

**Globalization as Collective Representation:  
The New Dream of a Cosmopolitan Civil Sphere**

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By its friends and its enemies alike, globalization is hailed as a revolutionary, path-breaking, *weltgesichte* phenomenon. It is solving the world's economic problems or condemning more and more of the world's people to poverty. It creates equality and cooperation or deepens inequality and hegemonic domination. It opens the way for world peace or for a new and nightmarish period of terrorism and war.

Is it possible to pry "globalization" out of the clutches of the rhetorical binaries that define the passionate simplifications of symbolic life?

Globalization is, indeed, one of the central facts of our time. It is a reference that must become central to the social sciences, but has not yet. In some respects, Ulrich Beck is right that modern social science has been hobbled by a methodological nationalism that now must be overcome.

But globalization is too important to be left to the "globalizers," to the entrepreneurs of globalization, whether economic or intellectual, who have created what might be called the discourse of globalization. The entrepreneurs of globalization, whether institutional ideologists or thinkers, make use of the *fact* of globality to suggest that the traditional rules of the game no longer hold, whether such rules are the economic "laws" connecting markets with economic inequality and undemocratic power with domination, or the basic theories and ideas that mark the disciplines of social science.

About such claims we must be very cautious. Globalization is not an alternative reality that makes previous knowledge and social reality irrelevant. It is a long emerging

if only recently risible and represented reality, a social phenomenon that in itself is neither sacred nor profane. It must be put back inside history and social science.

To begin this process, we might start with a compelling phrase of Anthony Giddens, one of the most gifted of the globalizing thinkers to whom I have just referred. Globalization marks, according to Giddens, a compression of space and time. To this I would wish to add a friendly amendment. Such compression must refer not only to the pragmatics of communication but to its semantics, to the basic units of meaning, the symbolic languages upon which interactions depend. There is, with globalization, conceptual compression as well. If this amendment is accepted, then I think it is useful to see globalization as the compression of space, time, and meaning. It is via such compression that globalization creates a significantly more expansive field of action and organization.

The question, however, is whether such an expansion marks a new order of magnitude, as Giddens as the other entrepreneurs of globalization suggest, such that new knowledges are necessary? If the answer to this question is no, as I will suggest below, then why has in incremental change in scale so frequently been *represented* as a change of exponential magnitude? Could it be that this shift in the representational order itself represents the fundamental and radical change? If so, it is an aspect of globalization to which its institutional and intellectual entrepreneurs have paid little attention.

We will return later to this shift in the field of representation. Let us speak first of the mundane process of globalization. My hypothesis is that globalization should not be understood as something radically new. It marks rather another step in the millennia-long compression of time/space/meaning, and the corresponding expansion in reach of the

institutions that represent them, i.e., the extension of political, economic, and cultural organization and power.

Indeed, far from being a radically new development, this process of compression/expansion already formed the central subject of modernization theory in the middle of the last century. More than any other historical transformation, modernization theorists were fascinated by the movement from “particular” and “local” to the “universal” and “national,” a process framed as the movement from traditional to modern society. In retrospect, from the perspective created by postmodern critique, we can see this binary as both tragic and absurd. The first set of terms represents a vast simplification, ignoring the extraordinary variation between different forms of earlier societies, for example the giant power reach of early empires. The other side of the binary is also highly exaggerated. Nation and universal are as contradictory as synonymous. As for the much heralded modernity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it turned out to be as barbaric as any recorded in the annals of traditional history.

Nonetheless, the modernization theorists were right in thinking broadly about an historical movement of enlargement of scope. Insofar as we are moving toward a more global playing field, we are in the midst of this familiar process. Social organizations and cultural structures alike are expanding their scope and reach. By emphasizing the familiarity of this process, and how it was a central topic for modernization theory, I want to suggest that, whether italicized, capitalized, or followed with an exclamation point, globalization does not represent an abrupt change. To understand it, we need not invent new or alternative knowledges. What we need to do instead is to better apply the

theoretical and empirical ideas already available, which means to orient them in a more global way.

Every process evoked in the globalization literature has already been conceptualized in studies of the movement to a national scale, which involved incremental and uneven but persistent transformations in economic, political, military, religious, legal, penal, and cultural life. It is true, of course, that most of what we know about these processes has been generated from within a national context, but these processes work have been conceptualized in a manner that has little to do with the scale of the nation as such.

Let us consider, for example, the classical theoretical writings of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, and their systemic understandings of such social phenomena as class formation, mode of production, division of labor, functional differentiation, bureaucracy, stratification, authority, and power. Were the concepts and propositions created by these writings, in contrast with the classical authors' empirical findings, dependent on scale? The empirical equation of their own phase-specific societies -- identified in terms of nation, civilization, or class -- with universalism and rationality was often myopic. But their theorizing about the organizational and cultural processes involved in sustaining universalism and particularism can largely still stand. In order to theorize processes of globalization, we do not need radically different knowledges. The same is true for much of the modern theorizing we have inherited from such sociological thinkers as Parsons, Elias, Goffman, and Geertz. They, too, dealt centrally with universalizing processes and compressions of temporal, spatial, and cultural scale, and their insights also provide foundations for thinking about the globalizing phase we are experiencing today.

In the heightened rhetorics about globalization and new knowledges there are more than merely empirical claims. There are moral assertions about justice being possible for the first time or no longer being possible again. There is a sense of imminence, of an historical shifting that, for better or for worse, has already transformed, or is about to, the meaning of social life. I wonder, however, whether globalization, in the mundane sense in which I have described it thus far, has in fact have any particular normative purchase? Do these empirical changes give us greater access to the good life?

Let's do a thought experiment. You are a citizen of Florence in the year 1500, one of the greatest and most powerful of the Renaissance city states, and you are visited by the angel of history and vouchsafed a vision of the different, nationally organized world that is to come. After listening to a speech in the public square, you turn toward your companion and exclaim:

Hey, you're not going to believe this, but there's going to be, starting in a hundred years or so, the birth of an amazing thing called the nation state, and everything henceforth will be organized on a gigantically different scale. There will be an extraordinary compression of time and space, and everything, I mean everything, will be subject to the new law of nationalization. Someday, everything we take for granted -- about economic life, war, science, customs, politics, religion, education -- will be based, not on this little puny city or even a region, but on the great entity that will be called the nation.

Would you have been right, in that long ago Florentine time, to be so excited? Did nationalization turn out to be anything so great? It did represent a new compression of space, time, and meaning, and it did mark a new period of immense historical

significance. But was it liberating in the normative sense? Did it have any particular moral purchase? Should we have heralded it in the kind of utopian manner that institutional and intellectual entrepreneurs today speak about globalization?

The enthusiasm of our Florentine ancestor may be excused. The movement toward the city-state had once promised enlightenment, freedom, and justice, and he was already beginning to feel its restrictive corruptions full face. The promise of expanding to the national field seemed to provide a way out of that urban cul-de-sac. It might well have made universalism seem possible, just as the city had before. But this later promise to make the universal concrete turned out no differently. The social and moral possibilities of nationalization were, in the end, rather more limited than its institutional and ideological entrepreneurs had thought.

This caution must hold also for the phase of time-space-meaning expansion that constitutes globalization today. It is a mundane process that, in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has created at least as much trouble as possibility. The reach of markets has dramatically expanded, producing and distributing on a wider scale than ever before. These economic processes, however, have contributed as much to exploitation and commodification as to wealth creation and economic participation. Information from distant parts of the world has become increasingly available in real time. But information has not itself become free floating and universalized; even the most rapidly circulated and easily available information remains attached to particular world views, interests and powers. Rather than having displaced enslaving religious dogmas for liberating reason, such globalizing ideologies as nationalism, communism, fascism, and economic liberalism have merely provided secular versions of dogmatic constraint. Like the earlier

world-historical belief systems that emerged from the Axial age, these modern ideologies have created supplicants and priests. In the name of purification and world transformation, they have justified massive violence and created havoc and mayhem on a global scale. It is hardly surprising, in light of this modernist legacy, that so-called traditional religion has recently found the global stage a new life.

As the world's territory has been scaled down from empires and up from cities, globalizing rhetorics charged nation-states with the mission of democracy and equality. It has been much more likely, however, for the new nations to become iron cages of suppression, with the "universalism of the people" becoming a camouflage for primordiality of some primitive kind. If nations represented a new phase of time/space/meaning compression, their expansionary powers have not necessarily been linked to individual freedom or civil rights. The origins of international law in the Treaty of Westphalia brought the immensely destructive wars of religion to an end, but it did so by underscoring national sovereignty. The treaty gave freedom and respect not to individuals but to states. We live still according to the tradition of international law that has nothing intrinsically to do with human rights. With the significant but partial exception of the European Union, which itself represents regional power, no larger, more impartial, more universalistic, and more democratic entity has yet taken over from the nation-state.

These sober reflections about 20<sup>th</sup> century globalization are underscored when we consider war, the national form of organized violence so conspicuously neglected by classical and modern social theory. Has it not been the very compression of time, space, and meaning that has allowed destructive violence and mass murder to become so world-

wide? The utopian vision of a cosmopolitan and boundary-less civil society eloquently espoused by Kant emerged just as the ideal of a democratic civil sphere was becoming firmly instantiated in the revolutionary nation state. Napoleon rode alongside Kant. Since that time, the imperial idea of reshaping the world in the name of universal ideals has been related to war, whether waged for a French warrior's vision of "Europe," a Russian commissar's plan for communism in one country, a German dictator's scheme for a *Volk Gemeinschaft*, or a new and democratic world order as envisioned by the United States.

Yet, while we must resist the impulse to fold normative aspirations for a "global imaginary" into the mundane empirical processes of globalization, we should not desist from trying to steer time/space/meaning compression in normatively more compelling way. There are democratic possibilities that the new phase of globalization opens up. In thinking about the resources available for this normative task, we should consider why the current expansion of organizational and culture power has been called "globalization" at all. To answer this question, we need to return to the possibility I mentioned at the outset. If the social and cultural processes involved in contemporary time-space-meaning compression are not radically new but mundane, it may well be that the sense of its newness is in the name, in the signifier and not the signified. We must understand "globalization," in other words, as a process of social representation.

Why has "globalization" emerged as a dominant new imaginary? What discourse does it crystallize, what fears does it carry, and what hopes does it represent?

"Globalization" appeared as response to the trauma of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a moment of hope when it seemed, not for the first time, that the possibility for a world-wide civil society was finally at hand. Since before the Enlightenment, the idea of world peace has

accompanied the expansion of organizational and cultural power. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century on, the political theory of high and organic intellectuals alike has articulated the idea of peaceful conflict resolution through the concept of civil power. The possibility for civil control, as opposed to military violence or political domination, can be traced back to the idea of the social contract, to the Lockean vision of consensual agreement and persuasion in contrast with the Hobbesian resort to force and fraud. Sociologically, the idea of civil society points to the idea of a liberal discourse that is at once critical and tolerant, and to institutions, from factual and fictional mass media to voting and law, that allow collectivities to be guided by symbolic communication among independent and rational citizens who feel bound by ties of solidarity and mutual obligation.

In what has been called the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the “Age of Equipoise” that followed upon the end of the Napoleonic wars, there was the sense, not only among Euro-American elites, that such cosmopolitan peace was close at hand. It seemed possible to believe that, alongside the expansion of organizational and cultural power, there was emerging an expanded international civil sphere. That this civil utopian vision of a peaceful world was shadowed by the expansion of colonial conquest outside Europe is a fearful symmetry only visible from our own time.

This dream of reason was shattered by the First World War. For intellectuals and artists, and thoughtful men and women on every side, the war exposed the barbarism that contradicted modernity’s promise to create a more civil society. If that first globalizing war exposed the ugly face of military nationalism that threatened cosmopolitan peace, so much more so did the totalitarianisms that emerged during its wake. The Second World

War marked a globalizing battle over the very possibility for modern societies to be organized in civil way.

In the wake of these war traumas, the victors promised to renew the dream of cosmopolitan peace. The utopia discourse of world civil society was even embedded in formally democratic institutional regimes, the quasi-world governments of first the League of Nations and then the United Nations. The ideas for these repair efforts were provided by such high intellectuals as Bertrand Russell and implemented by such organic intellectuals as Ralph Bunche. Yet, the carrier groups for these efforts at renewing the cosmopolitan dream were the victorious national hegemon themselves. Such an infrastructure of national power belied the aspirations for a global civil order. When strains at the level of nation-states became too intense, the League of Nations was destroyed. It had been hobbled from its beginnings, of course, by America's refusal to join. The United Nations was undermined even more quickly, by the division of the postwar universalizing spirit into the fighting camps of the Cold War. The rhetoric on both sides of this great divide rang the bells of international peace, but in the background one could always hear the sound of war.

When the third world war of the short 20<sup>th</sup> century was finished, there were once again utopian hopes for the repair of civil society and the creation of world peace. The utopian representation "globalization" first emerged in the late 1980s, as the Cold War wound down. As this new collective representation gained power, in the decade following, it looked like a world civil society was finally at hand. This time around, the high and organic intellectuals were former former activists and peacenicks, post-Marxist and liberal leftists who had campaigned for peace against the Vietnam war in the U.S.,

for “Europe” and against national boundaries on the continent, and for nuclear disarmament on both sides. International law would be based, not on the rights of sovereign nations, but on individual and human rights. National force was pledged to multinational, not national interest, to a new world order in which peace and civil respect would reign. The Security Council of the United Nations was approached as if it were a global democratic forum in which rational discussion could affect the distribution of wealth and the application of power.

Once again, however, this moment of equipoise was underpinned by a national infrastructure. It was the victors in the Cold War who were most excited about globalization; the losers were more interested in national reconstruction and restoring regional strength. It was the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, who gave commencement addresses on civil society as the key to world peace. It was NATO that intervened in Kosovo. It should not be surprising that this most recent dream for cosmopolitan peace reigned for scarcely more than a decade. The post-war collective effervescence in which globalization became such a powerful new representation came to an end with the election in America of George W. Bush. National interest was unabashedly reasserted, global agreements cancelled, and global conferences and institutions boycotted. As the President and neo-conservative politicians and intellectuals handled and channeled the national trauma of September 11, 2001, it highlighted anticivil violence and global fragmentation and pointed to a Hobbesian struggle between civilizations. Collective violence once again came to be waged by nations and blocs, with divisive rather than unifying effects for the world scene.

These events were experienced by the intellectuals promoting globality, and by its organized carrier groups, not merely as disappointment but betrayal. For explanation, many turned to anti-Americanism, the long-standing culture structure which divides good and evil by polluting the United States and purifying any collectivity, ideology, or region that comes to represent the other side. No matter how culturally satisfying, however, this interpretation elides the systemic processes at play. The structures and the ideologies of the world are still primarily organized nationally, and hardly at all in a globally civil way. As long as this organizational structure is maintained, if and when other states amass extraordinarily asymmetrical power, they will undoubtedly act in a similar way.

To accept anti-Americanism as explanation rather than as interpretation, moreover, misses the ambiguous and often productive role that this cultural trop often has played. To pollute America as a hegemon is to make deviant anti-civil actions as such, not merely the United States. By creating a stark if simplifying contrast between “American” action, on the one side, and a more civil sort of global power, this binary has the effect of allowing the purifying power of the globalization representation to be sustained. In February, 2003, in the days just before the American invasion of Iraq, the meaning of this cultural confrontation, and the stakes involved, were clearly displayed on the front page of the *New York Times*. Reporting the massive demonstrations that had unfolded throughout the world on the previous day, a *Times* correspondent wrote: “The fracturing of the Western alliance over Iraq and the huge antiwar demonstrations around the world this weekend are reminders that there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.” Apparently factual, this statement must be seen rather as interpretive reconstruction. It framed these empirical events in a

globally civil way. They are presented as transpiring on the public stage of the world, and America is portrayed, not as an elect but as a particularistic nation, confronting not the evil of an Iraqi dictator but the world as a civil, rationally-organized society: “President Bush appears to be eyeball to eyeball with a tenacious new adversary: millions of people who flooded the streets of New York and dozens of world cities to say they are against war based on the evidence at hand.”<sup>1</sup>

There is not a world government to curb a hegemonic state bent on defending its interests as nationally conceived. The nascent global civil sphere has none of the institutions that, in a fully functioning democracy, allow public opinion to produce civil power and thus regulate the state, such as independent courts, party competition, and elections. Yet this nascent global civil sphere does have access to institutions of a more communicative kind. Despite different languages and separated ownership and organization, national news stories construct extra-national events in a manner that often reveals a high level of intertextuality, creating the common understandings and interpretations that allow there to be putatively global events. These “factual” understandings are sustained by the intense circulation around the globe of “fictional” mass media, which are far from being merely entertaining in their cultural effects. These fictional media are movies, television dramas, novels, music, and the international brands whose consumption is creating a more common material culture worldwide.

It is within this symbolic and institutionally constructed sea of global public opinion that there emerges the world stage, on which transpire polls, demonstrations, social movements, scandals, corruptions, terrorism, electoral triumphs, and tragedies,

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, “A New Power in the the Streets: A Message to Bush Not to Rush to War.” *New York Times*, February 17, 2003, A1.

performances that palpably create the very sense that there is a supra-national life. It is within this febrile and often highly unstable membrane of global consciousness that international institutions and nongovernmental organizations create forms of governmentality, from agreements over labor conditions and world health to regulations about the environment and land mines. The rules and resources that sustain governmentality, as opposed to government, rest on consensus and agreement rather than on the violence-backed power of a state.

The dream of cosmopolitan peace has not died. The foreful hope for creating a global civil sphere remains. It is embodied in the collective representation of globalization, which has organizational integuments and political and economic effects. There is a global stage in which local events are evaluated, not only nationally or ethnically, but according to the standards of the civil sphere. Before this stage sits an idealized audience of world citizens. Sometimes the performances projected to this audience are initiated by avowedly global actors. More often, they reflect local scripts national actors, which are projected on the world stage and evaluated according to the principles of cosmopolitan peace and by the discourse and interactions of civil life.

Since the first national institutionalizations of civil societies, there has been imagined the possibility for a civil sphere on a supra-national scale. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the trope of “oriental despotism” emerged, reconfiguring colonialism into a fight for civil power on a global scale. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Lisbon earthquake became a trauma for Europe and offered a sentimental education for “all mankind.” In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the moral movement against anti-slavery achieved political success by generating moral empathy, extending solidarity and psychological identification to

nonwhite others for the first time. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the narration and memorialization of the Holocaust formed a powerful basis for expanding moral universalism, establishing genocide as a principle for evaluating national, ethnic, and religious power. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, globalization emerged as a new representation on the fragile public stage of world life. Tied to organizational processes that are enlarging the scope of institutional and cultural power, it promises to sustain the dream of cosmopolitan peace in a more compelling manner than has been possible up until this time. It will be a powerfully contested symbolic power in the new century.