

CULTURAL DIFFUSION AND CONVERGENCE

- A. Processes of spatial exchange, or **diffusion**, have influenced events in the past and continue to shape the present.
- B. During the **Columbian Exchange**, new plants, animals, ideas and even diseases were exchanged between the peoples of the Americas and those of Europe, Asia and Africa. More recently, aspects of American popular culture have spread throughout the world. Such spatial diffusions have affected regions of contact.
- C. **Cultural divergence** occurs when different cultural influences cause an area to divide into separate parts. **Cultural convergence** occurs when different cultures exchange ideas and become more similar.
- D. **Cultural diffusion** today is leading to **cultural convergence** on a global scale, creating a common global culture. This can be seen in the spread of democratic ideas, the English language, technology, and global sports.

A thousand years ago, separate cultural regions thrived in the Americas, the Middle East, Europe, India, China and Sub-Saharan Africa. These independent regions often had very little contact or communication with one another, or none at all.

Various elements of culture — including food, clothing, shelter, religious beliefs, and technology — were then quite different in each part of the world. Today, developments in one region often spread quickly to other areas of the world, creating more similarities.

Diffusion refers to how something *diffuses* or spreads. A drop of ink, for example, will spread through a glass of water until the ink and water blend into a single mixture. Plants, animals, goods and ideas are all capable of diffusing in new regions or cultures.

Geographers and historians are especially concerned with the patterns that such diffusion takes. They look at the spread of a phenomenon, the speed of its diffusion, the path it takes, and the effects it has on various regions of contact. As with migration, features of physical geography may pose natural barriers preventing or slowing down diffusion.

Let's examine some of the ways in which cultural diffusion takes place:

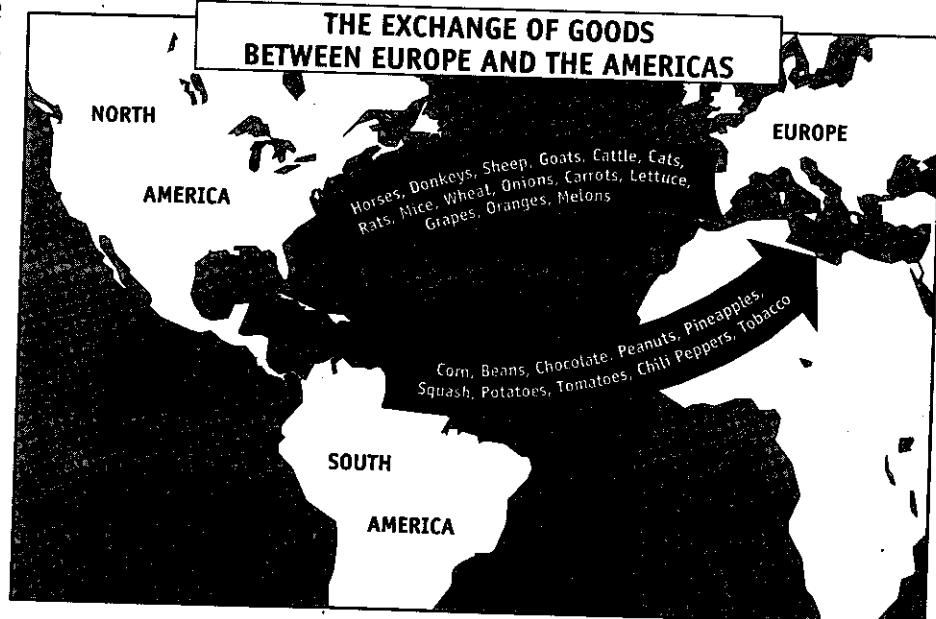
THE SPREAD OF NEW PRODUCTS

Sometimes contact between two different cultures leads to an exchange of products. Travelers and merchants bring the new products back to their homelands. Use of these new products quickly spreads, stimulating trade. People demand more of the product, and merchants compete to obtain it. Other people will try to produce the good locally to meet the rising demand.

Trade Along the Silk Road. For example, Middle Eastern and Roman merchants established overland trade with ancient China along the Silk Road. Over this route, Chinese silk was introduced to Europe. Romans had never encountered a material as fine and smooth as Chinese silk. Previously, Romans had only worn wool, linen or cotton. Silk quickly became a symbol of wealth and high status in elite Roman society. The Silk Road also saw the exchange of chariots, languages, and metallurgy. In particular, the Chinese traded silks for horses and camels for use by their armies to prevent foreign invasions.

CASE STUDY: The Columbian Exchange

European and Native American cultures encountered each other for the first time in 1492. This encounter, referred to as the Columbian Exchange, led to the introduction of new products to both cultures. Europeans brought horses, goats, cattle, pigs, chickens, wheat, and goods like cannons, crossbows and steel



to the Americas. At the same time, Native Americans had developed many foods unknown to Europeans. An important result of the encounter was that the European diet was greatly improved by the introduction of new foods such as tomatoes, chocolate, potatoes, beans, peppers, pumpkins, squash, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and corn. Europeans also learned how to smoke tobacco.

CASE STUDY: Chinese Inventions Foster European Exploration

At the time of the Middle Ages in Europe, China developed gunpowder, the compass, and printing. European merchants like Marco Polo brought news of these inventions back to Europe. Borrowing from the Chinese, Europeans copied these products. They used gunpowder to construct cannons and adapted the compass to improve their seafaring skills. These Chinese inventions later allowed the rulers of Spain and Portugal to launch voyages of exploration across the Atlantic Ocean.



Marco Polo was 17 when he left Venice with his father and uncle for China. This illustration shows their arrival in China.

The Spread of New Technologies. Today, the spread of new products is especially rapid. People learn of new products through travel, newspapers, television, and telephone conversations. For example, personal computers did not exist before the 1980s. They were first developed in the United States, but they quickly spread throughout the world.

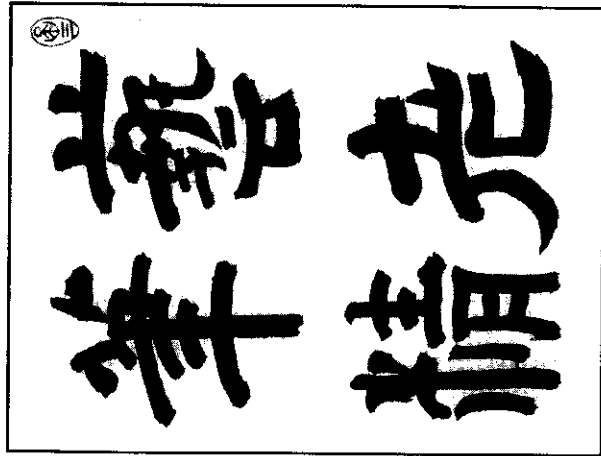
Even more recently, scientists and engineers developed cellular (*mobile*) phones. These have spread rapidly even to less developed nations, which lack enough telephone cables for landline telephones. In just a few years, cellular phones have spread from America, Japan, and Europe to every region of the world.

THE SPREAD OF NEW IDEAS

Contacts between different cultures can also lead to important exchanges of ideas. Religious beliefs, political ideas (*like democracy*) and other ideas often spread from one culture to another. The great world religions all spread from their places of origin to neighboring areas. Islam, for example, arose on the Arabian Peninsula. Arab peoples then brought Islam to the rest of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain. Later, Islam spread to parts of South and Southeast Asia.

CASE STUDY: The Spread of Chinese Culture

Japan's location close to China brought many aspects of Chinese culture to Japan. For example, Japan's rulers claimed to be absolute emperors, like those of China. Buddhism and Confucianism also came from China and interacted with Japanese beliefs to create new values and beliefs. Confucianism taught loyalty to the ruler, while Buddhism taught the Japanese to reject selfish desires. Japan also adapted Chinese characters to create their own written language. Chinese music, art, pottery, weaving, and cooking further influenced Japanese styles and tastes.

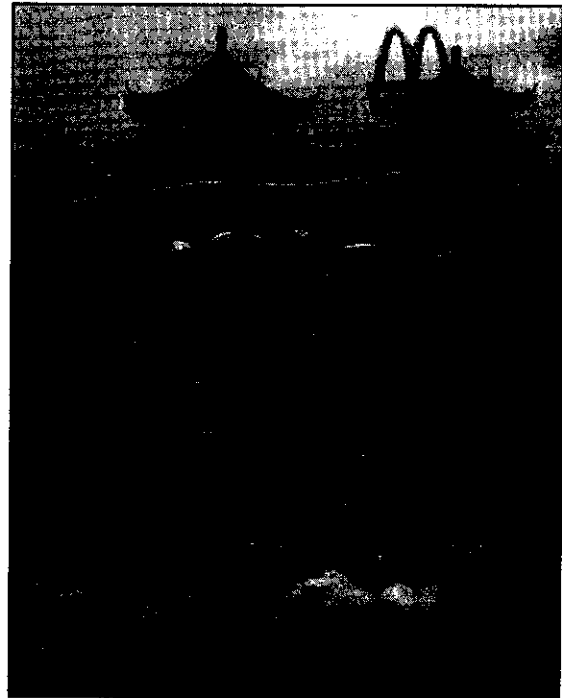


China greatly influenced Japan's writing and other aspects of Japanese culture.

Even such elements of culture as clothing fashions, art styles, ways of cooking food, and music can spread from one region to another. Walk down the streets of any American city and you might find Italian and Chinese restaurants or women wearing shoes based on styles from Europe.

CASE STUDY: The Global Reach of American Popular Culture

American culture is a product of many influences, including those from Native American, English, French, Spanish, African, Asian, and other cultures. In the early 20th century, a vibrant American culture emerged with new technologies, like the radio, record player, moving picture, and television. After World War II, American popular music and movies became popular in Europe and later spread to every continent. Today, people throughout the world see American movies and television programs, dance to American "pop" music, and use English as an international second language. Many wear American casual dress styles, such as tee shirts with logos, and large numbers even eat at American fast-food franchises, like McDonald's and Taco Bell. American artists like Michael Jackson and Lady Gaga are international icons, known in almost every corner of the world.



A McDonald's restaurant in the heart of Beijing, China.

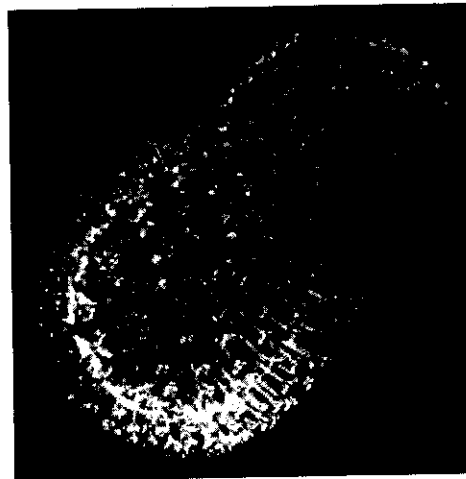
We often think of the diffusion of a new phenomenon as beneficial, but it can sometimes have negative effects. One example of this is the spread of new diseases from one culture to another. The disease diffuses as the microorganisms that cause the disease are spread.

Today, we live in an increasingly interconnected world. People travel more than ever on airlines that reach every corner of the globe. In addition, our global food supply plays a role in the spread of disease. Mass production and the global distribution of foods make it easier for some illnesses to spread.

New diseases are therefore emerging at an unprecedented rate. Often they have an ability to cross borders rapidly and spread from one country to another. Some scientists fear a **pandemic flu**, a new strain of influenza that might lead to a global **pandemic** (*an epidemic over a wide geographic area*).

CASE STUDY: The Avian Flu Threat

In 2004, a serious threat of pandemic occurred. An **avian flu** virus was detected in birds in Vietnam. The virus that causes this infection in birds can mutate (*change*) to infect humans, who have no immunity against it. It was feared that this virus in birds might combine with a human flu virus, leading to a highly contagious and deadly outbreak. At first, it appeared that this would indeed occur. In 2005, cases of avian flu (*H5N1*) were identified in Turkey, Russia, Mongolia and China. Cases were also later identified in Romania, Greece, Croatia, Bulgaria and the United Kingdom. Fortunately, fears of a global pandemic, which might have killed millions of people, were not realized.



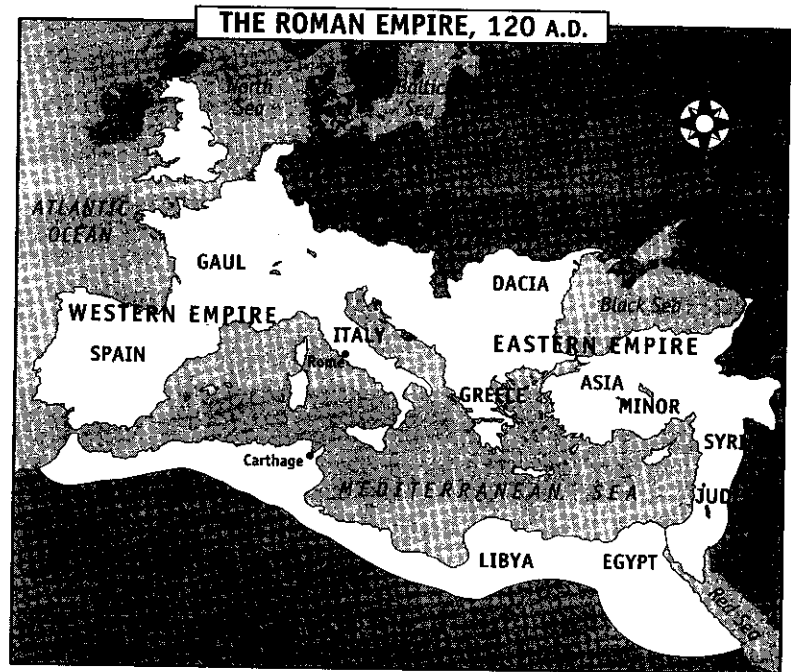
The H5N1 Avian flu virus under high magnification.

Cultural diffusion can play an important role in both **cultural divergence** and **cultural convergence**. To *diverge* is to separate, or to go in different directions. To *converge* is to come together.

CULTURAL DIVERGENCE

Over time, many societies experience some degree of cultural divergence. Some members begin to move away from the core values of their culture. Often this happens from exposure to new ideas through processes of cultural diffusion. Physical barriers, like mountains, might also separate members living in different parts of a cultural region. Isolated from one another over a period of time, the resulting groups eventually develop completely different cultures.

The Roman Empire. For example, cultural divergence occurred in the later Roman Empire. At one time, this giant empire covered most of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. However, waves of Germanic tribes from Northern Europe later attacked the Western part of the empire. These invaders introduced new cultural elements to the Western Roman Empire, while the Eastern Roman Empire, with its capital at Constantinople, fell under the influence of Greek culture. This cultural divergence eventually led the Roman Empire to break apart.



India. In another example, Aryan India was once unified by a common Hindu culture. But the arrival of Islamic influences from the northwest led India to become divided into Hindu and Muslim areas.

Aztecs and Yaquis. Yet another example of cultural divergence can be seen between the Aztecs and the Yaquis of Mexico. Many scholars believe that several thousand years ago, they once spoke the same language and shared a common culture. However, the Yaquis and Aztecs later became separate cultural groups. The Aztecs then migrated southwards to Central Mexico. Aztecs and Yaquis came to speak different languages and to hold different religious beliefs.

CULTURAL CONVERGENCE AND GLOBALIZATION

Cultural diffusion can also lead to **cultural convergence**, in which different cultures become similar or even come together.

For example, at the end of the fifteenth century, European and Native American Indian cultures were completely separate. The Columbian Exchange brought about cultural convergence. European ideas and customs (such as Catholicism, landholding, the Spanish language, and royal government) merged with Native American traditions (such as using tobacco and eating corn, tomatoes, chocolate, and squash) to create a new "Latin American" culture.



*A street in Tokyo —
notice how many signs are in English.*

Globalization. Today, the rapid pace of cultural diffusion is contributing greatly to cultural convergence. Every society quickly learns, through air travel, newspapers, television, telecommunications, and the Internet — what is happening in other societies. Global transportation and trade make it easier to exchange products with other cultures. Each society borrows or adapts what it finds best in other societies. This cultural convergence has led to the phenomenon known as **globalization** — the creation of a common global culture. We realize that we are all citizens, not only of our own countries, but of a common global community.



Cultural convergence today can be seen in the global spread of democratic ideas, the English language, new technologies, and even global sports.

DEMOCRATIC IDEAS

In 1980, many countries did not enjoy democratic government. Much of the world was still ruled by communist regimes and military dictatorships. However, in the late 1980s and 1990s, democracy was on the march.

Democracy spread to many new regions of the world, including the Philippines, Chile, Nicaragua, Argentina, Panama, and Haiti. News of events in one area quickly spread to other areas. In Africa, dictators fell from power in Somalia, Liberia, and Ethiopia.

The Communist Party lost its monopoly of power in the Soviet Union. Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany all toppled their communist dictatorships in favor of democratic governments. In 1991, the Soviet Union itself split apart into Russia and other states, all of which chose popularly elected governments. Despite some pessimism about democracy's future in Russia and countries of the former Soviet Union, there is strong support for democracy as the best form of government among most of its citizens.



The movement for democracy led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the re-unification of Germany.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The spread of new technologies is also contributing to cultural convergence and globalization. At one time in history, different parts of the world did not even know about each other's existence. It took months to reach some places by ship. There were no other means of communication. Today, people in every culture are familiar with telephones, televisions, computers, cell phones, and the Internet. These new technologies link us closer together than at any other time in history.

Even a small home business with access to the Internet can now market its products to people around the globe. Not only can people communicate all around the world, but they also share the common experience of using these technologies. This shared experience and enhanced ability to communicate is helping to build a common global culture.



An Arabic woman talks on her cell phone.

GLOBAL SPORTS

Even competitive team sports have gone global. With cable television, space satellites and the Internet, people can follow sports taking place in every part of the world. Global cultural convergence is further advanced when teams from different countries come together to compete periodically in international sporting events — such as the Olympics or the World Cup in soccer.



A U.S. player scores a goal against Algeria in the 2010 FIFA World Cup held in South Africa.

These sporting events appeal to a wide global audience. They bring people together as citizens of a new global community. The rules of the game rise above differences. Sports contribute to social unity, tolerance and integration. Sports provide a universal language that can bridge cultural gaps, resolve conflicts, and bring about greater understanding among people of different backgrounds and nationalities.

CHAPTER STUDY CARDS

Cultural Diffusion

- ★ **Cultural diffusion** is a process of spatial exchange in which ideas, products, cultural traits and even diseases spread from one place to another.
- ★ Examples of cultural diffusion include —
 - **The Columbian Exchange.** Europeans learned new ideas and products. Native Americans obtained new animals and faced deadly diseases.
 - **Spread of American Popular Culture.** American movies, “pop” music, TV programs, “fast foods,” and casual dress styles have all spread around the world.

Types of Cultural Diffusion

- ★ The exchange of products.
- ★ The spread of technology.
 - Europeans adopted gunpowder, the compass, and printing from China.
- ★ The spread of ideas.
 - Religions often spread their beliefs from one place to another.
 - Buddhism, Christianity, Islam.
- ★ The spread of cultural traits.
- ★ **Pandemics.** Spread of diseases:
 - **Bubonic Plague**
 - Spread of smallpox in the Americas to Native American Indians.



Cultural Convergence and Globalization

- ★ **Democratic Ideas.** In the 1980s and 1990s, democratic government spread to many new areas of the world, replacing military dictatorships and communist states.
- ★ **English Language.** English has become quite widespread as the international second language throughout the world.
- ★ **New Technologies.** Satellite television.
- ★ **Global Sports Competitions.**
 - Winter and Summer Olympics.
 - World Cup in soccer.

Cultural Convergence and Divergence

- ★ **Cultural Convergence.** Different cultures acquire common ideas, products, and traits, becoming more similar.
- ★ **Cultural Divergence.** Different parts of a cultural region are exposed to different influences and become dissimilar.
For example:
 - Roman Empire divided into Western and Eastern Empires.
 - Islamic influences in India divided the region into Hindu and Muslim.
 - Aztecs and Yaquis.