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An Invasion Without Guns, And A Welcome One

by David R. Henderson

Wall Street Journal, December 12, 2002

We hear endlessly these days about the juggernaut of America culture ranging the world in search of local customs to destroy, bringing Western entertainments and tastes to tradition-bound societies and smashing up indigenous habits and tastes. Sounds awful. But is it true?

"A typical American yuppie," writes Taylor Cowen, "drinks French wine, listens to Beethoven on a Japanese audio system, uses the Internet to buy Persian textiles from a dealer in London, watches Hollywood movies funded by foreign capital and filmed by a European director, and vacations in Bali." Mr. Cowen's point, argued neatly in "Creative Destruction" (Princeton, 179 pages, \$27.95), is that the invasion works both ways. Indeed, it has for such a long time that it is hard to say exactly where one culture begins and another ends.

Wherever people are, almost all the cultural products that they think of as indigenous owe their existence to the cultural exchange brought about by trade. Jamaican migrants, for example, were exposed to African-American rhythm-and-blues while working on sugar plantations in the Southern U.S. in the late 1940s and brought the music back with them. It was only then that Jamaican music took off, helped along by R&B radio broadcasts from New Orleans and Miami. Or take the steel-band ensembles of Trinidad. Their instruments -- oil drums -- came from multinational oil companies.

Even the Indian hand-weaving industry, treasured by Mahatma Gandhi, was a product of trade. Mr. Cowen notes that the railroad, introduced by the British in India, made it possible for handweavers to flourish by selling to larger markets. It allowed for economies of scale -- higher production at lower cost -- and made high-quality foreign yarns cheaply available.

Steel drums, foreign yarn, French movies . . . It turns out that "cultural exchange" is hard to condemn. But surely Hollywood's global dominance is an example of cultural exchange at its worst. Right? Well, argues Mr. Cowen,

not exactly. First, he observes, the movie industry in Hong Kong thrived until the 1997 communist takeover, and in India it thrives to this day, despite Hollywood. In short, it is possible to compete with Hollywood and win. Second, where local entertainment industries are indeed weak or moribund, as in Europe, Hollywood is less to blame than bureaucrats.

Most European governments heavily regulate television, usually owning major channels, too. And they require TV stations to pick up a certain percentage of domestically produced shows. Meanwhile, about 70% of the funding for the average European film comes from the state -- and is thus made to please its funding source. It's not surprising that Europeans, when they get to choose, go to movies made by a competitive industry rather than a subsidized one. Yes, even the French.

Mr. Cowen does concede that trade can transform the ethos of certain cultures, and not always for the best. But it does so by making people in those cultures better off. Collectors sitting comfortably in New York or London may prefer art from a pristine Papua New Guinea, untouched by the commercial spirit and the mixed tastes that come with it. But the Papua New Guineans may feel differently, preferring clean water, adequate food and access to antibiotics to a life that is nasty, brutish and short -- and unsullied by cultural "imperialism."