MMAP - International Policies - Position Paper

Musical diversity and the recent and potential effects of globalisation

We consider here the effects of globalisation resulting from

1) private or corporate activity

2) government intervention through international agreements and trade treaties.

Effects of private or corporate activity

Most of the most noticeable effects are a consequence of technological change.

Technological change includes the availability of new technologies such as those for the more efficient transportation of people, sound recording, internal dissemination through electronic transmissions. Although developed by advanced Western countries, these do not necessarily present as an intrusion by another country so much as simply new, more advanced methods to achieve local objectives.

However, they are causing major changes to the social structures that support musical activity – e.g. the village that watches television instead of making music, urbanisation that weakens village traditions and replaces them with new urban musics.

Some of the more overt and direct effects of private or corporate activity include:

- Take-over of ownership of local record companies by transnational companies
- Increasing domination of the local recorded music market by the music promoted by the transnational companies: homogenous in style, performed by foreign musicians to a mass international market
- Increased movement of people, voluntarily through cheaper international transport, or involuntarily as refugees, all carrying their musical traditions to the new country as audience or performers.

Positive effects can include

- Greater access to a rich international market by local musicians
- As a reaction to the homogenisation of mass media music, an increased assertion of local musics
- Because of immigration, greater diversity in the live music available within a country
- Because of outward tourism, the local audience gains an experience of musical diversity in other countries
- A similar potential exists through global internet access to diverse musics.

Government intervention through international agreements and trade treaties

International trade treaties are intended to provide easier access for the signatory countries to each other’s markets. Generally speaking, they work in two ways: to gain a greater understanding of and harmonisation between the trading practices of the two countries, and to remove obstacles to “fair” trade.

The current emphasis in trade treaties is to “trade liberalisation”, that is, to free international trade from “trade-distorting” interventions by governments that favour local over foreign providers.

Common examples of such interventions include

- subsidies, or limits on the access to subsidies by foreigners
- mandatory local content quotas e.g. on radio or television
- limitations on foreign ownership of local cultural entities e.g. broadcasting systems, press, film distributors
- government ownership of local entities such as e.g. broadcasting systems
- co-production treaties with selected foreign entities (film)
- government procurement practices favouring local providers over foreign providers
- immigration treaties to ensure some preference to local artists
- tax credit systems that favour local over foreign artists or entities.

It is mainly these government interventions that become the target in free trade negotiations.

But usually, the viability of cultural activity depends on such support (to overcome "market failure") and its removal would imperil the culture.

An important concept underlying the push for trade liberalisation is the doctrine of comparative advantage: that those countries which are the most efficient producers of a commodity will, and should, dominate the market. This justifies, for instance, international dominance by the US film industry. However, the consequence of that dominance is that film making in other countries can die out. Cultural diversity is lost, cultural homogeneity wins.

Many governments argue that the economic justification of the doctrine of comparative advantage is inappropriate to culture, that "culture is not a commodity like any other", that every country has a right to sustain its own culture by intervening in the market if necessary, and that culture should be removed from the negotiation table in international trade agreements (the "cultural exemption", "cultural exception", "cultural carve-out").

Trade negotiations potentially involving culture are taking place under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the WTO, and in bilateral or regional negotiations between governments. The contention is between the countries that seek to include culture in these trade-liberalising agreements, primarily the United States of America, and those that seek to exclude it – a rather long list of countries, in which France and Canada are leaders.

A proposal has been put to UNESCO by a network of national cultural ministers to draw up and auspice an international agreement in support of cultural diversity, as a "standard-setting instrument" in the context of international free trade negotiations. The General Conference will vote on this in September 2003.

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