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GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY DILEMMAS

Sebastian Andrei Labes^{*}

Abstract: *This paper aims to present an important phenomenon of our world, namely the contradictory relationship between globalization and cultural identity. In this work identity is understood as a cultural practice therefore it cannot be analyzed without taking into account global communication and diversity. The multidimensional transformation of our society in the XXI century is marked by increased interconnectivity and affirmation of singular identities. These identities come in constant tension with the context in which the existing political forms that are in crisis and the restructuring processes through new projects are struggling to set up a new society. Globalization versus cultural identity it's not a zero-sum game even though the two might be perceived as opposite processes this paper argue that it globalization cultural identity can go hand in hand with globalization.*

Keywords: globalization; cultural identity.

JEL Classification: F60; Z13.

INTRODUCTION

Initially, globalization was seen as a broadening, deepening and acceleration of global interconnection in all aspects of contemporary social life, culture and crime, from finance to the spiritual sphere (Miliana, Constantin, 2006). Globalization reflects a broad perception that the world is fast becoming a common social space, influenced by economic and technological forces, so that developments in one region of the world can have profound consequences on individuals and communities across the globe.

A definition of globalization must list all its major effects: a deep tendency retrieval unit, the internationalization of production shifts, the free movement of goods, information and people, domination of international companies, growth global competition. (Brăilean, 2004)

The term culture comes from the Latin word *colere* which means 'to grow' / 'to honor' and generally refers to human activity. UNESCO's definition considers culture as 'a series of distinct features of a society or social group in terms of spiritual, material, intellectual or emotional'. (UNESCO, 2009)

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Culture is an inheritance that is transmitted using specific communication codes such as gestures or words, writing and the arts, media (press, radio, TV), interactive media (phone, internet). Similarly gestures, rituals, theoretical knowledge, abstract rules, and religion are transmitted (Saljooghi, 2011). Culture can be acquired through various forms of subjective memory (reflexes, words, pictures) but also through memory targets (objects, pictures, books, numbers, rules).

Popular use of the word culture in many Western societies may reflect exactly that layered character of those societies. Many people use this word to refer to the elite consumer goods and activities such as cuisine, art or music. Others use the label of ‘high culture’ to distinguish it from the ‘low culture’, designating all consumer goods that do not belong to these elite.

Cultural identity is the identity of a group or culture or of an individual as far as one is influenced by one's belonging to a group or culture. Various modern cultural studies and social theories have investigated cultural identity. In recent decades, a new form of identification has emerged which breaks down the understanding of the individual as a coherent whole subject into a collection of various cultural identifiers. These cultural identifiers may be the result of various conditions including: location, gender, race, history, nationality, language, sexuality, religious beliefs, ethnicity, aesthetics, and even food.

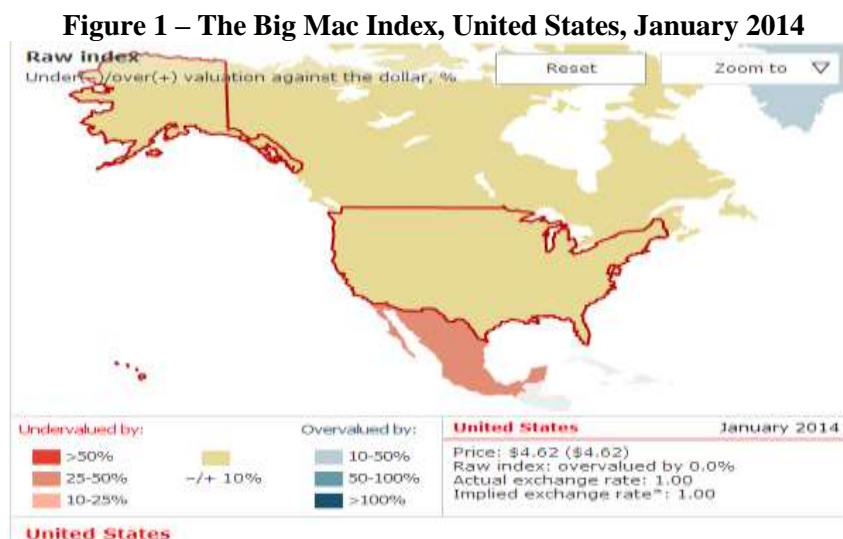
1. CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION

Scholars also stress the concept of cultural globalization which refers to the transmission of ideas, meanings and values across world space. This process is marked by the common consumption of cultures that have been diffused by the Internet, popular culture, and international travel. Cultural globalization involves the formation of shared norms and knowledge with which people associate their individual and collective cultural identities, and increasing interconnectedness among different populations and cultures (Inda, Rosaldo, 2002).

Encyclopedia Britannica defines cultural globalization as ‘a phenomenon by which the experience of everyday life, as influenced by the diffusion of commodities and ideas, reflects a standardization of cultural expressions around the world’ (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013).

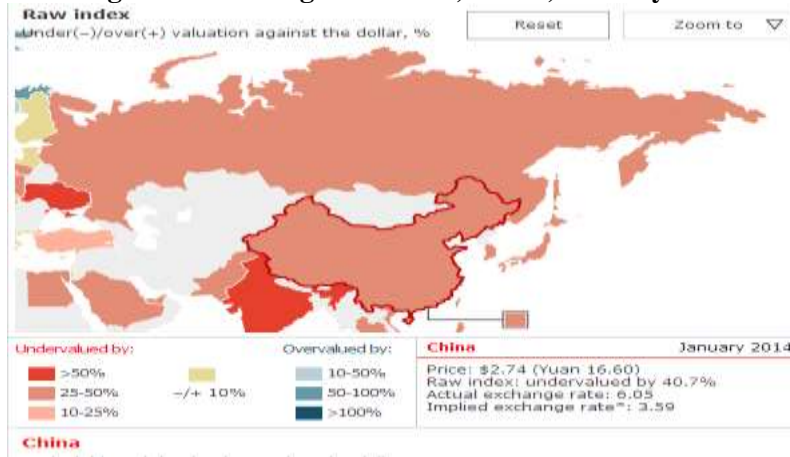
A visible aspect of cultural globalization is the diffusion of certain consumer products from certain parts of the world and more specifically there is a big debate considering the global influence of American

products like McDonald’s or Coca-Cola referred as Americanization or Coca-colonization. For instance, as a measure of the influence of McDonald’s chain of fast-food restaurants Pam Woodall, a Senior Economics Writer at *The Economist* introduced in 1986 the Big Mac Index which since then is published every year. The Big Mac Index is an informal way of measuring the purchasing power parity (PPP) between two currencies and provides a test of the extent to which market exchange rates result in goods costing the same in different countries. For example, the average price of a Big Mac in United States of America in January 2014 was \$4.62 (Figure 1 – The Big Mac Index, United States, January 2014); in China it was only \$2.74 (Figure 2 – The Big Mac Index, China, January 2014) and in the Euro Area \$4.96 (Figure 3 – The Big Mac Index, Euro Area, January 2014) at market exchange rates. So the ‘raw’ Big Mac index says that the Yuan was undervalued by 41% at that time, meanwhile the Euro currency overvalued by 7.3%. (The Economist, 2014) The Big Mac index has become a global standard that can be adapted in different themes like *Tall Latte index* with the Big Mac replaced by a cup of Starbucks coffee, *iPod index*, or *Ikea’s Billy bookshelf* built on the same principle.



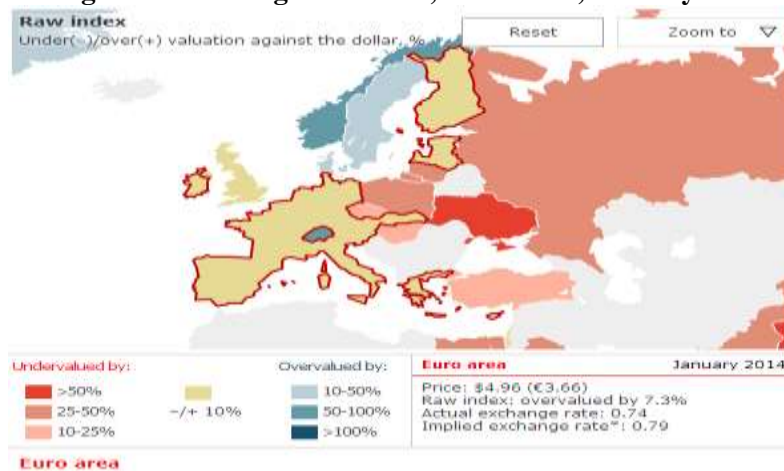
Source: *The Economist*, The Big Mac Index, Interactive currency-comparison tool

Figure 2 – The Big Mac Index, China, January 2014



Source: The Economist, The Big Mac Index, Interactive currency-comparison tool

Figure 3 – The Big Mac Index, Euro Area, January 2014



Source: The Economist, The Big Mac Index, Interactive currency-comparison tool

2. TRANSCENDING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE NEW GLOBAL SPHERES OF INFLUENCES

Mutations that have been occurring in the world in the last 50 years technologically, economically and politically (the spread of electronic computing and communication, economic globalization and the dissolution of the former communist states block), accompanied by the persistence of shocking inequalities regarding the human condition in different parts of the globe, fueled intensified ideological confrontations between different groups of society and the leaders of various countries. (Platon, 2010)

Gradually intellectual horizons and the conduct of publishing and intellectual registry have changed appreciably along with diversified benchmarks and priorities by which thinkers from different social status and from different parts of the world appreciate the nature and consequences of various events and social processes. Old prejudices that have been maintained for centuries continue to mingle with the spectacular progress of knowing humanity. The shadow of the cold war - which seemed to have ended in 1989 - and the ‘sparks’ of the nowadays hot wars which are still present in everyday life of some nations continue to obscure the righteous judgment of some thinkers. (Giddens, 2001)

Globalization is claiming new transnational public spheres and communities willing to transcend nationality and regional borders. In this category are usually included business people, artists, and youth culture. Equally visible is the propensity to fragment national communities, during that fewer people in close proximity share the same cultural inventory. This phenomenon was particularly spread in the former communist countries. After the collapse of the Soviet Union many groups have rediscovered their cultural identity – the question was whether the majority or minority – a condition in which they fought or are still fighting for eigenvalues using the same language. From the mentioned perspectives, globalization and localization are parts of one and the same process. Local participation in the economic and political life will make all the features of national cultures derived from such as French, German, Russian, Thai and so to be understood only in the global context. Regarding individual - despite the differences that separate one from another, despite the views of the world nurtured by his own culture and language - he has the opportunity to cultivate dialogue and benefit from it. (Neumann, 2009) It seems that this is a tremendous opportunity for self-realization and enrichment of society.

3. GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

When we speak of cultural identity we are thinking especially about language, cultural heritage, traditions and religion. However, none of them has become a character of uniformity and was not accepted unanimously by the Member States or those who crave integration into the European Union. Is there a European language? No! And probably never will be one anytime soon, although some countries have managed to impose and promote their language universally available - English, French, and Spanish and others. In the same manner we can also speak about their culture, traditions or religions.

European area is one of the nations. Let us remember that in 1954, when the Western European Union (WEU) was established the core idea was to strengthen cooperation between Western European nations in the security sphere and actually creating a European military alliance. All states were required components of general assistance in case of aggression against a member state, to preserve peace and security in Europe. Subsequently, WEU (Western European Union) member states provided a platform for social and economic cooperation, but each state has kept further identity and uniqueness.

This concept, which emphasizes the role of various societies in creating culture, could become the backbone of the concept of 'European interdependence'. Interdependence means not just a single European government, but involves understanding and global cooperation, based on a set of ethical rules, which act to prevent the transformation of national sovereignty in cultural aggression.

Europe became what the Europeans wanted or, to paraphrase Jonathan Scheele, former Head of European Commission Delegation in Romania in the period 2001 - 2006, 'Europe continues to be a project of its citizens'. In this context Europeans should be keeping contributing to this project, but they will not in any way lose their identity, to imitate or to copy what the others are. Integrating into a system is, without a doubt a great advantage but keeping the identity is not only an obligation but also the only chance of survival of individuality. However in order to fully harmonize a united Europe in a united system of various cultures will require a long-term perspective.

4. PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

The issue of preserving cultural identity in the complex process of globalization is twofold. On the one hand there is the danger of cultural homogenization, which means that people could reach to one single form of culture, and on the other an acute cultural and psychological disintegration for both individuals and society. Both risks are correlated. There is a form of behavior, often unconscious, which appears to some as a form of cultural aggression. Another name for it would be ethnocentrism wrong led. (Lieber, Ruth, 2002) This behavior, characteristic especially to developed countries like Germany, England, France, Netherlands, and Luxembourg, constitute a threat to European understanding and should be corrected. The great powers, consciously or not, could remove or abandon completely indiscriminate valuable cultural traditions. Instead, they bring cultural models of learning from outside,

promoting a foreign way of life of peoples, thus constituting a major source of incoherence and disorientation. (Kaygusuz, 2012)

A global system vulnerable to aggression from some and cultural disintegration of others does not constitute a firm basis for mutual understanding, dialogue, cooperation, joint initiatives and European solidarity. It is clear that such a situation has its roots in colonialism. Cultural identity at both levels - national and international, remains one of the main necessities psychological, spiritual, which could become a growing source of conflict within societies and between them. The risk of rupture increases as the side effects of backwardness of historical learning processes begin to be felt. There is tolerance, but not the most honest acceptance of nations located on a higher level of technological progress and civilization, for the values of the new countries that have entered or will enter the European Union. Here we must carefully stress two fundamental themes: the polarization (the intellectual tendency to see diversity without perceiving unity and vice versa) and redistribution issue. The redistribution issue is learning that the right to diversity implies the need for global solidarity. Cultural identity is the one that gives people dignity and allows them not to lean before others only to survive. There is of course a common cultural heritage of humanity, whose protection and recovery is one of our greatest responsibilities. This legacy could become even more relevant if the focus would be on the human role in its constant process of creation and not putting it in a museum of collections from ancient times.

Problems posed by the cultural identity are even more important as they can't be easily resolved through a process of redistribution. Cultural autonomy is not guaranteed (or withdrawn), as required by international agreements to redistribute resources; however they may be indispensable to others. Cultural identity is a way of perceiving a set of relationships and human values. (Tomlinson John, 1999) If we want to live in a culturally viable twenty-first century we need to start intensifying the learning processes of parents and their children who will reach maturity or old age at the beginning of the next decades. This process involves the mutual fertilization of cultures and global interdependence, based on a flourishing plurality of cultures excluding imposing a unique learning model. (Wang Yi, 2007) Also, we will need a total respect to the values of others, a consensus on a minimum number of universal values and a greater role for international trade, for people of all ages to travel freely and recognize global nature of the inheritance of the whole world from a perspective located outside our culture. Developing this understanding and its spread is one of the main objectives of a new approach to globalization.

Despite popular belief, namely that globalization requires cultural hegemony, the reality shows that there is a cultural resistance that persists and becomes a value, becoming stronger. This gives the possibility of cultural resistance, which can promote the common interests of society. Measurement, analysis and comparison of cultural values in different countries and geographical areas of the world have revealed that cultural values in different countries do not tend to converge although economic development pushes all countries toward a common direction. This direction provides common strengthening values. Communication is global, and yet it does not imply a cultural globalization. Strengthening identities is used in many cases as a control mechanism for chaotic globalization. Moreover, identity is a tool built on the foundation of experience and generator of meaning in people's lives. This effect, which can be a religious, national, ethnic, territorial, or in relation to gender equality is fundamental to people's lives and characterizes the world as much as globalization and technology do. Communication plays a major role as a new public space and it allows dynamic construction of intercultural and facilitates movement from monologue to dialogue, dialogue and cooperation. (Suiogon, 2011) Cooperation should be based not on words but on deeds, in close relationship with different identities.

CONCLUSIONS

Globalization is frequently felt as a menace to strong national and cultural identities. Some might fear about its tendency to homogenize different cultural realities, by annihilating every single mark of singularity (Gil, 2009). However, it cannot be denied that globalization tends to erase differences and to create similar life patterns around the world: consider, for example, the case of franchising's, such as McDonald's, Starbucks, Coca-Cola, etc. Societies find themselves eating the same food, watching the same movies, wearing the same clothes. In this process of homogenization, cultural particularities and differences are lost, cultural identities are shattered, critical thinking disappears.

On the other hand cultural identity if properly understood can be more a product of globalization than its victim as Tomlinson is arguing. Identity is not a zero-sum game but it does suggest that the way in which national identity is experienced within globalization is, like everything else, influx. (Tomlinson, 2003) Another, quite contradictory, conclusion stressed by the same author is that 'globalization, far

from destroying cultural identity, has been perhaps the most significant force in creating and proliferating cultural identity'. The idea that globalization and identity can go hand in hand it's surprising and reveals the actual power that identity has against the massive force of globalization.

In the European context national identity is a very powerful form of cultural identity in which the de-territorializing force of globalization meets the opposition of regulatory and the socializing institutions of the state. However Brussels efforts in building a Europe that shares common values and aspirations come in hand with preserving the cultural heritage of each Member State and even more of each cultural group. The model of European Union in the matter of cultural identity I believe is a successful one that manages to bring together globalization and cultural identity. This is one of the European Union's prerogatives that makes it to be perceived as a 'soft power' popular and desirable for the vicinity countries. The process of harmonization takes time as the European Union is expanding towards the Eastern countries but the European project it's one of the successful stories in which globalization actually proliferates rather than destroys identities.

When it comes to preserving cultural identity there is the danger of ethnocentrism a behavior of great powers especially noticed in Western Europe but not only that can led sometimes to cultural aggression. Two processes rise in the matter or preserving cultural identity in a global context: polarization and redistribution. If we want to we want to live in a culturally viable twenty-first century we need a total respect to the values of others, a consensus on a minimum number of universal values and a greater role for international trade, for people of all ages to travel freely and recognize global nature of the inheritance of the whole world from a perspective located outside our culture. Developing this understanding and its spread is one of the main objectives of a new approach to globalization.

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