

It's Only a Movie – Right?

Deconstructing Cultural Imperialism

Examining the Mechanisms Behind U.S. Domination of the Global Cultural Trade

Emilee Rauschenberger
Fall 2003

Table of Contents:

I.	Introduction	2
II.	The History of Cultural Imperialism Theory	6
III.	Evidence Supports Free-Trade Paradigm.....	12
IV.	Problems with the Dependency Theory.....	17
V.	Reconsidering the Concept of a Cooperative Audience	20
VI.	Further Research	25
VII.	Conclusion: The Need for American Cultural Diplomacy.....	28
VIII.	Works Cited.....	32
IX.	Appendix.....	35

“Our cultures are being reduced little by little to nothing. These technologies have no passport and no visa, but they are affecting us and shaping us.”

– Joseph Ki-Zerbo, a historian from Burkina Faso, West Africa

I. Introduction

A Starbucks sits in Saudi Arabia’s sacred city of Mecca, not far from Islam’s holiest site, serving its signature coffee to Muslim pilgrims who arrive from across the globe. The 1997 U.S. blockbuster film *Titanic* is praised by Chinese President Jiang Zemin in a speech before China’s National Peoples Congress.¹ Mickey Mouse now welcomes its fans in Europe and Asia from his Magic Kingdoms in France or Japan. Whether it’s beverages, blockbusters, or a bit of Disney’s delights, it appears that the world can’t quench its thirst for American culture.

But the spread of American consumer culture goes beyond popular consumption, raising questions and concerns of U.S. dominance in the cultural sphere, what effect such cultural commodities are having on the values of societies and, in turn, on the realm of politics. The term “cultural commodities” refers to products of the print and audio-visual industries including movies, television, publishing, radio, and music. These products are vehicles for the transmission of values, lifestyles, and ideologies that many see as corrosive to the recipient culture.

The intrusion of American consumer culture into the everyday lives of the average global citizen has prompted many to charge the U.S. with a new form of colonialism – “cultural imperialism.” Generally speaking, the term “cultural imperialism” refers to the worldwide spread and dominance of American consumer

¹McChesney, Robert W. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. (New York: New Press, 2000), p. 115.

culture and products, which many nations claim is eroding their local cultural traditions and values and represents a form of global cultural regulation. Thus, the issue of cultural imperialism raises both questions of cultural identity and government policy.

Although complaints of U.S. cultural imperialism are a recent phenomenon, the spread of the culture of a dominant world power is not. From the Roman Empire to 19th century European colonizers, dominant powers have spread their language and culture as a means of indirect control over their subordinates. In addition, throughout human history, peoples have exchanged cultural experience, ideas, values, and goods through art, trade and migrations. But never before has technology been able to spread ideas to the masses in quite the same fashion. The massive scale in which U.S. cultural products are being distributed and consumed has reached a level never before achieved.

The popularity of U.S. films, music, books, and other cultural commodities in countries across the globe has prompted many politicians, academics, and others to look closer at the possible effects of the globalization of American culture. While it is clear that American products are flooding world cultural markets, there is much debate on whether or not these products pose a threat to indigenous cultures or are significantly influencing countries' domestic and international policies.

Certainly, there is an emerging global perception that the U.S. is promoting its cultural abroad at the expense of indigenous cultures. France, perhaps one of the most culturally nationalistic nations, has often been at the forefront of such criticism and with warranted concern. In France, American films accounted for more than 60 percent of box office revenues according to the country's Ministry of Culture in the early 1990s. Back

in U.S., French films make up only 0.5 percent of the American market.² Other American cultural products have become widely popular in this country of 60 million. France's former Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, has been particularly critical of the globalization of U.S. consumer culture, calling for "a real crusade against... this financial and intellectual imperialism that no longer grabs territory... but grabs consciousness, ways of thinking, ways of living."³ A decade later, French Minister of Culture, Hubert Vedrine, publicly blamed the U.S. for the "standardization and trivialization of culture."⁴ It seems that the popularity of McDonald's, U.S. films, and other American trends, the appearance of a Disney World outside Paris (labeled a "cultural Chernobyl) have brought French farmers, politicians, academics and others together in scorn of all things American.

However, the French are by no means alone in their disdain for the American cultural hegemony. Individuals and governments around the globe have expressed concern regarding the influence of American cultural products on both a local and national cultures. U.S. cultural imperialism has become a topic of debate in not only scholarly circles, but in economic, legal, and legislative arenas as well. Unfortunately, even the terrorist network al-Qaeda has claimed that their attacks on the U.S. have been partially motivated by a reaction to perceived American cultural imperialism. This phenomenon, whether or not it can be proved, has important political and social repercussions that cannot be ignored.

² Ames, Paul. "EC Braces for Clash With U.S. Over Movies." *Associated Press*, 2 Oct. 1993.

³ Rauth, Robert K. "The Myth of Cultural Imperialism." *The Freeman*, a publication of the Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., Nov. 1988, Vol. 38, No. 11.

⁴ Kaffsack, Hanns-Jochen. "French rage at American influence". *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 1999.

Understanding the issues surrounding cultural imperialism are essential with growth in the cultural trade rapidly increasing worldwide. Trade in the cultural sector has increased significantly in recent years. According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), there has been a significant increase in cultural imports from \$47.8 billion in 1980 to \$213.7 billion in 1997, a jump from \$12 per capita in 1980 to \$44.7 per capita. In other words, the world is seeing a significant expansion in the demand and trade of cultural goods, particularly music, games, and sporting goods.

During this period of growth, cultural products have become the largest U.S. export according to UNESCO's Human Development Report. Thus, U.S. has remained the dominant player in the global cultural trade, especially in the audiovisual sector. Of the films shown worldwide, 85% are produced in Hollywood, according to UNESCO. Even in Europe, U.S. films dominate the list of imported movies, which account for more than 80 percent of films shown in cinemas throughout the EU. This is despite the fact that, statistically speaking, the top film producing countries are India, China and Hong Kong, and the Philippines. The U.S comes in fourth, yet its films are the most widely distributed and viewed. In addition, in some EU countries, up to 60 percent of television programming is from non-European sources, again chiefly the U.S.⁵

This imbalanced, one-way flow of the cultural trade has fueled fears of cultural erosion in virtually every corner of the globe from Canada to Vietnam. According to a 2002 study conducted by Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, eight in 10 Africans and six in 10 Latin Americans feel that

⁵ Casert, Raf. "Quota Issue Sidestepped; EU Approves Reduced Audiovisual Aid Package." *Associated Press*, 21 June 1995.

their traditional way of life is under siege as a result of globalization, compared to only three in 10 who feel the same in the U.S.⁶ In addition, the same study revealed that large majorities in 42 of 44 countries surveyed felt that their way of life is being lost and is in need of protection from foreign influence.⁷

Clearly, global trade of cultural commodities, dominated by U.S. products, is growing rapidly. And people are not only noticing but also feeling the pinch, voicing concerns that their way of life and traditional culture are being threatened.

II. The History of Cultural Imperialism Theory

Speculation of cultural imperialism emerged in the post-World War II under various names, including “neo-colonialism,” “soft imperialism,” and “economic imperialism.” Over the years, it has gained numerous other labels such as “media imperialism,” “structural imperialism,” cultural dependency and synchronization,” “electronic colonialism,” “ideological imperialism,” and “communication imperialism.”⁸ Such theories describing cultural imperialism emerged in the 1960s and gained prominence by the 1970s. Such research encouraged the establishment of international organizations, such as UNESCO, designed to research and monitor global information flows.

Despite the wide attention and audience cultural imperialist theory has gained, it has been hindered by the lack of clear definitions. Agreeing on a single definition of culture, cultural commodities, and other key terms in this area of research has proved

⁶ Stokes, Bruce. “Global is Better”. *National Journal*. 7 June 2003.

⁷ “Views of a Changing World 2003: War with Iraq Further Divides Global Publics”. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 3 June 2003.

⁸ White, Livingston A. “Reconsidering cultural imperialism theory”. *Transnational Broadcasting Studies Archives*, No. 6., Spring/Summer 2001. <www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring01/whiteef.html>.

difficult. Thus, various definitions for cultural imperialism have evolved. In his 1976 work *Communication and Cultural Domination*, Herbert Schiller set the first standard of the term cultural imperialism defining the phenomenon as the way in which major multinational corporations, including the media, of developed countries dominate developing countries.⁹ And while Schiller mainly focuses on the communications aspect of cultural imperialism, the theory has also been applied to explain phenomenon in other fields such as international relations, education, sciences, history, literature, and sports. While this paper will focus on the media and communications aspect of cultural imperialist theory, it must be acknowledged that cultural imperialism of any kind does not exist in a vacuum. As Schiller once pointed out, “Media-cultural imperialism is a subset of the general system of imperialism. It is not free-standing; the media-cultural component in a developed, corporate economy supports the economic objectives of the decisive industrial-finance sectors.”

Since the end of World War II, the debate on the U.S. cultural influences has evolved from a “communication and development” paradigm and modernization theory to one of “cultural imperialism” and dependency perspectives. Though a “post-modernist” position has emerged; however, it is also in the process of evolving and thus much of the debate remains focused on cultural imperialism claims and notions regarding dependency structures.¹⁰ Though there are many theories offered to explain the explosion of American culture, many can be grouped into main two prevailing paradigms

⁹ Schiller, Herbert I. *Communication and Cultural Domination*. (New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976).

¹⁰ Sreberny-Mohammadi, Annabelle. “Media Covers the World,” in John Downing, Ali Mohammadi and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990), p. 296-307.

which have often been referred to as the “dependency” paradigm and the “free-market” paradigm.

The dependency paradigm attributes Western/U.S. cultural hegemony to a new form of colonialism bent on spreading capitalist values. Often said to be linked to neo-Marxist theories, the dependency theory considers transnational media products as highly standardized goods, which are produced in a capitalist context and have a substantial influence on audiences, which are considered passive consumers. Herbert Schiller, one of the leading authors of this view, asserts that transnational media and communication industries are the “ideologically supportive informational infrastructure” of global capitalism and agents for “the promotion, protection and extension of the modern world system” which “create ...attachment to the way things are in the system overall.”¹¹

These industries and products are seen as causing severe negative effects on such as cultural alienation, homogenization, synchronization, dominance and the creation of false needs and consciousness. Prominent academics advocating this leftist position include Herbert Schiller, Smythe, C. Hamelink, Fejes, and Janus.

For these dependency theorists, cultural imperialism is the pressure put on one society to adopt the culture, values, and lifestyle of another. Schiller points out that “a society is brought into the modern world system when its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping its social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system.”¹²

The terms such as “world system,” “society,” and others are considered to be generally

¹¹ Tornlinson, John. *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 125.

¹² Schiller (1976) as paraphrased by White in “Reconsidering Cultural Imperialist Theory.” (2001).

understood concepts, and the main idea of the theory is the one nation dominates another. Media plays a central role in creating and transmitting the dominant culture to the developing society. Exactly how this domination is achieved and maintained is are explored by various proponents of the theory.

In general, the proponents of the dependency theory assert that transnational media organizations determine the ways in which people interpret information about culture, an idea that serves as a guiding assumption for cultural imperialist thinking.¹³ This implies that the developed power actively plays a role in dominating another country, while also implying the dominated country acts as simply a passive audience. Simply put E.J. Dionne in the *New York Times* shortly after the attack on American cultural imperialism from French Culture Minister Jack Lang: “For the left wing critics, American culture is popular around the world not necessarily because it is good, but because it has behind it the enormous resources of a very rich country.”¹⁴ American culture permeates the world because it has the power and money to do so.

Meanwhile, others consider the unmatched popularity of U.S. cultural products simply a result of free-market laws, unaffected by ideological motives. The proponents of the free-market paradigm, which is considered a more conservative approach, argue that U.S. hegemony in the cultural trade stems from economic factors. Firstly, American commodities have economic advantages because the U.S. maintains large production budgets and advanced technology and has a large and highly competitive home market, and thus foreign products have a hard time competing. Other leading advocates of this paradigm include De Sola Pool, W. H. Read, Lee, Boyd, and Tarle,

¹³ White, (2001).

¹⁴ Dionne, E.J. Jr. “Cultural Meeting in Paris Sets off Debates.” *New York Times*. 21 Feb. 1983.

Still this school of thought maintains that the market produces what the consumers demand. According to this logic, the global consumers are a cooperative and participatory audience, and thus determining their own exposure to U.S. cultural products. Because audiences are seen as cooperative counterparts in the cultural trade, free-market proponents insist that U.S. products effect on viewers is minimal. In addition, in this scenario, both the consumers and the producers benefit from the trade.

Furthermore, several authors of this paradigm also argue in favor of what they call the theory of the “lowest common denominator” and the concept of “cultural discount.” According to the lowest common denominator theory, cultural products will be engineered to appeal to the largest number of people and thus culture specific elements will be kept to a minimum. Similarly, the idea of a cultural discount means that a product rooted in one particular culture will be less attractive to audiences of another culture. In more explicit terms, it means: “a particular programme rooted in one culture, and thusly attractive in that environment, will have a diminished appeal elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the style, values, and behavior patterns of the material in question ... A ‘cultural discount’ is the notion that the willingness to pay for a culturally distant programme is reduced.”¹⁵ Again, this argument relates back to the idea of the lowest-common denominator theory in which U.S. cultural products draw on more universal values and references, and are less culturally specific, and thus are more widely popular abroad.

Another argument indirectly linked to the free-market paradigm but put forth to explain the popularity of U.S. cultural commodities abroad (which could be considered

¹⁵ Hoskins, C. & Mirus R. “Television fiction made in USA.” *Import/Export: international flow of television fiction*. In P Larsen (ed), Paris: UNESCO, 1990, p 86.

related to the idea of least common denominator) is that Americans are a diverse population that is a “melting pot.” French writer, Pierre Billard, and others championed this idea, claiming that as a nation of immigrants, the U.S. has absorbed talent and influences from various parts of the world and “synthesized it into a universally accepted culture.”¹⁶

However, returning to the theories of dependency and free-market, both paradigms rely on textual arguments and often lack the support of substantial empirical evidence. While both based on ideological concepts and economic forces, the dependency argues U.S. cultural dominance is a result of capitalist market laws and while other attributes it to free-market laws. There other key differences between the paradigms have to do with the role of consumers and possible effects of U.S. hegemony, which are summarized and illustrated in Table 1. Dependency writers consider the consumers as passive audiences and the effects of cultural imperialism as global. On the other hand, free-market supporters consider consumers as cooperative players with the power of choice in the market place and thus minimize the possible effects of the global dominance of American cultural products. In a nutshell, dependency minded scholars trumpet the theory of a capitalist conspiracy behind America’s cultural invasion while free-market supporters consider U.S. cultural domination as a result free market mechanisms.

¹⁶ Rauth, (1998).

Table 1: A Comparative Look at the Dependency and Free-Market Theories

	Dependency/Conspiracy Paradigm	Free-Market/Trade Paradigm
Reasons for U.S. Cultural Dominance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideological • Capitalist market laws conspiracy embedded in Western/U.S. and capitalist values, norms, ideas • Stereotyped or standardized values and norms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free-market laws • Universality • “Lowest Common Denominator” Theory • Low “Cultural Discount” • Unique U.S. market advantages <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Competitive domestic market ○ Large production budgets
Audience Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative
Cultural Effects of Dominance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependency • Cultural homogenization, synchronization, dominance, alienation • Creation of superficial/false needs and consciousness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal effects • Cultural Integration • Audience Approval • Mutual benefits

III. Evidence Supports Free-Trade Paradigm

Today’s American cultural dominance is more likely a result of market mechanisms, through which the U.S. has utilized and retained competitive advantages, rather than a result of a prevailing ideological conspiracy to advance the capitalist agenda. These unmatched advantages have made American cultural products more competitive and thus popular worldwide. This fact, along with the universal appeal of

American products, is ensuring its hegemony on the global stage. In addition, cultural trade is subject to market forces and suffers from market ills as other trade sectors do. Illegal piracy and bootlegging is on the rise to the dismay of American corporations, undermining capitalist ideas and confirms the universal appeal of American products.

First and foremost, American movies and music, sitcoms and soap operas as well as other cultural commodities all benefit from the inherent economic advantages of being “made in America.” To begin with, the U.S. has the largest and most technologically powerful economy in the world, with a per capita GDP of \$37,600. It is also a competitive market-oriented economy, where business firms and private individuals make most of the decisions, with relatively little interference from governmental bodies. Compared to their counterparts in Western Europe and Japan, U.S. business firms have “greater flexibility in decisions to expand capital plant, lay off surplus workers, and develop new products.”¹⁷

Furthermore, U.S. businesses and firms are at or near the forefront in technological advances, especially in computers among other things. The U.S., along with Britain and Scandinavian countries, are leading the world in the development of the internet. Thus, the U.S. is a center for internet development and traffic of e-commerce, which is proving extremely profitable. The internet, along with the development of satellite-delivered services, is making universal access to American products possible. Both represent examples of how investments in technology are increasing the ability of U.S. products to reach further into foreign markets than ever before.

¹⁷ *World Factbook*, (Central Intelligence Agency, 2003), <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>>. “Cultural, trade, and globalisation.” UNESCO, April 2000, <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/industries/trade/index.shtml>>.

In short, American cultural industries have larger production budgets, strong domestic returns, advanced technology, and greater independence than other cultural industries worldwide. Besides these unique economic advantages, the American cultural industries also benefit from the fact that English is among the most widely spoken languages in the world – a legacy inherited from the former British Empire.

Besides utilizing these overwhelming economic advantages, American products promote universal themes, often relying on sex and violence to generate blockbuster revenues. However, though these are well known features in American media products, especially music and films, such products are reaching out to the broader human desire to simply “enjoy yourself.” Cultural critic Ariel Dorfman, a Chilean exile and ex-patriot brought attention to universal appeal of American cultural products as a result of its self-indulgent message. In his book entitled *The Empire’s Old Clothes*, Dorfman argues that through its cultural products, America has been able “to project a universal category – childhood – onto alien cultures... and to seek in them infantile echoes, the yearning for redemption, innocence, and eternal life that, to one degree or another, are part of the constitution of all human beings.” Dorfman then goes on to illustrate how American culture have “a more ambitious and universal thrust to it, a concept of the child as a common denominator between varying civilizations that appeals to more deep-rooted dissatisfactions in today’s society.”¹⁸ This would also explain why most American international blockbusters have generic, over-simplified plots traditionally found in stories aimed at children.

¹⁸ Dorfman, Ariel. *The Empire’s Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and Other Innocent Heroes Do to Our Minds*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 56.

Meanwhile, the trends in the expansion of U.S. cultural trade reflect, well, business as usual by targeting most receptive segments of population and submitting to the ebbs and flows of market force. A majority of these American “industrial products of fiction” are directed first and foremost to the world’s upper and middle class global consumers, supporting the argument that the cultural trade is more of a profit-driven enterprise than ideological one. Cultural products are also found more in urban areas than rural and in countries that have been able to develop more than say sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁹ Again, the products are following the flow of money and economic development and are less prevalent where demand is low.

In addition, American cultural icons must also adjust to the economic realities in respective locations, proving they are not invincible forces. In fact, there is a possibility that the power and influence of U.S-based media conglomerates and of American cultural products is waning. For example, U.S. recording artists generated 60% of their sales from markets abroad in 1993. That number had dropped to 40% by 1998.²⁰ Similarly, in 2003 a *New York Times* article entitled “U.S. TV Shows Losing Potency Around World” reported that American television shows were increasingly being shifted to “fringe time slots” instead of during primetime hours in abroad markets. (The article attributed this trend to the rise in the development of local programming.)²¹ And in 2002, McDonald’s decided to close more than 175 restaurants in about 10 other countries due to their “under-performance.”

¹⁹ McChesney, (2000), p. 101.

²⁰ Adam Sandler, “U.S. Sounds Lost in Translation,” *Variety*, Mar. 23-29, 1998. as quoted by McChesney, (2000), p. 101.

²¹ Kapner, Suzanne. “U.S. TV Shows Losing Potency Around World.” *New York Times*. 2 Jan. 2003.

Additional evidence supporting the free-market paradigm includes the tendency of U.S.-based transnational corporations to pursue profits over political agendas. In 1997, when Disney produced *Kundun* a film portraying the life of the Dalai Lama, the Chinese government froze Disney's media projects within its country. This move prompted Disney to send none-other-than Henry Kissinger as well as its CEO Michael Eisner to China. Both succeed in finally smoothing over the company's relations with Chinese officials apparently so that Disney can continue to pursue its aspirations to bring its products (including a Disney theme park) to the 1.2 billion people of China.²² Similar censorship has occurred in Rupert Murdoch's News Corporatoin media outlets in China. The entire fiasco illustrates that Disney and other U.S.-based media giants care most about what money their products are making – not about what messages they are conveying.

And finally, bootlegging of CDs and movies and other forms of commercial piracy and counterfeiting are rising worldwide much to the dismay of American distributors. In 2002, counterfeiting along accounted for an estimated 5 to 7 percent of global trade and is growing, according to the International Chamber of Commerce.²³ Such emerging trends are further spreading American products, brands and icons, and thus contributing to the perception of an American cultural invasion. Illicit trade is also undermining the authority and monopoly of corporations and confirms the universal appeal of American products and their profit-oriented purpose. If U.S. cultural imperialism is fueled by the goal of converting the world's masses to advocates of American free-market capitalism, then perhaps the rise in bootlegging and commercial

²² McChesney, (2000), p. 115.

²³ Wilson, Michael. "Two Chinatown Stores Raided in Counterfeit-Goods Sweep." *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 2003.

piracy may be slightly more tolerated. Instead, the U.S. corporations may consider profits lost to the illicit trade in cultural goods as a sacrifice to advance the over-arching political-economic message intended. But this is not the reaction of the distributors, and logically so since their business is first and foremost a profit-driven enterprise. Instead, the media corporations are pressuring governments worldwide to crackdown on illicit trade and enforce international copyright agreements.

IV. Problems with the Dependency Theory

The main problems that arise with the dependency theory pertain to the concepts of a strictly passive audience and claims of cultural homogenization and synchronization. Dependency theorists as well as foreign nationals allege that American pop culture is spawning cultural synchronization and homogenization. Complaints are often aimed at American products themselves and the values and lifestyles they encourage.

But while cultural synchronization and homogenization are occurring to some extent, this trend is neither irresistible nor inevitable. Audiences are exercising control of which aspects of American culture to accept. John Tomlinson points out that American culture, or Western culture in general, does not represent an indivisible package that is simply adopted by local cultures.²⁴ Instead, some aspects of “Western” culture are adopted while others are found irrelevant and are resisted. This idea is further supported by the findings of Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker of the University of Michigan, both who recently conducted empirical tests on the extent of cultural change in societies undergoing modernization and industrialization. Their study produced evidence of both

²⁴ Tomlinson, (1991).

“massive cultural change” and the “persistence of distinctive cultural traditions.”²⁵

Similarly, Hamilton argues that, while capitalism has become virtually a universal way of life, factors within respective civilizations continue to structure the organization of those societies: “What we witness with the development of a global economy is not increasing uniformity, in the form of a universalization of Western culture, but rather the continuation of civilizational diversity through the active reinvention and reincorporation of non-Western civilizational patterns.”²⁶ These studies support free-market theorists’ argument that cultural integration, not dependency, is occurring within societies abroad.

It is also worth mentioning that advanced media, which are becoming widely available in the form of telecommunications, computers, and satellite technology, provide for greater interactions between sender and receiver than has ever before been possible. These developing trends also present a challenge to the idea of a passive audience and a strictly one-way information flow of information.

In addition, such effects of cultural influences are not necessarily irrevocable. There are regions where American ideas, values, and lifestyles were incorporated into a society and then later removed. Collective socio-political movements have sprung up in many societies to counter to Western influences. These movements have “build trenches of resistance on behalf of God, nation, ethnicity, family, or locality”²⁷ and have, at least in some respects, reversed American influences formerly incorporated into their

²⁵ Inglehart, Ronald & Baker, Wayne. “Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values.” *American Sociological Review*, Feb. 2000, Vol. 65, p. 19-51.

²⁶ Hamilton, Gary G. “Civilizations and Organization of Economies.” *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, edited by N.J. Smelse and R. Swedberg. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994. (p. 1984) as quoted by Ingle Hart & Baker, 2000.

²⁷ Castells, Manuel. *The Power of Identity*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), p. 356.

respective societies. Iran comes to mind as the most successful case thus far of society that underwent a process of de-Americanization after the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The assertion that American culture preeminence is creating cultural dependency is also be problematic. While it's true that American products are dominating international markets and are popular among global consumers, this fact does not necessarily translate into cultural dependency. American competition may be pushing local artists out of the marketplace, but this does not mean that local cultural innovation is deadening. Despite American culture's global hegemony, China's film industry in Hong Kong remains vibrant, India's "Bollywood" films are gaining worldwide audiences, and Korean music, film and fashion recently gained immense popularity throughout Asia markets.²⁸ Clearly, other cultures are capable producing world-class cultural commodities as well.

However, while there are weaknesses in aspects of the dependency paradigm, it is important not to marginalize the fact that the capitalist ideology does accompany the spread of American culture. The advancement of the free-market is a priority for the U.S. government (it is even stated as a pillar in the national security strategy), and thus the U.S. government welcomes the expansion and success of the media conglomerates and their products. Past U.S. officials have voiced support for control and dominance in the cultural arena. Director of Kissinger Associates and a former official of the Commerce Department in the Clinton Administration, David Rothkopf wrote an article entitled "In Praise of Cultural Imperialism" in which he declared:

"For the United States, a central objective of an Information Age foreign policy must be to win the battle of the world's information flows, dominating the airwaves as Great Britain once ruled the seas... The

²⁸ 'Korean Wave' piracy hits music industry." *BBC News*. 9 Nov. 2001.

United States dominates this global traffic in information and ideas. American music, American movies, American television, and American software are so dominant, so sought after, and so visible that they are now virtually available literally everywhere on the Earth. They influence the tastes, lives, and aspirations of virtually every nation.”²⁹

With statements like these, it is understandable why capitalist conspiracy and dependency theories exist. But if the spread of American capitalist market laws was, in fact, the driving force behind U.S. cultural imperialism, then logic would suggest that cultural imperialism would be more concentrated in and focused on converting non-Western, less-capitalistic societies. Yet, Canada has suffered from foreign cultural imperialism as well. At one point, 85 percent of all television programs aired in prime time slots by Canadian broadcasters were imported from other countries. To reverse this trend, developed on of the most comprehensive political strategies to counter American cultural influences. The Canadian government has not only imposed quotas on American television and radio programming but has also, since the 1960s, created and funded a number of programs and institutions designed to promote development within their television, film and radio industries. This example is to illustrate that spreading the American capitalism has not been the sole reason behind the phenomenon of American cultural dominance.

V. Reconsidering the Concept of a Cooperative Audience

However, free-market theorists need to reconsider their assertion that audiences are always cooperative agents that choose to consumer American goods. The theory fails to consider the increasingly crucial role children and young adults, not exactly conscious

²⁹ Rothkopf, David. “In Praise of Cultural Imperialism: Effects of Globalization on Culture.” *Foreign Policy*, 22 June 1997.

consumers, are playing in the cultural trade. Children, an untapped market first utilized in post-war America, have become the main targets as well fans of American cultural products. In his *New York Times* bestseller *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser explains the origins of contemporary child marketing strategies in the U.S., with none-other-than McDonald's being among its pioneers:

“The McDonald brothers had aimed for a family crowd, and now Kroc improved and refined their marketing strategy. He'd picked the right moment. America was in the middle of a baby boom; the number of children had soared in the decade after World War II...Kroc understood that how he sold food was just as important as how the food tasted. He liked to tell people that he was really in show business, not the restaurant business. Promoting McDonald's to children was a clever, pragmatic decision. ‘A child who loves out TV commercials,’ Kroc explained, ‘and brings her grandparents to a McDonald's gives us two more customers.’”³⁰

Besides providing “pester power” to sway parents to become customers, the goal of marketing to youngsters is to foster brand loyalty and thus create customers for life. Soon, Kroc added McDonald Playlands, happy-meals, and employed other strategies to reach out to the young customers. And it worked:

“McDonald's soon loomed large in the imagination of toddlers, the intended audience for the ads. The restaurant chain evoked a series of pleasing images in a youngster's mind: bright colors, a playground, a toy, a clown, a drink with a straw, little pieces of food wrapped up like a present. Kroc had succeeded, like his old Red Cross comrade [Walt Disney], at selling something intangible to children, along with their fries.”³¹

³⁰ Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. (New York: Perennial, 2000), p. 41.

³¹ Schlosser, (2000), p. 42

During the last two decades of the 20th century, companies followed McDonald's lead³² and directed their marketing at children, spawning massive research on the preferences and psychology of these "kid kustomers." The 1980s have even been tagged "the decade of the child consumer."³³

The strategic targeting of youngsters in the advertising and marketing world has already proven effective in the U.S. Children's advertising on television, which is the primary medium for reaching kids, became so effective that in 1978 the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) attempted to ban all advertisement on television directed at kids seven years old or young. The head of the Commission, Michael Pertschuk, argued that young children need to be shielded from such advertising, which profits from the child's inability to distinguish between reality and advertisements, thus believing the claims of advertisers. The attempt ultimately failed. Since then, the number of advertisements aimed at children has only increased and children's cable channels have such as Nickelodeon, the Cartoon Network, and the Disney Channel now exist and claim close to 80 percent of the country's young viewing audience.³⁴

Obviously, American companies from fast-food chains to video games distributors to filmmakers have learned how to attract, shape and retain young consumers, from toddlers to teenagers. Logically, when expanding overseas markets, American companies globalized their successful kid-oriented marketing approach – and what has turned out to be very opportune time. The globalization of child-oriented marketing trends coincided with a population surge in many parts of the world, a sort of global baby

³² Disney, toy manufacturers, and breakfast cereal companies were also among the first to direct their marketing toward youngsters.

³³ Schlosser, (2000), p. 43-44.

³⁴ Schlosser, (2002), p. 46.

boom. The world is currently witnessing its “largest-ever young generation” with people between the ages of 15 and 24 numbering more than 1 billion, according to a report published by the United Nations Population Fund. Most of this growth is occurring in developing countries while industrialized nations in Europe, North America as well as Japan actually experiencing slow or virtually no population growth.³⁵ But that’s not all. In the next decade, the world population will continue to grow by approximately 80 million a year, according to the same report. Thus, young populations everywhere are bulging, and an increasing number of them are growing up on a diet of American cultural goods. This is especially true in developing countries of the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Central Asia where the median age of national populations often falls below 25 years, according to data compiled from the CIA’s World Fact Book.³⁶ (For graphs illustrating median age populations by region, refer to the appendix.)

The fact that American cultural products are aimed at younger audiences, a massive demographic world population, poses two major concerns. Firstly, very young audiences are often unable to distinguish between reality and entertainment and advertising claims. Thus, they often do not make conscious choices regarding their consumption habits of cultural commodities. On this issue, critical analysis of Chilean exile and ex-patriot Ariel Dorfman credits American pop culture for shaping people’s minds – and especially the youths. “Industrial products of fiction,” a term Dorfman uses to refer to cultural commodities, “turns them [youths] into competitors, teaches them to see domination as the only alternative to subjection... they [youths] are learning sex

³⁵ “World Population Will Keep Growing,” *New York Times*, 2 Sept. 1998.

³⁶ This information was obtained from the various country profiles available from Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book, which can be accessed at (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>).

roles; perverse and deformed visions of history; how to grow up, adapt and succeed in the world as it presently is.”³⁷ On this last assertion Dorfman discusses at length how superheroes, such as the legendary Lone Ranger, “don’t rebel or even question the laws and the status quo... they just correct the glitch in the system.”³⁸

The fact that kids cannot be considered conscious consumers that can make their own decision is problematic for proponents of the free market paradigm. According to the paradigm, the effects and influence of products are minimal due to the cooperative nature of the audience. They seem to have failed to consider the inability of youngsters worldwide to make critical media choices or have the willpower to resist wanting a Happy Meal, watching Jurassic Park, and wearing Levi jeans.

Another possible problem with this revolutionary market strategy is that it may be widening the natural generation gaps within societies abroad, providing evidence to support dependency theorists’ claims of cultural alienation. With the increase in American cultural influences in recent decades, younger generations are growing up with McDonald’s, Arnold Schwarzenegger and other American icons that are shaping their value systems in this critical stage of development. Older generations are witnessing the “Americanization” among the younger generations, and believe it is threatening the existence of their traditional values and lifestyle. These fears are growing more acute with trends of hyper-commercialism wedging American icons into virtually every sector of society, from massive billboard advertisements to product placement in local films. Hence, this can explain why the number of critics and claims of cultural imperialism have increased despite the soaring popularity of American culture abroad. This may also serve

³⁷ Dorfman, (1983), p. 206.

³⁸ Dorfman, (1983), p. 105.

to explain why American cultural goods are still in high demand despite the fact that U.S. government actions and policies are sparking a rise in anti-American sentiments overseas.

Still, another major problem both dependency and free-market theorists need to consider is how U.S. cultural hegemony is affecting political power within other countries, especially non-democratic ones. Most likely, the popularity of American products is preventing local artists from gaining exposure and making a living. Local artists, authors, film makers and others simply do not have technology or financial resources to compete with U.S. products. And since music, film, and other medium can play critical roles in expressing ideas about political and social issues, the dominance of American culture is preventing thus preventing public discourse to some extent.

Thus, whether intentionally or inadvertently, U.S. cultural products are likely preventing the development of an essential ingredient of democracy – freedom of expression. Furthermore, by preventing expression of new ideas, perhaps the popularity of American culture is inadvertently re-enforcing the political status quo in many countries. This leaves us with the ironic possibility that media and culture produced by and exported from the U.S., the world’s beacon of democracy, could be a reactionary force in many societies abroad.

VI. Further Research

However, the components contributing to perceived cultural imperialism are many, and there is still much research being conducted in this relatively new field. Topics that have largely neglected and require further consideration include how audiences receive, interpret, and use cultural messages as well as the perceived link

between consumption levels and cross-culture effects. The link between the latter issues has been somewhat taken for granted, while empirical research done at the micro-level has not confirmed the assumption. Preliminary research in these and other neglected topics has, thus far, provided few definitive conclusions. Some studies have indicated a strongly eroding cultural effect³⁹ while others have suggested a strongly positive effect on the recipient culture. Other studies have showed little or no effects on the receiving audiences.

With this puzzle crucial to understanding how cultural imperialism may work, I conducted my own research to analyze how the level of exposure to American culture in one country may affect political relations between it and the U.S. First, I selected and operationalized my variables. For the independent variable, I chose the film industry while my dependent variable was the level of political alliance between the U.S. and another country. I chose the audiovisual industry as my independent variable because many often accuse Hollywood of being a common vehicle for the spread of American culture. In addition, with 85% of films shown worldwide originating in Hollywood, it is clear that American films dominate the international audiovisual market.

To measure the independent variable, I compiled data on the audiovisual industry in 27 different countries. More specifically, I looked at what percentage of foreign films imported were American in a given year. This percentage varied from 6.5 to 100 percent. Most of these cinema statistics were available only in five-year intervals since 1970. Thus, in general, I used cinemas statistical data from the following years: 1970, 1975,

³⁹ Barnett, G.A. & McPhail, T.L. "An examination of the relationship of United States and Canadian identity." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. Billington R. Strawbridge, S., Greensides, L., & Fitzsimons, A. (eds) 1980. p. 219-323.

1980, 1985, 1990. At times, some data on a particular year for a particular country was unavailable, but in general I was able to compile data in these areas consistently.

However, the difficulty on obtaining such data limited my cases to 27 countries. A majority of these cases, 17 out of 27 (62.9%), were European states⁴⁰ while there were only three African (Egypt, Morocco, Tanzania) and three Asia (China, Cyprus, India) countries in my study. The other five countries represented Australia, North America (Canada and Mexico), and South American (Cuba).

To complement the data on American film imports, I also computer what percent of each country's film industry was imported. I felt this was an important factor because it reveals whether film imports make up a significant proportion of the national market. Thus, the higher the percentage of films imported, the more influence these foreign films may potentially have on a state's population. On the other hand, if a country has a well-developed local film industry and thus does not import many films, the potential influence foreign films may have on a population is likely to be reduced.

To compute this data, I took the number of foreign film imported in 1995 and divided this number by the total number of films shown in a country, which is the sum of 1) the average of film produced nationally between 1988 and 1999 and 2) the number of films imported in 1995. The end result of this number gave me a rough idea of what percentage of the film market in a given country was made up of imported films. This percentage ranged from 14.38% (in India) to 99.7% (in Cyprus). In my regression analysis, I used this variable to weight the potential influence American films may have on the dependent variable.

⁴⁰ The European states in my sample include: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Switzerland.

Again, my dependent variable was the level of political alliance between the U.S. and another country. Thus, I used a variable and data set developed by international political scientist Bruce Bueno de Mesquita.⁴¹ The variable, referred to as tau_lead, gives a numerical value between 1 and -1, which represents how closely allied a country is with the U.S. by measuring the similarity of foreign policy positions of both countries. A value of 1 represents the strongest alliance possible while a value of -1 represents the weakest.

To determine if there was any relationship between these two variables, American film imports and a country's level of political alliance with the U.S., I computed the change in each variable in five-year intervals starting with 1970 and ending in 1990. I then ran a regression on these data. However, despite accounting for the amount of film imports in general as well as weighting variables that had the unfair advantage of being English-speaking countries, the regression analysis showed very little correlation between the two variables, which is contrary to what I had expected. Thus, more research in the field of audience reception and levels of exposure as well on other topics is needed before academics and politicians alike can understand the complex characteristics and effects of cultural imperialism.

VII. Conclusion: The Need for American Cultural Diplomacy

In conclusion, while the theory of a capitalist conspiracy is a tempting window through which to see cultural imperialism, I believe current research analysis and evidence deems it the weaker argument. The dependency theory relies on the concept of audiences as passive subjects and disregards evidence that U.S. cultural products are

⁴¹ Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce. *The War Trap*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

lacking distinctively American aspects. Instead, American cultural hegemony can be considered more of a consumer culture, spread to produce financial profits first, and capitalist proponents second.

But without fully comprehending how the U.S. media and culture are shaping the values, live styles, and institutions of societies worldwide, the U.S. needs to answer the accusations of cultural imperialism. In his works, Schiller has warned that both “the acknowledgement of and the struggle against cultural imperialism are more necessary than ever.” Thus, the U.S. needs to formulate a coherent policy in the area of cultural policy. Such action is not only needed to counter imperial accusations and cultural critics worldwide but also to reserve the U.S. a credible role in contributing to the worldwide cultural debate and in shaping the future of cultural trade which promises to be a hot topic in the global economic and political arena.

In order to develop effective cultural diplomacy strategies, American policy makers need to have a progressive attitude. The aim of cultural policy must not be to help others resist change but manage it – not avoid challenges but rise to meet them. Thus, asserting defensive protectionist policies should be avoided since it does not directly address the problem of weak domestic cultural industries. Besides, imposing quotas on American products may only fuel commercial piracy. Protectionist measures are being sought to temper American influence in the European Union; however, these policies are not always enforced. Realizing this, the U.S. should not insist on removing existing protectionist measures and honor the GATT and WTO principle of “cultural exception” by which cultural commodities are exemption from GATT and WTO rules. The concept was unofficially adopted based on the understanding that “culture is not like

any other merchandise because it goes beyond the commercial: cultural goods and services convey ideas, values, and ways of life which reflect the plural identities of a country and the creative diversity of its citizens.”⁴²

Meanwhile, the U.S. can play a proactive role in offering alternatives. Alternatives should include encouraging other nations to: provide government assistance to cultural sectors, organize partnerships between private and government sectors, and establish exhibitions at which local cultural producers can promote their work to foreign and domestic audiences. The U.S. government can also help organize and sponsor exchange programs between countries and set up educational workshops to provide professional training in arts such as sound engineering, film making, and acting. The possibilities for such supportive programs are numerous.

In this way, the U.S. has a unique opportunity to become a cultural ambassador. Taking the claims of cultural imperialism seriously and offering measures through which societies worldwide can preserve and express their traditions would likely help improve the U.S.’s tarnished international image. How the U.S. chooses to respond to evidence and claims of cultural imperialism will likely confirm suspicions of American imperial designs or provide evidence of its serious commitment to challenge global grievances. As Edward Said once pointed out, the United States does not want “to be an imperial power like the others it followed, preferring instead the notion of ‘world responsibility’ as a rationale for what it does. Earlier rationales - the Monroe Doctrine, Manifest Destiny, and so forth - lead to ‘world responsibility,’ which corresponds exactly to the growth of

⁴² “Cultural, trade, and globalisation.” UNESCO, April 2000, <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/industries/trade/index.shtml>>.

the United States' global interest after World War II."⁴³ Thus, developing meaningful cultural policies is essential for the U.S. to authenticate its commitment to global cultural diversity and challenge the world's suspicions of the existence of an American imperial agenda.

⁴³ Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 285.

Works Cited

- Ames, Paul. "EC Braces for Clash With U.S. Over Movies." *Associated Press*, 2 Oct. 1993.
- Barnett, G.A. & McPhail, T.L. "An examination of the relationship of United States and Canadian identity." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. Billington R. Strawbridge, S., Greensides, L., & Fitzsimons, A. (eds) 1980. p. 219-323.
- Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce. *The War Trap*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981)
- Casert, Raf. "Quota Issue Sidestepped; EU Approves Reduced Audiovisual Aid Package." *Associated Press*, 21 June 1995.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Power of Identity*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), p. 356.
- "Cultural, trade, and globalisation." UNESCO, April 2000, <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/industries/trade/index.shtml>>.
- Dionne, E.J. Jr. "Cultural Meeting in Paris Sets off Debates." *New York Times*. 21 Feb. 1983.
- Dorfman, Ariel. *The Empire's Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and Other Innocent Heroes Do to Our Minds*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 56, 105, 206.
- Hoskins, C. & Mirus R. "Television fiction made in USA." *Import/Export: international flow of television fiction*. In P Larsen (ed), Paris: UNESCO, 1990, p 86.
- Inglehart, Ronald & Baker, Wayne. "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values." *American Sociological Review*, Feb. 2000, Vol. 65, p. 19-51.

- Kaffsack, Hanns-Jochen. "French rage at American influence." *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 1999.
- Kapner, Suzanne. "U.S. TV Shows Losing Potency Around World." *New York Times*. 2 Jan. 2003.
- "'Korean Wave' piracy hits music industry." *BBC News*. 9 Nov. 2001
- McChesney, Robert W. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. (New York: New Press, 2000), p. 101, 107, 115)
- Rauth, Robert K. "The Myth of Cultural Imperialism." *The Freeman*, a publication of the Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., Nov. 1988, Vol. 38, No. 11.
- Rothkopf, David. "In Praise of Cultural Imperialism: Effects of Globalization on Culture." *Foreign Policy*, 22 June 1997.
- Sandler, Adam. "U.S. Sounds Lost in Translation." *Variety*, 23-29 Mar. 1998.
- Schiller, Herbert I. *Communication and Cultural Domination*. (New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976).
- Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. (New York: Perennial, 2000), p. 41-44, 46.
- Sreberny-Mohammadi, Annabelle. "Media Covers the World," in John Downing, Ali Mohammadi and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990), p. 296-307.
- Tornlinson, John. *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 125.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 285.
- Stokes, Bruce. "Global is Better". *National Journal*. 7 June 2003.

“Views of a Changing World 2003: War with Iraq Further Divides Global Publics”. The
Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 3 June 2003.

White, Livingston A. “Reconsidering cultural imperialism theory”. *Transnational
Broadcasting Studies Archives*, No. 6., Spring/Summer 2001.

www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring01/whiteef.html.

Wilson, Michael. “Two Chinatown Stores Raided in Counterfeit-Goods Sweep.” *New
York Times*, 3 Dec. 2003.

World Factbook, (Central Intelligence Agency, 2003),

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>.

“World Population Will Keep Growing,” *New York Times*, 2 Sept. 1998.

IX. Appendix

(Please see attached graphs)