CHAPTER 29. Globalization of Culture

Popular and Folk Culture

Within the broad context of cultural geography, writers have struggled to deal with the difference between modern urban culture, which is highly changeable and influenced by technological developments, and the traditional, long standing customs of populations which are only minimally affected by urbanization. As a result, human geography in the 1990s began to focus in on the new subfield of cultural geography, which explores the contrasts between "folk" culture and "popular" culture. These terms are somewhat problematic because they ignore the issue of mass culture (or the culture of the masses) and what is sometimes called high or elite culture. In some writings, popular culture is thought to be a protest against the mass culture which is produced by the elite for the middle-class. These politicized views of the distinctions between popular, folk, mass, and elite culture engage scholars from a wide range of disciplines. Geographers have played a role in these discussions, but most human geography books ignore the issues of class related to the development of cultures and focus instead on the differences between folk and popular culture.

Folk culture is defined as traditional practices held by small homogenous groups typically living in isolated areas. Popular culture, on the other hand, is found in large heterogeneous societies that share certain habits and customs.

Geographers typically ask two basic questions for both folk and popular cultures: What is the origin and what is the diffusion of folk and popular culture? Folk cultures generally have anonymous locations. Their practices are so deeply embedded in the culture that it is hard to know when and where things developed. In contrast, popular culture is generally well documented because it is so new. Its origins are often in wealthy countries such as Japan and those of North America and western Europe. The usual examples of popular culture refer to clothing, music, and foods. Much, if not all, of popular culture refers to leisure time and the growing affluence of the world's population.

The cultural trait of music shows interesting variations. We can think of folk music, popular music, and artistic or academic/classical music. Classical music is not discussed in geography textbooks, but there are many discussions of popular and folk music.

The boundaries between folk and popular music are vague. In the United States, country music — which is said to have originated in the Ozark Uplands and the Appalachian Mountains in middle Tennessee and Kentucky lowlands — is an example of how folk music was commercialized, standardized, and made into popular music. Popular music is music written by specific individuals for the purpose of being sold to a large number of people. Accordingly, country music fits the definition of popular music, although frequently it makes use of traditional themes, tunes, and story lines. Popular music is relatively new (since approximately 1900 in Europe and North America) and its continuing evolution reflects the influences of various populations.

Folk cultures are promoted by isolation. The physical can provide barriers to movement and themes for stories and songs. It also dictates some food preferences and dress patterns. Folk housing is also an important part of the cultural landscape, and it has attracted the attention of many geographers over the years. It is difficult to study folk housing in the United States because the rapid industrialization of society very quickly standardized building types and building materials. Even so, geographers have shown interest in the traditional house types that originated on the eastern seaboard and diffused westward.

Popular culture is also important when discussing housing, food, and clothing styles, although it is difficult to gather comprehensive data on these practices. Folk culture is threatened by popular culture. Popular culture is spreading around the world. Carried by television and other forms of media, it has penetrated formerly isolated locations in the world. In the United States and western Europe, the many critics of the diffusion of popular culture decry the homogenization and power of the culture that they are a part of. They complain about the uniform landscapes created by popular culture. Architectural taste is criticized by writers and scholars. They heartily dislike the fast-food culture that characterizes popular culture. Many environmentalists are concerned that the material needs of popular culture will put greater demand on the earth's resources. In the last fifty years, it is youth who have been the primary focus and carriers of popular culture. Most of the students in an AP Human Geography course will be part of the popular culture and will certainly have opinions they would like to share with each other.
KEY POINTS

1. Cultures have affected one another throughout history, but the extent and scale of interaction has greatly increased over the past century.

2. The globalization of culture has eroded the distinction between folk culture and popular culture while fostering the development of new identity communities that cut across traditional cultural lines.

3. Cultural products produced in a small number of places exert an influence greatly disproportionate to their size, but the geographic pattern of this influence is highly uneven.

4. Economic and cultural globalization are closely linked, and that link has increasingly led cultural products to be seen as commodities to be bought and sold (commodification).

5. The twin impacts of economic and cultural globalization make it increasingly important to see individual places not in isolation but in relationship to other places and to processes unfolding at extra-local scales.

6. The globalization of culture has threatened distinctiveness of individual places, leading to efforts to protect endogenous cultural products.