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Foreword

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This issue is devoted to exploring some of the questions raised and the challenges posed by globalisation, and how it is becoming increasingly necessary to adopt a global approach to all forms of cultural exchange throughout the English-speaking world. The development of Global Studies and the growing fund of published research devoted to various aspects of the “British World,” testify not only to the vitality of work in these areas, but also to the perceived necessity for the application—to issues which can otherwise often prove intractable—of an approach combining the explanatory power of a number of disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

True, defining globalisation remains very much a work in progress: but any working definition would need to take account of the “compression” and “intensification” which Roland Robertson has identified as its principal characteristics (a definition to which both Andrew S. Thompson and Patrick Lonergan refer below). And this compression/intensification matrix clearly conditions the antithesis, explored in the articles below, between a centripetal dynamics, on the one hand, and centrifugal tensions, on the other.

As Andrew S. Thompson makes clear in the opening essay of this collection, Empire is one of the oldest forms of governance in human history: so too, therefore,

are the consequences of periods of imperial(ist) domination. Our own period—post-“cultural turn”—is, of course, still interested in all facets of empires and their aftermath: but we are especially preoccupied by the perceived risk/threat of cultural homogeneity. The spheres of economic influence/interference have now reached a degree of development and sophistication such that economic integration now threatens—or so the globalisation pessimists would argue—to destroy or severely limit cultural diversity.

Yet, as the contributors show, there seems little evidence to suggest that globalisation is, in practice, able to simultaneously impose identical cultural norms at every point on the planet’s surface: indeed, whatever the extent of the networks in place, globalisation rarely succeeds in snuffing out all opposition. Economic nationalism, protectionism, legislation to curb immigration: these and other instruments are regularly used to halt the progress of standardisation or hegemony. To which might also be added the idea of cultural resistance. Alice Byrne, for example, shows how the Dominion governments were quick to resist what they saw as undue cultural pressures being brought to bear through the British Council during the 1930s. Clearly, the “British world” had its limits, and Raphaël Costambeys underlines the extent to which the “British invasion” of the American popular music industry, rather than a form of cultural imperialism, was actually a pre-emptive bid to seal off a fast-disappearing British culture from further colonisation by the United States.

Arguably, the “projection” of Britishness has been far less successful than that of Irishness. Patrick Lonergan and Martine Pelletier both show, in different ways, how “global Ireland” or the Irish “brand” have (been) developed: to the detriment of Irish cultural sovereignty, or “authenticity,” it might be argued—always assuming that cultural “authenticity” can actually be retained when a culture elects to assert its autonomy. Philip Whyte’s account of some of the difficulties faced by postcolonial writers in this regard seems to point in a more complicated direction: the movement of populations—African or other—around the globe, means that claims for the “authenticity” of a culture can come from a range of sources, exogenous

“authenticities” sometimes taking root in new host environments. This is the conundrum also explored by Monia O’Brien Castro: cultural “sovereignty,” like its political counterpart, can be proclaimed (or surrendered) from any point of territory, several claims even emerging from the same place. The resulting “multicultural” state, a form of colonisation in reverse, may give rise to tensions, even to violence: it none the less revives or reinstates, that cultural diversity and complexity which globalisation was deemed to have placed in jeopardy, and seems to point to the existence of a permanent cycle of, as it were, periods of compression of cultural diversity, followed by or accompanied by the intensification of local cultural identities.

In practice, then, the extensive and intricate networks which have long existed (in trade and commerce, but also in the arts, education, technology transfer...) in the Anglophone world, as well as the large-scale and long-standing circulation of people, ideas and practices, mean that these countries form a highly ambiguous, even paradoxical structure, or set of structures. They are often closely integrated, yet remain very flexible. The English-speaking world works openly towards greater standardisation in a number of areas, yet constantly threatens to divide into competing centres of activity, or even fragment radically under the strain of regionalist or communitarian practices and claims. The dynamics of the English-Speaking world, the push towards unification or standardisation, can rarely, if at all, be considered in isolation from the permanent tension, resistance and open conflict which the “system” often generates.