

THE QUESTION OF GLOBALISATION MYTHS, EXAGGERATION AND REALITIES : CONTESTED TERRITORIES

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ABSTRACT

Ideas on globalisation are varied and definitions lack consensus. This paper surveys the conceptualisation of globalisation as presented by various scholars. It also looks into the state of its politics and the concept of sovereignty.

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation is the buzzword of our time, yet its meaning remains elusive. Here, we could say globalisation refers to the interconnectedness of human activity on a global scale, to the unprecedented flow of capital and labour, technology and skills, ideas and values across state and national boundaries, but in ways which neither states nor nations can adequately control. As to its contributions, there is no denying its profound impact on our economies, politics, cultures, and social lives.

The terms global and globalisation-referring to the idea that the world is becoming one place as opposed to a myriad of relatively independent, different, and faraway places-came into popular use only 40 years ago (Waters, 1995). Many theories of globalisation have stated that the increasing interconnectedness of individuals and societies has in fact been occurring for many centuries (Robertson, 1992:58-60) and that it is also contemporary with modernisation, internationalisation between states, and processes of commercial and economic systematisation (Rosenau, 1990; Riley and Monge, 1998:355). Recent theories of globalisation also are focusing on the increasing rate of innovations in communication technologies and transportation networks that compress time and make the world smaller (Giddens, 1991). It is also agreed by Riley and Monge (1998:355) and King (1991:viii) that the development of phenomena such as mass-mediated communication, a global telecommunications industry, world-wide banking and financial markets, multinational corporations, international non-governmental organisations, global warming, and the notion that 'Chernobyl is everywhere', brings the idea of a global society or community into prominence once again. This leads many people, including theoreticians, to appreciate that the interconnected nature of globalisation has largely accelerated social mobility, facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and generally

made communication easier and cheaper. What is more, members of communities differing in culture and religion are assumed to have greater capacity than ever before to know and understand one another.

Today, societies are believed to be able to co-ordinate their responses to common problems and common needs. Through the United Nations and other international organisations, universal standards are being established in such areas as the rule of law, public accountability, human rights, and the principles of good governance. There is, in particular, much greater consciousness of the rights of women, of the need to question the legitimacy of male dominance in both personal relationships and social institutions. Yet, these and other benefits, valuable though they may be, are not the only forces that are relentlessly driving globalisation forward.

In the globalising world, the market seems to have become the new god. Increasing production and consumption are now seen as the key to human salvation. The need to subordinate all economic activity to the rigours of global competition has achieved the status of a universal dogma. Not only economies but also entire societies and cultures are being restructured in the name of productivity, as if it were the only reliable measure of progress.

Many state leaders are aware of the impact of this phenomenon and some are cautious. During the recent APEC conference on November 16, 1998, the Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, in his opening speech, welcomed 'globalisation' but cautioned against rushing towards it, for fear that it would be abused and cause world-wide poverty and disparities between the rich and poor. He said, 'We should not reject globalisation. It has to come to this shrinking world. But the big and the powerful can be magnanimous and accord the small and the weak time and latitude to prepare and make adjustments' (New Strait Times, 1998a).

While the 'State' itself is subjected to powerful pressures for privatisation and deregulation - for instance, telecommunications and banking, - it is less and less able to exercise effective control over the national economy, to sustain public services, or prevent gross inequalities of wealth and income. Some consider that the state might lose its exclusive control of territory, and function less as a sovereign entity due to the effect of the international market and new communication media (Hirst & Thompson, 1996:170-1) while other critics do not agree. The issues are generally dialectical in nature and are unevenly experienced across time and space (McGrew, 1992:74).

Diverse claims have been made concerning the consequences of globalisation. Many commentators highlight the progressive breakdown of family values and with it the exacerbation of social problems¹, not least of which are crime and drug² abuse. For others it is racial and religious fanaticism such as Al-Maunah as a response to the effects of Western style modernisation (Waters, 1995:2). Those that take a broader view focus on the impact on economic and social life interlaced with other factors, which creates a 'snowball effect'.

This could be seen in the recent economic meltdown experienced by the 'Asian Tigers'. Responsibility was also placed on George Soros and the currency speculators who make the currency volatile and unpredictable (New Strait Times, 1998b). Globalisation can also result in societies becoming politically unstable. Demonstrations in Indonesia led

to the downfall of Suharto³ and political unrest in Malaysia, in which the people have urged reform, or 'Reformasi'⁴ of the government, illustrated such consequences. Global traits could be seen to prevail when Al Gore, the Vice President of the United States supported 'Reformasi', by proclaiming the protesters as 'the brave people of Malaysia' (CNN, 1998). This has angered the Malaysian government, which considers its sovereignty to have been questioned.

The point here is that interference in the domestic problems of other countries is not a single nation issue. If that happens, globalisation could leave third world countries totally exposed and unable to protect themselves. The net effect, some critics point out, is the blocking of the development of third world countries, of their emergence as newly industrialised economies.

The discussion of globalisation is interesting, never seeming to end, and has drawn in many scholars. Ideas on globalisation are varied and definitions lack consensus, which is not surprising as many of them, emanate from different backgrounds and schools of thought. The present discussions on globalisation are widely distributed into several disciplines and domains, which include sociology, economy, politics and culture.

In order to do this, the general ideas of globalisation by Robertson, Giddens, Harvey, Ohmae, Held, Hirst and a few other scholars will be surveyed in terms of the conceptualisation of globalisation, the dimension of globalisation, the state and its politics and the concept of sovereignty. Before examining the concept, I feel it is essential to begin with the manifestations of globalisation and its paradox.

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GLOBALISATION AND ITS PARADOX

Globalisation has its own character and particular impact in almost all areas including economy, politics and culture. However, some of the claims made are diametrically opposed and open to challenge (Curran and Seaton, 1998:243). Listed below are some of the many characteristic claims in relation to globalisation:

- 1 *The world is shrinking* - referring to the concept of time-space and the factor contributed by technology such as transportation, communication etc. It has also contributed by reducing the costs of computing power and telecommunication (Norman, 1994:3).
- 2 *The dynamism of the global financial system* - the expansion of financial systems to other nation-states.
- 3 *Expansion of transnational corporate activity* - the rapid growth of TNCs and MNCs to other nation-states, international ownership and acquisition.
- 4 *The rapid growth in global communication and media networks* - new technology, such as satellites, television, internet, satellite telephone etc. (Curran and Seaton, 1998:242).
- 5 *Flow of peoples across national boundaries* - tourism and economic and political immigration (Axford, 1995:134-6).
- 6 *The emerging authority of institutions and communities above the nation-state level* - EC, ASEAN, United Nations, IMF etc..

- 7 *The reducing role of the nation-state* - Reduction of this role can be seen in government policy-making, legislation, law and control. Factors contributing to this arise from economic liberalisation promoted by IMF, EC, NAFTA, APEC etc.
- 8 *Sense of similarity across borders* - in terms of a single culture, social life, fashion, beliefs, ideology etc.

Scholars are far from agreeing over globalisation. The characteristics enumerated above are not undisputed. The greatest contention centres on how the term 'globalisation' should be understood, whether or not it is new and what its consequences are (Giddens, 1998:28). Some of the disagreement is related to divergent political and economic positions. Some argue that globalisation is largely a myth, or the continuation of long established trends and, as has been repeatedly mentioned before, globalisation itself is complicated and dialectical. It is dialectical since it embraces contradictory dynamics. As Giddens said, globalisation is a dialectical process because '....it does not showa generalised set of changes acting in a uniform direction, but consists in mutually opposed tendencies' (Giddens, 1990:64). Included below are some of the arguments surrounding the issue.

1. The question of how new globalisation is? Robertson insists that the process of globalisation is not new, that it predates modernity and the rise of capitalism. However, modernisation tends to accelerate globalisation and the process moves to the level of consciousness during the contemporary period (Robertson, 1992:58). In mapping the path of globalisation, Robertson disagreed with Wallerstein (Wallerstein, 1974; Waters, 1995:41), who suggests that the world has been undergoing social compression since the beginning of the sixteenth century. Robertson (1992:58-60) argues that its history is in fact much longer. He maps the path of globalisation through five phases namely the Germinal Phase, the Incipient Phase, the Take-off Phase.

Some claim the essence of globalisation can be traced in Durkheims' work on his theories of differential and culture, Weber in his ideas on 'rationalisation' (Water, 1995:5) and Marx in capitalism (Marx, 1977:222-3). In spite of their disagreement over the exact date, they somehow agree that globalisation is a process continuing from the past. However, Giddens (1998:30) argued that globalisation is a present reality. It is not just a continuation of or a backtrack to previous years. His argument is based on the nature of the past and present as being very different politically and economically, which is very closely echoed in the Malaysian past and present.

2. The question of how global the global economy is? Hirst and Thompson (1996:1) questioned the concept of the existence of global economy alongside the necessity for nation states to outline their economic strategies. He argued that if a truly global economy has emerged then national economies would be extinct and thus the outlining of domestic economic strategies by nation-states would be redundant. However, nation-states are still outlining their own policies (ibid.:1996:1). European trade, argued another theorist, still remains regional in nature, and exports go in the main to other countries in the area, as they did in 19th century. However, Giddens (1990) argues that today national economies are more open than in the past. For example more products and services are traded today. Mutual trading arrangements exist with many more countries than before. The significant thing that is happening is the increase in world financial markets, operating on a real time basis and 24 hours a day.

3. The question of universalisation. One of the earlier claims for a consequence of globalisation was the universalising of modern social life. The basis of this claim was a phenomenon exemplified in the Far East; standard modes were applied on assembly lines, global fashion and tastes were an accepted feature of consumption regardless of nation. However, some claim that this situation also promotes particularisation. Particularisation could be seen by relativising 'locale' and 'place' so that an intensification of uniqueness is thereby fostered. Manufactured products were made to show differences in order to promote the resurgence of nationalism and ethnic identities (Robertson, 1990; Wallerstein, 1991; Harvey, 1989; McGrew, 1992:74) - Cashmere cardigans are promoted as Scottish though in actual fact could be woven somewhere else, 'Made in UK' rhetorically referring to quality', A & W product is served with French fries in global chains, but not in Malaysia where the consumer have an option to be served with rice.
4. The question of a world 'sans frontiers'. One consequence of globalisation is a world without frontiers. Political boundaries are no longer significant in conducting transactions in commodities and services. "The first amendment" or freedom of speech seems to apply to all nation-states (internet, e-mail). Keniche Ohmae (1995) emphasised that people now live in a borderless world, the nation-state today is a fiction and politicians have lost their power. Giddens said, 'they are not, but the shape is being altered', the reality is 'boundaries are becoming fuzzier than they used to be', for example the EU. In fact the nation-state could be expanding and its power could be growing rather than diminishing. For example, the Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Berlin Wall (Giddens, 1998:32).
5. The question of the reality of homogenisation? Another claim for globalisation is the homogenisation of our modern social life. This creates the concept of 'sameness' or 'similarity' across the globe - consumer products, city life, religion, human rights, bureaucratisation etc. Today, no one will go hungry for McDonald's or thirsty for Coca-Cola as they can get them almost anywhere in the world. Levi jeans are globally acceptable as trousers and worn regardless of status, income, nationality, ethnic background or gender. City life in the modern state is similar in terms of the stress of traffic congestion or losing money on the stock exchange. Here, the claim for global homogenisation seems to be true, though some critics disagree. The opposing point of view says that globalisation also involves assimilation and re-articulation of the global in relation to local circumstances. For instance, practice in religions such as Islam or Christianity across the globe has its own pattern of differentiation. Muslims in Malaysia and those in the U.K. each have their individual ways of celebrating Aidil Fitri. Christians in the Philippines celebrate Easter in a different manner to that of the Catholics in the Vatican City (Hannerz, 1991:107-28; McGrew, 1992;74).
6. The question of integration. Many scholars claim that a consequence of globalisation is the integration of economies and union of people across territorial boundaries. The former can be seen in the European Union. Integration can also mean the sharing of a single currency, taxation system and laws. New forms of global, regional and transnational communities or organisations unite people across territorial boundaries. The United Nations, transnational corporations, sports organisations, trade unions and transnational class formations, for example. However, globalisation could also be seen as an agent of fragmentation in certain areas. For instance, labour becomes

increasingly divided along local, national and sector lines. Meanwhile, ethnic and racial divisions become more acute while the 'other' groups become more closely knit (Bull, 1977; Bozeman; 1984; McGrew, 1992:75). Apart from economy, the claim that integration produces a single society and culture has also been questioned. While such a trend is conceivable, according to Water it will probably not be harmonious. Instead, it will probably lead to high levels of differentiation, multicentricity and chaos. This is because there is no central organising government and no tight set of cultural preferences and prescriptions (Waters, 1995:3).

THE DIMENSION OF GLOBALISATION

Theoreticians who have defined the concept of globalisation may be divided into two groups. The first group identifies globalisation through single causal logic. Among these are Wallerstein - economy (1984), Rosenau - technology (1990) and Gilpin - politics (1987). The other group identifies the dynamism of globalisation by multi-causal logic. These are Robertson (1992) and Giddens (1990). Both of these notions will be examined using Malaysia as a case study.

Wallerstein (1990) sees globalisation through his concept of 'world system theory', the ideas in which have some similarity to Robertson's (1990) concept of 'global compression'. Wallerstein's focus on the reality of world structure has led to criticism of his ideas as reductionist because of his single causal domain, economy.

Wallerstein stresses that capitalist global economy created a universal economic space (1990:35). Humanity remains fragmented into discrete nation-states with their own sovereign political rule. The world economy is also seen to have an unequal structural arrangement with core, semi-peripheral and peripheral areas. He also claims that this structure maintains inequalities in power and wealth. Periodic crises in the global-economy will stop the global economic restructuring, which reinforces these inequalities of power and wealth. These problems provoke resistance on a global scale in the form of anti-systemic movements (Wallerstein, 1991) such as those seen recently in Indonesia and Korea⁵. Wallerstein's idea successfully breaks away from some of the limitations of orthodox sociological thought but it is criticised for its shortcomings, especially on the phenomena discussed by the theorists of international relations. As Giddens argued, world-system theory concentrates only on economic influences, which are insufficient when considering a subject like the rise of the nation-state and the nation-state system (1990:69).

Meanwhile, Rosenau (1990) describes globalisation as the intensification of global interconnectedness through the scope of technology. According to him, the factor of technology has made the world become smaller, has made people more mobile; news/information travelling at the speed of light gives people an ability to cross space and time that they never had before; the technology of modern transportation - aeroplane, train, the computer-internet, satellite-communication, media, news and others. As he said;

It is technology that has profoundly altered the scale on which human affairs take place. It is technology, in short, that has fostered the interdependence of local, national and international communities that is far greater than any previous experienced (Rosenau, 1990:17).

As for Gilpin (1987), he said 'globalisation is a product of political factors, in particular the existence of a 'permissive' global order - a political order which generates the stability and security necessary to sustain and foster expanding linkages between nation-states'. In a global states system, where a sovereign nation recognises no authority above its own, the creation of such a permissive political order can only arise from the exercise of power. According to him, globalisation is a historically contingent process, depending on the hegemonic state in the international system to impose a form of world order, which fosters interaction, openness, co-operation and interdependence. Based on his analysis, the modern era of global interconnectedness is conditional upon a stable and secure hegemonic (liberal) state.

Giddens maps the dimension of globalisation by stressing the need to include all the above ideas in understanding its process. He approaches the phenomenon of globalisation by distinguishing between what he understands to be its constituent dimensions (Giddens, 1990:70). The multi-causal approach of Giddens is based on four dimensions of modernity; capitalism, surveillance (inter-state system), militarism, and industrialism.

According to Giddens, the centres of power in the world of economy are the capitalist states, in which capitalist economic enterprise is the main form of production. The operation of TNCs could be seen as operating independently of the political factor. The economic preponderance of the TNC's gives them the capacity to set up the linkage and exchange that turn the world into a single market for commodities, labour and capital (Giddens, 1990:70).

The surveillance process, according to Giddens, is also being extended globally in a system of nation states. According to him, nation-states are the main players within the global political order, while TNCs are the dominant agents within the world economy. Thus with both influences, state and TNCs, it provides a global extension of commodity markets, including money markets. This co-operation between the state and the TNCs could force the state to further the interests of its own population to the detriment of people in other states. This factor could create a scenario for global inequalities (Giddens, 1990:71).

The concept of alliance refers to the concept of world military order. With these alliances world war has become impossible, confrontation occurring only in local and peripheral conflicts (Giddens, 1990:75) such as in Rwanda and East Timor.

Industrialism in globalisation refers to the incorporation of local industries into an international division of labour in which there is an increasing level of trade in raw materials, components and commodities between previously separate and complete industrial economies. This industrialisation has also eroded Western economic dominance but has two significant consequences. According to Giddens, industrialisation has harmful effects on the ecology of the planet, but has contributed services and information development. This apparently has initiated the industrialisation of culture, especially with regard to consumption, through globalisation in mass media (Giddens, 1990:75-6).

According to him, the process of globalisation is full of contingency, uncertainty and unpredictability. Globalisation 'is more than a diffusion of western institutions across the world, in which cultures are crushed' instead globalisation 'is a process of uneven

development that fragments as it co-ordinates' (Giddens 1990:175). Based on his ideas, globalisation and the world system should be seen as influenced by several sets of primary processes associated with the nation-state system, co-ordinated through global networks of information exchange, the world capitalist economy and the world military order (Giddens, 1987:288).

After examining many views of globalisation, it is generally agreed that the intensification patterns of global interconnectedness have serious repercussions for the conduct of organisational life, in the public and private sectors. If 'globalisation' constitutes the key 'predicament', then 'bureaucracy' is positioned as the crucial impediment to the successful management of its effects. Globalisation, it is argued, creates an environment characterised by massive uncertainty. In such an environment only those organisations that can rapidly change their conduct and learn to become ever more enterprising will survive and prosper. Because 'bureaucracy' is held to be a 'mechanistic' form of organisation best suited to conditions of relative stability and predictability, it becomes the first casualty of such an uncertain environment (Du Gay, 1996:154).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In spite of the multi various theories of globalisation there is one tenet that theoreticians hold in common: the world is becoming a smaller, more singular place, formed through the integration of economic, societal and socio-cultural processes. This refers to the idea of interconnectedness and interdependence of economic, political and cultural activity, which is thoroughly explained in the theory of globalisation.

This process shows the involvement of human activity on a global scale, the unprecedented flow of capital and labour, technology and skills, ideas and values, which can cross State and national boundaries at high speeds. Speeds only made possible by the contribution of communication technology and excellent transport networks - the development of which the world is currently experiencing. The impact of this process can be seen through the increasing numbers of international agencies (TNAAs and TNCs) and institutions (FIFA, Amnesty International), which conceptually represents the globalisation of the world economy, the increasing global forms of communication, the acceptance of unified global time, the development of global competitions and prizes, the development of standard notions of citizenship, rights and the conception of humankind.

However, some of the outcomes are a direct result of the actions taken cautiously by contributors who have seen the decline in the role of the nation-state due to deregulation and global interdependence; that is, the world organizations or supranational bodies can be seen to be taking over the main role of the nation-state in global politics.

While the notion of globalisation has elaborately explained the virtues of a singular place, it cannot explain the phenomenon of the anti-global, such as local dynamics, cultural diversity, economic inequality, political fragmentation and information imbalance. For example, some third world countries at present are experiencing an economic boom and are enjoying a newly found high standard of living - without a clear autonomy in their economy and political structure. In order to maintain this 'experience', these countries have to abide by 'world politics' and 'world economic structure', usually dictated by the 'Western agendas'. This clearly proves that the process of globalisation is still very much

based on 'inequality' and 'dependence' rather than 'interconnectedness' and 'interdependence'.

As the effects prevail, coupled with the 'experience' running out of steam (economic meltdown), Third World Countries have formed the 'South and South' nations group and EAEC (East Asia Economic Caucus) - a move to resist total Western domination. With the recent economic meltdown, some countries like Malaysia had no choice but to appeal to international organizations for the regulation of world capitalism, and to put a stop to the worldwide spread of deregulation which has created disparities among the poor states. However, in its effort to implement control measures, Malaysia came under severe criticism from the West when it took its currency off the world financial market. Comments like 'taking the country backwards' became the norm. This attempt by Malaysia may be the beginning of a deglobalisation era, something that should be taken seriously for a better future.

NOTES

- ¹ Issues on homosexuality, such as the right of gay and lesbian couples to bring up children.
- ² Drug issues are no longer treated as domestic problems. They have been accepted as a global problem. For example American Marines were sent to Columbia to fight drug barons and eradicate the 'coca' plant in those countries. Money was given to Bolivian farmers to replace their 'coca' plants with 'citrus' plants.
- ³ The riot in Indonesia caused by economic turmoil in the country which lead to inflation. The President was accused of corruption and cronyism.
- ⁴ Reformasi, or Reformation, lead by deposed Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The objective of reformasi is to stop the government from practising corruption.
- ⁵ Indonesian and Korean rioting against the government because of job losses and government enforced 0% economic growth.

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