

Cultural homogenisation in the city

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Abstract

Cultural homogenisation has been the major concern in the city as the local culture is prone to be undermined by more powerful, such as globally more dominant cultures (Ritzer, 2010). Indeed, while this topic has been extensively treated by the academic literature, notably described by such theories as McDonaldisation theory, Globalisation and Americanisation, a unified approach that informs on the factors that trigger cultural homogenisation is missing. In particular, despite the recognition that various factors underpin cultural homogenisation, the literature focuses on parochial viewpoint clusters, usually concentrated on the role of *communication technology* or the mode of *governance*. As such, the purpose of this paper is to explore the drivers of cultural homogenisation with a view to bridging these two concepts through a focused analysis of the enhanced interaction between cultures on the one hand, and the current shift toward entrepreneurial modes of governance of the city on the other. Specifically, this paper examines the intersections of two viewpoints in the effort to make a case for the growth of the city without the convergence of the cultures.

I. Introduction

As the long history of the discussion of culture in academia has shown, a general consensus on the definition of “culture” is

impractical, with more than 150 alternative definitions identified by researchers and scholars (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). The elements composing cultures are generally intractable: beliefs, patterns of behaviour, meaning and art can be notoriously difficult to pin down, let alone be defined. As such, the term “culture” will be used in this paper “to indicate the set of individual attributes that are subject to social influence” (Axelrod 1997).

It can be easily argued that any modern city epitomises a fundamental manifestation of the culture in which it is located. As an intrinsic feature, a culture, therefore, serves to “distinguish[es] the members of one group or society or category or nation from another” (Hofstede, 1980), and can become a defining character to any given city. Conversely, city culture has been evolving through the interaction, in fact, competition with other cultures. As the frequency and possibility to interact with other cultures increases, it seems that local cultures in the city tend to become absorbed or at least converged to more homogenous culture. Indeed, the influence of other cultures can be easily observed in the city. The convergence becomes manifest in behavioural trends: more and more people purchase the same product, listen to the similar music and wear the global brand clothes (Prasad, 2006). Notably, among the extensive academic investigation of cultural homogenisation, Hassi and Storti (2012) proposed possible scenarios for the emerging cultural patterns resulting from the

globalisation. Matei (2006) has elaborated on the underlying process paying more attention to the impact of the advent of telecommunication technology. Ritzer (2010), on the other hand, argued that the removal of the barriers that prevent the flow of the cultural information is a factor that leads to the cultural homogenisation. However, while most of the research repeatedly associates the advancement of communication technology with the driver of cultural homogenisation, the important shift of the governance in the city that arguably contributes to cultural homogenisation has seemingly been underrated. Thus, this paper synthesises the relative literature to examine the drivers of the cultural homogenisation from both perspectives.

Section II explores the interaction between different cultures and the emergent patterns of the cultural groups with the particular experiment by means of agent based model. In section III, the political-economic driver of the cultural homogenisation is discussed with a focus on the marketing of the place among the public sector. Finally, the integrated view from the two drivers are drawn out as conclusions, and the possible solutions to sustain the growth of the city whilst preserving the local cultures is provided.

II. Social influence as a driver

As a key driver, technological advancement eliminated the traditional barriers in the communication and the transportation, thus enabling more interactions between the communities (Ritzer, 2010). However, while the exchanges of the goods and services is described as improved, the ensuing dilution of local cultures have raised attention (Berger, 2002). This becomes all the more obvious in the argument that the interplay of world culture with local cultures is one of domination and near-alteration (Held and

McGrew, 2003), to the extent that the unique cultural experience in the city could become eroded. To make things worse, it has become apparent that each culture is not equally disseminated, with more powerful cultures in America and the western countries dominating the world, often subsumed under the banner of “globalisation”. Jaja (2011) suggests that the world is experiencing Americanisation, instead of globalisation, through the domination of the media and the penetration of American company in the world. In addition, across the whole nations of the world, “the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society and the world” (Ritzer, 2010)

The spread of the cultures has been extensively researched in other disciplines and contexts. Social scientists modelled the dissemination of knowledge (Carley, 1991), the diffusion of social norms (Lewis, 1967) and the spread of innovations (Rogers, 1983) in the community. Psychologists have also studied social influence in the society. Marsden and Friedkin (1993) explored “social foundations for influence” that “provide a basis for the alteration of an attitude or behaviour by one network” (Marsden and McBurnett 1993). Tellingly, anthropologists have suggested that the cultures can be treated as symbolic systems with which people transmit their experience (Geertz, 1973). Finally, biologists have extrapolated the concept of “meme” to serve as an analogy of genes to describe elements of cultures. Dawkins suggested that “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.”). Although various models are suggested, these models assumed that agents are equally likely to be influenced by

other agents, which do not fully capture the nature of the interaction between culturally different entities.

Agent based model

Axelrod (1997) attempted to model human interaction and cultural dissemination, with the particular focus on the fact that the possibility of the interaction between humans increase when they are culturally similar. To formalise the dissemination of cultures, computer simulations have been widely adopted. In the experiment, culture is assumed to be described as several factors such as religions, languages and the outfit. Thereafter, individual entity is modelled as an agent that possesses a set of cultural attributes, and the emergent cultural patterns in the fictional geographic environment is observed through the event of interaction between agents. Agents interact with neighbouring agents based on the similarity of their cultural factors. Each cultural factor is described by a digit. In the experiment, an agent possess five cultural factors and each of them is described by 10 degrees. Thus, a agent's cultural character is described, for example, [2, 4, 5, 3, 6]. And if the neighbouring agent's cultural property is [2, 7, 5, 4, 2], the similarity of the culture between these two agents are computed as 40% since they share two same properties out of five attributes of the culture. In this case, the interaction occurs for 40 %. And when it does, one attribute out of the three differing property is randomly selected, then changed to the neighbour's trait on this feature. Thereafter, the similarity of the two cultures increase from 40% to 60% as now the agents share three out of five cultural factors. Through the experiment, Axelrod found that the number of the unique cultures decrease with the number of attributes, and increase with the number of alternative traits. This suggest that the culture is preserved when

there is less properties in the culture and more alternatives in each factor. Most importantly, despite the trend of the convergence, the dissemination of the culture stops before reaching the entire homogenisation. This implies that the difference of the cultures will continue to exist, even after the intense interaction of different cultures. The influence of the other cultures will be observed, but the complete assimilation of the cultures will unlikely happen. Similarly, Smith (2003) argues that the other cultures influence culture only superficially, where the rooted cultures are preserved. Furthermore, Tomlinson (2003) argues that the interaction with other cultures can translate counter-intuitively to the inverse effect of the convergence of the cultures, pointing out that people realise more deeply the uniqueness of their own culture in the society through the access to different cultures.

While the agent can only interact with neighbouring agents in the proposed experiment, the advent of communication technology may enable the agents to interact with a wider range of culturally different agents. In such a case, one might assume that the possibility of convergence increases as it makes it easier for the powerful cultures to reach local ones. However, as the agents interact with similar cultures, the access to more options of cultures will most likely enable agents to select whom to interact with, and consequently not yield a straight convergence of cultures, but instead gives rise to the possibility of less homogenised culture but more diverse patterns of cultures (Axelrod, 1997). Considering the current city, the boundary between different cities are not based on the geographical proximities, rather on the international relations, or perhaps the resemblance of the cultures.

III. Entrepreneurial city as a driver

The equally important driver of the cultural homogenisation is the current shift of the governance of the city toward what is called “entrepreneurial city” (Harvey, 1989). While public sectors used to deal with the rigid divisions that do not involve risks, they have shifted their characters towards more initiative, collaborating with private sectors (Hall and Hubbard, 1996). The difference between the public sectors and the private sectors are blurred, and economic development is prioritised in the governance. On the one hand, the economic competitiveness in the city is promoted through the entrepreneurial mode of the governance (Jessop and Sum, 2000). However, on the other hand, such acknowledgement of a city as “growth machine” (Harvey 1976) may enable dominant business groups to control the policies, and the marginal voice tends to be excluded (Sadler, 1993). Specifically, increasing budget is allocated to “place marketing” (Paddison, 1993) to attract global investment. More and more cities construct “facsimile culture” (Cusick 1990) to attract visitors from abroad. In the entrepreneurial mode of the governance, the city cultures are largely determined by the global economic trend, and “every day” cultures are seemingly thrown up (Jackson, 1991).

Place marketing in Toronto

The place marketing of the city is exemplified in the McClinchey’s (2008) case study, in which ethnic neighbourhood in the city of Toronto and their ethnic festivals are investigated. The areas are designated as Toronto Association Business Improvement Areas (TABIA). TABIA is a non-profit organisation that “represent more than 40,000 business & property owners”, with the official approval of the city of Toronto (Toronto

Association of Business Improvement Areas [TABIA], 2007–2010). TABIA organises ethnical festivals to promote the businesses in the district and to revitalise the local community. For example, Wexford Heights is located in the east end of Toronto, and the area has been well known for frequent incidents relating to violence. To improve the image of the area and attract more visitors, TABIA organised an ethnic festival, Taste of Lawrence Festival in 2007, to introduce the local cuisine to people from abroad. At the same time, TABIA has held First Annual Salad Festival in Wexford Heights. The latter event aimed to be the world largest salad event, and sponsored by multiple politicians and business men. As a result, the First Annual Salad Festival was featured in multiple media and attracted a large number of visitors. McClinchey (2008) argues that the First Annual Salad Festival “overshadowed” the Taste of Lawrence Festival. As the advertising and the commodification of the place may lead to the homogenisation of the place (Britton, 1991), “the events should, however, be consistent with the destinations overall image and cultural heritage” (Pugh and Wood, 2004, p. 65).

To combat such entrepreneurial strategies of the governance, various oppositional groups are formed (Lees and Melhuish, 2015). The diverse approach has been taken to express the importance of socially excluded groups in order to preserve the local cultures in the city (Rose, 1992). “The nature, scope and organisation of oppositional groups have been similarly diverse, ranging from well organised and funded groups such as Birmingham for People to more specialised interest groups such as Worker’s City in Glasgow” (Hall and Hubbard, 1996). This includes the proposal of the public policy, demonstrations, and pickets (Brownhill, 1993). Specifically, the role of the art has raised attention as a way to “take part and

help shape the relics of their city (and society) as well as their locality” (Catterall, 1998). In contrast to the entrepreneurial mode of the governance, it is important to note that there is a trend in the governance that encourages the inclusive culture rather than advertised cultures that are designed to appeal to promote the economic competitiveness of the city.

IV. Conclusion

This paper investigated the degree of the cultural homogenisation derived from the advent of the communication technology and the entrepreneurial strategy of governance. The agent-based computer simulation demonstrated that, while the dissemination of the culture proceeds to a certain level through the interaction between culturally different agents, the original attributes of the culture continue to exist. In addition, as one tends to select culturally similar entities to interact (Axelrod 1997), the advanced communication technology has possibly alleviated the tendency of the convergence of the culture by providing us more options of the different entities to interact with. The future step is to measure the effect of the communication technology on the cultural homogenisation through agent based model. On the other hand, the impact of the entrepreneurial mode of the governance on the cultural convergence has been assessed. As shown in the case study of Toronto, the excessive extent of place marketing can potentially lead to the standardisation of the city culture. Nevertheless, “the hegemony of the urban regime is never complete, but is always contested” (Hall and Hubbard, 1996), with the oppositional group attempting to provide the coherent view of the place that reflects the “every day cultures” (Jackson, 1991) of the city. However, the effort of the oppositional groups has been underrated as it is very

difficult to assess if their activity contributes to the revitalisation of the local cultures in the city. To sustain their activities, we need “a robust evidence base, including artists, local communities and policy-makers” (Lees and Melhuish, 2015).

As the investigation of two drivers of cultural homogenisation illustrate, the interaction of different cultures will lead to the partial integration of these cultures rather than the complete elimination of either culture. Thus, the city does not need to shut off from the rest of the world, for fear of the cultural homogenisation. Instead, each city needs to admit the difference between the cultures in the other cities, and interpret and learn from them, while carefully maintaining the rooted cultural elements. At the same time, as the shallow understanding of the culture may lead to the fundamentally similar local events, irrelevant to the location of the city, the international investors ought to comprehend the complexity and the importance of the local cultures when sponsoring the events. In summary, the advanced communication technology and the entrepreneurial mode of the governance can counter-intuitively produce more refined cultures in the city by enabling more access to different cultures, not to mention the social and economic competitiveness.

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