

Globalization's Impact on Culture: An Exploration of McDonalidization vs. Clash of Civilizations

Ioannis Karras^{ID*}

ABSTRACT

This theoretical article sets out to conceptualize the notions of McDonalidization and the clash of civilizations in a globalized context and propose a middle-of-the-road solution in this dichotomy, i.e., hybridization. As cultures and cultural values constantly evolve and reshape and new forms of culture emerge, cultural hybridization is the preferred viewpoint adopted herein. In essence, cultural expressions (such as values, beliefs, and ideas) interact and engage with one another, promoting and broadening cultural offerings.

Keywords: Clash of civilizations, hybridization, McDonalidization.

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Department of Foreign Languages,
Translation and Interpreting, Faculty of
Humanities, Ionian University, Greece.

*Corresponding Author:
e-mail: karrasid@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, economies have become globally oriented and integrated. In the wake of this trend, globalization emerged. This notion of a global economy has fired a surge of changes on various levels, including economic, political, and cultural. However, globalization is often reduced to mere economic and political boundaries, not cultural. This substantial element of culture is often neglected in economic and political circles, perhaps implying a capitalist focus on business while sometimes ignoring the cultural impact among different ethnic groups and nationalities. Globalization is seen as having beneficial effects but also as having an ostensible negative impact not only on the international economy but also on individual cultures due to the diffusion of values, beliefs, and ideas and the subsequent "standardization" of cultural expression. Economic globalization is beyond the scope of this article. However, its crucial and potent role in bringing about cultural globalization-or McDonalidization (Ritzer, 1993), as it is often referred to, is the main focus.

To this end, Huntington (1998) and Ritzer (1999), the two 'Cassandras' (Cassandra is a Greek mythical figure that symbolizes the prophet of disaster) of globalization, as Magala (2005, p. 56) characteristically puts it, try to conceptualize the notion of culture at large and cultural values in particular as they are affected by globalization. They take quite opposing stances in their approach to the effects of globalization on cultural values. The former refers to the 'clash of civilizations', whereas the latter uses the term 'McDonalidization,' as discussed below. These two concepts are diametrically opposite, yet combined, they offer fertile ground for further exploration.

This ongoing debate is encapsulated in the idea that, on the one hand, globalization leads to homogenization-in which McDonalidization is embedded-and on the other hand, some posit that globalization promotes increased cultural differentiation. In other words, the argument goes as follows: are cultures and cultural values converging or diverging? As a result of this argument, McDonalidization and the clash of civilizations are often perceived as mutually exclusive instead of two sides of the same coin.

2. DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

In order to fully comprehend the complexity of globalization and its effects on culture, it is deemed important to define and conceptualize these notions, hence delineating them and offering a theoretical



underpinning while helping the reader construct a notional framework. To this end, I will first briefly look at the notions of *culture*, *globalization*, and *McDonalidization*, followed by an overview of what the clash of civilizations means.

2.1. Culture

The first term to explore is *culture*. In defining culture, [Held et al. \(1999, p. 329\)](#) view is adopted. They approach culture as “a lived and creative experience for individuals as well as a body of artifacts, texts, and objects.” Culture, as it relates to globalization, which is at the core of this discussion, concerns the “movement of objects, signs, and people across regions and intercontinental space” ([Held et al., 1999, p. 2](#)). Nonetheless, culture should not be perceived as merely a knowledge and belief system passed down from one generation to the next but as a set of beliefs, ideas, values, attributes, and expectations that change and adapt as changing circumstances dictate. Due to the fluid nature of culture, delineating it is rather challenging. Anthropologists [Kroeber and Kluckhohn \(1952\)](#) concluded that more than 164 definitions of culture existed, and obviously, this number has been growing in the ensuing years.

2.2. Globalization

The second term that needs to be addressed is *globalization*. *Globalization* is a term that is employed in various ways, as the literature addressing it is produced by various disciplines ranging from sociology to economics. In layman's terms, globalization is the development of international exchange of goods and services and other economic activities. Indeed, economists commonly see it as “the integration of markets across space” ([O'Rourke & Williamson, 2004, p. 1](#)). In other words, it is economically and politically driven. Although the driving force of globalization is economic activity, the repercussions are undoubtedly the homogenizing effects it has on culture and cultural identity, and its consequences have a bearing on culture and core cultural values, ideas, and beliefs, which transcend geographical boundaries. Hence, a more inclusive definition would also incorporate ‘culture’ in this process of a global-scale interaction. This precise interplay of culture and globalization is the focus herein.

2.3. McDonalidization

As stated above, *McDonalidization* is a term coined by [Ritzer \(1993\)](#) to describe the phenomenon by which things are produced in similar, standardized ways. It is the tendency of cultures to converge by sharing some common traits and practices. He explains that his labeling should not reflect any negative attitudes towards the McDonald's fast-food chain per se and states emphatically, “It is no better or worse than most other fast-food restaurants and other manifestations of the rationalization process. I have labeled the process of concern here ‘McDonalidization’ because McDonald's was, and is, the most important manifestation of the process” ([Ritzer, 2004, p. xiii](#)).

2.4. Clash of Civilizations

This term is rather self-explanatory. It originated in the work of political scientist Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* ([Huntington, 1998](#)), and the main premise is that when civilizations and cultures converge, conflict and hostility result. Consequently, people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world. His thesis puts culture at the core as future wars would be fought between cultures and not countries. Recent history has proven him right.

3. McDONALDIZATION: WHAT DOES IT ENTAIL?

Although radically different in their approaches to globalization and how it affects cultural values, [Huntington \(1998\)](#) and [Ritzer \(1999\)](#) agree that core cultural values are affected and do change; however, “they differ with respect to the direction of change” ([Magala, 2005, p. 57](#)) Therefore, in the sections that follow, a critical view of these directions of change is provided.

Firstly, McDonalidization as a phenomenon and what it entails are presented. I will address key elements of McDonalidization as addressed by various scholars ([Ritzer, 1993, 2013; Titus, 2023](#)), well-known in the area of globalization as it pertains to culture. To start with, one obvious result of the convergence of culture or homogenization is believed to be the obvious threat to old traditions, values, ideas, and languages being lost or undergoing substantial changes. These changes suggest that the newly emerging ideas and values, for instance, could threaten the old ones as they are perceived as having lower status or inferior. This fear may be seen as unsubstantiated as the opponents of globalization seem to neglect that culture is not static, but it is constantly changing or evolving.

[Ritzer \(1993\)](#) choice of the well-known American brand McDonald's may be perceived as his skepticism or even fear of the spread of American mass and popular culture. However, he does not explicitly state that. Instead, he claims that this metaphor is used based on the principles of fast-food

restaurants, which are coming to dominate an increasing number of sectors of American society and the rest of the world.

Cultural globalization is often associated with some nations that exert influence and power, for example, the USA. [Holton \(2000\)](#), however, states that this association between cultural globalization and Americanization is overstated. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Americanization or Westernization, of which Americanization is a big part, has exerted great influence on 'peripheral' cultures. [Appadurai \(1990\)](#) talks about regional homogenization, in which case the cultural 'periphery' is under threat by cultural homogenization from the cultural 'core' and reminds the reader that, for instance, what 'Indianization' may be for Sri Lankans and 'Japanization' for the Koreans might be more of an issue. Indeed, this may have been the case for decades, but regional homogenization seems less important as globalization has taken over. In any case, the fear still appears to be that of nations losing their cultural values in a never-ending melting pot. [Magala \(2005\)](#) talks of these basic cultural values as the 'software' in that they guide people's practices. The growing fear is that cultural values will not remain constant and stable over time but will give in to the pressures exerted by, for instance, mass media and social media, eventually disappearing. The idea then becomes that these prior sound cultural values will lose their importance and become irrelevant to people, simultaneously losing individuals' identities. I do not share this belief as it is felt that these influences are more 'locally' based and probably do not have a global effect without, naturally, undermining or underestimating their importance for the cultures affected.

The point made, and the conclusion drawn are that there is undeniably an imposed superiority of some cultures over others. In essence, some cultures overshadow other 'smaller' ones, leading to a passive tolerance or even acceptance on the part of the 'smaller' ones. Most would agree that the Western powers (namely the USA and affluent Western European countries, e.g., Germany and the UK) still exert great influence and shape the rest of the world. However, more recently, other major players, namely China and India, have joined the game, thus creating a more intricate picture.

4. ARE CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS REALLY CLASHING?

[Ritzer \(1999\)](#) disregards the phenomenon of cultures 'clashing,' as he believes there is nothing to clash. Global economies have led to the creation of 'global cultures,' which in turn have arguably created, on the one hand, a tendency for the homogenization of cultures and, on the other hand, have brought about a polarization of cultures or, to put it differently, have fostered increased cultural differentiation. [Huntington \(1998\)](#) view of this cultural 'polarization' is depicted below (see [Fig. 1](#)). It clearly illustrates these two extreme approaches of globalization on cultural values. He discusses the notion of cultures diverging in that they are moving away from a common set of cultural traits and practices rather than converging or a common set of cultural traits and practices coming closer together, the latter being the case with McDonalidization.

[Huntington \(1998\)](#) bases his thesis on the initial assumption that civilizations are bound by religious doctrines, which are then manifested in political ideologies and, hence, practices. His building blocks for categories are, for example, the Western and the Islamic traditions. He argues that there are identifiable and distinct differences between these civilizations or cultures, and they are bound to be mutually exclusive. He posits that "differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic [...] These differences are the product of centuries" ([Huntington, 1993](#), p. 25). Due to these deep-rooted differences, he opines that homogenization cannot occur, as there is no common ground to build mutual respect and understanding. It could be said that Huntington takes quite a pessimistic view in his thesis. Even his choice of the word "clash" denotes many negative connotations in that the idea of violent confrontation or conflict lurking over cultures is eminent. He does not believe that cultural differences can coexist in a more harmonious union.

5. ACCEPTING HYBRIDIZATION-GLOCALIZATION

I believe having a narrow vision and seeing cultural globalization as either leading to a cultural clash or creating a sense of McDonalidization does not do justice to such an intricate phenomenon, as it does not consider elements woven into this complex fabric. Hence, another dimension merits scholarly attention. My views center around the 'middle road' approach, and I believe this may be

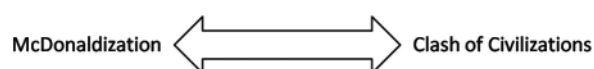


Fig. 1. Two extreme (opposing) approaches of globalization to cultural values.

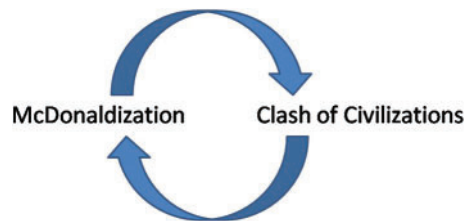


Fig. 2. Interplay between McDonaldisation and the clash of civilizations.



Fig. 3. Both McDonaldisation and the clash of civilizations lead to hybridization.

more pragmatic, as I do not see anything akin to a ‘world culture.’ In essence, I would claim that cultural clashing feeds into McDonaldisation, which feeds into cultural clashing. This translates into an interplay (see Fig. 2) between McDonaldisation and cultural clashing. There is, in other words, an interconnectedness that becomes apparent. The result of this interconnectedness is that hybridization, originally a biological mechanism, is now being used to refer to blending traits from diverse cultures. The figure below clearly illustrates this relationship.

Moreover, using the McDonald’s metaphor in Ritzer’s argument is not coincidental. Nonetheless, I would use it favorably to underscore the positive traits of hybridization. It is widely known that McDonald’s has standardized certain aspects of the food served, the service provided, and the overall branding and image it wants to portray globally. However, it does make adjustments to suit the target/local market. McDonald’s remains successful as it adapts its product to accommodate local needs, values, and religion regarding food and thus satisfies consumer demands based on the specific cultural context. Therefore, in line with Nederveen (2003, p. 53) supposition, “it would make more sense to consider McDonaldisation as a form of intercultural hybridization, partly in its origins and certainly in its present globally localizing variety of forms.”

In essence, McDonald’s is a global company but ‘localizes’ its ‘product,’ a concept referred to as *glocalization*, reinforcing the notion that local versus global can be substituted by the local and global model as complementing rather than mutually excluding each other. This coinage results from combining the words ‘globalization’ and ‘localization.’ Glocalization’ combines the words ‘globalization’ and ‘localization’ to emphasize that a global product or service is more likely to succeed if adapted to the specific requirements of local practices and cultural expectations. Along the same lines, one can speak of ‘Coca-Colization’ to infer the same approach whereby a global company has accommodated local characteristics. More specifically, Coca-Cola produces slightly altered soft drinks to suit the preferences of local markets and is thus a representative example of ‘think global act local.’ To take this notion one step further, Holton (2000, p. 143) writes that the hybridization thesis focuses “on the intercultural exchange and the incorporation of cultural elements from a variety of sources within particular cultural practices.” Incorporating these ‘foreign’ cultural elements into new ‘unified’ cultures is positive as it caters to the trends and demands of today’s globalized society. Cultures will inevitably continue to come into contact, often incorporated in a rather syncretic manner. Cultures can retain their unique values but will be enhanced with elements of new ones (see Fig. 3). This is an attitude that I suggest we adopt as it will lead to more harmonious coexistence.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, the notions of McDonaldisation and the clash of civilizations were addressed to find their primary loci in the terrain of globalization. Their effects on society and their salience of interdependence were argued, and a case was made for the fact that one feeds into the other, which is interpreted as something positive. The view, then, supported in this article is that of hybridization. In other words, cultures and cultural values are constantly evolving and reshaping, and new forms of culture are emerging. Therefore, it may be seen as too narrow a paradigm to suggest that it is a matter of McDonaldisation versus a clash of civilizations. Instead, it should be seen as an interrelationship that is constantly evolving and will not necessarily lead to a single global culture but rather indicates that there will always be interconnectedness among cultures. Finally, it could be said that global culture is a mosaic of many cultures, where some pieces (individual cultures) may be larger than others. However, they all contribute to the great aesthetic effect of the tapestry and the “creation of new syntheses” (Tuncer, 2023, p. 95). In conclusion, I do not espouse the view of those who vehemently support the idea

that cultures will not be able to resist the numbing and neutering effects of globalization nor withstand its homogenizing forces.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he do not have any conflict of interest.

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