

3. Cultural Hegemony: Who's Dominating Whom?

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Deirdre Straughan posted this on her blog, *Countries Beginning with I*, in 2005.

A popular meme in American consciousness is cultural hegemony: the idea that American culture, as represented in widely exported American movies, TV shows, fast-food restaurants, and brands, is overwhelming the traditional cultures of other countries. The fear is that this will eventually result in a sadly homogenized world in which everyone abandons their own customary foods and entertainments to eat at McDonald's and listen to hip hop.

This theory seems to be popular on both sides of America's own cultural divide. The liberal left worries that we are teaching the rest of the world to be destructively, mindlessly capitalistic and individualistic. A more conservative viewpoint worries that we are "exporting the wrong picture" of America, an argument propounded by Martha Bayles of Boston College in a *Washington Post* editorial.

There are two problems with this theory.

The first is that it's arrogant. It is true that American popular culture is widely consumed worldwide. This is not simply because American media companies are good at selling their products—no one is forcing people to watch American shows. In many countries, local cinemas and TV stations show American stuff because their customers want to see it. Some governments work hard to censor what their people see, for political or religious/cultural reasons (or both). Nonetheless, their citizens often go to great lengths, sometimes breaking the law, to obtain and consume American media. It's not being forced on them by those evil capitalists in Hollywood.

The cultural hegemony argument is also a subtle put-down of other cultures: it assumes that they are so weak or ignorant that they cannot be trusted to decide for themselves what they should see and hear. That these people should, "for their own good," be protected from invasive American culture, so that their "native" cultures will be preserved. 5

(Aside: Preserved for what? As a quaint playground for American tourists who want the "authentic" experience when they travel in other countries?)

The second problem with the theory of cultural hegemony is that it's simply not true. I've been in many parts of the world and, while you do see signs of American/Western culture everywhere, most people value their own cultures and work actively to preserve them, consuming local media, food, etc. alongside whatever foreign stuff they like.

India is a great example of a society which needs no special measures to preserve its traditional culture—unlike, say, France (said she mischievously). Indians love TV, and have plenty of it: at least two or three channels for every major language (of which India has 14 or 15, including English), and at least one each

for Muslims, Christians, Jains, and Sikhs (probably Buddhists as well, though I didn't see this), plus one for each of the major branches of Hinduism. In addition to news and worship, there are channels dedicated to Indian-produced TV series and movies, and channels of Indian music videos. A few channels show imported TV, movies, and music, plus CNN International/Asia and BBC World, but these are vastly outnumbered by local fare—no case to be made there for Western culture overwhelming India! Which is hardly surprising: India has been absorbing and subsuming foreign cultures for 3000 years.

If there's any cultural invasion going on, it's occurring in the opposite direction. A number of Indian directors are doing well in Hollywood, some with films you can't tell apart from any other Hollywood product (M. Night Shyamalan), others bringing Indian or cross-cultural themes to Western audiences (Gurinder Chadha), and/or adding Indian spice to otherwise Hollywood-standard movies (Mira Nair's *Vanity Fair*).

There's a growing presence of American brands in India, but that doesn't mean that Indians are adapting to American tastes. Reading a women's magazine in Mumbai, I saw an ad for a very familiar American brand, Pillsbury. Attempting to sell devil's food cake mix in India, you wonder? Nope. The ad was for a rice flour mix that could be used to make *dosas*, *idlis*, and *vadas*—distinctly south Indian treats. I'd be surprised if that product ever got to the U.S., and I didn't see any ads for Pillsbury brownie mix or refrigerator cookies in India. American companies, far from trying to foist American tastes on Indians, are studying the local market and adapting their products accordingly. You don't get to be a global brand by expecting everyone to like what Americans like—as most American multinationals are keenly aware, even if the American general public is not. 10

So, the next time you get worried about American culture taking over the world, look around you. If you can't get to a foreign country to see what's actually happening there, just look at your American hometown: how many “ethnic” restaurants do you have? And what is American culture itself, but a rich soup of the many cultures that Americans originally came from?

It's not just Americans who buy into the “American cultural behemoth” myth: UNESCO has recently passed a resolution supporting nations' rights to set a protected percentage of “local culture” to be shown in cinemas and aired on TV. Several nations have such laws, which Hollywood has been protesting as protectionist.

Questions

1. How does Deirdre Straughan define cultural hegemony? What are the two problems she sees with the “theory” of cultural hegemony?
2. How does Straughan use India as an example of a country that has preserved its heritage? Do you find it convincing? Explain your response.
3. How does Straughan argue that cultural hegemony is going “in the opposite direction” (para. 9)?