

In a forthcoming book, Associate Professor Robert Nelson examines globalisation not in economic terms but as a pervasive cultural force. Looking at international brand names, advertising, corporate messages, fashion, Hollywood films and their stars, sport and media, he shows how globalisation heartily promotes stereotypes and sameness while suppressing difference and voices of resistance.

In this interview with Kate Latimer, he discusses how globalisation isn't just about money – it's about corporatising our imagination and cultural values as well.

Standardising the Imagination

Q: What do you mean by cultural software?

RN: Ah, we're proud of that term. It's the sum of cultural energies and templates that condition how people imagine the world, how they fantasize and desire.

By the globalisation of cultural software, I mean the incursions into the imagination caused by media, medial transmission and promotion of archetypes, products, values and services. They are insidious and of course on a scale that overwhelms any previous perspective. The growth in image culture is hard to overestimate. It follows a decline in manufacturing as a proportion of our economy. The growth has all been in services. As the material quality of things counts for less and less (because goods are already in oversupply) the energy going into the artificial fetishisation of goods and services increases.

Q: What are the stereotypes that thrive in a globalised world?

RN: There are lots of them. Marketing saturates us in images of success and glamour which conform to a very narrow set of experiences. For the most part, they're so far from your and my reality that we can only recognize them as fantasy. For example, the most common way for any competitive corporation to sell a product or service is to use teens or 20-somethings with long legs, long hair and V-shaped torsos.

Q: There have been pockets of resistance to this kind of advertising – I'm thinking of billboards graffitied with facetious slogans or international 'no shopping' days or the anti-logo arguments as a way of undermining the corporate message. What has happened when people have jacked up against being commodified and conditioned?

RN: There is enormous feeling against the globalization of spiritual and physical stereotypes. But the movement has no capital behind it. The feminists who complained about this kind of stereotyping in the 1970s have no consolations in the way that the corporate world steadfastly ignores their sense of justice. Their anathemas are to no avail and their antagonists are more capitalized than ever, with marketers yet more professional in ensuring the maximum pervasiveness of the retrograde sexist image.

Q: Why have we/they become fixated on youthful images? It could have gone either way – we could have become a culture where it was great to be the wise elder – but no, we've

gone the other way. Any theories why?

RN: Two reasons. First, if you're old and wise, you aren't going to be a great consumer. Commerce appeals to rash and impulsive behaviour and has difficulty promoting whims or luxuries using sober hoary folk. You reserve your retired actor (always male) for selling insurance. Second, commerce acts through fantasy. Everyone wants to be young. Youth invokes hope and potency as well as impulsiveness. And we could add a third. Since ancient Greece, youth has determined the canon of beauty. I think that our materialism has inherited the most immature parts of Hellenic culture.

Q: What are the key values being promoted by globalisation?

RN: The key values centre on ambition and greed, the zeal to possess greater goods or to enjoy more charisma, by artificial means, which is, in itself, a revolting value. The globalised world means a marketed world. We market everything, including time and opportunities. Things that cannot be marketed receive only the most naïve promotion in our mind, unassisted by world capital. Like contemplating an idea. Talking to a parent. Doing a drawing. Acting politically. Playing tunes on the recorder. Talking to a child. In fact talking to anyone in a receptive way rather than projecting the assertive fantasies supplied by media. Then there are values of a spiritual or religious kind. They also only feature if they can be promoted commercially, in which case they probably aren't very spiritual in character but instrumental in a way analogous to all other competitive cultures geared for material profit.

Q: If something can't be marketed (like playing tunes on the recorder) are we losing interest in it?

RN: As a proportion of human endeavour, yes. There will always be people who play the recorder but thousands more who energetically transfer cultural enthusiasms elsewhere.

Q: You say that globalisation muffles voices of resistance. What are the long-term ramifications for societies where this occurs?

RN: Yes, that's interesting. Ironically, we are a democratic society and voices of resistance are partially encouraged and make good press, as when someone thinks that interest rates should rise. Resistance is especially tolerated if it's marketable, that is, if it sells papers or TV bytes. Meanwhile, resistance is more than muffled in some of those highly religious cultures--especially Muslim--whose spiritual values we offend with our aggressive medial parade of globalised soft-porn, violence and consumerism. I don't want to romanticize theocratic cultures, whose strictures personally do not appeal to me. But I think that we have to understand that we do have our own strictures, surreptitiously promoted through media and equally abhorrent to others outside it; only ours is the perspective that prevails because fuelled with capital.

Q. Are movie stars and sports stars the modern day replacement for saints?

RN: Yes, along with their Prada and Nike and Pepsi and Mercedes: there's a whole iconography in popular culture which people are encouraged to worship. You could consider the whole of advertising (which in a way subsumes so much of mainstream film, because no one invests in it until all the marketing has been worked out) as a kind of global 'Collegium propaganda fidei', an organization for the promotion of the faith. But

what faith? A hagiography of how someone managed to lose 10 kilograms or fornicate with someone else's girlfriend?

Q. Why does it matter if the world becomes more globalised?

RN: Lots of people argue something along these lines and you have to credit their case. Economically, the term refers to the theory that all countries will enjoy a higher material standard of living if barriers to free trade are reduced. The material benefits of globalisation, defined in that way, may well exist. Well, I'm no economist and can't really judge; but I gather that the utopia is patchy. The evidence of our material welfare is much more conspicuous than that of Brazilian coffee growers.

But can I add one thing?

Culture has always been determined to a large extent by capital. That's no news at all. But not long ago, capital was still not able to penetrate the more intimate zones of the psyche. But now it can. There are people who specialize in it. They're artists. Capital has globalised instruments, sometimes called media or communication; it has logo-authority, a bizarre world proliferation of badges with heavy-duty investment, mostly with little material substance. Contemporary consciousness is highly manipulated, I think to unprecedented levels; and anyone who doubts this has probably been nowhere near children or youth or televisions or the global patriarchs who disseminate their branding among them. And in their hands, with the copious inventions of capital, the most trivial things achieve the greatest prominence.

Q: OK, where is it going to go? Will globalisation ensure that in the future people in Upper Mongolia and the Midlands and Kyoto and Caulfield, Victoria will all be watching the same movies and eating the same food and talking the same way, while wearing the same clothes? Is globalisation getting rid of our differences?

RN: Globalised ideology and its products will be relentlessly propagated throughout the world. But there will always be a core of products and practices that do not lend themselves to universal marketing; and, in the fullness of time, they will gain the most marvellous air of authenticity by contrast to the lifeless spoils of McCulture. Although we as individuals can't stop globalisation—and globalisation will have an irreversible effect on our planet—it will never prevail in all areas of the imagination, and bedrock cultural credibility is bound to default to its proper province, which lies with the creative freedom of the individual.

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