global?” (Robertson 2001, p. 462), and “What drives the globalization process?” (Robertson, 2001, p. 461).

As an answer to the first question, the author identified three major motor forces of globalization, namely capitalism, Americanization and what he calls *McDonaldization*.

Capitalism. As early as the mid-1800’s, Karl Marx noticed the expansionism specific to capitalist economy, by virtue of which a company that no longer makes profit in a given country will have to explore possibilities in other countries in order to survive¹. In Europe, capitalist expansion surged in the 1990’s, with two simultaneous flows: one from the West to the (former communist) East, under the form of companies in search of cheap production facilities and markets, and the other from the East to the West, under the form of emigrants pursuing the mirage of a better life. The devastating consequences of this phenomenon on what the ‘civilized’ world impersonally calls the ‘developing’ countries, most of which completely unprepared to cope with the change economically, socially and culturally, determined social theorists to declare that ”humanity is more and more connected in the global dimensions of exploitation and oppression” (Wood & Foster 1997, p. 67).

Americanization, the promotion of American economic, social, and cultural patterns throughout the world, is the most typical example of expansion in recent history. Setting aside the imperialistic shades of America’s (economically driven) involvement in the politics of other countries and the use of military force in the name of democracy, we have to admit that the land of all opportunities managed to exert

¹ according to what he called *the general law of capitalist accumulation*

more influence on the planet than any other nation ever. In this sense, George Ritzer detects the following elements that contributed to the diffusion of the American model worldwide:

- the industrial model and the consumption model;
- the marketing of American media (including Hollywood films and popular music);
- the selling of American sports (NFL football and NBA basketball) abroad;
- the transnational marketing of American commodities (Cola, blue jeans, and computer operating systems);
- the extensive diplomatic and military engagement with Europe, Asia, and South America;
- the training of the world's military, political and scientific elites in American universities;
- the expansion of the American model of democratic policy;
- the development and use of the international labour market and natural resources by American corporations (Ritzer, 2004, p. 86).

A closer look reveals that the list above actually outlines the image of any global-local contact, with its ups and downs. Therefore, the capitalist industrial model cannot be *applied* blindly in a certain country, without taking into account its specific economic and social conditions. As a matter of fact, one of the central points that Joseph Stiglitz made in his book *Globalization and Its Discontents* regards precisely the devastating effects of imposing capitalist economy in countries that were not ready to deal with it socially and culturally. In the same context, we should not overlook the determination with which Eastern European industries were dissolved through invasive EU policies, theoretically because they were not efficient, and practically because they had competitive potential.

On the other hand, the American aggressive marketing model is definitely one to be followed, but to the benefit of local products. Unfortunately, especially in the former communist countries, the fascination of the new was so bewildering for the fragile collective conscience that everything that was foreign, be it product or tradition, was automatically considered superior and embraced to the detriment of the local. This, combined with the collapse of national industry and agriculture, facilitated the colonizing process. For instance, Romania, one of Europe's main sources of wheat and a major wine producer thirty years ago, now imports flour from Hungary and Germany, whereas the Romanians drink wines from France and Italy, and celebrate Halloween and Valentine's Day, although there are Romanian equivalents for these traditions.

In terms of the international labour market and the education system, we should grant the American model the obvious merit of giving people all over the world the opportunity to make a future for themselves and their families. Even if the vast majority of the people trained and employed in America, or in Western European countries for that matter, stayed in their adoptive countries and contributed to the respective economies, the model centred on genuine values such as the respect for the individual and their honest work is definitely to be promoted.

Finally, the hypocrisy of diplomatic and military intervention in the name of democracy, and the use of natural resources by international corporations are the most conspicuous shades of colonization in the picture of the globalization process. Actually, these two forms of invasion take advantage of the poverty of the local people and the corruption of national political regimes, bringing little or no benefits for the masses. It is well-known that, in spite of the declarative observation of norms and regulations, the exploitation of natural resources is very often done with total disregard of the environment, leaving behind ecological disasters.

McDonaldization is not, as we might expect, a form of Americanization, nor is it a new phenomenon in its essence. Actually, the concept that underlies the process was set forth as early as the 1920's by the German political economist and sociologist Max Weber in his theory on formal rationality and bureaucratization.² If Weber invoked the bureaucracy as the fundamental pattern of the modern world, predominated by formally rational systems, 80 years later, the American sociologist George Ritzer identifies the McDonald's franchise as being characteristic for the contemporary stage of rationalization. In other words, following the spread of mass manufacturing and mass consumption, the postmodern society has come to be predominated by the fast-food restaurant model, whose basic principles are efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (Ritzer, 2000). Since these principles are reproducible in any economic, social, and cultural context, it becomes obvious why the McDonald's franchise still has huge influence all over the world, together with other epitomes of mass consumption such as the shopping mall, the superstore, the theme park, the casino, or home shopping television.

1.2. 'Glocalization' and 'Grobalization'. Concept Delimitations

If the three motor forces of globalization were relatively easy to identify and define, given their predominantly economic basis, the discussion becomes more complex when it comes to the other two questions raised by Robertson regarding the global-local and the homogeneity-heterogeneity relationship. Due to the predominantly cultural implications and their pertaining ambiguities, these questions can no longer be answered in absolute terms, precise classifications and clear-cut distinctions. On the contrary, being matters of interrelation, their essence can be most efficiently pinpointed *at the intersection* of theories and concepts. Therefore, Robertson felt the need to refine his approach to the global-local relationship by introducing the term *glocalization*, defined as "the interpenetration of the global and the local resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas" (Robertson 2001, pp. 458). This concept is meant to point out not only that the global and the local should not be regarded as opposite concepts, but also that they cannot be actually separated, given the continuous process of reciprocal reassessment that takes place at every point of their intersection. In this sense, Robertson identifies four elements that underlie *glocalization*, namely:

- the growing pluralism of the world and the sensitivity to differences;

² In his collection of essays *Economy and Society* (1921/1968)

- the capacity of individuals and groups to adapt to the glocalized world and act as creative agents;
- the capacity of the contradictory responses to globalization to counteract its levelling effects and foster the innovative blend of local and global characteristics;
- commodities and the media, the two key forces of cultural change, do not act coercively, but provide material to be used by individuals and groups in a creative way.

On the other hand, in order to balance the approach further, George Ritzer coins the term *grobalization*, derived from the verb *to grow* and focusing on “the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations [...] and their desire, indeed need to impose themselves in different geographic areas” (Ritzer 2004, p. 73). As the author declares, the concept of *grobalization* is meant to counterbalance that of *glocalization*, dealing with the aspects that the latter tends to neglect or downplay. In other words, if *glocalization* emphasizes diversity and heterogeneity, *grobalization* acts as its complementary, granting utmost importance to homogeneity and the levelling tendencies of transnational interactions. In this context, Ritzer’s theory establishes four fundamental elements that point to the antithetical relation between the two sub-phenomena of globalization:

- the growing similarity of the world and the minimization of differences;
- the limited capacity of individuals and groups to adapt and innovate in a globalized world, under the overwhelming pressure of larger structures and forces;
- the tendency of globalization to overpower the local and to limit its ability to act and react;
- commodities and the media, as key forces of cultural change, largely determine the life of individuals and groups in the globalized world.

1.3. Grobalization and the Promotion of ‘Nothing’

As it becomes obvious from the above, the process of globalization is driven by two forces, namely the economic expansion tendency and the cultural preservation tendency. Under the circumstances, the effects of globalization largely depend on the relationship between these two forces. To be more specific, if their relation is kept in balance, they can become complementary, and turn globalization into a genuine integrative process, substantiated by the elements listed under the concept of ‘glocalization’. On the other hand, if the imperialistic impulses exceed the consideration for cultural diversity, globalization becomes a colonization process, predominated by the elements belonging to the ‘grobalization’ paradigm. Unfortunately, the latter situation is valid for most contemporary transnational interactions, in which power relations still divide the world into ‘big’ and ‘small’ countries.

Thus, the levelling power of grobalization in a consumption-determined world led social theorists to associate with it the concept of ‘nothing’, in the sense of “centrally conceived and controlled social forms that are comparatively devoid of

distinctive substantive content” in opposition with the concept of ‘something’, defined as “that which is locally conceived and controlled and is distinctive in content” (Ritzer 2004, pp. xi-xiv). Given its massive ramifications in all areas of social life, the concept of nothing generates a complex ‘non’ paradigm that contains: non-places, non-things, non-people, and non-services, all considered to bring about “the death of the local and the decline of cultural innovation (Ritzer 2004, p.xv).

Non-places. The concept of non-place as an element of cultural geography is not an innovation of contemporary social theory. Actually, it originates in the work of 20th century leading anthropologists and sociologists as Edward Relph, Marcel Mauss and Marc Auge. In his book *Place and Placelessness*, Relph defines the concept of non-place in opposition with the concept of place, characterized as “... full with meaning, with real objects, and with ongoing activities. They are important sources of individual and communal identity, and are often profound centres of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties” (Relph 1976, p. 141). On the other hand, *placelessness* is “an environment without significant places and the underlying attitude which does not acknowledge significance in places. It reaches back into the deepest levels of place, cutting roots, eroding symbols, replacing diversity with uniformity” (Relph 1976, p. 143).

For the purpose of this study, it is essential to extract a central idea from these definitions, namely: given people’s psychological and emotional attachment to their local environment, any economic and social disruption of the latter reaches as deep as their sense of belonging and alter the very cultural patterns that support local/national identity.

Emblematic examples of non-places are the fast-food restaurant and the shopping mall, which are organized in such a way as to encourage impersonal interactions. It is interesting to notice, however, that the progress of technology tends to turn more and more place into non-places. For instance, the local diner with a wireless network automatically loses its traditional function of bringing people together for genuine human interaction, since people prefer to surf the Internet or text instead of socializing.

Non-things are the outcome of mass production and the aggressive marketing policies of big companies. The Gap jeans, the Gucci bag, Benetton sweaters and the Big Mac are considered the most relevant examples of non-things. However, social theorists notice that the presence of non-things, characterized by the lack of distinctive substance, is no longer confined to the limits of non-places. Therefore, under the pressing need for economic survival, places with profound historic or religious meaning undermine their very essence as places and sell trinkets bearing images of personalities, holy water or miracle-working icons.

Non-people are the people who, by virtue of their job or position in a structure, interact with their interlocutors impersonally, sometimes based on a pre-established script. Generally related with non-places, non-people are part of the dehumanization of human interaction in the world of mass consumption. Examples of non-people are McDonald’s employees, Disneyland staff wearing costumes of characters, bank tellers, bartenders, waiters and hotel receptionists.

Non-services are the impersonal services provided by non-people in social contexts that discourage genuine human interaction. As with the other components of 'nothing', they tend to break the boundaries of the paradigm and become more and more generalized.

2. CONCLUSIONS

The distinction operated by the two major contemporary theories described above offer one of the most elucidating perspectives on globalization so far because:

- it regards heterogeneity and homogeneity not as opposing, but complementary concepts, which condition each other and whose interaction is reciprocally revealing;
- it identifies *grobalization* and *glocalization* as the two distinctive sides of the phenomenon of globalization, dealing with it from the perspective of the two antithetical mechanisms that drive it, namely the need for economic growth and the desire for cultural assertion;
- it detects the tension between these driving mechanisms, which most often operate at the expense of each other, and hence the controversial character and the disruptive impact of globalization on societies throughout the world.

In this context, it becomes obvious that the balance between its driving forces draws a very fine line between globalization as a genuine integrative process and as an act of colonization in disguise. In other words, as long as economic growth remains the determining driving force of transnational interactions, what we generically label as globalization is nothing but a form of postmodern colonization in the name of increasing profitability. By imposing their consumption model on other nations, the big economic empires of the world automatically alter local patterns of thought and behaviour in the direction of cultural homogeneity.

On the other hand, the centre-margin paradigm still supports the distinction between America, Western Europe, and the 'core countries' of the EU, associated with wealth, civilization, order and democracy, and the Eastern European countries, or the 'emerging' nations of the EU, regarded as emblems of poverty, barbarism, chaos, and corruption, fostering power relations that have nothing to do with integration and the embracing of diversity. On the contrary, it induces the idea that these 'other' nations need to be disciplined, civilized and closely directed in every area of their economic life, regardless of the specific social and cultural context. Needless to say that, under the circumstances, the concept of *glocalization*, with its emphasis on diversity, hybridity, and independence, remains confined within the space of the unrealistic, if not demagogic discourse.

As a matter of fact, the main objectives of *glocalization* are put together in an almost utopian image that has no correspondence in the reality of the postmodern world: "Rather than increasing penetration by capitalist firms and the states that support them, or by rationalized structures, this perspective sees a world of diversity" (Ritzer, 2004, p. 75).

Last, but not least, we should remember that the nations situated on the 'margin' side of the power relations paradigm can contribute to integrative

globalization by displaying a balanced attitude towards it. Such an attitude relies on their capacity to get rid of what made them vulnerable in the first place, namely two extreme patterns of thought specific to ex-communist countries:

- the isolationist tendency aggressively promoted by the communist doctrine based on the exacerbation of national heritage and the perception of everything that comes from the outside as a potential threat;
- the impulse to embrace blindly the Western economic and cultural model as part of a 'liberation syndrome' after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The two opposing tendencies are equally destructive, since they provide the perfect ground for ignorance, oblivion, prejudices and stereotypes that undermine the genuine cultural exchange. In this context, it is sufficient to remember that most of the Western population still mistakes the Romanians for the Romani and have deep fears regarding a potential invasion from the East. On the other hand, in the Eastern European countries, provincial isolationism disappeared with the fall of communist regimes, only to make way for an increasing tendency towards cultural compliance.

Under the circumstances, individuals and nations on both sides of the centre - margin paradigm should understand that sustainable globalization ultimately relies, as its central concept of 'embracing' suggests, on honest and respectful interaction, from positions of equality and mutual acceptance.

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