How "American" Is Globalization?

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Preface

Somehow globalization is "American." Both academic Marxians and *Wall Street Journal* editorial writers tell us so, differing in their degrees of guilt or pride. This assumption, in its modest form, merely acknowledges the worldwide reach of U.S. cultural or business activity, but at the extreme it hints of conspiracy, alleging that globalization is a nefarious Americanization. Nowhere is the assumption itself questioned. This amounts to national hubris, frankly, and one result is that when globalization hiccups, critics from Paris to Tokyo feel entitled to pass the buck to the United States. And Americans shamefacedly accept it. The purpose of this book is to investigate the assumption that globalization is American. I define globalization as the increased economic integration and interdependence of nations, driven by liberalized trade and capital flows. The kinds of questions I want to ask are: Is the appetite for fast food American? Is the spread of the Internet American? Is the widespread use of English American? Just what is culturally *American* about globalization?

Such an interrogation could extend to several volumes, but some aspects of globalization are more properly the provinces of other scholars. This book does not deal with the effects wrought by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, or the United Nations, or by AIDS, development monies, currency devaluations, organically modified foods, and several other topics that it might properly include. Rather I have sought to focus on the culture of everyday life outside the United States and the degree to which it has been "Americanized." I try to disentangle American culture from modernity in general, for there is a large element of the latter in globalization. The speeding up of life, sanitation, hygiene, the communications revolution, urbanization—these are modern, but

not necessarily American, changes to life. "Modernity" itself is examined in many other studies but usually not in relation to American culture and globalization.

So, how *American* is globalization? The short answer has two parts, and they are separated by a clutch of cultural restraints. Answer one: globalization is not as American as we think it is. It's just that everyone, especially Americans, recognizes American films, language, and logos when abroad, and draws the conclusion that the world is becoming Americanized. This is a bad case of cultural myopia. The globe is not speaking more English or dining daily at Wendy's.

In fact, a clutch of cultural constraints—language, food, habitation patterns, educational institutions, attitudes toward race and honesty—resist change in general, and resist the American face of globalization especially. They do so because change makes a bad fit with local culture. Imagine trying to park your Oldsmobile in Osaka! We should not underestimate this "persistence of the local," the ways in which local culture determines what can be globalized.

But the second and best answer to "How *American* is globalization?" seems to be "more than we know." Most of us understand little of the logistics of globalization, such as containerized freight, franchising, cash machines, bar codes, commercial aviation, and airfreight—all American-born features of modern economic exchange. They are only tools, but they suggest modes of use and, indirectly, ways to organize daily life. The use patterns attending these inventions *are* increasingly American. But even here, skepticism is appropriate. The longshoremen of Marseilles now use hand-held bar code scanners to log in containerized freight, but they still call them *marteaux*, after the hammers that their grandfathers used to remove shipping manifests. Does the use pattern or the historic allusion carry more *oomph* in daily life?

After a précis of my views, the next thing that I owe readers is a look at my passport. Gone are the days when one could write speculatively on this topic from the university library, by reading theory, or by attending conferences. So: Between 1982 and 2002 I lived outside the United States for six years. I taught at universities in Spain, France, Austria, and Japan, each for over a year. I spent six months in Mexico, and a month each in China, Poland, the Baltics, India, and Russia. For lesser periods I traveled in Holland, Belgium, Egypt, Hong Kong, Hungary, Israel, Jordan, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Greece, Turkey, South Korea, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Germany, and Switzerland. I traveled alone for the most part, taking notes and pictures, riding local

buses and trains, sometimes hitchhiking. I rode in the back of a pickup truck across Cambodia. I ate the local food whenever possible, even at the Hakodate fish market where it was still alive. Sometimes, yes, I ate at McDonald's. I talked to as many people as I could—I speak French, Spanish, German, and Japanese. Despite all this travel, I have focused my examples in three nations—Mexico, France, and Japan—in order to develop a thicker description of local interaction with globalization.

In a previous career I was a financial journalist for *Fortune* and then *Money* magazines, and in this book I have followed that training to find the fault lines of producers, markets, work, and consumption habits. Given this approach, I found the *New York Times, Wall Street Journal,* and *International Herald Tribune* enormously helpful, and the reader will find their reportage gratefully acknowledged. However, I also profited from the scholarship of Ronald Inglehart, Geert Hofstede, Richard Pells, John Tomlinson, Reinhold Wagnleitner, and William W. Lewis. Globalization sounds dry and abstract, but making it specific and local has been a labor of love for these writers and scholars, and I want to thank them, even as I add my two cents to the debate.