
THE GLOBALIZATION OF NOTHING

GEORGE RITZER

University of Maryland

WITH

MICHAEL RYAN

University of Maryland

In this essay,¹ we will argue that we are witnessing the globalization of nothing.² Note that we are *not* arguing that globalization is nothing; indeed it is clear that the process is of enormous significance. Rather, the argument is, using a term borrowed from Weber, that there is an *elective affinity* between globalization and nothing. That is, one does not cause the other, but they do tend to vary together. Thus, globalization tends to involve the spread of nothing throughout the world. Of course, what is pivotal is the meaning of nothing.

By *nothing*, we mean (largely) empty forms that are centrally conceived and controlled and relatively devoid of distinctive content. Conversely, *something* is defined here as (largely) full forms that are indigenously conceived and controlled and relatively rich in distinctive content. Thus, it is easier to export empty forms (nothing) throughout the globe than it is forms that are loaded with content (something). The latter are more likely to be rejected by at least some cultures and societies because the content is more likely to conflict with local content and be found offensive by more of the natives. In contrast, empty forms are less likely to come into conflict with local forms and since they are devoid of distinctive content, it would be difficult for them to arouse anxiety in the natives. In addition, empty forms have other advantages from the point of view of globalization including the fact that since they are so minimalist, they are easy to replicate over and over

and they have a cost advantage since they are relatively inexpensive to reproduce. A good example of nothing in these terms is the shopping mall which is a largely empty structure that is easily replicated around the world and which can be filled with an endless array of specific content (e.g. local shops, local foods, etc—something!) that can vary enormously from one locale to another.

We also argue here that nothing can be broken down into four sub-types; all of them largely empty of distinctive content and easily globalized. The four sub-types are *non-places* (Auge, 1995), or settings that are largely empty of content (e.g., the mall discussed above), *non-things* such as credit cards in which there is little to distinguish one from the hundreds of millions of others and which work in exactly the same way for all who use them, *non-people*, for example, telemarketers who interact with all customers in much the same way relying heavily on scripts, and *non-services*, for example, ATMs provide identical services where the customer does all the work.

In addition, something can also be broken down into four corresponding sub-types; all of them largely full of distinctive content and not as easily globalized. The four sub-types are *places*, or settings that are rich in distinctive content (for example, a local diner where the patrons are likely to be acquainted), *things*, such as a one of a kind painting by Picasso, *people*, for example, a local butcher who comes to know and be known by his regular customers, and *services*, or the type of work that would be performed by a human loan officer when interacting with and deciding upon loan decisions for his customers.

Five continua are used to distinguish nothing from something, and more specifically to distinguish between non-places—places, things—non-things, people—non-people, and services—non-services. The left hand pole of each the following is the something end of the continuum and the right is the nothing end:

- (1) Distinctive Substance—Lacking in Distinctive Substance. This is closely related to the definition of something/nothing. A local book shop with a knowledgeable and involved owner and staff and a lovingly chosen selection of books, many of them quite out of the ordinary, would be a good example of that which is distinctive in substance. Amazon.com exemplifies that which is lacking in distinctive substance since, although it began as an online bookseller, it now offers virtually anything it thinks it can sell, and earn a profit from, over the Internet.
- (2) Unique—Generic. That which is unique tends to be something. For example, Oldenburg (1989) has written of what he calls “great good places” such as local taverns and cafes. Their one-of-a-kind personnel, food, customers and ambiance puts them at the unique end of this continuum. An outlet of a fast food chain is obviously an example of that which is generic.
- (3) Local Ties—No Local Ties. Ties to the local community tend to be associated with being something, while a lack of such ties tends to be associated with nothing. For example, the first Taco Bell in San Bernadino, California had deep and local ties. Now, a trip to Taco Bell, no matter where it is located in the world, will be much like a trip to any other Taco Bell.
- (4) Temporally Specific—Time-less. Just as with space discussed in the preceding continuum, that which is tied to a specific time period tends to be something, while that which is not tied to any particular time period tends to be nothing. Colonial Williamsburg is linked to a particular time period and is therefore something in spite of the fact that it is basically a theme park. In contrast, Disney World is self-consciously time-less since it seeks to represent many different time periods (real and imagined), or even no time period at all.
- (5) Human Relations—Dehumanized. That which is rich in human relationships tends to be something, whereas that which is lacking

in such relationships (is dehumanized) tends to be nothing. Thus, a personal loan negotiated between banker and customer and the wholly impersonal credit card loan that is pre-approved, or granted by a computer program, are good examples of the extremes of this continuum.

Thus, the basic argument is that globalization is bringing with it the worldwide spread of nothingness. More specifically, we are witnessing the global proliferation of that which tends to be nothing characterized by lack of distinctive content, the generic, lack of local ties, time-lessness, and dehumanization. Of course, that which tends to be something is being globalized as well, but to a much smaller degree and with far less impact on the world. Furthermore, while that which is expensive can be nothing (one of millions of Gucci bags is little different from one of billions of Big Macs), that which is inexpensive is far more likely to be nothing, or to be made inexpensive (due to economies of scale) and into nothing by being transformed into a commodity produced millions or billions of times in exactly the same way and then sold throughout the world (usually by non-people providing a non-service in a non-place). Thus, while the Internet and various forms of telecommunications make it possible to sell great works of art throughout the world, the impact of that is minuscule in comparison to the global distribution of Disney kitsch of all varieties.

More on Globalization

Globalization theory has emerged, in part, as a result of a series of developments internal to social theory, notably the reaction against such earlier perspectives as modernization theory.³ Among the defining characteristics of this theory were its orientation to issues that were of central concern in the West, the preeminence it accorded to developments there, and the idea that the rest of the world had little choice but to become increasingly like it (more democratic, more capitalistic, and so on). Other theories (e.g., world system⁴ and dependency theory⁵) emerged in reaction, at least in

part, to such a positive view of the West (as well as the Northern vs. the Southern Hemisphere) and offered global perspectives that were critical of it for, among other things, its exploitation of many other parts of the world. Nevertheless, they retained a focus on the West, albeit a highly critical orientation toward it. While there are many different versions of globalization theory, there is a tendency in virtually all of them to shift away from a focus on the West and to examine transnational processes that flow in many different directions, as well as those that are independent of any single nation or area of the world.⁶

In his recent overview of globalization theory, Roland Robertson outlined what he considers to be *the* key issues in globalization theory.⁷ While all are important, three of them lie at the center of this essay and two of them are closely related to one another. The two interrelated issues are as follows: “*Does global change involve increasing homogeneity or increasing heterogeneity or a mixture of both?*” And “*What is the relationship between the local and the global?*”⁸ These two issues are tightly linked since the predominance of the local would tend to be associated with heterogeneity while the dominance of the global would be associated more with homogenization. Whatever the mix (and there is always a mix) of the local and the global, heterogeneity and homogeneity, the third issue raised by Robertson remains of great importance: “*What drives the globalization process? What is its motor force?*”⁹ The answer to the last question(s) is highly complex since there is certainly no single driving force, nor is there a single process of globalization. However, later in this essay, after we have specified our approach to the globalization process, we will discuss several of the motor forces will concern us here.

It is clear that to Robertson, and many other students of globalization, the central theoretical issue is the relationship between the highly interrelated topics of homogeneity-heterogeneity and the global-local. Indeed, Robertson is not only known for his interest in these issues, but for his articulation of a

now-famous concept—*glocalization*—that emphasizes the integration of the global and the local.¹⁰ While glocalization is an integrative concept, and Robertson is certainly interested in both sides of the glocal-global, homogenization-heterogenization continua, his work tends to emphasize the importance of the glocal and the existence of heterogeneity.¹¹ We will seek to offer a more balanced view on these issues by developing a second concept—*grobalization*—to supplement the undoubtedly important idea of glocalization.

The concept of glocalization gets to the heart of not only Robertson's views, but also what many contemporary theorists interested in globalization think about the nature of transnational processes.¹² *Glocalization* can be defined as the interpenetration of the global and the local resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas. The concept of *grobalization*, a much-needed companion to the notion of glocalization,¹³ focuses on the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like and their desire, indeed need, to impose themselves on various geographic areas.¹⁴ Their main interest is in seeing their power, influence, and in some cases profits grow (hence the term *grobalization*) throughout the world. Grobalization involves a variety of subprocesses, three of which—capitalism, Americanization, and McDonaldization¹⁵—are central driving forces in grobalization, but also are of particular interest to the authors and of great significance in the worldwide spread of nothingness. Hence, a better understanding of how these processes affect grobalization will help us better understand how nothing is so easily globalized.

Glocalization and Grobalization

Grobalization and glocalization are rooted in competing visions of the contemporary world. Grobalization is a very modern view emphasizing the growing worldwide ability of, especially, largely capitalistic organizations and modern states¹⁶ to increase their

power and reach throughout the world. Two of the most preeminent modern theories—those of Karl Marx and Max Weber (and of their followers)—undergird this perspective. While Marx focused on the capitalistic economic system, Weber was concerned with the rationalization of not only the economy, but many other sectors of society, in the modern world.

While modern theories like those associated with the Marxian and Weberian traditions are closely linked to the idea of globalization, glocalization is more in tune with postmodern social theory¹⁷ and its emphasis on diversity, hybridity, and independence. In conjunction with local realities, the globalization of so many commodities and ideas gives communities, groups, and individuals in many parts of the world an unprecedented capacity to fashion distinctive and ever-changing realities and identities. Rather than increasing penetration by capitalist firms and the states that support them, or by rationalized structures, this perspective sees a world of increasing diversity. Although all nations are likely to be affected by the spread of capitalism and rationalization, they are likely to integrate both with local realities to produce distinctively glocal phenomena.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that globalization and glocalization offer very different images of the impact of transnational processes. After all, they tend to stem from the antithetical bases of modern and postmodern social theory.

Globalization can be analyzed culturally, economically, politically, or institutionally. At the extremes, in the realm of *culture*, globalization can be seen as a form of transnational expansion of common codes and practices (homogeneity) whereas glocalization involves the interaction of many global and local cultural inputs to create a kind of pastiche, or a blend, leading to a variety of cultural hybrids (heterogeneity). The trend toward homogeneity is often associated with cultural imperialism (see below), or, to put it another way, the growing international influence of a

particular culture (hence, an aspect of globalization). There are many varieties of cultural imperialism, including those that emphasize the role played by American culture,¹⁸ the West,¹⁹ or core countries.²⁰ Robertson, although he doesn't use the term cultural imperialism, tends to oppose the idea (as do others²¹) and thereby supports, as we have seen, the concept of glocalization by describing a series of cultural hybrids resulting from the interpenetration of the universal and the particular.

Theorists who focus on *economic* factors tend to emphasize their growing importance and homogenizing effect throughout the world and are therefore in tune with the idea of globalization. They generally see globalization as the spread of the market economy throughout many different regions of the world. While those who focus on economic issues tend to emphasize homogeneity, some differentiation (heterogeneity) is acknowledged to exist at the margins of the global economy. Examples include the commodification of local cultures and the existence of flexible specialization that permits the tailoring of many products to the needs of various local specifications. More generally, those who emphasize glocalization would argue that the interaction of the global market with local markets would lead to the creation of unique glocal markets that integrate the demands of the global market with the realities of the local market.

A *political-institutional* orientation also emphasizes either homogeneity or heterogeneity. One example of a globalization perspective in the political domain focuses on the worldwide spread of models of the nation-state and the emergence of isomorphic forms of governance throughout the globe—in other words, the growth of a more-or-less single model of governance around the world.²² The most important example of this is the global spread of a democratic political system. One of the most extreme views of globalization in the political realm is Benjamin Barber's thinking on "McWorld," or the growth of a single political²³ orientation that is increasingly pervasive throughout the world.

Interestingly, Barber also articulates, as an alternative perspective, the idea of “Jihad”—localized, ethnic, and reactionary political forces (including “rogue states”) that involve a rejection of McWorld in the political realm. Jihad also tends to be associated with an intensification of nationalism and therefore is apt to lead to greater political heterogeneity throughout the world. The interaction of McWorld and Jihad at the local level may produce unique, glocal political formations that integrate elements of both the former (e.g., use of the Internet to attract supporters) and the latter (e.g., use of traditional ideas and rhetoric).²⁴

Overall, we can, following Robertson, offer the following as the essential elements of glocalization:

1. The world is growing more pluralistic. Glocalization theory is exceptionally sensitive to differences within and between areas of the world. In other words, it emphasizes heterogeneity.
2. Individuals and local groups have great power to adapt, innovate, and maneuver within a glocalized world. Glocalization theory sees individuals and groups as important and creative agents who have a great deal of power to shape their own lives.
3. Social processes are relational and contingent. Globalization provokes a variety of reactions—ranging from nationalist entrenchment to cosmopolitan embrace—that feed back on and transform globalization, that produce glocalization.
4. Commodities and the media, arenas, and key forces in cultural change in the late 20th and early 21st centuries are *not* seen as totally coercive, but rather as providing material to be used in individual and group creation throughout the glocalized areas of the world. Again, this emphasizes the power of the agent to use available resources to shape their own unique destinies.

Contrary to the above, *grobalization* leads to a corresponding set of largely antithetical ideas:

1. The world is growing increasingly similar. Grobalization theory tends to minimize differences within and between areas of the world. In other words, it emphasizes homogeneity.
2. Individuals and groups have relatively little ability to adapt, innovate, and maneuver within a grobalized world. Grobalization theory sees larger structures and forces tending to overwhelm the ability of individuals and groups to create themselves and their worlds. Thus, the agent is not seen as a strong force.
3. Social processes are largely one-directional and deterministic. Grobalization tends to overpower the local and limits its ability to act and react, let alone act back on the grobal.
4. Commodities and the media are the key forces and areas of cultural change and they *are* seen as largely determining the self and groups throughout the grobalized areas of the world. Again, this emphasizes their power over the agent whose destiny is largely constricted by the power exerted by these key forces.

Derived from this is another important difference between these two perspectives: the tendency on the part of those associated with the glocalization perspective to positively value it²⁵ and to be critical of globalization as well as those who emphasize it.²⁶ This is traceable, in part, to the association between glocalization and postmodernism and the latter's tendency to value positively the individual and the local over the totality-diversity over uniformity.

Glocalization

A discussion of some closely related terms (and related examples) will be of considerable help in getting a better sense of glocalization. One such concept, is *heterogenization*, a term that emphasizes the diversity that is characteristic of glocalization and

that stands in stark contrast to the *homogenization* that can be seen as accompanying globalization.

Another is *hybridization*, which emphasizes the mixtures of the global and the local as opposed to the *uniformity* associated with globalization.²⁷ A hybrid would involve the combination of two or more elements from different cultures or parts of the world. Among the examples of hybridization (and heterogenization, glocalization) are Brazilian tourists visiting Tokyo to watch Turkish women engage in Thai boxing, Canadians watching Asian rap performed by a South African band at a London club owned by a North Korean, and the more mundane experiences of Americans eating such concoctions as Irish bagels, Chinese tacos, Kosher pizza, and so on. Obviously, the list of such hybrids is long and growing rapidly with increasing glocalization. The contrast of course would be such uniform experiences as eating hamburgers in the United States, quiche in France, or sushi in Japan. More to the point of this essay, globalization brings with it forms and products (e.g., Gap jeans, Starbucks coffee, McDonalds cheeseburgers) that tend to replace local variants and to lead to increased uniformity throughout the world.

Yet another synonym for glocalization is *creolization*.²⁸ The term *creole* generally refers to people of mixed race, but it has been extended to the idea of the “creolization of language” involving a combination of languages that were previously unintelligible to one another. The opposite of creolization might be conceived of as *purification*, whereby alternative languages and peoples are prevented from entering, or driven out if they succeed in gaining entree, in order to maintain the purity of a language or a race. At its extreme, globalization involves purification as indigenous elements are driven out and replaced by purely global alternatives. Creolization is often used interchangeably with hybridization so that the following example could be used to illustrate both concepts (as well as glocalization): “sitting in a [Starbucks] coffee shop in London [they are now ubiquitous there] drinking Italian espresso

served by an Algerian waiter to the strains of the Beach Boys singing ‘I wish they all could be California girls.’”²⁹

All of the above-hybridization, heterogenization, and creolization—should give the reader a good feel for what is meant here by glocalization and, as pointed out previously, those terms will sometimes be used as synonyms for it. Similarly, although a better feel for grobalization awaits in the discussion of capitalism, McDonaldization, and Americanization, the terms *homogenization*, *uniformity*, and *purification* are more or less synonymous with it. That is, as we will see, all three of these processes seek to replace indigenous alternatives wherever they are found in the world and in the process create increasingly pure capitalistic, McDonaldized, and Americanized forms across the globe.

Those who emphasize glocalization tend to see it as militating against the globalization of nothing and, in fact, view it as leading to the creation of a wide array of new, glocal forms of something. In contrast, those who emphasize grobalization see it as a powerful contributor to the spread of nothingness throughout the world. This being said, it must be noted that there are important similarities and differences between glocalization and grobalization and their roles in the globalization of nothing.

Grobalization

The concept of grobalization, as well as the subprocesses of capitalism, McDonaldization, and Americanization, are at odds, to some degree, with the thrust of globalization theory—especially glocalization—that have the greatest cache today. There is a gulf between those who emphasize the increasing grobal influence of capitalistic, Americanized,³⁰ and McDonaldized³¹ interests and those who see the world growing increasingly pluralistic and indeterminate.³² At the risk of being reductive, this divide amounts to a difference in vision between those who see a world that is becoming increasingly grobalized³⁴—more capitalistic,

Americanized, rationalized, codified, and restricted—and those who view it as growing increasingly glocalized-more diverse, effervescent, and free.

While there are many different subprocesses that could be discussed under the heading of globalization,³⁴ we will focus on capitalism, McDonaldization, and Americanization. While it is clear that all of these processes are important, their relative significance and impact will vary (to the degree that they can be separated³⁵) on a case-by-case basis (nation, export considered, and so on). Furthermore, even though each of these will be discussed separately, it is clear that while they are not reducible to one another, they are highly interrelated.

Capitalism

No force has contributed more to globalization in general, and globalization in particular, both historically and present-day, than capitalism. As Marx fully understood over a century ago,³⁶ capitalist firms must continue to expand or they will die, and when possibilities for high profits within a given nation decline, capitalistic businesses are forced to seek profits in other nations.³⁷ Eventually, such firms are led to explore and exploit possibilities for profit in increasingly remote and lesser developed regions of the world. Thus, except perhaps for the earliest forms, capitalistic businesses have always had global ambitions; they have always been interested in globalization and contributed to glocalization. However, their impact has greatly accelerated in the past several decades.

During the Cold War that lasted much of the 20th century there were powerful restraints on capitalism's global ambitions. Most important, there was a seemingly viable alternative to it—socialism/communism—and this served to temper capitalism's expansion. However, by the close of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, with the death of the Soviet Union and the near-

death of communism/socialism, as well as with China and Russia behaving very much like capitalistic nations, almost all limits to the global ambitions of capitalistic firms have been eliminated (or at least greatly reduced). As a result, it is only now that we are beginning to see the full-flowering of globalization in capitalism. After all, in Marx's day (the mid- to late 1800s), capitalistic businesses were comparatively small and many important technologies (computers, telecommunications, huge cargo planes and ships, and so on) that permit and encourage high levels of globalization did not yet exist.³⁸ Today's enormous capitalistic firms, equipped with magnificent globe-straddling technologies,³⁹ are far better able to globalize than their predecessors. *And*, they move into a world in which there is *no* viable alternative to capitalism. We live in an era in which, truly for the first time, capitalism is unchained and free to roam the world in search of both cheap production facilities and labor as well as new markets for its products. As two neo-Marxian thinkers, Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster, put it, "humanity is more and more connected in the global dimensions of exploitation and oppression."⁴⁰ It could be argued that it is only now that capitalism exists as a truly global phenomenon and the implication of Marxian theory is that this sets the stage, for the first time, for the emergence of global opposition to it.

Capitalism is clearly related to economic globalization, especially in the area of consumption that is of central interest to the authors. That is, it is capitalistic firms that produce the vast majority of non-places, non-things, non-people and non-services that exist throughout the world. However, capitalism is also related to other aspects of globalization. Without adopting a simplistic (economic) base-(political) superstructure model,⁴¹ it is clear that much globalization in the political realm is affected to a large degree by the capitalistic economic system. Thus, the United States' much-avowed desire to see democracy throughout the world,⁴² as well as many of its military adventures, are closely related to the needs of its capitalistic system. That is, democratic societies are more likely

to become capitalistic and they are more likely to be open to the incursions of capitalistic firms from other countries (especially the United States). And, in those cases where a society does not move on its own in the direction of “democracy,” there is always the possibility of U.S. military involvement in order to nudge it, not-so-gently, in that direction.

Similarly, organizational-institutional globalization is also closely related to capitalism. For example, the proliferation of the franchise system of organization (this involves a franchiser [e.g., Subway] selling others [franchisees] the right to operate an outlet, although some control remains with the franchiser which also usually gets a share of each franchisee’s profits⁴³) throughout the world is driven, in significant part, by capitalist economics. Note that this would be especially relevant to the central argument here concerning nothing as franchises would be, by definition, centrally conceived and controlled, as well as largely devoid of distinctive content.

We need not go into more detail here about capitalism because so much has been written about it, its operations are so well-known, and it is so obviously a form of globalization. We will now turn our attention to two somewhat less well-known forms of globalization, although we will have occasion to return under each of them to their relationship to capitalism.

McDonaldization

This is the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society and an increasing number of other societies throughout the world. It fits under the heading of globalization because it involves the *growing power* of this model and its increasing influence throughout the world. The model’s basic principles are *efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control*, particularly through the *substitution of nonhuman for human technology*, as well as the seemingly inevitable *irrationalities of*

rationality that accompany those process.⁴⁴ The basic concept, as well as its fundamental dimensions, is derived from Max Weber's work on formal rationality.⁴⁵ Weber demonstrated that the modern Western world was characterized by an increasing tendency toward the predominance of formally rational systems and that the rest of the world was coming under the sway of these systems. Thus, the process of McDonaldization, or at least its forerunner (increasing formal rationality and bureaucratization), obviously predates McDonald's as an institution.⁴⁶ However, that franchise is seen as an exemplar (the bureaucracy was the model in Weber's approach) of the contemporary phase of rationalization. While the fast-food restaurant is the paradigm of this process, the process has by now affected most, if not all, social structures and institutions in the United States, as well as most nations (at least those that are reasonably developed economically) in the world. Thus, McDonaldization is restricted neither to the fast-food industry nor to the United States. Rather, it is a wide-ranging and far-reaching process of global (even global) change.

In terms of globalization, the McDonaldization thesis contends that highly McDonaldized systems, and more important the principles that lie at the base of these systems, have been exported from the United States to much of the rest of the world. Many nations throughout the world, and innumerable subsystems within each, are undergoing the process of McDonaldization. While McDonaldization is traceable, most proximately, to the United States, and especially the founding of the McDonald's chain outside Chicago in the mid-1950s, the process cannot simply be subsumed under the heading of Americanization. First, it has roots outside the United States, including the German bureaucracies analyzed by Weber at the turn of the 20th century. Second, the process has taken root by now in many nations and at least some of them are in the process of exporting their own McDonaldized systems throughout the world, including back into the United States (for example, the exportation of England's Body Shops or Sweden's Ikea [it's actually owned and managed by a company based in the Netherlands] to the United States and many other nations).

McDonaldization can be thought of as a transnational process that is increasingly independent of any particular nation, including even the United States, and therefore is not reducible to a specific form of Americanization. As such, it is a particularly powerful force in the globalization of nothing. In the future, paralleling the history of mass manufacturing, we can anticipate that the center of McDonaldization might even shift from the United States to another part of the world.

It is clear is that McDonaldization deserves a place in any thoroughgoing account of globalization, especially under the subheading of globalization. There can be little doubt that the logic of McDonaldization generates a set of values and practices that has a competitive advantage over other models. It not only promises many specific advantages, but also reproduces itself more easily than other models of consumption (and in many other areas of society as well). The success of McDonaldization in the United States over the past half century, coupled with the international ambitions of McDonald's and its ilk, as well as those of indigenous clones throughout the world, strongly suggests that McDonaldization will continue to make inroads into the global marketplace not only through the efforts of existing corporations but also via the diffusion of the paradigm.

It should be noted, however, that the continued advance of McDonaldization, at least in its present form, is far from ensured. In fact, there are even signs in the United States, as well as in other parts of the world, of what Ritzer has previously called *deMcDonaldization*.⁴⁷ There are, for example, the increasing problems of McDonald's: it recently lost money for the first time and, as a result, was forced to close restaurants, fire employees, scale back planned expansion, and even let its chief executive go. Paradoxically, the great success of McDonald's has made their restaurants targets for various groups with grievances against the restaurant chain, the United States, and even globalization. In light of such international difficulties, McDonald's is rethinking its plans

to expand in certain areas and is cutting back in places where it is particularly likely to be an object of protest and attack.⁴⁸ Thus, the continued growth of McDonald's is not inevitable, although the same cannot be said of the underlying process of McDonaldization.

Nonetheless, at the moment and for the foreseeable future, McDonaldization will continue to be preeminent and it is clearly and unequivocally not only a global process, but also one that contributes mightily to the spread of nothingness. The whole idea behind McDonaldization is to create a formal model based on a limited number of principles that can be replicated virtually anywhere in the world.

Americanization

Americanization can be defined as the propagation of American ideas, customs, social patterns, industry, and capital around the world.⁴⁹ It is a powerful unidirectional process stemming from the United States that tends to overwhelm competing processes (e.g., Japanization) as well as the strength of local (and glocal) forces that might resist, modify, or transform American models into hybrid forms. Moreover, the notion of Americanization is tied to a particular nation—the United States—but it has a differential impact on many specific nations. It can be subsumed under the heading of globalization because it envisions a *growth* in American influence in all realms throughout the world.

Americanization is inclusive of forms of American cultural, institutional, political, and economic imperialism. For example, we can include under this heading the worldwide diffusion of the American industrial model and the later global proliferation of the American consumption model; the marketing of American media including Hollywood film and popular music; the selling of American sports such as NFL football and NBA basketball abroad; the transnational marketing of American commodities including cola, blue jeans, and computer operating systems; the extensive

diplomatic and military engagement with Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and South America; the training of many of the world's military, political, and scientific elites in American universities; the expansion of the American model of democratic politics; and the development and use of the international labor market and natural resources by American corporations.

A good example of Americanization is found in the case of Hollywood films.⁵⁰ The American film industry has overpowered many national film industries in Europe (especially France and Great Britain) and elsewhere, to the detriment of national artistic expression. The blockbuster films of Julia Roberts and Harrison Ford not only flow through an official distribution system, but video tape and DVD versions are also pirated and sold on the streets of third world cities. While several nations, including India and China, continue to produce large numbers of commercial films, even in these countries, American films are often featured on theater marquees. Similarly, many films that are less successful in America find a global market, and this can hold true for art films as well as action movies. The result is not simply a general familiarity with American movies and many other cultural products; those products tend to have an adverse effect on local products. Indeed, in France today there is a very public debate over the so-called cultural exception, which involves, among other things, the subsidization of its flagging movie industry.

Yet this is only one part of the Americanization of contemporary cinema. Another side is that the grammars of other national cinemas are being transformed for distribution in America. The Chinese, for example, have bemoaned the fact that their leading directors (including Zhang Yimo and Chen Kaige) make films that exoticize (or "orientalize"⁵¹) Chinese culture and history for Western audiences. A recent example is Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which won many international prizes, but reportedly was unsuccessful in mainland China. In short, Chinese films are being tailored to American sensibilities in order to gain prestige and sales.

As a result, American film culture has, at least in some senses, become world film culture. This is not to say that American cinema is not subject to diverse interpretations depending on the cultural context in which it is viewed, but only to suggest that American cultural artifacts are an increasingly central element of global culture.

Capitalism, McDonaldization, and Americanization

The argument here is that capitalism, McDonaldization, and Americanization are all globalization processes deeply implicated in the proliferation of nothing throughout the world. However, there are important differences among them that need to be fleshed out here.

Capitalism is certainly a powerful force in the globalization of nothing. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the most important is that in order to maximize profits, capitalistic firms are generally driven to reduce products to their simplest, most basic elements. To put this in terms of our definition of nothing, they seek to produce that which comes ever closer to the nothing end of the something-nothing continuum. While capitalistic businesses can and do produce that which lies toward the something end of that continuum, there is far less money to be made in the production of something than of nothing (for one thing, the demand for something is far less than that for nothing). Thus, capitalists are most likely to be drawn to that which is already nothing or to progressively transform something into nothing. This dynamic helps to explain the attraction of McDonaldized systems to other capitalistic organizations, but we must go beyond capitalism because, as we have seen, nonprofit organizations also seek to become increasingly McDonaldized.

What of the linkage between capitalism and Americanization? Clearly, there is a strong relationship here—the American economy is the unchallenged leader of global capitalism. But, of course, the

two are not coterminous. On the one hand, many other nations are also capitalistic and, furthermore, still others (most notably China) are moving strongly in that direction. On the other hand, there are forms of Americanization in, for example, the arts and basic sciences, that are, at least to some degree, separable from capitalistic interests.

McDonaldized systems are imperatively, and by design, minimalist; they are long on form and short on content. Thus, when McDonaldized systems are exported, especially from the United States to other parts of the world, little or nothing can or need be extracted in order to allow them to fit into the new environment. Second, there is little in the way of demand from local populations to remove offending elements (because there are so few elements anyway) and those that exist are mainly generic forms (lacking in distinctive content) that can fit almost anywhere. Third, a few local elements can be larded into the extant system, either by addition or substitution, without altering the system in any dramatic way or conflicting with the generic components. Thus, for example, McDonald's adds local menu items (suitably McDonaldized) to its menus in many countries (e.g., McSpaghetti in the Philippines), but its underlying principles remain sacrosanct and therefore almost totally unchanged. It is for these reasons, and undoubtedly others, that there is near perfect fit between globalization, the exportation of nothing, and McDonaldization.

The relationship between Americanization and nothing is less clear-cut than that between McDonaldization and nothing. On the surface, Americanization inherently involves something—especially the fact that fundamental American characteristics and values infuse all of its forms.⁵² The shopping mall, for example, is closely linked to the importance of the automobile in the functioning of American society as well as to the value Americans place on their automobiles—the love affair Americans have with their cars.

However, many of the Americanized forms exported to the rest of the world are attractive not just because of their American character and roots, but also because they have proven to be particularly malleable and adaptable to many other cultures and nations. They often can be detached from their American roots and reconstructed in many different ways in many other places. For example, Orchard Road, the main shopping street in Singapore, is awash with huge indoor malls, but they are in a highly urbanized area and rely heavily on foot traffic and consumers who arrive by public transportation rather than by automobile.⁵³ Thus, many other countries have now adopted the shopping mall and still others are likely to do so in the future. While malls in other parts of the world may have some, even many, indigenous shops and products, they are still clearly malls and very much in line with their American models and predecessors.

In other instances, however, Americanization brings with it, or becomes, nothing in other societies. For one thing, as everyone's second culture, the United States exports what appear to be innocuous phenomena that fit quickly and easily into other cultures. For another, that which is distinctly American about these phenomena is quickly lost sight of, or systematically extracted, rendering the American export nothing, or seemingly so. In some cases, success throughout the world depends on playing up the American roots and characteristics of these exports, while in other cases it involves playing them down or even striving to obliterate them. To the degree that things like a pair of Levi Jeans, a can of Coca-Cola, a set of Mickey Mouse ears, a Malibu Barbie Beach House, and the like come to be disconnected from their American roots and become forms that fit anywhere and everywhere—that is, nothing—they can move effortlessly from one culture to another and be sold widely in all cultures. Thus, the success of McDonald's in Japan, and elsewhere, is aided by the fact that it is regarded by many as a local restaurant chain. This is exemplified by the case of a Japanese Boy Scout who, on a trip to the United States, was

surprised to find McDonald's in Chicago—he thought McDonald's was a Japanese chain.⁵⁴

In the end, however, Americanization is at a disadvantage relative to both capitalism and McDonaldization in the global spread of nothing. As we have seen, the desire of capitalists to maximize profits leads them in the direction of producing nothing and aggressively exporting it to the rest of the world. For their part, McDonaldized systems are largely devoid of substance and therefore need do very little in order to fit into other cultures. In contrast, Americanized systems are defined by elements of American culture and, at least in some cases, those elements must be extracted in order for them to succeed in other cultures. Furthermore, in different countries it is not always the same elements that must be extracted and this greatly complicates matters. That is, one culture may require the removal of one set of elements, while another may demand a very different set be removed. Overall, both capitalism and McDonaldization are purer forces in the globalization of nothing than Americanization. That is, that which emanates from capitalism and McDonaldization will generally be close to the nothing end of the continuum, while that which stems from the United States will contain at least some of the “something-ness” of American culture.⁵⁵ That is not to say that capitalism and McDonaldization are necessarily more powerful factors, but they are certainly purer factors.

In fact, overall, it is capitalism that is the most powerful force in the globalization of nothing. To the degree that it can be separated from capitalism, Americanization is a more powerful force than McDonaldization. Furthermore, both capitalism and Americanization are more multidimensional forces than McDonaldization. That is, they are more likely to bring with them *both* something and nothing. While the impact of the United States has its ambiguities, and is not as powerful as capitalism, it is clearly an enormously powerful force throughout the world. The power of Americanization comes from its strength in all of the sectors being discussed here—cultural, economic, political, and institutional.

While capitalism affects all of these realms, its greatest impact is obviously in the economic realm. McDonaldization also is found in all of these sectors, but its most profound effects are cultural and economic. Americanization is not only a potent force in these realms, but its power extends much more into the political and institutional areas, including the military. The political and military hegemony of the United States in the world today accords it enormous power. While it is possible to discuss the role of capitalism and McDonaldization in politics and the military, there is far more to those realms than simply increasing profitability and increasing rationalization.

Some Complexities

While this discussion has largely been set up as a confrontation between glocalization (and something) and grobalization (and nothing), the reality is much more complex than that. There is also a glocalization of nothing and a grobalization of something and their existence already adds great complexity to this discussion.⁵⁶ However, even that only begins to scratch the surface.

As Douglas Goodman recently pointed out, there are many examples of contradiction within the social and cultural world in general and more specifically within the realm of the consumer culture that is of primary interest to the authors.⁵⁷ Furthermore, these contradictions play themselves out at all levels from the most local to the most global and everywhere in between. It is not simply that glocalization and grobalization (and something and nothing) contradict one another, or at least seem to, but that out of their mutual interactions a wide range of other contradictions emerge. Thus, the grobalization of nothing often spawns a reaction that leads to the emergence or reemergence of a more local tradition. For example, the influx of fast food into South Korea gave impetus to the rebirth in chewing Betel nuts.⁵⁸

There is another possibility. Instead of combating the grobalization of nothing through the creation of a glocal something, it is possible that all that will be created are yet other consumer products that fit our definition of nothing—they are centrally conceived, controlled, and relatively void of distinctive content. One example is an Eastern European product, Ordinary Laundry Detergent, created there as an alternative to Tide, which is advertised as “better than ordinary laundry detergent.”⁵⁹ In fact, by touting the “ordinary,” the Eastern European detergent could be seen as more nothing than Tide’s branded version. Furthermore, it is not inconceivable that it, or a product like it, could become successful outside Eastern Europe, as yet another example of the globalization of nothing.

Yet another possibility is that glocal elements could respond with what Robertson calls “willful nostalgia” and purposely create products that embed themselves in the indigenous past of a particular region or nation.⁶⁰ Examples include the Shiseido cosmetics firm⁶¹ and the makers of French chocolates,⁶² both of which invoke an image of the past to sell their products in their home countries *and* internationally. Of course, these, too, become simply other centrally conceived and controlled consumer products that are relatively void of distinctive content that are to be grobalized, this time from a base in Japan or France.

Yet another layer of complexity is added when we realize that grobal firms themselves make their own use of “willful nostalgia” by creating products for a specific market that draw on the history and traditions of that market. Again, what appears to be a glocal alternative becomes simply another tool to further the grobalization of nothing. A good example is the fact that McDonald’s sells kampong burgers in Singapore.⁶³ The term *kampong* refers to the local villages in which most Singaporeans lived before being resettled in the high-rise buildings that are now so common there. Thus, McDonald’s is using nostalgia not to create something truly glocal, but rather to further the grobalization of nothing, this time embodied not only in itself and its usual fare, but also in the

kampong burger, a thinly camouflaged minor variation on one of the paradigmatic examples of the globalization of nothing—the hamburger.

The point of this is to make it clear that the use of the concepts that have been delineated theoretically in this essay—the globalization of nothing and the glocalization of something—reveals interesting and important variations when we descend into the real world of global-glocal consumption (and much else). These ideal-typical concepts, as well as the more general theoretical perspective outlined here, are useful not only in themselves, but also for their utility in helping us analyze apparent deviations from, or variations on, them.

Notes

¹ We would like to thank Todd Stillman for his many valuable contributions to this essay.

² This essay is based largely on a forthcoming book by Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing*.

³ Rostow, W. W. (1960). *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Tiryakian, E. A. (1992). Pathways to metatheory: rethinking the presuppositions of macrosociology. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *Metatheorizing* (pp. 69–87). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

⁴ This line of work was inaugurated by the publication of Wallerstein, I. (1974). *The modern world-system*. New York: Academic Press.

⁵ See, for example, Frank, A. G. (1967). *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

⁶ Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁷ Robertson, R. (2001). Globalization theory 2000+: Major problematics. In G. Ritzer & B. Smart (Eds.), *Handbook of social theory* (pp. 458–471). London: Sage.

⁸ Robertson, R. (2001). Globalization theory 2000+: Major problematics. In G. Ritzer & B. Smart (Eds.), *Handbook of social theory* (p. 462). London: Sage.

⁹ Robertson, R. (2001). Globalization theory 2000+: Major problematics. In G. Ritzer & B. Smart (Eds.), *Handbook of social theory* (p. 461). London: Sage.

¹⁰ Robertson, R. (1994). Globalisation or glocalisation? *Journal of International Communication* 1, 33–52.

¹¹ For another, see Berger, P., & Huntington, S. (Eds.). (2002). *Many globalizations : Cultural diversity in the contemporary world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹² Robertson, R. (2001). Globalization theory 2000+: Major problematics. In G. Ritzer & B. Smart (Eds.), *Handbook of social theory* (pp. 458–471). London: Sage. Globalization is at the heart of Robertson's own approach, but it is central to that of many others. The most notable is Appadurai's view that the “new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” (see Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization* (p. 32). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. While John Tomlinson uses other terms, he sees glocalization as “friendly” to his own orientation (see Tomlinson, J. (1999). *Globalization and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

¹³ We feel apologetic about adding yet another neologism, especially such an ungainly one, to a field already rife with jargon. However, the existence and popularity of the concept of glocalization requires the creation of the parallel notion of globalization in order to emphasize that which the former concept ignores or downplays.

¹⁴ We are combining a number of different entities under this heading (nations, corporations, a wide range of organizations, and so on), but it should be clear that there are profound differences among them including the degree to which, and the ways in which, they seek to globalize.

¹⁵ We will outline the elements of McDonaldization in the section under globalization but here we discuss it as a process that is sweeping across the globe, as a centrally important globalization process.

¹⁶ States further the interests of capitalist organizations, but also further their own interests, some of which are separable from the capitalist system.

¹⁷ Best, S., & Kellner, D. (1997). *The postmodern turn*. New York: Guilford Press; Ritzer, G. (1997). *Postmodern social theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill. For an explicit effort to link globalization and postmodern social theory, see Mike Featherstone. *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*. London: Sage, 1995

¹⁸ Kuisel, R. F. (1993). *Seducing the French: The dilemma of Americanization*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Ritzer, G. (1995). *Expressing America: A critique of the global credit card society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

¹⁹ Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

²⁰ Hannerz, U. (1990). Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture. In M. Featherstone (Ed.), *Global culture: Nationalism, globalization and modernity*. London: Sage.

²¹ Canclini, N. G. (1995). *Hybrid cultures: Strategies for entering and leaving modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press; Pieterse, J. N. (1995). Globalization as hybridization. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash, & R. Robertson (Eds.), *Global modernities*. London: Sage.

²² Meyer, J., Boli, J. W., Thomas, G. M., & Ramirez, F. (1997). World society and the nation-state. *American Journal of Sociology* 103, 144–181.

²³ Barber's view of McWorld is not restricted to politics; he sees many other domains following the model of McWorld; Barber, B. (1995). *Jihad vs. McWorld*. New York: Times Books.

²⁴ More broadly, there are those who focus not only on politics but on the global influence of a multiplicity of institutions. For example, few if any countries can afford the U.S. system of health and medical care, but most have at least been influenced by it to some degree. While the globalization of aspects of the U.S. health care system has led to some degree of homogeneity, glocalization resulting from the interpenetration of that system with folk remedies and systems has led to increases in heterogeneity.

²⁵ See, for example, Cowen, T. (2002). *Creative destruction: How globalization is changing the world's cultures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁶ See, for example, Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

²⁷ Canclini, N. G. (1995). *Hybrid cultures: Strategies for entering and leaving modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press; Pieterse, J. N. (1995). Globalization as hybridization. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash, & R. Robertson (Eds.), *Global modernities*. London: Sage.

²⁸ Hannerz, U. (1992). *Cultural complexity: Studies in the social organization of meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.

²⁹ Zwingle, E. (2000). A world together. In K. Sjursen (Ed.), *Globalization* (pp. 153–164). New York: H.W. Wilson.

³⁰ See, for example, Kuisel, R. (1993). *Seducing the French: The dilemma of Americanization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

³¹ See, for example, Hayes, D., & Wynyard, R. (Eds.). (2002). *The McDonaldization of higher education*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey; see also a number of the essays in Ritzer, G. (Ed.). (1992). *McDonaldization: The reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

³² Appadurai is a strong representative of this position, see Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

³³ Although everyone recognizes that globalization and more generally globalization play themselves out differently in various local and national contexts. See Mudimbe-Boyi, E. (Ed.). (2002). *Beyond dichotomies: Histories, identities cultures, and the challenge of globalization*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

³⁴ Other examples are imperialism and (neo-) colonialism.

³⁵ This is no easy matter. For example, Disney is a capitalistic organization, its origins clearly lie in the United States, and it is highly McDonaldized.

³⁶ Marx, K. (1867/1967). *Capital: A critique of political economy* (Vol. 1). New York: International.

³⁷ This is part of what Marx called the general law of capitalist accumulation.

³⁸ We could have easily added another section here on technology, which can be seen as a globalizing force in its own right. However, it is also closely linked to capitalism, Americanization, and McDonaldization (non-human technology is, of course, one element of this process).

³⁹ This is what Kellner calls “techno-capitalism.” See Kellner, D. (1989). *Critical theory, Marxism and modernity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. On the role of technology in globalization, see Hornborg, A. (In press). *The power of the machine: Global inequalities of economy, technology, and environment*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

⁴⁰ Wood, E. M., & Foster, J. B. (Eds.). (1997). *In defense of history: Marxism and the postmodern agenda* (p. 67). New York: Monthly Review Press.

⁴¹ Implied, at times, in Marx’s work, and more explicit in the work of some neo-Marxists, is the idea that it is the economy that is of ultimate importance in society and everything else (politics, religion, and so on) is merely “superstructure” that is erected on that all-important economic

base. It should be clear why this is often associated with *economic determinism*, an idea that is anathema to most non-Marxists and even neo-Marxists.

⁴² Although the United States has supported many authoritarian regimes when it is in its interest to do so.

⁴³ Dicke, T. S. (1992). *Franchising in America: The development of a business method, 1840–1980*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

⁴⁴ Ritzer, G. (2000). *The McDonaldization of society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

⁴⁵ Weber, M. (1921/1968). *Economy and society* (3 vols.). Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press.

⁴⁶ Weber, M. (1927/1981). *General economic history*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

⁴⁷ Ritzer, G. (1998). *The McDonaldization thesis* (pp. 174–183). London: Sage.

⁴⁸ While McDonald's is not likely to go out of business any time soon, it does find itself in an already overcrowded, saturated market in which profits are being driven down by increasingly intense price competition. This problem is likely to be exacerbated as foreign competitors increasingly enter the American market. However, even if McDonald's were to disappear, the process of McDonaldization would continue apace, although we might need a new label for it.

⁴⁹ Williams, F. (1962). *The American invasion*. New York: Crown Williams.

⁵⁰ Kael, P. (1985). Why are movies so bad? or, The numbers. In P. Kael (Ed.), *State of the art* (pp. 8–20). New York: Dutton.

⁵¹ Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.

⁵² And, given their American roots, McDonaldized systems have many of these characteristics, as well.

⁵³ Chung, C. J. et al. (2001). Harvard Design School guide to shopping. Koln: Taschen.

⁵⁴ Ohnuki-Tierney, E. (1997). McDonald's in Japan: Changing manners and etiquette. In J. Watson (Ed.), *Golden Arches east: McDonald's in East Asia* (pp. 161–182). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁵⁵ As usual, artificial distinctions are being made here.

⁵⁶ See *The Globalization of Nothing* for a discussion of these alternatives.

- ⁵⁷ Goodman, D. (In press). The contradictions of consumer culture. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *Handbook of international social problems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- ⁵⁸ Bak, S. (1997). McDonald's in Seoul: Food choices, identity, and nationalism. In J. Watson (Ed.), *Golden Arches east: McDonald's in East Asia* (pp. 136–160). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- ⁵⁹ Money, R. B., & Colton, D. (2000). Global advertising. *Journal of World Business* 35, 189–205.
- ⁶⁰ Robertson, R. (1995). Glocalization: Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash, & R. Robertson (Eds.), *Global modernities* (pp. 25–44). London: Sage.
- ⁶¹ Schutte, H., & Ciarlante, D. (1998). *Consumer behavior in Asia*. New York: New York University Press.
- ⁶² Terrio, S. (1996). Crafting *grand cru* chocolates in contemporary France. *American Anthropologist*, 98, 67–79.
- ⁶³ Beng-Huat, C. (2000). Consuming Asians: Ideas and Asians. In C. Beng-Huat (Ed.), *Consumption in Asia lifestyles and identities* (pp. 1–34). New York: Routledge.