"Hegemonic" Globalization and Cultural Diversity: The Risks of Global Monoculturalism

Australian Mosaic

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Our Global Era

Our global community is facing a broad spectrum of local, national, and international challenges. Our response to these challenges will shape the nature, quality, and meaning of our lives throughout this century. Among these challenges are dramatic increases in world population -- most of which will be occurring in the developing world -- widespread poverty and famine, environmental desecration and destruction, international migration flows, endemic diseases (e.g., AIDS, Avian Flu, TB), world-wide violence, terrorism and ethnopolitical and religious conflict, and a distinct pattern of globalization that can be termed "hegemonic" because of its control and dominance by powerful individual, national, and multinational corporations whose policies, plans, and actions are threatening cultural and biological diversity and promoting the rise of global monoculturalism.

Globalization

Globalization -- or increases in the scope and magnitude of human contact, interaction, and interdependency -- is inevitable. Indeed, some argue that globalization began when our human ancestors first journeyed out of Africa to inhabit the distant corners of our world, generating in the process thousands of diverse cultural traditions. The issue, then, is not globalization itself, but rather particular patterns of globalization. If the sources of globalization are concentrated in the hands and pocketbooks of a few powerful individuals, nations, and organizations, and if the parameters are oppressive because of their extent, focus, and intent, then the potential for the destruction of cultural and biological diversity is high.

In today's world, the major sources or drivers of globalization are transnational and transcultural communication media, capital flow, transportation, tourism, and military and security alliances, all of which are generating new and unpredictable levels of interdependency. The uncertainty and unfamiliarity of this situation are raising increased levels of fear, doubt, and suspicion. Where once events and forces in distant

lands had little consequence for other parts of the world because of time and distance, these events and forces now have global implications and consequences, often with little possibility of prediction, control, and/or management.

"Hegemonic" Globalization: Western Values, Life Styles, and Dominance

While the emergence of increased Chinese and Indian political, economic, and military power has changed the chemistry of events and forces shaping globalization, Western governmental, commercial, military, and religious interests are still controlling international markets, capital flow, commercial ownership, and cultural identities. This "hegemony" constitutes a serious challenge for developing nations and traditional cultures because it locates the power for molding national policies and decisions in the hands of "foreign" interests. In addition, it also pressures minority populations in developed nations to assimilate and to conform to the dominant culture.

The major players in "hegemonic" globalization include North American and Western European nations and their satellite nation partners, media, national and international financial institutions (e.g., World Bank, IMF, WTO), and, of course, multinational corporations who hold no national loyalty. This group has been termed the "Davos" faction because of the annual gathering of their leaders in the luxury resort town of Davos, Switzerland.

 A serious concern is the "hegemonic" imposition of values associated with North American (i.e., United States) popular culture, including individualism, materialism, competition, hedonism, rapid change ("progress''), profit, greed, commodification, consumerism, reductionism, celebritization, privatization, and English-language preference. These values carry with them a way of life that are alien and offensive to many people throughout the world, even residents in Western cultures. They are powerful values, generated and sustained by institutions and organizations with self-serving agendas. Of special concern is the fact that American popular culture values are becoming the preferences of youth around the world.

It is true there is considerable cultural diversity in Western societies, and that this diversity is encouraged and supported. But pressures to assimilate and to conform to the dominant national culture are also present, and prejudices against diversity are widely present and institutionalized (e.g., institutional racism).   In addition, it is unfortunate that the cultural diversities that exist fall prey to commercialization and commodification. Consider the crass commercialization of indigenous cultures associated with tourism in many nations. If it can sell, commercialize it. While all societies seek economic growth and stability, there is, in my opinion, a justifiable and widespread *angst* regarding "hegemonic" globalization.

It could be argued that "hegemonic" globalization has been omnipresent throughout history. Wars, for example, have always resulted in winners imposing their ways on losers. Consider the powerful cultural legacies that continue to exist from the days of Greek, Roman, Arabic, Spanish, and British and French imperialism and colonization.

"To the victor belongs the spoils!" This point of view contends "hegemony" is simply part of the human condition -- a kind of Darwinian survival of the fittest applied to cultures, societies, nations, and civilizations. But in a globalized world in which time, place, and action are no longer limited nor constrained by distance, the consequences of cultural "hegemony" assume problematic implications and proportions. Monoculturalism at a global level is more problematic than monoculturalism at a national level.

Thus, we are compelled to ask if the fruits of "hegemonic" globalization constitute local and global improvements? Are we building a better world for all, or only for a small select group? Are the values and actions of the powerful who support "hegemonic" globalization the values and actions we would choose given the opportunity to control our choices? There are many inconsistencies between the ideals and the reality Western culture as revealed by the tragic scenes of Hurricane Katrina and the widespread poverty, alienation, and disenchantment of those citizens denied access and opportunity.

The West speaks ardently of democracy, especially of representative government and active citizen participation, but a closer look at many Western societies reveals that many governmental, commercial, educational, and religious institutions are under the control of special interest (i.e., lobbyist) groups who shape and determine policies and decisions. Is this democracy or oligarchy? It is notable, and I say this with great disappointment, that the United States government, a major force in "hegemonic" globalization, has failed to sign nine international treaties. Further, its recent actions at the United Nations, where it has insisted on major changes in UN recommended governance procedures and policies, indicate that it is seeking to limit international powers.

Should Western Cultural Values Be Emulated?

There is a reciprocal relationship between a culture's values and its institutions -- these reflect and support each other. In "hegemonic" globalization, the values and institutions of Western ways of life are being distributed across the world via a score of powerful globalization venues (e.g., trade, investment, tourism, alliances) that are often insidious in nature. For example, Western fast foods, clothing styles, entertainment, and languages carry with them potent cultural communications about morality, identity, and life priorities. Thus, cultures and nations, as both sources and target of "hegemonic" globalization, must ask whether Western cultural values and institutions are the global standard to which they aspire?

I do not mean to romanticize non-Western cultures for there is certainly much that can be criticized regarding their distinct values and practices. But, I am more concerned here about the loss of cultural diversity and all that it represents for alternative ways of knowing (i.e., epistemology) and behaving, and the different constructions of reality these offer.   No culture have resolved all of life's problems, but the variations do offer wisdom and insights into the process of adaptation. In the West, there is widespread

alienation of youth, abuse of substances, family disintegration, marginalization of minorities, racism, poverty gaps, vulgarities and excesses of public culture, extensive corporate and governmental corruption, and the destructive social and environmental consequences of rampant consumerism, materialism, and commodification.

Unbridled capitalism, the heart of Western national economies, has proven itself to have too little concern for people, and too much concern for profit. More than 250 major corporations in the United States engaged in fraudulent accounting practices that misrepresented actual corporate worth and financial value in pursuit of profit and exorbitant salaries for corporate leaders.

To be sure, "hegemonic" globalization has led to increases in GNP, national wealth, social mobility, job opportunities and choices, and improvements in health care in developing countries. Level of living has increased and there are positive examples of liberation from oppressive cultural traditions and practices in the name of human rights (e.g., clitorectomies) and increased personal freedoms from authoritarian governmental control. But inherent in these increases in wealth and changes in custom is the eventual penetration of a world view aligned with Western cultural assumptions and practices. It cannot be otherwise. One cannot buy into the process and product of "hegemonic globalization" without having to give up or change prior assumptions and practices. Further, increases in GNP in developing nations have also been associated with increased gaps in income inequity. The rich get richer. Diverse ways of life are lost in favor of a global monoculturalism with questionable consequences.

While "hegemonic" globalization claims to be driven by the pan-human values of liberty, democracy, human rights, and justice, these appeals often become passing entry points for cultural penetration and control by Western political and economic forces. National and individual wealth may increase, but a new array of problems emerges. Level of living does not guarantee quality of life. Who has benefited from global monoculturalism? Are residents more secure and content? Or does disillusion and disappointment eventually set in when the limits of opportunity are recognized.

In many societies in which "hegemonic" globalization forces are active, families have collapsed leaving youth, the elderly, and working parents isolated from previous collective ties. Socialization now is shaped via peers, media, and advertising, and it occurs in new settings like movie theaters, shopping malls, night clubs, and traffic jams. Advertising, a major driver of "hegemonic" globalization, confuses "needs" and "wants." Sex and sexy celebrities are used to convince consumers to buy and prefer certain brands of beer, cigarettes, automobiles, clothes, foods, and appliances -- especially Western products -- often without revealing the small print. Self-indulgence, one of the principle values inherent in "hegemonic" globalization, encourages narrow self-interests and individuality. Connection to others and to life itself -- the essence of spirituality -- becomes lost amidst materialism and the purchase of over-priced fashions, fast foods, personal electronics, and the other accoutrements of the Western status and identity.

By definition, "hegemonic" globalization minimally engages the participation and decisions of local populations. For the most part, cultural and national entry and dominance is often limited to existing privileged sectors who remain part of the ruling class. But the process itself favors and privileges an "exploitive" character type that further empowers an exploitive "capitalistic" model. I am concerned about the consequences of using this character type as a the model for an emerging society to prize and value.

The Quality of Change: Globalization With . . .

I am not a Luddite. I am not against change, nor am I against globalization. I am, however, against "hegemonic" globalization because of its consequences for homogenizing cultural diversity. I am against the asymmetrical concentration of power and wealth of "hegemonic" globalization because it is driven by concentrated values and motives capable of homogenizing the world's diverse cultural traditions for commercial and political gain. "Profit" is not in itself evil, but when "profit" is driven by greed and avarice, it is simply violence. We need a globalization that is driven by equity and ethics.

I can hear my Western critics' cries already: "It is their choice, " "They want what we have," "Our way has more comforts, choices, goods, and services." I am compelled to say "Yes" to many of these arguments. But I must also ask whether or not citizens are fully aware of the sources and consequences? Majid Tehranian, a globalization scholar, points out that there is a widespread resistance to "hegemonic" globalization in the form of localist, pan-nationalist ethno-nationalist, regionalist, environmentalist, feminist, and even religious movements. Each of these movements is an expression of resistance to the forces of cultural homogenization, uniformity, and conformity associated with "hegemonic" globalization. The resistance reflects an acute distrust of those in power because of their agendas. Even terrorists have used "hegemonic" globalization -- replete with its values, institutions, products, and abuses -- as motivation for their destructive actions.   Amidst this resistance, the issue of unity and diversity in our global community become a significant concern.

Douglas Porch, a British scholar, in his acclaimed book, *Wars of Empire,* noted parallels between turn of the century European imperialism and much of what is transpiring.   He writes:

> "Through imperialism, poverty would be transformed into prosperity, the savage would be saved, superstition would vanish into enlightenment, and order would be imposed where once only turmoil and barbarism reigned. . . . The peace operations and humanitarian interventions of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries may be seen as a revival, albeit in less violent form, of yesterday's "savage wars of peace." The ultimate goal was similar: fling open markets to the global economy, bring government

to the hitherto ungovernable, end tribal conflict and ethnic cleansing, and recruit converts for the Western way of life (p. 16).

The Issue of Universal Values

As the world moves inexorably toward becoming a global community, it is natural to ask whether there are would encourage and sustain both unity and diversity, values that would have "universal" appeal.   In my opinion, among the values that meet this criteria are peace, sustainability, civility, equality, social interest, non-violence, interdependency, tolerance, diversity and spirituality.   Spirituality refers to connectedness – to unity with one another and to the larger universe in which we live. It is associated with feelings of awe and reverence for the mystery of life and with an identification with the very life force that animates the universe. And it is here that diversity in all its forms becomes even more precious and salient because diversity reflects the essence of life itself.

For unity and diversity to work, informed and principled global leadership are needed. I envision a global leadership characterized by (1) a *knowledge* of global challenges and resources, (2) a *prizing* and *prioritizing* of cultural diversity, (3) the *wisdom* to inspire and guide changes with equity, ethics, and inclusion, (4) the *character* to speak for humanity rather than narrow interests, and (5) the *ability* to inspire trust.   I can imagine an action agenda for global leaders of this fiber and cloth beginning with a global program that engages populations throughout the world in dialogues and discussions about the events and forces driving globalization and their consequences.

Possible Guidelines

Recently, the International Labor Organizations (ILO) and the World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization (2004) recommended a series of guidelines designed to shift the emphasis of globalization from a "narrow preoccupation with markets to a broader preoccupation with people." They stated that globalization "should be brought from the high pedestal of corporate board rooms and cabinet meetings to meet the needs of people in which they live."   They contended that the social dimension of globalization must become the arbiter of policies and practices, because: " . . . it (i.e., the social dimensions) is the dimension of globalization which people experience in their daily life and work: the totality of their aspirations for democratic participation and material prosperity. A better globalization is the key to a better and secure life for people everywhere in the 21st century." They suggested the following guidelines be considered:

- **A focus on people**
- **A democratic and effective State.**
- **Sustainable development.**
- **Productive and equitable markets.**
- **Fair rules.**
- **Globalization with solidarity.**

- ***Greater accountability to people.***
- ***Deeper partnerships.***
- ***An effective United Nations.***

If we enter into widespread dialogues and discussions of these guidelines, if we discuss their virtues and limitations, if we test them in the crucibles of local, national, and international change, then, in my opinion, we will be prepared to meet the critical challenge of encouraging unity and diversity in our world.

I am reminded here of the poignant words of Octavio Paz, Mexican Nobel Prize Laureate, who wrote: " Life is diversity, death is uniformity. Every culture that disappears diminishes a possibility of life."