Evaluate the debate between those who think that globalisation leads to homogenisation (including 'McDonaldization') and those who claim that it fosters increased cultural differentiation (what some call 'Balkanization')

The culture debate in globalisation represents an attempt to make sense of present phenomena in the world and ascertain whether the trends described as globalisation are resulting in differing peoples' culture becoming convergent or divergent. This essay assesses the range of interpretations on this question. First some definitions must be established. Following David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton in their *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, culture will be approached as "a lived and creative experience for individuals as well as a body of artefacts, texts and objects"[1]. Although the aspect of globalisation most pertinent to this discussion will concern the "movement of objects, signs and people across regions and intercontinental space"[2] (hereafter: cultural globalisation), this will be situated within the wider definition of trends referred to as globalisation: "the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life"[3].

[1] David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.329
[2] Held (1999), ibidem.
[3] ibid., p.2

George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization Thesis* presents an ostensibly bleak view. The lower classes – "are the ones who are most likely to go to McDonaldized schools, live in inexpensive, mass-produced tract houses and work in McDonaldized jobs"[4]. In some ways, Ritzer's fear seems to represent a fear of globalisation as the spread of US mass culture:

> The emphasis on buying large numbers of easily replaced things leaves us surrounded by poor quality goods that do not function well and that fall apart quickly. Since we can more easily, acquire and reacquire, many of the things that we desire, we are left with a cynical and blasé attitude toward the world. The scoring systems relied upon by credit card firms reduce all of us to a single number. Our fundamental character means little and that contributes to the expansion of a flat, dull, characterless society.[5]

Ritzer is describing what he sees as a logical consequence of economic forces and business trends towards rationalization. McDonaldization involves "an increase in efficiency, predictability, calculability and control through the substitution of non-human for human technology"[6]. The dystopian consequence is referred to as a consequence of the inherent irrationalities of this rationalization and it permeates culture so deeply that it can sap workers of their autonomy as individuals by scripting working hours behaviour and speech[7] – even as it mystifies them into believing themselves to be happy[8]. Curiously, Ritzer limits the potential scope of his thesis, since this otherwise all-pervasive force apparently "constitutes no threat to indigenous culture. China, for example, is not going

[4] George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization Thesis* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p.68
[5] Ritzer (1998), p.113
[6] ib., p.vii
[7] ib., p.64
[8] ib., p.67

to see its culture radically altered by the invasion of McDonaldized systems"[9]. I have introduced Ritzer in the cultural homogenization camp based on what I regard as the vector of his thesis.

Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton divide attitudes to globalisation into three categories – the hyperglobalists, the sceptics and the transformationalists[10]. *Global Transformations* then goes on to describe a position on cultural globalisation which argues that whilst there is a great deal of evidence to say that cultural globalisation largely and increasingly involves Western and predominantly US domination of cultural production; conversely, consumption means different things at the local level.

Simultaneous with a spread of the infrastructure required to produce, transmit, and receive cultural products such as television programmes, there has been a strengthening and consolidation of the electronic, linguistic and corporate structures used to disseminate them[11] such that: 35 years after the first dedicated transatlantic telephone cable was laid in 1956[12], 200 satellites were in operation[13]; by 1996, approximately 80% of the world's electronically encoded information was thought to be in English[14]; and approximately 20-30 very large MultiNational Corporations (MNCs) presently dominate

[9] ib., p.183
[10] Held (1999), p.10
[11] ibid., p.370
[12] ib., p.342
[13] ib., p.343
[14] ib., p.345

the global markets for entertainment, news, television – all of them based in OECD countries and the majority of them in the US. Tourism has also vastly increased to become the largest single industry in the world[15]. The important caveat behind these intensifying flows is that they are very uneven. Held *et alii* point out that for every OECD country member's 36.6 minutes of international phone call usage in 1997, each person in sub-Saharan Africa made on average one minute of international calls per year[16]. A quarter of international calls were made by the US[17]. In the early 1970s, the US was exporting three times more television programming hours than the next three largest exporters combined[18]. It seems that cultural globalisation is happening in a tiered way, but this is not a centre/periphery model of stratification by nations.

Held *et alii* are prepared to grant only that, "within the West there has been some degree of homogenization of mass cultural consumption, particularly among the young, and that it is spreading to the more affluent strata of the developing world, especially in East Asia and Latin America"[19]. They insist however that the consumption of these internationally homogenised cultural products is locally differentiated: "The cultural context of production and transmission must always in the end encounter an already

[15] ib., p.360
[16] ib., p.344
[17] ib.
[18] ib., p.359
[19] ib., p373

existing frame of reference in the eyes of the consumer or receiver"[20].

In *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Benjamin Barber describes two forces which coexist in a dialectical relationship. He uses the word "Jihad" to mean "militant … dogmatic and violent particularism"[21] and depicts this as in some ways arising out of the circumstances of globalisation ("McWorld") thus: "What ends as Jihad may begin as a simple search for a local identity, some set of common personal attributes to hold out against the numbing and neutering uniformities of industrial modernization and the colonizing culture of McWorld"[22]. In this somewhat disingenuous analysis, Barber gives these monolithic categories a personified agency but is at least able to manipulate a less crude dichotomy than his compatriot Samuel Huntington.

Barber writes that whilst "Jihad not only revolts against but abets McWorld"[23] the two do not necessarily bring about a dialectical progression towards a higher truth that comprehends them both since they share in common only that "Each eschews civil society and belittles democratic citizenship, neither seeks alternative democratic institutions"[24]. Yet, having said this, Barber expresses his view that "the forces of McWorld are the forces underlying the slow certain thrust of Western civilization and as

[20] ibid., p.374
[21] Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (London: Corgi Books, 2003); cited here from *The Globalization Reader*, ed. Frank J. Lechner and John Boli (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.24
[22] ib., p.24
[23] ib., p.22
[24] ib., p.23

such may be unstoppable"[25]; and he predicts that "McWorld's homogenization is likely to establish a macropeace"[26] after the multimicrowars of Jihad are over.

Samuel Huntington can objectively be accused of essentialism since when he is not resorting to the puerile dichotomy of "The West versus the Rest", his preferred categories are "civilisations" such as the Western, the Confucian, the Japanese, the Islamic and the Latin American. These categories are Huntington's units of analysis – he implies that they are identifiable by choosing them and then goes on to argue that they are distinct, thereby implying that they are internally consistent. He argues that "differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic … These differences are the product of centuries"[27]. Critically for the homogenisation thesis, it is for this reason that he does not believe that such differences will soon disappear. "This centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline"[28] he suggests.

Huntington foresees balkanisation and conflict as inevitable because intrinsic cultural values are opposed to each other in a world which is metaphorically becoming "smaller"[29] – where interactions are increasing. One is entitled to ask: why should such interactions not result in greater homogenisation? Huntington allows that some states can

[25] ib., p.26
[26] ib.
[27] Samuel Phillips Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no.3, 1993; cited here from *The Globalization Reader*, ed. Frank J. Lechner and John Boli (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.28
[28] Lechner (2000), p.31
[29] ibid., p.28

chose to join the bandwagon of the West and "its values and institutions"[30]. However, other states choose isolation at a high cost to themselves, and still others have been attempting to modernise without Westernising[31]. Since "Western civilisation is both Western and modern" and "Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations" this reasoning makes it incumbent on other civilisations to adopt our culture if they want to leave the ranks of the "generally less advanced economically"[32] or the politically unstable[33]. But, as noted, they cannot easily change their ways. Instead, it is possible that they will resent the West's military and economic predominance[34].

The clash of civilisations ensues and hence so does continued cultural divergence. It is perhaps prudent to be suspicious of such a line of reasoning as Huntington's since its leitmotif – to contrast the fundamental superiority of the audience's culture and civilisation with the failure of other races to be powerful – makes its social constructions more likely to be appealing to ingroup readers.

To conclude, if we are to admit that globalisation is to some extent taking place – and the writers examined have all acknowledged this – then it must follow that commonalities are increasing as "interconnectedness" and the global spread of cultural

[30] ib., p.33
[31] ib.
[32] ib., p.31
[33] ib.
[34] ib., p.32

practices, products, institutions and signs increases[35]. However, it is not inevitable that this intensifying global cultural flow should lead to global cultural homogeneity for the following reasons. Firstly, the processes of globalisation are happening in an uneven and stratified way; secondly, these institutions and cultural products are modified and consumed in semiotically different ways locally; thirdly, because as Barber implies, groups can react against it and there can be collective action and economic benefits to differentiation; and finally because the "colonizing culture of McWorld" [36] – unlike the literal colonising cultures of the 19th and 20th centuries – is not in the business of imagining "alternative centres of political identity and legitimacy"[37].

[35] *The Globalization Reader* (2000), p.2
[36] ib., p.24
[37] Held (1999), p.374

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