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Orbits of Contemporary Globalization

A. Fuat Firat
University of Texas - Rio Grande Valley

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Markets, Globalization & Development Review



Orbits of Contemporary Globalization

Globalization is a phenomenon that has been discussed much in the past few decades. It has been defined as or intimated to be many things. Therefore, because I intend to discuss globalization once more, I feel the need to give a definition of globalization as I mean to explore it: “Globalization is the movement and integration of people, products, markets, ideas, media, in effect, all kinds of cultural artifacts, across the globe.”

With this definition, I wish to begin with correcting a misconception regarding the beginnings of globalization. Often, in the discussions of globalization, its beginnings are placed in centuries well into the AD years. Some indicate Marco Polo, others mercantilism. For example, in a well-received book, *Globalization and Its Enemies*, Cohen (2007) mentions three ‘acts’ of globalization (p.3):

The present globalization is just the third act in a story that began half a millennium ago. The first act began with the discovery of America in the sixteenth century, the age of the Spanish Conquistadors. The second act was the nineteenth century, the age of the English merchants.

I would like to bring to our attention that human beings were global first, as well documented in major migrations of early human populations (Mithen 2003). During these migrations, tribes met, often fought, but also integrated, passing along genes, tools, cultures, and the like. It is thus that Neanderthal genes are found in contemporary Europeans. The idea that localities existed first – and that globalization started when local people began to move and borders began to be violated – seems to be a reversed version of actual human history and prehistory. Humans (and proto-humans) were global first, local later. Localization began as human populations started to reduce hunting and gathering, jettisoned nomadic lives, and began agriculture and animal husbandry at larger scales.

With settlements, the idea of ownership of land and of other things also gained prominence. The concept of property, being of or from a certain place, and similar notions of localness and rootedness, including the concept of local versus global, are possibly all products of this momentous change in how humans lived. With this recognition, we can begin to explore the varying sets of limitations that have occurred across history to restrict humanity’s global existence, thereby giving humanity’s global experience different forms and faces.

Of special interest in this paper is the form of contemporary globalization. How did contemporary form of globalization develop and become dominant? In this question is the suggestion that – while a certain form of globalization is dominant today – remnants of other forms of globalization coexist and, of course at times contest each other. As we periodize forms of globalization, we ought not fall into a trap of thinking that – because one form is so prominent – others no longer exist or have disappeared. International economists have discussed how different reasons prompted nations to seek economic links and interactions with others outside their national borders (Chamberlain 1977). They cite, for example, seeking resources, such as raw materials, as one key reason; seeking labor, generally cheaper labor, has been another. Finally, seeking markets has been suggested as yet another reason. It would be safe to say that as at different periods one or another reason might have been dominant, indeed, all these reasons have coexisted across history, albeit with different intensities.

I also wish to suggest that economics represents only one dimension of all that has been humanly created across human history. In its most general sense, all that is humanly created is *culture*. For an initial conceptualization of possible distinctions, we can say that all that is given to humans is, on the other hand, *nature*. We know that across history, humans have tried to conquer nature through culture, but this impulse took on an unprecedented momentum in modernity. Once this initial conceptualization is made of a distinction between culture and nature, however, we have to develop a more nuanced conceptualization of the distinction between culture and nature. We have to realize that – especially with modernity – what is or was nature has increasingly been invaded and reshaped by culture, and that even our concept of nature is a cultural product. Since this symbolic nature of the human experience is omnipresent, I would like to discuss developments, forms, and experiences of globalization from a cultural perspective. This means, a perspective that does not compartmentalize the economic, social, political, and other dimensions of culture, but one that tries to articulate the human experience in a way that integrates all these dimensions.

During different eras of the human experience on Earth, cultures with different characteristics have dominated. Even when localities developed with their distinct traditions, languages, ethnicities, and the like, when we observe the artifacts from different localities we tend to see certain similarities, specifically in the key defining aspects of cultures. This may partially be due to the natural progression of the human experience and the ways human knowledge about the human condition has evolved

but, partially at least, it must also be due to the global ties and interactions that human beings had throughout their history and prehistory. That is, globalization has always played a role in the global progression of human cultures; humans have always interacted and learned from each other.

There is a period in human history, specifically until the advent of Renaissance and later the Enlightenment, when spirituality constituted the essence that was dominant across all cultures. As a result, human communities, despite being in distinct localities, developed organizing principles and institutionalizations through which they organized life, and subjectivities through which they imagined their existence, leading to cultures suffused with spirituality. The organizing principle for these communities was harmony with the forces of the universe, clearly observed across cultures of the world of this period in the mythologies that guided the way of institutionalization and organization of people's lives (Campbell 1990). Whether led by tribal councils or feudal lords or monarchies, all governing institutions were imbued with spiritual powers and meanings. The subjectivity is one of the 'faithful'. Global relations were mostly guided by military conquests due to imperialist desires to impose the invader's spiritual, often religious, faith.

In contrast, the epoch now generally called 'modern' brought in a focus on the 'material' conditions and principles of the universe. This was a period of material culture. Since the key purpose of the culture was to take control over nature (Angus 1989) – to give humans the power to determine their own destiny – humanity focused on studying and generating reliable, therefore, scientific knowledge regarding how the material universe worked. The intent was to control – or at least mitigate – nature's forces and use them to humanity's benefit. Of the different domains that culture came to be conceptualized to consist of, the *economic* specifically dealt with the material resources and matters. This eventually led the 'economic' to become the central, most dominant domain of modern material culture. The organizing principle of the economic domain of material culture is economic value accumulation and its central institution is the market. The subjectivity that dominates during this era is that of the 'consumer' (Firat and Dholakia 2017). This is the time that many contemporary students of globalization are most interested in; understandably so, since this is the epoch we have experienced in the past few centuries. This is also the reason for the contemporary political turmoil and intellectual ferment, since the status quo is now threatened by a series of new cultural and technological developments. Consequently, we may be witnessing some new forms of globalization.

Most noticeably, we seem to be witnessing an erosion of the highly material culture due to the greater incursion of communication technologies into the daily lives and therefore meaning producing systems. We are witnessing, in effect, the triumph of the symbolic nature of human existence (Lévy-Strauss 1963) that the dominant modern material culture largely suppressed – through illusory separations of discursive domains (science, morality, art; see Foster 1983) and practical domains (social, political, economic) of culture. These separations are waning, but the hegemonic dominance of the market, an institution that has proven to be extremely resilient, and its capability to absorb and coopt resistance and revolt, stunts the rise of a symbolic culture. Instead, with the increasing diffusion of the institutionalized practices of the market, and marketing, into all domains of culture we are today experiencing an iconographic culture (Bengtsson and Firat 2006). In this iconographic culture, there is relative autonomy from the material, but a persisting necessity of semblance to (and referral to) material experiences of the past for meaning construction. In contrast, in a symbolic culture meaning construction is freed from all constraints; instead, solely culturally negotiated construction of meaning is paramount.

This cultural arbitrariness does not imply loss of reason or of preference. Instead, reasoned, reflected upon, and carefully negotiated adherence to principles – rather than an illusory belief that material facts of the universe will inevitably guide humanity to an indisputable truth – is most likely to be the way of a symbolic culture. Yet, in our contemporary world of iconographic culture, market icons and iconic spectacular entities – including brands and celebrity personalities – carry the day, not symbolically negotiated principles. The hegemony of the market and the iconographic culture have given birth to the dominance of neoliberal ideology (see, e.g., Özgün, Dholakia and Atik 2017), an ideology that promotes the idea that if the market is left to work free of any interference then all liberal ideals of modernity, including democracy and civility will prevail. Consequently, the current form of globalization we are experiencing reflects all these aspects.

Another contemporary condition is that the institutions that maintain, support, and promote the market-centered capitalist order are now firmly constituted and unshakably in place. In other words, they are well institutionalized. These institutions reinforce and stabilize the order to the extent that the capitalist class, the bourgeoisie, becomes the keeper or the *guardian* of the order. This class has lost all elements of the vanguard role that led it to craft and construct a new order, as at the time when capitalism was emerging and propagating (Hardt and Negri 2000). This

condition allows others – who were not originally members of the capitalist class, or who are different from the original essence of capitalists – to join in in the management of capitalism as its guardians, and thus reaping the benefits. Mostly, these guardians come from the agents of the state. During the time that capitalism was evolving and constituting, the state had already largely integrated with the interests of the capitalist class and their key institutionalization, the corporations. Initially receiving commissions for managing capitalism and thus building large wealth, the ruling elements in the state can also eventually become members of the capitalist class. This is the condition we observe today, even in Russia and China, countries with communist histories. The globalization we are experiencing, therefore, is one where market capitalism is managed by a combination of original and budding capitalists who serve the corporations, the central institution of the market capitalist order.

This corporate order has also moved centers of capital accumulation from industry, commerce, and service sectors to the burgeoning finance sector (Dholakia 2011). Thus, capitalism is institutionalized across all domains and sectors of the economy. One key result of this is the greater role of speculative capital growth and the further removal from the labor theory of value. We know from the interjections of Baudrillard (1981) that sign value has been replacing exchange value as the principle of market (e)valuations. This meant that the rationale of the market as classical economists, including Ricardo (1817/1911) and Marx (1867/1976), saw it, the rationale that would maximize efficiency of the allocation of resources that depended on the equivalence of values indicative of social labor, was derailed. Prices in the market no longer reflect social labor, not even in the long-run. Instead, they reflect culturally arbitrary (e)valuations based on symbolically communicated meanings imbued in market offerings; they reflect sign values. The resulting inefficient allocation of resources has been evident for decades given, for example, the tons of food items trashed and wasted while at the same time millions go underfed or hungry. Yet, at the same time, accumulation of wealth for those who own capital or manage capitalism has been skyrocketing, another indication of the imbalances and inefficiencies of a market order infused with an iconographic culture.

The globalization of this expansion and institutionalization of management of capitalism and neoliberal ideology also extends to cooptation of elements earlier not absorbed into the order, such as the privatization of public goods (Özgün, Dholakia and Atik 2017) and 'entrepreneurialization' of agency. We increasingly hear about state policies that promote and finance entrepreneurs and their budding firms,

often called social enterprises (Akella and Eid 2017), which strive to provide what used to be public goods, such as garbage collection or penal administration, within a private economy. Having agency in the contemporary global culture is increasingly equated by people (including, for example, immigrant women entrepreneurs in the Arab world and Scandinavia, see Alkhaled and Berglund 2017, Airbnb property managers, Uber drivers, and the like) to being or becoming 'entrepreneurs'.

Contemporary globalization, with the characteristics briefly discussed above, has brought humanity to a precipice. The rift between the haves and have-nots widens as the extraordinarily rich constitute smaller percentages of the world's population as they amass greater and greater percentages of the world's wealth, controlling more and more of its resources. At the same time, communication technologies – diffusing to larger populations, including the very poor – give a false sense of democracy and mostly ineffectual voice to people (Yurdakul, Atik and Dholakia 2017). Many, indeed, create a lot of content on the web (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody 2008), but have little access to information effective in constructing persuasive messages and campaigns to propose and promote alternative organizations of life, because such information is extremely expensive and proprietary, requiring highly skilled researchers and technicians. The result is a public arena inundated with discourses constituted of a lot of fluff, sound-bite-filled but content-weak emotional signifiers. These signifiers are able to move people to push the 'Like' or 'Buy' buttons, but they are reducing possibilities of analysis and reflection.

In such a global environment, marketing becomes the means of constructing culture. Marketing campaigns are no longer solely the method of business but invade all domains of culture. Politics, for example, is no longer a matter of proposing principles for people to reflect upon and vote up or down, but a process of finding out what will resonate in the market in order to fashion political campaigns accordingly. Consequently, politics is no longer about improving the intellectual and social capacities, but – akin to providing people who are illiterate offerings that will enable them to function, even with illiteracy – about reinforcing their shortcomings. Instead of encouraging us to be reflective and responsible citizens, the 'echo-chambers' of politics channel us torrents of feedback that we can digest, as consumers. These consequences of the market centered iconographic culture are now the global condition.

Are there ways to escape the gravitational and centripetal hold of such tight neoliberal and iconographic orbits? There certainly are possibilities for escapes and for alternatives. It is my hope that MGDR will provide a forum and a platform to explore these.

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