CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

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Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the importance of cultural imperialism seen as a debate between the imposed acculturation of a population and the embracing of a culture by individuals of their own volition. To what extent a foreign culture is no longer an improvement and becomes a menace to cultural identity? Cultural imperialism is felt in the cultural goods around the world and now the consumer replaces the citizen and all things are translated into commodities. Concepts, products, moral concepts, political views are proliferated by the more powerful civilization, one of the greatest example being the United States, which is usually associated with ideas such as freedom, democracy, human rights, but also McDonaldization, a concept that encompasses a number of aspects ranging from education to tourism.

Keywords: culture, commodity, identity, acculturation

Globalization is according to Ritzer "the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organization of social life on a global scale, and growth of a shared global consciousness."[1]

This is a very wide definition as it encompasses a number of transnational processes. If we refer to the language dominance and to the non existence of a linguistic diversity, we reach a very important subject, that one of cultural imperialism. This concept has been a very prominent one in the late twentieth century. Cultural imperialism opens the discussion that "a global culture is in one way or another liable to be a hegemonic culture."[2] The synonyms for globalization in cultural terms are hybridity and creolization. Friedman underlines the twofold aspects of the transnational process, by stating that "hibridity should be seen as the cultural corollary to economic globalization."[3]

Before starting to discuss about the importance of cultural imperialism and its manifestations, it should be mentioned that cultural hybrids existed also in the past (e.g. blues, jazz), but they were not in the centre of attention. Further on, this problem will be discussed because the role of the Westerners, who are the target consumers of cultural products, should be well understood.

In one way or another, if you want to become modern you have to become Western. This issue brings along another problem, that one of the dominant cultures that threaten to overwhelm other more vulnerable. In fact it is a simple process, a process of domination "of America over Europe, of the "West over the rest" of the world, of the core over the periphery, of the modern world over the fast-disappearing traditional one, of capitalism over more or less everything and everyone."[4]

The cultural imperialism is felt in the cultural goods around the world: from clothes to food, and from film and television to architecture and sports. In the last two decades there has been a change in the relation PRODUCER - CONSUMER. Formerly, the producer was

[1] George Ritzer, The McDonaldization of Society, Thousand Oaks, Pine Forge, California, 1996, p. 72
[2] John Tomlinson, Globalization and Culture, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, p. 79
[3] Jonathan Friedman, The Hybridization of the Roots and the Abhorrence of the Bush in Featherstone, Mike and Lash, Scott (eds.), Spaces of Culture, London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1999, p. 237

[4] John Tomlinson, Globalization and Culture, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, p. 80

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of most importance, while now the focus is on the consumer. Now the consumer replaces the citizen and all things are translated into COMMODITIES.

In the clothing industry, there is an interaction between the producer and the consumer. A few leading fashion houses from Paris, London, Milan and New York give the trend and the rest of the world should follow, keeping in mind two aspects:

- For the expensive, brand products, the aspect counts and specific detail which shows that the product is an original one. Western people are willing to pay extra money just to have the label of a famous fashion house at sight. At the same time, the consumer's pride is that the product he owns is produced on a small scale. This is better explained by Jonathan Friedman, who says that hybridity is "linked to the emergence of new global cultural elite made up of upper - and middle - class Westerners who are the target consumers."[5] At the same time, hybridity is the ideology of the most powerful group, the "attempt to define the cultural state of the world, a reading for the most sophisticated cosmopolitans."[6]
- For the cheap products, the wear resistance is still important. The consumers who buy these kinds of products want to have the brand name too. They know that they have fake products, manufactured in the Far East, in third world countries, but they are happy as long as they are wearing a "brand" product.

The light (textile and shoe) industry in Romania had suffered because of the cheap imports from China. The domestic shoe producers due to the manufacturing costs cannot put on market shoes cheaper than 150-200 RON, while the Chinese products can be found in the shops at smaller prices. Not only the shoe manufacturers have suffered because of these products of dumping prices, but also the related field of shoe repairing. The price for replacing a heel for a lady shoe is equivalent to the price of a new pair of shoes produced in China.

This is a good example of how an economic feature originated in a country (practically across the world) has an impact upon people and factories in another part of the world (theoretically, anywhere in the world).

One of the most essential human needs is food and that is why the global producers have taken advantage of this aspect as much as possible. Many years ago, foreign products were imported especially for the needs of people coming from the same country as the product. For example, in London there still exist, near Oxford Street (near Marble Arch) a street with many food shops where feta cheese was initially sold mainly for the Greek community living in that area. After a while, English people understood that they were dealing with a good and tasty product, so it was imported for the chain of supermarkets, like Sainsbury, British Home Stores and Safeway.

In this way, the product feta lost its locality. At the same time, in all the Balkan Peninsula people are eating a kind of cheese similar to feta, but it is called Bulgarian cheese or "telemea" cheese in Romania.

Likewise, in France in the region called Champagne, a bubble wine was produced which become so popular abroad that today it is produced in many countries and is commonly known as champagne. All other producers have been obliged to find a different name (*sparkling wine*) because champagne is a trade mark of French producers.

[5] Jonathan Friedman, The Hybridization of the Roots and the Abhorrence of the Bush in Featherstone, Mike and Lash, Scott (eds.), Spaces of Culture, London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1999, p. 237
[6] Ibidem

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In the past, if you wanted to eat a dish specific to a certain area, you had to go in a country of that area. Now, this food is coming to you. It is easier to find in London, Chinese, Italian, French restaurants than a restaurant with an English tradition. The same applies to the downtown area of Bucharest; one can find many restaurants with different specific, and only a few with typical Romanian cuisine. If you ask an Englishman why there are not restaurants with local dishes, the answer would be quite amazing. The traditional English food was prepared in large quantities for people who had the same tastes. In a cosmopolitan city like London, it is very hard to find people who share the same tastes or wishes. For the Romanians eating in a Turkish or Greek restaurant either in Romania or abroad, the surprise will be quite big: he will eat like as he does home. Why is that? Because the Romanian cuisine has been largely influenced by the Greek and Turkish ones (e.g. musaca, mititei, sarmale). In Bucharest, as well in many other cities from Europe, you can find many places where you can eat shaorma, kebap, products that were initially destined to the Turkish and Arab population living in the respective cities.

At the same time, nowadays countries are invaded by the international retail groups and supermarket chains like Auchan, Carrefour, Lidl, Cora, Bricostore, Kaufland, where one can find a products from different countries (Lidl, for example, has the Greek week, the Spanish week, etc. when specific items from a particular country can be purchased).

The spread of McDonald's restaurants across the world is a very good example of globalization result and that is way the phenomenon was called McDonalization. The main features of this chain of restaurants are "efficiency, calculability, predictability and control."[7] All these features are in accordance with the request of the modern society, viewed by many as the synonym for the Western society. It is said that in Moscow, in the early 1990's, when the first McDonald's restaurants were opened, people queued outside the shops for more than one hour. One can imagine how many people were there, if one takes into consideration the fact that these restaurants are well known for the quick services. People were eager to be closer to a symbol of American society which was McDonald's. McDonaldization means the diffusion of a certain pattern and it has to do with nothing (as Ritzer underlines) because it can be decontextualized. The advantage of the McDonald's recipes is that one of being easily accepted worldwide with minor changes in a few countries. In India, the hamburgers are made with mutton, instead of beef, because of the local religion. Ritzer considers this case also an example of nothing, because it his opinion this change is just a cosmetic one while the main features remain the same. The same applies to the Romanian case, nowadays one can buy for a specific period of time in McDonald's meatballs, cheese dumplings, hamburgers with pork and horse radish, in an attempt to address more customers. This advertising lasts only for a short period, but this seems to be a way of attracting more customers with a hybrid product. The taste is not the same as for the traditional one, but McDonald's counts on the fact that people will enjoy the association of a great brand to a dish that is specifically Romanian. It's a marketing strategy that appears to be working, at least for the time being. Advocates of tradition and real values are still waiting for the moment when Romanian restaurants will be appreciated for the genuine dishes, and the young public (mostly adolescents and people under 30) will enjoy having a healthier food in a healthier environment.

During the Cold War, Coca-Cola was a symbol of United States of America and it was blamed by the communist media as an equivalent of superficiality. As for the case of McDonald's, Coca-Cola is a symbol of a new, different world. But what happens when the taste is no longer the one that the products were associated with at the beginning?

[7] George Ritzer, The McDonaldization of Society, Thousand Oaks, Pine Forge, California, 1996, p. 82

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Franchising is nowadays the new trend, but at the same time, it alters wittingly or unwittingly the concept, the taste, the public, even if in small imperceptible doses.

Another good example of cultural imperialism is the spread of soaps and telenovelas. Soaps and telenovelas have known a wide spread, being in accordance with some requests of the modern audience:

- each episode does not last longer than one hour; people would rather see two episodes from different soaps than watch a movie that could last sometimes more than two hours; the problem appears when one watches an American soap opera like *The Young and the Restless* (which first aired in 1973 and is still broadcasted today, reaching the fabulous episode 10,415), which seems to be an unending story, especially for the Romanian viewers, where the story was 5 years behind the original US broadcast. A synthesis of the first 4,000 episodes (comprising 18 years which were never aired in Romania) was shown so that the audience could understand the plot.
- the action goes on certain patterns in such a way that viewers foresee the next steps;
- the end stresses always the concept of good prevailing over the evil (how many viewers would watch a telenovela ending in a Shakespearean way?)

In her essay, Madalina Nicolaescu presents a study of the circulation of global images in Romania. The study revealed that the Latin American telenovelas are watched mainly by women with low education who dream about Cinderalla type stories. "The Cinderella, rags-to-riches stories of the Latin American telenovelas provide more venues of identification than the US soaps or even prime time serials. The telenovelas are very much about prospects of social mobility achieved via marriage and which does not involve hard work or any special skills or knowledge."[8]

After the revolution, in Romania appeared a lot of shows, many in accordance with the imported format: "Surprize, surprize", "Din dragoste", "Iarta-ma", "Vocea României", "Românii au talent", "Te cunosc de undeva", "X Factor". These are shows dealing with the modern conceptions of trying to "be authentic". The underlying theme is that one should not cave in to social expectations and one should not ignore one's "voice within".

In Romania, one can find ELLE and Cosmopolitan magazines which are: "structured on the principle of what Friedman has called "glocalization" (Friedman 1995). In this process the local translation of the global is simultaneous with the production of the global and not just subsequent to it."[9] It is noted that the Romanian version of Cosmopolitan is much thinner than the British one. This reduced number of pages is due to the lack of advertisements. Lately, some big companies like Calvin Klein, Yves Saint Laurent, Ralph Laurent became present in Cosmopolitan, because they considered 10 years ago that for that moment the Romanian market was not prepared for their products, i.e. they "did not lie within the readers' financial possibilities."[10] The initial producers' refraining to advertise in Romanian magazines suggested that "consumerism and consumer in Romania were still in its early stages."[11] (idem)

Even architecture can be touched by the signs of cultural imperialism. If between the two world wars, the sky scrapers were only in the USA, today they can be found almost everywhere. If the geophysical conditions of some countries do not permit high buildings, one can find normal constructions made out of steel and glass. Sky scrapers can be found also in Asia (Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea), in Africa (South African Republic, Nigeria), in South America (Brasilia, Venezuela, Columbia). Not even the traditional Europe

[8] Mădălina Nicolaescu, "Global Journals", Fashioning Global Identities, Bucharest, 2001, pp. 164-165
[9] Idem, p. 169
[10] Idem, p. 170
[11] Ibidem

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could avoid this trend. While in some countries the new modern buildings are in close vicinity of traditional brick buildings, in Paris there is a separate district called "La Dϑfense" where these modern buildings are allowed to be constructed.

The Discovery Channel has presented a while ago a documentary concerning the pulling down of a recently built sky scraper, situated in the heart of London, not far from Saint Paul's Cathedral. The reason for the demolition was the discrepancy created by the association of this building with Christopher Wren's masterpiece, as well as with other pieces of fine architecture from the respective area. However, in another part of the English metropolis, Liverpool Street Station, one can find a lot of modern buildings recently constructed.

Football is the most popular sport all over the world and by far the greatest money earner (by the TV transmission rights, advertising rights, tickets, and different kinds of souvenirs). One may call football "la folie" of our times. Football players like Pele, Beckham, Maradona, Hagi, Owen gain more than presidents of commercial corporations and they are better known than scientists, writers and many politicians. Beckham is a good example in this respect. Being talented and handsome, he succeeded in making the introvert Asian build him a full size chocolate statue.

Cultural imperialism no longer sees human beings, but possible customers. And that is why there are gathered together shops, fast-food restaurants, theatres, cinemas in a single vast enterprise that Tomlinson calls "McWorld".

Baudrillard stresses on the fact that: "work, leisure, nature and culture, all previously dispersed, separate, and more or less irreducible activities that produce anxiety and complexity in our real life and in our "anarchic and archaic" cities have finally become mixed, massaged, climate controlled, and domesticated into the simple activity of perpetual shopping. (Baudrillard 1988:34)."[12]

It is known that in the first half of the year 1985, when the ratio between pound and dollar was almost 1:1, the prices in UK became suddenly attractive for the Americans (usually the ratio was 1 pound = 1.67 dollars). Immediately, air lines companies organized charters from New York to London and the Americans came in London to buy from Harrods.

"The activity of shopping itself is now undoubtedly one of the most popular cultural practices in western societies and the "shopping element" is present - structured into - almost any contemporary leisure activity."[13]

Nowadays, all museums, galleries, castles, cathedrals and other points of cultural attractions have before exit a special place where people can find souvenirs of any kind. When souvenirs deal with things from the culturally area visited, they can be considered a reinforcement of the information acquired during the visit. The trouble comes when in those shops appear items with no relation to the visited place. It is also unfitted to have images of masterpieces of architecture, painting and sculpture put on common things (imagine Mona Lisa on a towel, on a pen or on a trinket).

In terms of politics, globalization means a reducing of the importance and values of the nation states. Basically, in order to easily reach international agreement on different subjects, there have been founded supranational institutions, like the European Union, the G8 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, U.K., U.S.A), or even the WTO (the World Trade Organization). EU and U.S.A enjoy a one and half trillion dollar trade and investment. The two represent 50% of global production.

[12] John Tomlinson, Globalization and Culture, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, p. 87
[13] Idem, p. 85

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In his book *European Union between Reality and Virtualty* Octav Bibere asked several rhetoric questions to underline the oldness of the idea of a European identity. "Does the history of Europe really begin with the assault of Troy with the Trojan horse, with Ulysses' long way back home? Or does the politics start in Europe with the polis and the Athenian democracy, with the edict of the Emperor Caracalla, by which all free people living in the Empire received Roman citizenship?"[14]

Continuing Octav Bibere's ideas, it can be said that Steven the Great, the count of Moldavia (the defeater of Mohamed II, who was the Conqueror of Constantinople) had the sense of the European identity when he looked for allies in other European counts (even among those who hardly could be called his friends).

On the other hand, Cezar Birzea underlines that, "the European idea based on identity and on a common cultural patrimony is very old."[15] The idea of a United Europe has appeared at the first Christian Emperors, who even developed a Pan European political project called "Renovatio Imperii". The second project of founding a European Union has been made in the XVI – XVIII centuries and was called "Res publica Christiana", which was considered a spontaneous movement originated in the new idea of seeing Europe as a dominant civilization.

In the XVIII-XIX centuries the idea of European identity reached a new peak and there appeared proposals of collective security in a project called "United States of Europe", launched and supported by the famous French writer Victor Hugo (1795). A project was initiated by the bishop of Saint Pierre and another one by the French philosopher Saint Simon (1814).

In the period between the two World Wars, Europe was very weak, while US has appeared for the first time as a world power. At the same time it became the main supplier of Europe, having the opportunity and necessity to increase its production by 300%. US became the main source for lending money to Europe.

US submitted to Europe a project belonging to President Woodrow Wilson of a Worldwide Order based on two principles:

1. The principle of nationality – meaning self – determination and national sovereignty.
2. The Society of Nations like super – national authority (with the main role reserved to US).

The project remained in the incipient stage. There were also some projects proposed by Europeans. One project called "Europa Communis" has been proposed in 1924 by Coudenhove – Kalergi. A notable proposal was the one of the French politician and Foreign Affair Minister, Aristide Briand in 1930. The project was called the European Federal Union. Aristide Briand was received favorably in Romania and according to Ştefan Delureanu, it has been supported by Iuliu Maniu, a famous politician, chief of a conservative party, who considered that a regional organization form in the frame of a European Federal Union made sense and it was efficient (the region was to include Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Romania and Greece).

Unfortunately Italy and Germany opposed the project and it has not received enough support from the countries of the Little Alliance.

When one speaks now about Western Europe one thinks of a group of friendly countries having common political approach to many key issues of the world. That was not the situation in late 1940s when Germany was seen by many Europeans as the country which provoked the World War II. As French people suffered a lot in that war, French diplomats had a difficult task: if France accepted the position of the American diplomacy

[14] Octav Bibere, Toader, Gabriel Razvan, EU – Between Reality and Virtualty, All Educational, Bucharest, 1999, p. 15

[15] Cezar Birzea, The European Politics and Institutions, Corint, Bucharest, 2001, p. 26

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towards Germany (by supporting reconstruction of Germany) they would hurt the sensitivity of French people remembering the war effects. If they opposed US, the relations with them would suffer.

In the spring of 1950, Robert Schumann – the French Minister of Foreign Affairs came with a proposal of attracting Germany in a form of European cooperation, proposal thought by another French politician, Jean Monnet, but approved by the foreign secretaries of U.K and US.

The first step in the direction of European integration was made by the decision of three neighbour countries: Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg to form a Custom Union called Benelux, aimed to cancel the custom barriers between them and to promote common custom tariffs for the third countries.

In 1948 the European Economic Cooperation Organization has been founded having as the first task to distribute the financial help from US, received under Marshall Plan.

The single market was finally declared complete on 1 January 1993 – and even then the project was not quite finished. The question is why did it take more than 40 years to accomplish it? An appropriate answer would be that it is easier to harmonize customs tariffs than to harmonize taxation. Article 2 of the Treaty of Rome set the following aim for the European Economic Community (EEC): "to promote throughout the Community a harmonious and balanced expansion, an increase in stability, an accelerated raising of the standard of living and closer relations between the states belonging to it."[16] (1957)

To be modern means to be western, as this paper has underlined before. So what the world is facing now can be called the Westernization. A French political economist Serge Latouche in his book The Westernization of the World "presents a particularly forceful indictment of westernization as the "drive towards planetary uniformity" and the "world-wide standardization of lifestyles" (Latouche 1996; xii, 3) and so his position represents a good example of this style of global cultural critique."[17]

It is the planetary uniformity and standardization of lifestyles that each cultural area across the world should fight against. Imagine a world without the French elegance, the English diplomacy, the Italian frankness, the German exactness, the Spanish way of celebration, the Greek heritage, and the American pragmatism. As objective as one might try to be, that world would be, to say the least, plain.

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[17] John Tomlinson, Globalization and Culture, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, p. 89

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