



Roundtable: “Cultural Transfer or Cultural Imperialism?” (roundtable discussion), *Diplomatic History*, Volume 24, Issue 3 (Summer 2000).

- [Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “Shame on U.S.? Academics, Cultural Transfer, and the Cold War: A Critical Review”](#)
- [Richard Pells, “Commentary: Who’s Afraid of Steven Spielberg?”](#)
- [Bruce Kurlick, “Commentary: The Future of Cultural Imperialism”](#)
- [Richard Kuisel, “Commentary: Americanization for Historians”](#)
- [John W. Dower, “Commentary: ‘Culture,’ Theory, and Practice in U.S.-Japan Relations”](#)

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I found reading Jessica Gienow-Hecht’s article and the various commentaries on it to be quite stimulating. The subject of cultural transfers internationally is a difficult but important topic for scholars to deal with, and if proper precautions are taken, her article does much to set the stage for what should be an increasingly fruitful future literature by providing a useful summary of how thinking on the matter has changed with time.

Yet despite my pleasure in considering the topic, I was struck by what seems to me to be the failure of any of the writers, except perhaps Richard Kuisel, to make the most important point possible about the subject at hand: that political power matters fundamentally for the process of cultural transfers. To be sure, Gienow-Hecht points out that the first two waves of writers on the topic appreciated the reality of American power behind cultural transfers of the Cold War period. However, she then moves on to the third, post-Cold War school and appears to conclude that the tone of the debate has been raised, for analysis now stresses such factors as 1) the manipulative resistance of weaker peoples to cultural imperialism; 2) the global rather than national forces behind cultural transfers; and 3) the multiplicity of forces and consequences behind cultural changes making impossible any easy generalization about these processes themselves.

At first reading, Gienow-Hecht’s implicit argument favoring the most recent analyses of cultural transfers may seem to make sense. It is easy enough to see the gaping holes in the pro- and anti-cultural imperialist arguments of the 1940s through 1970s. It is reassuring to believe that there is progress in scholarly debates as arguments become more complex and less resonant with the political passions of the times. Still, whatever the shortcomings of the first two waves of cultural transfer thinkers, these earlier writers understood something that most of a later generation has lost sight of, to the detriment of their scholarship: that America’s presence in the world since 1945, or that the history of Western development’s impact on global relations over a longer time period, has had a distinctive character to it that profoundly challenges and remakes the ways of weaker peoples--from their family structures to their artistic endeavors to their economic organization and to their political values and institutions. To omit this basic fact from the analysis, as Gienow-Hecht approvingly implies the current generation of writers typically does,

is to fail to analyze the chief variable determining the character of cultural transfers over the last sixty years.

While Gienow-Hecht is implicit in making this mistake (though she calls her essay a “Critical Review” it is nothing of the kind as her own position is nowhere clearly stated), her commentators are more explicit. So Professor Richard Pells assures us that “Americanization” as an international phenomenon “may be exaggerated.” He continues that in his book *Not Like Us*, he recognized that “the sights and sounds of American mass culture have radiated throughout the world. But I argued that their impact is superficial and more limited than most people assume. The presence of American movies, blue jeans, and hamburgers has not, it seems to me, substantially changed the political institutions and social mores of other countries” (497).

But doesn’t Pells’ finding depend on what we mean by “culture?” Pells never tells us what he means by the term, but Gienow-Hecht follows Akira Iriye and defines it as “a shared system of beliefs, artifacts, ideology, customs and a way of life” (465n). If championing such things as liberal constitutional democracy, a definition of human rights that includes equality for women and ethnic and religious minorities, and the liberalization of economic institutions constitutes “culture”--and it seems to me that Iriye’s definition mandates that they do--then Pells is obviously quite mistaken to single out mass consumer items as the appropriate measurement of cultural change due to American power. And he compounds his mistake--again based on his disregard for power--with the fatuous observation that Americans are as likely to adopt foreign cultural imports as foreigners are to adopt ours (498).

By contrast, for a brief moment Professor Bruce Kuklick’s essay seems to assert the centrality of power. He criticizes words like “modernization” and “globalization” as the motive forces for cultural transfers, declaring that such “categories of analysis lack much of a bite; they are toothless and win our approbation at the cost of conveying any information that might be uncomfortable” (507). But unfortunately, Kuklick quickly demolishes his own point by hoping we will “think ourselves out of the political” when we concern ourselves with the sources of cultural transfers (508). The concerns Kuklick then brings up--religion and the outward orientation of some cultures versus the inward orientation of others--are certainly valid enough concerns, but to rule out the political as he so cavalierly does is surely a grave error, for it means that he will be unable to comprehend these grand terms of “modernization” and “globalization” in the only way they can be justly approached--as the products of a certain form of civilization that is quite obviously Western and American.

Nor is Professor John Dower’s commentary any help. Although the evidence he provides about Japan demonstrates quite a bit of American cultural penetration, to the extent he thinks theoretically (and he denounces “the poverty of grand theory” 526), Dower tells us that he favors “‘poststructural approaches’ that have been attentive to irony, complexity, contradiction and delusions that accompany Eurocentrism and the peculiar parochialism of American style ethnocentrism” (526). Apparently Dower is unaware of the “irony” that the “complexity” of his own historical evidence does to his theoretical position.

The only commentator in this parade of distinguished professors to come anywhere near the mark is Professor Richard Kuisel. He opens his essay quite rightly stating that for him

“Americanization remains the operative concept.” Before proceeding to an enlightening remark on the many “Americas” that have been exported, he writes that culture transfers, “may be a two-way street, but most of the traffic has been heading in one direction--from the United States. It is a mistake to suggest any kind of parity between, for example, the Americanization of Europe and the Europeanization of America” (510).

Yet even Kuisel nods. He argues that “the proper object of historical investigation should be the particular, not the general” (512). But why? He himself admits that “by building from the particular we can reach the general,” but we must eventually get there--the general is the goal. What, then, is the general? Kuisel’s own examples risk leaving us with the particular and hence without a means of seeing the forest for the trees. Such a danger is made manifest when Kuisel trips all over himself declaring in a phrase I challenge anyone to explicate usefully for later research: “It may be useful to conceptualize Americanization as a stage of globalization--one in which for a century or so there was strong overlap and mutual reinforcement. But it seems that globalization preceded Americanization and may succeed it and that the two are not congruent...A future generation may find that globalization superseded Americanization at the end of the twentieth century” (515).

My bottom line is that to the extent these essays are indicative of what the Academy is thinking, a new day for broad-based cultural historiography may not yet be dawning. What all of these essays have in common is their inability to appreciate the centrality of political power in the discussion of cultural transfers (although Kuisel makes a start); to be even modestly compelling theoretically; or to see history in any broad sweep whatsoever. Woe to those who follow in the footsteps of this series of articles--graduate students, beware--for implicitly their false promise is that the road ahead is now clear.

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