

{THE GLOBALIST COOKBOOK}

Does globalization improve culture or does it just water it down?  
An economist investigates.

BY CHRIS MOONEY

"I THINK I LIKE the fish best, and then the crab," says economist Tyler Cowen, digging into plates of sea bass with tamarind sauce, seafood with lemongrass and chili, and soft-shell crab dipped in lime, salt, and pepper. The setting is Huong Que ("Four Sisters"), a bland-looking Vietnamese restaurant in Falls Church, Va., that Cowen has visited at least 30 times, and which he describes as "very strong" in his popular online guide to ethnic dining in the Washington, D.C. area.

It's no cliché to observe that the 40-year-old Cowen - author of 1998's "In Praise of Commercial Culture" and director of George Mason University's Mercatus Center - is what he eats. Cowen's guide opens with the proclamation, "Restaurants manifest the spirit of capitalist multiculturalism." On a similar note, his books celebrate the dynamism and creativity that market forces introduce into the arts and culture. Cowen champions such detested entities as Hollywood, megastores, and Brit pop while sharply criticizing snobs, purists, and government subsidies to arts organizations. "There's no National Endowment for the Arts that subsidizes good food," he told an interviewer last year. "Yet we have a wonderfully diverse selection."

Cowen's new book, "Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing the World's Cultures" (Princeton), once again salutes the marriage of fine arts and free markets. Globalization, he argues, may indeed make one culture more like another; but it also makes the world as a whole more beautiful. It increases the degree of choice that individuals can enjoy within any given culture - and we should all be grateful for that. "A typical American yuppie," he enthuses, "drinks French wine, listens to Beethoven on a Japanese audio system, [and] uses the Internet to buy Persian textiles from a dealer in London..." Besides, cultural blending can promote artistic creativity through the introduction of new technologies: Consider the popular postwar music of Zaire, which drew upon the electric guitar, as well as upon Cuban and American music styles heard on phonographs and radios.

In person, Cowen resembles a thinner, darker haired version of comedian Chris Farley, with a plummy voice that borders on the aristocratic. His wide-ranging tastes don't stop at high culture and exotic cuisine. The index of "In Praise of Commercial Culture," for example, shows more page citations for the rock band My Bloody Valentine than for Vladimir Nabokov, and a reference to Smashing Pumpkins is nestled between ones to John Sloan and Adam Smith. Cowen also collects Haitian art and has traveled to some 60 countries; at the outset of "Creative Destruction," rather than citing a series of academic papers as the book's foundation, he points to his "diverse experiences as a cultural consumer."

And why not? In a sense, Cowen's blended identity - as academic and connoisseur - correlates nicely with his description of globalization as a process that mixes national and other identities together willy-nilly, often with creative and unexpected results. Cowen grew up in New Jersey and received his doctorate in economics from Harvard. He began to focus on the economics of culture, he says, because "I wanted to do something that would overlap with the time I was putting into the arts in my personal life." At the notoriously free-market-oriented George Mason, Cowen is regarded as something of a Renaissance man - which is only fitting, since he rhapsodizes about the 15th-century Italian courtier Baldassare Castiglione in "In Praise of Commercial Culture."

Cowen's chosen academic field is rather small and specialized; partly as a result, he confesses to writing more for "people who live culture" than for academics. And when you consider a typical paper title in the field - "The Sculpture Market: An Adjacent Year Regression Index" is a good example - you can't blame him. Cultural economists apply the tools of economics to society's cultural and entertainment sectors, with particular emphasis on policy questions regarding government's role in arts funding. When it comes to strictly aesthetic judgments, however, they're in an awkward position. Although the love of a particular art form or artist may drive them into the subdiscipline, as economists they're not really supposed to engage in nonmarket valuations.

But few economists of culture take their appreciation of the market to the extreme that Cowen does. Most "believe in some form of state support for the arts," according to Ruth Towse, former editor of the *Journal of Cultural Economics* and a professor at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. This may explain Cowen's ongoing intellectual battle with New York University economist William Baumol, whose seminal 1966 report "Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma" (co-written with William Bowen) more or less launched cultural economics as a discipline. Baumol and Bowen's analysis warned that live performing arts - opera, classical music, drama, dance - face an inherent economic difficulty. While productivity in most sectors increases over time thanks to technological advances (think, computers) "you can't keep upgrading actors or violinists with a better microchip. Instead, says Baumol, costs in the performing arts "rise persistently faster than the rate of inflation." In an interview, Baumol is blunt: "If you want Shakespeare to continue to be performed, somebody has to pay for it" - and the audience isn't always able, or willing, to. It's a short leap from such insights to championing the NEA.

Cowen's "In Praise of Commercial Culture" directly responded to Baumol's arguments. In fact, Cowen claimed, just like other sectors, the arts benefit greatly from technological advances. New technologies not only promote the dissemination and preservation of art (e.g., DVDs), they also inspire innovation by creating new possibilities (e.g., the electric guitar, or the recording studio). Cowen also pointed out that classical music and opera are alive and well in the United States: from 1965 to 1990, for example, the number of symphony orchestras increased from 58 to 300.

Over dinner at Huong Que, Cowen described Baumol as "pessimistic" about the health of the arts. In the past, he's also applied the pejorative label "cultural pessimist" to critics as politically dissimilar as T.W. Adorno and T.S. Eliot, Jurgen Habermas and Robert Bork.

These thinkers, he's argued, are guilty of slighting capitalism's beneficent influence on the arts, which has been demonstrated throughout history - for example, in Renaissance Florence and 17th-century Amsterdam, where artists whose work was in demand acted as entrepreneurs, often operating more or less as they pleased instead of humoring patrons and customers. Rembrandt, wrote Cowen, "used a strong art market to establish his artistic freedom."

Today, according to Cowen, we are enjoying a similar cultural efflorescence. He concedes that artists who aren't any good at self-promotion may find their work getting lost in a mass consumer culture. Nevertheless, he concludes, "more, artists make it than ever before." Cowen is not alone in his optimism: Next year, Harper Collins will release libertarian New York Times economics columnist Virginia Postrel's "Look and Feel," an examination of the increasing prominence of aesthetics in market-driven consumer culture - from American Express's gorgeous Blue card to the carefully designed interiors of Starbucks outlets.

"In Praise of Commercial Culture" instantly defined Cowen as the leading proponent of free-market position within the arts and culture. Nick Gillespie, editor-in-chief of the libertarian magazine Reason, claims that Cowen's robust defense of megastores as founts of diversity pretty much sealed the Barnes and Noble vs. Independent Bookstore debate. "When you read that book now, everything in it is absolutely true - to the point that it almost seems dated," Gillespie says.

Of course, our highly commercialized culture is not universally admired, even by economists. In their 1995 book "The Winner-Take-All Society," Robert Frank and Philip J. Cook argued that America's current superstar-obsessed society suffers from a kind of market failure: It fosters inequality and waste as talented individuals fight for a small number of lavish rewards. In the cultural sphere, Cook and Frank bemoan the predominance of blockbuster movies and heavily marketed pop albums, which they claim crowd out more innovative but less marketable works.

"In Praise of Commercial Culture" was a polemical book - its author admits as much. But with his latest work on globalization, Cowen has adopted a somewhat chastened approach. Even as it defends capitalist cosmopolitanism as fundamentally creative and beneficial (the book's title borrows from Joseph Schumpeter's famous description of capitalism), "Creative Destruction" acknowledges the irrevocable loss of cultural traditions around the world Cowen attributes the softening of his views to travel, and particularly to his experience of places in the so-called third world "that are simply horrible."

Cowen also seems at pains, these days, to distinguish himself from his libertarian allies. As he puts it, "I think one should genuinely look at any problem with an openness to the possibility that the government might actually make things better. Just as a sociological matter, most people who call themselves libertarians don't do that." No, Cowen is not prepared to embrace the National Endowment for the Arts. But he's careful not to sound

doctrinaire: Since the agency's budget is so small, he says, I'm not hung up. I don't have this conservative, "This is ruining the arts, you have to kill this thing attitude."

His newfound attention to nuance isn't likely to win over globalization critics like University of Maryland political scientist Benjamin Barber, author of the 1995 book "Jihad vs. McWorld." Barber is not impressed, for example, with one of Cowen's classic case studies: Trinidadian steel-band ensembles who "acquired their instruments - fifty-gallon oil drums- from the multinational oil companies." Barber retorts in an interview, "I've also seen third-world necklaces made out of spent 50-caliber machine-gun shells. Does that justify colonial war?"

Ultimately, Cowen and Barber see cultural globalization in wholly different ways. Cowen emphasizes the varieties of cultural success: Although the United States litters the world with tourists and Hollywood films, he notes, Canada dominates the Harlequin romance novel market while Mexico and South America clean up when it comes to Spanish-language programming. But Barber regards the United States' influence in the world as hegemonic, and the reach of its corporate culture as coercive. "Cultures evolve very nicely, thank you, without Taco Bell and MTV, and to argue that we're actually helping them along with their change by colonizing them is ridiculous," he says.

Cowen has made a name for himself among his fellow intellectuals by embracing mass culture. Still, when it comes right down to it, his own tastes may not be all that adventurous. Pressed to name his favorite creative minds, he offers a duo which may disappoint his readers: "Shakespeare and then Beethoven." For a self-professed "cultural optimist," when it comes to modern-day capitalist art, Cowen doesn't seem to have fully embraced the shock of the new.

The same cannot be said, however, for Cowen's restaurant reviewing - which thrives on the previously undiscovered. This brings us back to Huong Que, where a portrait of the four sisters after whom the restaurant is named hangs on the wall opposite our table; the sisters are smiling, but the painting's backdrop is filled with incongruous dark clouds. It isn't very good art, says Cowen, and I can't disagree with him.

But we're here for the food. Right now, we're sampling some of "the major Vietnamese sauces," explains Cowen. "Black bean, tamarind, lemongrass." The flavors, he tells me, "are all pretty light, sharp, and a little piercing." And with his final appraisal of the cuisine, one hears a faint echo of his opinion of globalized culture: "It all tastes fresh."