

Globalization and Culture

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We are living in an age of economic globalization in which international movements of commodities, capital and information have increased to a degree that is unprecedented in history. The high level of international commercial integration is the primary aspect of globalization. But it should be noted right from the start that the principles of free world markets are not applied across the board uniformly but selectively. For example, the global labour market is not as free as the markets for industrial products and capital. So whereas industrial products and capital are associated with high mobility, labour, and especially unskilled labour, encounters serious obstacles in terms of its freedom to move between countries, even though it is known that the abolition of barriers to the free movement of labour would go a long way toward mitigating the enormous problems stemming from the unequal distribution of income between the economically developed and the developing countries, as well as within these same countries. Economic globalization tends to intensify rather than diminish this inequity.

This is because economic globalization is not a process stemming from a new economic model, as the resultant of a number of different factors, which, by taking into account the problems and particularities of individual economies, could make a positive contribution to countries' symmetrical economic development. It is, in essence, the imposition, albeit through market forces, of the dominant model of neo-liberalism. Economic globalization, based on the principles of neo-liberalism, maximises the asymmetrical interdependence between countries to the benefit of economically powerful states and multinational corporations, which, on the basis of concepts like efficiency and economies of scale, seek the most appropriate environment for maximizing their profits.

Under these conditions, most countries on Earth, and especially the less powerful ones, will end up being politically and economically dependent. It could in fact be argued that the neo-liberalism that constitutes the basic strategy of the contemporary globalization process is essentially being used as a means to promote the economic and political interests of the stronger countries, or rather those of powerful economic and political vested interests, since even in economically and politically strong countries, a significant segment of the population lives below the poverty line. The financial and social benefits supposedly offered by economic globalization are highly uncertain compared to the real disadvantages it entails for most countries.

It is particularly interesting to examine not only economic globalization, but globalization more generally, which most commentators on the phenomenon scrupulously avoid discussing. What more general globalization are we talking about today? Globalization is essentially an illusion, since we are referring to processes by which people are incorporated into a single, global community with a uniform global consciousness. Globalization is basically a social

process. But what global community is there to talk about even today? What are its commonly recognised moral, social and cultural values? What are our common attitudes and above all, what actions have we taken as regards world peace, human rights, unemployment, the unequal distribution of income and wealth or the conservation of the planet?

The modern “age of globalization” does not seem to have preservation of the peoples’ peace and freedom as its primary concern, but rather the liberalisation of trade and business. And this is because the terms have been laid down by economically powerful countries, above all by the United States, the global superpower, for whose benefit globalization is being put into practice. The present day notion of globalization cynically idealises the image of a society that is at the mercy of financial markets and multinational corporations, while its dynamic remains unequal and selective. It is a society without human compassion, since the basic message of neo-liberalism is deregulation and the conversion of human relationships into commercial and business dealings.

Seen from one viewpoint, the overall domination of neo-liberalism as an economic system could bring about the automatic abolition of wars and local conflicts, the final result being the “global state”. In his book entitled “The End of History”, Francis Fukuyama argues that humanity is entering into a new period absolutely controlled by the free market, and that because Western-type capitalism and the values that accompany it no longer have an adversary, humanity will therefore become homogenized under the hegemony of market forces. In this way, ideology, social struggle and the prospects of radical social change now belong to the “Museum of History”. It should however be pointed out here that history has not in fact ended; historic memories have merely been adjusted. Market forces do not possess homogenizing tendencies; on the contrary, with the inequities they produce they tend more to destabilise societies.

At the opposite pole to Fukuyama’s global uniformity are the views of Samuel Huntington as initially set out in his article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations”. According to Huntington, new alliances spurred by modernisation are being formed on the world’s political stage based on cultural criteria, in contrast with the past when alliances were based on ideology. Civilizations and cultural identities create the models of cohesion, fragmentation and clash. Countries and peoples with similar civilizations are coming closer together, while those with different ones are drawing apart. Frontiers and alliances are not being abolished but rather redefined on the basis of cultural criteria. In fact, there are such significant conflicts between civilizations that they can even lead to military conflicts. This theory of “fragmentation” has many flaws. One of them is related to economic globalization - i.e. it clearly ignores the economic effect of world markets on civilizations - which, as pointed out above, is being used as a means of promoting the economic and political interests of the strong countries. It also ignores the fact that cultural differences per se are not usually the real cause of the clashes, but are used by those who promote them as a means of expression and organisation, so that people can understand them.

A third theory argues that today’s world is governed simultaneously by unifying and fragmenting tendencies among the various cultures and societies, since, despite the existence of many common elements among peoples, a revival of nationalism and religious movements can be seen at the same time. Owing to the two countervailing trends, this theory is not conducive to predictions about the future of humanity.

The globalization model followed in the economic sector, as noted earlier, was not a product or combination of existing economic models aiming to promote balanced development among states. Instead, the model of neo-liberalism, and in particular the monopoly system of one ruling global economic power, was essentially imposed through market forces, and tends to be applied in the cultural realm as well, which is defined by Clifford Geertz as “an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes

towards life". The fact that culture frequently provides the metaphors and associations with which "friends" are distinguished from "enemies" should not be overlooked. The cultural globalization being promoted does not aim to create a global culture that will be the product or result of the amalgamation of existing cultures – even if such a homogenous culture were broadly desired or at least accepted – but rather to impose a ruling global culture, that of the United States.

This "Americanization" – not even "Westernization" – of culture on the basis of American values, models of aesthetic expression and lifestyles will have enormous repercussions. Having been deprived of their culture, traditions and history, the peoples will be the absolute victims of the prevailing forces of neo-liberalism, which they will no longer have any incentive to resist. Their dependence will now be three-fold: political, economic and cultural.

In fact, cultural globalization, or to set it more softly "the myth of cultural integration or global cultural homogeneity" which is often falsely labelled "cultural modernization", that is associated with the loss of historical identities and socio-cultural characteristics, will increase their political dependence, since it is known that people lose their national consciousness together with the consciousness of their special culture. At the same time cultural globalization will foster countries' deeper economic dependence, since in the field of culture too, the "free trade" of American culture and related commodities will prevail to the benefit of their producers, and will not even need to be adapted to other peoples' cultural particularities.

In conclusion, cultural globalization, in the particular form and with the particular processes that is being promoted, undermines the foundations and unity of communities and peoples. It is identified with cultural dependence and alienation. The final target is obvious. It is cultural hegemony and cultural imperialism.

We must oppose the models of global uniformity dominated by neo-liberalism and fragmentation or by the clash of civilizations with that of dialogue between cultures. It must be recognised that although there are universal values which we should all embrace, the diversity of cultures necessitates respect for difference. Thus the only path leading to the co-existence of peoples on an equal basis is mutual understanding and the acceptance of cultural differences, as pointed out by President Mohammad Khatami, who proposes that dialogue – in the Socratic sense of being a tool for learning, thinking and exchanging views – be used as a method of achieving mutual understanding. Acceptance of diversity, distinctiveness and of dialogue expands the boundaries of knowledge and civilization, minimises the misunderstandings and confusion that frequently complicate relations between peoples, creates and sets in motion procedures for resolving international disputes, and in general, constitutes the most effective means of ensuring peace and security in the world – a world with many problems and many social, economic, political and cultural dissimilarities.

The co-existence of peoples on an equal basis, respect for differences and diversity, and acceptance of dialogue constitute, in our view, the primary elements on which the contemporary view of the world should be based. For this reason, we regard them as components of universality. Thus, in opposition to globalization, we propose universality, encouragement of which presupposes the refutation of both the cultural fanaticism that is used as the main argument for achieving the geostrategic goals of modern imperialism, and the ethnocentrism that polarises peoples, sometimes as a cause and sometimes as a result of conflicts. By fostering universality, cultures will retain their autonomy and will at the same time be able to manage any differences among them, so that these differences cease to constitute basic features of their self-definition, especially by extremist elements, thus removing the possibility of their being exploited by forces that rely on fanaticism. In this way, those who use force, conflict and war, and those who discover "evil axes", will be obliged to call their interests by their real name and not deliberately muddle them by invoking God, peace, freedom, democracy or justice.