The Gradual Slide towards Homogeneity: The Influence of Convergence Forces

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Abstract

Cultures and nations are losing their uniqueness to globalization forces as if they are indeed in a 'global village'. Convergence forces of information explosion, ease of travel and transportation, and economic imperatives bring about homogeneity, and similarity to cultures, societies and the way of life. These are the defining terms of our time. It seems that we are gradually sliding towards homogeneity. Convergence forces are creating unprecedented level of similarity among various peoples and cultures. This article elaborates on these issues, not only as the way they are but as an early signal heralding the shape of things to come.

Introduction

Many of our actions have both positive and negative outcomes. Very seldom does anything have just either positive or negative results. There are always unintended consequences to any action. Actions and activities have residuals outcomes. No matter how small, the residual outcomes are present in all of our undertakings.

We have strived to increase standardization in our organizations for many years. While we are aware of the associated costs of standardization (complete similarity and sameness), so far the benefits have overshadowed the costs. It is well known that there are certain benefits to standardization. Among these benefits are economic gains and efficiency. There are, however, other associated costs, much of which are not clearly evident. We also know that there are certain benefits to diversity and variety. We praise diversity and variety not only because of the benefits they bestow but also for the associated costs of similarity and standardization. While homogeneity and standardization could reduce the final

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production costs, it creates sameness and eliminates variations. Without variations, newness, novelty and innovation would not exist. Therefore, we pursue differentiation and variation. For example, to attract attention and increase the interest of the audience, we introduce variation and multiplicity of items into our oral presentation and discussion.

If variety is the spice of life, sameness is bland and boring. It may not be apparent what globalization is doing to our lives by creating sameness and similarity. This article attempts to shed light on our gradual slide towards homogeneity and the loss of uniqueness. It appears that we are becoming more similar. In effect, some level of homogeneity and similarity is creeping into our global community in ways that are not quite evident.

While there are discussions on various aspects of globalization and economic convergence, particularly among developed countries, resulting from the spread of regional agreements and other governmental undertakings, such as privatization of state-owned firms (for example, Drezner, 2001; Henisz et al., 2005; Venables, 1999), here the discussion is on cultural convergence.

Most of the early writings on globalization (for example, Kennedy, 1993; Levitt, 1983; Ohmae, 1990; Rodrik, 1997) discussed the economic aspects of globalization, both its positive and negative consequences. The presentation of cultural aspects, however, was tied in with the economic consequences of interdependence and integration. Although we acknowledge the impact of economic forces on the society, we could have a separate discussion on socio-cultural aspects that bring nations and societies into direct contact and consequently, may result in mutual influence.

The issue of cultural convergence has drawn the attention of scholars on globalization. Several have argued on the side of political and cultural globalization (for example, Castells, 1996; Meyers and Hannan, 1979; Petrella, 1996). In an extensive review of the literature, Guillen (2001, p. 244), in search for answers to five questions about the impact of globalization, one of which was on the issue of political and cultural convergence, concluded that the evidence in support of political and cultural globalization is quite persuasive.

In addition to the discourse on economic and policy divergence, there is an ongoing debate that globalization has created, among other things, convergence of the media. Reviewing this stream of academic discourse, Jenkins (2004) suggested that this line of academic discussion has mostly been about the flow of Western media products into global markets, falling back on old models of cultural imperialism. He, however, asserts that while globalization involves the flow of media content from the West to the East, it also involves the flow of media content from the East to the West. This phenomenon has been promoted not only 'by corporate interests both in Asia and in the West, but also by grassroots interests, including both fan and immigrant communities, who are asserting greater control over the flow of media content across national borders' (Jenkins, 2004, p. 41).

The theme here is not the emergence of a 'global culture', but the slow move towards similarity. Similarity does not mean the uniform sameness and duplication of all aspects, such as cloning, but sharing of certain important features. As Smith (1990, p. 171) pointed out, the idea of a 'global culture' is a practical impossibility. The following is an elaboration on these issues.

Convergence Forces

Due to globalization, we are moving in the direction of more similarity and sameness for everything. There are certain forces that move us in the direction of more similarity and homogeneity. In fact, a number of factors contribute to the global similarity; for example, global dynamics in which 'convergence forces' (Hinds et al., 2011) engage us in intercultural collaboration result in continuous

movement towards similarity and homogeneity. There are three major convergence forces: (i) ease of travel; (ii) information explosion; and (iii) economic imperatives.

1. *Ease of travel*: Today, it is much easier and more convenient to travel to faraway places that previously were either inaccessible or very difficult and expensive to reach. Travel to far distances used to be only available to a very wealthy minority in any society. The travel difficulty had created regional differences and even local differences. Each community had its own ways of doing things and relating to environmental phenomena. Variations in lifestyle, beliefs and behaviour and, of course, mental frameworks for processing information were more or less regional and even local. Now, all of these factors are becoming global. The ease and speed with which we move around and reach remote places has reduced the local/regional differences.

2. *Communication and the influence of media and the Internet*: 'Information age' is the term often used to describe our time and the influence of information in our lives. Information is the dominant force that governs everything around us. Now, with the advent of the Internet, information is available inexpensively to all humanity. With widespread availability and accessibility, we are connected to far corners of the world as if they exist within our physical reach. We have more information about almost every aspect of peoples' lives, no matter how far away they live. All of this has created unprecedented familiarity, and sometimes understanding, bringing us closer to each other. We know more about various people and how they live than previously was possible. All of this has brought us closer to each other virtually when actual close proximity is out of reach. We are afraid of the 'unknown' and more comfortable with the 'known'. Information availability enables us to turn most of the 'unknown' into 'known'. While we still consider some places and people 'exotic', no longer do we consider those who are 'different' as necessarily 'deficient' and undesirable. Information availability enables us to evaluate, compare and contrast different phenomena and decide which fits us better. This results in the adoption of 'functional' and 'practical' in everything around us. In effect, global homogenization and similarity is well underway.

3. *Economic imperatives*: As modernization impacts economic, political and industrial sectors, there will be convergence around a set of universal values and practices (Steel and Taras, 2010, p. 213). Whenever and wherever there is a new method of production or conducting business in a certain way, be it the use of technology, a way of performing jobs or interacting with others either across the firms or across the borders, that results in improved productivity and increased efficiency, it would be adopted by competitors all over the world. This is the economic imperative. There is no choice for business enterprises but to emulate those practices. This would bring us all towards similarity and homogeneity. Such a phenomenon is accelerating continuously because of increased global business activities.

It is appropriate to acknowledge that convergence is a familiar concept in many fields, particularly in business management. For example, Miles (1977) extensively discussed the managerial relevance of convergence epistemologically. While he offered a very fruitful discussion on convergence, he did not address the issue from socio-cultural convergence perspective.

Any discussion on 'convergence forces' that bring us, socially and culturally, towards similarity with each other, implicitly or explicitly, should bring forth a reference to 'divergent forces' that compel us to preserve our identity. It is natural that things should come to balance and equilibrium. Our scientific understandings from biology, ecology, physics, engineering, sociology, psychology, etc.,

are all confirmation of this reality. There is no escaping from it. Therefore, the discussion here on convergence towards homogeneity implicitly acknowledges that when people sense and experience convergence forces, they attempt to preserve their identity and uniqueness. Consciously or unconsciously, they fall back on their cultural heritage, or magnify and exaggerate them. Recent revival of cultural heritage in Moslem nations is an example of this phenomenon.

Collaboration among nations and business organization is nothing new. However, the past two decades have been marked with unprecedented intensity and growth of global work. The growth of global work is attributed to a relatively orderly international relationship among nations, an integrated global economy and dramatic advances in technology (United Nations [UN], 2001). Various statistics signify this trend. For example, there were about 39,000 global corporations at the end of 1993. This number increased to 61,000 by the end of 2003; and to 82,000 by the end of 2008. Employment at these companies in the United States (US) increased by 34 per cent during 1991–2001 and by 42 per cent outside the US in the same period (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 1996, 2004, 2010). Interaction among diverse people who are employed by these companies introduces them to new and different ways, which could accelerate the adoption process leading them to more homogeneity and similarity.

Changing Cultural Features

Convergence forces that accelerate the gradual slide towards homogeneity and similarity are not only prevalent in business, but they are becoming more apparent in the society. Most features of national cultures used to remain, more or less, constant with little change, if any at all. Cultural changes would take place very slowly over a long period of time. Therefore, this slow change was a prominent feature of national culture that influenced its definition, making beliefs and values central features of culture (Hinds et al., 2011, p. 139). In this way, culture was considered as 'programming (software) of the mind' (for example, Hofstede, 1988), or viewed as static and 'in the head' (Leung et al., 2005). Such a view assumed culture as synonymous with beliefs and values of people of nations that would change very slowly over a long period of time (Hofstede, 1988).

Today, however, a more dynamic view of culture is necessary to describe the global reality. Various actors, including educational, governmental and economic institutions, should be considered in the discussion and definition of culture. As Kitayama (2002) suggested, a 'system view of culture' is more descriptive of what is happening today. The dynamics of global interaction, intermingling and relationships among people, businesses, governments and various other international actors, influence and change everything around us, including ourselves. In this vein, Gelfand et al. (2007) asserted that the present value-based view of culture leaves out important global, societal and organizational dynamics. The static view of culture, which assumes cultures are stable, has been seriously questioned by Taras and Steel (2009). There is considerable evidence that cultures do change more often and faster than we previously thought (Taras and Steel, 2006). There are indications that the spread of modernization and free market values result in cultural convergence (for example, Adams, 2005; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Ralston et al., 2006). However, Inglehart and Baker (2000, p. 19) asserted that 'Economic development is associated with shifts away from absolute norms and values toward values that are increasingly rational, tolerant, trusting and participatory.' They also mention that 'cultural changes are path dependent. The broad cultural heritage of a society…leaves an imprint on values that endures despite modernization' (Inglehart and Baker, 2000, p. 17).

We can look at the convergence issue from another perspective: the movement towards integration of Western practicality and functionality with Eastern philosophies. For example, Sharma (2004), in an indirect reference to convergence, offers a discussion on unfolding of several events such as moderni-zation of villages and spiritualization of cities; engagement in Western enlightenment and Eastern awakening and spirituality; convergence between religions, science and spirituality; holistic vision in market context; and visions and models of man. In the same vein, Pandey and Gupta (2008) attempted to illustrate a conceptual convergence between modern social sciences such as organizational behaviour and Vedantist, Confucian and Buddhist teachings and thinking.

Today, national cultures have much more contact with one another and are directly exposed to various practices, whereas previously, they would only be aware of them indirectly. Convergence forces result in the exposure, familiarity and sometimes adoption of different new practices. Taras and Steel (2006), for example, found significant changes worldwide towards lower power distance and higher individualism and achievement orientation. Aided by socio-economic developments, this trend is accelerating, and the result is more homogeneity and similarity among national cultures. Another example is the analysis of 81 societies by Inglehart and Baker (2000, p. 19), who found significant cultural changes using World Value Survey data. In yet another study, Inglehart and Welzel (2005) asserted that socio-economic developments cause cultural changes in a predictable direction. It is apparent that the choice of food, music, dress and other daily activities is becoming similar around the globe.

The following is an elaboration on the tendency towards cultural similarity. It discusses certain continuous alteration that is taking place in two attitudinal dimensions, namely, individualism and collectivism. These dimensions have been frequently used in the discussion of national cultures, and while they are diametrically different, both have been and are influencing each other.

Individualism

A society in which the ties between individuals are loose and people are expected to look after themselves and their families is called individualistic. Individualism tends to increase with modernity (Hofstede, 2001, p. 225).

In the last couple of decades, there has been a significant increase in international business. Between 1970 and 2006, world trade increased from $650 billion to $24 trillion (Walker, 2007). This increase in international business was accompanied by an increase in the number of international companies from 39,000 in 1993 to 82,000 in 2008 (UNCTAD, 1996, 2010). While most of the trade involving advanced technologies was initiated by countries that are identified as individualistic, the role of other countries could not be ignored.

Business transactions are built on trusting relationship. In individualistic countries, trust in others in a business relationship is handled through institutions and organizations. Legal and formal contracts among total strangers guarantee fulfilment of business obligations without fearing that they would renege. Various laws and formal procedures are enacted to safeguard such transactions. This practice obviates the need to personally know other parties in a business deal. Also, there is another related aspect. The individualistic nature of business and non-business relationship leads to the emphasis on personal privacy that is protected by formal safeguards. This emphasis is not matched by a similar concern in collectivist cultures.

There are certain issues for which the reverse of the above-mentioned practice prevails. For example, in individualist societies, even though individuals are expected to fend for themselves, other services are offered to all in such a way that resembles collectivist attitudes and practices. The interest in more

collectivist ways is getting more attention every year. In recent times, these practices have been getting the emphasis that could be regarded as the early signs of changing cultural practices. For instance, offering health insurance for most if not all people in many Western societies has become a norm. Even in the most individualist country, the US, recent passage of health care laws, while objected to by many, is an indication of less individualistic and more collectivist mentality. Another example is social security coverage that is universal in the US or the unemployment insurance that, by taxing many, provides some protection to individuals in times of economic downturn.

Collectivism

Societies in which individuals, from birth onwards, are integrated into strong cohesive in-groups are called collectivist. These groups, throughout people's lifetime, continue to protect them in exchange for complete loyalty (Hofstede, 2001, p. 225).

When individualist societies show interest in providing some amount of protection to those who need it, this could be regarded as the influence of collectivism. The reverse is taking place in collectivist nations. Usually, business transactions in collectivist societies rely more on trust and familiarity than formal contracts. Most business deals are made on that basis among people who already know each other. For those who are not within the close circle of family and friends, establishing a relationship for the purpose of building trust comes before any business deals are consummated. Business deals do not take place between total strangers. Knowing the other parties in business transactions is necessary and therefore, the issue of privacy takes a back seat to building trust. In these societies, privacy is a relatively general concept. Most relationships and the way of dealing with others are codified by the society. Codification of daily activities leaves very limited individual and personal discretion leading to limited personal choices. Because the foundation of most transactions in these societies is personal and the relationship and involvement of the collective is vital, most activities are taking place within a close circle of familiar people and acquaintances. There is very little that individuals can keep to themselves without others knowing about them. What are considered personal and private issues in other cultures are often not secret to many, especially those that regularly interact with the individual. Privacy has limited application here.

However, similar to all other aspects of culture, convergences forces are influencing this collectivist aspect too. Individuals are demanding more personal freedom and choices. This reduces pressure for conformity to traditional ways. For example, recently, all North African nations rebelled against old ways and demanded changes that were characteristics of modern societies. The uprising in these countries, along with other Arab nations such as Yemen and Syria, collectively were dubbed by the news media as the Arab Spring, and many scholars quickly adopted the term (for example, Zahra, 2011). Lisa Anderson (2011), the President of American University in Cairo, while advancing a number of points in explaining Arab Spring, acknowledged the role of globalization of norms of civic engagement and the use of technology, for example, the Internet and Facebook in the uprisings. While these countries and their cultures could not be considered individualistic by any measure, the demands of all of them—in addition to democratic changes—resembled those enjoyed by the individualistic cultures, such as personal freedom and privacy and less government intrusion into their private lives.

Convergence forces are particularly evident in the former Soviet republics. They were ruled under totalitarian and communist regimes for generations; therefore, to these nations, personal freedom and privacy was a luxury that they could only read about occasionally if they had access to the Western media. Communism, with its roots in Marxism, theoretically took a high ground expecting from each

person according to his/her ability and tried to offer to each person according to his/her needs. However, this concept focused on wealth distribution without much emphasis on wealth creation. During more than 70 years of communism, countries that followed such a philosophy found themselves short on economic development and abandoned it. When the yoke of repression was lifted with the fall of communism, people learned about many aspects of life that were forbidden under the Soviet system. Again, convergence forces quickly reshaped what was a collectivist environment into individualist pursuit, as if it was always the norm.

Demands for less government intrusion into the people's lives and respect for personal choices became the new mantra, leading to changes that were unprecedented. To emulate the West, governments embarked on privatization of state-owned enterprises. A little more than two decades after the fall of communism, privatization of state-owned enterprises is going strong, with varied results among the former Soviet republics (Mitra and Selowsky, 2002). The race to catch up with the West is setting public policy agenda in many of the old Soviet republics, especially Russia. Recently, the Russian government has started accelerating privatization of state-owned banks in an effort to reduce government ownership to a minority position (Iosebashvili, 2012).

Business Practices and Organization Forms

Convergence forces especially influence business practices around the world. Globalization has intensified competition for market share and costumers' demands. Economic imperatives force businesses to quickly adopt new production methods that improve productivity. Examples are the just-in-time production (JIT) method (Davenport and Glaser, 2002), various forms of organization design and the employment of the best people in high-level positions of multinational companies regardless of their citizenship. The appointment of an American as the president of Sony of Japan is a good example of this trend. In a short time, these practices have become global standards. Another example is the move by major financial institutions globally towards certain novel practices. To capitalize on the interest of Moslem consumers that amount to around $1 trillion, some banks in Europe and the US have started offering various services that use Islamic standards (Burn, 2011).

New forms of organization design have made it possible for enterprises from developing countries to become global participants in business activities around the world. These designs have altered the process of internationalization and have reduced the time it takes to become a global company. Internationalization used to be an incremental expansion. Firms would go through a learning process in successive stages of domestic, international, multinational and global design and restructuring. Now, this norm is being revised. The unique feature of the global economy that is dominated by the interlink between firms in the value chain covering research and development (R&D), production, logistic, marketing and financial services enables these firms to start from the beginning on a global mission. These firms are 'born globals' (Fatehi, 2008, p. 404).

There are two paths to internationalization:[1] the traditional path and the new path. The traditional path would take many years of doing business and amassing resources internally. The new path is provided by the free trade system and network of its participants that acts as a springboard from which firms can launch themselves directly to the global stage. In doing so, they become a part of the global network and acquire network structures.

Previously, not having a large home market was a hindrance to growth and internationalization. While many European firms by necessity were engaged in cross-border businesses, their operations were merely an expansion to neighbouring markets that were within a few hours of travel time. Today,

globalization has made it possible for the firms from small home markets to expand globally. Because of their small home markets, these firms are forced to utilize innovative strategies that considered the whole world a market. They are also free to design organizational structures that are not burdened with intermittent, large-scale modifications as traditional companies had to go through. Now, it is not necessary to go through a progression of domestic, international, multinational and global structure. They become global players from the beginning, or at an early state of their growth.

Characteristically, globalization provides small and medium-size firms, as well as start-ups, the possibility of becoming global operators. The global market is a vast network of many firms, in many industries, with a multitude of links to each other in the form of supplier–buyer–customer–marketer–middleman–service provider, etc. According to the UN, for example, there are 60,000 firms with more than 800,000 national affiliates operating in the global market (UNCTAD, 2001). This vast network is at the disposal of those who have the ingenuity of knowing how to utilize it.

Unencumbered with the organizational memory of old methods, and free from organizational habits, traditions, culture and structure that are past oriented, the newcomers to the global market can move quickly and effectively. It will often take these firms much less time to become global players than their traditional counterparts took to reach to a global status. The development of the organizational structure of these firms particularly follows a less cumbersome path that directly takes them to global design. The innovative newcomers, all of which start with a much smaller size than existing global companies, in a short time, acquire a global posture and structure. Because they move quickly to the global level, these firms are not using the conventional designs. They use innovative, fluid and organic structure. This structure is in congruence with the network character of global economy.

Global economy is emerging as a worldwide web of inter-firm connections (Mathews, 2002). Internationalization, therefore, can be defined as the process whereby firms are becoming integrated into the worldwide web of economic activities. From this perspective, major features of the global economy, namely, the size and the web-like feature, free trade system and the existence of global customers, push and pull firms to become global players using innovative organizational designs.

The push comes from the size of the network of the global market that cannot be reached by conventional methods if a firm does not have a considerable resource base. Also, from the inception, most of these firms have a global mission. The pull comes from the free trade system that allows cross-border transaction without many restrictions, and makes faraway people the next-door customers. Even niche players that previously did not have enough customers at home to grow can find enough customers in distant places. The pull also comes from the existing global companies that need suppliers to service their operations in multiple markets. These global customers pull competent and imaginative newcomers to the global stage. To serve these customers and move quickly, the newcomers cannot be burdened with the rigidity of traditional forms. They devise their own forms that do not fit into conventional designs. These firms are characterized by their connections with suppliers, marketers and other firms, and when needed, with the local governments. In effect, they use a 'network' design. The network, however, is not a solid form, nor a design that has a permanent skeleton upon which the organizational requirements of job design, authority–responsibility designation, communication and relationships could be fleshed out. It is more of multidirectional than either a vertical or horizontal organization. It is in a permanent state of evolution and mostly involves external relationships with other firms, and their own subsidiaries and joint ventures. The framework of traditional organizational structure cannot portray a network organization because this form of organization relies on dynamic relationships.

The new network form is adopted by all participants in the global economy regardless of the country of origin. Their cultural background may influence some unique practice of their headquarters, but their global activities are based on whatever cultural practices of their partners dictate. In this way,

the partners' particulars and peculiars influence the norms at the headquarters. Naturally, the most practical and efficient practices are adopted. In this way, the gradual slide towards homogeneity and similarity continues.

Concluding Remarks

Convergence forces and globalization highlight value differences and threaten the possibility of preserving these differences. The isolation of cultures, nations and markets of the previous period has been replaced by close interaction, intermingling and integration among them, actually or virtually. This phenomenon is making it difficult if not impossible to preserve distinct separate identities, and heralds the prospects of assimilation of all by the forces of modernity in the form of homogeneity and similarity of what was previously the domain of national culture. Modernization, or more specifically technological developments, has been a driving force in all of this. As information-processing technologies intrude into arts and music, some experts fear that in the future, creative domain may become routinized or altered. As modern information-processing technology creeps into various facets of our lives, and computer software turns '…more of the subjective domain of human creativity into objective tasks, some observers worry about cultural homogeneity' (Steiner, 2012: C3).

This article is a harbinger of evolving homogeneity and similarity at the global scale. It is an early signal that if we do not seriously attempt to preserve our unique and precious variations, it may not be too far from now that we succumb to the forces of modernity and become, more or less, homogenous entities as if we were all manufactured products.

Note

1. This section is based on published material on a new form of organization design from the first author (Fatehi, 2008).

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