

Fairy Tales and Globalization

Bringing Up the Young in the Values
and Virtues of Great Civilizations

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Abstract

Globalization, albeit no longer so global these days, affects children's values, self-images and world outlook through targeted marketing of fairy tales, games and assorted media products. This article analyzes these effects and proposes to those concerned a number of measures to counteract them.

Keywords: neoliberal globalization, marketization, culture, education, values, ideologies.

This paper is not about fairy tales adults tell each other outlining the benefits or dangers of globalization. It is not about the efforts of promoters of globalization to spread the gospel to the young, emphasizing, as does the World Bank, its inevitability (UN, n.d.). Nor is it about children who grow up in cross-cultural situations, the offspring of diplomats, military personnel, and other kinds of expatriates (Bell-Villada et al., 2001). Rather, it attempts to look at the cultural and educational aspects of globalization as it engages children by means of fairy tales and related activities and products. Alongside economic, technological, and strategic issues, fairy tales should interest and concern adults as well, since they are also parents, teachers, and mentors.

EXPOSURE TO GLOBALIZED CULTURE

Fairy tales and bedtime stories play a crucial role in the development of the child: “For some fairy tales are a gulp of fresh air, for others it is food for thought or a way to go beyond oneself. Still others look for alternative life paths and find answers in their quest for self-growth; they believe that for every life situation there must be a fairy tale. Fairy tales are fundamental for understanding and deepening relations with the outside world” (Ben Aarsil, quoted in Perrot, 2011, p. 235). In the Convention of the Rights of the Child, signed in 1989, the United Nations recognized the right of children to play and to participate freely in cultural and artistic activities appropriate for their age as well as encouraging the production and dissemination of books for children. The UN General Assembly adopted this convention at a time when globalization was gathering momentum. Indeed, a global approach to children’s rights is appropriate, since comparative research has shown that “global capitalism creates common problems for youth in different places and circumstances” (Cole and Durham, 2008, p. 4). Increased movements of capital and products in the context of the weakening welfare state have reduced the protection of children from the market and its commercial interests.

Parents, often juggling several jobs just to stay afloat, also pay less attention to their offspring. With the exception of relatively wealthy

families, children face a decrease in local inputs from public school and family, with fewer visits to museums and fewer bedtime stories. They are thus introduced to global imaginations transmitted via sophisticated marketing campaigns trying to increase consumption and create product loyalties, leading occasionally to real addictions: “with their engaging, interactive properties, the new global media are likely to have more profound impact on how children grow and learn, what they value, and ultimately who they become than any medium that has come before” (Von Feilitzen and Carlsson, 2002, p. 189).

“Children say they ‘learn a lot’—information, judgments, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors—from the cartoons, action series and other television programs they watch. Even more important: they learn ways to understand reality” (Ibid, p. 20). Globalization affects what children do, watch, read, and wear. It shapes their self-images, their dreams of the future, and their relations with their peers as well as with grown-ups. For example, the hugely successful U.S.-made Spanish-language TV series *A Teenage Girl Like You* (*Muchachita como tu*) is “filled with stereotypes of dominant views of femininities, social class, race, and power” (Medina and Wohlwend, 2014, p. 41).

Fables, stories, and parables have long been disseminated across cultures. Aesop and the Bible are two examples of the world distribution of certain ideas and values, as well as of the virtues they promote. While biblical stories benefited from the institutional support of three major religions, Aesop’s fables did not, and relied at the outset on the spirit of the Renaissance. These initially foreign narratives came to coexist in local cultures with traditional stories and occasionally produced interesting cases of symbiosis and syncretism. These stories, such as La Fontaines’ and Krylov’s renditions of Aesop’s fables, were told or read by parents and grandparents, and quotes from them became part of everyday speech, but they did not invade children’s lives the way new media have done in the last two decades.

A particularly powerful way globalization engages children has been termed ‘transmedia.’ The term “describes franchises, anchored by films, television shows, or video games, with a reach that extends beyond multimedia to toys, books, video games, collectibles, apparel,

and all sorts of household goods” (Ibid, p. 44). This is a hegemonic global phenomenon promoted by a handful of media giants active across national borders.

One of the more prominent cases of transmedia is the *Disney Princess* franchise, which packages Disney productions released between 1937 (*Snow White*) and 2022 (*Raya and the Last Dragon*). With annual global retail sales in 2021 of \$56.2 billion (Vlessing 2022), this franchise operates an empire of interlocking sales.

The breadth and complexity of operation of the *Disney Princess* franchise is striking, and this explains its continuing growth. It submerges preschool girls into a veritable flood of pink paraphernalia visible in every aisle of stores catering to this age and gender group. Its products end up penetrating town and country, classrooms and schoolyards, bedrooms and kitchens, clothing closets and lunch boxes. Children look for popular Disney brand names, and complying parents usually oblige since it is not easy to find alternatives in the stores (Goudreau, 2012).

American corporations no longer hold a monopoly on transmedia. Pokémon, created and launched in Japan in 1996, is, perhaps, the most graphic example of the power of globalization used by a successful company outside the United States. This is how it describes its own success barely two years later: “Children are inundated by Pokémon today. In the morning they eat Pokémon seaweed on their rice; they exchange Pokémon cards with their friends at school; they play Pokémon Game Boy games after school; and they have Pokémon chocolates for snacks. They eat Pokémon curry for dinner, watch the Pokémon anime (cartoon) in the evening, and when they get into their futons at night, they read Pokémon comic books... We’ve had plenty of fads starting after the war with war games and plenty of franchising crazes with, i.e., chocolates and cards. But there’s never been a boom in Japan like Pokémon before” (quoted by Cole and Durham, 2008, p. 179).

The scope of immersion into this culture is indeed unprecedented, and the experiences of mass education in authoritarian societies in the 20th century seem to pale in comparison with the success of globalized transmedia to penetrate even the most private nooks of life.

Nothing is left to chance. To achieve such a degree of penetration, transmedia must be science-based and focused: “We do not often enough realize that commercial marketing is the best financed source of media production in our world, and that it is often at the cutting edge of semiotic innovation... Transmedia franchises place co-branded content, and with it their ideological messages and inducements to consumption, throughout our virtual and spatial environment” (Lemke, 2011, p. 292).

Media companies have managed to obliterate distinctions between content and advertising, which makes regulation by child protection agencies very difficult. “Many cartoons, programs and computer games are a form of advertising in themselves inasmuch as the vehicles for ‘merchandising,’ i.e., the marketing of toys, dolls, clothing, accessories, etc., to youthful viewers.” This, in turn, creates “unprecedented intimacies between children and marketers.” Advertising has been shown to grow at twice the rate of GDP growth. TV advertising aimed at American children grew from \$100 million in 1983 to nearly \$13 billion by the end of the century. Children reportedly influence over \$500 billion in purchases in the United States alone (Von Feilitzen and Carlsson, 2002, pp. 9, 21, 25, 28).

VALUES AND IDEOLOGIES

The ideological efficacy and consistency of transmedia have been widely recognized. *Disney Princess* succeeds in broadcasting traditional feminine dreams of a happy family and reinforces deference to a more powerful male figure (Lacroix, 2004). Disney film production volume surpasses that of major countries with well-established cultural policies such as France, even though that country has one of the more articulate cultural policy traditions. While this naturally provokes resentment and criticism (Ariès, 2002), one must remember that it was the French government that facilitated the implantation of the first Disneyland in Europe, which now successfully competes for tourists with the Louvre and the Notre Dame cathedral and is among the most profitable of the eleven Disney theme parks straddling the world.

Most fairy tales varied from country to country. *Snegurochka* and *Ilya Muromets* would populate the world of Russian children, while

Astérix and *Obélix* accompanied French children. Each hero was part and parcel of the national culture and conveyed a certain set of moral values and behavior principles. In order to be part of globalized children's media, some of these nationally rooted stories become unhinged and come to reflect mostly American culture and acquire American paraphernalia. For example, it is not certain that French children recognize the local origin of some of Perrault's stories, notably *Sleeping Beauty*, *Puss in Boots*, and *Cinderella*, when they encounter these French stories in Disney productions.

One ubiquitous feature of globalized children's entertainment is the body image of girls, which instills in the tender minds of pre-schoolers the concern about being slim. Barbie dolls and Disney princesses, as a tribute to political correctness, may be African or Asian, they may be dressed as an astronaut or a doctor, but they are invariably slender. This contributes to widespread eating disorders, low self-image, and self-body-hate, an epidemic that, like financial crises, began in the United States but has now affected the entire capitalist world.

Girls are not the only targets of globalized media for children. Boys face a barrage of screen images of men who are foolish, less articulate, and often violent. This appears to be a consequence of the otherwise healthy move away from the hitherto pervasive sexist images of women and "casually racist sitcoms" (Utton, 2014). Boys remain largely stereotyped and polarized between those of a meek underachiever and an intrepid hero. In spite of a greater, albeit recent, awareness of boys' emotions in our society, in child-targeting media, boys rarely cry or otherwise express their feelings. Moreover, the increasing strength of girls' performance in the classroom, in conjunction with the strongly mediatized "meek and foolish man," may have an effect on young boys' motivation to succeed in school.

Values and models transmitted by globalized media also touch on the social. Pokémon is a case in point. It offers not only an alternative world of connectedness, but also promotes the values of accumulation, competition, and consumption, and in this sense mimics capitalism (Cole and Durham, 2008, p. 20, 179). At the same time, because commercialized children's culture—mass-produced clothing,

backpacks, videos, toys—is widely accessible, it tends to obscure class divisions’ (Ibid, p. 83).

Yet this role of transmedia, expressed *inter alia* in the form of fairy tales, must be understood as an effective means of political socialization of future voters, and not only in the world’s periphery. “Social class divisions are more extreme now than at any time in U.S. history, but... widespread consumption of commercial children’s culture...divert[s] children’s attention from these tectonic economic shifts” (Ibid, p. 96). They feel they all belong to the same “community,” that of Pokémon players or of Barbie clubs. Thus, influence is made as much by omission as commission when issues of economic inequality and social solidarity are mostly avoided. This is another incarnation of neoconservatism, “traditional in its functions but innovative in its form and discourse” (Bruno, 2000, p. 212). Globalization has the potential to create a more balanced and just world, but so far it has reinforced fragmentation “between rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless” (Von Feilitzen and Carlsson, 2002, p. 7). At the turn of this century, nine out of ten children lived in poor countries, while “globalization-from-above hampers implementation of children’s information rights expressed in the UN convention” (Ibid, p. 16).

Pokémon promotes a view of “society based on so-called ‘friendly’ or ‘brotherly’ competition, which is none other than a society of commercialism and an endless rush for power” (Bruno, 2000, p. 193). Messages emitted via transmedia to millions of children not only socialize them into capitalist accumulation, but also legitimize and reinforce what is often called “millennial capitalism,” with its emphasis on immediate gratification and consumption rather than on patient labor and long-term investment. The culture of game acquired in childhood is preserved into adulthood as magic get-rich schemes, lotteries, and gambling, which replace hard work and savings as the dominant ethos of the new capitalism. More and more people dream of winning many times the amount of their annual income, as addiction to gambling, particularly online gambling, appears to grow. For example, in Britain the number of gambling addicts doubled in six years to reach half a million (Gallagher, 2013). Games have

come to be seen as a salvation from financial ruin. While lotteries and online gambling attract mostly the poor, derivatives, futures, and other products of financial engineering embody this ethos for the rich. This ethos constitutes demodernization (Rabkin and Minakov, 2018), “a counterpoint to the spirit of Enlightenment” and replaces its emphasis on the rational with magic and fantasy (Perrot, 2011, p. 12). This manifests itself in the transformation of workers and employees into spectators of a small group of privileged elites controlling both symbolic and financial capital (Ibid, p. 16).

Sociologists are not alone in leveling criticism against media penetration. A few years ago, Britain’s Archbishop of Canterbury deplored the “intrusion of consumerism into childhood” and singled out Disney for the “corruption and premature sexualization of children” (Gledhill, 2002). Reactions can be more forceful and even violent; globalization provokes religious fundamentalism, ethnic nationalism, and racism: “the debate is now between two tendencies: on the one hand, commercial consensus and universal commercialization, on the other, reaffirmation of identities, which is a reactionary and also inefficient barrier on the path of globalization” (Perrot, 2011, p. 429). It is adults who fuel these conflicts. Children may be severely restricted in their access to global and even local media and may become passive victims of political violence or ostensibly “active” victims as underage soldiers.

A potent ideological message is therefore constantly transmitted, whether the child is in the classroom, bedroom, or “chilling” with friends, benefitting corporations interested in maximizing profits through increased sales and market penetration. Business logic has replaced pedagogical and moral desiderata that used to be determined not only by the parents, but also by the church, the state, and, ultimately, society. The triumph of neoliberal economic relations has turned books into merchandise targeting, along with toys and other transmedia, a very vulnerable segment of the population: children. Transnational corporations naturally marginalize or even eliminate local providers of traditional fairy tales, puzzles, and toys, even when their products cost several times more than the more traditional local products.

At the same time, neither children nor their parents or teachers need be passive consumers. The power of values conveyed by transmedia can sometimes be mitigated by active engagement (Appadurai, 1996). Ubiquitous TV series can be invited into classrooms as objects of study, roleplaying, and discussion. Would Chinese children accept that dragons are villains, as portrayed by American cartoons, while dragons are revered in their own culture? Would girls in Germany accept the meek self-image of a Disney heroine dreaming of marrying a prince, while such a firm and assertive woman as Angela Merkel ran their country for nearly two decades?

Such active engagement is possible only in the absence of a sense of cultural inferiority. Otherwise, “many poorer nations and cultures are excluded from being represented at all, often within their own borders,” and there occurs “assimilation by the more powerful of the less powerful” (De Block and Buckingham, 2007, p. 22). For example, cultural inferiority had long existed among Soviet elites, which eventually contributed to the cultural submission of most post-Soviet republics to American cultural models and moral values. Transnational corporations quickly established themselves in the former Soviet republics, currently occupying a dominant position with respect to children’s books and toys (Buday, 2013). This position may have been shaken in Russia in the last year and a half with the departure of Disney and other transnational corporations in line with the policies of the U.S. and the European Union.

Cultural inferiority can also be instilled by government campaigns, as happened to Arab Jews when they were brought to settle in the State of Israel and forced to shed and even hate their culture as the culture of “the Arab enemy” (Shohat, 1988). Children of these Arab Jewish immigrants to Israel would shun the Arabic stories and lullabies they had grown up on and were forced to learn Hebrew renditions of Russian stories brought in by Zionist pioneers and made into symbols of the dominant culture. They would also throw away lunches lovingly prepared at home because the smell of “Arab food” would exclude them as carriers of an inferior culture (testimony of Ella Shohat in *Forget Baghdad*, 2022). Nowadays, home-made food is likely to be exchanged for the more desirable Pokémon cards (Thorne, 2005).

THE POWER OF GLOBALIZATION

Currently, half-a-dozen children-targeting corporations dominate the distribution of media products on virtually every continent. Widespread media deregulation and “concerted efforts to defend free commercial speech¹ based on American constitutional interpretations” have “devastating implications for the viability of local production and the local cultural resources for children.” This also leads to “an increasing dominance of the English language worldwide” (Ibid, pp. 8, 17). For example, since the requirement to perform in the native language was abolished in 1999, almost all Eurovision entries have been sung in English. No wonder free trade is often called “the gospel of the strong” (Kotkin, 2014, p. 389).

These dilemmas and challenges are part of the continuing debate about globalization. Is “Coca-colonization, that is, U.S. cultural hegemony, inevitable and irresistible (Wagnleiter, 1994)? Or can there exist multiple sources of global cultural influence (Cowen, 2002), such as Bollywood or Latin American soap operas? Non-U.S. heroes, such as *Astérix*, have made inroads into the world market, the latter being available in 77 languages. However, all its commercial documentation is usually produced in English, even for literary production, which is subsidized by the French government (Bruno, 2000, pp. 125, 139). At the same time, the Russian animated cartoon *Masha i Medved'* (Masha and the Bear) was translated into 25 languages, reaching children in over one hundred countries. It became the only Russian-language video viewed by over one billion people on YouTube (Safonova, 2016).

Important changes in modes of reasoning in children have been noted and attributed to globalization. Thus, the spread of Western, mostly American, stories and cartoons reportedly has promoted instant, almost automatic associations as opposed to the more traditional and slower modes of reasoning developed through exposure to folk fairy tales (Almazov, n.d.). This effect may be truly significant in view of the early, often pre-literacy initiation of children to Internet surfing and unsupervised viewing of cartoons and other entertainment products largely produced by transnational media companies. At the same time,

¹ Commercial speech is a form of protected communication under the First Amendment.

national production of storybooks and TV programs for children continues to shrink under the influence of powerful transnational media giants. The institutions of childhood, including compulsory schooling and child labor laws, were meant to protect the child from the market. Ironically, as a result, children have become a lucrative target market, not as workers (except in many poor countries), but as consumers (Zelizer, 1985). In other words, globalization challenges these protective institutions created barely a century ago.

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Vigorous public debate is needed to ensure public participation in developing media policies of locally produced cultural programming. While global media help children become consumers, national programming should help educate them as engaged and responsible citizens, teach them that freedom is not limited to choosing among competing brands of dolls. Arguably, a commercial system cannot and would not do this. It has therefore been proposed to require commercial media to exit the field of children's media. However, this kind of proposal goes against the logic of deregulation and neoliberalism that has permeated ruling circles in most countries. Rather than regulating business and protecting citizens from its excesses, governments have largely become agents of the private sector that actively promote the interests of the proverbial one percent. This is detrimental not only to adults, but also to children, who have even less wherewithal to resist the power of globalized corporations.

Therefore, pro-active, grassroots approaches on the part of educators, writers, and artists may shape and encourage government intervention (Frère and Jacquemain, 2013). Specially designed storybooks, animated cartoons, and online games should introduce the young to a variety of cultures, including aboriginal cultures, from those of China and Japan to those of Iran and Turkey, from Russia and the rest of Europe to Africa and the Americas, without Hollywood standards or TikTok formats at the same time. Particular attention should be given to the difficult task of providing models of behavior for boys, helping them reach maturity and inner harmony. Educators,

above all parents, must critically discuss the values of competitiveness and egoism with their children in spite of the messages broadcast by corporate media. A pleasant and natural way to do so is to give children a chance to hear stories that have shaped their ancestors' culture for generations.

For this to happen, parents' involvement is both crucial and critical. It is easy and tempting to plug the toddler onto interactive media and leave globalized media giants to shape the child. Parents must promote sensitivity to their cultural heritage, and otherwise be there for their offspring. Children should acquire what rightly belongs to them: their cultural heritage. This is not a matter of nostalgia or political control but, rather, of preservation of cultural diversity and education of responsible citizens. This involvement should produce a generation freed from the belief, actively promoted by business interests, that neoliberal globalization is natural and inevitable. They should become citizens despite massive global efforts to reduce them to passive consumers. This, in turn, should prompt national governments to resume their duty as protectors of children from undue commercial interests and from the values that underlie such interests. But for this to happen, the change must come from citizenry rather than imposed from above.

They can demand changes in educational policies and limitations on the power of advertising that is targeting children. They can also be more selective in shopping for and with their children. It is equally important to offer their offspring access to alternative educational programs independent of commercial interests and promote values of inclusiveness and interchange. Some of these programs are sponsored by UNESCO, thus ensuring both quality and scope (Stepanyants, n.d.) The ball is squarely in the parents and teachers' court.

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