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Economy, Ecology, and Globalization

Globalization fundamentally strips away unique local flavor from a community and replaces it with bland, homogenous consumerism. The ramifications of this might seem at first to be held strictly to cultural tourism—why travel to a foreign country if it offers the same food, dress, music, art, and religion as is present in one’s homeland? But the reality is that the effects of globalization extend much deeper, and that it is a direct cause of serious problems on this planet.

Through globalization, the degradation of a place’s local individualism and replacement with a monoculture of western consumerism destroys rich traditional cultures. In many cases, the degree of self-sufficiency of a locale is compromised. Individuals that once lived meaningful, sustainable lifestyles—oftentimes indigenous peoples—are reduced to the role of consumers in an extractive, exploitive, throw-away economy. In Tropic of Orange by Karen Tei Yamashita, Arcangel has a first-hand encounter with globalization in a once-traditional Mexican cantina that has been culturally transformed. Arcangel orders traditional Mexican food called nopales—a dish made from cactus flesh—and inquires about the establishment’s beer selection. The waiter states that they have Budweiser, Schlitz, Hamms, Michelob, Coors, Miller, Miller Lite, and Samuel Adams. Arcangel responds

by saying, “You don’t think it strange? . . . All American beers. But we are in Mexico, are we not? Where are the Mexican beers?” Yamashita continues to write, “Arcangel looked around at all the hungry and miserable people in the cantina—all eating hamburgers, Fritos, catsup, and drinking American beers. Only he, who had asked the cook the favor of cooking his raw cactus leaves, ate nopales.” In this scene, Arcangel observes the cultural impacts in what might as well be ground zero of globalization. Everyone seems perfectly content with the changes as they sit and consume their industrial American food, except for Arcangel; he is disgusted by what he sees, and even more so disgusted by the customers who don’t seem to care about or even notice the damage done. Time-honored Mexican beer is replaced with aggressively marketed and intensely branded (and yet, completely generic) American beer. Traditional cooking, which requires intimate knowledge of the local environment, seasonality, and healthy, whole foods, is replaced with highly processed imported American food.

Globalization’s consumerism manifesto travels through television as its main vehicle. Among others are motion pictures, radio, internet, billboards, and magazines. The messages of Western materialism and the work-buy-waste cycle are broadcasted 24 hours a day on hundreds of different channels across thousands of types of programs. In Tropic of Orange, Emi explains to her anti-media friend, “It’s just about money. It’s not about good honest people like you or about whether us Chicanos or Asians get a bum rap or whether third world countries deserve dictators or whether we should make the world safe for democracy. It’s about selling things: Reebok, Pepsi, Chevrolet, AllState, Pampers, Pollo Loco, Levis, Fritos,

Larry Parker Esq., Tide, Raid, the Pillsbury Doughboy, and Famous Amos.” Emi sums it up quite well—the fact that television exists for the sole purpose of corporate advertising. The “programs” (including newscasts) that seemingly exist for the public’s entertainment, happiness, and fulfillment are actually just the bait used to lure in droves of willing viewers. This is how globalization so successfully transmits its consumeristic agenda to the masses.

There are innumerable faces behind the name globalization, but one that continuously fights to push economic globalization into all corners of the Earth, in the form of global free trade, is the World Trade Organization (WTO). This international superpower’s membership consists of over 500 corporate representatives that act as trade advisors. There is absolutely no input from NGOs, and very little input from most of the countries that sign onto WTO regulations, with exception of the rich countries. Developing countries hold very little influence and are systematically overlooked in favor of the commercial interests of multinational corporations. Undermined countries can’t back out from the WTO due to fear of ostracism from trade opportunities that are integral to their national economy.

Economic globalization and free trade inevitably lead to globalization of Euro-American consumer culture. This causes the destruction of locally unique cultures and lifestyles, including that of indigenous populations. Economic globalization is also responsible for degrading the degree of self-sufficiency of so-called “unproductive” communities. By transforming their relatively localized, self-reliant economy into one based on exporting and importing goods to and from

foreign lands, their once-sustainable local economy is subjected to the volatility and insecurity of global commodity markets.

Despite the chaos of globalization, there is still hope for those of us who choose to opt-out of the barrage of consumerist messages. Luckily, there are many fixes on an individual level that are quick, easy, low-hanging fruit, such as abstaining from watching television and shielding oneself from internet advertisements.

Having a life and mind at least partially devoid of corporate advertising can facilitate more responsible consumption habits. As for the big problems, such as the WTO and dilemmas in developing countries, more work is required. To change such a system would require a massive global uprising of citizens, and would also require the support of national governments. In the meantime, we in the developed world must realize that each of us has the ultimate control over our own culture and lifestyle, and that global change must start from within oneself.