

# **American Popular Culture: Socializing and Homogenizing Mind, Nation, and World**

## **The Socialization and Homogenization of Mind and Nation**

It is said that a fish does not know or recognize the water about it until it is caught and raised from the depths of its milieu so necessary for survival. It is then it may understand the essence of its survival. It seems to me that the same analogy may be applied to American citizens. We are embedded in a popular American culture to which we seem to be oblivious. I say this because if we were aware of the elements of popular American culture that daily socialize our lives determining who we are, what we value, what are our priorities, and where are we going as we accept this culture, I am sure that there would be a widespread protest against the culture. Indeed, there have been many protests and calls for change and reform. But the silencing of these voices suggests an inevitable end.

As I look at the recent presidential post-election developments in the USA, it is clear to me that the no candidate spoke of the role of popular American culture as a cause of our nation's precarious status and potential decline. While it is true that unemployment is an immediate concern for everyone, as it is in virtually every other nation in the world, the proposed solution to the problems we face assures a repetition of the very forces, events, and people that caused our problems.

In my opinion, in our global era, we cannot continue to pursue a popular American culture that seeks domination, control, and oppression of its own people, and the other people of other nations and cultures. Not only are the "ethoses" of American popular culture (e.g., greed, competition, consumerism, commodification) a danger for everyone as separate priorities concerns, but there is an obvious hegemonic effort to export the American culture and to establish a global homogenization of culture.

Octavio Paz, the great Mexican poet and author, noted that "Life is diversity, death is uniformity." Much like bio-diversity, every culture we destroy or homogenize reduces our choices and options for finding alternative solutions to the very problems we have created. Our blindness to this in the face of the obvious and apparent destructive nature and consequences of American popular culture represents a sinister intentionality. By homogenizing world cultures, the options, alternatives, and choices afforded by cultural diversity disappear, and we are left with a single, homogenous way of life that can easily be dominated by a few nations, institutions, corporations, and individuals. We are in urgent need of local, national, worldwide discussions on the implications of this situation.

The dilemma that exists is that claims for American "exceptionalism," are unwarranted. These claims were developed and sustained in a different period time. We now live in a global era. We cannot solve our problems by creating problems for other people

and nations in a winner take all mentality. American society, as informed by American popular culture, is **not** the model needed for a global era in which “interdependency” is a outcome of the globalization process. It is a model built on a failed economic, political, and moral system, and has led to severe consequences for national survival and well being. Carlos Fuentes (1995), the well-known Mexican author and social critic, wrote of the apocalyptic implications of this current state of affairs for the global community years:

We leave behind us a century of scientific light and political shadow, a century of unequalled progress and unequalled inequality, a century of technology became universal, but so did violence; a century that opened a wide chasm between scientific progress and moral lag, between technological wonders and political miseries. . . . The homelessness, violence, drugs, declining standards of education, insecurity, rotting infrastructures, unattended problems of the old age, women, children, the AIDS pandemic; these are indeed, the cavalries of the Apocalypse in the first world -- but also in the Third World. . . . This is the novelty. There is a Third World in the First World, just as there is a First World in the Third World (Fuentes, 1995, p. 8)

### **American Popular Culture: Exporting the American Way**

I have identified “twelve” American popular culture ethos (forms/processes) that I feel are sources of national problems. I have placed their opposite ethos in parentheses.

#### **1. Consumerism:**

The promotion of the constant and unlimited purchase of goods as a source of personal satisfaction and status. Consumerism has little concern for the consumption and exploitation of natural and human resources. (**Sustainability**)

#### **2. Materialism:**

The belief that personal worth and well being is directly related to the acquisition of tangible goods and personal possessions. Materialism is a major source of consumerism. (**Spirituality**)

#### **3. Commodification:**

The assignment of a monetary value to all things so they can be treated as commodities (i.e., articles of commerce or trade on the commodity market and exchange) to be considered in determining worth and value. Within this ethos,

money becomes a critical arbiter of personal, governmental, and commercial decisions. (**Human Worth**)

#### 4. **Inequality/Privilege/Diversity**

This American cultural ethos seeks to hide or disguise itself amidst spin, platitudes, and self-righteous assertions in government, commerce, media, and religion, but the harsh reality is that the very diversities we claim to support constitute sources of their absence or minimal existences. Racial, ethno-cultural, gender, sexual preferences, social class, and a host of other biases define popular culture, and are sustained by it. (**Diversity/Equality**)

#### 5. **Violence and Power:**

The impulse and tendency to use harsh and abusive force for both pleasure (e.g., football, computer games), and to pursue power (e.g., bullying, gangs, war). There is a tolerance of violence and, in many ways, a fascination with its expression and consequences. (**Peace**)

#### 6. **Individual Self Interest:**

A focus on the "individual" to such an extent that there is minimal attention to the consequences of this for the social and collective nexus. Support for individual rights, while essential for the protection of human freedom and liberty, is often in conflict with the needs of a society and nations (**Social Interest, *Gemeinschaftesgefühl***).

#### 7. **Celebrity Identification and Pre-Occupation:**

The attachment and concern for the lives of celebrities to such an extent that there is preoccupation with the events in celebrity lives at the expense of concern for critical issues in one's own life and events of the wider world (e.g., People Magazine, TV shows, fan clubs, social networks). (**Attachment to "Ordinary" Citizens and Neighborhood Life**)

#### 8. **Competition:**

Competition is a defining trait of the American national character and daily life. Throughout education, commerce, entertainment, athletics, and political arenas of life, competition is considered good and to be encouraged. "Survival of the fittest" is an ingrained virtue, and there is often little concern or admiration for those who are second best. (**Cooperation**)

## 9. Financial Greed:

In accord with its capitalistic system and attachment to competition in all areas of life, the unbridled pursuit of profit has turned into greed—an excessive desire to acquire money and material wealth often at the sacrifice of all ethical, moral, and often, legal standards. (**Sharing**)

## 10. Rapid and Constant Change:

The emphasis on rapid “change” and the pursuit of the new is a valued goal and activity. This is powered by the new technology. This emphasis continually pushes the boundaries of current and conventional beliefs and activities to new limits. This is especially true for TV programs, movies, computer games regarding explicit sexuality, violence, and dress styles and fads. (**Tradition, Continuity**)

## 11. Hedonism:

While the pursuit of pleasure is certainly a “normal” human value and behavior, first articulated in great detail in ancient Greece, and subsequently in Western psychology (behavior is motivated to seek pleasure and to avoid pain), its pursuit in America is unhampered by the extensive freedoms to self-indulge, and to disregard tradition or convention. These views often conflict with religious beliefs that see seeking pleasure as a sin. (**Self-Denial, Endure**)

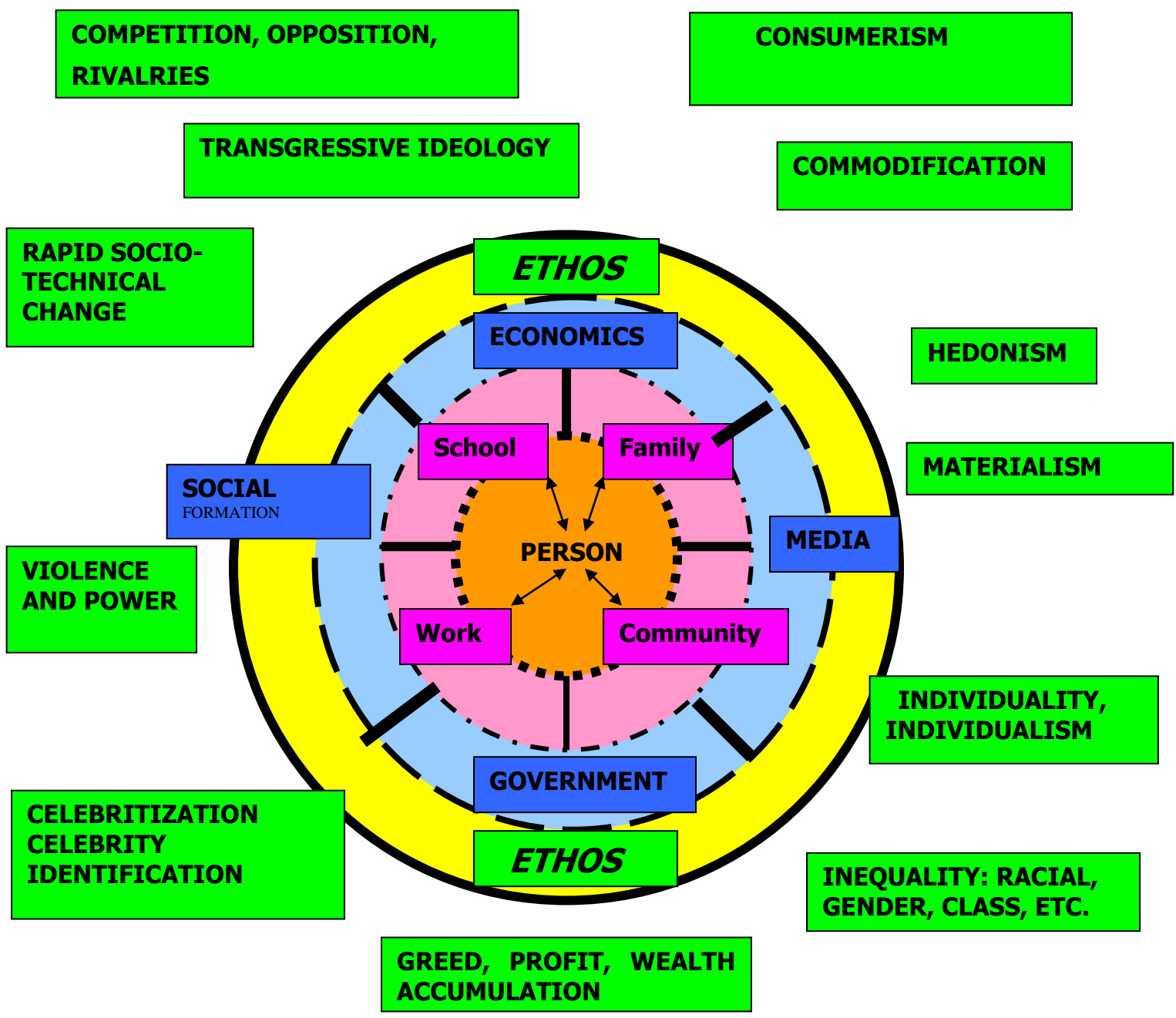
## 12. Transgressive Ideology:

An emerging cultural ideology that accepts as normative, violations of human decency and morality by promoting illicit behaviors (e.g., violent murder, torture, rape, pedophilia, incest, pornography, substance abuse, sado-masochism) involving all ages. This is manifesting itself in literature, movies, music, and television. (**Civility, Decency, Respect**)

There are others representations of American popular culture that could be added (e.g., American exceptionalism, “I did it my way” mentality, fast-food diet domination, sexualization of advertising), but, my point is made. Think about it! Each day we are caught in a cultural web that we openly criticize and yet cannot seem to escape. The power of American popular culture is vast and complex. I have charted the “**cultural socialization process**” in Figure 1. As Figure 1 demonstrates, we exist in a world of tiered ethos and institutions. They are powerful and it is difficult to function apart from them even if we seek selective detachment. We have choices, but our choices are limited. We speak of free will, but our freedoms are constrained.

Figure 1: The Socialization of American Culture, Society, and Psyche:  
Ethos (Green) ↔ Macrosocial (Blue) ↔ Microsocial (Pink/Magenta) ↔ Person (Gold)

**ETHOS:** Popular American Culture Ethos  
**MACROSOCIAL:** Economics, Media, Social Formation, Government  
**MICROSOCIAL:** Family, school, Work, Community, Religion  
**PERSON:** Psyche, Behavior



## Some Closing Thoughts

Popular American culture is a source of conflict in our society. The elements of this culture generate and sustain ways-of-life that are destructive for American people and society. Yet another challenge we face is that the culture is being exported across the world resulting in a colonization mind and nation. These are serious issues and we are already witnessing the resistance among many to imposition of American domination.

There is a seductive appeal to American popular culture as it enters/penetrates another culture. Some might say, "Why resist, it is much better than what they have." No it is not! I do not wish to romanticize traditional cultures of third-world nations and people for they too have obvious faults, limitations. There is a need for citizen activism and local, national, and global dialogues. Michel Foucault called attention to the urgent need to recognize the forces that guide and shape our society --- often insidiously -- and to speak and act against them in the hopes we may create peace and justice.

The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.

*[http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12614.The\\_Chomsky\\_Foucault\\_Debate](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12614.The_Chomsky_Foucault_Debate)*

What I fear at this time is the growing abuses and misuse of power and wealth by government, corporations, and individuals seeking to preserve the *status quo*, even, if necessary by force. There is a resurgence of "unbridled" nationalism reminiscent of the late nineteenth century in Europe when nations pursued identity and purpose with such fervor that they were willing to fight international and civil wars. Fervent and fanatical nationalism -- "my nation right or wrong," "xenophobia," "build fences and walls," "protect borders" -- brings with it hate, violence, and war, not peace, justice, and security.

it is essential we grasp the critical challenges and opportunities before us if our world is to survive, not at a primitive level of want and desperation, but as a place of being -- existing, becoming, evolving -- characterized by respect and admiration for the highest human aspirations, hopes, and fulfillments of our potential. We can begin this process by acknowledging that **it is wrong -- morally, ethically, and legally -- for any nation or people to pursue their political, economic, and/or cultural security and safety by openly or insidiously imposing upon any other nation or people, a form of governance, economic, culture (e.g., values, religion, language), and/or military occupation and control that serves to colonize, oppress, and dominate this nation or people by any means that limits their free self determination.**

These are not words of my making. They appear in various forms inspired by the (1) founding documents of nations (e.g., *Declaration of Independence*), (2) organizations (*Universal Declarations of Human Rights* – UDHR), (3) statements of human aspirations for dignity and freedom (e.g., *The Montpelier Manifesto*), and (4) various Liberation Writers (e.g., *Paulo Freire*, *Ignacio Martin-Baro*). What better guidelines for rethinking and remaking our future can there be?

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