

Globalization

Globalization has become one of the principal symbols of economic, cultural and political life in the 21st century. Although there is no precise definition of globalization, due to the complexity of the term and the varying attitudes towards it, put simply it is the process by which nationality is becoming all the time more irrelevant. However, it is obviously more complicated an issue than that, it has also being defined as ‘a set of processes which represents a change in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions, expressed in transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity’. (Held & McGrew 00:55) Others define it as ‘the widening, intensifying, speeding up, and growing impact of world-wide interconnectedness.’ (www.polity.co.uk)

In layman’s terms, globalization is basically the means by which people around the globe are now more connected to each other than ever before. Information and money flow more swiftly than ever and goods and services produced in one part of the globe are progressively more obtainable worldwide. International travel is also more frequent and international communication is routine.

While there can be no uncertainty about many of the modern day phenomenon’s being recent developments, such as the internet for example, globalization it is argued, has been an ongoing process for some time. Perhaps the first sign of globalization occurred centuries if not millennia ago, at which time spices were been imported into Europe and Egypt from Asia. However, it was not until around 200 B.C, that regular trade routes between the eastern and western ends of the Eurasian landmass were established and globalization began to flourish. (O’Rourke 99:1)

Since Columbus and De Gama sailed from Europe more than 500 years ago, globalization has evolved in fits and starts. The first great globalization boom occurred in the fifty years or so prior to World War I. Many commentators on the topic have even accepted the fact that globalization was more developed along some of its dimensions in that time, than it is today. The First World War disrupted the growth of globalization for more than a generation and following the Second World War; globalization again emerged as a trend.

Globalization as we know it today, is vastly different from its humble beginnings. It first appeared in the English dictionary in 1961. This marked the beginnings of clear recognition in the modern period of the growing importance of the global connectedness of social events and relationships. (Scott 97:257)

The origins of this current wave of globalization are two conflicting, yet complementary forces. These forces being firstly, the early efforts by well-meaning people to build a superior tomorrow, and secondly, the long-term efforts by determined corporations to build superior profits. An example of the former is the European Union. Originating shortly after World War II, forward-looking people in France and Germany decided to closely monitor and integrate their countries' coal and steel output, in the hope of making their economic interdependence a serious obstacle to the warpath. They achieved their goal of preventing war and at the same time significantly helped the development of globalization.

In the 21st century, globalization has had a variety of impacts on international politics. In fact, it has been the predominant trend shaping the politics of the world since the 1980's. However, contrasting views do exist in relation to globalization, so it's imperative to assess both the positive and negative impacts of this development.

The Positive Impacts of Globalization

So is the world a better place as a result of globalization? Well, this is a question that rouses much debate. Advocates of globalization point to the many improvements in the world, which they claim result from globalization.

Improvements such as the creation of a new world politics, in which states are not closed units anymore. Although some people believe that the state will wither away and matter less in the era of globalization, there is very little proof to support this theory. Whilst one cannot deny that free trade limits the ability of states to set policy and defend domestic companies, the effects of this have been limited, since global economic integration is still at a relatively low level. What's more, numerous opinion polls carried out around the world have indicated that political loyalties remain primarily fixed at the national level. It appears that the public are still of the opinion that nations, and nations alone, can provide a forum for the political expression of the popular desire. So one can conclude that in a more integrated world, nation-states may even become more important. They have a special role to play in creating conditions for growth and compensating for the effects of economic competition, whilst they are also key players in formulating treaties that address global problems.

The world economy is more interdependent than ever before. The most powerful image of this interdependent world is contained in the family of depictions, which surround globalization. It has been portrayed as the 'end of sovereignty' and the 'borderless world' to name but a few.

(Fry & O'Hagan 00:249)

The revolutionary explosion of information and communication technology is another advantage of globalization. The fastest growing instrument of communication, the internet, allows individuals from different regions and cultures, to communicate speedily across huge distances and to access information rapidly. The combined effects of this is witnessed by the steady acceleration in the rate at which human beings experience changes in their economic lives and an apparent reduction in the spaces that separate them from their fellows. (Barry-Jones 00:9) This revolution has also played a fundamental role in the development of multinational corporations and global financial markets.

The world now shares a common culture and there is a general growth in the homogeneity of the world's people. Much of this is due to the fact that democracy is spreading rapidly. Between 1975 and 1995, the number of democracies in the world underwent a significant increase from thirty-six to seventy-eight states, coinciding with a globalization boom. The combining of the institutions and practices of democracy with the effective governance of global authorities has being of great importance. For example, the recent Lockerbie bombing trials have taken place in the Netherlands under Scottish law. This could not have occurred without such close links between nations, a benefit of globalization. Globalization is not, as some suggest, narrowing or foreclosing political choices and discussion. It is in fact, enlightening and revitalizing the modern political environment. (www.free-trade.org/issues)

For less developed countries, globalization offers access to foreign capital, global export markets, and advanced technology while breaking the monopoly of inefficient domestic producers. Faster growth, in turn, promotes poverty reduction, democratisation, and higher environmental standards. While globalization may confront government officials with more difficult choices, it raises the productivity and living standards of people in countries that open

themselves to the global marketplace. The result for their citizens is greater individual freedom.

Globalization has been coupled with reductions in pollution levels. The theory is simple; market competition imposes a never-ending drive for efficiency and innovation. Since pollution results from the waste of a resource input, rising industrial competency results in lowered pollution. Economic expansion has also generated the required prosperity to invest in pollution control. A study in America showed that between 1970 and 1997, total air pollution actually decreased by about 31 percent. (www.cascadepolicy.org)

Globalization offers numerous advantages, but we need a more careful consideration of the relative advantages of markets and states if we are to realize them. (www.humanities.mcmaster.ca)

The Negative Impacts of Globalization

In contrast to the above arguments in favour of globalization, there are opponents who insist that globalization is indeed a negative development for humanity. They regard it with hostility, believing that it increases inequality within and between nations. (www.imf.org) Globalization sceptics offer their own definition of globalization; they perceive it to be ‘the rapid expansion of coordinated trade and economic development around the world, without the same incorporation of human rights and labour standards.’ (www.earthtimes.org) Despite the fact that anti-globalists are in the minority, ignore them at your peril. The massive anti-WTO protests in Seattle, USA in 1999 is testament to this fact. Full-scale protests and mass arrests continued for days on that occasion, culminating in 600 arrests and an estimated US\$3 million in property damage. (www.motherjones.com)

Sceptics argue that globalization paralyses governmental efforts to subject worldwide economic forces to regulation and control. A seismic shift in the global economy has occurred, resulting in the 100 largest economies in the world today consisting of only 49 states while the remaining 51 economies are transnational corporations. (www.civiced.org) In many people’s opinion, this is becoming far too unbalanced, and it is not a healthy situation to be in. The general feeling amongst the international community being that the majority of power should not be vested in private enterprises but should remain with the Nation-States as it has done since the Westphalian state system was introduced. The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 formally recognized the principles of territorial sovereignty, each party to the treaty agreed to honour the boundaries of the others and to refrain from interfering in their internal affairs. It’s claimed that globalization is assaulting this national sovereignty. This current shift

in power is emphasised by some startling statistics; for example, the GDP of the six largest Japanese trading companies is almost as big as that of all the nations of Latin America combined. (www.globalisationguide.org)

It's argued that the effects of globalization are uneven. This point is illustrated through the reality that the income gap between high-income and low-income countries has grown since the expansion of globalization. But it is incorrect to assume that globalization has caused this disparity, or that nothing can be done to improve the circumstances. The reason low-income countries have not been able to integrate with the global economy as quickly as others is in part due to their chosen policies and partly because of factors outside their control. No country, especially the poorer nations, can continue to remain cut off from the world economy. (www.imf.org/external) So even if globalization has failed much of the developing world in modern times, it surely must be the way forward.

Another valid complaint is that globalization does make it more difficult to prevent against transnationally orchestrated crimes such as drug trafficking and terrorism. The latter point has been taken much to heart after the recent atrocities of the September 11th terrorist attacks in America. Such internationally coordinated terrorism wouldn't have been possible without the free movement of goods and persons, which are the hallmark of globalization.

Accountability is another worry among opponents of globalization. Since the development and growth of multi-national corporations has occurred, who are they now accountable to? It's more difficult for any nation-state to intervene in any wrongdoing, since the corporation is likely to have support from other states where it has a base, and therefore provides employment and helps the economy of the country.

The reversibility of globalization is another cause for concern, such an action did occur in the inter-war period between WWI and WWII. Supporters of globalization will argue that this was a direct result of the two great wars, however, a retreat from liberal economic policies had already begun prior to WWI, due to the uneven distribution of globalization. (O'Rourke 99:1) Many nation-states felt they weren't prospering as well as others from globalization and returned to their more domestic economic practices. A good example of this is Japan, which currently has a lower share of exports in GDP than it had in the inter-war period. (Held & McGrew 00:325) Another recent case of this reversibility is the 1997 financial crash in East Asia, which further proved the volatility of globalization.

A major concern of anti-globalists relates to the safety of our environment. Detrimental environmental effects such as global warming, pollution and the danger of nuclear war being the principal concerns. All of these are linked to globalization. The terrifying consequences of any of these elements value no national boundaries. Understanding the seriousness of these effects, no matter what an individual's nationality or cultural identity, has heightened the awareness of the process of the growing interconnectedness of national societies. The more widespread and concentrated people's reliance on each other becomes globally, the more it is in their shared interest to diminish these harmful effects. (Scott 97:258)

Opponents of globalization argue that it facilitates an increase in the amount of discrimination and other abuses of human rights occurring in public domains. The technical difficulty of regulating the content of messages makes the internet a particularly effective means of misusing freedom of expression. As Mary Robinson said during her time as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'In considering this issue, we must keep in mind that the right of freedom of expression is a precious fundamental right - any attempt to restrict it must be approached with absolute care and considered within the strict parameters of human

rights norms.' Her point is a valid one because although the internet has made it easier for people to publicly display feelings of hatred and racism, freedom of expression is a basic human right and cannot be revoked.

Conclusion

In concluding this debate on globalization, it is important to note that it has a dual nature. Globalization bodes both good and ill for mankind. It's significantly altering the traditional Westphalian state system, upon which the fundamental principles of global politics have been based since its inception in 1648. Globalization challenges the viability of such a non-transnational system in this age of information, leading to criticisms that it's somewhat of an outdated entity. However, the role of the Nation-State should not be undermined.

Despite this concern, the opportunities of globalization represent great power, along with great promise. The march of globalization continues, and with each step it takes, socio-economic and political changes and tensions are unearthed. The task ahead is not to try and reverse globalization, which would be a futile effort in any case, but instead to harness its positive potential while managing its adverse effects. So it's now up to mankind to determine whether or not the power will be cleverly used, and the promise fulfilled. The bottom line is that to argue the inherent merits and dangers of globalization may obscure the fact that globalization is here to stay whether we like it or not.

