

Neil Hrab on the soft anti-Americanism of the International Network on Cultural Policy

Canada and China Versus America

Riots, vandalism, raucous protests — we're all familiar with hard-edged displays of anti-Americanism abroad these days. But this pernicious envy also takes other forms. Not all of them involve demonstrators screaming slogans or throwing stones, nor do they all take place in the street. This "soft" anti-Americanism rarely makes the headlines. Let's take a look at one such case.

An alliance of about 60 governments called the International Network on Cultural Policy will meet in Shanghai, China, in October to denounce freer trade in cultural products, such as films, books, and television programs. The International Network claims that freer trade in such items hurts "local and national cultures." The group takes a zero-sum view of trade in cultural items: A greater influx of foreign — read: American — cultural products into a given country crowds out the "space for domestic cultural expression." The network was founded in 1998, and operates out of Canada's Ministry of Culture.

In reality, the International Network on Cultural Policy wants to preserve its member governments' ability to protect domestic cultural producers from foreign competition. Some network members want the organization to encourage its member states to limit the entry of American cultural products — such as movies and music — into their markets.

To that end, the International Network is working to enact a global "cultural diversity" convention by 2005 to make it impossible to contest cultural protectionist policies in future global trade talks. The convention will be discussed at length in Shanghai. New Yorkers should note that the International Network on Cultural Policy has the United Nations's blessing in this effort. The U.N.'s Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization is working to build support for the convention. That's a strange way for Unesco to welcome America, which recently rejoined the body after a 20-year absence, back into its fold. But let that pass for now.

Studying some of the International Network on Cultural Policy's more prominent members can give us an idea of what forms cultural protectionism can take. Let's begin with France. France maintains quotas and restrictions that, according to the United States Trade Representative's office, bar many French television viewers from seeing many American programs. France also limits the amount of American music French radio listeners can hear. In 2003, just before an International Network meeting in Paris, President Chirac blasted "champions of unlimited trade liberalization" — again, read: Americans — for trying to force-feed cultural products "pre-formatted for the masses" to global consumers.

This fear of too much American culture is particularly pronounced in Canada, where the government mandates a required minimum of government-certified "Canadian" broadcast content.

As Kim Campbell, formerly the Canadian

prime minister, put it, "Images of America are so pervasive" around the world "that it is almost as if instead of the world immigrating to America, America has immigrated to the world, allowing people to aspire to be Americans even in their distant cultures."

Now, is it really a problem if consumers around the world enjoy Hollywood movies over domestically produced fare? Viewed through the International Network on Cultural Policy's zero-sum prism, a Frenchman who watches Hollywood blockbusters more often than French dramas injures his French identity by doing so. The same goes for a Canadian woman who prefers watching reruns of "Seinfeld" and "Everybody Loves Raymond" rather than the Canadian comedy program "SCTV." The International Network on Cultural Policy seems to be saying that consumers cannot be trusted, so governments need to keep them from absorbing too much American popular culture.

More ominously, authoritarian governments could use the proposed convention to justify censorship. Last May, for example, the communist Chinese government told broadcasters to reject any content that promotes Western values and lifestyles. An overly loose cultural diversity convention could allow the Chinese government to frame such directives as measures aimed to "protect" the local culture rather than to stifle dissent.

How can American policy makers take on the International Network on Cultural Policy's challenge?

They could start by pointing out the wider implications for international trade should the network's brand of cultural protectionism catch on. By declaring that "cultural products" cannot be treated like "commodities," the convention would set an ominous precedent for future trade talks by taking an entire industry off the table. This could then expand to other sectors, with dire consequences.

For example, if a cultural protectionist convention succeeds, it may embolden European governments who want to shield their farmers from competition to employ a similar gambit to take agricultural goods off the table for future trade negotiations. This would seriously hurt the world's poor by shutting Third World farmers out of Western markets.

America could reconsider its decision to rejoin Unesco. President Reagan abandoned the agency in the mid-1980s, disgusted with its flagrant anti-Americanism. If Unesco wants to push for a global cultural protectionist convention, that's its prerogative. But if it does, the organization should not expect America to remain a member, or American taxpayers to send it so much as a dime.

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