2 Scenarios of Global Culture

Il faut revendiquer, par rapport à l’idéologie globalitaire, la notion de métissage . . . Nous sommes dans des mondes qui ne vont pas vers la globalisation culturelle; il faut être malhonnête intellectuellement pour penser que nous allons vers une culture globale.

(One has to reclaim, in relation to globalist ideology, the notion of hybridity . . . We are in worlds that are not heading toward cultural globalization; one has to be intellectually dishonest to think that we are heading toward a global culture.)

—Armand Mattelart

The notion of global culture is inherent to the contemporary zeitgeist. It conjures up images of a planetary MTV generation listening to Britney Spears on a Sony Walkman in Nike sneakers and Gap sweaters while biting into Big Macs washed down by gulps of Coca-Cola. To some, these snapshots of a global youth consumer culture are unmistakable signs of the fulfillment of McLuhan’s global village, where a new generation linked by the language of global popular culture celebrates diversity and thrives in an increasingly interconnected world. To others, these same vignettes are symptoms of a global dystopia where identity, citizenship, and social agency are manipulated by industries of mass persuasion that shape them into niche subcultural markets for a global and soulless capitalism. In spite of their disagreement, both criers of utopia and prophets of dystopia consider transnational media and cultural industries to be major forces in the globalization of culture. Technologies such as satellite television, cellular phones, the Internet, and digital cable have created seamless flows of transnational images, ideas, and ideologies that link scattered locales in what Indian American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996) metaphorized as the “scapes” of globalization.

In the academic world, the idea of global culture—alternatively referred to as “transnational culture,” “cultural globalization,” or “globalization of culture”—has attracted engagement and speculation
across disciplines. Books and conferences in anthropology, comparative literature, cultural studies, communication and media studies, geography, sociology, and other fields have been devoted to understanding the implications of cultural globalization. Deliberations revolve around the global ubiquity of U.S. popular culture and thrash out its consequences for other nations and communities. Opinions have coalesced in two competing scenarios: one views cultural globalization as the transfiguration of worldwide diversity into a pandemic Westernized consumer culture. The other regards cultural globalization as a process of hybridization in which cultural mixture and adaptation continuously transform and renew cultural forms. The first scenario emphasizes the global; the second stresses the local. The former believes that cultural globalization is a process of “saturation”; the latter sees it as a process of “maturation” (Hannerz, 1989). Empirical data are invoked to lend credence to both scenarios, but there is no evidence sufficiently compelling to put the matter to rest. For this reason, I prefer to use “scenarios” in reference to conceptions of global culture. A scenario is, according to the 1984 edition of *Webster’s II*, “an outline of a hypothesized or projected chain of events.” More modest than “paradigm,” less academic than “thesis,” and less banal than “perspective,” “scenario” captures the speculative nature and tentative ontology of theories of global culture.

**Cultural Dichotomies in International Relations**

Scenarios of global culture are intrinsically political. They echo rival visions of the world and the power practices deployed to create and sustain those schemes while at the same time they attempt to discredit and dismiss alternative views. Thus in the “international information flows” debate of the 1970s and 1980s, the United States advocated a “free flow” of information in tandem with its demands to liberalize media and information worldwide. The “free flow” ideology clashed with the “fair and balanced flow” doctrine advocated by many other states, both Western liberal democracies and developing countries. Cold War superpower rivalry was a powerful undertow in this quarrel, with U.S. business interests and concerns over Soviet manipulation clashing with the rest of the world’s resistance to unbridled media capitalism. Scenarios of global culture are also political in a more elementary sense, in that political leaders invoke these scenarios to justify state policies. They believe that global culture is relevant to issues of governance, since it is alternatively perceived to be a threat to national identity or to provide
an opportunity to expand a nation’s sphere of influence. Thus, while in the past the French polity used Gallic culture as a tool for spreading a humanist message it believed to be universal, contemporary France sees the Americanization of global media culture as a dual threat to French cultural identity within France and to the rayonnement of French culture abroad. This explains why, in the wake of the global information “war” that followed the destruction of Taliban rule in Afghanistan in 2002 and Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq in 2003, French officials have called for bids by the private sector to create a “French CNN,” a twenty-four-hour Francophone news network that would give France leverage in international “public diplomacy.” Scenarios of global culture are political in a third way, relating to academic politics, where intellectual discourses are never insulated from the national and global environment in which they develop. The rejection of the “cultural imperialism thesis” in U.S. mass communication research, for instance, reflects the national political climate and ideological reluctance to admit to the existence of global American power projection, as much as it is a product of empirical research and theoretical development. Similarly, some formulations of postmodernism in the 1980s exhibited an uncanny compatibility with neoliberal tenets: cultural fragmentation fit neatly with niche marketing, reader agency related to individual consumer autonomy, and “decentering” and “deterritorialization” tied in with post-Fordist business practices (the last to be explained in Chapter Five). Whether the topic is global culture or global warming, ideological riptides often dispose intellectual formations, and the ensuing politicization turns discussions into polemical arguments that undermine substantive deliberation.

The notion of culture has enjoyed sustained interest over the past decade, and this attention has drawn it from its academic quarters into public discourse. In the last decade, a few widely circulated publications, such as Benjamin Barber’s Jihad vs. McWorld (1996) and Samuel Huntington’s The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (1996), have treated culture as a key explanatory variable in world affairs. Because of their commercial success and influential ideas, these books help us understand some of the prevailing ideas associated with cultural globalization. Both volumes have regained importance—and been reissued—in a wounded post–September 11 United States attempting to make sense of its newly felt vulnerability, seeking solace in “cultural” explanations of the behavior of nation-states and nonstate actors.
In *Jihad vs. McWorld*, political scientist Benjamin Barber conceives of global culture in bipolar terms. The book’s subtitle, *How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World*, bespeaks its vision of a struggle over world culture between the consumerist utopia of “McWorld” and the fundamentalist dystopia of “Jihad.” Admittedly, Barber is right when he points to transnational capitalism as the driving engine that brings what he calls “Jihad” and “McWorld” in contact and shapes their interaction. Nonetheless, two facets of his model are unhelpful. The first is its positing of “Jihad,” defined as ethnic and religious tribalism, against “McWorld,” a transnational capitalism driven by consumerism, with no space for any alternative. Writes Barber: “[O]ur *only choices* are the secular universalism of the cosmopolitan market and the everyday particularism of the fractious tribe” (1996, p. 7, emphasis added). Barber attempts to exit this diametrical opposition, in a chapter titled “Jihad via McWorld,” when he postulates that Jihad stands in “less of a stark opposition than a subtle counterpoint” (p. 157) to McWorld. Nevertheless, Barber unwittingly contradicts that claim by offering plethoric evidence in support of a bipolar, rather than a multipolar and contrapuntal, understanding of cultural globalization.

This scenario emphasizes the global at the expense of the local, since it believes that globalization rules via transnational capitalism. The local impulses of Jihad, in Barber’s view, are no match for McWorld’s powerful global market forces. Clearly, it would be naïve to invest excessive credence in local abilities to “resist” the global. But Barber merely brushes off a vast multidisciplinary corpus on the dynamism of cultures and their ability to negotiate foreign influence. His assumptions about audiences’ reactions to “the seductive lifestyle trinity of sex, violence and money” (p. 90) offered by an “information telesector” with an American face are redolent of the mass society paradigm whose proponents believe people to be passive and vulnerable. Thus he writes: “Infantilism is a state of mind dear to McWorld, for it is defined by ‘I want, I want, I want’” (p. 93), reducing audiences to infantile cultural dupes, defenseless against the pernicious ideology of consumption. Barber recognizes that consumerism and fundamentalism feed off each other’s energies, writing that “Jihad not only revolts against but abets McWorld, while McWorld not only imperils but re-creates and reinforces Jihad” (p. 5). However, his conclusion veers toward immoderate formulae in which the interaction of Jihad with McWorld creates “startling forms of inadvertent tyranny” that range from “an invisibly constraining consumerism to an all too palpable barbarism” (p. 220). These issues notwithstanding,
Jihad vs. McWorld’s provocative thesis, broad sweep, accessible style, and wealth of information have made it a classic work.

The “clash of civilizations” thesis propounded by political scientist Samuel Huntington has come to the fore as both retroactive premonition and rationale for the September 11, 2001, attacks and their aftermath. As Dutch sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1996) reminds us, there is a long tradition among historians of dividing the world into neatly defined civilizational spheres (the phrase “clash of civilizations” itself was coined by Middle East historian Bernard Lewis). After his initial article in Foreign Affairs (Huntington, 1993), that bastion of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, Huntington expanded his thesis into a book published in 1996. In the article, “The Clash of Civilizations?” Huntington (1993) had written that a clash of civilizations was to occupy the center of world politics. He had explained that “with the end of the cold war, international politics moves out of its Western phase, and its centre piece becomes the interaction between the West and non-Western civilizations and among non-Western civilizations.” In the subsequent book, where the question mark after “The Clash of Civilizations” revealingly disappeared from the title, Huntington broadened his argument to a sweeping culturalist thesis, in which all differences among nations are determined by “culture.”

The self-evident premise of the book that the non-Western world has only “entered” international relations after the Cold War notwithstanding, Huntington (1996) writes that “the central theme of the book is that culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War era” (p. 20). The building blocks of Huntington’s thesis can be summarized as follows. First, in coming conflicts, civilizational culture—however nebulously defined—will shape alliances between states, but these states will remain the leading political agents operating from and within civilizational spheres. Second, although six or seven civilizations will compete for power, the main fault line will be between the West and the Rest, especially between the Western and Islamic civilizations. Third, the West, and especially the United States, should reject multiculturalism and universalism and instead should focus on strengthening putative core Western values such as liberty, capitalism, the rule of law, and human rights.

Huntington’s thesis stirred controversy for several reasons. Intellectually, his division of the world into neatly separated civilizational blocks is not representative of global cultural complexity. Huntington
uses “civilization” and “culture” in a manner that suits the examples he offers to support his thesis. While his use of “civilization” is hazy, his use of “culture” is wanting in its assumption of cultural homogeneity. As an example, communities and nations as fundamentally diverse as the Shiites of Lebanon and Iran, the Malays in Malaysia, and the Wahhabi Sunnis in Saudi Arabia are lumped under the monolith of Islamic civilization. In addition, the intercivilizational borders that form the foundations of Huntington’s edifice are arbitrary. If Western civilization’s core identifier is Christianity, as Huntington assumes, why is Latin America, with its hundreds of millions of Catholics, excluded from Western civilization? Skidmore traced Huntington’s cosmetic attempts to remedy these unfortunate contradictions between the article, where China and its sphere of influence were referred to as Confucianist civilization, and the book, where Huntington replaced “Confucianist” with the even vaguer characterization “Sinic” (Skidmore, 1998, p. 182).

The notion of “clash of civilizations” advances a political agenda with domestic and foreign policy components. Notably, Huntington’s simultaneous dismissal of multiculturalism and internationalism stands out in its oscillation between isolationism and triumphalism:

Some Americans have promoted multiculturalism at home; some have promoted universalism abroad; and some have done both. Multiculturalism at home threatens the United States and the West; universalism abroad threatens the West and the world. Both deny the uniqueness of Western culture. The global monoculturalists want to make the world like America. The domestic multiculturalists want to make America like the world. A multicultural America is impossible because a non-Western America is not American. A multicultural world is unavoidable because global empire is impossible. The preservation of the United States and the West requires the renewal of Western identity. The security of the world requires acceptance of global multiculturality. (1996, p. 318)

Huntington accomplishes the feat of dismissing notions of both homogenization and hybridization in favor of a model of civilizational conflict that is intellectually parochial, empirically untenable, and politically dogmatic. Both universalism and relativism are therefore repudiated, lest they interfere with the hermetic categorization that lies at the heart of the book. Writes Nederveen Pieterse (1996): “[I]t is the blatant admixture of security interests with a crude rendition of civilizational difference that makes Huntington’s position stand out for its demagogic character” (p. 1389).1
Huntington’s thesis is the least helpful of these perspectives for understanding intercultural relations. While competing forces do shape cultural globalization, they come as multifaceted and internally diverse constellations of various forces that work on numerous registers with different intensities, and rarely if ever do they come as neatly prepackaged and unitary categories. These include the constellations of local, national, regional, and global; economy, politics, society, culture; and power, accommodation, appropriation, resistance. The civilizational clash thesis fails to account for the mediations between the dual forces of universalism and particularism, homogenization and hybridization, that weave the fabric of global culture.2

In contrast to the bipolarity embodied in The Clash of Civilizations, my objective is to understand the complexity and polyvalence of intercultural relations. An exploration of the homogenization and hybridization scenarios is thus necessary but not sufficient, since my main interest lies in the role the mass media play in these scenarios. To this end, after exploring scenarios of global culture I revisit two schools of thought in media and communication research that are broadly associated with homogenization and hybridization: (1) the cultural imperialism thesis, rooted in the critical political economy of international communication; and (2) the active audience school, grounded in reception theory and cultural studies. I address questions such as: How do these two “paradigms” relate to the homogenization and hybridization scenarios? How have “cultural imperialism” and “active audience” formulated cross-cultural media influence? Finally, how do these two approaches inform an analysis of hybridity as a communicative phenomenon?

Both homogenization and hybridization acknowledge that global culture has been in the making for centuries; they both also regard transnational media, especially audiovisual media like television and film, as active shapers of contemporary culture. The importance of electronic media stems from their ability to connect hitherto relatively isolated spheres of life with relatively continuous streams of sounds, images, ideas, and information. This heightened “complex connectivity” (Tomlinson, 1999) links a multitude of “local” communities, thus forming the communicative space of global culture. Because of the ability of contemporary technologies to transcend time and space, they have accelerated the process of cultural globalization and at the same time expanded its range.

Agreement on the general premise that electronic media perform an active role in the globalization of culture does not preclude divergences
on the intensity, scope, and desirability of the media’s impact, issues grounded in larger geopolitical considerations and revolving around power and identity. These questions remain controversial: Is there an emerging global culture? What does the globalization of culture entail for local diversities? Does cultural globalization extend the political, economic, and technological power of dominant countries to the cultural domain, or, to the contrary, does it stimulate local renewal? Does this process lead to homogenization, or is it spawning a multitude of hybrid cultures?

THE GLOBAL MEDIA DEBATE AND THE RISE OF “CULTURAL IMPERIALISM”

The cultural imperialism position emerged in the early 1970s as a radical critique of functionalist international communication research (see Tomlinson, 1991, for a comprehensive treatment of cultural imperialism). Grounded in an understanding of media as cultural industries that harks back to the Frankfurt School, cultural imperialism is firmly rooted in the critical political economy tradition. Researchers working within this scenario have focused on systemic issues such as capital, infrastructure, and politico-economic concentration of power as determinants of international communication processes. Their basic assumption is that economic and political relations of dependency between first and third world create vast inequities—cultural among others—between nations. The founding texts of the cultural imperialism thesis were published in the 1970s and included Herbert Schiller’s Mass Communication and American Empire (1971/1992) and Communication and Cultural Domination (1976), Jeremy Tunstall’s The Media Are American (1977), and Armand Mattelart’s Multinational Corporations and the Control of Culture (1979). Also influential in establishing this research tradition were Ariel Dorfman’s and Armand Mattelart’s Para Leer al Pato Donald (1971), Oliver Boyd-Barrett’s chapter “Media Imperialism” (1977), and Johann Galtung’s Journal of Peace Research article “A Structural Theory of Imperialism” (1971).

The first wave of research focused on nation-states as primary actors in international relations, alleging that rich Western nation-states exported their cultural products and imposed their sociocultural values on poorer nations in the developing world (Schiller, 1971/1992). This group produced a number of studies that demonstrated that the flow of broadcast news and entertainment was biased in favor of industrialized
countries, both quantitatively, since most media flows were exported by the Western countries and imported by developing nations, and qualitatively, since developing nations received scant and prejudicial news coverage in Western media (Charles, Shore, and Todd, 1979; Larson, 1979; Varis, 1974, 1984).

Concerns about unequal international media flows ushered in the New World Information Order debate, or NWIO, later known as the New World Information and Communication Order, or NWICO. The 1976 Nairobi, Kenya, Nineteenth General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), whose mission as a specialized agency of the United Nations encompasses issues of communication and culture, passed a resolution adopting NWICO by consensus, and the thirty-first UN General Assembly shortly followed suit. In 1977, UNESCO appointed Irish statesman Sean McBride chair of a newly created International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, known as the McBride Commission, to follow up on the resolutions. At first focused on news flows between the North and the South, the NWICO debate evolved to include all international media flows. This change occurred because news and entertainment flows were both unequal, and also because (then) new media technologies such as communication satellites and video-cassette players and recorders made the international media landscape more complex. Strong differences polarized conference attendees in two groups. Comprising the United States and the United Kingdom, the first group insisted on the “free flow of information” doctrine that advocates unfettered market processes in information and media programs. The second group, a coalition of Western, Communist, and developing countries, perceived the “free flow of information” ideology as a justification for continued Anglo-American economic and cultural domination, what Mattelart (1994) retrospectively derided as “the free fox in the free chicken house” (p. 236). The latter group argued instead for a “free and balanced flow” of information (Masmoudi, 1979; Schiller, 1974; Zassoursky and Losev, 1981). It is important to emphasize that this was not a West-versus-Rest debate, since Canada and France, for example, often opposed the United States and the United Kingdom. It is equally crucial not to underestimate the influence of cold-war rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the legitimate American concerns about authoritarian control of information.

In addition to geopolitical competition, the chasm between the two sides was anchored in two different conceptions of culture. According
to the United States and Great Britain, cultural products were private commodities to be sold and bought according to market mechanisms. The other camp argued that culture was a public resource to be protected by the state from market forces because cultural products concretize a country’s national identity and cultural distinctiveness. One of the first UNESCO reports, the result of a conference on culture and identity, reflected those concerns:

Culture belongs to man, to all men. The conference was unanimous in recognizing and reaffirming with conviction and force the equal dignity of all cultures, rejecting any hierarchy in that area . . . . It therefore reaffirmed the duty of each to respect all cultures. It could be clearly seen that the affirmation of cultural identity had become a permanent requirement, both for individuals and for groups and nations . . . . Cultural identity [is] the defence of traditions, of history and of the moral, spiritual and ethical values handed down by past generations. (UNESCO, 1982, p. 8)

Besides the report’s asserting that culture was a public resource, the strong feelings suggested by its language are grounded in an unstated definition of culture as national culture. This view is also based on the assumption that national culture is a unitary entity that carries a repertoire of beliefs and traditions that require an active role by the state to protect the authenticity of national culture from endogenous corruption, a holistic conception of culture that, I argue in Chapter Seven, offers little help in understanding contemporary intercultural relations. Within this approach, when external influence or foreign influence was mentioned, it customarily referred to the United States, whose commercial popular culture has been the bête noire of governments and scholars alike. Information was subjected to a similar controversy between those who advocated a public service and educational role, and those who argued for the commercial exploitation of information resources. The passage in 1977 of a UN resolution that supported NWICO reflected widespread international (1) acceptance of the holistic conception of culture and (2) opposition to the free flow principle advocated by the United States.

Despite the fact that UNESCO and UN resolutions on the subject were neither legally binding nor practically feasible, both the U.S. government and nonstate actors in the United States fought the New World Information and Communication Order. The Reagan administration called on UNESCO to stop its efforts to “control press freedom,” and then assistant secretary of state Elliot Abrams counseled UNESCO to look for a solution to world communication problems in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States (Kleinwachter, 1994). U.S.
press coverage was in line with U.S. government policy, epitomized in a *New York Times* editorial that some considered the first public call for withdrawal from UNESCO. “If it turns out to be impossible to reject this attempt to tamper with our basic principles,” the *New York Times* wrote, “there is always the alternative of rejecting UNESCO itself” (quoted in Gerbner, 1994, p. 114). Indeed, the controversy eventually led to the withdrawal from UNESCO of the United States and the United Kingdom, and to the de facto decline of the global media debate.³

In the aftermath of the NWICO debate, the notion of cultural imperialism became a rallying cry for developing countries in their attempt to formulate an alternative to the globally pervasive Anglo-American media. The enduring resonance of imperialism rhetoric and its effectiveness at mobilizing disparate interests of relatively weak developing nations remains evident, although this discourse no longer prevails in international organizations. For example, UNESCO publications nowadays speak of hybridity instead of dominance (see Brunel and Lefort, 2000; Portella, 2000), which may explain why the United States rejoined UNESCO in 2002—in the famous “Axis of Evil” speech by U.S. president George W. Bush. This, however, is a moot point, since international media and cultural flows are no longer regulated by states but are now deregulated under the sway of the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. Clearly, the idea of cultural imperialism has been losing its political luster.

“Cultural Imperialism” in Question

The intellectual cachet of “cultural imperialism” did not stem from rigorous theoretical definition, because as a notion the term suffered from a polysemic ambiguity that wrapped the thesis itself in controversy. The thesis’s founding narratives (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Galtung, 1971; Mattelart, 1979; Schiller, 1971/1992, 1976; Tunstall, 1977) contained a variety of definitions whose differences ranged from subtle nuances to more substantial divergences. In one of the first published and most frequently cited definitions, U.S. media critic Herbert Schiller wrote in his seminal *Communication and Cultural Domination* (1976): “The concept of cultural imperialism . . . best describes the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the value and structures of the dominating center of the system” (p. 9). While
ushering in an era of radical critique of global power structures, Schiller’s definition revealed some of the contradictions that were to bedevil the cultural imperialism thesis. He essentially described a structural socioeconomic process while referring to it as cultural imperialism. The language he used—“world system,” “social institutions,” “structures,” and “center”—does not directly address the notion of “culture” in cultural imperialism, with the exception of a mention of the “values” of the center. British researcher Jeremy Tunstall (1977) included culture more explicitly in his definition of cultural imperialism, which stated that “authentic, traditional and local culture…is being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, mainly from the United States” (p. 57). One year later, Bolivian writer Luis Ramiro Beltrán (1978b) defined cultural imperialism as “a verifiable process of social influence by which a nation imposes on other countries its set of beliefs, values, knowledge, and behavioral norms as well as its overall style of life” (p. 184).

These definitions set the tone for the emerging thesis and simultaneously showed the first cracks in its edifice. First, there is the unarticulated conception of culture as a holistic, organic entity that is closely associated with the nation-state. Emerging in tandem with the NWICO debate, this view is problematical because it glosses over the cultural diversity and fusion that exist within most nation-states, and for other reasons elaborated on in Chapter Seven. Besides, critics were quick to accuse proponents of the cultural imperialism thesis of ideological rigidity and bipolar thinking. The cultural imperialism approach’s claims of cultural authenticity were synchronic, while assertions of cultural imposition and erasure were allegedly reminiscent of early theorizing in mass communication, such as the “magic bullet” and “hypodermic needle” models that treated audiences as passive cultural dupes. Early warning signals about the ambiguity of the concept came from its own advocates. The Belgian-born critic Armand Mattelart (1979), co-author with the Chilean-born Ariel Dorfman of Para Leer al Pato Donald (1971), raised concerns about cultural imperialism’s ambiguity, and wrote that the concept has “too often been used with ill-defined meaning” (p. 57). In a sweeping assessment, U.S.-based media scholar Fred Fejes (1981) warned of the absence of rigorous conceptual work and called for innovative theory construction. Fejes advocated research on the national aspects of domination, and a historical perspective on the “extremely complex interrelationships” (p. 286) between mass media and dominance. He also called for expanding cultural imperialism research from
the mass media to other areas, such as professional training and information data transfers. Most relevant to this book, Fejes argued for the necessity of a sophisticated understanding of the concept of culture. He thus encapsulated a major weakness of the thesis under critique:

[A] great deal of the concern over media imperialism is motivated by a fear . . . of the threat that such media poses to the integrity and the development of viable national cultures in Third World societies. All too often the institutional aspects of transnational media receive the major attention while the cultural impact, which one assumes to occur, goes unaddressed in any detailed manner. Generally a perception of the cultural consequences of the contents of various media products is based on a view of the mass media as primarily manipulative agents capable of having direct, unmediated effects on the audience’s behavior and world view. (p. 287)

Fejes concluded his statement by pointing to what he saw to be promising developments in literary scholarship on culture, a nod that in retrospect was prescient to the extent that it came on the heels of nascent theoretical (Hall, 1980/1997) and empirical (D. Morley, 1980) developments that would turn out to be influential in media studies.

By the 1990s, critics of the cultural imperialism perspective—both in media and interdisciplinary venues—were legion. The thesis of Herbert Schiller and his colleagues was dismissed as a monolithic theory that lacked subtlety, and it was increasingly questioned by empirical research. Titles such as Media Imperialism Reconsidered (C. Lee, 1980), The Decentering of Cultural Imperialism (Sinclair, 1992), “Beyond Cultural Imperialism” (Golding and Harris, 1997; Straubhaar, 1991), “Media Imperialism Reformulated” (Boyd-Barrett, 1998), and “Media Imperialism Revisited” (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000) have appeared with increasing regularity, underscoring an unequivocally revisionist trend.

Some scholars (C. Lee, 1980; Salwen, 1991; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997; Straubhaar, 1991) criticized the cultural imperialism approach for failing to adapt to changes in international media flows, while others (Elasmar and Hunter, 1997; Willnat, He, and Xiaoming, 1998) argued that the cultural imperialism scenario was unsubstantiated by empirical data. Sreberny-Mohammadi concluded that cultural imperialism has “lost much of its critical bite and historic validity” (1997, p. 47). While there is some truth in most of these writings, the fact that many critics still spend substantial print space outlining the deficiencies of cultural imperialism has imbued the thesis with a residual life-after-death attraction and continues to expose the lack of a solid alternative.
Because of their size and resources, countries like Brazil (Straubhaar, 1984, 1991) and China (C. Lee, 1980) raise questions about the cultural imperialism thesis. Both China and Brazil have substantial domestic audiences, strong cultural traditions, and resources relatively proportional to their size. With the world’s largest population, a strong economic growth rate, a nuclear arsenal, and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, China is a great power en route to superpower status. With Latin America’s largest economy and dominant military forces, a population close to 175 million, and a thriving creative tradition of television drama, Brazil is an emerging giant.

The cases of China and Brazil offer a corrective to the broad brush of the cultural imperialism thesis, but their main contribution is to stimulate new theoretical debates. For example, in his examination of Brazil, U.S. scholar Joseph Straubhaar (1991) introduced new theoretical material by reinterpreting the Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung’s (1971) concept of “asymmetrical interdependence” as a characteristic of international media relations whereby countries have multiple relationships and differential degrees of cultural, economic, and cultural power. Some scholars met the notion of interdependence with skepticism, with Mattelart, for example, arguing that it is a “leitmotif at the heart of the doctrine of soft power” (2002, p. 600), which in Mattelart’s view serves to deny the existence of a hierarchy of nation-states and to absolve dominant countries from responsibility and accountability. Nonetheless, whether one focuses on the power imbalances that “asymmetrical” suggests or the two-way interactions that “interdependence” connotes, the debate on intercultural media relations has moved into more nuanced terrain.

Salwen (1991) for instance, argued that exposure to foreign media is only one of several factors that may weaken cultural identities and transform social values. However, Salwen cites cases (Granzberg, 1982; Kang and Morgan, 1988; Tan, Tan, and Tan, 1987) where Western cultural influence did create “personal conflicts and social disruptions” (p. 39). For further research into this phenomenon, Salwen advocated widening the scope of methods and approaches involved in the study of cultural imperialism beyond critical political economy because “the phenomenon of cultural imperialism is far too important and far-reaching for its analysis to be limited to any single…subdiscipline” (p. 36). This statement is at once an acknowledgment of inequality in intercultural relations and an invitation for further interdisciplinary research.
What transpires from these analyses is that the shortcomings of “cultural imperialism” do not warrant a sweeping dismissal. As explained in Chapter One, several leading figures in the cultural imperialism scenario since the 1970s (Boyd-Barrett, 1998; Mattelart, 1994, 1998) have acknowledged the need to revise the dominance perspective and recognize the notion of hybridity, with the caveat that cultural imperialism as a general framework should not be dismissed. This shift reflects a more nuanced understanding of culture within the political economy tradition (Mosco and Schiller, 2001) and a blending of political economy and cultural studies approaches (Miller et al., 2001), concretizing an evolution (in the critical political economy tradition) that considers, in Edward Comor’s words, “the multiple and integrated levels of both structure and agency” (2002, p. 320).

Reconsidering the cultural imperialism thesis and elucidating some of its blind spots are therefore more useful than rejecting it wholesale. Notably, that thesis’s most important contribution transcends criticism: the argument that power pervades international communication processes. For instance, writers in that tradition have analyzed Western government intervention on behalf of cultural industries (Comor, 1997; Fehrenbach and Poiger, 2000a; Herman and McChesney, 1997; Mattelart, 1994; Schiller, 1991), some contending that the free flow doctrine is partly a rhetorical strategy that serves corporate media interests at the expense of nation-states and citizens. Finally, these researchers have paved the way for the argument that the right to communicate is as important as the right to freedom from oppression and the right to a clean environment, that the right to communicate is a civil right that ought not be subordinated to commercial interests.

The evolution of the debate is therefore a redirection of emphasis rather than a paradigm shift. There is growing interest in communicational dimensions of social justice, human rights, global civil society, and the transnational public sphere (Braman and Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1996; Thussu, 1998). This new direction has benefited from the theoretical and empirical contributions of feminism, postcolonial thought, cultural studies, and critical perspectives on development. The journal Public Culture, published by Duke University Press for the Society of Transnational Cultural Studies, focuses on issues of civil society and the public sphere from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives located at the intersection of the critical social sciences and interpretive humanities. Public Culture has institutionalized, perhaps more than any other
forum, the language of transnationalism (Chuh, 1996; Rouse, 1995) and a new “critical” perspective on internationalism (B. Lee, 1994). Other arenas where global issues of power and culture can be addressed critically from standpoints outside the cultural imperialism thesis *strictu sensu* include the special issue of *Communication Theory* on postcolonialism and the *Journal of International Communication.*

**Questioning the Postimperialist Blues**

Retrospectives on the cultural imperialism school have summarized and synthesized critiques directed against it (Roach, 1997; Tomlinson, 1991), but few have explored the institutional and disciplinary bases of the anti-cultural imperialism discourse. As mentioned earlier, theoretical perspectives are influenced by the environment in which they develop, in that the institutional space where a discourse arises exerts a formative influence on the tenor of that discourse. In that regard, what is the significance of the fact that many critics of the cultural imperialism thesis’s hailing from North American mainstream mass communication research (with some notable exceptions: C. Lee, 1980; Salwen, 1991; Straubhaar, 1991) have not fully engaged the tenets of cultural imperialism research? Indeed, most critics have claimed that the cultural imperialism thesis is rhetorical rather than scientific, ideological rather than empirical. For example, in their introduction to the special issue “Media Flows of Latin America” of the journal *Communication Research,* U.S.-based scholars Everett Rogers and Jorge Schement (1984) write that “[m]any publications are of a polemic nature, selecting facts mainly to support one position or another, and aiming at political persuasion rather than at the scientific testing of hypotheses. When a theoretical viewpoint has been utilized, such as dependency theory, empirical data have not always been brought to bear on theoretical hypotheses” (p. 161). Subsequent critiques of the cultural imperialism thesis echo this perspective by pointing to scarce empirical support or by asserting the weakness of foreign television influence (Elasmarn and Hunter, 1997; Willnat, He, and Xiaoming, 1998).

Repeated criticism compelled exponents of cultural imperialism to defend (Schiller, 1991) or reformulate (Boyd-Barrett, 1998; Mattelart, 1994) their claims. However, the critics’ preoccupation with empirical—in other words, statistical—validation or invalidation of the tenets of cultural imperialism, while on the surface illustrating methodological differences, exposes deeper epistemological and ontological divergences,
which then U.S.-based German scholar Hanno Hardt (1988) fleshes out in his critical review of comparative mainstream mass communication research in the United States: “This tradition fails to consider historical growth as an indissoluble process that cannot be dissected into empirical parts or facts and prefers to treat communication and media studies in terms of a series of specific, isolated social phenomena. In this context, it seems that the field suffers not only from a cultural bias but also from a social scientific bias toward searching for laws governing the relationship of media and society. As a result, empirical research techniques obscure cultural differences” (p. 138). The rejection of the radical agenda of the cultural imperialism thesis was also grounded in the political context of post–World War II social science research in the United States. According to Hardt (1988), U.S. international communication research has developed in response to the needs of the U.S. government and not as an autonomous area of knowledge. It is true that U.S. policy makers viewed the global spread of American television as both a commercial opportunity and a strategic advantage. U.S. media scholar Michael Curtin (1993) argued that Federal Communication Commission officials were keenly aware of these advantages and ensured that the international regulatory environment was suitable to U.S. governments and corporations. The American policy discourse that emerged in the 1950s is best described, according to Curtin, as “official internationalism,” a doctrine dedicated to enhancing U.S. leadership and later serving as the framework for the notion of free flow of information.

This policy discourse on global television can be understood within a broad historical pattern that some critics have identified in public discourse in the United States as the denial of empire. Literary scholars Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease argue that the absence of empire is an enduring characteristic of the study of U.S. culture. In their view, American studies and diplomatic history “mirror one another in their respective blind spots to the cultures of US imperialism” (1993, p. 11), because the resilience of the idea of U.S. exceptionalism articulates imperial practice with academic discourse. Kaplan (1993) claims that this discourse is grounded in two historical eras: the struggle for independence from the British, and the Cold War against the Soviets, when the United States saw itself as resisting imperial domination. The passing of these two eras did not entail the waning of empire denial. Kaplan cites a New York Times opinion piece whose author refutes the claim that the 1991 Gulf War was imperialistic and argues for a distinction between unipolarity and U.S. dominance, explaining that “a unipolar world is not the same
as a hierarchical system dominated by a single power that creates the rules as well as enforces them” (quoted in Kaplan, 1993, p. 13). Kaplan reads this explanation as a double dynamic of displacement and denial that replaces notions of imperialism and empire with euphemisms such as “unipolarity” and “world power.”

This analysis of imperial practices within a body of knowledge that, according to Kaplan (1993), has systematically refused to acknowledge the presence of these practices is emblematic of a critical and interpretive turn in the human and social sciences. It is remarkable that mainstream international communication research has entered its putative postimperialist era at precisely the point in time when other disciplines have come to terms with power relations in their fields. The field of American studies is an interesting exemplar of this trend, because arguably no other area in the social sciences and humanities is as inextricably bound to the history and national identity of the United States. In a landmark article in *American Quarterly*, American studies scholars Jane Desmond and Virginia Domínguez (1996) called for relocating American studies in a “critical internationalism” (p. 475), a notion borrowed from cultural critic Benjamin Lee (1995). From the onset, the authors draw a clear distinction between critical internationalism and a superficial internationalization that merely adds a few international courses to the curriculum and a few non-American scholars to the faculty. According to Desmond and Domínguez (1996), this internationalization movement remains U.S.-centric and immune to analyses of the United States from other countries and intellectual traditions.

They call for a dynamic interface between U.S. and non-U.S. scholars that would establish new sites for the production of knowledge, and for a clear engagement with issues that may not be of immediate concern and interest to the domestic U.S. sphere. This globalist outlook, according to these American studies scholars, is best achieved by the adoption of a comparative epistemology, which to succeed must engage and respect scholarship about the United States produced by non-U.S. scholars, and not ghettoize these scholars and their intellectual traditions according to geographical or political criteria. It is significant that American studies—a field whose focus is by definition the national sphere of the United States—would enter such a critical moment of increased self-reflexivity and international engagement, when international communication—a field that by name is indubitably cosmopolitan and whose scope is nominally the world—would retreat from a critical and globally engaged agenda.
Developments in American studies can serve as a departure point from which to reform the cultural imperialism thesis and revisit some of its core beliefs in the wake of the current interest in “cultural globalization.” Before examining the assumptions of the cultural globalization literature vis-à-vis cultural imperialism and its critics, it is important to understand the contributions of the active audience group to the study of transnational communication and culture. Just as the critical movement in American studies helped restore the agency of the Other in U.S. history and foreign policy, active audience research, as we will shortly see, restored a sense of social agency to audiences that cultural imperialism scholarship had—paradoxically, in light of its progressive agenda—denied them.

The Active Audience and Global Media Studies

The history of audience research has oscillated between approaches that emphasized the media’s persuasive power and perspectives that stressed audience activity. While a teleological origin is impossible to pinpoint, the Frankfurt School in Germany played a pioneering role in focusing on the media audience, since the school’s critical perspective associated instrumental uses of communication with the rise of fascist exploitation of the masses and the concomitant loss of individual agency. In an environment of modernization and urbanization, traditional social mediators between leaders and the people crumbled, and as a result alienated individuals succumbed to targeted persuasion campaigns. The Frankfurt School approach’s deep gloominess stems from its grounding in the totalitarian experience of Nazism. When its leading figures Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse escaped from Nazi persecution to New York in the late 1930s, they stirred a debate about the role of the mass media in society.

North American–based researchers such as Elihu Katz, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Robert Merton refuted the Frankfurt School’s attribution of powerful effects to the mass media and disagreed with their German colleagues’ assessment of social mediators between politicians and the people. These two lines of thought can be found in Lazarsfeld and colleagues’ The People’s Choice (1944) and Katz and Lazarsfeld’s Personal Influence (1955), which developed the “two-step” flow idea of mediated influence to counter the Frankfurt School’s belief in unmediated communication between leaders and their constituencies. Contra the philosophically grounded and theoretically informed critical methods
of Frankfurt School scholars, U.S. researchers advocated functionalist approaches to mass media effects. In 1946, Merton published *Mass Persuasion*, a study of the Kate Smith war-bond broadcasts in the United States. Reviewing these developments, British media cultural studies scholar David Morley (1994) pointed out that Merton (1946) presciently called for an emphasis on the actual process of communication, at a time when most researchers focused on the content (Berelson, 1952) of the mass media, but that Merton’s call for a new direction led to an unintended switch from content to effects, often studied from a behaviorist perspective (for example, see Bandura, 1961). By emphasizing limited media effects, these studies prepared the ground for notions of audience activity.

The “uses and gratifications” tradition developed in the environment hostile to Frankfurt School–inspired models of powerful media effects and passive audiences. Dennis McQuail (1984) traced the beginnings of “uses and gratifications” to the 1940s, when early studies of radio looked into the social environment of listeners. A broad and eclectic literature concerned with the motivations of media users (see Klapper, 1960) ensued, whose central concern was the “functions” of the media, expressed by Katz when he made his famous pronouncement that “less attention [should be paid] to what media do to people and more to what people do with the media” (1959, p. 2). Katz was in fact arguing that media-effects research should presume that audience behavior is selective, launching “uses and gratifications.”

There are several strands of uses-and-gratifications research (McQuail, 1984; McQuail and Gurevitch, 1974), whose core assumptions are that individuals in the audience (1) are motivated to make conscious choices about which media to use, and (2) know how to use them in order to obtain gratification. Early formulations emphasized a psychological approach (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974) that focused on needs and the expectations they create, within a functionalist framework that influenced later research (Liebes and Katz, 1990; Rosengren, Wenner, and Palmgreen, 1985). No longer as prevalent as it once was, “uses and gratifications” still occasionally frames research on “new” technologies such as the cellular phone (Leung and Wei, 2000) and the Internet (Papacharisi and Rubin, 2000).

Since the 1970s, postfunctionalist developments within mass communication research have challenged the uses-and-gratifications perspective. These approaches include cultural studies, semiotics, symbolic interactionism, and even mainstream mass communication and political
communication research (Ang, 1991, 1996; Carey and Kreiling, 1974; Chaney, 1972; Downing, 1996; Elliott, 1974; Hall, 1980/1997; Morley, 1980, 1992; Nightingale, 1996; Swanson, 1977). Uses-and-gratifications scholars were themselves dissatisfied with aspects of the theory (see McQuail, 1984 and Rosengren et al., 1985). Critics focused on the theoretical thinness of the uses-and-gratifications approach, its methodological flaws, its individualistic psychological focus associated with a lack of attention to power and structural issues, its assumption of a stable, conflict-free social environment, and the consumerist connotations of its language. Criticism of the uses-and-gratifications perspective was somewhat concurrent with the development of the active audience formation in cultural studies, which shares uses-and-gratifications’ basic assumption of audience activity, but has substantially different theoretical positions, methodological tools, and political sensibilities.

To understand audience studies in their historical context, it may be useful to go back to mid-twentieth-century Europe. Concerns with “Americanization” can be traced back to interwar Europe, when fascist governments adapted U.S. media-production strategies for propaganda purposes (Fehrenbach and Poigier, 2000b). These concerns turned into a widespread preoccupation in post–World War II Europe when U.S. soldiers introduced American consumer icons—most famously Coca-Cola. At that time, American popular culture was perceived to be “here, there, and everywhere” (Wagnleitner and May, 2000), and as a result was met with hostility in European countries struggling to rebuild their states and societies (Fehrenbach and Poiger, 2000b), leading to a variety of anti-American discourses (Ellwood, 2000). However, post–World War II European reactions to U.S. culture were ambiguous, at once rejection and acceptance, and may be better understood if we situate them in the internal dynamics of some European countries. For example, while the reconstruction of German cinema was shrouded in fears of Americanization, Fehrenbach (2000) has argued that the real cause of these concerns was anxiety about post-Nazi German identity. Similarly, debates about limiting U.S. popular music on French radios conveniently deflected attention from internal French struggles (Petterson, 2000), while disputes over U.S. popular music in 1940s Britain highlighted class differences in British society (Hebdige, 1988). Nonetheless, perception of U.S. cultural influence was a unifying theme in Europe in the 1940s and 1950s, and to some extent is still a factor in present-day Europe.

More importantly, U.S. social science provided a counter-template for European audience research. Theoretically, the cybernetic
communication model (Shannon and Weaver, 1949) subsumed the audience under the individualistic term “receiver,” while mass media organizations were described as “senders.” Communication was a process of transmission that took place through “message” and “feedback” in a “channel” where the process could be challenged by “noise.” This mechanistic model thus reduced audience activity to “feedback,” presumably to be provided by audience surveys. Though this model dominated North American media research, it was less influential in Europe, where it nonetheless was engaged by scholars like the British Richard Hoggart and the Italian Umberto Eco (see Nightingale, 1996, for a more elaborate discussion of this issue). Nonetheless, Shannon and Weaver (1949) was explicitly taken as a counter-model in cultural studies approaches to audience activity.7

British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall counterposed his encoding-decoding approach (1980/1997) to the cybernetic model. Hall conceived of the process of communication as a “complex structure in dominance” (p. 91) that consists of four distinct but connected “moments”—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction. Each of these stages, in Hall’s view, is necessary “to the circuit as a whole,” but none of the stages predetermines the next, even if the moments of encoding and decoding are “determinate” (p. 91). Hall proposed three hypothetical decoding positions: a “dominant-hegemonic” code, a negotiated code, and an oppositional code. Dominant meanings are those that “win plausibility for and command as legitimate a decoding of the event within the limits of dominant definitions” (p. 99). This formulation can be seen as the beginning of the notion of “no necessary correspondence,” through which Hall (1985, 1986) expressed his theory of articulation based on notions of Gramscian hegemony as opposed to the more necessary correspondence between institutional practices and social effects seen in the Althusserian notion of interpellation.

The encoding/decoding proposal had a significant influence on the then nascent audience-research tradition in cultural studies. In the 1980s, half a dozen empirical studies crystallized the empirical implications of Hall’s theory. The founding cohort included David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon’s Everyday Television “Nationwide” (1978), Morley’s The “Nationwide” Audience (1980), Dorothy Hobson’s Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera (1982), Ien Ang’s Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination (1985), and David Buckingham’s Public Secrets: EastEnders and Its Audience (1987). This first wave was mostly British
and focused on single television programs. Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, not all these studies were concerned with reception. In fact, as Australian scholar Virginia Nightingale (1996) reminds us, some of these studies focused substantively on media production.

The central theoretical and epistemological questions of the active audience design were taken up in North America in a special issue of the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, “Cultural Studies and Ethnography” (1989), and a symposium organized around a provocative piece by Canada-based Martin Allor (1988) in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. These two scholarly events, among other publications and conferences, signaled a transatlantic migration and a subsequent institutional recognition of audience ethnography in North America. This recognition was foretold by literary scholar Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984), although in that book Radway focused on romance novels and not on television. There was also James Lull’s *World Families Watch Television* (1988), with a symbolic interactionist bent, and Liebes and Katz’s *The Export of Meaning* (1990), grounded in a modified uses-and-gratifications perspective. These developments were anticipated by earlier studies on media reception that were often unacknowledged (see Curran, 1990).

Though American versions shared the British school’s focus on audience activity, they did not place equal weight on exploring how media reception reproduces ideological structures. Neither did most U.S. active audience studies account for the material realities that frame media consumption. Rather, this research focused on what it saw as the empowering attributes of subversive interpretations of media texts, which led some critics to bemoan what they saw as a “cultural populism” (McGuigan, 1992) that was “pointless” (Seamann, 1992). In fact, both U.K. and U.S. variants of active audience research suffered from the critiques leveled at cultural studies in general, namely, according exaggerated importance to discursive processes at the expense of structural forces (see the various contributions to Ferguson and Golding, 1997). Morley, an audience-research pioneer who nonetheless warned elsewhere of the “pitfalls” of audience activity (Morley, 1995), encapsulated the core argument against (most) North American audience research as follows: “One of the crucial features of the American (and predominantly literary) appropriation of British cultural studies has been the loss of any sense of culture and communications as having material roots, in broader social and political processes and structures, so that the discursive process of the constitution of meanings often becomes the
exclusive focus on analysis, without any reference to its institutional or economic setting” (Morley, 1997, p. 123). However, though Morley acknowledged the “unhelpful romanticization of consumer freedoms” (p. 137) in some active audience studies, he nonetheless warned of an artificial separation between what he considered to be complementary micro- and macroprocesses.

This “debate” between—and also within—North American and British approaches to the audience, joined by scholars from India, Latin America, and Scandinavia (see Murphy and Kraidy, 2003b), underscores that the audience is, explicitly or latently, the linchpin of research on media influence. Indeed, the cultural imperialism perspective was predicated on an unstated audience, which was putatively assumed to be dependent, passive, and vulnerable. But does recognition of audience activity, which opens the possibility of some kind of social agency, fatally undermine the cultural imperialism thesis? Or does such recognition usher in a more urbane methodology to tackle cultural dominance?

In fact, the radical critique of transnational cultural power initiated by cultural imperialism scholars may be more crucial at a time when “globalization,” with its ideological baggage and economic bases, is promoted as an alternative framework for international communication studies.

FROM “CULTURAL IMPERIALISM” TO “CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION”? 

Globalization has become, in the terms of world-system theorist Immanuel Wallerstein (2000), an “enormous recent furor” (p. xix) in the human and social sciences. The word “global” is more than four centuries old, but its derivatives “globalize” and “globalization” appeared only in the late 1950s, and in 1961 Webster’s was the first major dictionary to define “globalization” (Waters, 1995). Two decades later the word had already entered academic parlance, but it is the 1990s that witnessed the rise to prominence of the notions “global culture” and “cultural globalization.” As an innately interdisciplinary constellation of concepts and perspectives, “cultural globalization” differs from both the cultural imperialism thesis and the active audience group. That dissimilarity, however, should not distract from the intellectual debt that cultural globalization owes to both aforementioned media-research traditions, as global culture scholars have implicitly borrowed and adapted ideas from writings on both cultural imperialism and audience activity.
Like “imperialism” in the 1970s and “postmodernism” in the 1980s, “globalization” is an infamously ambiguous word, “a maddeningly euphemistic term laden with desire, fantasy, fear, attraction—and intellectual imprecision about what it is supposed to describe” (Miller et al., 2001, p. 18). Its founding sociological narratives culminated in the early 1990s, when British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990) described globalization as the “intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (p. 64), and U.S. sociologist Roland Robertson (1992) defined it as “the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” (p. 8). Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz’s definition of a global “ecumene” as a “region of persistent culture interaction and exchange” (Hannerz, 1994, p. 137) reflects its anthropological underpinnings, conceived of by Arjun Appadurai (1994) in terms of disjunctive flows of people, capital, technology, images, and ideologies.

Global culture gained recognition as a salient social science research issue in a 1990 double issue of the journal *Theory, Culture, and Society*, subsequently reissued as a book (Featherstone, 1994). In that volume, British sociologist Anthony Smith (1994) expressed some trepidation toward the concept of “global culture.” If culture meant a collectivity’s way of life, Smith argued, then it is impossible to speak of a global culture, because there are many different ways of life and therefore many cultures. Nonetheless, Smith acknowledged a developing global culture that “is tied to no place or period. It is context-less, a true melange of disparate components drawn from everywhere and nowhere, borne upon the modern chariots of global telecommunication systems” (p. 177, my emphasis), effectively introducing, without naming it, the idea of deterritorialization and its more controversial cousin, hybridity.

The volume *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization, and Modernity* (Featherstone, 1994) instituted the vocabulary of the Anglophone debate on the tension in global culture between cohesion and dispersal, homogenization and heterogenization. In addition to Anthony Smith’s contribution (1994), Arjun Appadurai expounded his now famous notion of “disjuncture,” Zygmunt Bauman (1994) underscored the “ambivalence” of modernity, and Immanuel Wallerstein (1994) famously cast culture as “the ideological battleground of the modern world-system” (p. 31). Besides setting the parameters of the debate, the volume (Featherstone, 1994) questioned the idea of global cultural uniformity, paving the way for the hybridity discourse. In his extensively cited and anthologized
article “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”—reprinted in his Modernity at Large (1996)—Appadurai proffered his landscape metaphors (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, financescapes, etc.) to illustrate deterritorialization, and held that cross-cultural exchanges “play havoc with the hegemony of Eurochronology” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 30).

Another seminal volume on global culture carried the proceedings of an international symposium held in Binghamton, New York, in 1989. Culture, Globalization, and the World-System (King, 1990/1997) regroups some of the contributors to the global culture issue of Theory, Culture, and Society with other scholars. While it shares the Featherstone (1994) collection’s concern with the relationship of the global and the local, King’s volume is more inclusive in that contributors hail from both the humanities and social sciences. In contrast to the former’s inclusion of mostly sociologists and anthropologists, the latter gathered art historians (Barbara Abou-El-Haj and John Tagg) and visual media scholars (Janet Wolff and Maureen Turin) in addition to sociologists (Roland Robertson and Immanuel Wallerstein) and anthropologist Ulf Hannerz. Many of the authors have interdisciplinary affiliations: Robertson is also a professor of religious studies, King holds a joint appointment in sociology and in art history, Wallerstein is a political economist, and Hall is probably the world’s preeminent cultural studies scholar.


A similar debate arose in international communication scholarship, where several factors explain the advocacy of “cultural globalization” as an alternative to “cultural imperialism.” First, the end of the Cold War as a global framework for ideological, geopolitical, and economic competition catalyzed a rethinking of conceptual approaches and analytical
categories. By giving rise to the United States as the lone superpower and at the same time leaving the world politically fragmented, the complexity of the post–Cold War era presents tension between global forces of cohesion and local reactions of dispersal. In this intricate arrangement of interlocking subnational, national, and supranational forces, the nation-state no longer monopolizes political agency. Globalization thus allegedly replaced cultural imperialism because it conveys a process (or more accurately, many interlocking processes) with less coherence and direction (Tomlinson, 1991), weakening the cultural unity of all nation-states, not only those in the developing world. Whereas the term “imperialism” reflects an intentional and systematic endeavor, “globalization” refers to a more complex phenomenon, “a dialectical process because...local happenings may move in an obverse direction” (Giddens, 1990, p. 64).

The opening of the field of international communication to approaches beyond social psychology and political economy is the second factor behind the switch from imperialism to globalization. Notably, the irruption of cultural sociology and anthropology, in addition to cultural studies and its combination of literary criticism, semiotics, and Marxist cultural interpretation, contributed to moving the relatively contained field of international communication into a more explicitly interdisciplinary configuration of approaches that, as mentioned earlier, I have referred to as global media studies (see Kraidy, 2002c). The recognition by theorists of global culture—hailing from anthropology (Appadurai, 1996), sociology (Bamyeh, 2000) or literary studies (Jameson, 1998)—of the importance of the communicative dimensions of globalization is the third factor contributing to the shift from imperialism to globalization. This recognition reflects a growing awareness that many of the economic, political, and ideological aspects of globalization are predicated on gathering, encoding, manipulating, disseminating, decoding, restricting, resisting, countering, marketing, selling, and buying information.8

In his exploration of the connections between globalization and culture, British media scholar John Tomlinson (1999) argued that an understanding of the “complex connectivity” (p. 2) of globalization is impossible to achieve outside “the conceptual vocabularies of culture” (p. 1). Tentacular networks that carry information, ideas, images, commodities, and people across national borders create an intricate level of connectivity that forms the backbone of globalization. By increasing the interconnections between various localities and by intensifying
the quality of these contacts, globalization connotes closeness, or “global spatial-proximity” (p. 3). Tomlinson views proximity as a primarily phenomenological issue that arises in people’s lived experience of globalization as inherently local and embodied.

If globalization is experienced locally, then each place encounters globalization differently. While nodes on the network of global connectivity—such as large cosmopolitan airports—are relatively standardized, local communities, according to Tomlinson (1999), retain their diversity, because of the continuing centrality of local life. While Tomlinson, following Robertson (1992), acknowledges that globalization has an inherent drive toward “global unicity” (1999, p. 10), he is nonetheless critical of the cultural imperialism thesis because in his view it implies an unjustified logical chain that links connectivity, proximity, and uniformity. Tomlinson laudably emphasizes the need to “unravel from the complexly intertwined practices of the cultural, the economic and the political, a sense of purpose of the cultural—that of making life meaningful” (p. 18, emphasis in original), an unpacking that requires the explicit recognition of the diversity of local engagements with the multiple dimensions of globalization.

Tomlinson spells out a medial position when it comes to the importance of culture in globalization. On one hand, he criticizes Giddens (1990) for subsuming culture to technology in his treatment of globalization. Indeed, Giddens’s *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) contains a sole mention of the cultural realm; the prominent sociologist, as if in an afterthought, recognizes culture as “a fundamental aspect of globalization” (p. 77). On the other hand, Tomlinson is equally critical of those who privilege culture over other dimensions of globalization, as illustrated in the statement that “[w]e can expect the economy and the polity to be globalized to the extent that they are culturalized, that is to the extent that the exchanges that take place within them are accomplished symbolically” (Waters, 1995, pp. 9–10, quoted in Tomlinson, 1999, p. 22). Waters’s claim, as Tomlinson himself points out, is strongly idealist and neglects the political economy of globalization; it also espouses the old distinction between the cultural, political, and economic spheres, a separation that is arguably no longer tenable because of the complex links between these spheres of human life (see Jameson, 1998). Shunning both cultural fetishism and material determinism, Tomlinson draws a distinction between culture as “instrumental symbolization,” which he attributes to Waters, and his own understanding of culture as “existentially significant meaning-construction” (1999, p. 23). “Instrumental
symbolization” refers to the ways in which communication and cultural codes are used to facilitate political and economic processes of globalization. In contrast, a view of culture as an existentially significant process of meaning construction typifies a phenomenological approach committed to understanding locality. Meaning construction should not be misconstrued as mere symbolic play subjected to the determining forces of globalization. Rather, culture is “consequential” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 24, emphasis in original) because it affects weighty individual and social actions. Though culture does not determine other aspects of globalization, it is indispensable for understanding them.

Moving from imperialism to globalization as a framework for international communication research is, however, problematical, because the two schemes occupy conflicting positions on the ideological spectrum. Thus the teleological argument that international communication has evolved from a paradigm of imperialism to one of globalization is not a natural development, but a substantively, though not exclusively, ideological shift. To that effect Curran and Park (2000) decry narratives of “linear development in which those mired in the error of media imperialism theory have been corrected by the sages of cultural globalization” (p. 8) and conclude that the cultural globalization approach neglects history and power.

In this regard the role of the state, an issue growing in salience in international communication research (Braman, 2002; Curran and Park, 2000; Morris and Waisbord, 2001; Nordenstreng, 2001), is an important point of friction between the cultural imperialism and cultural globalization approaches. The former regards powerful Western states as complicitous with transnational corporations in exploiting weaker states in developing nations with the help of accommodating elites, while in the latter the state is increasingly invisible or, when present, plays an allegedly protectionist or authoritarian role. Again, Curran and Park (2000) are instructive in this regard: “In the cultural globalization literature, the state and nation tend to be associated with hierarchy, monolithic structures, historically contingent identities, repressive cultures, spatial competition, and war. Indeed, cultural globalization is viewed as positive precisely because it is thought to weaken the nation” (p. 11). It is true that the analysis of contemporary cultural flow and hybrid forms requires a more polished framework than the cultural imperialism thesis. However, because it tends to celebrate the weak state, cultural globalization theory may be justly regarded as a discourse whose bases are more ideological than empirical. In effect, “cultural globalization”
elicits the same sort of criticism that has riddled “cultural imperialism” since the 1980s: in addition to being ideologically motivated, it tends to be conceptually ill defined because its arguments tend to be general and ungrounded in concrete settings. Because of this baggage, the cultural globalization approach is less than ideal for a critical understanding of contemporary hybrid cultures.

Is there an alternative to the cultural globalization perspective, one that would give adequate attention to cultural hybridity and at the same time address political and economic power and recognize an important, albeit changed, role for the state? The 1970s were the decade of “cultural imperialism,” the 1980s of the “active audience,” the 1990s of “cultural globalization.” The verdict is still out on which discourse of global culture will capture the first decade of the twenty-first century. Without succumbing to the temptation of an illusory teleological ordering of scenarios of global culture, presently available options are not satisfactory. The remaining chapters of this book explore the imbrication of hybridity and power in communicative and cultural processes, leading to the formulation in the ultimate chapter of critical transculturalism as a framework for the study of global communication and culture. Before reaching that point, however, it is essential to trace the genealogy of the idea of cultural mixture in intellectual and public discourse. The next chapter explores the historical development, applications, and critiques of the notions of hybridity, miscegenation, syncretism, mestizaje, transculturation, creolization, métissage, Créolité, and négritude.