Globalization, “McDonaldization” and Values: Quo Vadis?

YILMAZ ESMEER

ABSTRACT

It is frequently asserted that the ongoing process that is commonly referred to as globalization should bring about widespread changes in values. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the unparalleled increases in the flow of capital, goods, services and information coupled with the revolutionary developments in information and communication technologies should result in a convergence of values.

This paper is an attempt to assess the direction and the magnitude of value change between 1981, when the first WVS/EVS surveys were conducted, and 2001, the last year for which data are available. Data from some 20 countries are analyzed to follow possible changes in values. Furthermore, the paper offers a test of the convergence hypothesis by examining the standard deviations and the coefficients of variation of a wide-ranging list of values.

The conclusion is that cultural value change has been rather limited during this period at least for this sample of countries. Among the dimensions studied, marriage, family and gender relations seem to be the area of most significant change. On the other hand, we have found almost no evidence for even a slow convergence of values.

During the two and a half decades following the first round of values surveys in 1981, the world has witnessed profound changes in political, economic and social spheres and ever accelerating technological advances. If the well-known Chinese curse, “may you live in interesting times” was ever to refer to a specific time period in human history, the last couple of decades of the 20th century would certainly be a strong candidate.
The major developments of this era are only too familiar to repeat here. We like to recall historical periods by certain keywords to refer to its major characteristics. And it would perhaps be an understatement to say that the most popular keyword to characterize the last 25 years of world history is “globalization.” The term, according to Anthony Giddens, “has come from nowhere to be everywhere in a period of just a decade.” (quoted in Dervis 2005:3) A casual Google search at the time of this writing turned out no less than 110 million entries for “globalization – definition.”

Globalization is customarily defined as an unparalleled increase in the flow of capital, goods, services, and information. Less mentioned are increased political, legal and cultural exchanges which are assumed to bring about convergence in these spheres. However, at least to this author, the most dazzling developments took place in information and communication technologies. Many products and services that seem to be integral and indispensable parts of our lives either became widespread or even came into existence during this era. Younger generations cannot even imagine a life without portable computers, mobile telephones, the internet, MP3 players and so goes on the list. Yet those in their 50s today will remember the days when such gadgets and services were too wild even for the fantasies of writers of science fiction. The impact of these technological developments on both the speed and the volume of communication and information exchange has been mind boggling.

It was around the middle of the last century when social scientists were measuring postal mail and telephone traffic as indicators of social integration. In two seminal works, Nationalism and Social Communication (Deutsch 1962) and The Nerves of Government (Deutsch 1966) Karl Deutsch was drawing attention to the central role of communication in government and international relations. Likening it to the nerve system of an organism, Deutsch stressed the significance of communication as well as the movement of goods and services in drawing up civilizational and cultural boundaries. “Several societies might be connected to each other by a larger interchange of goods and services than with any other societies. In this case we might say that they form a sort of great society, something parallel in some respects to what is sometimes called a civilization, but not identical with it.” Furthermore, communication is an important element in forming the “common set of stable, habitual preferences” that defines a culture. “In so far as a common culture facilitates communication, it forms a community” (Deutsch 1962:88; emphases original).

The “interchange of goods and services” as well as capital among countries today is not even comparable to what existed in the 1950s.