

# Cultural Imperialism and Communication

Oliver Boyd-Barrett, School of Media and Communication, Bowling Green State University

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.678>

**Published online:** 25 June 2018

## Summary

Central to many definitions of the term “cultural imperialism” is the idea of the culture of one powerful civilization, country, or institution having great unreciprocated influence on that of another, less powerful, entity to a degree that one may speak of a measure of cultural “domination.” Cultural imperialism has sometimes been described as a theory, especially where scholars build a case that the cultural influence of the stronger entity has had a pervasive, pernicious impact on the weaker.

The term evolved from 1960s neo-Marxist discourses within cultural, media, and postcolonial studies that contextualized the post-World War II “independence” wave of new nations emerging from colonial servitude. It was propelled by the writings of nationalist revolutionaries, revolutionary theorists, and their sympathizers of the 1950s and 1960s, but it has sweeping relevance across human history. The foremost western theorist of cultural imperialism in the West was Herbert Schiller. The concept was adopted and endorsed in the 1970s by both UNESCO and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Following Oliver Boyd-Barrett, the concept may denote a field of study embracing all relationships between phenomena defined as “cultural” and as “imperialism.” These encompass cultural changes that are (1) enforced on a weaker entity and (2) occur within both stronger and weaker entities through contact, contest, and resistance, including (3) assimilation of social practices encountered by the stronger in the weaker entity, and (4) original hybrids manifesting cultural traces of both stronger and weaker entities.

The concepts of cultural and media imperialism were much critiqued during the 1980s and 1990s, and many scholars preferred alternative concepts such as globalization and cultural globalization to analyze issues of intercultural contact, whether asymmetrical or otherwise. John Tomlinson critiqued the concept, identified four different discourses of cultural imperialism, and argued in favor of its substitution with the term “globalization.” Mirrlees has placed Tomlinson’s work in context by describing the dialectical—parallel but mutually aware—development of both a cultural imperialism and a cultural globalization paradigm. Both are influential in the 21st century.

“Imperialism” commonly references relations of conquest, dominance, and hegemony between civilizations, nations, and communities. “Cultural imperialism” relates primarily to the cultural manifestations of such relations. Culture and empire relate in many different ways, fueling different theories that often play on dichotomous discourses, including territorial/non-territorial, totalistic/partial, benign/malign, ephemeral/perpetual, superficial/essential, voluntary/involuntary, intended/unintended, welcome/unwelcome, forceful/peaceful, noticed/unnoticed, linear/interactive, homogeneous/heterogeneous, and acceded/resisted.

The concept has affinities with hegemony, the idea that stability in conditions of social inequality is achieved not mainly by force but by securing the consent of the masses (starting with co-optation of their indigenous leaders)—through persuasion and propaganda—to the elite’s view of the world. This process is commensurate with forms of democracy that provide the appearance but not the reality of choice and control. Fissures within the ranks of the elites and within the masses create spaces for resistance and change.

Culture encompasses the totality of social practices of a given community. Social practices are manifest within social institutions such as family, education, healthcare, worship, labor, recreation, language, communication, and decision-making, as well as their corresponding domains. Any of these can undergo change following a society’s encounter with exogenous influences—most dramatically so when stronger powers impose changes through top-down strategies of command and influence.

Analysis of cultural imperialism often incorporates notions of media imperialism with reference to (1) print, electronic, and digital media—their industrialization, production, distribution, content, and capital accumulation; (2) cultural meanings that media evoke among receivers and audience cultures; (3) audience and media interactions in representations of topics, people, and ideas; and (4) relationships between media corporations and other centers of power in the reproduction and shaping of social systems.

Media are logically subsumed as important components of cultural imperialism. Yet the significance of media can be understated. The concept of mediatization denotes that “knowledge” of social practices draws heavily on media representations. Social practices that are experienced as direct may themselves be formed through exposure to media representations or performed for media.

Discourses of cultural imperialism speak to major current controversies, including: cultural suppression and genocide; ideas of “globalization”; influential economic models of “capitalism” and “neoliberalism”; ideologies that are embedded in the global spread of concepts such as “modern,” “progressive,” “growth,” “development,” “consumerism,” “free market,” “freedom,” “democracy,” “social Darwinism” and “soft power”; cultural specificity of criteria and procedures for establishing “truth”; instrumentalization for the purposes of cultural conquest of academic disciplines such as psychoanalysis, economics, social anthropology, or marketing, or environmental crises, especially as linked to western ideologies that underwrite humanity’s “right” to dominate nature.

---

**Keywords:** capitalism, culture, dependency, globalization, hegemony, hybridity, imperialism, modernity, modernization, nation, propaganda

**Subjects:** Communication and Technology, Communication Theory, Communication and Social Change, Critical/Cultural Studies, Communication and Culture, International/Global Communication

 Sign in  
to  
annotate

You do not currently have access to this article

**Login**

**Subscribe**

---

Please login to access the full content.

Access to the full content requires a subscription

---

Copyright © Oxford University Press 2021.

Printed from Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Communication. Under the terms of the licence agreement, an individual user may print out a single article for personal use (for details see Privacy Policy and Legal Notice).

date: 02 October 2021