Jamie Uys’s humorous yet moving film The Gods Must Be Crazy narrates the story of what happens when a pilot flying across the Kalahari Desert of Botswana drops a Coca-Cola bottle into the midst of a tribal group. The confused aboriginals explain the object as a gift from the gods. But the bottle challenges and destroys the traditions and social mores of their world. To defy the object’s destructive influence, the tribe sends out one of its members to toss the evil thing over the edge of the earth, a distance the clan believes is some twenty days’ walk away. Uys’s movie was so popular on the international market that its producers created a sequel. The Gods Must Be Crazy offered a conspicuous sample of American consumer imperialism and its victimization of the Third World. Released in 1981, the film struck a vital chord in the middle of what has come to be known as “The Grand Debate”: Have Americans become cultural imperialists? Do manufacturers, policymakers, and other interest groups attempt to conquer and corrupt the rest of the world by flooding it with consumer products made in the United States of America?

Since 1945, the study of cultural transfer has formed a powerful tool for the analysis of America’s interaction with other nations. But in contrast to other approaches, neither historians nor their peers in neighboring fields have ever devised a clear-cut terminology. Indeed, they have not even employed a single line of argument. Originating in political think tanks after World War II, the investigation of cultural transfer has made its way through academic institutes the world over, until it finally arrived in the public sphere in the 1980s. By far the most popular – or notorious – approach has been termed “cultural imperialism”, a notion and an ideology that appealed to a long list of supporters in the 1960s and after, and that – because of its persistence and influence – deserves the attention of all scholars interested in the study of culture and foreign relations. However, sociologists, historians, anthropologists, and others have suggested that the notion of “cultural imperialism” should be replaced with a more fluid term that avoids what they regard as the naive active-passive dominator-victim dualism. Alternative terms include, for example, “cultural transmission” and “transcultural interaction”. Students of culture and foreign relations should therefore use these terms with great caution and realize that they are based on specific arguments and interpretations.

Three trends of cultural transfer
The emergence of a cultural imperialism critique
Four discourses on cultural imperialism
Critics of cultural imperialism theory
The future of cultural transfer studies
Bibliography
Three trends of cultural transfer

Cultural transfer does not represent a single, static trend or a set of criteria. Most historians of cultural transfer probably would deny that they all belong to one school. The specific meaning of the term is neither timeless nor free of ideological underpinnings. Instead, each meaning is generated out of its various discourses, its use. Since World War II, the study of cultural transfer has developed in cycles. Hence, its significance must be interpreted through historical lenses. First, the cold warriors deplored the absence of an active and forceful cultural diplomacy among U.S. officials. In contrast, their descendants, the critics of cultural imperialism, described the export of American culture as thinly veiled global capitalist exploitation. Finally, a third group of countercritics challenged the concept of cultural imperialism with a variety of different arguments. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a rather heterogeneous group of scholars argued that local resistance either modified or completely stymied imports as part of a global process. Begun as a purely political debate, the discussion has expanded into an increasingly academic dispute over culture as an instrument of power that either “functioned” or “did not function.”

Scholars of U.S. cultural transfer are primarily concerned about U.S. cultural influence in the world but also deal with foreign influences in the United States. In contrast to their peers working in the field of political history, they look beyond the level of decision-making processes to figure out how culture, especially the export and osmosis of culture, can be explained as an instrument of political or economic power, a tool of international communication, and a dynamic force on its own. In particular, they seek to find out how governmental and nongovernmental actors exerted power abroad by importing and exporting material goods and ideas as well as by creating international networks and organizations. In this context, culture, and American culture in particular, does not connote a specific meaning but rather a conglomeration of aspirations, emotions, and identities shared by human beings living within a geographically and politically defined area. “Culture”, contemplates Akira Iriye (1997), “determines what the ends of a nation are; power proves the means for obtaining them.”

Cultural imperialism is based on the assumption that one nation tries to force its culture, ideology, goods, and way of life on another country. In the United States, critics of cultural imperialism as an instrument of diplomacy study the extent to which American culture reached and influenced foreign shores under governmental and private auspices. On one end of the spectrum, historians interested in cultural imperialism argue that postwar U.S. policymakers made a conscious effort to export American culture abroad in order to gain access to raw materials, cheap labor, and new markets for U.S. consumer products. On the other end of the spectrum, scholars have proposed to supplant the notion of cultural imperialism with cultural transmission, which seeks to deemphasize the question of agency and, instead, admits a more fluid concept of interaction.

In the past the idea and study of cultural transfer has appealed to many audiences outside of the academic world. It is this appeal to both scholars and the broader public that distinguishes the significance of cultural imperialism and cultural transmission from most other theoretical concepts discussed among diplomatic historians. Whether they liked it or not, since at least the early days of the Cold War, journalists, politicians, and intellectuals have fretted over the power and meaning of American culture abroad.
Since at least the 1960s, cultural imperialism has proven to be a tremendously popular and enduring concept. It has introduced culture as a variable into the study of foreign relations and thereby has significantly broadened the field. It has built the foundation upon which more than two generations of historians have based their research strategies and arguments. It has penetrated many academic disciplines, including musicology, sports, sociology, and political science. And it has left a long-lasting mark in the public arena; politicians the world over, for example, lament the manipulative influx of U.S. movies. Tiny nations, remote people, and unknown tribes find their way into the headlines of international journals through their outspoken protests against Western cultural imperialism. From Iceland to Latin America, Central Africa to the Philippines, local spokesmen presumably mourn the demise of their indigenous mores and traditions that is coupled with the rise of Anglo-American television and culture.

In harmony with the public debate, several generations of academics have struggled with questions of cultural transfer. Despite the scholars’ intergenerational hostility and despite historians’ increasing urge to defy old approaches for new configurations, students who desire to labor in the vineyard of cultural transfer need to know these interpretations. Each of the three principal trends still finds its way into early-twenty-first-century historiographical debates – and rightfully so. For despite all the ideological baggage, each trend offers viable methodological insights for research related to the meaning of American culture in the international arena.

In the years following World War II, policy-makers and intellectuals began to believe that cultural diplomacy and cultural images made a difference in global politics. This assumption seemed radical if not revolutionary for most observers at the time. In 1938, when the State Department established the Division for Cultural Relations, many U.S. officials still criticized the use of culture as a diplomatic tool. Their reluctance reflected a consensus that culture belonged to the realm of creativity, public taste, and free enterprise. How and why should one win diplomatic negotiations by invoking art, music, books, and theater performances? On a more basic level, cultural programs were costly and there were no voters abroad to legitimize such investments.

After 1945 the situation changed as both U.S. diplomats and intellectuals began arguing that the United States needed to sell the American way of life abroad. Public figures as well as policymakers, such as the State Department consultant Arthur W. MacMahon, media czar Henry Luce, and Senator William Fulbright, encouraged governmental authorities to make more of an effort to influence foreign nations through culture around the world. In the early Cold War years, consequently, the American government created a number of organizations and programs, such as the United States Information Agency and the Fulbright exchange program, that sought to sell American culture – including literature, music, and art – abroad. The USIA was founded with the specific purpose of developing a cultural propaganda program for audiences abroad and to develop them with a full and fair picture of American life, society, and culture. The Fulbright program was created right after World War II to enable foreign students (notably German students) to study in the United States and become acquainted with the American way of life. Likewise, the program sent (and still sends) U.S. academics abroad to learn about cultural differences but also to act as informal ambassadors of the United States.

Designed in 1950, the “Campaign of Truth” was supposed to represent a psychological counterattack against Soviet indoctrination. Employing books, brochures, exhibitions, and lectures, the campaign was aimed at public opinion leaders and other “multipliers.”
One might wonder why policymakers grew so interested in the American way of life. Why did they suddenly seek to impart American culture to others? First, on the ideological level, American culture was dizzily democratic; anything was allowed. American culture also seemed essentially resistant to autocracies on the left or the right, as reflected in the postwar consensus on liberalism manifest in the writings of intellectuals like Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Daniel Boorstin, and Louis Hartz. Consequently, U.S. policymakers and scholars were convinced that the promotion abroad of an enterprise-based culture would help to spread democracy around the world and contain fascism, communism, and other repellent foreign ideologies.

Second, and on a more practical level, communist regimes, above all in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), made Bildung (knowledge, education) and Kultur (high culture) pivotal points of their own propaganda. The GDR government claimed to be a democratic institution and it attacked American culture as a manifestation of a degenerate democracy. Communist officials knew that Europeans identified strongly with their high culture. Public opinion polls taken between 1945 and 1950 revealed that many Germans dreaded the adaptation of democratic values at the expense of their cultural heritage. Communist propagandists had convinced German audiences that they could be communists and, simultaneously, admirers of high culture, such as the romantic music of the nineteenth-century composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky. According to their propaganda, democratic audiences in the Western world, in contrast, supposedly “drugged” their minds with jazz.

Third, in the decade after World War II many Americans felt a deep apprehension over what they saw as their worsening reputation in a world of cultural diversity abroad – new cultures, new nations, and new arms. Shortly after the Soviets launched the satellite Sputnik, Franz M. Joseph and Raymond Aron edited a collection of articles under the telling title As Others See Us (1959). In this book, some twenty representatives from all over the world portrayed their countries’ impression of American society. The French, Aron asserted, detested America’s “big industry, mass production, the lowering of standards in favor of the masses”, as well as its race problems, superficiality, “industrial barbarism”, and “the intellectual fodder offered to the American masses, from scandal magazines to digests of books”. In the end, the book represented a most depressing analysis of America’s image abroad. Most people believed that “Americans had done remarkable things in production and they had technical ‘know-how,’ but America itself was … [a] giant with the head of a lout”.

Academic and journalistic investigations of American cultural transfer abroad in the late 1950s and 1960s underlined the prevalent belief that American information and exchange efforts represented a timid reaction to the Soviets’ dynamic propaganda. “America is the greatest advertising country in the world”, the journalist Peter Grothe complained in 1958. “Yet when it comes to the most important advertising campaign of all – that of advertising ourselves and the democratic way of life – we run a poor second to the Communists”. Grothe reproached U.S. policymakers for not having made the most of cultural relations programs after World War II, blaming the small-mindedness and indifference of the president, Congress, and the American public. And sociologists like Princeton University’s W. Phillips Davison demanded more effective programs with clear-cut values, detailed purposes, and a rigid selection and training of personnel. They urged policymakers to employ American books, films, and information programs as instruments to acquaint people the world over with U.S. history, politics, and culture.
All people, in short, needed more American culture, and it was the government’s task to export it abroad.

The men and women who took part in this debate, it should be added, employed a rather unspecific idea of American culture. Historians investigating the United States Information Agency – designed in 1953 to convince people abroad that U.S. goals were in harmony with their hopes for freedom, progress, and peace – have underlined the uncertainty to define the core and the ins and outs of American culture. As Laura Belmonte and others have shown, USIA’s programs focused on areas that were regarded as representative of American culture and society, including consumer products, high living standards, and the advantages of a free-market economy. But throughout the 1950s the agency was hampered by conflicts over the content of its agenda and its mission. Michael Krenn has shown that at the World’s Fair of 1958, endless debates over how to deal with the United States’s “Achilles’ heel” of race relations inhibited the entire organization of the U.S. exhibit.

In sum, until the 1960s the debate over the export of American culture remained primarily a political one. Its participants were civil servants, writers, and journalists who viewed the government’s developing cultural programs abroad as worthy although insufficient weapons to contain totalitarianism in the world. These men and women did not ask whether foreign audiences would welcome such messages.

Cultural Imperialism – The emergence of a cultural imperialism critique

But in the late 1950s and early 1960s concern over the implications of American culture bounced back to Europe, where it inspired a debate that would dominate academia for the next thirty years. Indeed, academics everywhere increasingly internalized the debate on U.S. culture abroad but they also dramatically revised previous assessments. A blooming leftist movement associated capitalism with a host of things characteristic of twentieth-century society, including consumerism, modernity, bureaucratic “soulless” organization, and the conflict between society and the individual. Their findings would lay the groundwork for the study of U.S. cultural imperialism.

Again, the theme – a critical interpretation of American culture in the world – was not entirely new. Since the early 1900s, if not before, European conservatives such as D. H. Lawrence and Adolf Halfeld had criticized American civilization for its lack of soul and education. Americans, these writers argued, scoffed at high culture. Americans’ essential national identity and values, such as productivity, efficiency, and rationality, stood in contrast to the most fundamental characteristics of Kultur, including quality work, contemplation, and the creative use of leisure. Many observers, that is, interpreted American civilization not just as plainly different from but as a treacherous threat to European culture.

The critics of the early 1900s found a faithful audience among post–World War II intellectuals. In the 1940s and 1950s, European leftists also began worrying about American influences, such as McCarthyism and consumerism. Horrorstricken at the term “mass”, the Frankfurt School, a group of philosophers, sociologists, and historians, viewed the United States as a mass society with a mass culture that annihilated liberty, democracy, and individualism. The sociologist Herbert Marcuse stated that Americans represented a prime example of how human existence in advanced industrial societies remained passive, acquiescent, and unaware of its own alienation. In his writings,
Marcuse developed the image of the “one-dimensional man” (the title of one of his books), an individual incapable of thinking dialectically and of questioning his society. Instead, humans had willfully subordinated themselves to the domination of technology and the principles of efficiency, productivity, and conformity.

The Frankfurt School was particularly worried about the demise of Kultur. Intellectual leaders such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Leo Lowenthal devised a theory based on Marxism that stressed the subliminal totalitarianism of news agencies, television, and broadcasting. Fostered by the media, American capitalism had turned into an economically and culturally repressive force. High culture no longer represented a foreign, opposing, and transcendental sphere that contrasted with reality. Instead, in the struggle between East and West, Kultur (that is, the individual philosopher, the preservation of theory, art, and high culture) had mutated into a propaganda tool and, thus, to a consumer good. By materializing and mass-producing aspects of high culture, modern humankind had mutilated its original meaning.

The Frankfurt School influenced more than a generation of American thinkers. Disillusionment originating from the Vietnam War and domestic urban and student revolts captivated a culturally influential segment of Americans who came to condemn both the free-market economy and the U.S. government. The promotion of democracy by the United States seemed hypocritical and meaningless in the age of napalm bombs and the Watts riots. Journalists and scholars such as David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, Vance Packard, and William H. Whyte studied the subject of the mass media in the 1940s and 1950s. They believed that the United States was the dominant promotor of capitalism around the globe and concluded from their study of the mass media that it represented a tool of U.S. capitalist ideology, perpetuating U.S. capitalism at home and abroad. To criticize the United States for its military involvement in the Third World, notably Vietnam, implied automatically a critique of American capitalism proper. Capitalism was bad because it threatened human wholeness, true individuality, the sense of community, social bonds, self-realization, and authentic values.

This critical interpretation of the nature of American capitalism profoundly influenced the writing on U.S. foreign relations. Discontent with the “realist” approach of historians such as George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, and others, a new generation of “revisionists” shifted the study of the international system to the impact of domestic ideology as well as economic and social forces on U.S. diplomacy. And as American society grew wealthier, critics turned their attention away from the American working class to suppressed domestic minorities and the Third World, where they found that American capitalism, in search of new markets, raw materials, and cheap labor, acted as a victimizer, brutalizer, and exploiter. The making of American diplomacy had to be seen as part of America’s capitalist political economy, argued New Left historians such as William Appleman Williams, because the health and persistence of the domestic economy depended on ever-expanding markets abroad. Williams, Gabriel Kolko, and others stressed the economic motivations of U.S. diplomacy and, thus, turned the investigation of the East-West conflict into a struggle between capitalism and socialism. U.S. policymakers constituted the foremost guilty party in this scheme because their actions were motivated solely by their greed, their quest for new markets that the Soviet Union did not even want.

The historiography of U.S. economic and political imperialism formed the foundation for the study of cultural imperialism. Although the term “cultural imperialism” had appeared in scholarly analyses before, it was only in the 1960s that this critique came to
be a catchword as well as a coherent argument. The 1977 edition of the *Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought* defines cultural imperialism as “the use of political and economic power to exalt and spread the values and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of a native culture”. Critics of cultural imperialism were united in their portrayal of Western culture as an expansive, predatory force. They cast their critique in a structuralist framework that associates political ideas with an underlying discourse that, in turn, shapes the entire culture in the context of which such ideas are expressed. Unlike the discussants of the 1950s, who had called for more American culture abroad, the critics of cultural imperialism reproached the U.S. government and the business community for spreading that culture beyond U.S. borders.

Four discourses on cultural imperialism

John Tomlinson developed a most insightful critique, on the basis of which we can identify at least four different discourses of cultural imperialism. His categories are the media, national domination, the global dominance of capitalism, and the critique of modernity. Media imperialism is the oldest and by far most widely debated category. Most importantly, it relates to current political issues. The study of media imperialism originated in Latin America among students of communication research. In the 1950s and 1960s, Latin American economists interpreted their countries’ economic relations to Europe and the United States by developing a theory of dependency. Chilean communication scholars quickly appropriated that concept when, at the time of the 1970 election that brought Salvador Allende to power, they began to admonish the United States for its involvement in Latin American affairs. One of the most dramatic and widely read essays written by these scholars came from Armand Mattelart, a professor of mass communications and ideology at the University of Chile, and Ariel Dorfman, a literary critic and novelist. In *Para leer al pato Donald* (“How to Read Donald Duck”, 1971), they held that in an effort to protect U.S. economic interests in Chile, the Central Intelligence Agency financed and fostered an arsenal of psychological warfare devices to indoctrinate the minds of the Chilean people, including Disney cartoons and other consumer products. They denounced Hollywood’s distorted version of reality and cautioned Latin Americans against U.S. propaganda. The danger of Walt Disney, Mattelart and Dorfman believed, consisted of the manner in which the United States “forces us Latin Americans to see ourselves as they see us”. The authors stated that the Chilean people would eventually free their own culture and kick out the Disney duck: “Feathers plucked and well-roasted….Donald, Go Home!” Published shortly before the Chilean revolution, this essay appealed to readers far beyond the borders of Chile; *Para leer al pato Donald* went through more than fifteen editions and was translated into several languages.

American scholars quickly borrowed the concept of media imperialism. The Watergate scandal propelled suspicions of a conspiracy between the government and the media and of abuses of executive power. In a variety of studies, the communication scientist Herbert I. Schiller retraced a powerful connection between the domestic business, military, and governmental power structure on the one hand and, on the other, the “mind managers” – that is, the leaders of the U.S. communications industry – who in his view had conspired to manipulate minds at home and abroad. As Schiller saw it, nineteenth-century Anglo-American geopolitical imperialism had been replaced in the twentieth century by an aggressive industrial-electronics complex “working to extend the
American socioeconomic system spatially and ideologically” across the globe. “What does it matter”, Schiller asked in 1976, “if a national movement has struggled for years to achieve liberation if that condition … is undercut by values and aspirations derived from the apparently vanquished dominator?”

A second group of critics understood cultural imperialism as the domination of one country by another. To no small degree, this discourse grew out of the growing concern of the United Nations Economic, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with the protection of national cultures, as well as the rising interest in the study of nationalism in the 1970s and 1980s, as represented by Benedict Anderson and others. In this interpretation, “culture” suggests a natural and static heritage of traditions that are akin to a certain country. It also serves as a tool of social control as important as controlling material resources. Hence, cultural imperialism implies the efforts of one country to undermine another country’s cultural heritage by imposing its own. Frank Ninkovich’s analysis of the State Department’s efforts to establish an art program between 1938 and 1947 showed that during World War II, policymakers attempted to use artifacts of American culture, notably paintings, to promote “a sense of common values among nations of varied traditions”. Just as free trade would have a liberalizing effect by contributing to other nations’ economic well-being, art would create a common sense of culture. Simply put, if everyone agreed that American culture qualified artistically and aesthetically as a universal way of life and taste, it would indeed increase foreign acceptance of American values and American politics.

A third group of scholars interpreted cultural imperialism as the expansion and sometimes global dominance of U.S. consumer capitalism. Historians like Ralph Willet identified imperialist motivations within the American business community and government. Carrying this argument even further, others, such as Emily S. Rosenberg, claimed that in the twentieth century U.S. foreign policymakers had purposely begun to spread American culture, information, and the concept of a free and open economy in order to expand the national market abroad. Here, culture identifies capitalism in its most materialist form, encompassing goods and ideas associated with such goods, both of which foster homogenization. Culture is thus turned into an instrument to fuse different societies into one international economic system. E. Richard Brown (1982) denounced U.S. medical and health education programs sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation in pre-1949 China. They were a “Trojan horse”, guided “in their conception and development by imperialist objectives”. These programs, Brown held, “were more concerned with building an elite professional stratum to carry out cultural and technological transformation than with meeting the health needs of each country”. The programs facilitated American control of foreign markets and raw materials.

The most persisting and intellectually challenging criticism of U.S. cultural imperialism, however, originated among a fourth group of scholars who redefined the debate into a critique of modernity. The arguments of Jürgen Habermas, Marshall Berman, and others followed the outline of the Frankfurt School, which had originally launched the postwar investigation of cultural imperialism. Building on the writings of Marcuse and others, they depicted cultural imperialism as the imposition of modernity. They studied how the primary agents of modernity, such as the media, bureaucracy, science, and other social and economic institutions of the West, transferred the “lived culture” of capitalism to non-Western cultures. These scholars admitted that members of a recipient society had choices but that these choices were conditioned and manipulated by the modern
capitalist environment in which these societies existed. Culture and modernity thus became a global prison.

In the eyes of Habermas and others, “modernity” represents the “main cultural direction of global development”. Culture entails capitalism but also mass culture, urbanism, a “technical-scientific-rationalist dominant ideology”, nation-states and a certain one-dimensional self-consciousness. The domination of these all contribute to the core meaning of Western “imperialism”.

The critics of modernity were the first group that focused their analyses not on the question of agency but on the process of manipulation itself. They expanded the study from “American” to “Western” cultural imperialism that left out no field, no people, and no culture. While this perspective retained the term “imperialism”, it also served as a forerunner for later trends in the debate over cultural transfer by moving the emphasis from the question of guilt to the actual process of cultural imposition. Because of its innovative approach, much of the critique of modernity has remained fashionable after most other critiques of cultural imperialism have ceased to influence the debate.

**Critics of cultural imperialism theory**

Students who are interested in the concept of cultural imperialism should be aware of the unresolved theoretical and methodological problems within the debate. A number of scholars have claimed that the cultural imperialists “have shown remarkable provincialism, forgetting the existence of empires before that of the United States”. Since the sixteenth century, European governments have developed a variety of cultural exchange programs, although they may not always have hoped to expand their empire by exporting their culture. The British in India and the Middle East, the Germans in Africa, and the French in Indochina all imposed their own culture abroad as a powerful tool to strengthen trade, commerce, and political influence and recruit intellectual elites for their own purposes. The historian Lewis Pyenson has shown that between 1900 and 1930, “technological imperialism” – the attempt on the part of state officials to employ scientific learning to form an international network of communication and prestige abroad – skillfully complemented German expansion in China, Argentina, and the South Pacific. In addition, new studies on U.S. policies in Asia and Europe have demonstrated that American policymakers did not hesitate to sacrifice economic (and ideological) objectives in order to realize geopolitical interests.

Individual case studies on private interest groups, such as philanthropic foundations, the American Library Association, and the press corps, show that often neither policymakers nor businessmen, but rather nongovernmental American organizations, were among the most active advocates of American culture and values abroad. The State Department as well as Congress were often reluctant to develop a full-fledged policy of cultural diplomacy. Often, these institutions were omitted from the process altogether.

Yet by far the most emphatic attacks against the critics of cultural imperialism came from Tomlinson, Frederick Buell, and others, who reproached authors such as Schiller for falling into the very trap they originally wished to avoid. Tomlinson stated that their rhetoric “repeats the gendering of imperialist rhetoric by continuing to style the First World as male and aggressive and the Third as female and submissive”. In doing so, Schiller and others had assumed an imperialist perspective that viewed the Third World as made up of fragile and helpless cultures while at the same time serving the interests
of Western modernity. It was said that the critics of cultural imperialism employed a theory suffering from a vague language of domination, colonialism, coercion, and imposition. Thus, ironically, the critics of cultural imperialism were made to seem the worst cultural imperialists.

Cultural imperialism, according to John Tomlinson, consists of the spread of modernity. It is a process of cultural loss and not of cultural expansion. There never were groups of conspirators who attempted to spread any particular culture. Instead, global technological and economic progress and integration reduced the importance of national culture. Therefore, it is misleading to put the blame for a global development on any one culture. The notion of imperialism – that is, purposeful cultural conquest – is irrelevant; instead, all countries, regardless of whether they are located in the northern or southern hemisphere, are victims of a worldwide cultural change.

Since the mid-1980s, scholars have paid closer attention to both global and local aspects of the American and Western cultural transfer. Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians have stressed the peculiarity of individual cultures in the context of a nonbipolar world. Under the influence of resurfacing nationalism the world over, one group of scholars has studied the periphery in greater detail, producing analyses of individual communities that came in contact with American (or Western) culture after World War II. Inspired by the growing debate on globalization, a second group has opted for precisely the opposite approach. Instead of unilateral imperialism, it has developed a concept of global modernization.

Scholars of local responses to American culture have investigated individual case studies, weighing resistance against acceptance. Borrowed from both psychology and literary criticism, response theory addresses the preconceptions influencing the reactions of human beings exposed to an external impression such as a text, a sound, or a visual perception. Response theory moves the focus of research from the question of agency to the question of audience and reaction. Instead of looking at broadcasters and producers, these scholars investigate, for example, the audience of television shows like Dynasty.

Inspired by the public debate abroad over the impact of U.S. cultural imperialism, since about the mid-1980s response theory has affected nearly all studies of cultural transfer in history, sociology, and cultural studies. For example, Culture and International Relations (1990), edited by Jongsuk Chay, studies particular aspects of culture such as literature, music, religion, or television programs to calibrate the effects of American culture abroad. The authors’ findings vary in their assessment of the impact of American culture, but they agree that indigenous people never simply accepted consumer goods from the United States. Reinhold Wagnleitner, for example, argued that Austrian youth revised the original meanings of jeans, Coca-Cola, and rock and roll into something new that accorded with their own needs; those consumer products offered not only comfort but also freedom from social constraints as well.

A number of scholars delineated a profound appeal of Western culture to non-Western countries, but challenged the assumption that U.S. policymakers and businessmen sought to manipulate certain target groups. Other studies focusing on the effects of cultural imperialism underlined the difference between foreign people and foreign governments. James Ettema, D. Charles Whitney, and others suggested in their studies of the media that audiences make conscious choices concerning what they listen to, read, and watch. Studies of underground movements in China and Eastern Europe in 1989 also demonstrate that in many cases, Western television programs inspired audiences to start a revolution against their own political leaders.
Another group of scholars concluded that audiences not only simply accepted the fruits of Western cultural imperialism but developed a strong resistance to American products and culture. Scholars of Islamic societies have consistently emphasized the stark opposition of orthodox Muslims to Western influences. Individual studies in cinematography, drama, literature, and cultural studies in Latin America, Asia, and Africa demonstrate that, notwithstanding the influence of Western goods, since the mid-1970s local audiences began to reject individual aspects of Western culture.

In many cases, a more detailed analysis of the origins of local resistance shows that peculiar local conditions informed it more than an outright condemnation of American culture. Under the intriguing title *Seducing the French* (1993), Richard F. Kuisel investigated economic missions, foreign investment, and U.S. consumer products in postwar France. He emphasizes that French opposition to U.S. culture “was (and is) about both America and France”, because it intensified French fears of losing their cultural identity. Kuisel concedes that the French underwent a process of Americanization. But at the same time, they succeeded in defending their “Frenchness”. French consumers found some American products appealing but they also continued to cherish and idealize French national identity, notably the idea of a superior French high culture.

Likewise, the average German citizen traditionally tended (and tends) to adhere to a more exclusive image of culture than his or her American counterpart. German *Kultur* traditionally stressed high culture and was closely linked to the enhancement of *Bildung*. It was ethnically bound, deeply rooted in German history, and – particularly in the case of the arts, music, and performance – dependent on state funding. After World War II, West Germans did not view the intrusion of American popular culture as cultural imperialism. To them, American culture remained always incompatible with *Kultur*. In other words, adoption of cultural artifacts does not necessarily translate into cultural and political adaptation.

The response theorists concluded that the model of a unilateral attempt to force consumer products and ideas on foreign nations is fundamentally flawed: resistance and cultural identity played a powerful role in the perception of American culture abroad. U.S. officials, in turn, were uncertain of the scope and nature of cultural exports. Their actions, furthermore, were quite comparable to the efforts of cultural diplomats of other countries. As Will Hermes concluded in the periodical *Utne Reader*, “American pop culture isn’t conquering the world”. Perhaps, he wondered, American cultural imperialism is “just part of the mix”.

Informed by the poststructuralist approach, scholars from a variety of disciplines suggested in the late twentieth century that the term “cultural imperialism” be replaced with another term that seeks to circumvent the simplistic active-passive, dominator-victim dualism. For example, musicologists and anthropologists developed a variety of concepts seeking to broaden our understanding of global music interaction. Their suggestions, including “artistic sharing” and “transculturation”, could easily be translated into other fields as well.

“Cultural transmission”, for example, became one of the most appealing “post-imperialist” interpretations. The notion stemmed from the vocabulary of psychology, where it alluded to the interaction between cultural and genetic influences on human behavior. One of the most important historical accounts is a collection of essays, *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe* (1993). The contributors addressed diverse issues such as rock music in Italy and the reception of
Disneyland in France. *Cultural Transmissions* describes the various avenues of acceptance, rejection, and alteration that audiences may choose when confronted with American culture.

Spurred by the vision of a “global village”, another group of scholars has advanced a theory of “globalization”. That term alludes to the compression of the world as well as to humans’ increasing perception of the earth as an organic whole. Many understand this phenomenon simply as an economic development. Yet globalization is multidisciplinary in its causes and its effects. Its vague meaning allows researchers to interpret the term broadly; thus, it includes many features of modernization, including the spread of Western capitalism, technology, and scientific rationality.

Once again, the theme – globalization – was not at all new. Modern ideas on the interconnectedness of the world could be found as early as the writings of turn-of-the-twentieth-century German sociologists. Max Weber, for example, offered various conceptual frameworks of universalism beyond political borders. In “Soziologie des Raumes” (The sociology of space, 1903), philosopher-sociologist Georg Simmel argued that a national border is not a geographical fact with sociological consequences but a sociological fact that then takes a geographical shape.

This theme received renewed attention in the late 1980s when sociologists came to believe that socioeconomic relations everywhere were undergoing a profound change that resembled the Industrial Revolution in scope. No longer could cultures and societies be analyzed in the framework of the nation-state, these scholars believed. They argued that, first, any society is in a constant exchange with other societies; that, second, most countries consist of a multitude of cultures; and that, third, cultures do not necessarily reflect the borders of a nation-state. Sociologist Roland Robertson, one of the most prominent advocates of a global theory, proposed that a new concept replace the prevalent social scientific system of mapping the globe into three different worlds after the end of colonialism in the 1960s. Instead of a tripartite worldview, he outlined a vision of the globe as a more organic, interconnected, single network.

Inspired by this argument, students of cultural transfer moved their research away from its anti-American focus and toward a more global level, with no one identifiable enemy. Scholars replaced the concept of U.S. cultural domination with the study of Western cultural influence, but they disagreed over the relationship between manipulation and globalization. A few, like Orlando Patterson, still maintained that the modern process of worldwide cultural interaction could be interpreted as a clandestine American push for global uniformity. Others, however, like Peter Beyer, believed that globalization comes “quite as much at the ‘expense’ of” Western as of non-Western cultures, since both are part of a dramatic change.

Scholars such as Karen Fog Olwig employed the global approach to reflect on the tension between local and supranational cultural and political developments. Some of these analyses presented a despairingly bleak picture of the future cultural world order. Samuel Huntington, for example, invoked the specter of a “clash of civilizations”, a World War III, where Western and Eastern societies would battle not for political and ideological reasons but as a consequence of cultural conflicts. Huntington argued that in the future people would identify themselves by reference to their faith, food, and local traditions instead of ideas and national political systems.

Charles Bright and Michael Geyer’s 1987 account painted a more optimistic picture. They interpret the shift from Westernization to globalization as the fusion of tradition and modernity: “This is not Spengler’s Decline of the West, but the beginning of a
global reordering in which the West seeks its place in a world order it must now share with radically different societies. It is the beginning of a truly global politics”. John Urry and Scott Lasch (1987) even theorized that the globalization of economic, political, and social relationships indicates the “end of organized capitalism”. In a completely interconnected global economy, no one country will be able to control the market. Frederick Buell claimed in his book National Culture and the New Global System (1994) that for almost every academic discipline the “world of hybrid cultural production” was becoming the rule.

Interestingly, major critics of U.S. cultural imperialism, too, revised their earlier reproaches along these lines. Herbert I. Schiller, for example, reframed his argument in terms of world-systems theory. In an article published in 1991, he portrayed an expansive, transnational corporate authority that has replaced an autonomous United States in influencing all economic and cultural activity. Literary critic Edward Said, who analyzed the image of Orientalism in Western society, argued in Orientalism (1978) that the West culturally dominated the Orient by creating an artificial cultural vision of the latter “as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience”. His later study, Culture and Imperialism (1993), detailed how Western authors and audiences developed a literary perspective on imperial geography distinguishing between “us” (the West) and “them” (the Third World). “Western imperialism and Third World nationalism feed off each other”, Said summed up, “but even at their worst they are neither monolithic nor deterministic”.

It would be misleading to abandon the notion of cultural imperialism and replace it with another, equally exclusive term. Scholars who are interested in the study of cultural transfer need to understand that culture, just like power, may be used to attain any number of objectives and to pursue any number of policies. Therefore, cultural imperialism is as suitable or unsuitable a designation as any other one. In the end, each term provides only one perspective on the chaos of cultural interaction. To understand and partake in the research in this field is to realize that there is no central paradigm. Instead, scholars must borrow insights from all three discourses retraced above.

The future of cultural transfer studies

At least four points of the debate on American cultural transfer abroad and on the question of where students of cultural transfer should turn next merit scholarly attention. First, the Internet revolution represents one of many events pointing to both globalization and multiculturalism, implying that Americans may no longer be able to
agree on the substance and meaning of their culture, let alone agree sufficiently to export the idea of an American culture. In a way, this discord echoes the original conviction that Americans have no culture worthy to export.

Second, at the same time, the American public has once again begun to fret over the portrayal of American culture abroad, thus reinventing the discussion of the 1950s. On 8 June 1997, the New York Times Magazine published a special issue titled “How the World Sees Us”. International observers reluctantly admitted the preponderance of American power and culture. But they also stressed their respective countries’ resistance. “American movies have achieved the impossible”, exclaimed playwright Edvard Radzinsky in one article. “Russians are so sick of them that they have started watching films from the days of Socialist Realism”. And American commentators concurred. “Some of America’s cultural exports are so awful that you begin to suspect that we’re using the rest of the world as a vast toxic waste dump”, editor Michiko Kakutani said.

Third, the center of the debate is changing rapidly. Until recently, the discussion centered on the nation-state, with a few significant exceptions. After the end of the Cold War, however, scholars paid more attention to the individual entrepreneur. The debate, that is, shifted from a nation-centered critique to the study of the impact of private business. This change of argument not only obliterated national boundaries but, equally important, transferred the object under investigation from politics to capitalism.

Fourth, until the late twentieth century the debate in the United States centered almost exclusively on that century. With only a few exceptions, discussants seemed to agree that the transfer of American culture had no history before the formal establishment of a program and then an agency that was in charge of projecting U.S. culture abroad. Yet sociologists tell us that bureaucratic formations follow rather than outline the way of a political trend or need. By shifting the notion of cultural transfer from formal government programs to nongovernmental encounters, scholars have increasingly realized that cultural transmission has existed everywhere and much earlier in time. Indeed, cultural transmission often preceded formal diplomatic ties. Although their findings were for many years ignored in the debates over cultural transfer, students of American history have for decades been investigating nineteenth-century ambassadors of American culture abroad. They have looked at missionaries in China, soldiers in Cuba, and the encounter between American settlers and Indian nations. They have investigated actors, as in the examination of the exodus and exchange of private groups including political émigrés, businessmen, and artists. They have also studied ideas and products as transmitted, for example, by scientists, poets, tourists, and museum curators. Their findings underline the general point that there was quite a lot of cultural transfer prior to World War I.

Bibliography


