Style & Culture; The joy of thinking globally; Art and commerce enrich each other, says an economist happily obsessed with what he sees as the virtues of modern culture.:[HOME EDITION]

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Full Text (1558 words)

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To those obsessed with the authenticity of native cultures, it will come as dispiriting news that Canada's Inuit did not begin carving soapstone until 1948. Or that Tuvan throat-singing was stagnant until Western record sales helped revive it. Or that the theme song chosen by Saddam Hussein, on the occasion of his 54th birthday, was Frank Sinatra's "My Way."

Tyler Cowen is not discouraged by these facts. On the contrary, the slightly impish academic revels in them. A Harvard-trained economist steeped in mathematics, Cowen is nevertheless primarily concerned with music, art, literature, film and food, and he pursues them all with rare passion. This is a man who can talk about Haitian voodoo flags, Iranian cinema, Hong Kong cuisine, Abstract Expressionism, Zairian music and Mexican folk art seemingly with equal facility, and he does just that in three provocative books about culture, markets and the pessimists who plague them.

A professor at George Mason University in Virginia, Cowen decided some years ago to merge his professional interests with his cultural obsessions. That led him away from monetary policy and the like -- bread and butter for your garden-variety economist -- to such big picture questions as: Are art and commerce really in opposition? How does technology affect art? Is globalization good or bad for artists? And what do we mean by "authenticity" and "diversity" in matters of culture?

In his latest book, "Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World's Cultures" (Princeton University Press), Cowen continues to offer answers. This time he tackles globalization, arguing that despite such tragedies as lost languages and cultural submersion, international trade accounts for much of the planet's cultural vitality -- and always has.

"If we consider the book," he writes, "paper comes from the Chinese, the Western alphabet comes from the Phoenicians, the page numbers come from the Arabs and, ultimately, the Indians, and printing has a heritage through Gutenberg, a German, as well as through the Chinese and Koreans."

In fact, Cowen believes that commerce and art are allies. And he contends that because commerce is driving technology, ideas, goods, services and people across borders more freely than ever before, we are in the midst of an unprecedented boom in artistic creativity all over the world. The quality, quantity and variety of cultural output is greater than ever; if there is more dreck, there is also more genius. And more people have more access to it than ever, at lower prices, regardless of where they live

Cowen's cheerful notion -- that the market-driven glass of culture isn't merely half full, it's brimming over -- puts him in a small minority among cultural commentators, many of whom take a much bleaker view of change. Critics of globalization fret that dumbed- down American TV, movies, music and even food are sweeping away rich local cultures.

Benjamin R. Barber, in his book "Jihad vs. McWorld," portrays the world as caught between the "bloody politics of identity" and the "bloodless economics of profit." John Elster, a Columbia University political scientist, says: "My hunch is that globalization will be bad for the production of high-quality art, which typically requires sustained, focused work that thrives best in a limited setting."

But to Cowen, these critics merely embody a cultural pessimism that has become the prevailing orthodoxy of our age at both ends of the political spectrum. Conservatives lament the decline of "cultural literacy" and the classics, while liberals bemoan the homogenizing spread of American commercial culture. Cowen is having none of it, and his books constitute a full-blown assault on this worldview.

"Western culture has been on a general upswing since at least the year 1000," he says flatly, "a fact neglected by many cultural pessimists. We should view the 21st century with anticipation, not dread."

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Eminem for the ages

At lunch in a Peruvian Chinese restaurant -- the maddeningly worldly Cowen pronounces the house specialty "not Peruvian enough" - - I ask the economist what will endure in the arts. "Eminem," he says. "As a lyricist, he's close to unparalleled." "Seinfeld" too. "Read 18th century Restoration comedy and see an episode of 'Seinfeld.' 'Seinfeld' is much better." John Updike and Philip Roth, of course, but also Stephen King and "the early movies of John Woo." He goes on to name Frank Gehry, Pedro Almodovar, Robert Gober and Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

"Real multiculturalism I'm a fan of," he says and, in fact, his cultural tastes couldn't be more catholic. But "a lot of it is people wanting to attack the West," and Cowen unashamedly exalts Western technology, political and social values and free markets.

To Cowen, markets are essential stimulants to culture; homogenization and diversity are not opponents but Siamese twins, both resulting from the same forces. The idea is that the McDonald's and Mon Kee restaurants inevitably go hand in hand, which is one reason Cowen is so fond of Los Angeles. "Paris and Hong Kong," he writes, "both centers of haute cuisine, have the world's two busiest Pizza Hut outlets."

At 40, Cowen is something of an odd duck in his field -- a statistical outlier, as an economist might put it. He grew up in suburban Hillsdale, N.J., and might well come by his lifelong optimism genetically (his father ran a chamber of commerce). At 14 or 15, he was the chess champion of all New Jersey, and as an undergraduate he attended George Mason, a hotbed of libertarian social and political thinking that happens to be (shhh!) a state university.

After Harvard, Cowen taught at UC Irvine before returning to George Mason, where, single and childless (he's about to marry a Russian emigre), he found himself with the time and tenure to pursue his interest in global culture. By now he's been to 60 countries, owns thousands of CDs and watches TV only in Spanish, to keep up his language skills.

In New York, Cowen has a speaking engagement at a public library and it goes well; he's patient and engaging and makes great use of his props. On the wall he's put up some of his Third World art collection, and on a boom box he plays some of Paul Simon's "Graceland" CD, noting that Simon was criticized in many quarters for the way he drew on African music. Cowen proceeds to

play some of this African music and then plays the even earlier American swing music that influenced the African music -- American music that in itself has African roots. "Trade across cultures has brought us many wonders," he says.

For all his critics, Cowen does have fans, including Timur Kuran, an economist and expert in Islamic law at USC. "Tyler Cowen, unfortunately, is not going to be on any required reading list," says Kuran. "Yet, in the long run, his impact may be greater. The sort of books he's writing over the long run may influence social thought in a much deeper way."

Cowen first made a splash in the cultural arena in 1998 with his book "In Praise of Commercial Culture" (Harvard), in which he argued that art and commerce are essential partners if creativity is to flourish. An example might be chain bookstores, the bete noire of cultural pessimists everywhere. To Cowen, these stores are part of a rosy picture indeed: In 1931 there were only 500 bookstores in the entire country. The number of books in print in America grew from 85,000 in 1947 to 1.3 million in 1996, while the number of publishers grew from 357 to more than 49,000. Blockbusters -- like the Bible or "The Pilgrim's Progress" -- were far more dominant in earlier eras, and books cost much more: In 1760, Cowen reports, a cheap schoolbook consumed two days' wages for an ordinary laborer. Today a paperback costs little more than the minimum wage for an hour's work.

In "What Price Fame?," published by Harvard two years ago, Cowen applied economic theory to the culture of celebrity, weighing the costs and benefits of fame both to the famous and to their fans. Fame, Cowen concluded, powerfully motivates aspiring celebrities and the corporations that seek to profit from their renown, while audiences reap ever better performances.

Now, in "Creative Destruction" (the title echoes economist Joseph Schumpeter, who said creative destruction is how capitalism works its magic), Cowen argues that global trade and communication are enriching all the world's cultures and that there's no such thing as cultural authenticity. South African Ndebele art, which relies on beads, was sparked by Czechoslovak bead imports in the 19th century. The steel band ensembles of Trinidad, he observes, got their instruments from multinational oil companies and soon learned how to hammer a series of precise bumps on the surface to create musical notes.

Cowen is convinced we've got more cultural diversity than ever. "Who's the Proust of Papua New Guinea?" he asks, echoing the famous question posed by Saul Bellow. "He's a sculptor and he's incredible. We just don't know his name."

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: TOUTING VITALITY: "Trade across cultures has brought us many wonders," says Tyler Cowen. The author and college professor tackles globalization in his latest book, "Creative Destruction."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Linda Spillers For The Times; PHOTO: 'UPSWING': "We should view the 21st century with anticipation, not dread," says author and economist Tyler Cowen.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Linda Spillers For The Times

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