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## Consuming cultures

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## Consuming Cultures :

### Translating the Global, Homogenizing the Local

The sense of “consuming” addressed here relates to a culture of spectacular consumption in which we almost all are now implicated, and in which our main purpose is to consume: we inhabit and are inhabited by a society of consumption . A second but allied meaning relates to culture as just another product or service to be consumed. There is also an additional sense in which the planet’s local and long-standing cultures are being consumed and transformed by a globalizing economic culture which makes the local conform, and renders the local homogenous. The words and representations of these several facets of consuming cultures will be examined below.

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It is interesting to note how so often the primary sense of consumption, eating and drinking, provides the examples of cultural differences and their obliteration : we talk of McDonalds as the great culinary leveller of our taste buds, and when we used to talk about cultural imperialism rather than globalization, Coca-Cola-ization stood for the historical process of economic homogenization and Americanization.

In fact, what has become known as McDonaldization is a little more complex than it seems and describes not only a process of globalization, but also one of its derivatives, what is now called “glocalization”. But before engaging the glocal, I shall first explore globalization as a an economic tendency, as a political strategy, as a dominant ideology, as a discourse of hypermodernity, as the bogeyman of the globophobic.

Globalization is now firmly entrenched in our imaginaries as the inescapable driving force of the twenty-first century. But is this process of international economic and thus cultural harmonization, standardization or homogenization so modern and so recent?

The discourse of globalization, has as we shall see in detail a little later, been recuperated from already existent analyses of processes of internationalisation and homogenisation, it has been *détourné* as the French has it. *Détourné* is difficult to translate into English. The term “hijack” is probably quite close, while “divert” is too neutral. A hijack in French is a *détournement*, and in the 1960s and 1970s Guy Debord and the Situationists advocated the *détournement* of texts and of language.<sup>1</sup> More recently, politicians and

marketing strategists have *détourné* the concept of globalization. And yet as we shall see even their recuperated sense of globalization is not so far from a much more well-established vision of this process.

Since when have we been theorizing globalization? Let us examine the following text:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. ...it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, ... industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands...

In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production.

The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

The extracts just cited date from 1848, and are taken from the *Communist Manifesto*. (pp. 83-

84) It is not immediately clear whether Marx and Engels consider this march towards a global economy and culture a good thing but the sense of the words that follow is quite transparent:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all ... nations into [its] civilisation....It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (p. 84)

Already over a century and half ago Marx saw economic globalization as an inevitable process, but did he foresee the commodification of intellectual and cultural production? Even if Marx understood the logic of capitalism – which evidently he did better than anyone in the mid nineteenth century – what he did not foresee was the emergence of a post-bourgeois economy and the hypermodern economic colonization of culture and language.

For Marx and Engels, true internationalists, at least within the confines of a white Euro-American world-view, who transposed and introduced ideas and lexical innovations from one European language to another, the internationalization of the work and product of the intellectual could only be beneficial to progressive forces. The two titans of interventionist, politico-economic critique were right in foreseeing and predicting economic and intellectual

globalization, although this came only after a long dominance of national capitalist strategies stretching from the late nineteenth century until the rise of post-World War 2 Americanization. But since the change of power relations expected by Marx and Engels did not happen, either in the West or in the Marxist-Leninist world, the globalization of intellectual, cultural and informational production has fallen totally under the hegemony of the economic.

The national bourgeois economy may have been replaced by networks of global economic power, but the new form of power still uses the same *modus operandi*, the same strategy : “it creates a world in its own image” .

However, it needs to be underscored, Marx was against neither economic nor intellectual cosmopolitanization as he called it. The world had to be extracted from its feudal misery, the town must replace the country, Nature must be mastered. While not against the local, Marx and Engels did not cry over its demise, since, according to their historical determinist analysis, the new global hegemony of the proletariat had first to traverse the historical phase of nation states.

As often with Marx and Engels, their discourse reveals itself to be contradictory, or at least it seems so to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century, for they are at once critical of the brutality of the bourgeoisie yet admiring of the progress inherent in the advance of bourgeois national and international capitalist modernization. Let us examine one further paragraph from the *Communist Manifesto*, a text that oozes disdain for the marginal and the unmodern and which contains a famously disparaging turn of phrase referring to the peasant way of life. It is also a text that shows the acute analytical prowess of Marx in its prediction of the twentieth-century economic, but also cultural, balance of power.

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semibarbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West. (p.84)

In this extract from *The Communist Manifesto* we are confronted at once with the full power of Marx’s critical capacities and at the same time with an engrained Hegelian disdain for the assumed backwardness and decadence of the “Orient”. As we can see Marx, like Hegel,

establishes an equivalence between what is termed “rural idiocy”, and the ignorance and the backwardness of the East. Such historically inaccurate and ill-founded prejudices are still sadly entrenched, a century and half later, in the post-colonial, yet still deeply colonialist, European imaginary concerning the Other, and above all the Oriental Other, now globalized and latterly glocalized.

But while Marx and Engels may have been unable to foresee the evolutive nature of consumer capitalism, post World War II “alternative” theorists such as Cornelius Castoriadis and the even more marginal Guy Debord not only were able to theorise and predict the development of economics but also the ways in which power and its representations would evolve.<sup>2</sup>

Guy Debord, in his now celebrated and oft recuperated theory of *société spectaculaire*, “society of the spectacle”, analysed the nature of alienation in twentieth-century modern society.<sup>3</sup> While frequently understood as a critique of the manipulation of the image in modern society, the *Society of the Spectacle* goes well beyond analysing the relatively restrained sphere of the mass media. Debord focuses on the impoverishment of the daily lived experience, the increasing alienation and fragmentation of human existence. The spectacle, the sum of the independent images and representations provided by modernity, then serves as a substitute for real and whole experience of life. Individuals separated from one another in everyday life find unity only in the passive contemplation of the image, modern substitute for religion. Of course, the core problem is not image and representation but the society that has need of them. For Debord there were two types of spectacle in the 1950s, the diffuse, represented by the “liberal democracies” providing the illusion of choice, and the concentrated, constituted by the authoritarian model (the Soviet bloc, China, Indonesia) in which the spectacle is focussed on a quasi-religious leader. Later, in an analysis which foresaw the fall of the wall, *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* published in 1988, Debord located what he called the “integrated spectacle” into which the two systems had started to merge and to recuperate features the one from the other. This “post-communist” phase of the “integrated spectacle” in which in terms of representation the New World Order replaced the Cold war, is what is now represented as globalization.

## GLOCALIZATION

Like many of the theoretical terms employed in contemporary professional and academic discourses, glocalization can convey both a positive and a negative construction of the process it describes. For those in the sphere of business communication, glocalization constitutes a positive and effective marketing strategy. Their usage and application of the word may help us to perceive the reality of what is hidden behind yet another manipulation of language by the hegemonic power that is the economic and the spectacular.

The CIOs (chief information officers) whose role and status in many large multinational companies is second only to that of the CEO (chief executive officer) or company president, perceive glocalization as a term that emphasizes “that the globalization of a product is more likely to succeed when the product or service is adapted specifically to each locality or culture in which it is marketed”. (“Glocalization”) A fusion of the equally positively inflected “globalization”, with the word “local”. It was first used in the late 1980s by Japanese economists writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, but was popularised by, and here we see an example of the imbrication of the discourses of business and social sciences, sociologist Roland Robertson for whom the term describes the mediating, relativizing or minimizing effects of local conditions on global pressures. For Robertson glocalization signifies the “simultaneity of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies”. (1997); a practice of particularization that can be seen in the corporate strategy of tailoring commodities to local markets. <sup>4</sup>

Robertson’s analysis of glocalization favours the Japanese business approach, which he renders more human by referring to the Japanese “people”, and particularizing the Japanese as “genuinely global people”, while the Americans are deemed to have no understanding of the imbrication of the particular and the universal:

But the basic idea of glocalization is the simultaneous promotion of what is, in one sense, a standardized product, for particular markets, in particular flavors, and so on. In my judgment, this does give a very interesting cast or tone, to the Japanese presence in the modern world. Because I myself believe --- and I am not saying this just because I am in Japan, just because I am sort of confronted here, in a very pleasant way, by many Japanese people, but I believe that because of the indigenous nature of the concept of glocalization, that the Japanese are in a particularly strong position to, in fact, identify themselves as genuinely global people, in a way which the Americans are not. In fact, if one had to think of the two most opposite nations in this respect, I would say that the Japanese have a major strategic, *cultural* advantage in the whole globalization process, and that up to now, up to this point, the Americans are out of it --- they stand no chance, because they don't have a conception, they don't have a philosophical, cultural conception, of the interpenetration of the particular and the universal. (Robertson 1997)

In other words, Japanese glocalization is inoffensive, while American glocalization fails to take into account local sentiment. But this gloss on glocalization/globalization evades the issue. What is in question is not the process of Americanization, a process that was never in any case monopolized by the Americans, as Roberston (1997) himself underlines, but rather the homogenization of everyday life. Globalization, no matter where the product is produced or which transnational company is extracting the profits, is about the unification of our fragmented, alienated existences into a unified consumer imaginary through the passive consumption of homogenized products and images. That Japanese glocalization is more “successful” than American, is of no consequence.

In any case, McDonaldization should thus not be considered a straightforward internationalisation of an American product and practice, but rather the insidious adaptation of any product or service not to local taste buds, but rather to the paradigms of local popular culture; a process of particularization not unknown to American corporate strategy. Thus a recent McDonalds advertising and promotion campaign in France featured not a Disney cartoon character or feature film star, but the French popular cultural mythic hero Astérix. The self-same Astérix who defended local Gallic culture against Roman cultural and military imperialism is thus recuperated to the sales campaign of the spearhead of American everyday consumerism.

There is another starkly contrasting understanding and application of the term glocalization as descriptive of a “historical process whereby localities develop direct economic and cultural relationships to the global system through information technologies,” thus “bypassing and subverting traditional power hierarchies like national governments and markets” (“Glocalization”). This entails the Utopian notion of constructing a non-material or virtual “gift economy” connecting local and global via information technologies. This idealist strategy begs the question of what happens to those excluded from, or those who lie beyond, the reach of such technologies. Such a strategy also creates a dependence on technologies developed and managed by the global hegemony of the economic sphere. Of course, we can and we do use this technology to our own ends - we have all used Internet for the past decade as a means of engaging in research and distribution of that often critical research – but let us not forget that such usage is contingent and that we are privileged in having access

to such technologies. What happens on the fringes and in the underbelly of the BRICs?<sup>5</sup> Do the excluded constitute a new neo-Marxist category of the ignorant, the idiocy of the technologically deprived, who can only hope like the hundreds of millions of Chinese hinterland peasants beyond the pale of the Chinese economic miracle to be absorbed sooner rather than later into the global economy?

There are intermediate positions on globalization/glocalization, such as that of Thomas L. Friedman, who appears to have no major quarrel with the inevitable economics of globalization, and who sees possibilities for intercultural enrichment and awareness being provided by it. But he is concerned to preserve culturally “authentic” everyday practices. “Friedman thinks good globalization is when a little Japanese girl goes to McDonalds in Tokyo to enjoy the American way of life and food. Bad globalization is when she gets off the plane in Los Angeles and is surprised that they have McDonalds in America too.”<sup>6</sup>

This latter position would seem to have us imagine that McDonalds is “genuine”, “authentic” or even exotic American “ethnic” food. As though somehow there was an equivalence between traditionally prepared sushi and an industrially produced pâté of minced meat and fat in a sandwich. Once again, the reality is that, in both the sense of post World War Two economic neo-colonization and in the sense of the displacement of local socio-cultural practices by globalizing tendencies, Americanization has emanated from America, Japan or even the European country the most vehement in its demand for the “cultural exception” to globalization, France. Beyond the particular object, beyond the “authenticity” of the culinary dish placed before us, what matters is the processes constitutive of the Americanization of everyday life that have long since embedded themselves in, and transformed, local imaginaries and local realities. I have Taiwanese students who grew up with McDonalds; indeed, the first McDonalds this author ever visited was in downtown Taipei in 1978. For those students American fast food culture is already long since a normalized part of Taiwanese life. But now both in Taiwan and on mainland China there are local and glocalized fast food restaurants functioning like McDonalds.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that culinary taste and ingredients are challenged and transformed by foreign, imported, “global” practices. I have mainland Chinese students who believe that milk products are an integral part of traditional Chinese culinary culture. Moreover, over the past few years restaurants in China which serve otherwise entirely



Chinese cuisine, have started to offer milk and milk-based drinks with the food. But while the imbibing of red wine in China although increasingly widespread is still seen as exotic, the consumption of milk products, never formerly a part of the traditional Han Chinese diet, goes unremarked. Globalization constructs itself on our collective forgetfulness.

This tendency to mask the global and normalize it as local even goes down beneath the level of the national: the marketing strategies of the hyper-local. For instance, national or even transnational or rather supranational television, radio and Internet-based news and entertainment services, can and do produce community-level news packages tailored to local sensibilities. Or they may simply give the impression of so doing. So as to attract local advertising, for instance, in the Provence region of France, Europe 2, the pop music station, inserts regular local advertising slots into its national product, together with intermittent pre-recorded announcements which tie in the station to a local community: this is Europe 2 Avignon, this Europe 2 Manosque, This is Europe 2 Aix-En-Provence. But these manifestations are purely virtual and no news or other non-advertising product is ever broadcast. But then we can always, can we not, as was suggested by the utopian vision of glocalization, access the authentic and the local via our computer?

## **THE ETHNIC GROCER**

The simplicity of the authentic or perhaps better the authenticity of the simple, is pervasively marketed in the everyday life of Western, and increasingly Asian, hypermodernity. In the attempt to go beyond the staid, stale ordinariness of the consumed everyday, we are offered the "exotic": an exotic redolent of the nineteenth century racial imaginary but in which discourse the ethnic has supplanted the now banished "racial". In terms of popular everyday advertising and consumer practice "ethnic" now signifies exotic and authentic. Restaurants are no longer vaunted as "exotic" but as "ethnic." A similar slippage from exotic to ethnic is to be found on an American web site promoting and selling "ethnic" food.

The site in question is that of EthnicGrocer.com – a mail-order site selling dried or canned food ingredients from around the world. These are represented as "Genuine" products, that is they are produced and packaged in the country whose cuisine they are meant to typify.

Once again the imagined exotic or ethnic is reduced to an equivalence – the food of the Other. We are presented with a veritable global “democracy” of comestible products in which the selected few – only a score of countries are represented – are given equal space. China being no more or less important than Poland, we are called upon to accept a visual virtual utopia in which the Polish sausage can rub shoulders with the Peking duck.

“Click on a country to embark on an international culinary shopping spree” –  
“now the world is so small it fits on your plate.” (Ethnic Grocer)

But it is not just the jaded linguistic signs that are re-manipulated in this cyberspace exotic food bazaar, but also the image. How can a country be represented without the image – after all the Internet web page is increasingly constructed of and around the visual? When we click on a country, we click on an image. When we click on an image we get a country. In the teleology of the web page, cuisine thus becomes inevitably homogenized and nationalized in a pattern of popularized Heideggerian consumption: One image, one country, one cuisine.

As Laurent Gervereau (2003) has recently reminded us: The need for images reveals itself also as a need for metaphoric summation...Pernicious simplifications get constructed *in the name of the image* – its complexity is feared. It must be brought to heel. (p. 480)<sup>7</sup>

In the rather “innocent” web page under discussion, simplicity is privileged, complexity is eschewed. National cuisine is hegemonic. is privileged over local, regional cuisine, and each nation is represented by a non-culinary image. (But when and where does national cuisine exist, except perhaps in America where the globalized is the national?) China here is represented by a segment of bamboo stalk, France by wine glasses, Italy by a Venetian canal, Poland by a famous church, Japan by a geisha and an umbrella, the Philippines by a shadow and an umbrella, Spain by a bullfighter, Greece by its classical tradition, Mexico by an Aztec statue, India – incomprehensibly- by a camel, and Thailand by a Buddha.

As with film, here the still visual image displaces other senses; taste and smell are not yet electronically reproducible on a laptop. So olfactory and oral sensations are displaced, and their exotic character alluded to simplistically with images. Even when the website features pictures of cans of beans and plates of pasta, it is still the visual clichéd stereotype that is deployed to represent a national culinary culture.

The national so far has been mentioned only in passing, by allusion to the way it seems to be subsumed and eclipsed by the global. Yet the national is very much imbricated in the processes of globalization and glocalization. The national continues to exist in the sense that the product distributed and consumed by all those within the national boundaries, becomes the great leveller, the grand homogenizer. Mainly these products – such as milk-derived products – are produced by multi-national companies such as the French-based Danone. These are, of course, global products, that sometimes are glocalized. For instance, the French supermarket Carrefour distributes non-Chinese and Chinese products in its China-based supermarkets. What matters is not what is consumed but the pattern of homogenized consumption, what is important is that what is consumed is consumed all over China, or for the moment all over modernized China, in other words, is consumed nationally. For local holders of power this is the global at the service of the national. Indeed, the process of globalization is essential to the completion of older national projects with equally unifying ambitions. In China, the standardisation of distribution and consumption, takes forward, completes the project of cultural nationalization, a project launched much later in Asia than in Europe. So that is why Starbucks can be found in the Forbidden City and not just in Hong Kong, and why McDonalds is in every town worth the name in China.

McDonaldization, then, is also the final phase, the accomplishment, of nationalization in the ex-Third World, in the BRICs, and Glocalization makes McDonaldization even more recuperable to the national project: the tentacles of a nineteenth-century process of modernization and nation-state building reaching down into hypermodern globality.

But globality, the time-space that all of us here today now inhabit, is not the bright uniformly coloured map of the world with which globalization's propaganda presents us. The map is stained and blotched with the inequalities and injustices of populations left behind, left out, left struggling underneath, lost in the folds of the dimensional computer-generated models, and in the parentheses of post-modern academic discourse, sterilized and sanitized in the hegemony of the Greek suffixes that have reproduced themselves so intrusively in this presentation tonight.

They are hidden in the caves under the crags of the cliff faces of a thousand plateaux. When present at all, they are metaphorically yet literally, bookishly yet cynically, written into the margins of our discursive strategies.

And these dispossessed are not only the hundreds of millions of citizens of the BRICs, and the aspiring BRICs, who have yet to benefit from any form of modern life, but also the host of forgotten post-colonized in our midst. The north African women who clean up after us after we lock our office doors at day's end and leave behind the subalterns in the pages of our cultural studies manuals.

As academics we stand scientifically, neutrally, helplessly on the sidelines of a world dominated by the market, analysing and at times even critiquing the New World Order, only to find our words subverted and recuperated by business and business -ologists. At worst we are ourselves turned into the mediators, the passers of socio-economic conflict that goes veiled by the so-called cultural.

But as women and men of letters we should be capable of going beyond critique of the global, the local and the glocal, we should be capable of challenging the linguistic order within which we are all trapped, of contributing to a new poetics of a new world culture which as that bearded white male bourgeois radical, Karl Marx, predicted, will inevitably come. But will that culture be merely that of the globalized, the glocalized, the hyper-localized, the mass customized homogenous product. Or is humankind still capable of turning and twisting the shabby, soul-less language of hypermodernity into a new poetry of everyday life in which alienation will be reversed, and separation overcome?

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## <sup>1</sup>NOTES

For more on the theory of *détournement* and on Situationism in general see Ken Knabb (ed and trans) (1981). *Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley, CA. : The Bureau of Public Secrets. An excellent summary and analysis of Debordian theory in French can be found in Anselme Jappe, *Guy Debord*, Pescara: Edizioni Tracce, 1993 (for the original Italian); Marseille: Via Valeriano, 1995 (for the French translation). See also for Debord's and other Situationist texts <http://www.nothingness.org>

<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, radical French theorist of Greek origin, moved gradually over a period of twenty years starting in the immediate post-World War Two period, from a neo-Trotskyist critique of Soviet bloc communism to a fundamental critique of Marx's historical determinism. In particular, he ultimately demonstrates that Marx extrapolates to the whole of history ways of thinking that are appropriate and applicable only to Marx's own historical era, subsumes the diversity of global social forms under a schema making sense only for developed capitalist society . For a good analytical summary of Castoriadis's work see : Poirier, N. (2004), *Castoriadis : L'imaginaire radical*, Paris : PUF.

<sup>3</sup> But importantly the French word *spectacle* also translates as "show", as in cabaret or theatre.

<sup>4</sup> One of the outstanding examples of recent glocalization is that of the Internet search engine Google.

<sup>5</sup> Another business sphere term, an acronym for the Brazil, Russia, India, and China viewed as a group of emerging economies with large potential markets?

<sup>6</sup> Edward Tanguay, review of Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* cited in Stroupe.

<sup>7</sup> « Le besoin d'images se révèle être aussi un besoin de résumés métaphoriques....*Au nom de l'image*, se construisent des simplifications pernicieuses. Sa complexité se voit crainte. Il faut l'asservir. »