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Economic and Cultural Globalization

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PAUL A. CANTOR

C*ultures Merging* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006) is an excellent book—with an unfortunate subtitle, *A Historical and Economic Critique of Culture*, which might lead us to expect that Eric L. Jones will be discussing the economic basis of cultural achievements in areas such as music, painting, and literature. But he rather cavalierly dismisses the “confusing use of culture to mean the arts” (p. 48). His book is essentially about globalization as an economic and cultural phenomenon, and it offers a cogent and well-documented defense of the way the market economy is spreading its influence to every corner of the earth. Thus, *Cultures Merging* joins Tyler Cowen’s *Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World’s Cultures* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002) as a powerful antidote to the antiglobalization tirades that bombard us from all sides today in both popular journalism and academic discourse.

Jones generously acknowledges Cowen’s work, and it is not a criticism of his book to say that he cannot quite match the verve and intellectual excitement of Cowen’s arguments. Nor does Jones equal Cowen in the complexity of his view of globalization. Jones is unwilling to discuss at length the negative effects of globalization, and, unlike Cowen, he does not look at the cultural tragedies that sometimes result when modernization overwhelms and annihilates traditional ways of life. But given the antiglobalization slant of so much commentary today, one can understand

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why he would want to accentuate the positive and minimize the negative aspects of globalization—if only to restore some balance to debate on the subject. Accordingly, his book makes a major contribution to that debate and supplies new ammunition for anyone who wants to battle fashionable arguments against the spread of a market-oriented way of life around the globe.

What Jones means by a “critique of culture” is a refutation of the idea that culture is a factor that must be taken into account in economic analysis and in particular of the insistence that cultural considerations can and should impede the spread of modernization and the market economy into areas where traditional ways of life prevail. In short, Jones sets out to counter the widespread view that the market economy is itself a cultural construct specific to the Western world and therefore wrongly applied in other cultures, particularly in the undeveloped world. As Jones himself concisely states the position against which he is arguing, “The extreme holders of this view stigmatize any attempt to extend market economics beyond the West as disrupting other cultures for profit. . . . All cultures embody the inalienable rights of those born into them and deserve protection for that reason. Trying to integrate other cultures with the international economy (globalization) is wrong” (p. 7).

Jones systematically exposes the limitations of this way of thinking, arguing that “[t]his syndrome amounts to cultural relativism in holding that every culture is unique, and desirably unique” (p. 7). He shows how wrong it is to conceive of even the most traditional cultures as homogeneous and unchanging. Opponents of globalization make it sound as if other cultures around the world would be able to preserve a sort of timeless purity without the spread of Western influences. Antiglobalization rhetoric rests on a romantic primitivism, rooted in a hatred of Western civilization as corrupt and a desire to find its pristine antithesis on some remote non-European shore. But Jones’s title points to an alternative conception of culture that is closer to the historical truth. Cultures are not self-contained and, as it were, hermetically sealed off from one another. Rather, when carefully examined, they generally turn out to have a complex texture and more often than not are the product of a merging of one prior culture with another.

Let me as a professor of English offer the English language as an illustration of what Jones means. The worldwide spread of English is often presented as an example of the baleful effects of globalization. Something homogeneous and unchanging called English is supposedly taking the place of other homogeneous and unchanging languages elsewhere on the planet. But languages everywhere are always changing, and what we think of as simple English is of course extraordinarily complex—the product of several languages and cultures intermingling over time in the course of the complicated interaction of the peoples of the British Isles among themselves and with the peoples of the European continent and elsewhere. English is fundamentally a mixture of an original Anglo-Saxon vocabulary; French words added as a result of the Norman Conquest; substantial doses of terms from Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and

Scandinavian; as well as words with Latin and Greek roots adopted by scholars since the Renaissance. Moreover, wherever English has spread, it has assimilated words and speech patterns from the languages it was supposedly conquering, from the Caribbean to the Indian subcontinent. In sum, the English language is as much the product of globalization as it is its agent.

In fact, what we call globalization is only the latest phase and culmination of the process by which all cultures have developed over millennia, ever since the first cave-man ventured out of his cave to see what was going on in the cave across the valley. Perhaps he learned how to draw a mammoth from seeing one on the “foreign” cave’s wall; maybe he showed the other cave dwellers how to use a mammoth bone to beat a rhythm on a rock. Cultures develop precisely by merging, and it is a basic error to think that the lines that currently divide up the cultural map of the world have any kind of eternal validity and therefore should constitute permanent barriers to future cultural exchange.

Jones aptly makes this point with regard to describing the history of cultures: “The subject cries out for a movie rather than a set of still pictures. Snapshots of culture conceal the mutability that appears in the long run” (p. 39). Because opponents of globalization ahistorically think of non-Western cultures as static, they lament these cultures’ encounters with Western culture. The antiglobalization position is actually reactionary, as shown by the fact that it is perfectly embodied in Rudyard Kipling’s notorious pronouncement, “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (“The Ballad of East and West,” 1889). In fact, the twain have been meeting ever since Greek clashed with Trojan on the plains of Troy, and the West began to be easternized, even as the East began to be westernized. Perhaps to his surprise, Jones could have strengthened his case by drawing on contemporary work in cultural studies, where “cultural hybridity” has become a central concept. Particularly in the field known as postcolonial studies, scholars treat cultures as hybrids, blends of antithetical impulses, emerging, for example, out of the tense but productive encounters between native traditions and a colonial heritage. Cultural hybridity is also a central idea in much of postcolonial literature, especially in the works of Salman Rushdie. The deepest reason why his *Satanic Verses* offended Muslim fundamentalists is that it challenged the myth of a pure, ahistorical essence of Islam and instead presented the religion as developing over time as it absorbed elements from alien traditions.

Jones does an especially good job of dealing with arguments that claim that religion is a cultural force that necessarily trumps economics. To people who insist that Islam—with its prohibition against taking interest—is simply antithetical to the spirit of capitalism, Jones counters: “Islam exhibits plenty of traits favorable to commerce and was, after all, founded by a merchant” (p. 221). Christian Europe began with a negative attitude toward “usury” but eventually found ways to get around it. Jones answers those who point to ways in which Islamic societies have rejected westernized modernity: “This cultural position can account neither for the fact that Islamic science flowered during what was in European terms the Middle Ages nor for the selective

eagerness with which modern Islamic societies seize on innovations in military hardware and information technology” (p. 212).

Jones points out that efforts to explain economic development in cultural terms often rely on simplistic post hoc ergo propter hoc reasoning. Many scholars were surprised by the spurt of growth in the economies of Asia after World War II, beginning in Japan, spreading to areas such as Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, and most recently coming to China and India. In the grip of orientalist stereotypes, these scholars had thought of only the West as dynamic and conceived of the East as frozen in time, mired in the past and incapable of adapting to the modern world. Faced with a new dynamism in the East, some economists even reversed their understanding of Asian culture and tried to view it as actually conducive to economic growth. This is the so-called Asian Values thesis, in which, as Jones puts it, “Asians, primarily the Chinese, have beliefs and behaviors that distinguish them from Europeans and Americans. They work for the benefit of the community; they work hard; they are thrifty; they respect education” (p. 165). Notice the nature of this reasoning: (1) Asians are enjoying economic growth; (2) this growth must be due to something distinctively Asian about their societies; and (3) that “something” is their indigenous Asian culture.

The problem with this argument is the time lag in the explanation. Asian values had already been in place for more than a thousand years in most cases, but no such economic growth was evident before the second half of the twentieth century. Jones quotes Fareed Zakaria, a skeptic of the Asian Values thesis: “‘Then I wondered, if being Indian is a key to economic success, what explained the dismal performance of the Indian economy over the four decades since its independence in 1947 or, for that matter, for hundreds of years before that? One might ask the same question of China, another country with an economy that performed miserably for hundreds of years until two decades ago’” (p. 165). In short, the Asian economic miracle came much too long after Asian values were already in place to be explained in terms of them. What changed in Asia after World War II was the introduction of elements of the capitalist system that gradually spread from Japan to China and India.

Jones does not emphasize this point, but it is interesting to observe scholars searching for anything to explain Asian economic growth other than the simple fact that Asian nations have finally turned more or less to free-market principles. Indeed, many economists have tried to put a collectivist spin on the Asian economic miracle, arguing that Asian traditions of cooperation allowed nations such as Japan to outperform the U.S. economy, with its traditions of rugged individualism and cut-throat competition. But now that Japan has been plunged into economic stagnation by the cumulative effects of years of bureaucratic intervention and mismanagement, the country has lost its luster as the poster child for a third way between capitalism and socialism. Some economists are now offering China as an alternative to the free-market model—a managed economy that supposedly will outperform capitalism in the West. In fact, however, the remnants of communism are impeding Chinese economic growth, and only to the extent that China has adopted Western business practices,

including tentative steps toward establishing the rule of law and private-property rights, has it achieved the progress it has. Jones seems hesitant to come right out and say it, but what his book shows is that the freeing of markets around the globe is solely responsible for the economic growth the world has experienced in recent decades.

Perhaps the strongest part of Jones's book is his vigorous argument against cultural protectionism. As he points out, it has become increasingly difficult for advocates of protectionism to make their case on strictly economic grounds. They have thus turned to broader cultural arguments, claiming that barriers must be erected against foreign products to preserve native cultural traditions.¹ Drawing upon his experience on the other side of the globe, Jones calls our attention to a case that might otherwise have escaped our notice:

Australian interests have long been piqued at New Zealand competition, and their demands neatly indicate the hyperbole of cultural protectionism. Pique turned to outrage when a trade agreement forbade excluding New Zealand television programs from the Australian market. A spokesperson for one Australian opposition party claimed that New Zealand competition threatened not only the cultural identity of Australians but their human rights. The Australian government lamented that the trade agreement prevented it from excluding the competition but swore that local content quotas would insulate Australia's "world-class" (yet somehow tragically vulnerable) television networks from fresh foreign assaults over the next decade. (pp. 224–25)

Jones's parenthetical sarcasm is right on target—if Australian television is so good, why does it need to be protected from foreign competition?

Jones is especially acute in analyzing how economic protectionism and government support actually corrupt the arts. Such support is intended to free artists from having to achieve success in the marketplace by pleasing the public, but it has the unintended consequence of making artists newly dependent on the government bureaucracy that now finances their works. Instead of having to cater to the taste of the public, artists now have to come up with the sort of work that arts-funding committees will approve: "The results may sometimes be excellent, but without open competition there is no good way of telling this or ensuring it will happen. The longer subsidies and quotas on foreign products persist, the more likely taste will come to rest within approved bureaucratic parameters. Artistic composition will increasingly have its eye on grant getting" (p. 231). This objection to government funding of the arts is a serious one, which Cowen does not sufficiently deal with in his recent book *Good and Plenty: The Creative Successes of American Arts Funding* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

1. **Editor's note:** For an insightful analysis of what is perhaps the leading instance of this cultural argument, see Jacques Delacroix with Julien Bornon, "Can Protectionism Ever Be Respectable? A Skeptic's Case for the Cultural Exception, with Special Reference to French Movies," *The Independent Review* 9, no. 3 (2005): 353–74.

The publication of Jones's book illustrates the very process of globalization it celebrates. The author was born in England and has spent much of his life teaching in Australia. His book is published by an American university press. Critics who lament the worldwide diffusion of English should learn to appreciate the advantages of the language as a medium of international communication. Without having to worry about the vicissitudes of translation, Jones can spread his ideas to all corners of the earth in English. I am delighted to report, however, that in little nooks and crannies of his prose, he has resisted the international standardization of English. I have been to England many times, and, as a professor of English, I am of course familiar with a great deal of English writing. But I have to admit that I came across idioms in Jones's prose that I did not understand (except from context). I can handle soccer *pitch* (p. 239) rather than *field*, and I assume that "takes the biscuit" (p. xiv) must mean what Americans mean by "takes the cake." Because I am a teacher, like Jones, I can guess what it is "to mug up a few references" (p. 45). But I know *swan* only as a noun, not as a verb, and I am particularly curious to find out what it means to "swan around the salons and fleshpots of London" (p. 92). I had to turn to a dictionary to find out that "bad cess" (p. 11) means simply "bad luck" (it turns out to be an Anglo-Irish idiom). And I wondered what in the world "barracking" (p. 111) for a team might be, until the same dictionary told me it means "cheering," but only in Australia.

How these Anglicisms and Australianisms survived the tyrannically homogenizing copy editing of an American university press I will never understand. Jones must have stuck to his guns, as we Americans say—and more power to him, as we also say. Local idioms evidently still survive in the English language even as we move into the globalized twenty-first century. Indeed, as Cowen has argued more generally, globalization paradoxically often helps to preserve the local—for example, by providing a global market to revitalize the creation of local products that did not have a sufficient market in their own countries. So let me conclude by saying—even as a partisan of the globalization of English—*Vive la différence!* Jones himself builds up to a similar conclusion about the prospects of globalization: "True identity springs from individual creativity, not geographical affiliation. There will be new syntheses; local cultures that were silenced by domineering nation-states and empires like the USSR will be reborn. Modernization may demolish some anthropological oddities, but it will lead to a more varied future" (p. 251).