

Globalization and Cultural Identity

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Globalization, once it has been accomplished, is the process, whereby the entire world uses a free market system and consequently labor, capital, products and services are traded freely. Globalization is a three dimensional term, encompassing political, economical and cultural aspects.¹

Is globalization a process, which started just in recent years, and how far back do its roots reach? To some it began with the Turks taking control of the silk road, to others it began by passing through the seas of the Cape of Good Hope and with the discovery of America, whereby world trade expanded and natural resources from different parts of the world were transported to Europe; still others believe it began towards the end of 19th century with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, which brought on the development of production and transportation means. However, these developments really first began being referred to as “globalization” with the fall of the Eastern Block countries and with the advancement in communication technology, including news media and the widespread use of the internet, causing an increase in communication between people. These last two components are important factors, which have direct influence on the cultural dimensional aspect of globalization. We may then say: In reality, globalization has been around since the beginning of mankind. We merely evaluate its history according to various phases of paradigms. But one thing is sure, as transportation and communication increase in speed, the process of globalization becomes more and more apparent. As globalization speeds up, we become more aware of it and this increase, in comparison with past percentages, causes everything in the world to become influenced more quickly.

Almost all agree on the point, that globalization cannot be turned back. Whether we are in favor of globalization or are against it, it is definitely an ever-expanding process.

When we look at historical developments, particularly capital and labor movements, which are still with us today, we see that since the end of World War II free circulation has increased significantly. Economic and

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political entities such as the European Union and EFTA stand before us as the most important indicators of this current status. With the fall of the Socialist Block, the largest barrier impeding this process was removed, and we witness the nonexistence of an opposing fundamental ideology. Ironically, one of the goals of Marxism, Internationalism, although having disappeared in some aspects, has on the other hand begun to become a reality.

As for the political and cultural dimension of globalization, we are confronted via the world media with an agenda reflecting the downfall of the national state model, and with the prevalence in recent times of the terms and fears known as cultural “homogenization” and micro nationalism.

In recent years, with the process of globalization, the international media has begun to present the national state model as an old fashioned style of management.

Waves of nationalism were the initiating cause of the disintegration of empires 150 to 200 years ago, which ended in each nation establishing its own state. During this process each nation-state formed its own industry, customs quotas and similar preventative measures to protect the value of its national industry, its own local capital and labor force.

During the disintegration process of the empires, some states, despite their lacking the qualities of becoming a nation, did so nevertheless. The dividing up of the empires, which occurred according to lines on maps created artificial states.

Particularly in developed countries, where the population is becoming more and more aged, coupled with the rise in unemployment, the obligations of being a social state and providing systems of social security have become an unbearable burden. As a result of this, developed nations and popular name brand manufacturers have begun locating their production sites in other countries where labor is inexpensive. Multinational companies/brands, which formerly only sold products to countries, now as active operatives in a country, either affect the country’s entire economy, or are affected by its economic makeup.

With the increase in possibilities of international capital, communication and transportation, and in the face of growing competition, the desire for greater mobility and the preference to counter changing rules from country to country with protective measures is apparent.

Under present day conditions, the domestic capital of nations is no longer sufficient and an ever-increasing need for foreign resource capital exists. Thus the economic success of countries is measured by how much foreign capital they receive.

Upon examining the example of the European Union, where countries choose to join of their own accord (despite historical hostilities and differences), the probability of the national state model falling to the way side and globalization prevailing, is not sufficiently substantiated. Yet, why are European states willing to abandon their own sovereignty? Because the purpose of a national state, which is to ensure the well-being and happiness of its citizens, is believed to be better able to be provided for in this manner, and because common knowledge calls for this.

The most important developments in recent years in respect to globalization within the framework of the European Union are free travel, the opening of borders between countries and the removal of all trade hindrances.

Additionally, the positive qualities of globalization can be cited as examples meriting notice.

The fact that opponents in the last two large wars have united politically and economically is for the sake of world peace a very important occurrence.

As we all know, politics and economics are processes, which directly affect and determine each other. As economic integration increases, political integration will intensify. The weakening of the national state model is a natural result, in my opinion. Today in place of referring to total independence, countries speak of their mutual dependence on each other. Total independence has become impossible and is viewed as a third world country approach.

Economics is the most important dimension of globalization, which affects politics, and politics in return affects economics, and both of these affect the cultural dimension of globalization. The cultural trade of goods and services between countries is conducted within the framework of a global economic system. Between the years 1980 and 1998 a 5-time increase in the market for cultural goods and services occurred. The information-society's most important component is the cultural industry, which is expanding at an incredibly rapid rate. Just as the products of

these industries can create cultural values, or change them, as well as function to strengthen cultural identity, they can also hasten their disappearance. According to the UNDP Human Development Report published in 1999, two-thirds of the world's population are unable to benefit from global economic growth, based on international trade and developing technologies, and do not have the opportunity to become part of an informed society. This brings about the necessity to discuss whether or not "culture" can be regarded as any economic process within globalization economics.

In order to understand the fundamental importance of the issue, let us examine how much of a portion of our lives is encompassed by cultural goods and services: cultural goods consist of a variety of products such as books, magazines, multimedia products, software, records, CDs, films, videos, audiovisual programs and fashion designs. Cultural services are comprised of libraries, documentary centers, museums, theatres, and orchestras, even circuses, press, cable news broadcasts, and satellite broadcasts. As of 1998, the world's 5 largest cultural exporters were Japan, USA, UK, Germany and China, exporting 53% of cultural goods and services while maintaining an import rate of 57%. In the 1990's the concentration of large firms in this market established an oligopoly, in the global sense. In the year 2000 nearly half of the world's cultural industries were located in the USA, 30% were located in Europe, with the remainder being located in Asia. Today, 85% of movies seen in the world are made in Hollywood, whereas on the African continent, an average of 42 films are produced a year. In Africa, Chile and Costa Rica 95% of the films viewed are imported from the USA.

The question confronting us and requiring a response, better yet the challenge before us is:

Must cultural goods and services be seen as part of the global economy? The response to this question, over which UNESCO and affiliated organizations have been racking their brains for years in search of an answer, is de facto "yes". In order for it not to be so, different legal rules applicable to the cultural goods and services business would have to be agreed to and acted upon, which as of today would not be possible.

It is at this point that globalization becomes a problem from the cultural identity perspective:

In the global economy, culture has almost become only a one-way operating manner of business; cultural goods and services produced by rich and powerful countries have invaded all of the world's markets, placing people and cultures in other countries, who are unable to

compete, at a disadvantage. These other countries have difficulties in presenting the cultural goods and services, which they have produced to the world market and therefore are not able to stand up to competition. The natural result is that these countries are unable to enter the areas of influence occupied by multinational companies of developed countries.

To make a simple point let us look at language: In scientific and cultural areas, the language of dominant cultures is quickly spread by means of the media and the internet and becomes the common means of communication. Noticeably, the most frequently used language is English. English is the common language of use on the internet and if one is expressing oneself on information technology, it is the English terms, which become inserted into the local language. If with present day communication opportunities you are unable to reach your people with your folk songs and your literature, this means that the cultural identity of a generation ago and that of the current generation will be different. If the native fairy tales, songs, celebrations and stories of your childhood are replaced with computer games produced on a different continent, then you have already become part of a global culture.

In my opinion, there will be two results, medium and long range, which will be difficult to bear: firstly, in the world market for cultural goods and services, the role of underdeveloped or developing countries will steadily decrease. If these countries forfeit their right to their own production and distribution, or are forced to do so, this will be detrimental to their national economy. A resulting example would be, a loss of foreign money income, qualified labor and potential export opportunities. But more importantly, cultural products for the enrichment of all mankind would not be produced and they would not be offered as a service for mankind. As long as the rules of international business perceive cultural goods and services as equal with other goods, and as long as on the global economic level, the powerful and the weak enter into competition under equal trade conditions, the cultural diversity of developing countries will be in danger.

The second result will be a growing awareness on the local level for the need to protect cultural identity and cultural diversity. What is meant here is: when we look at mankind's situation today, the diversity of race, sex, language, class, age and religion can not be ignored. Each one of these variables holds the potential for serious clashes for any state and with globalization is eliminated. In the day-to-day lives of people, these most significant factors have accumulated for hundreds of years and form the pattern of the cultural identities of societies. No

matter how much globalization challenges the authority of states, and even if it changes the nationalistic awareness of people, the truth is that, the roots of the identities of societies and cultures will not change very much. No matter how much globalization is encouraged by the lifting of boundaries in the markets, the struggle for identification on the local (micro) level is increased by that much. Who would want to break off all cultural ties in order to be a world citizen? Or worse, who could claim that cultural ties are in opposition to world citizenship?

But today throughout the world, in the midst of the discussion on globalization, it is increasingly being claimed that globalization brings with it homogeneity and that the identity of countries, in short their cultures, are becoming destroyed. The protest marches in Seattle, Davos, and Geneva indicate that the subject of globalization and cultural identity need to be taken much more seriously.

The current danger on the horizon is that of micro cultural diversity giving birth to a sense of nationalism on the local level. Language, religion, race, age group, different traditions etc. may be seen as the world's richness and the foundation of a single colored globe is shown by the multitude of colors at its base. But from the economic perspective this local diversity, which lingers far behind developed countries, contains within itself an extraordinarily explosive quality, which it both protects and frequently displays. From day to day, nationalism on the micro level is manifesting more and more expressions such as democracy, human rights and similar concepts. Nations are made up of ethnic and religious elements, which can be challenged in the name of individual freedom and freedom of oppression. In short, in each society, or in each of its subcultures, reference points of cultural identity, ethnic roots, religious beliefs, and the attempt to establish one's own laws exists. Globalization brings with it a sense of opening up and the defining of cultural identity and the declaration of values which each person has taken on for themselves, can be seen as a basic right. Just as the protection of these local identities is necessary during the process of globalization, it is equally important not to disperse the traditional makeup of these local societies in such a manner as to endanger their being lost forever. Once groups of people, who have traditionally lived together, begin to differ and struggle with one another, it is doubtful that the happiness and well being of all of mankind can be brought about. The Balkans, the Middle East and Africa provide us with examples of lessons to be learned for both the supporters and the protestors of globalization.

As today's global economy continues to expand, we know neither how to protect cultural identity at the local level, nor do we know how to prevent local nationalism. What we do know is that if an economic standard of comfort is not ensured for, then developing countries will face even more hardships in the future. The protection of the world's natural environment and cultural diversity, and the elimination of poverty can only be accomplished with economics. As long as the countries, which are in control of the global economy do not share same worries as those of less fortunate nations, the destruction of local cultures in underdeveloped countries will continue and waves of local nationalism will become a serious a threat to world peace.