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# Globalization and cultural production

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## Introduction

Among the many transformations in the world economy during the last quarter century is the expanded trans-nationalization of cultural production. In 2015, the United States earned USD 31,529 billion in revenue from filmed entertainment (Statista 2016), and as a singular measure this figure is but one small indicator of how the robust production and distribution of cultural products that include film, radio, television, books, music, and other forms of media now constitute an overwhelmingly vibrant global economic sector. Although world markets are not new, what has changed is the rapid acceleration of the globalizing world economy, and, in particular, the organizational arrangements that underlie it. As organizations have become increasingly transnational in scope, industrial arrangements of production and distribution have become more complex. Social theorists (Weber [1921] 1978) recognized that globalization of industrial forms would be the end point of modernity, itself the outgrowth of scientific technology and industrial production that has yielded a world of economic markets, legal settings, and political organizations in which social institutions operate under rational organization principles. In the study of these arrangements, however, organization scholars found that when firms expand into less familiar cultural locales, they are often confronted with ambiguous marketplaces and no clear route to success – requiring firms to reconceptualize how their market is structured along lines of, for example, competitive strategies (Fligstein 1996), labor relations (Dobbin et al. 1993), and organization boundaries (Davis, Diekmann, and Tinsley 1994) in order to augment familiar institutional strategies for action. Strategic corporate leaders play a pivotal role in the process (Fligstein 2001), as do trust and reputation (Kollock 1994).

According to neo-institutionalists, the global spread of organizational forms leads to growing interdependencies among countries, with social institutions eventually resembling one another through worldwide adoption of shared cultural understandings of economic and legal systems. These claims pertain to some extent to the production of cultural products in a global context, but their applicability is less straightforward. As global theorists have observed, incorporating the concept of culture, “the signifying system through which necessarily (among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored” (Williams 1981:13), into understanding societal, national, or organizational levels of development is complicated by

the many ways in which culture itself is understood as a focus of study. Britain's 2016 Brexit referendum to exit the European Union notwithstanding, concepts such as national identity and national culture, for example, are no longer regarded as unitary, and likely never could be. Despite the fact that cultural products are circulated by powerful corporations, the symbolic creativity they organize, produce, and distribute is not immune from the inequalities of class, gender, and ethnicity present in the industries of contemporary capitalist societies; in addition, cultural products are increasingly significant sources of wealth and employment in many economies.

Because cultural production as an industrial system encompasses "outputs [that] are marked by high levels of aesthetic and semiotic content in relation to their purely practical uses" (Scott 2000:2), and symbolic content plays an increasingly important role in how countries, nations, regions, and cultures interconnect on organizational levels, this chapter addresses what sociologists understand about globalization and cultural production, that is, the transnational institutional arrangements that are associated with creation or execution, reproduction, circulation, and exhibition of cultural products. I focus especially on meso-level analyses of cultural production because of their ability to reveal the mechanisms by which culture shapes and is shaped by structural forces and local action.

## Studying globalization and cultural production

The political-economic perspective is perhaps the best known scholarly approach to understanding how global cultural production is embedded in economic systems that are interrelated with political, social, and cultural life. Insights by scholars who assume an overtly critical stance about the consequences of these interconnections have tended to dominate this approach to the field, especially in the study of media. A perhaps unintended consequence of an overtly critical perspective is that it can encumber empirical approaches to the study of cultural production at the global level (Scott 2005). This is because, as Hesmondhalgh and Saha (2013:188) note,

some versions fail to recognize the ambivalence and complexity of popular culture and are little interested in a historical understanding of the development of cultural production . . . or in the highly varied forms that cultural production might take in different societies and among different cultures within those societies.

Scholarship focused on national industries, especially in the US, Europe, Canada, Latin America, and Australia, tends to avoid these pitfalls, offering keen insights about the organizations and markets associated with cultural industries and about the creative labor of art worlds contributing to cultural production at the global level. Yet this approach raises problems, too; in aiming to contextualize the contribution of creative workers adequately, it obscures the ways in which the work of cultural industries intersects with issues of power and structure, including matters of race and ethnicity. Taking these varied considerations into account, at this juncture the field of globalization and cultural production can be characterized as a composite of scholarship that on the one hand consists of grounded empirical work, usually at the national level but increasingly transnational in scope, whose implications for understanding the political-economic contexts of globalization and cultural production are undertheorized, and on the other hand relies upon top-heavy conceptual perspectives that overtheorize the hegemony of cultural industries in a world economy (see Guillen 2001).

Alternatively, scholars in the US, Australia, and Europe, especially those who study the television, film, and music industries, have been calling for middle-range theoretical approaches

(Merton 1949) that bridge this divide by targeting meso-level conceptualization, evidence, and analysis (Bielby and Moloney 2008). This intermediate approach emphasizes the importance of grounded analysis of institutional logics – the cultural determinants of organizational decisions (Douglas 1986), alongside production logics – the social contexts, and historical contingencies that shape markets and mediate the effect of concentration and competition on product homogeneity (Blyler and Dowd 2002). Analysis of institutional logics focuses on, for example, which organizational issues and problems stakeholders attend to in order to survive, or what answers and solutions are available or deemed appropriate (Thornton 2004), such as governance regimes that delineate legal obligations and prerogatives (Christopherson 2008), while examination of production logics considers, for example, how new technologies transform markets and how successful strategies toward technology (rather than the technologies themselves) are what prompt market changes (Dowd 2002). An obvious recent case is how the television format revolution (Chalaby 2012) and emergence of over-the-top distribution systems (Steemers 2014) have transformed the global television industry.

Although studying institutional and production logics of markets as such is important, it is also necessary to bring evidence of organizational, institutional, or economic issues into cultural explanations to better understand the mechanisms by which such logics operate. Scholars seeking a middle ground, where matters such as technological development are placed alongside aspects of the political economy rather than subordinated to it, have begun incorporating cultural concerns into traditional organizational and institutional analysis (Friedland and Mohr 2004). Granovetter's (1985) seminal insight, that market action is influenced by its embeddedness in a web of networked social roles and relations, was important to launching this line of thinking. Biggart and Beamish (2003) extended Granovetter's insights, arguing that it is also necessary for the study of market arrangements to focus on how institutional and organizational structures, practices, customs, and modes of operation in market contexts are themselves socially and culturally constructed – an approach that redirects attention to the agency of institutional actors in marketplaces and the factors that account for their actions. Scholarship on the sociology of markets and the sociology of consumption that examines exchange relationships between buyers and sellers attends to the types of products appropriate for exchange, the cultural meaning behind products, the relative power of actors over the supply and demand of what is being exchanged and their relative dependence on it, and the ever-important matter of trust (Dauter and Fligstein 2007). In sum, a shift to a middle-range theoretical approach to global cultural production invites a different set of questions, ones that advance an empirically grounded understanding of the mechanisms and dynamics as well as the structures that constitute the vibrant economic sector of global cultural production.

## Culture industries

More than four decades ago, organizational sociologist Paul Hirsch ([1972] 1991) identified the distinctive characteristics of the organizations that make up cultural-products industries. Today, understanding the social organization and dynamics of the creative worlds in which cultural production takes place is crucial to achieving a more nuanced and empirically informed approach to the study of global cultural production. Cultural products are shared significance embodied in form (Griswold 2013), meaning that they are expressive in nature and may be transcendent in effect. Hirsch himself described them as embodying live, one-of-a-kind performances and/or containing a unique set of ideas (Hirsch [1972] 1991). Such products originate from art worlds (Becker 1982), which are themselves organized around shared understandings among artists and their associates about materials, performance, expertise, criteria for evaluation,

quality of production, and so forth. Thus, the properties of cultural products, unlike those for strictly utilitarian use, encompass aesthetic or expressive functions. Consequently, cultural products flow in and out of fashion due to changing tastes, preferences, and patronage of consumers, creating unpredictable cycles of demand and tremendous business uncertainty. Although Hirsch's particular focus at the time was national-level industries, his insights are just as relevant to those at the level of global cultural production.

As symbolic forms that connote, suggest, or imply expressive elements that may be appropriated for the creation of social meanings, cultural products not only face demand uncertainty, their innovation can be uncertain as well. This added dynamic has implications for understanding cultural production at the level of the organization, whether it occurs at the global or the local level: the oversight of artistic origination, creation, and production is difficult to regulate bureaucratically because it relies upon intangible expertise – a situation akin to craft administration (Stinchcombe 1959), where the quality of the work cannot be unambiguously evaluated based on technical and measurable features of the finished product. Instead, the quality of the work and the competence of its creator are evaluated post hoc based on the acceptance and success of the work within the marketplace – an arrangement that significantly complicates the implementation of the rational bureaucratic organizational form and its control over the creative labor of employees.

The production-of-culture perspective, which is the prevailing conceptual approach to studying contexts of production (Peterson and Anand 2004), points to the importance of the effect of market structure (Dowd 2004a), embeddedness of organizations (Dowd 2004b), industry transformation (Jones and Thornton 2005), and classification of cultural industries (Janssen, Kuipers, and Verboord 2008) as central determinants of product range and diversity. Although this perspective has been widely adopted for the study of national industries and contexts, it has yet to be extensively applied to analyses of cultural production at the global level even as there is increased recognition of its existence (Wasko and Erickson 2008). In particular, there is a need to study the cultural spaces of creative labor, especially how access to collaborative arrangements is formulated and interacts with the conduct of day-to-day work practices (McRobbie 2004; Baker and Hesmondhalgh 2011).

In describing just how uncertain the demand for cultural products is, Hirsch ([1972] 1991) highlights the complexity of organizational control over the process of distribution. Manufacturers overproduce and from that abundance selectively sponsor large-scale promotion of new items in order to surmount the uncertainty of the market, an aspect of culture industry systems that necessitates specialized, labor-intensive approaches to product dissemination. Other scholars expand on this insight in specifically cultural ways. Because cultural products are symbolic and expressive, and their complex aesthetic properties resonate differently in different contexts, their marketing is based upon establishing meaningful social relationships that utilize personalized or charismatic strategies (Biggart 1989), which are more effective at revealing the potential personal utility (i.e., the pleasure, transcendence, or resonance) of such products (Hirschman 1983). However, as particularistic transactions, they introduce vast interorganizational complexities into the mix. They go beyond mere interconnections and interdependences among firms and individuals in key roles and the actions they take at the “input” and “output” boundaries of organizations (Hirsch 2000).

Observing such interorganizational dependencies associated with distribution of cultural products, especially at the global level, can be a challenge because they may include activity that is not readily visible to outside observers. This might encompass, for example, intra-organizational product modification following manufacturing – which can fundamentally transform a product from its original form to another for use in other locales (Bielby and Harrington 2008) – or complicated co-production agreements between firms from different countries. Such arrangements are intended to reduce uncertainty by anticipating the tastes of consumers in different

nations, but they still can fail miserably (see Hubka 2002). Conglomerates may modify product repertoires for different locales, but ever shifting tastes may overtake the market, circumventing well-developed corporate strategies altogether. In short, although enterprising producers and distributors of cultural products can come to dominate a nation, global region, or even the global market itself, cultural production and dissemination do not occur in an unfettered way. Although these complexities in cultural production were not directly anticipated in Hirsch's seminal contribution, his work continues to make possible keen insights about the organization of cultural industries.

Consideration of further constraints to cultural production adds yet another layer to the conceptual and empirical complexities that a middle-range theoretical approach can bring to the field. Peterson (1982) pointed out that cultural production at the national level is constrained by at least five factors: law, technology, market, organizational structure, and occupational careers. By identifying these hurdles, Peterson explicitly intended to problematize the production-of-culture perspective, organizational analysis, and institutional or economic perspectives, which do not always recognize such limits or constraints as central to the analysis of production in cultural industries. Important work by others adds factors to Peterson's list, a pivotal one being cultural policy *per se* (Crane 2002). As the location where social power writ large is brought into the mix of global cultural production, cultural policy is the site where national interests are developed and enacted as formal instruments to facilitate cultural standing and to protect cultural authority within and across national borders or regions. In arguing for its inclusion when studying globalization and cultural production, Crane (2002) identifies three observable strategies or lines of action available to national governments, urban governments, and cultural organizations for preserving, protecting, and enhancing their cultural resources on the international level – protecting the country's culture, creating and maintaining images, and developing and protecting international markets and venues.

Crane's suggestions are important when considering the study of globalization and cultural production because nations vary in the degree to which they subscribe to a cultural policy – if one even exists. The US, for example, offers minimal oversight of forms of high culture, whereas other nations such as France are vigorous in protecting encroachment upon their national cultural identity. Several international policy agencies predominate in the cultural production arena, each with its own membership and agenda: the European Union (EU), North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), Mercado Commun del Sur (MERCOSUR), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), World Trade Organization (WTO), and General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). All were created to encourage free (or freer) trade between member countries but also in some instances to set quotas on export of content to forestall overwhelming one nation or a set of nations. How such associations foster trade that creates advantages for wealthier nation-members is an empirical question (Baker 2016). These organizations notwithstanding, there are other less formal but equally concerted strategies within nations that are intended to manage cultural products at the local level. These, according to Crane (2002), include the process of culturally “reframing” aspects of specific national urban and historic sites so that they are more (or less) accessible to non-locals. Such strategies can blunt national efforts to maintain a balance between local and global exposure (Tinic 2006).

## Commodity chains and regionalism

Work by cultural geographers holds promise for advancing middle-range sociological approaches to globalization and cultural production. To some, global production occurs through seemingly

straightforward ties between manufacture and distribution – so-called commodity chains, which are the networks of labor, production, trade, and service activities that yield commodities (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986:159). Transnational chains array components of the production process across the world economy by relying upon key nodes of operation in different locations in the production process (Gereffi 1992:94). Within the chain structure, business transactions and intra-firm transfers contribute or “add” the value that moves production along to conclusion.

Although the metaphor of a chain structure is useful for conceptualizing how elements of cultural production flow across borders, it is really just a starting point because of the vastly more complicated nature of cultural products with complex aesthetic properties. Especially for geographers whose focus is the industries of television and film, basic concepts such as commodity chains are supplanted by the importance of geographic regions to sustaining synergies among workers with the creative skills necessary for the creation, production, and distribution activities that make up cultural industries. As sites of economic activity, geographic regions shape how development (the process of building and rearranging economic resources in the interest of enhanced productivity) and growth (the expression of that enhancement in terms of increments to gross product) actually occur (Scott 2002). Because of the interconnections among creative workers in art worlds, regional economies exhibit “efficiency promoting properties” among transactions at the local level, and particularly successful regions can effectively “push” national development and growth because of their strong network structure of production, technology systems, local labor markets, and regional business culture (Storper 1997). Hollywood is a particularly successful example of regional agglomeration, as is France’s film industry, Latin America’s telenovela production, and India’s Bollywood. The concept of agglomeration – the concentration of capital and labor comprising modern production systems – is crucial here. According to Scott, the synergy of agglomeration – coupled with strong industry marketing and distribution capabilities sustained by the influx of capital and labor to magnet-like metropolises such as Milan, Vancouver, Paris, Miami, or Hong Kong – is what accounts for a region’s unshakable competitive advantage despite an increasingly dispersed, polycentric global media commodity chain and strong national and regional industries elsewhere around the globe (Scott 2004). In short, the concept of regional agglomerations of cultural production offers considerable explanatory power for understanding globalization and cultural production in the absence of a culture industry’s ability to bureaucratically manage creative labor or control the conventions that organize and sustain art worlds where creative production takes place.

At the same time, there is evidence of a counterbalancing effect of cultural and political policies upon local, regional, and national economies. Scott acknowledges these factors as relevant but secondary to his emphasis on the concept of agglomeration as a fundamental explanation for the strength of regional production centers. The work of Michael Curtin (2005) speaks to this unresolved matter. Curtin (2005) studied how the institutional logics of politics, market, and cultural production and distribution in China thwarted Rupert Murdoch’s attempt to completely penetrate that country with his STAR satellite system of television distribution. In spite of Hong Kong’s unquestionable influence as a regional center of cultural production – a robustness that is due to its unique position at the periphery of China and its strong links to the West, primarily Europe – China’s openness to Hong Kong’s influence did not extend to an acceptance of STAR’s organizational mechanisms (its business strategy for growth, expansion, and development), which were fundamentally disrupted by China’s culturally distinct expectation that the market be subordinate to political intuitions and ideologies. In this instance, Western conventions about the interconnections between the market and corporate growth were not shared because the cultural assumptions underlying transnational co-orientation were absent, miscommunicated, out of reach, unknown, or unattainable. In short, the business plan could not

proceed as Murdoch intended because it ran counter to China's practice of subordinating the business of its economy to government interests. Another example that involves STAR's presence in South Asia entails – unlike in China – its successful entry into the vast television market of India (McMillan 2003). Ironically, here the *absence* of strict government oversight of violations to television production regulations unexpectedly enabled local private television companies and cable operators to grow and consolidate into strong regional networks that successfully compete with and, to some extent, displace the STAR's penetration. Further work that systematically examines the conditions under which cultural and political policies counterbalance or undermine altogether the synergies of agglomeration is clearly necessary.

## Conclusion

The study of globalization and cultural production is ready for a focused theoretical integration. Such a project will necessarily bring evidence of organizational, institutional, or economic issues into cultural explanations, consistent with the “cultural turn” in sociology. Studies of organizations and institutions ably document the forms and structure of conglomerates and consolidation, but it is those who study the structure of markets and the cultural specificities that affect them who often come closest to conceptually engaging what is pertinent to theoretical integration – particularly when they go beyond strictly national-level interests. Such efforts frequently entail reading across disciplinary boundaries. Although media scholars may be inclined to focus on topics such as industry concentration in the context of globalization and cultural production, they often overlook the importance of markets and institutional organization.

Empirical study of the impact of cultural policy on globalization and cultural production is crucial to advancing theoretical integration, but it remains to be seen how useful the valorization of the local-global dichotomy and attention to top-down effects of media institutions can be in moving the field forward. Moreover, in order to more effectively address the connections between globalization, cultural production, and political economy, scholars will need to reconsider Western assumptions that saturate thinking about modern organizational forms in light of challenges by ideological nationalism, differences in business relationships – such as Asian expectations that they be based on personal networks and relations of mutual obligation (*guanxi*) – and political cultures that foreground policy over institutional mandates (Appelbaum, Felstiner, and Gessner 2001).

With a revised agenda in mind, Hesmondhalgh (2013:64–117) offers several useful questions to guide our thinking as the field of globalization and cultural production develops. To what extent, he asks, have the cultural industries become increasingly important in national economies and local business? What are the implications of the further commodification of culture? What are the effects of the growth in size and power of cultural industry corporations on both cultural production and the wider society? To what extent have the dynamics of cultural production's distinctive organizational form – a combination of loose control of creative input and tighter control of reproduction and circulation – changed since the foundational work on creative labor conducted in the 1970s? Has the cultural labor market – especially its working conditions and systems of reward for cultural workers – improved or deteriorated since then, given the broader post-Fordist trends toward economic insecurity and precarity? To what extent does the increasingly global reach of the largest firms mean an exclusion of voices from cultural markets or an increase in opportunities to gain access to new global networks of cultural production? In what ways have digitalization and the internet transformed cultural production and consumption, and the barriers between them? Finally, what can be said about the quality of cultural texts, and to what extent are the texts produced by the cultural industries growing more or less diverse?



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