GLOBALISATION:
A THREAT TO AUSTRALIAN CULTURE?

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> ... humanity is installing itself in monoculture: it is preparing to mass-produce culture as if it were beetroot ... (Lévi-Strauss, 1955:37; quoted in English translation in Holton, 1998b:163)

What was for Lévi-Strauss a symbol of cultural homogenisation has paradoxically been elevated to the status of an Australian icon: the beetroot has come to be recognised as the distinguishing ingredient of the classic Australian milkbar hamburger. At the same time, this unassuming vegetable has been implicated in recent debates about globalisation and culture following the launch of the McOz by global fast-food chain McDonald's in 1998 (Dale, 1999:19). For many, the golden arches of McDonald's are the quintessential symbol of all that is bad about globalisation – mass-produced culture and economic domination by multinational corporations. However, the case of the beetroot in the McOz reveals some interesting ambivalences inherent in processes of globalisation.

While sales of the McOz are contributing to the profits of a foreign company, the ingredients for the burger are locally produced and frequently also exported (McDonald's Australia, 2001).[1] Indeed for a short time, the McOz was withdrawn from sale because the company was unable to source enough Australian beetroot; yet within a few months, it was able to arrange for enough local producers to grow beetroot for the

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[1]   Likewise in 1998, Austrian McDonald's patrons were treated to a taste of 'Australian culture' with the launch of the "Ayers Mãc" as part of a limited edition series of burgers representing seven wonders of the world.

McOz to return triumphant (Dale, 1999:20). On the one hand, the purveyors of the McOz have surely contributed to the demise of the traditional Aussie milkbar, which was once the small-business equivalent of the Australian "independence ideal" (Capling *et al*, 1998:117). On the other hand, McDonald's – or Macca's, as it is called in Australia by many a Shazza and Dazza – has delivered a challenge to the charge of unmitigated global homogenisation by promoting products that have a strong cultural resonance for local markets. But now that McDonald's in New Zealand has released its own Kiwi Burger, are we led to conclude that this apparent diversity is nevertheless just bland global uniformity concealed in a different wrapper?

The beetroot illustrates some of the complex ways in which global and national forces interact, intertwining the economic and the cultural, and showing the potentially fine line between the promotion and exploitation of local industry and culture by global markets. Popular debates about globalisation and culture have tended to neglect some of these complexities in favour of caricatured ideological positions, generating the need for an approach that broadens the discussion and questions some of its conventional assumptions. Despite the conjurations of globalisation as a by-word for US-driven capitalist domination, or Australian culture as archetypically white, middle-class and ocker, I will argue that globalisation and culture are multi-centred[2] and heterogeneous in nature. Accordingly, it cannot be assumed either that globalisation is necessarily wholly bad and in need of opposition, nor that Australian culture is necessarily good and thus worth preserving at all costs.

Beginning with an attempt to place globalisation and culture in theoretical and historical perspective, I will then consider how globalisation has interacted with two significant aspects of Australian cultural life: popular culture – including entertainment, sport and other practices of everyday life – and political culture – the values and identities informed by, and informing, our systems of governance. The two of course cannot be kept entirely separate: both play an important role in constituting Australians' collective identities. Nevertheless, there

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2   To continue the vegetable analogy, they are more like rhizomes than trees (Delanty, 2000:84; cf Deleuze and Guattari, 1983).

is a useful working distinction to be made between popular culture as *what we do* (for example play bocce or two-up or both) and political culture as *who we are* (for example Indigenous Australians or global citizens or both).

Globalisation and Culture in Perspective

> Globalization lies at the heart of modern culture; cultural practices lie at the heart of globalization (Tomlinson, 1999:1).

As concepts, globalisation and culture are wide-ranging, interrelated and highly contested. Valiant attempts to conceptualise globalisation, such as

- ... the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa ...
  (Giddens, 1990:64)
- ... the compression of the world into a "single place" ...
  (Robertson, 1992:6), or
- ... a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding ... (Waters, 1995:3),

may never be truly comprehensive, but they indicate an agreement that globalisation involves not only an *objective* intensification in global interactions, but an emerging *consciousness* of the world as a single place (Robertson, 1992:6). It is a process that operates at many levels, including the economic, political, environmental and cultural. Moreover, it overlaps with earlier terms such as Americanisation and Westernisation (Holton, 1998b:163, 166; Waterhouse, 1998:55), while reflecting the fact that, with the growing influence of formerly "peripheral" regions such as Asia and Latin America, the forces involved in transforming the global field are no longer as strongly centred around particular geographical locations.

Economics has arguably become the dominant discourse in debates about globalisation (Delanty, 2000:87), but even though international trade and

finance are undoubtedly an important dimension of globalisation, they should not be seen as the prime mover for all other global processes. Critiques of both orthodox Marxism and liberalism have shown that culture is not merely parasitic on economic structures, but is subject to quasi-autonomous processes of incorporation and resistance that defy purely economic explanation (Holton, 1998b:161, 172). Without wishing to underestimate the seriousness of the consequences of economic globalisation for worldwide inequalities, it will be important to elaborate some of the ways in which cultural globalisation operates on its own terms.

Historical analysis provides further challenges to assumptions about globalisation and culture by undermining claims that globalisation is a recent and inevitably unidirectional phenomenon in contrast to the stability of Australian national identity since time immemorial. Even though the pace of globalisation has undoubtedly intensified with the onset of the modern era, foreign trade, diplomatic relations and intercultural exchange have long been significant features of world events, to the extent that it is feasible to argue that globalisation has been occurring for several millennia (Holton, 1998b:9).[3] On the other hand, the historical peaks, troughs and discontinuities of global expansion suggest that globalisation is not as unstoppable as we are often led to believe.[4] By contrast with globalisation's antiquity, ideas of the nation-state, nationalism and national culture as we understand them are relatively recent phenomena dating back only to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1992).

Globalisation and the nation-state, often considered to be polar opposites, have in fact developed together in a complex historical relationship: the rise of nationalism, for example, was a product of cross-fertilisation across national boundaries (Holton, 1998b:16), while international fora such as the United Nations and Olympic Games have entrenched the role of the nation-state as the basic, if not the only, unit of international relations. For this reason we should be wary of positing the relationship

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3   Some authors argue however that globalisation is inseparable from modernity (eg Tomlinson, 1999:32, following Giddens).

4   *Pace* Federal Treasurer Peter Costello (see Grattan, 2001:6).

between national and global culture as a zero-sum game: one may reinforce the other.

Popular Culture: Cultural Imperialism, Hybridisation and the Limits of Commodification

In recent decades, globalisation has ploughed deep furrows across Australia's cultural landscape. Developments in communication and transportation technologies have allowed for new forms of cultural production, consumption and exchange, while the changing nature of global markets has resulted in the consolidation of media and entertainment ownership, and increased flows of cultural products into and out of Australia. Concerns abound that our leisure time is becoming increasingly commodified and emblazoned with corporate logos, and that the popularity of cultural products originating in the United States signals the demise of Australian culture. However, fears of cultural imperialism often fail to take into account salient aspects of Australia's cultural history, the nature of cultural transmission, and the vitality and breadth of contemporary Australian popular culture.

Australian culture has always been influenced by imported cultural products, and indeed has been largely built on selective adoption of overseas cultural practices.[5] Despite its English origins, cricket is now a more central feature of Australian popular culture than the home-grown game of Australian Rules, which has struggled to expand its following to all States. Even reservations about the recent "Americanisation" of day-night cricket for television consumption in the 1970s have largely faded; indeed these changes have placed cricket in a better position to hold its own against more traditionally American sports such as baseball.[6] The mixed origins of contemporary Australian culture suggest that the dynamic of overseas cultural influence cannot be explained purely in

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5   American influences were already prominent in Australia in the 1850s (Waterhouse, 1998:51).

6   Instead, one of the most pressing dangers to the cultural integrity of the gentleman's game today is arguably an internal one: the spectre of corruption raised by match-fixing allegations.

terms of cultural imperialism, with larger, more established powers prevailing over their younger, apparently more impressionable counterpart.[7]

Recent research into cultural studies also questions the viability of the cultural imperialism theory as a whole. It shows that, despite popular fears that cultural media such as TV have become the new opiate of the masses or a tool of Americanisation, people do not generally absorb culture passively but actively engage in cultural exchange (Storey, 1997:225-8). Cultural transmission involves an interactive process of negotiation, incorporation and resistance that may include, but is not reducible to, market dynamics of supply and demand. Furthermore, there are many other aspects of culture that remain highly resistant to commodification, such as language, personal relationships and religious, ethnic and political affiliations (Tomlinson, 1999:88).

Studies of cross-cultural influence have used terms such as hybridisation and creolisation to describe processes whereby local cultures make imported products their own.[8] Coca-Cola, for example, is considered in many countries to be a native drink, and is believed in some cultures to smooth wrinkles or raise people from the dead (Howes, 1996:6; Tomlinson, 1999:84). Uncritical celebrations of hybridisation may admittedly mask actual power inequalities and relationships of dependency. However, hybridisation may also become a means of confronting inequality, as in the case of Indigenous Australian bands such as the metal/hip-hop group NoKTuRNL, and the Warumpi Band, whose single "Jailanguru Pakarnu" (Out from Jail) was the first rock song to be released in an Aboriginal language (Warumpi Band, 1999). In these ways, the process of hybridisation demonstrates that material origin is not the only indicator of authentic meaning for local cultures.

A further reason for questioning theories of cultural imperialism is the growth of a locally based culture industry in recent decades, paralleled by the willingness of successive governments to countenance measures

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7   The idea of cultural imperialism has come under considerable criticism in recent years (Holton, 1998b:64-5; Tomlinson, 1999:79-80).

8   See for example the work of Homi Bhabha and Jonathan Friedman (Holton, 1998b:178, 179).

to support it (Waterhouse, 1998:47; McCarthy, 1999). The rise of the Australian film industry over the last thirty years, for example, has had a significant impact on Australian cultural consciousness, one that is arguably far greater than a bare comparison between attendance rates for local and overseas films would reflect (Terrill, 2000:314). Local films such as *The Castle* have resonated with Australian audiences by appealing to home values while drawing attention to the foibles of domestic insularity in a broader global context (Siemienowicz, 1999).

Australian popular culture has also thrived by reaching beyond its own territorial boundaries, both through the exporting of products like Foster's beer,[9] and Australian diasporas in London and on the well-worn backpacking trails of Europe. Exporting culture frequently runs the risk of banality and caricature; at worst, it may exploit local cultural resources without providing adequate support to local communities, which is a particular concern for Indigenous Australian art (Janke, 1998:14, 37-39).

However, contact with the world may also bring into relief some previously unnoticed features of Australian culture. Some of the most challenging (if not wholly accurate) insights into Australian culture have been provided by tourists such as Bruce Chatwin and D.H. Lawrence, while Australian émigrés have also played an important role in contributing to a sophisticated understanding of Australia. Indigenous Australian photographer Tracey Moffatt, like author Peter Carey now based in New York, has produced work that has strong Australian and global resonances. Her most recent series of stills from TV footage, entitled *Fourth*, captures the anguish of sports people who had just lost their events at the Sydney Olympics (Webb, 2001). Against the backdrop of Cathy Freeman's athletic success and its implications for the perceptions and identities of Indigenous Australians, Moffatt's work is a call to remember the many others both nationally and globally who have lost far more than a sporting event.

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9   Which seems to be drunk everywhere but in Australia, but has nevertheless retained its iconic status.

Political Culture: Historical Globalisation, Multiculturalism and Transnational Identities

Globalisation has been characterised as a threat to Australia's political culture on a number of fronts. In particular, claims are frequently made that incursions of international organisations upon national sovereignty and the effects of large-scale migration on social cohesion are restricting the ability of the Australian polity to uphold its own fundamental values and determine its collective identity (see for example Strachan, 1998). Although there is little doubt that the changes that have taken place in international governance and migration patterns since the Second World War have had a profound effect on Australian demographics and politics, it is important to consider them in a wider evaluative framework and a broader historical context.

While many of the concerns raised about the effects on our political culture of international engagement have some legitimate basis – the entrenchment of economic rationalism in government as a result of international financial pressures is one important example (Capling *et al*, 1998:52-4) – some of the more positive changes to Australian political culture as a result of globalisation have been overlooked. These include greater recognition of cultural diversity in public life and increased public support for humanitarian issues through the local presence of international non-government organisations like Amnesty International and Oxfam International.

Recent changes may have been considerable, but it is often forgotten that Australia is a country whose cultural identity has, from the very beginnings of white settlement, been formed in the midst of global forces (Holton, 1998a:198; Irving, 2001:47-55). Ever since the tendrils of the British empire grasped Australian shores, the culture that has developed in Australia has been deeply coloured by globalisation through its ties with Britain and the migrant consciousness of its settlers – as much because of as in spite of the country's early geographical isolation. On the other hand, the effects of eighteenth-century globalisation have proved devastating for Indigenous Australian cultures, with the genocide of whole peoples and the repression of traditional ways of living (Reynolds, 1987).

We forget our globalised past at our own peril. By focusing resistance on fears of cultural imperialism and Coca-Colonisation, it is easy to suppress the fact that mainstream Australian culture owes its existence to what is arguably a far more destructive program of imperialism, and to divert attention from the pressing need for reconciliation at many levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Equally destructive are attempts to return to an idealised and selectively imagined past in order to reclaim a pristine form of Australian culture, when in fact many of globalisation's historical effects are irreversible and are often vital features of our cultural lives.

If we cannot avoid critical engagement with the ways in which the history of globalisation has shaped our culture, nor can we fail to recognise the opportunities that contemporary processes of globalisation present for new configurations of both Australian and transnational identities.

Intensive international engagement and high levels of migration will almost certainly continue to play a significant role in Australian politics, but to see these processes as signs of the inevitable death of the nation-state and national identity is misguided. The complex interdependencies between international trade and international organisations on the one hand, and the nation-state on the other, suggest that global processes may change the role of the nation-state, but they are not making it irrelevant (Holton, 1998b:93-101; Tomlinson, 1999:102). Although the historically 'naturalised' linkage between nation (as a cultural community) and state (as a political community) has been strained as a result of globalisation and subversive nationalist resistance to it (Delanty, 2000:94-5; Tomlinson, 1999:104), the relationship between the two is likely to remain important. The recent introduction of compulsory civics education in schools, for example, is a positive counter-trend to the depoliticisation of national belonging through sport (Magdalinski, 2000:312), and an indication of a renewed awareness that common cultural understandings and effective democratic participation go hand in hand.

If the mutually reinforcing effect of political and cultural community applies at a national level, it is surely also relevant at a transnational level. At least since Kant's exposition of a cosmopolitan ideal only a

few years after white Australian settlement, visions of a global political culture and global citizenship have been profoundly influential (Delanty, 2000:55-6). The limited success of institutions such as the United Nations may have provided little cause for untrammeled optimism about a global polity, but it has brought that ideal a few steps closer. Democratic reform of the United Nations may contribute to a sense of global citizenship,[10] but such proposals for change in turn are only likely to be adopted when a stronger awareness of the cultural ties that bind humanity together – founded perhaps on a greater willingness to co-operate on global problems at a local level, and a shared respect for human rights – has developed.

Whatever the possibilities for reform, the development of a global polity is unlikely to make national identity obsolete, since the time-bound, historically rich and particularised features of national culture provide a sense of meaning and security that is impossible to replicate at a global level (Smith, 2000:239-47). Conversely, global and national culture may be mutually reinforcing: for example, the popular movement towards a global culture of human rights may reinforce Australian identity if it is paralleled by an informed, inclusive national debate about a Constitutional bill of rights, which will ultimately make our founding document more representative of and responsive to our shared values (Williams, 1999:23).

The potential for reciprocal reinforcement is also apparent in the process of building regional identities:

We can only play a part in [the region] if we go to the world as one nation, as a nation united and not a nation in any way divided. That is why Australians need to be clear about their identity and proud of it. That is why you can't go hobbling to the world saying: "Please put us in the big race, but by the way our indigenes don't have a real part of it and by the way, we are still borrowing the monarchy of another country." (Paul Keating, then Australian Prime Minister, quoted in Gordon, 1994; see also Wiseman, 1998:101)

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10   Such as those put forward by David Held, who proposes a people's assembly for the United Nations as a companion to the state-centred General Assembly (Held, 1995).

Regrettably, the change of federal government and the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s effectively hobbled efforts to negotiate constructively our cultural ties in the region (Castles, 1999: 32). Despite the cultural stalemate, our political role in the region has been re-asserted by our involvement in East Timor following the 1999 referendum, but the most enduring cultural legacy of our intervention may not necessarily be improved regional understanding about shared values,[11] but a renewed introversion back to the ANZAC myth as a basis for national pride.

Globalisation may also prove to be an asset to Indigenous Australian political culture through the formation of bonds with other Indigenous peoples worldwide. Indigenous internationalism has seen many positive developments over the last twenty-five years, most recently with the establishment of a Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues in the United Nations system (Pritchard, 1999:5). Learning from the experiences of other Indigenous peoples, such as the Inuit in Canada who have successfully negotiated recognition of their political and cultural entitlements, can provide valuable models for advancing the process of reconciliation.

Conclusion

Globalisation has produced a mixed harvest for Australian culture. The nation's popular and political cultures have been transformed by global forces both old and new, but in spite of Lévi-Strauss's fears that we are descending into monocultural vegetation, the diversity and vitality of Australian culture are arguably as great as they ever have been. Like education, globalisation may burden us with the awareness of new problems, but it also broadens the pool of resources that we have at our disposal to deal with them.

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11   Our willingness to criticise the human rights standards of other countries in the region while remaining blasé about our own involvement with UN human rights bodies is evidence of this.

Australian culture is not simply being towed down a one-way street to the global junkyard. Globalisation and national culture are involved in a two-way process where one frequently reinforces the other, whether through the hybridisation of popular culture or the promotion of human rights.

Likewise, there are features of national culture that will persist despite global pressures, whether because of their resistance to commodification or their unique ability to provide a meaningful sense of collective identity. Globalisation may have bleached some of the colour from our national garb, but the unmistakable purple streak – not so much aristocratic as egalitarian – remains.

Editors Note: The Wentworth Medal is awarded annually by the University of Sydney to the best essay on a specified topic. This essay by Jonathan Pickering was adjudged the winner in 2001.

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