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Americanization and the planetary spread of ethnic conflict : The globalization trap

by **Dr. Daniele CONVERSI** [Print this page](#)

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Since at least the year 2000, new books and independent research have begun to proliferate, illustrating with richness of details how corporations have taken over the functions of government in many crucial areas, thereby menacing the core of the *demos*. The works of Naomi Klein, Noreena Hertz, George Monbiot, Greg Palast and many others have highlighted how US-led corporate interests corrupt and appropriate government functions, bend entire legal systems and destroy popular sovereignty, endangering the very fabric of democracy on a global scale (Hertz 2000, Klein 2000, Monbiot 2000, Palast 2003). The sudden rise of the 'no global' movement has reflected and embodied this emerging concern for the unrestrained excesses of corporate capitalism.

However, these epochal shifts have yet to propel a significant amount of academic research. Indeed, most 'scholarly' analyses still proceed in a conceptual-terminological vacuum. Accusations that academia is complicit of collusion with corporate interests, and even of US imperial expansion (Pilger 2001), are therefore predictable. Although this may be to a certain extent true, it is worth considering that university scholars, secluded, safe and over-confident in their conservative niches, are normally slow to react to historical events and unable to grasp them promptly and articulate them in ways which are accessible to the greater public.

Significantly, scholars still cannot agree on the meaning of the term **globalization**, for which there is no yet coherent or universal definition: some authors focus on mere economic aspects, others on financial flows, others on policy-making and the law, and so on. Of all forms of globalization, *cultural globalization* is possibly the most visible and effective as it proceeds on its lethal path of global destruction, removing all traditional barriers and securities in its wake. It is also the form of globalization which can be more easily identified with US global dominance. In this opaper, I shall relate cultural globalization to the twin concept of '*cultural security*', as developed by Jean Tardif and others.

In its current shape, cultural globalization can be broadly understood as one-way massive import of standardized cultural items and icons from a single country, the United States of America. For large portions of the ecumene, it is hence synonymous with Westernization, and, more accurately, *Americanization*. The international consequence of this global threat is a widespread sense of '*cultural insecurity*'. The latter is so far unable to express itself in rational and organized ways, and is just beginning to express itself through visceral and unpredictable anti-American attitudes (Sardar and Davies 2002).

'*Americanization*' should be here intended in its most superficial, incoherent, fractional, and deficient sense. As aping and mimicking something one does not even grasp the value of. As the spread of quite trivial and commercial aspects of industrialized US mass-directed products.

The area which requires most urgent attention is the relationship between Americanization and inter-ethnic, or national, conflict. The main challenge is to define the relationship between the two: Does nationalism reinforce globalization or can it rather represent a challenge to globalization? Is globalization reinforcing nationalism or can it in some way be channelled in the opposite direction? What kind of nationalism is most likely to emerge with, or as a response to, globalization? Is globalization a causal factor in the explosion of ethnic conflict, xenophobia and racism?

The latter question is of particular importance, since most evidence seems to point to an affirmative response, namely the existence of a direct link between cultural globalization and the rise of racist and xenophobic nationalism. Over thirty years ago, Walker Connor (1994, 2004) was among the first to argue that an increase in international contacts is often accompanied by an increase in international conflict. Some contacts are bound to generate clashes, not encounters, and further separation, rather than the fusion of cultures. This seems to run counter to past and present assumptions auspicated by both communists and free-market fundamentalists.

But which kind of contacts are conflict-engendering? Certainly, not all forms of contacts are 'ethno-genetic' or bound to invigorate ethnic awareness and militancy. Otherwise, we should expect a world in perpetual conflict. So, which type of international contacts are bound to generate conflict?

This question points towards an entire new range of possibilities in the expansion of scholarly research. It is important to begin a tentative answer by saying that those contacts leading to a sense of group *threat* are the most conflict-engendering ones. Specifically, a threat to the group's culture, way of life and sense of continuity is likely to lead to an increasing group mobilization. This lies at the core of *cultural insecurity*.

However, too narrow a focus rules out the possibility that a sense of threat can be artfully fabricated by political elites. For instance, US elites have disproportionately amplified the 'threat' represented by internal 'outsiders', deviants, 'sects', terrorists and various media-stereotyped figures for purposes of internal political control, at least since the Clinton years (Zulaika and Douglass 1998). Similarly, I would add, a *real* threat can be easily hidden to public opinion by the media through political manipulation. Typical is the ominous attempt by the US administration to censor 'bad news' about polluting corporations and, in particular, the devastating consequences of the greenhouse effects and global warming. Therefore, whether threats are fabricated or really-existing, we need to focus strictly on political elites, remaining aware of their control of the media, hence of their capacity to filter, sieve and separate 'worthy' from 'unworthy' news (Herman and Chomsky 1988, Snow 2003).

There is scarcely any doubt that 'national sovereignty' has, to a great extent, been seized by multinational corporations. Yet nationalism has not died out. Indeed, I have argued that, despite its potential, the end of national sovereignty has paradoxically contributed to its dramatic increase (Conversi 1999). A major reason for this is what I identify as the 'pyramidal' structure of globalization, with a tiny elite of US corporate and governmental agencies at the very top level, with the majority well down on the bottom of the pyramid. In this context, it is unlikely that the current trend in global exchanges can foster inter-cultural dialogue. We have therefore to ask ourselves a crucial question: is it rather the case that cultural globalization does *not* really represent a genuine increase in inter-personal, inter-ethnic and inter-cultural contacts? In fact, in most areas of public life there is no cultural globalization at all in the real sense. The process is rather pyramidal and top-down, with a few individuals and groups, nearly all in the USA, establishing the patterns to be followed by the rest of mankind. If this 'brave new global world' had its own capital, this would likely be Hollywood, rather than Washington. Cultural globalization may still seem remote to vintage scholars secluded in their ivory towers and so mawkishly attached to their fetishistic object of research. Beyond academia's splendid isolation, 'Hollywoodization' has become a daily routine for millions of peoples all over the world. Indeed, for increasing numbers of common people, it is the only known reality. The most primary tools of socialization, erstwhile in the firm hands of the family (nuclear or extended), then assumed by the state in the industrialization 'phase' of compulsory schooling, have become, with post-modernity, at the mercy of uncontrollable cash-driven corporate powers and media tycoons. If a group can no longer socialize its children according to its culture and traditions, then the very basis of nationhood are visibly at stake.

The point is that nationalism and xenophobia have expanded in tandem with globalization: indeed, nationalism itself may not only persist and resist, but be perceived as a response to the onslaught.

By relying on Hollywood *et similia* as unique conveyors of 'globalization', inter-ethnic communication automatically drains away. There are instances where communication has virtually vanished: In most post-communist societies, the explosion of chauvinism, racism, neo-fascism and xenophobia goes hand in hand with a blind faith in mass consumerism. As diagnosed by LSE political philosopher John Gray (Gray 1998), free market dogmas have already heralded the triumph of 'anarcho-capitalism' and its atomic mafias in the MacDonalidized East. But there is a more important factor: the collapse of real, effective inter-ethnic and international communication as a direct consequence of superficial Americanization.

Let's take an example: until 1989, it was relatively easy to see on Hungarian television and in many of Budapest's cinemas, movie masterpieces from France, Russia, Italy, Britain and many other countries. This is no longer possible. Only the worst (and the best) of Hollywood can now be seen every day on every Hungarian channel and cinema theatre. Data on this 'cultural suicide' or 'self-genocide' begins now to be available -- albeit still largely undebated in Hungary itself. The same phenomenon is repeated in Poland, Russia, Uzbekistan and nearly all other post-communist societies run by corrupt/prostitute governments which have betrayed their ancient cultures in exchange of a bunch of US dollars. But the recognition of this common fate is silenced by the indignation of being compared, by an irritation of being 'bracketed together', and put into the same 'box'. Denial is the instinctive, irrational reaction. Any commonality, even an obvious one such as the shared legacy of 40 to 70 years of communism, is repudiated as crass generalization. But this very act of denial of a common predicament is harbinger of inter-ethnic conflict and is ultimately incompatible with membership in an international society or any supra-national organization.

Rather than representing a bridge between cultures, such an unilateral homogenizing drive has eroded the basis for mutual understanding, hampering inter-ethnic and international communication. This has been facilitated by the persisting legacy of totalitarianism which

had already turned communist societies into a cultural *tabula rasa*, preparing the ground for the onslaught of cultural globalization (Conversi 2001). In all former communist societies, Americanization has directly replaced Sovietisation. This has occurred at both the political and the cultural level. While McDonalds, MTV and Hollywood triumphed destroying all rivals, the *ancient regime's* political structures were inherited intact by US-led corporate power and simply transformed by means of corruption and subservience. What George Soros has identified as the myth of 'free market fundamentalism' has directly replaced the myth of communism: "It is market fundamentalism that has rendered the global capitalist system unsound and unsustainable.... Market fundamentalism is today a greater threat to open society than any totalitarian ideology." (Soros 1998)

Coming back to the case of Hungary 'Americanization' has not simply meant the eradication of Hungarian culture in all possible aspects bar language (in this case semantically and philologically impenetrable, hence unavailable to non-Hungarian speakers). It has also meant the effacement and undoing of neighbouring cultures. And two self-destructions add up to each other in incremental ways: from no culture and no inter-communication, through a twofold negative relationship, to unavoidable conflict.

Yet, if cultural globalization can be simply identified as naked 'Americanization', then the equation is simpler and scholars of nationalism *may* find something new to ponder about and begin theorizing anew. In this case, globalization would be automatically associated with colonialism and/or imperialism (depending on ideological inclination): The emperor is without clothes. It would follow that nationalism and ethnicity could potentially become vehicles of resistance to globalization. But this has mostly not yet been the case. On the contrary, nationalism has often reinforced globalization, and viceversa. Therefore their relationship needs to be scrutinized more in depth, knowing that an apparent acceptance of US iconography is no proof that neither the surface nor the substance will be passively accepted in the long term.

Three lines of research on this relationship can be tentatively proposed.

A first line of interpretation may focus on the long-term political effects of socio-cultural change, what has been more properly identified as 'cultural insecurity': Benjamin Barber's (1995) pioneering view that 'McWorld' harbors in itself the seeds of a planetary 'Jihad' belongs to a wider sociological tradition which sees massive social uprooting as leading to widespread social unrest, and cultural destruction as ushering social disintegration. This approach can be associated with a classical 'cause-effect' model or, borrowing from medicine and chemistry, an *homeostatic* view of social change (Conversi 1995). For instance, Ernest Gellner (1983) saw nationalism as an inevitable consequence of, and reaction to, industrialization. Zygmunt Bauman has famously argued about the relationship between modernity and the Holocaust (Bauman 1989) Walker Connor (1994, 2004) emphasized the underlying, persistent and pervasive force of ethnic sentiments against the grand projects of assimilationist 'nation-builders'. And, more recently, John Gray has diagnosed the very growth of Al Qaeda and global terrorism as a perverse consequence of the spread of Westernized modernity among non-Western elites (Gray 2003). In other words, there is a dialectic relationship between the social disruption brought about by Westernization and modernity and the subsequent explosion of nationalism, ethnic conflict and war, a relationship which becomes more pronounced as globalization intensifies.

A second interpretive framework may come from what should be called '*failed communication*' view, expressed in the preceding paragraphs. The key argument is that the current 'world order' has a vertical, indeed pyramidal, structure, where groups have less and less opportunities to inter-communicate or interact in a meaningful way and know each other's traditions. For increasing numbers of individuals, a US-manufactured mass consumerist culture remains the only 'window on the world'. Consequently, to know and appreciate one's own neighbours has become an ever arduous task. 'Free-market fundamentalism', spearheaded by cultural Americanization, has led not only to environmental catastrophe, but also to an incremental raise in nationalism and xenophobia. According to this view, there is no globalization *tout court*, quite the contrary, there is increasing bridge-building and erosion of understanding behind a facade of global homogenization.

A third line of analysis should focus on a more concrete and actual form of globalization, which can work independently from Westernization: the expanding role of *diaspora* in international politics and the rise of 'e-mail nationalism' --a term coined by Benedict Anderson (1992). In an increasingly uniform world, ethnic 'identities' have not only resisted, but are being unremittently emphasized. The expansion of the internet has prompted the creation of global ethnopolitical networks which can be constricted by state boundaries only at the price of curtailing fundamental human rights. Although increasingly monitored by state agencies, mobile phones have at the same time reinforced ethnic exclusivism, family ties and parental control by increasing communal contacts and decreasing the chance of new inter-personal encounters.

The most recurrent theme in the recent literature of nationalism has been that of ethnic persistence and continuity (Smith 1998). As with other historical mass movements, ethnic mobilizations and conflicts have frequently surprised scholars and journalists for their sudden, 'unexpected' appearance. The emphasis on the unfathomable and elusive character of ethnicity should hence be part of a wider sociology and history of human *unpredictability*. As a recent example, a (truly global) anti-global movement has unanticipatedly emerged in dispersed locations of the ecumene, from Seattle to Prague,

from Quebec City to Gothenborg and Genoa, ostensibly without announcing itself. Yet, a popular reaction against the excesses of globalization, perceived by many as all-pervasive US colonialism, was fully predictable -- and some have anticipated both its emergence and its initially contradictory, disorganized, 'anarchical' modalities (Barber 1995).

Likewise, the evidence accumulated from many case studies over the last thirty years point to the possibility of predicting or at least expecting, the explosion of ethnic conflicts in specific situations. There is, for instance, ample evidence to say that the role of the state is essential in prefiguring ethnic conflict. The latter largely depends on the state's (either conflictive or tolerant) response to, and relationships with, multiculturalism, religious pluralism, and ethnic dissent. Of course, nationalism can either become a weapon of the weak or a vehicle of oppressive regimes and empire-builders.

In this paper, I have just begun to expose the corporate view's misconception that Mcdonaldization and Hollywoodization can foster better understanding. Much more needs to be said about this process of planetary destruction and its impact on fostering human conflict. The very notion of cultural security, so central to international relations and peaceful coexistence, can be seen in its unprecedented precariousness. Moreover, even the domestic cultural policy of the world's most powerful country is envisaged as a danger to the rest of mankind. This is particularly so as the US has arrogated the right to secure its market by means of cultural protectionism, insulating itself from outside currents on the ground of a perceived superiority of its culture and achievements: "If the Americans are offered less than 3% of foreign-produced products, how are they prepared to understand the world?" (Tardif). At the same time, the rest of the world is coming slowly to term with the fact that Americanization is no matter of 'free choice', but part of an ordained political agenda founded on the infliction of centrally devised cultural policies. The sense of cultural insecurity has therefore spread onto a planetary scale, and will be more increasingly so.

To recapitulate my point, the current form of cultural globalization as synonymous of Americanization is engendering conflict on a series of levels. Because the process is one-way and *unidirectional*, the result is anything but the fusion between nations or amalgamation of ethnic groups. Contrary to the gospel preached by the evangelists of unrestrained globalization, the imposition of more and more American mass products and cultural icons means less and less possibilities for direct inter-ethnic encounter, communication and understanding among nations. In its current form, globalization means war.

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