Globalisation and the Fear of Homogenisation in Education

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Introduction

In 1993, we commenced work on a research project which utilised the then emerging concept of globalisation to investigate the ways in which the work of an international organisation, namely the OECD, affected the processes of educational policy-making in Australia (Rizvi, Lingard, Taylor & Henry 1995-97). Little did we realise then how ubiquitous would the use of the concept of globalisation become in just five years. Nowadays the talk of globalisation is everywhere—in the media, in social and economic analyses, in academic writings and in political rhetoric rationalising particular policy preferences. Some of this interest in globalisation can be put down to theoretical fashion, though much of it also relates to genuine attempts to understand the global reconfiguration of social and economic relations, particularly as they affect nation states. There is the often-repeated suggestion of political imperatives that determine the policy options for governments. There is the assertion that the world economic system is converging. Further still, there is genuine community fear about the homogenisation, read as Americanisation, of national identities and cultures. In this paper, we explore the extent to which this fear of homogenisation is justified, especially as it relates to education policy-making.

The fear of homogenisation is expressed in a variety of different ways, and is articulated by a number of theorists. Such theorists normally subscribe to some sort of notion of world system. For example, the world-systems theories of Wallerstein seek to identify the universal in the particular, whether as commodification or as time-space distanciation. In education, many theorists have pointed to the hegemonic convergence of a particular way of thinking about educational policy-making and governance. Green (1996) has, for example, provided a detailed account of the dominance of a particular organisational paradigm in education around the world. Slee, Weiner and Tomlinson (1998) have shown how ‘school effectiveness thinking’ has become global. Other writers have pointed to the diminishing importance of the structures of national policy-making. In the cultural field, the fear of homogenisation is encapsulated in Barber’s (1992) term ‘McWorld’. Barber (1992, p.54) argues that ‘four imperatives make up the dynamics of McWorld: a market imperative, a resource imperative, an information-technology imperative and an ecological imperative’. Each of these, argues Barber, contributes to ‘shrinking the world and diminishing the salience of national borders’. Nowhere is the fear of homogenisation greater than in relation to the emerging global mass culture. American mass culture, in particular, is seen as eroding and dissolving local cultures and traditions.

In this paper, we argue that the case for homogenisation produced by globalisation is overstated, and that it rests on a deterministic logic that assumes that choices are no longer available to political communities within nations. The fear of homogenisation suggests that local traditions are in imminent danger of being sucked into a global vortex, but this suggestion is itself based on a flawed understanding of the processes of globalisation. We argue that globalisation does not impinge on all nation states and at all times in exactly the same way. And not all effects of globalisation are straightforwardly negative or positive. The way globalisation rhetoric is taken up in educational policy communities varies considerably. We suggest that a debate about globalisation centred around homogenisation
is not terribly helpful, and that 'it is not a question of homogenisation or heterogenisation, but rather of the ways in which both of these tendencies have become features of life across much of the late twentieth century world' (Robertson 1994, p.27). What we need to discern is how both of these tendencies are mutually implicated in particular circumstances. This makes globalisation an empirical problem, demanding description of the particular, and the ways in which the particular has been produced by the general.

The literature on globalisation talks about three interrelated dimensions of globalisation, namely economic, political and cultural. In what follows, we seek to show how the economic, political and cultural effects of globalisation vary across time and space, and how the discourses of globalisation are used in ways that are markedly different in different countries and under different political regimes within the same country. This account is intended to demonstrate the flaws inherent in the homogenisation thesis, and the various ways in which the local and the national remain the most significant sites of cultural production and political struggle.

Economic globalisation

Writing about economic globalisation, Hobsbawm (1994, p.227) distinguishes between international and transnational dimensions. Transnational economic transactions, he argues, involve 'a system of economic activities for which state territories and state frontiers are not the basic framework, but merely complicating factors'. Regarding such transnational economic activities, he argues that a globalised world economy came into being in the early 1970s. Such economic globalisation is most obvious in respect of finance where 'instantaneous' and 'stateless' financial markets now operate (Waters 1995). Latham (1998, p.11) notes the exponential growth of transnational financial markets, pointing out that, whereas in 1973 on a typical day there was $15 billion of global foreign exchange traded, by 1995 this figure had reached $1300 billion.

Globalised financial markets are very difficult for nation states to control and, as such, impose considerable constraints on the policy options of national governments. In this way, economic globalisation can be seen to make more porous the political borders between nation states, even though there has not been liberalisation of trade to the same extent as with finance. There is thus a disjunction between the way we organise politically—largely within nation states—and the way the globalised economy now operates. Habermas (1996, p.292) has recently observed: 'While the world economy operates largely uncoupled from any political frame, national governments are restricted to fostering the modernisation of their national economies. As a consequence, they have to adapt national welfare systems to what is called the capacity for international competition'. The disjunction between the enhanced fluidity of global capital, particularly financial capital, and the bounded and geographical fixity of our political organisations (and of much of our political thinking) thus becomes a focus of political concern.

Waters (1995) argues that in an ideal-typical pattern of economic globalisation, trade would move in the direction of free exchange between localities, unrestricted by national political boundaries. Some of this is already occurring, for example, in the economic relationships between British Columbia and the west-coast states of the USA, or in relationships between the Northern Territory in Australia and parts of South-east Asia. We have also witnessed the emergence of regional trading blocs, for example, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and the European Union (EU). These blocs are further manifestations of the borderless economy that puts pressure on the nation state, but one which is bounded to some extent at the
regional level. In addition, the emergence of transnational corporations with budgets larger than those of many nation states, and with operations spread across the globe, is another important component of economic globalisation exerting pressure upon nation states. Latham (1998, p.11) points out that of the world's one hundred largest economies, forty-seven are multinational conglomerates.

However, the case concerning the disjunction between the global fluidity of capital and the boundedness of the political processes of the nation state can be overstated. As already noted, despite clear trends in that direction, the liberalisation of trade on a global scale remains limited. And capital ultimately remains tied to a particular place, especially in respect of the headquarters of banks and other financial institutions. Further, political responses to economic globalisation are by no means everywhere the same. For example, Japan and the so-called Asian Tiger countries have retained considerably more control over their financial systems and trading arrangements than has Australia. This suggests that national responses may be conditioned as much by ideological and political factors as by any 'determining' imperatives of globalisation.

Consider, for example, how economies of differing sizes, political traditions, located in specific trading blocs, with distinctive economic focuses, or with varying levels of educated labour and so on, respond to economic globalisation. What appears clearer, however, is that the economic nationalism of the post-war Keynesian political settlement is breaking down everywhere and that there is therefore the need for a new political and policy consensus. (Brown, Halsey, Lauder & Stuart Wells 1997). If the Keynesian settlement was the highest achievement of attempts to civilise national capital then a new progressive politics is needed in an attempt to civilise global capital (Latham 1998). Education has a particular role to play in such civilising processes. But the ways in which policy might deal with global capital is bound to vary across nations. While some nations like Japan have considerable latitude, others like Australia are more constrained. Nations like Papua and New Guinea that are heavily dependent on international aid and loans from monetary organisations have little room to move, as the conditions tied to such aid and loan programs are restrictive, and create policy boundaries that are difficult to cross.

Political globalisation

The discussion above has highlighted the importance of political structures at the nation state level in the operations of the global economy. Political structures are however not confined to nation states. Politics itself is becoming globalised. In this section we will consider three aspects of political globalisation to illustrate further flaws in the homogenisation argument. These three aspects are the changing constitution of the nation state, changes to the structure and modus operandi of the administrative structures of the state, and varying educational policy settlements by different governments within the same nation at different points in time.

The nation state as we know it was the creation par excellence of the modernist project and grew into its mature form throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reaching its apotheosis in Western countries in the Keynesian settlement of the first thirty years after the Second World War. The result was a sophisticated political and administrative structure which was responsible for the welfare and security of the people within its national borders, as well as for a national economy, which was often protected from international competition through tariff barriers for imported goods. Central to this project was the creation of political citizenship linked to nation and the invention of national identity
amongst disparate ethnic groups—the nation as ‘imagined community’ as Benedict Anderson (1983) puts it.

Globalisation has placed pressures upon this bounded notion of the nation. Think, for example, of the impact of what Appadurai (1996) calls the global flows of people (migrants, refugees, tourists, politicians, policy elites), ideas (including policies), images, goods and services, facilitated by both the new communication technologies and improved transportation. In that respect, Appadurai also hypothesises the creation of an emergent post-national politics working across nations in respect of both local and national politics. We have also seen the fragmentation of some nations (for example, the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union) and the move to supranational political arrangements amongst other nations, with the European Union the best case in point. Waters (1995, p.113) suggests that the range of international organisations, including for example, the OECD, the United Nations, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, collectively constitute ‘a complex and ungovernable web of relationships that extends beyond the nation-state’.

Where does the nation state now stand in this globalising political context? The international relations literature tends to dichotomise the impact of globalisation upon the nation state between ‘besieged’ and ‘defiant’ accounts, with the former in our view over-emphasising the ‘intrusive and corrosive processes of globalisation’ and the latter under-emphasising these same effects (Reus-Smit 1996, p.163). For example, Hirst and Thompson (1996) considerably underplay the significance of globalisation, while Appadurai (1996) probably overplays its significance and is a little premature in speaking of the demise of the nation state. Our view is that the nation state remains important, but now works in a different way and sits in a ‘mutually constitutive relationship’ with ‘emerging global structures and processes’ (Reus-Smit 1996, p.163).

There have been different political responses to globalisation by different nations. Witness the distinction between the more state-centric continental European response and the more parsimonious, stricter market liberal approaches by the Anglo-American nations, or even the role of the state in say, Singapore and Malaysia, compared with both. Having said that, we accept that these varying responses, particularly in the West, sit within the parameters of what we might call a post-Keynesian settlement, indicative of the end of the high point of modernism of centralised and expanding state policy structures. We have also witnessed growing inequality within Western nations and the emergence of a number of political backlashes, including a backlash national chauvinism in the context of pervasive insecurity (Bauman 1997). Such backlash chauvinisms (for example, One Nation in Australia, neo-Nazis in Germany, Le Penn in France, the white working class militia in the USA) are one response to globalisation. In arguing our position that nation states and political citizens within them still have considerable political salience, we are not arguing for such a version of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation. Quite the contrary, we vehemently reject such backlashes, and instead argue the need for a normative rethinking of local–national–global political relations (see Henry, Lingard, Rizvi & Taylor, forthcoming).

Turning then to a consideration of globalisation and the restructuring of the administrative and policy producing state. We accept a similar argument here to the one proffered above regarding the salience of the nation state in a globalised context. Thus, whilst acknowledging that throughout the world the policy and administrative apparatuses of the state itself have been restructured, we believe the state nonetheless remains no less important than during the period of the Keynesian settlement, but that it now simply operates in a different fashion (Lingard 1996).

In a recent report, the OECD (1995) has argued that new public sector management structures in member countries are linked to a more open international economy, which
demands increased competitiveness and forces a more intimate interrelationship between private and public sectors. Anna Yeatman (1990) has demonstrated how Labor governments in Australia embraced corporate managerialism as the frame for both the structure and *modus operandi* for the state in the face of a globalising economy. Likewise, Michael Pusey (1991, pp.210-11) has observed that the attempt by governments to ‘globalise’ national economies ‘presupposes a closer functional incorporation of the ‘political administrative’ system (the state, and with it the obligatory conditions of elected governments) into an augmented economic system’. Cerny (1990) has spoken of the ‘competition state’ to refer to the fact that the international competitiveness of the national economy has become the overall focus of the nation state’s policy regime, incorporating in a ‘meta-policy’ way other policies within such a framework. Thus what we have seen in many of the OECD countries are new public sector management practices and a restructuring of relations between the policy generating ‘centre’ of public bureaucracies and the policy implementing ‘periphery’—what Kickert (1991) has referred to as ‘steering at a distance’. Yet these new steering mechanisms have evolved within distinctive political histories. So, for example, in the Australian context, restructuring has affected the working of federalism (Lingard 1993). Pressures for restructuring have played out very differently in New Zealand with its unitary and unicameral political system. In the UK educational policymaking, intermediate state structures have all but evaporated, and in the US policy leverage for the federal government has been minimal—there is not the degree of vertical fiscal imbalance which exists in Australian federalism.

In Australian policy production, there has been a ‘ministerialisation’ of policy-making (Knight & Lingard 1997) accompanying the new state arrangements. This has seen a strengthening of the hands of the minister and advisers *vis-a-vis* the bureaucracy in policy production. The number of statutory authorities, with some distance and autonomy from the minister, has been considerably reduced. For example, Labor abolished the Schools Commission that had both policy advice and policy management functions in 1987 and replaced it with the merely advisory Schools Council, while the Howard government abolished the Schools Council and has not replaced it with anything. In marked contrast, public administration in the UK has seen not the abolition of statutory authorities, but rather their proliferation, with the creation of a large number of quasi-autonomous agencies (see Hood 1995, Mahony & Hextall 1997). Thus there have been different administrative responses to globalisation in Australia and the UK. In both cases, such changes have justified in terms of the demand for fast and focused policy-making in a globalised world. An OECD report, *Governance in Transition* (1995), documents the extent to which new managerialist structures and practices have been put in place inside the public sectors of the OECD countries, but in all cases these have been mediated by particular cultures, politics and histories.

Despite these differences across public administrations, Waters (1995) speaks of ‘organisational ecumenism’. On this matter there has been a heated debate within the public administration literature about whether or not we have seen the emergence of a new global paradigm of public administration. Hood (1995) suggests that rather than a new global paradigm, what we are witnessing is opposition to the older style hierarchical, rule-bound, public sector bureaucracies which accompanied the Keynesian welfare state settlement. In a rapidly changing world the ‘red-tapeism’ of older style bureaucracies is assumed to be inappropriate (Yeatman 1990). The new public management has had a profound impact, not only upon the organisation and administration of education, but also upon the substantive content of educational policies themselves (see, for example, Ball 1994 and Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry 1997). The competitive state arrangement sees
internationalising of the economy take on a meta-policy status, subsuming other policy
demands, including education, under its rubric.

We turn next to a brief consideration of a tale of two educational policy settlements in
Australia—that of Hawke–Keating Labor (1983-96) and of the conservative Howard
government (1996 to present). The differences between these two settlements exemplify
the problems associated with the homogenisation view of globalisation. Nonetheless both
these settlements can be characterised as sitting within post-Keynesian frameworks and as
responses to both the empirical and ideological elements of globalisation. As such, they
both fit broadly within the new policy consensus concerning education and the global
economy, which suggests that as control over the national economy is weakened, the
‘upward skilling’ of people becomes a central policy goal, requiring the tightening of the

The Hawke–Keating educational policy regime was largely justified in terms of
globalisation. It sought to tighten and narrow the focus of education across the three
sectors of schooling, TAFE and universities through a range of national policies. Because
of the different funding arrangements operating in each sector, Labor was able to have
more direct say in universities than in the other two sectors. While it pushed for greater
efficiency and better proof of outcomes, it also emphasised an equity framework (Lingard,
Knight & Porter 1993). The efficiency element saw the introduction of a fee structure in
higher education, which was nevertheless still mindful of equity matters. In schooling and
TAFE there were new national policy frameworks linked to the internationalisation of the
economy through the production of multi-skilled workers and an attempt to better integrate
aspects of schooling and vocational education and training. A range of national policies was
negotiated in schooling, including the National Policy for the Education of Girls in
Australian Schools, National Goals for Australian Schooling, The National Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, the National Asian Languages and Cultures
Strategy, and National Curriculum Statements and Profiles (Lingard & Porter 1997). These
policies reflected the various elements in this post-Keynesian educational policy settlement
framed by a particular reading of globalisation. The National Asian Languages and Cultures
Strategy was linked to broader foreign policy, trade and political goal of integrating
Australia more closely with Asia (Rizvi 1997). Labor’s approach then was an interesting
hybrid that sought to pull together market liberalism and social justice. Its approach also
maintained a symbiotic relationship with the trade union movement, specifically within
education with the peak national bodies of the teacher unions. Labor’s policy goals were
thus about con-joining economic rationalism and social rationalisation.

The Howard educational policy regime differs considerably from Labor’s and has been
driven to a much greater extent by economic rationalism than social rationalisation (see
Reid 1998). A backlash politics was important in the Howard electoral strategy, including
of getting the ‘battlers’ on side. Yet equity concerns have been considerably downgraded.
More broadly, policies of multiculturalism and reconciliation with Indigenous Australians
have come under attack. Howard has also articulated an anti-feminist stance. The notion of
group disadvantage has also been considerably weakened. Luke (1997) has argued that the
rationale for Howard federal educational policy rests upon the return of the individual
deficit subject. Concerns with efficiency, balancing the budget and greater use of user- pays
mark the central elements of the new educational policy agenda across the three
educational sectors. In higher education there has been an enhancement of user pays
approaches, talk of vouchers, and a weakening of equity concerns. TAFE has been pushed
further down the market track. In schooling, there has been a narrowing of national
schooling policy goals away from equity concerns and towards literacy and numeracy. The
New Schools Policy for non-government schools has been abolished, allowing for unconstrained growth of non-government schools and their claims upon the public purse. The introduction of the Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment has put government and non-government schools potentially in market competition with each other. The Government’s relationship with the trade union movement generally has been antagonist. Educational initiatives of the Keating government such as the National Schools Network, the National Professional Development Program, the Australian Teaching Council have all been abolished by the Howard government apparently because of their association with Labor and because they bore the fingerprints of the teacher unions.

What this discussion shows is that the discourses of globalisation do not have the same logic across political divides, and that party political ideology still mediates global pressures in the processes of policy production. At the same time it demonstrates that the post-Keynesian era has set the broader parameters for the negotiation of particular political differences. While the political rhetoric about globalisation appears shared, it is utilised in ways that are significantly different across nations, and across different political regimes. This is particularly the case with the global flows in cultural practices and products.

Cultural globalisation

A number of authors have recently pointed to the significance of the cultural flows between nations. According to Featherstone, Lash and Robertson (1995), this above all else seems to typify the contemporary globalisation process. These cultural flows are, of course, not divorced from economic and political dimensions. Furthermore, some flows, mainly those originating from the West, have more force than others and so reach a wider audience. Accordingly, there is fear about the possible homogenisation of culture. A ‘global culture’, in which everyone has the same cultural taste, is thus imagined. Barber’s notion of ‘McWorld’, Ritzer’s idea of ‘McDonalisation’ and the ‘Hollywoodisation’ of entertainment are just some of the examples of the homogenisation argument. But this situation is certainly much more complex that is sometimes supposed. As Ahmad and Donnan (1995, p.3) point out, ‘the notion of a hegemonic centre dispensing its products to the world’s peripheries is more often assumed than described’. Even if such cultural products reach every corner of the world there is not any guarantee that they are ascribed the same significance or meaning in different places and by different people. And even though the same cultural message might be received in different places, it is domesticated by being interpreted and incorporated according to local values’ (Ahmad & Donnan 1995, p.3). Furthermore, cultural flows do not always emerge from the same direction, and can often be working in many directions simultaneously. Pieterse (1995) has spoken of cultural globalisation as being concerned essentially with hybridisation.

What we are clearly witnessing are cultural flows that are not only multi-directional but also creolised (Hannerz 1987). This has created social conditions in which cultural fragmentation has become a dominant feature of most societies. There has been the destabilising of relationships between ethnicity and nationhood, as national, group and individual identities have become increasingly contingent. In light of increasing fragmentation of cultural life, groups of people have sought to revive ethnicities that had long remained dormant. Giddens (1994, p.253) has nicely encapsulated these simultaneous processes of global integration and ethnic disintegration in his observation that today there are ‘no others’ and ‘many others’. The ethnic diaspora, reconstituted by globalisation, has witnessed the emergence of hybrid ‘new identities’ (Hall 1992) within nation states, for example Greek–Australians or African–Americans. Appadurai (1995) talks of an emergent
post-national diasporic public sphere as a new terrain for politics. Stuart Hall speaks of post-national identity, arguing that accelerating globalisation has destabilised ethnicity and that the dual processes of de-territorialisation and greater transnational ‘connectedness’ have profound implications for our understanding of culture.

Set against these fragmenting pressures, the increasing global distribution of images through concentrated media and technology ownership, for example the empires of Murdoch and Gates, has potential for homogenising cultural differences. In global media constructions of desire and taste we have seen attempts at the development of something of ‘a common global lifestyle’ (Waters 1995, p.136), at least amongst the affluent. But such attempts have been totally successful, as corporate giants have had to ‘customise’ their products in an effort to make them more relevant to local audiences, who have been prepared to consider new ideas, but not entirely at the expense of local practices.

As an antidote to cultural globalisation, and compensation for global networking of programs and standardisation of media products, we have seen in recent years resurgent interest in local cultural production. In places like India, fears concerning the loss of identity have led to cultural activities that have situated meaning and express emotional belonging that was at risk of being eroded by the logic of globalisation. Murdoch-owned Star TV in India, for example, now puts a great deal of value on the diversity of identities in India, and seeks to conserve the variety of cultural heritages in that country. Star TV still contains a great deal of American material, but that material is modified and indigenised. In the process, what emerges is a global melange, in which the global and the local are constantly in tension, seeking accommodation in an on-going way.

In so far as education is concerned with the processes of cultural production and reproduction, the global–local nexus represents a cultural field within which educational policy is clearly located. With the increasing movement of ideas and technologies and of students and teachers, through programs like Socrates and Erasmus in Europe and UMAP in the Asia-Pacific, educational policy has to account for these global flows. Education is concerned with both the local and the global, sustaining both the distinctiveness and integrity of local, regional and national cultures and engaging with forces of globalisation and ‘de-territorialisation’. The question becomes: ‘Who is responsible for achieving a balance between these two conflicting trends?’ It is hard to imagine that local communities and more broadly the nation state can escape this responsibility.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the concept of globalisation encapsulates some of the real changes going on in the world at the present time. One way in which these changes associated with globalisation has been interpreted is in terms of the threatening force of homogenisation. In our view, such an interpretation is at best overstated, if not misleading. This is particularly the case in respect of the nation state, whose premature death has been announced by some globalisation theorists. We have argued that while the nation state remains important in educational policy production terms, the processes of globalisation have seen a restructuring of its organisation and modes of practice, manifest as the emergent competitive state. What has emerged is a changing pattern of relations, which, as Cerny (1997, p.253) observes, derives ‘from complex congeries of multilevel games played on multi-layered institutional playing fields, above and across, as well as within, state boundaries’.

Globalisation is mediated within the nation state by its history, culture, politics, political structures and by the nature of the government of the day. The extent of that mediation is
at times an indication of whether or not the ideological or empirical effects of globalisation are having greater or lesser impact on national policy production in education. For example, in writing about developing countries, Stewart (1996) distinguishes between ‘virtuous and vicious cycles of development’ in different countries in the context of globalisation. Nor does globalisation entirely determine how nation states relate to their awareness of its salience. Waters (1995, p.3) observes that in a way globalisation can be regarded as ‘the direct consequence of the expansion of European cultures across the world via settlement, colonisation and cultural mimesis’, though it is also linked to the development of global capitalism and the global economy. This does not imply that the entire globe has or must become capitalistic or Westernised, but it does suggest that all spheres of social life must establish their position ‘in relation to the capitalist West’ (Waters 1995, p.3). Western capitalism has become a reference point against which nation states entertain their policy options. Of course, the manner in which different nation states relativise their policies and cultural practices to globalising trends varies enormously, depending on their specific histories, political institutions, cultural traditions and the economic constraints within which they operate. The mode of this relativisation cannot therefore be stated in any a priori manner, and must be investigated empirically, to achieve a picture of the ways the local and the global articulate each other generally and specifically within education.

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Stewart

