CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

Cultural imperialism occurs when one community imposes or exports various aspects of its own way of life onto another community. The cultural part of the term refers to local customs, traditions, religion, language, social and moral norms, and so on—features of a way of life that are distinct from, though often closely related to, the economic and political systems that shape a community. The imperialism part of the term indicates that the imposing community forcefully extends the authority of its way of life over another population by either transforming or replacing aspects of the target population's culture. That is, cultural imperialism does not typically refer to occasions when a population voluntarily appropriates aspects of another culture into its own. Rather, the term usually designates instances of forced acculturation of a subject population. Today, issues of cultural imperialism in business arise most commonly in the context of international business and globalization.
A Brief History of Cultural Imperialism

The Ancient World

While the term cultural imperialism did not emerge in scholarly or popular discourse until the 1960s, the phenomenon has a long record. Historically, practices of cultural imperialism have almost always been linked with military intervention and conquest. The rise and spread of the Roman Empire provides some of the earliest examples of cultural imperialism in the history of Western civilization and highlights both negative and positive aspects of the phenomenon. In an effort to assimilate the Etruscan people into Roman culture, the Romans replaced the Etruscan language with Latin, which led to the demise and virtual extinction of that language and many other aspects of Etruscan civilization. Rome spent the next several centuries expanding its empire, culminating in a period known as the Pax Romana. During this time, through a unified legal system, technological developments, and a well-established infrastructure, the Romans secured a fairly long period of relative peace and stability among previously war-torn territories. However, this peace was secured, in part, by the forced acculturation of the culturally diverse populations Rome had conquered.

Cultural Imperialism and Colonization

During the modern period, cultural imperialism became one of the primary instruments of colonization. Colonization is the forced extension of a nation's authority over people outside its own boundaries to expand economic domination over their labor force and resources and political control of their territory. While colonization was almost always initiated by some kind of military intervention, its full effects were achieved through practices of cultural imperialism. Fueled by a belief in the superiority of their own way of life, colonizers used law, education, and/or military force to impose various aspects of their own culture onto the target population. Motivated, in part, by a desire to purge local populations of allegedly barbaric, uncivilized customs and mores, colonizers also knew that the best way to mitigate resistance by the colonized was to eradicate as far as possible all traces of the former way of life.

One of the clearest examples of the forced acculturation of a colonized population was the Spanish influence in Latin America, beginning with the conquest of the Aztec empire by Hernan Cortes during the early 16th century. After securing their physical presence in the region, the Spanish suppressed Mesoamerican culture, forbidding the Indians to learn and transmit their culture while simultaneously requiring them to read and write Spanish and convert to Christianity. This behavior was certainly not unique to the Spanish; other examples include the British influence in India and the Dutch and French presence in the Caribbean. Today, charges of cultural imperialism often still carry this legacy of association with the historical experience of colonization.

Contemporary Understandings

During the 20th century, cultural imperialism was no longer so closely linked with military intervention but rather with the exertion of economic and political influence by some more powerful nations such as Russia and the United States on less powerful countries. Many observers view Russia's forceful attempts during the Soviet period to impose communism on neighboring countries as a form of cultural imperialism. More recently, however, charges of cultural imperialism have been aimed primarily at the United States. Critics allege that imperial control is now being sought economically by creating a demand for American goods and services in other parts of the world through aggressive marketing. This "Americanization" of other cultures occurs when the mass exportation of American films, music, clothing, and food into other countries threatens to replace local products and to alter or extinguish features of the traditional way of life. Some countries have attempted to thwart this cultural threat through various kinds of legal action. For example, during the 1950s, France attempted to ban the sale of Coca-Cola and more recently McDonald's, and Canada has required that a portion of all radio air time must be devoted to Canadian music and subject matter.

Cultural Imperialism and Business

Imperialism Versus Relativism

Issues of cultural imperialism in business arise most obviously in the context of international business, in particular regarding business ethics in an international setting. Companies operating in foreign countries often experience significant tensions between respecting cultural differences, maintaining a sense of integrity to their own moral standards, and successfully conducting business. How should companies
conduct themselves when the moral values and social norms of the home country seem to conflict with, and especially when they appear higher than, the prevailing moral and social norms of the host country?

One possible response to this problem is a strict cultural imperialist stance, which contends that the home country’s moral and social norms are absolute and ought to be extended to all countries within which a company does business. According to the imperialist, when values clash a company ought to follow its own standards in all contexts without any consideration of the host country’s moral, social, and/or legal codes. One strength of this approach is its emphasis on maintaining integrity to a company’s own code of ethics, especially in cases where the moral standards of the host country seem lower than those of the home country and when a company might benefit financially from following these norms. For example, the strict imperialist would demand that if conducting business in a county with a record of gross human rights violations, a U.S.-based company should maintain and extend Western liberal values that aim to protect the basic rights of all human beings, even if doing so would compromise the bottom line. The imperialist stance acknowledges that commitment to one’s own moral standards is important.

However, the paternalism implicit in an imperialist stance clashes with the fairly widespread view that we ought to respect cultural differences, at least to some degree. Moreover, critics also point out that an imperialist stance violates a community’s right to self-determination and can have disastrous consequences. For example, in his discussion of the imperialist stance, Thomas Donaldson considers a case when members of a U.S. company operating in China caught an employee stealing. Following company policy on stealing the company turned the employee over to the legal authorities, which in this context resulted in the employee’s execution.

At the opposite extreme in response to questions about how companies ought to behave in an international setting is the relativist stance. In contrast to the imperialist, the relativist contends that no way of life is any better than any other; “our” moral norms are simply different, not better than “theirs.” The relativist argues that when practicing business in a foreign country companies should simply follow the host country’s moral, social, and legal codes. While the relativist stance avoids the imperialist problem of unfairly imposing “our” standards on others, critics argue that relativism is unacceptable because it allows or may even require a company to engage in or support practices that are harmful to members of the host country. For example, Donaldson discusses a case of a group of investors who decided to restore the SS United States, a former luxury cruise ship. Prior to the restoration, the asbestos lining of the ship had to be removed. While a U.S.-based company proposed to do the work at $100 million, a Ukrainian company bid for the job at less than $2 million, which they were able to do because of significantly lower health and safety standards in that country. A relativist would allow investors to accept the Ukrainian company’s bid without any consideration of the potential harms to workers there. Yet critics of this approach argue that while a country has the right to develop its own health and safety standards, if those standards fail to adequately protect workers from serious risks, then companies should object.

**Beyond Imperialism and Relativism**

While the strict imperialist fails to respect cultural differences, the relativist fails to oppose gross injustice. Most theorists agree that the correct approach is somewhere in between these two stances. To mediate between cultural imperialism and relativism when values clash, companies need to be able to differentiate between practices that are merely different and practices that are morally wrong and intolerable. Companies should balance respect for cultural differences with a commitment to maintaining a certain moral minimum. According to Donaldson, we can construct a moral minimum by noticing a set of core values found in nearly all cultures, such as reciprocity, respect for human dignity, a decent standard of living, and so on. Collectively, these overlapping values form a moral threshold that imposes limits on the extent to which companies ought to respect cultural differences. If the host country’s moral and social standards violate this moral minimum, a company should not simply capitulate to a relativist stance but is obligated to object.

Determining whether values and practices of another culture are simply different or morally intolerable is often difficult. Most actions exist in what Donaldson and Thomas Dunfee call moral free space, meaning that they are neither right nor wrong until we
consider them in context. While in the United States extravagant gift giving is seen as a potential form of bribery and raises questions about conflict of interest, in Japan this practice is central to cultural understandings about loyalty and respect. Thus, a U.S.-based company might respect practices of extravagant gift giving when conducting business in Japan given the meaning these practices carry in Japanese culture coupled with the fact that they do not appear to violate any core human values. In contrast, if a country permits child labor and if employing children prevents them from receiving a basic education, this would violate the moral threshold and companies ought to object. According to Donaldson, the key to balancing respect for cultural differences and moral decency is allowing context to inform judgments about ethical behavior. One way context can inform these judgments is by identifying the nature of the conflict when a clash in values or norms occurs. Donaldson distinguishes between two of the most common kinds of conflicts: conflicts of relative development and conflicts of cultural tradition. Conflicts of relative development occur when moral and social norms conflict because the home and host countries are at significantly different levels of economic development. For example, two countries may have considerably different views about child labor or wages, but these disparities may be due in large part to economic differences rather than a substantial clash in values. In contrast, conflicts of cultural tradition occur when moral and social norms conflict because of genuine disparity between two different value systems. For example, countries might disagree on the role of women in the workplace, which may reflect significantly dissimilar cultural understandings about equality.

To resolve conflicts of relative development, Donaldson suggests that company leaders ask themselves if the practice would be tolerated in the home country if the home country were at a similar stage of economic development as the host country. For example, some countries may permit workers to be paid extremely low wages, wages that may seem appalling in the United States. Yet if higher wages in the host country would lead to loss of jobs and investment there, and if the wage rates are sufficient for maintaining a decent standard of living in that country (i.e., if there is no violation of the moral minimum), then paying the lower wages may be permissible. However, when a conflict is due to a real clash between moral and social values, Donaldson contends that company leaders must determine whether it is possible to conduct business in that country without engaging in the practice in question and whether the practice violates a core human value. If the answer to these questions is no, then a company should object.

Social Obligations of Multinationals in Foreign Settings

Questions of cultural imperialism surface not only when values, traditions, and customs conflict but also when considering what positive moral and social responsibilities multinationals have to the host communities within which they operate. Many observers contend that multinationals have at least some obligations to be "good citizens" of the host countries where they do business, but what kinds of obligations do they have and to what extent? At minimum most agree that companies ought to behave appropriately within the customs and mores of a host community and support local social institutions, but what if these customs and institutions violate the moral minimum? What responsibilities, if any, do multinationals have to address gross human rights violations or other moral and social ills that may be occurring within the host community? Some have suggested that multinationals should use their power and influence with local governments to promote moral and social reform where needed. Other theorists are much more cautious about ascribing positive social responsibilities to multinationals in a foreign setting.

For example, Patricia Werhane argues for considerable constraints on the moral and social responsibilities of companies conducting business in a foreign country. Werhane contends that multinationals certainly have obligations not to cause more harm than is caused by the status quo in a particular country, and they should redress any harms that the company itself may have caused. However, beyond this, companies should not interfere in the political and social life of the host country. While it might seem initially plausible and admirable for a company to work toward improving the social and political environments within which they operate, Werhane worries that this kind of behavior violates a nation's right to sovereignty and self-determination.

There is a danger that companies engaging in activism will unrightfully impose their own moral and
social beliefs and values within host communities. Multinationals do not have the expertise to adequately address social ills, and as Werhane points out, if a nation's sovereignty can be overridden by another nation only on the most rigorous moral grounds, the occasions when corporate interference might be justified are rare indeed. A company may be permitted to engage in “quiet cooperation” with host governments to address social ills, but beyond this, Werhane maintains that if a company cannot uphold its own moral standards while practicing business in a foreign country, then it should refrain from conducting business there.

While concern that multinationals avoid unwarranted paternalism is important, critics point out that this approach overlooks the complexity of a multinational's relationship with the host countries where it operates. For example, in 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed by the Nigerian government for protesting certain activities of Shell Oil in the region, specifically environmental degradation and the economic exploitation of the native Ogoni people living there. Many observers argued that Shell should have used its influence with the Nigerian government to intervene on behalf of Saro-Wiwa, as this was a life or death matter. In response to these criticisms, however, the company claimed that it would be wrong to intervene in the case because multinational corporations do not have the right to interfere in the political and legal affairs of sovereign states. However, some critics maintain that Shell Oil’s economic presence in the region was already a form of interference that had disastrous political and social consequences for many people living in the region. Thus, while companies certainly need to avoid being unduly paternalistic, they also need to be aware of the ways in which economic relationships with foreign governments are not always morally and politically neutral.

**Contemporary Approaches**

The views discussed thus far explore issues of cultural imperialism as they arise in business practice within the current global economy. These approaches take a global free market system as given and then consider how, while conducting business within this economy, multinational corporations can maintain a balance between respect for cultural differences and integrity to their own moral and social standards. However, concerns about cultural imperialism also surface in discussions about the processes of globalization and development that have led to the dominance of free market capitalism on a global scale.

One stated goal of globalization is to aid and encourage the economic development of struggling, impoverished nations. One of the more popular development strategies known as catching-up development recommends that by expanding free market capitalism on a global scale poorer nations will be able to compete in the global market, increase their economic development, and eventually “catch up” to the levels of economic maturity that wealthier nations now enjoy. However, critics of this development approach worry that the extension of neoliberal economic policies on a global scale is itself a form of cultural imperialism. For example, Maria Mies contends that free market economic models and the development strategies based on them are not value neutral, but promote a particular conception of the good life—namely, one that is characterized by a consumer culture, materialism, individualism, competition, and profit maximization. Development strategies premised on the extension of free market logic take a conception of the good life popular in many Western nations as the standard to which all nations ought to aspire.

There are other possible models for economic development, such as sustainability models. The dominance of free market economic policies makes it difficult if not impossible for countries to explore other economic models that might be more compatible with their own cultural values and ideas about what constitutes a good human life. For example, Vandana Shiva argues that indigenous populations in India have been successfully conserving water and living off of the land for centuries in part because of an emphasis on communal ownership and management of natural resources. The extension of a free market economy on a global scale has fostered the privatization and commodification of water in India by large multinationals, threatening not only the livelihood of native peoples but also their traditional agricultural practices and ways of life.

The phenomenon of cultural imperialism is complex, and as we have seen, it emerges in a number of different contexts. As processes of globalization lead us to form unprecedented economic and political relationships with distant others, finding the proper balance between respect for cultural differences, moral decency, and successful business practice
becomes increasingly more important and also considerably more difficult.

—Theresa Weynand Tobin

See also Cross-Cultural Consumer Marketing; Multiculturalism; Relativism, Cultural

Further Readings


