

MULTICULTURAL America's IMPERIALISM

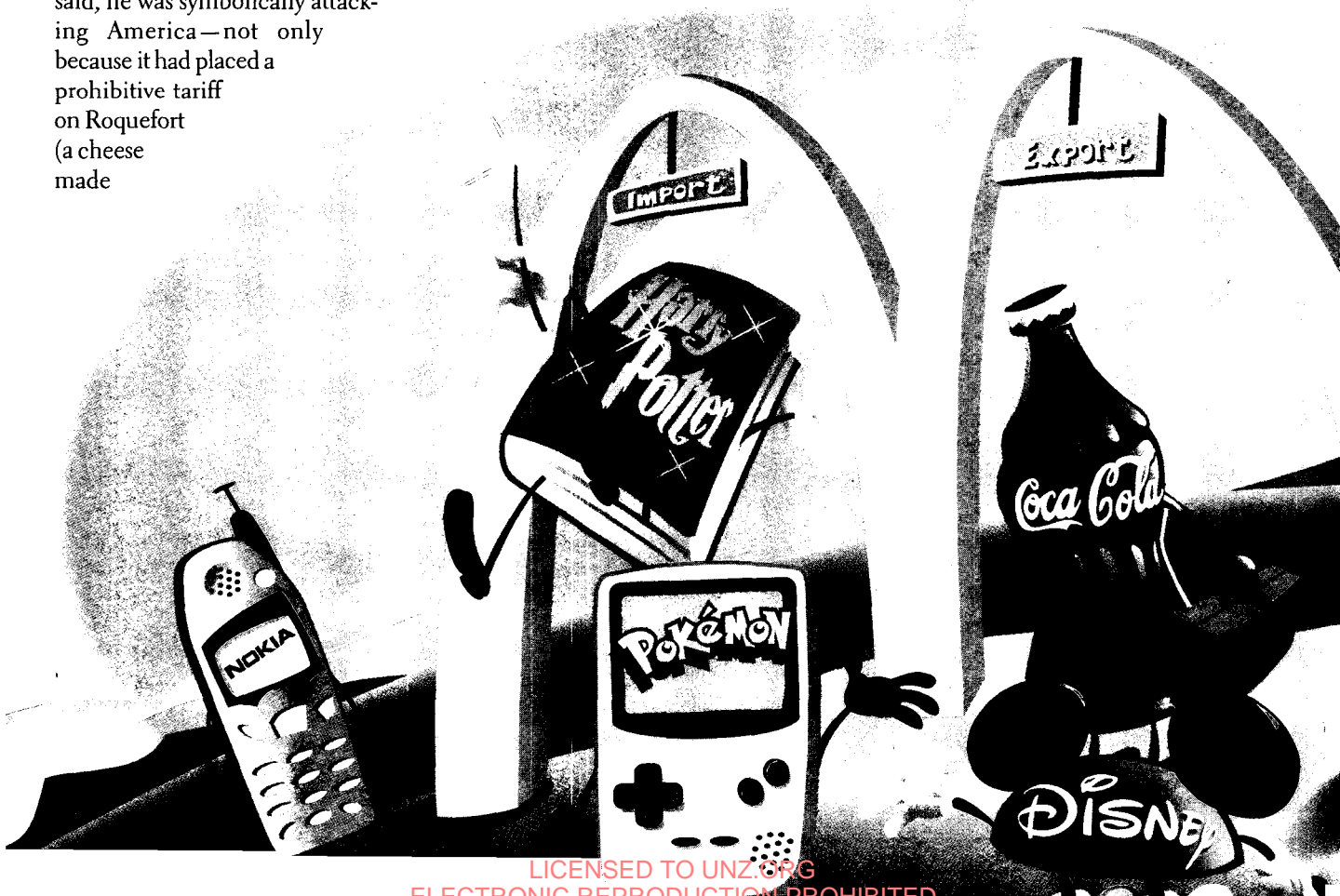
September promises to bring a verdict in the trial of Jose Bove, who last August led farmers in wrecking a half-built McDonald's in the French town of Millau. The luxuriantly mustached shepherd and union organizer has become a national hero in France. The president, prime minister, and many other politicians have voiced sympathy for his cause; 40,000 showed up to cheer him at the start of the trial; and not even the prosecutor wants Bove to serve prison time.

In attacking McDonald's, Bove has said, he was symbolically attacking America—not only because it had placed a prohibitive tariff on Roquefort (a cheese made

Globalization is turning the whole world into the United States, cultural nationalists complain. And they're right—but not in the way they think.

FRANCIS X. ROCCA

from Bove's sheep's milk), but because the United States is the home of economic globalization and mass-produced food. France's support for Bove bespeaks a pervasive anxiety there that American influence is destroying the native culture, argues Sophie Meuer in a recent *Foreign Affairs*. The authoritative newspaper *Le Monde* has declared that "McDonald's red and yellow ensign is the new version of America's star-spangled banner, whose commercial hegemony



threatens agriculture and whose cultural hegemony insidiously ruins alimentary behavior—sacred reflections of French identity.” Another sign of defensive nationalism is last March’s government dictate that civil servants eschew the terms “e-mail” and “start-up” in favor of *un message électronique* and *une jeune pousse*.

Such anxiety is not limited to France. “Native cultures feel threatened by the Americanization of their cultures,” complained Iranian President Mohammed Khatami last May. This might sound like more rabble-rousing against the “Great Satan,” but no less a U.S. ally than Israel recently considered limiting the non-Hebrew (i.e., English-language) tunes that radio stations may play.

Even Americans may feel misgivings about their country’s so-called “cultural imperialism.” It might be comforting to find CNN and MTV in one’s Singapore hotel room, but it can be disappointing, too. Exotic destinations are harder than ever to find. The world seems more and more the same—and more like the United States.

Well, yes and no. The ubiquity of Disney, Nike, Coca-Cola, and the like is deceiving. Consumers can appropriate such products for their cultures, using them according to local needs and tastes. Moreover, many other nations are strong competitors with the U.S. in fashion, food, and entertainment. Homogenization American-style wouldn’t be possible anyway, since America is less homogenous every day. And yet, global mass culture is American in a sense. For better and worse, in fundamental ways, it is making the rest of the world more like the U.S. even as it changes America itself.

Arch Villains

McDonald’s is a target not just for Jose Bove but for a host of environmentalists, animal rights activists, vegetarians, trade unionists, and enemies of capitalism. “During the past five years, McDonald’s restaurants have been the targets of violent protests—including bomb-

ings—in over 50 countries, in cities including Rome, Macao, Rio de Janeiro, Prague, London, and Jakarta,” writes the Harvard anthropologist James L. Watson in *Foreign Affairs*. Last April a young woman in France was killed after Breton separatists bombed one of the chain’s franchises.

The evils attributed to the golden arches are wide-ranging. McSpotlight.org, a London-based Website, shows photos of John Major and Tony Blair inside McDonald’s, and Margaret Thatcher eating a Big Mac, to illustrate the claim that politicians are owned by the “super wealthy.” The site also features an interview with a former “Ronald McDonald” clown who has come out as a vegetarian; and a poem by a Scottish school teacher actually named Ronald McDonald, mocking the corporation’s claim to exclusive commercial use of the “Mc” prefix. The last stanza reads:

In Beijing, McDonald's serves spicy chicken wings, in New Delhi vegetable McNuggets, in Tokyo teriyaki burgers. Big Macs are halal in Kuala Lumpur, and kosher (i.e. cheeseless) in Jerusalem.

Tae foreign foe we’ve nivver knelt,
For Scotland’s name oor bluid’s been skelt,
See you, Big Mac, an aa yir ilk,
Gang hame, an yodel up yir kilt.
Ye chikky burgers!

Among McDonald’s many alleged sins, the one with the most resonance outside of activist circles is that of the imposition of dreary sameness on the social and physical landscape. In his book *The McDonaldization of Society*, the U.S. sociologist George Ritzer argues that the hamburger chain epitomizes modern capitalism’s tendency to force a pre-programmed structure onto life, killing creativity and independent thinking.

Ritzer’s critique betrays an academic’s disdain for mass-market kitsch. His tips for resisting McDonaldization include reading the *New York Times* instead of *USA Today*, and watching PBS instead of commercial networks, as if higher-brow media organs didn’t present their own prefabricated visions of the world. Yet even a Big Mac aficionado like myself can’t dismiss such objections outright. While predictability is essential to any chain’s appeal, its downside is monotony. The charm of eating in a restaurant just like thousands of others, with the same menu and scripted exchanges between customer and clerk, soon wears off. Having robbed American popular dining of regional flavor, it might seem, McDonald’s is now busy doing likewise for the world’s.

Of course, if going to McDonald’s were really so dull, it wouldn’t be so common. (Watson reports that there are more than 25,000 outlets in 119 countries, and a new restaurant opens every 17 hours.) Although the business is global, it is also local-

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DAVE JOLY

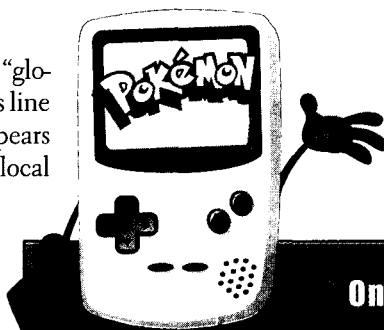
ized or, to use a marketing term, “glocal.” Its cookie-cutter restaurants line the highways, but when one appears in a historic setting, it fits in. My local McDonald’s, on a street originally laid down by the Romans, displays its golden arches discreetly—they are no larger than the coats of arms over the doors of medieval and Renaissance palaces nearby. From outside you can see the exposed-beam ceiling of the upstairs dining room.

Remember the scene in *Pulp Fiction* in which John Travolta tells Samuel L. Jackson about going to McDonald’s overseas?

Travolta’s account, which includes the detail that the Dutch put mayonnaise on their French fries, understates the variety of the restaurants’ international menus. In Beijing they serve spicy chicken wings, in New Delhi vegetable McNuggets, in Tokyo teriyaki burgers. Big Macs are halal in Kuala Lumpur, and kosher (i.e. cheeseless) in Jerusalem. You can order champagne in Rio, and beer in most of Europe.

The customization of McDonald’s goes beyond the food. In a collection of ethnological studies entitled *Golden Arches East*, Watson and other anthropologists show how McDonald’s serves different social functions in Hong Kong than in Houston. For instance, in the former city and elsewhere in China, teenagers and the elderly linger at McDonald’s for hours, something forbidden in U.S. franchises. With management’s cooperation, customers have made the McDonald’s experience a Chinese experience.

However, as Watson et al. point out, going to McDonald’s has also changed the customers. It has taught Chinese to stand in line, and their children to order for themselves rather than let parents choose for them. It has taught Russian employees to smile, and Russian customers not to take offense when smiled at. It has taught Japanese to eat with their hands and on their feet. The novelty of clean restrooms at McDonald’s has raised general standards of cleanliness in Chinese restaurants. In its humble way, this amounts to communicating a set of values. Hamburgers and French fries are not apt to replace rice and noodles in the Chinese diet, but McDonald’s has shaped the way that Chinese merchants and consumers do business.



On the Internet, a Korean can go to an Icelandic rock group’s site and download music. A Chilean can do preparatory research for his vacation in Greece.

ucts in a traditional, face-to-face way. These same characteristics also make McDonald’s an unsatisfactory model of global mass culture, which is increasingly transmitted in faster, less concrete, and vastly more complex ways. The social and economic impact of any retail chain is trivial compared to the changes that information technology has already begun to wreak on the world.

Like McDonald’s, the Internet is made in the USA. It is also an engine of American economic power; some 90 percent of commercial Websites are based in the States. A study by the research firm IDC shows that recent European sales by Amazon.com are several times higher

than that of its nearest European competitor. So why haven’t we seen some bookseller equivalent of Jose Bove lead a group of fellow merchants against the Seattle-based behemoth?

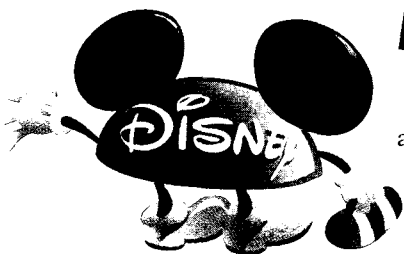
One reason is that there is no bricks-and-mortar Amazon outlet to trash, though e-terrorism would be possible. But the Internet does not generally incite economic or cultural nationalists. Despite its origins, few think of it as exclusively American. McDonald’s, for all its glocalization and native-born managers of national divisions, has a headquarters—in Oak Brook, Illinois. The Internet, originally developed for the Pentagon as a distributed communications network that could survive a nuclear attack, by definition has no center.

The Internet is an open system, and small countries, not to mention small merchants, are free to compete on it. American dominance will become more proportionate as foreign countries catch up in levels of online access. Forrester Research, Inc. predicts that by 2004 Western Europe and Asia-Pacific will have \$3.1 trillion of the global e-commerce market, approaching North America’s \$3.5 trillion share. The number of non-U.S. e-businesses should rise accordingly. American movies, music, and journalism have no lock on the Internet as a communications medium. Frenchmen, Indians, and Filipinos can use the Internet equally well to promote and sell the products of their cultures.

True, the Internet will reinforce English’s status as the global language, but the most important consequence of that will not be the extension of American pop culture (most of which either needs no translation, or already has one). As a lingua franca, English is increasingly used among non-native speakers. Since any Website with international aspirations features an English version, anyone with some command of the language can virtually roam the world. A Korean can go to an Icelandic rock group’s site and download music. A Chilean can do preparatory research for his vacation in Greece. (Global tourism should particularly benefit from this trend. Imagine how much more inviting India or Egypt becomes to a Pole or Brazilian once he learns English. A sense of worldwide access, which middle-class Americans have taken for granted for decades, is spreading to their counterparts in every other country.)

America’s Web

McDonald’s makes an attractive case study for anthropologists because, despite its size, it is a relatively simple business, selling a small range of prod-



Nevertheless, to say that the Internet is indifferent to the cultural origin of the content passing through it is not to say that the Internet is culturally neutral. The medium has a culture of its own, more in harmony with some ways of life than with others.

As anyone knows who has ever rushed through a pile-up of e-mails, or marveled at the array of sites instantly called up by a single search, or cursed a download lasting more than a few seconds, the Internet accustoms one to speed, efficiency, and sheer quantity. Because of its immunity to censorship, it encourages individual liberty. The low cost barriers to setting up a site promote equality. While these goods are not possessed or prized exclusively by any one nation, in combination they are a recognizably American set of values. Owing largely to the Internet, they will increasingly be the world's.

Native Brands

An inexhaustible range of choices, while exhilarating, can be mind-boggling. Consumers seek not just diversity and novelty, but familiarity and reliability. Thus the prominence of brands in the global economy. Here McDonald's provides a good model, even in a culture with highly developed culinary tastes. When a Roman sightseeing in Milan seeks a cheap and relatively clean place for a quick lunch, the golden arches can be a welcome sight amid the dubious bars and pizzerias in the crowded tourist zones.

Branding and globalization don't mean that American junk food must drive out other countries' specialties; the reverse can happen. Starbucks has made espresso as American as pizza, and taught millions worldwide the virtues of Guatemala Antigua and Arabian Mocha Sanani. What kind of a U.S. market for Jose Bove's Roquefort was there twenty years ago? Globalization has expanded the potential for profit in "highbrow 'micromarkets,'" as John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge point out in *A Future Perfect*. There is surely much more gourmet cheese being sold to upwardly mobile diners everywhere owing to the integration of the world's economy.

Non-American enterprises thrive globally by mastery of branding. The latest Harry Potter book, written and set in England, had the largest initial printing in U.S. publishing history: 3.8 million copies, most of which were sold within a day of publication. Although the U.S. edition features Americanized spelling and vocabulary, the forthcoming (Hollywood) movie will not change the hero's nationality—Englishness has been deemed essential to the property's appeal. "Denominations of controlled origin" such as champagne, sherry, and port function as brands in having international reputations. For connoisseurs, these

wines are not the real thing unless they come from the parts of Europe for which they are named.

More often, though, the national origins of brands are vague or unknown to their consumers. Watson writes of Korean youngsters joyfully surprised to find, when visiting the States, that Americans have McDonald's, too. Pokémon-related merchandise of every kind is coveted by the whole world's children, few of whom can realize that it originates in Japan. Benneton sells its brightly colored togs with ads celebrating the international brotherhood of attractive young people. How many know or care that the garment maker is

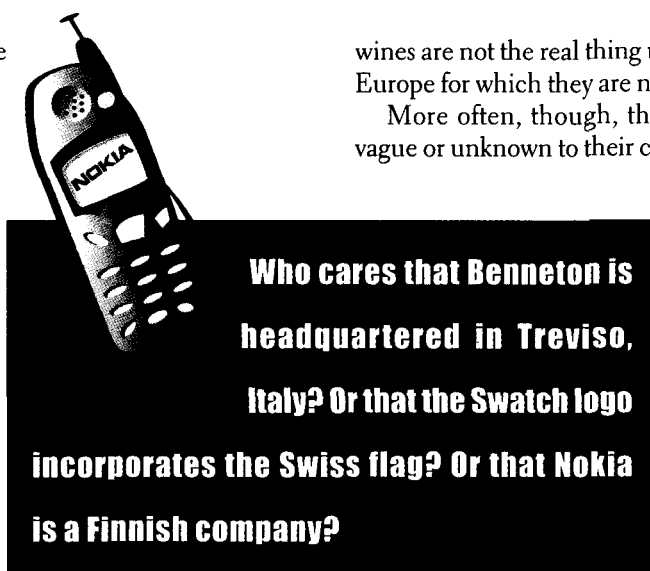
headquartered in Treviso, Italy? Or that the white-on-red cross in the Swatch logo is the flag of Switzerland? Or that Nokia is a Finnish company?

The most popular commodities on the global market might as well be from anywhere. Expanding choice gives advertising and brand loyalty greater roles—and regional customs a consequently smaller one—in determining taste. Yet the style of this consumerism betrays its national roots. It is the way that Americans have been buying and selling for at least a generation, a system that befits a society of high geographic and economic mobility. The content of global mass culture is multinational in origin and universal in character, but the structure of its distribution and consumption is distinctively American.

So the world is becoming more like America, but that does not mean homogeneity—rather, the opposite. Americans have never had more cultural choices. The offerings at a typical supermarket deli counter range from quesadillas to Thai chicken salad. Cable television commonly offers more than 100 channels, everything from soft-core porn to C-Span. At many public schools the instruction is in Spanish. The number of pop music genres on sale in a contemporary CD store would have bewildered a teenager of two decades ago. Worshippers disappointed with Christianity or Judaism have easy access to eastern religions, Islam, and the various forms of pagan spirituality known as New Age. The causes of this fragmentation are complex, but an indisputable one is the ever growing movement of goods and information around the globe.

There are fewer and fewer normative American tastes, making it harder to define American identity, and harder to adopt it. Once upon a time, for instance, immigrants and their children embraced baseball as a way to assimilate. Some of them, such as Joe DiMaggio, mastered the game and won the admiration of all ethnic groups. They became icons of Americanness. Now baseball is just one choice among many, and newcomers bring their sports with them. Immigrants from India, Pakistan, and other former British colonies in the West Indies have founded 170 cricket clubs in New York alone, reports Inigo Thomas in *Slate*. A \$30-million cricket stadium is now planned for Brooklyn.

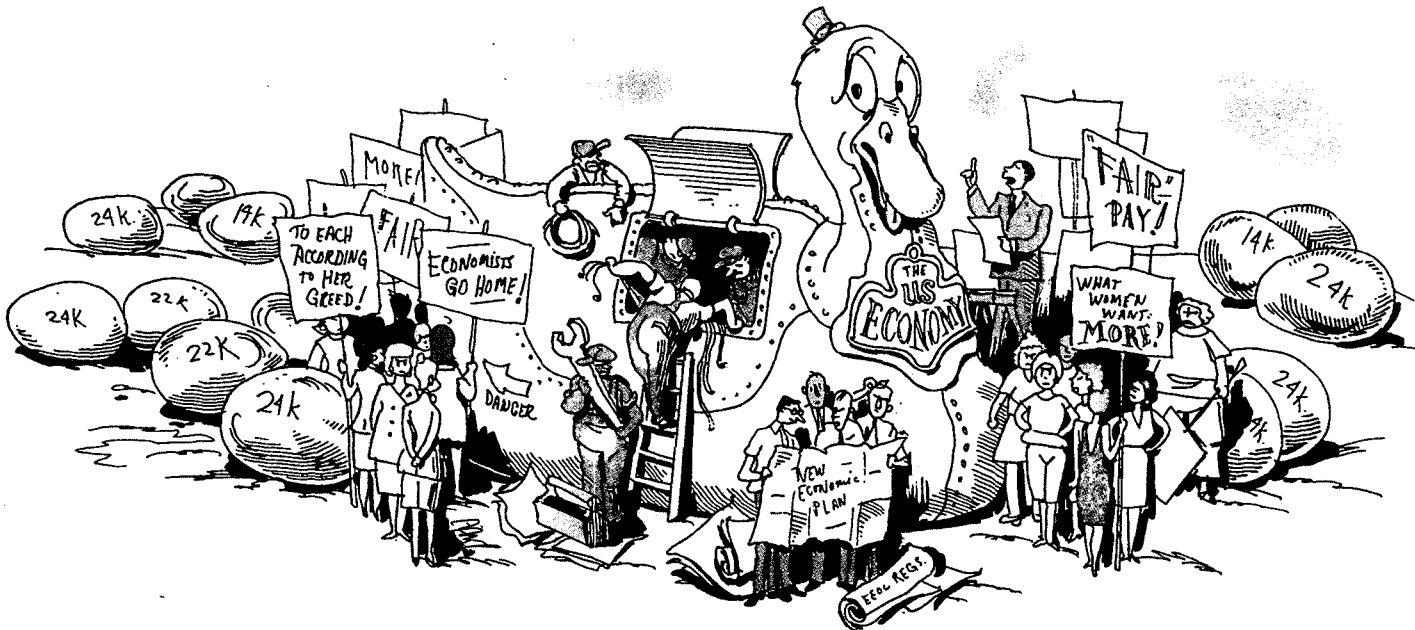
Now *that's* cultural imperialism. ❧



comparable Worth is

While Republicans sit silently,
Democrats are making hay
this election year with various
“pay equity” bills—which promise
to Sovietize U.S. wage scales.

DIANA FURCHTGOTT-ROTH



It's five months before the November elections, and ultra-liberals Tom Harkin and Ted Kennedy are holding court in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Republican Chairman Jim Jeffords looks on politely. No, this isn't a pep rally for an improbable Democratic takeover of the Senate. It's the next best thing, at least for the Democrats: a hearing of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions on establishing comparable worth—federal wage and salary controls regulating how much employers must pay each male and female worker.

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Senator Harkin is grilling Anita Hattiangadi of the free-market-oriented Employment Policy Foundation about comparable worth. He says “it's about time we do it here,” and calls for passage of the Fair Pay Act, of which he is sponsor. Harkin and Kennedy alike ignore testimony from one of the leading academic experts on women's wages, former Congressional Budget Office Director June O'Neill. In her view, comparable worth demeans women because “it conveys the message that women cannot compete in nontraditional jobs and can only be helped through the patronage of a job evaluator.”

Mindful of such criticisms, supporters of comparable worth are repackaging it these days as “pay equity.” It's a warm, fuzzy concept, designed to lure working women with the promise of potential raises and to discourage political opposition. After all, who could be against equity?

Indeed, pay equity is already a catch phrase among Democrats, who invoked it throughout the hearing. A massive U.S. Commission on Civil Rights report, due out in September, will portray “pay equity” as the new civil rights goal for women.

ELLIOTT BANFIELD