COMMODIFICATION AND CREATIVITY: A REVIEW OF TYLER COWEN'S *CREATIVE DESTRUCTION*

Dustin Kidd

Dustin Kidd is a dissertation fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Virginia. His dissertation examines controversies surrounding government funding for the arts, through the lens of democratic political philosophy.

Tyler Cowen. *Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing the World's Cultures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

IF THE "COMMODIFICATION OF EVERYTHING" INVOKES the question of the limits of capitalism, then surely we must include an examination of the cultural marketplace. The question has been gaining considerable attention in the academic world, as seen in the publication of such studies as Victoria Alexander's *Museums and Money* and Chin-tao Wu's *Privatising Culture.*[1] Tyler Cowen's *Creative Destruction* offers one of the few perspectives that celebrate the market while also taking culture seriously. He defends the cross-cultural market by arguing that it actually encourages and generates creativity and has historically produced new, and now celebrated, cultural forms.

[1] Victoria D Alexander, *Museums and Money: The Impact of Funding on Exhibitions, Scholarship, and Management* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); and Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s* (London: Verso, 2002).

Creative Destruction moves the discussion of cultural globalization away from the hypothetical "what might happen to the world's cultures on the marketplace?" to the empirical "what has happened in practice?" Cowen's case studies are carefully documented and empirically sound. They are also fascinating to read about, making this a book that even Cowen's strongest critics will value.

While the book opens with a series of vignettes illustrating the cultural conflicts that result from global markets (including Haiti's perceived musical imperialism in the Caribbean and French fears of American cinema) and while Cowen acknowledges the harmful potential of global markets, such as the cultural devastation that resulted from Western intervention in Polynesia, he emphasizes that global markets have produced a great surge of liberty for those who participate in them. Our cultural participation is no longer limited to local music and arts; indeed, we increasingly participate in cultural forms that originate in far-distant areas of the world. To make this "gains from trade" (12) argument, Cowen highlights three crucial but overlooked points about global markets. First, he identifies two contradictory meanings of the concept "cultural diversity": diversity within a society and diversity across societies. The former, Cowen says, often comes at the price of the latter. A global market increases diversity within participating countries while producing a relative homogeneity across the market. Second, this homogenization goes hand in hand with heterogenization. Mass markets have had the surprising effect of producing niche markets. Third, global markets spark creativity and produce innovation, even in the face of their destructive capacities. As Cowen says, "the 'creative destruction' of the market is, in surprising ways, *artistic* in the most literal sense" (18).

His third claim illustrates the sociological principle that creativity begins when isolation ends (suggested by Howard Becker,[2] among others), despite our widely held Emersonian assumption that the artist must escape the world to find her muse. As globalization ends isolation,

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2 Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

"art networks" emerge with the aid of both wealth and technology. The dynamism of global markets increases the likelihood of an alignment of creative, economic, and technological factors that generate new art forms.

The dance music of Zaire provides an interesting example of this dynamic. This twentieth-century musical form is the product not of ancient Zairean traditions, but of the 1920s' emergence of modern cities that served as market centers for mining, railroad, and military industries. The influx of workers from across Africa, and around the world, influenced these new musical forms, as did the introduction of radio and tourism in the 1950s. The point is that creative forms develop from cross-cultural interaction—particularly market-based interaction, because of the market's provision of wealth and technology. This wealth and technology also allow for the preservation of cultural heritage—a relatively new cultural endeavor—so that both old and new cultural forms may benefit.

While many cross-cultural markets have generated creativity, others have resulted in what Cowen terms the "destruction of ethos" (47) effect in that they have been largely detrimental for at least one of the participating societies. Cowen begins from the claim that each society has a unique spirit and a unique worldview. Interaction of these spirits and worldviews in the global marketplace can strengthen the development and preservation of some, while destroying others outright. Invoking Hegel's notion that "the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk," Cowen outlines the "Minerva Model" of cultural confrontation in the market where inter-cultural activity produces a short-lived creativity followed by the death of an ethos—a problem acutely faced by poorer societies as they interact in the marketplace with wealthier ones. Hawaii, for instance, experienced a cultural boom thanks to trans-Pacific activity in the late 19th century, only to be overrun by mainland American ideals by the mid-20th century. But the process that destroys an ethos can, according to Cowen, also produce new ways of thinking about the world and can transform existing worldviews.

To illustrate that cross-cultural marketplaces are due their proper respect, Cowen takes Hollywood's relationship to the global film industry as a case study. Hollywood has been vilified by cultural diplomats around the world for using its economic power to drive out the cinema of other nations. Cowen defends Hollywood on a number of grounds. First, he points out that film, as a cultural form, depends upon the clustering of large art networks and diverse technological capacities. Therefore, it is no surprise that cinema will emanate from cultural centers like Hollywood, rather than being equally produced in all locales. Second, Cowen argues that Hollywood's cultural potency is the result of genuine creative innovation, and not of economic monopoly. Third, he demonstrates that the clustering of film benefits not only the blockbuster, but also the small art house film. When the resources, staff, and technology that are required to produce a film are clustered in one location, then the costs of making an independent film is lower in that location, despite the fact that the dominant production houses—those known for making blockbusters—are also found there. Finally, Cowen defends Hollywood by drawing attention to other successful cinema clusters, such as Hong Kong and Paris.

Cowen insists that, contrary to the claims of their critics, cross-cultural markets do not produce a "dumbing down" effect. Global markets do, he acknowledges, suffer from the problem of translation. Indian filmmakers, for instance, favor action films because they translate better than other genres across the varieties of Indian cultures. Cultural producers will disfavor nuanced films that require audience members to share the same subtleties of humor, irony, or politics. But cross-cultural markets also have the best resources and technology for responding to the demands of niche audiences. Cowen refers to these niche groups as "hobbyists" in that, far from exemplifying an audience in need of dumbed-down material, they are experts at particular cultural forms with high demands for quality and technical superiority, as well as high expectations for variety. While Cowen acknowledges that many cultural forms, such as the Hollywood blockbuster, do appeal to the lowest common denominator, the big picture of global culture is one of innovation and diversity.

Cowen closes the book by warning against the impulse to solidify cultural boundaries and close cross-cultural markets. This tendency is exemplified most famously in France's sanctions against non-French films, sanctions that exist primarily to prevent French cinemas from being overrun by Hollywood blockbusters. Cowen concludes that such moves would lead to cultural isolation, which might mean the death, rather than the preservation, of national cultural forms. Globalization, he feels, enhances diversity while also enhancing liberty: "Cross-cultural trade does not eliminate difference altogether, but, rather, it liberates difference from the constraints of place" (129). Liberty, diversity, and creativity are all, according to Cowen, enhanced by the cross-cultural market.

Cowen's analysis deserves particular credit for liberating the discussion of culture from the issue of authenticity, that is, from the assumption that culture is made in one moment and encounters the world in the next. In particular, the cultural sphere has often been thought of as being isolated from the economic sphere, as if capital somehow taints culture. Cowen reminds us that cultural forms are produced within the social world from an engagement with the market, and not in some anti-social, or asocial, moment of isolation. This recognition forces us to contend with the market as a constitutive element of culture. In other words, instead of trying to retrieve a mythical, market-free culture, we can turn our attention to the ways that the market and culture are interrelated and to possible variations of or modifications to that relation.

But this is one area where Cowen falls short. He acknowledges that global markets lead sometimes to cultural flourishing and sometimes to the death of a cultural ethos, but he offers no analysis of which market conditions produce which results. If we know that global markets can produce both favorable and unfavorable results, we should want to steer the market so that the favorable results are more likely to occur. The absence of this line of analysis is likely due to Cowen's libertarian leanings. As a libertarian, he avoids any argument that could result in some form of market regulation. He wants most of all to convince us that markets can generate creativity. Acknowledging that they sometimes do quite the opposite serves rhetorically to convince us of his thoroughness. The idea that we could control the market in such a way as to avoid or lessen cultural deterioration—an idea that seems logical after reading Cowen's thorough analysis—violates the ideals of libertarianism because this control would require regulatory practices.

On a similar note, the book also under-theorizes the activities of cultural corporations. Indeed, after reading this book, one would think that music and film are brought into a literal marketplace by itinerant merchants, rather than being distributed in the varieties of markets that consist of stores, street vendors, catalogs, the internet, and cultural events by large multi-national conglomerates. Disney, Viacom, AOL Time Warner, News Corp, and Universal Vivendi control nearly all commercial cultural production in the United States and are huge players across the globe, yet Cowen never mentions them. A complete examination of culture's vitality in the marketplace needs to look not just at the cultural product that is being sold, but also at the sellers themselves. What are their interests and how do these interests shape the creativity-generating character of the cultural marketplace?

Despite these critiques, Cowen's argument has set a new standard for the cultural globalization discussion. His detractors will have to contend with the weight and scope of his evidence. This book should lead to more nuanced theories of globalization as well as more nuanced defenses for the preservation of cultural identities. What exactly is the French ethos that might disappear if American movies are introduced in Paris? How widely shared is this ethos and is it really as fixed as French cultural diplomats suggest? This book is not so much an analysis of the commodification of culture, as it is a revelation that culture generates from other commodification processes. Coffee production in Latin America and mining in Zaire are not the results of *cultural* commodification, but they are forms of capitalism that generated new and important forms of culture that are now reaching a worldwide audience thanks to the same global market dynamics from which they sprang.