

Is Cultural Imperialism a Thing of the Past ?

Kristy Nelwan

Universitas Multimedia Nusantara
kristy.nelwan@gmail.com

ABSTRAK

Teori imperialisme budaya yang menjadi topik hangat perdebatan sosial di skala internasional di awal tahun 1970-an pernah dituduh sebagai paradigma yang bertanggungjawab terhadap serangkaian eksploitasi dan kehancuran budaya di dunia ketiga yang dilakukan oleh negara-negara maju. Sejalan waktu, teori imperialisme budaya dianggap sudah usang dan tidak lagi relevan, terutama berkat sukses berkembangnya industri film lokal serta pemerataan pendidikan lewat jalur beasiswa. Selanjutnya, untuk mencapai keseimbangan dan mengisi kekosongan teori yang ada menyangkut relasi budaya antara dunia pertama dengan dunia ketiga, sejumlah konsep tandingan diusulkan untuk menggantikannya, misalnya dengan konsep globalisasi, atau imperialisme media, yang dianggap tidak berat sebelah. Akan tetapi, dengan menggunakan analisis wacana, penulis akan menunjukkan bahwa ide imperialisme budaya masih tertanam dalam konsep globalisasi, dan terus hidup hingga sekarang, meskipun dalam bentuk-bentuk yang lebih canggih dan terpoles, sehingga tidak bisa dikatakan bahwa imperialisme budaya merupakan artefak masa lalu.

Kata kunci: imperialisme budaya, globalisasi, imperialisme media.

The cultural imperialism theory emerged as a debate topic among scholars in the early 1970 (Thussu, 2000; Christophers, 2007). Suggesting that the system worked through nations by that time could lead, or probably did already, into serious cultural damage particularly in the Third World countries, cultural imperialism theory gained attention.

There were those who agreed with explanation that an imbalance flow of information was happening, with cultural damage as one of its consequences. Further research and discussions were then performed to, in general, minimize the impact. On the contrary, there were then some who argued that cultural imperialism theory was no longer relevant for many reasons, backed up by sensible case studies.

One of the well known ways to demonstrate the irrelevancy of cultural

imperialism theory, popular under the term 'counter cultural imperialism', was through the local film industry (Oliveira, 1993; Jin, 2007). Nevertheless advance study performed by these scholars demonstrated that what happened in the movie industry was not really that promising as fights against cultural imperialism, but more like another shape of cultural imperialism.

The other popular opposition hypothesizes that the same issues and matters are now discussed not under 'cultural imperialism' but the theory of 'Globalisation' (McQuail, 2005; Christophers, 2007; Tomlinson, Cultural Imperialism, 2002; Sakellaropoulos, 2009). Talked mostly about how distance is now not a big problem anymore, thanks to technology that has developed in brisk improvement, globalisation is indeed mentioned in various kind of discipline. Experts on economic/finance/ business, techno-

logy, communication, art and of course, culture all discuss globalisation with their own analysis and sentiments.

Using discourse analysis, this essay will scrutinize the history, definition, and impact of cultural imperialism and globalisation theories to see if cultural imperialism is actually a thing of the past, or not.

I. CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

The development of cinema and television played an important role in raising concern from scholars about cultural matters. As McQuils pointed out, the cultural experience that used to be “mediated by personal contact, religious ceremonies and public performance” is now “produced by the major industries...even when it appears in local or national variants and languages” (2005, p.114). Through movies and television programmes formed by The First World countries in one place, with a traditional, passive audience, even the poorest areas in the Third World, were able to get information about what was happening in another place (Wunderlich & Warriar, 2007). That, ideally, should be something good, if only the flow were balance between both sides.

Unfortunately, what happened was far from balance. Experts quickly spotted the imbalance condition right away with its effects, and that was when the discussion about cultural imperialism started. Basically the theory talks about how in many places in the world, Third World countries in particular, there were new forms of dependency emerging. This argument grew out from the fact that audience all over the world, from different cultures and background, were watching television programmes produced by only several countries.

Motives of these producer countries, according to texts available on this subject, vary from profit to power. One scholar addressed clear opinion on “The United States cultural

imperialism goals” was Petras (1993; cited in Golding and Harris, 1997:6) who claimed the two major constrains are economic—that is “to capture markets for its cultural commodities”, and political—“to establish hegemony by shaping popular consciousness”.

These goals were supported not just by the government and tools invented by the country, but also by the huge market that simultaneously operates hand in hand on spreading products, instruments and, unintentionally or hidden, ideology. Information from outside the Third World countries were flowing inside more rapidly, building worries for some who realized the further impacts, such as Schiller who became one of early scholars to write about and define cultural imperialism in the first edition of his book; *Mass Communication and American Empire* (1969; cited in Christophers, 2007, p.1).

The sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how it's dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even to promote the value and structures of the dominant centre of the system.

(Schiller 1976, cited in Thussu 2000, p.61)

This definition was then revised in the second edition of *Mass Communication and American Empire* that was published in 1992. Seeing the changes that happened, Schiller no longer thinks that the term “cultural imperialism” provides a suffice explanation for what is happening worldwide. Instead, he suggested that those to blame were now narrowed to “transnational corporation” who he believed are “continuing heavy favour of US media know-how derived from long experience with marketing and entertainment skills and practices” (Schiller, 1992, pp. 14-15).

When communication processes become too intense, it would not be wise to see it as a



normal condition, especially in regards on how it would influenced democratization process (Amin, 1997). Amin demonstrated how “intensification of communication” run by this “capitalist system” would not be a “liberating or democratizing factor” by giving example about “observer who does not see Western life on a daily basis is always struck by the incredible brain-washing of the dominant media” (Amin, 1997, p. 17). He argued, one need to remember that there is high possibility that a product would be accepted differently by people in different society because they were also facing different problems (Amin, 1997, p. 22). Encoding-decoding theory by Stuart Hall also highlighted the same issue saying that it is not just the matter of how the producer framed some information but it is also about how the audience accept it (1974/1980; cited in McQuils, 2005, p.112)

Trying to fight back this domination, New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) became noticeable in the early 1970s claiming that the First World countries were “conditioning the masses to the interest of those powers” and it caused people in the Third World countries into becoming “the victims of dominations in information”. Several key areas spotted through these meetings in order to minimize harmful impact of cultural imperialism were news flow, television flow, advertising and communication technology (Roach, 1997).

In 1980 the MacBride Commission submitted another report on this matter to the United Nation Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It emphasized the support given from UNESCO to the movement and challenged the accused (First World) countries to give some soft to hard responses.

Roach (1997) reviewed these responses, and sharply demonstrated how the reaction grew as the movement become visible. These countries’ reaction to cultural imperialism discourse reached its peak when The United States

(in 1984) and The United Kingdom (in 1985) withdrew from UNESCO (Unesco.org, 2006), accusing that the organization was trying “to prevent freedom of speech and freedom of press” (Margaret Thatcher to the Associated Press, 21 November 1984; cited in Roach, 1997).

Fortunately for the cultural imperialism warriors, that tough reaction drew even more attention worldwide. However, critics also started to question some flaws founded in the theory. Sreberny-Mohammadi strongly criticized cultural imperialism as an “ill-defined” concept and suggested another better-constructed notion to address problems caused by imbalance flow of information between The First and Third World countries. What Sreberny-Mohammadi thought is “more narrowly focused” was the notion of media imperialism (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997), which actually related to John Tomlinson’s work earlier in 1991.

In arguing how cultural imperialism actually worked, Tomlinson in *Cultural Imperialism* captured the term from four different angles; Cultural Imperialism as media imperialism, cultural imperialism as a discourse of nationality, cultural imperialism as the critique of global capitalism, and cultural imperialism as the critique of modernity. Media as “the most common focus for discussion of cultural imperialism” (p.23), led Tomlinson to propose two ways to centred cultural imperialism on the media: “either as the dominance of one culture’s media over another; or as the global spread of ‘mass-culture’ as such” (p.22).

Even lately when many countries that used to be “television programmes importers” became able to produce their own series that then dominated the audience’s attention, many scholars succeeded in proving that it did not signify the death of cultural/media imperialism. In 1993 Oliveira started with very convincing statistical data that says Latin America’s film industry was free from imperialism for they did

not just produce their own programmes, but they also exported these self-made soap operas to some other countries. However then the article developed and revealed the hidden truth about images of the characters in Brazilian soap operas that were pretty similar with the ones in American's soap opera, only with Brazilian faces. The story lines which seemed originally local, after closer observation turned out to be American soap opera scripts translated to local language with some setting changes (Oliveira, 1993). The same thing happened to cinema industry in Korea (Jin, 2007) and India (Raj, 2004) where the successful local industries apparently were just echoing the previous player by repackaging same ideas in more local outer shell (Morley, 1997; in McQuils, 2005).

Cultural imperialism also appeared in a very neutral form: Education (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997). Speaking about imperialism in African culture, Ali Mazrui (1975, cited in Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997) commented on university as "the single most sophisticated instrument of cultural dependency". Cultural imperialism on this matter could affect as far as ineffectiveness of Third World development plans, in a way that mapped by Sreberny-Mohammadi as follows.

Institutionalization of Western-style education helped, if not to create ab initio, to widen the gap between local elites and the masses and between urban dwellers and the rural masses. Educational qualifications became a passport into government bureaucracy and a life of comparative luxury; even after independence, the lack of trust between elites and masses makes it very hard for many Third World development programmes to be effective.

(Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997, p. 59)

Another critique came from Garofalo (1993, p.18) who said that cultural imperialism

theory "overstates external determinants and undervalues the internal dynamics, not least those of resistance within dependent societies". However, when it came in such a "sophisticated" form like education, it would be quite a challenge to see it as a threat. Little would people think about cultural imperialism when they are offered opportunities to study abroad. There is only small chance for them to reject the offer usually formed as 'scholarship', because they would want to take it. They would not even ask 'why most scholarship needed to make sure that candidates will be going back to their home country after they finished the scholarship program', let alone to realize the possibility of 'so they would become one instrument of cultural imperialism' to be the answer for that question. This "ability to affect what other countries want" was what Nye (1990; cited in Schiller, 1992) meant by *Soft Power* that illustrates how skilled these dominant powers are in the art of manipulation.

From movie industries to scholarship, from manufacture industries to many kind of 'aid'; that is just how 'creative' a part could be in developing its domination, and also how wide and puzzling cultural imperialism theory is. Some scholars suggested the Third World countries be more aware of these offers that, according to these scholars' analysis, are hiding the real truth about "continued Western exploitation of the Third World under the guise of so called 'modernization'" (Roach, 1997). However, to see it as "the spread of modernity" is the most suggested way by Tomlinson (1991, p.173) in order to minimize confusion in discussing cultural imperialism before concluding his writing with the sharp statement: What replaces "imperialism" is "globalisation".

This one from Tomlinson and many other similar claims stimulated new questions among other scholars who follow the theory's development: Is cultural imperialism a thing of the



past? Should we then move on and discuss Globalisation theory for a change?

II. GLOBALISATION

Trying to be more careful and not too optimistic—if not pessimistic, in discussing “modernity” and “globalisation”, Lull (2000) saw them not just as “stages in world history but also as destructive, irreversible developments driven by First World economic interests”. Here we can sense some sentiments that seem familiar and remind us of the emotions in previous discussions: awareness and *suspiciousness*. Particularly for globalisation, Lull drew attention to the fact that for many critics, “globalisation is not just a flow”, it is “a world system of exploitation”.

A slightly different tone comes from Anthony Giddens as the one who first used the term ‘globalisation’:

...the intensification of worldwide social relation which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. This is such a dialectical process because such local happening may move in an observe direction from the very distanciated relations that shaped them. Local transformation is as much as a part of globalisation as the lateral extension of social connection across time and space.

(Giddens, 1990, p.64)

Roland Robertson (1992, p.8) combined “intensification of consciousness” and “compression of the world” in his definition of globalisation. There is also similar opinions from Held and McGrew (2007) who see globalisation as a “widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness”. All these outlooks on globalisation mentioned rapid growth in technology, economy etc., that silmutaneously bridge the gap in every aspect of human life, especially between nation states.

Scholars have been in long, deep and complicated discussions about globalisation that the term has become so popular nowadays, used by people from differen diciplines for different purposes (Giddens, 2005). Debates are inevitable and brought out different arguments and questions on globalisation such as one from Hirst and Thompson (2002) who said that if globalisation is really about growing interconnectedness (increasing flows of trade, investements, and communication between nations), that means globalisation has been happening for the past fifty years. Yet then, they questioned it themselves: What are the differences of what we have experienced this last fifty years, in comparation with what happened in 1850-1914 ((Hirst & Thompson, 2002, p. 1)? Does that mean globalisation has been going on since the 19th century?

Some argue that it started even a lot earlier than the 19th century. In explaining the history of globalisation (1992; cited in Wunderlich and Warriar, 2007), Robertson suggested five phases to be examined. He marked the age of European exploration and the “global spread of the Roman Catholic Church” from 1400 to 1750 as the first phase, followed by The Enlightenment era together with European colonialism between 1750 and 1875 as the second phase. Then comes the era where many historical changes in technology happened from 1875 to 1925, which according to Hirst and Thompson (2002) could be compared with contemporer globalisation that has been happening for the past fifty years. The fourth one happened in 1925 to the late 1960s when what Robertson called “international regimes and institutions” such as United Nations and International Moneterly Fund became parts of the world’s political and economic system. The last phase is still going on until today, with rapid growth in information and communication technology which “have increased the speed

and volume of the circulation of goods, capital, services, ideas, and people”.

As globalisation became popular, the fact became clearer how broad the concept is that to see it by phases like Robertson did helped a lot in understanding the term. Appadurai (1996) decided to slice “global cultural flow” into five scapes: ethnoscapas, mediascapas, tecnoscapas, financescapas and ideoscapas because global cultural flow as part of the globalisation process are often viewed as something too wide and complicated. Keohane and Nye (2003; cited in Wunderlich and Warrier, 2007) preferred to divide its process into thin and thick globalisation. Thin globalisation is what happened a long time ago when people from different nation states did trading through the Silk Route. That was still, according to Keohane and Nye (2003), a process of globalisation that involved limited amount of trade and a small number of people. Contrastingly, thick globalisation is what we are experiencing nowadays which has “created a dense network and an intensification of economic, social, cultural and political interdependencies.”

However, Lull seems did not agree with the notion of ‘interdependencies’ in giving an explanation about globalisation. What really is happening, according to Lull (2000, p.226) is the exploitation of Third World countries who, for the First World countries were nothing more than “cheap labor sources and future markets” that are “desperate to attract capital” only to be included in the global system. As the result is one condition where “everything from food to sex to religion becomes more and more commercialized on a global scale”.

Stronger critiques came from Michael Marx (2000; cited in Lull, 2000, p.226) who argued that globalisation in the end is just a conspiracy to make every part of the world sell American culture and bussines, without paying attention to possibility that it might lead to major cultural damage and “environmental

destruction”. Similar concern came from anti-globalisation movements who set their goal specifically to “fight the destruction of cultures and the degradation of nature” (Wunderlich and Warrier, 2007, p. 33).

III. CULTURAL IMPERIALISM VS GLOBALISATION

Three phases in international communication research according to Golding and Harris are happy optimism, cultural imperialism, and globalisation. It was obvious that for Golding and Harris, cultural imperialism and globalisation are two different theories in two different times. However, if we compare the way scholars from both theories tried to minimize the confusion we would begin to spot some similarities.

Tomlinson (1991) suggested that we approach cultural imperialism with four different ways: cultural imperialism as media imperialism, cultural imperialism as a discourse of nationality, cultural imperialism as the critique of global capitalism, and cultural imperialism as the critique of modernity. The same method was applied by Appadurai (1996) who uses ethnoscapas, mediascapas, tecnoscapas, financescapas and ideoscapas in discussing global cultural flows. We can see there at least two points from each scholar that were actually talking about similar issues.

First, what was discussed by Tomlinson when he sees cultural imperialism as media imperialism is how to placed media in the notion; if media was driving the changes or if media was just following. It has not that big difference with Appadurai’s explanation on how media works as crucial instrument in global culture flows process. Second, cultural imperialism as the critique of global capitalism from Tomlinson could also relate to description about financescape (Appadurai, 1996, p. 34) where Appadurai also addressed critic to global capitalism.



The previous paragraph demonstrates how under different terms, scholars were actually discussing similar problems. The concept of “time compression” (Waters, 2000) in globalisation was basically explaining “intensification of communication” in cultural imperialism only in a smoother and less offending way. NWICO and Antiglobalization movements were demanding the same order, only under different time and different terms.

We can see that conflicts in society nowadays have not changed that much. The First World countries still dominate the system, as Third World countries are still the victim. This fact can be seen from critics against the system that was operating, no matter what the names were; in both cultural imperialism and globalisation the dominant spectrum was always First World countries caused same trouble for Third World countries.

Golding and Harris (1997) pointed out that if we look behind all those critiques on cultural imperialism theory and the emerging of a new term that made “the dynamic of imperialism have become complex and inconsistent”, it is easy to notice that “the old forms of inequality and mendacity that lay behind them still remain”.

IV. CONCLUSIONS & SUGGESTIONS

In defining globalisation, Robertson (1992) mentioned “the compression of the world” which according to Waters (2000) referred to the “increasing level of interdependence between national systems by way of trade, military alliance and domination and cultural imperialism” (Waters, 2000). Based on this demonstration we could then conclude that cultural imperialism theory is therefore a part of the globalisation concept, which should be translated carefully otherwise it would only make both concepts even more complicated and impossible.

Either way, therefore I would suggest that the notion of cultural imperialism still exists and is not yet to be called ‘a thing of the past’. The term itself still makes appearances in discussion on related topics, but moreover the effect of cultural imperialism is far away from gone. As Sakellaropoulos (2009) argued, the so-called “transition to the new scale of capitalism” is nothing else but “imperialism in its modern phase”.

After all it is not under what term we discuss the issue, but how aware are we of the real condition that is going on. Changes are happening, but not really toward the better end. The system has become more complicated; The media paints beautiful pictures of the world out there and makes us believe in it, yet exploitation still takes place, and majority of people in the Third World countries do not realize how they have been victimized (Golding and Harris, 1997; Lull, 2000). However, in regards to this “paradox with no happy solution in sight” (Lull, 2000), Amin (1997) tried to be more optimistic by saying that there is still “alternatives to this bleak future” namely “the struggle for a socialist alternative at all levels, national and international”.

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