

Cultural Imperialism? by Prof Taylor for British Council

<https://web.archive.org/web/20050418190153/http://www2.britishcouncil.org/history/history-why/history-why-cultural-imperialism.htm>

Ten years ago, there was a small publishing boom in the area of cultural imperialism which accused western powers (mainly the United States and Britain) of maintaining an imbalance in the flow of information from the First World to the Third World. This western dominance of indigenous cultures was a form of 'coca-colonialism' designed to maintain western power, prevent development, exploit resources - generally to 'McDominate'. The accusations often confused the commercial strategies of western multinational corporations with the foreign policies of western governments. Hollywood, for example, was somehow part of an American governmental strategy to sell the American way of life to local foreign cultures by displacing local values. The export of American television shows was also part of this 'conspiracy'. The flow was alleged to be uni-directional and negative in impact. It assumed unwillingness on the part of the recipients. And the matter was made worse when UNESCO took up the cause, not least during the period in the 1980s when Britain and the United States had walked out of that body.

It was a curious phenomenon, encouraged by Marxist scholarship. It seemed to belie the multi-ethnic nature of restaurants in London and Washington, the number of Japanese cars being driven in the west, the popularity of local films and television programmes - and the concern of many American diplomats who were worried about the image of the United States being provided from Hollywood about crime-ridden New York streets full of muggers and drug-takers. When the 'anti-globalisation' movement began to organise itself in more recent times, it took up many of the old cultural imperialism themes.

The problem, again, is that this belies the conduct of cultural diplomacy by most developed countries. The ideas behind the conduct of cultural diplomacy do not fit with the conspiracy thesis. This is because cultural diplomacy is about the development of mutual understanding. Here is admittedly hard evidence that western governments do spend their taxpayers' money on promoting their national cultures to foreign audiences through organisations such as the British Council. But the idea is that this will benefit international relations through cultural exchanges. One can, of course, debate whether this is a form of international propaganda on behalf of the value systems of the countries conducting it. But if the objective is to inform, educate and entertain on the assumption that greater mutual understanding will result, then it can only be argued that this is propaganda on behalf of peace.

The agonising in the United States after September 11th about 'why they hate us so much' would suggest a failure on the part of American cultural diplomacy. Considerable efforts are now - perhaps belatedly - being expended on convincing a global audience about the Americans 'as a force for good in the world'. The brick wall they face was partly constructed during the Cold War when charges of American imperialism, including cultural imperialism, took root in many developing countries. As one of the USA's closest allies, the British have a significant part to play in bridging what Tony Blair called the 'gulf of misunderstanding'. It will take a great deal more cultural diplomacy, perhaps over many years to come in the 'war' against international terrorism, for that wall to be broken down in the same way the one in Berlin was in 1989.

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He was the first historian to be allowed into the archives of the British Council.