

# Globalization: myth or reality?

Our final task in this introduction is to offer you a summary of the main arguments for and against globalization as a distinct new phase in world politics. We do not expect you to decide where you stand on the issue at this stage, but we think that we should give you some of the main arguments so that you can keep them in mind as you read the rest of this book. Because the arguments for globalization as an important new phase of world politics have been rehearsed earlier in this introduction—and also because they are most effectively summarized in Chapter 1—we shall spend a little more time on the criticisms. The main arguments in favour of globalization comprising a new era of world politics are:

- 1 The pace of economic transformation is so great that it has created a new world politics. States are no longer closed units and they cannot control their economies. The world economy is more interdependent than ever, with trade and finances ever expanding.
- 2 Communications have fundamentally revolutionized the way we deal with the rest of the world. We now live in a world where events in one location can be immediately observed on the other side of the world. Electronic communications alter our notions of the social groups we work with and live in.
- 3 There is now, more than ever before, a global culture, so that most urban areas resemble one another. Much of the urban world shares a common culture, much of it emanating from Hollywood.
- 4 The world is becoming more homogeneous. Differences between peoples are diminishing.
- 5 Time and space seem to be collapsing. Our old ideas of geographical space and of chronological time are undermined by the speed of modern communications and media.
- 6 There is emerging a global polity, with transnational social and political movements and the beginnings of a transfer of allegiance from the state to sub-state, transnational, and international bodies.
- 7 A cosmopolitan culture is developing. People are beginning to 'think globally and act locally'.
- 8 A risk culture is emerging, with people realizing both that the main risks that face them are global (pollution and HIV/AIDS) and that states are unable to deal with the problems.

However, just as there are powerful reasons for seeing globalization as a new stage in world politics, often allied to the view that globalization is progressive—that it improves the lives of people—there are also arguments that suggest the opposite. Some of the main ones are:

- 1 One obvious objection to the globalization thesis is that globalization is merely a buzzword to denote the latest phase of capitalism. In a very powerful critique of globalization theory, Hirst and Thompson (1996) argue that one effect of the globalization thesis is that it makes it appear as if national governments are powerless in the face of global trends. This ends up paralysing governmental attempts to subject global economic forces to control and regulation. Believing that most globalization theory lacks historical depth, they point out that it paints the current situation as more unusual than it is, and also as more firmly entrenched than it might in fact be. Current trends may well be reversible. Hirst and Thompson conclude that the more extreme versions of globalization are 'a myth', and they support this claim with five main conclusions from their study of the contemporary world economy (1996: 2–3). First, the present internationalized economy is not unique in history. In some respects they say it is less open than the international economy was between 1870 and 1914. Second, they find that 'genuinely' transnational companies are relatively rare; most are national companies trading internationally. There is no trend towards the development of international companies. Third, there is no shift of finance and capital from the developed to the underdeveloped world. Direct investment is highly concentrated among the countries of the developed world. Fourth, the world economy is not global; rather trade, investment, and financial flows are concentrated in and between three blocs—Europe, North America, and Japan. Finally, they argue that this group of three blocs could, if they coordinated policies, regulate global economic markets and forces. Note that Hirst and Thompson are looking only at economic theories of globalization, and many of the main accounts deal with factors such as communications and culture more than economics. Nonetheless, theirs is a



very powerful critique of one of the main planks of the more extreme globalization thesis, with their central criticism that seeing the global economy as something beyond our control both misleads us and prevents us from developing policies to control the national economy. All too often we are told that our economy must obey 'the global market'. Hirst and Thompson believe that this is a myth.

2 Another obvious objection is that globalization is very uneven in its effects. At times it sounds very much like a Western theory applicable only to a small part of humankind. To pretend that even a small minority of the world's population can connect to the Internet is clearly an exaggeration when in reality most people on the planet have probably never made a telephone call in their lives. In other words, globalization applies only to the developed world. In the rest of the world, there is nothing like this degree of globalization. We are in danger of overestimating the extent and the depth of globalization.

3 A related objection is that globalization may well be simply the latest stage of Western imperialism. It is the old modernization theory in a new guise. The forces that are being globalized are conveniently those found in the Western world. What about non-Western values? Where do they fit into this emerging global world? The worry is that they do not fit in at all, and what is being celebrated in globalization is the triumph of a Western worldview, at the expense of the worldviews of other cultures.

4 Critics have also noted that there are very considerable losers as the world becomes more globalized. This is because globalization represents the success of liberal capitalism in an economically divided world. Perhaps one outcome is that globalization allows the more efficient exploitation of less well-off nations, and all in the name of openness. The technologies accompanying globalization are technologies that automatically benefit the richest economies in the world, and allow their interests to override local ones. Not only is globalization imperialist; it is also exploitative.

5 We also need to make the straightforward point that not all globalized forces are necessarily good ones. Globalization makes it easier for drug cartels and terrorists to operate, and the Internet's anarchy raises crucial questions of censorship and preventing access to certain kinds of material.

6 Turning to the so-called global governance aspects of globalization, the main worry here is about responsibility. To whom are the transnational

social movements responsible and democratically accountable? If IBM or Shell becomes more and more powerful in the world, does this not raise the issue of how accountable it is to democratic control? David Held has made a strong case for the development of what he calls cosmopolitan democracy (1995), but this has clearly defined legal and democratic features. The worry is that most of the emerging powerful actors in a globalized world precisely are not accountable. This argument also applies to seemingly 'good' global actors such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace.

7 Finally, there seems to be a paradox at the heart of the globalization thesis. On the one hand, it is usually portrayed as the triumph of Western, market-led values. But how do we then explain the tremendous economic success that some national economies have had in the globalized world? Consider the so-called 'Tigers' of Asia—countries such as Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Korea, which have enjoyed some of the highest growth rates in the international economy but, according to some, subscribe to very different 'Asian' values. These nations emphatically reject certain 'Western' values, and yet they have had enormous economic success. The paradox, then, is whether these countries can continue to modernize so successfully without adopting Western values. If they can, then what does this do to one of the main themes of the globalization literature, namely the argument that globalization represents the spreading across the globe of a set of values? If these countries do continue to follow their own roads towards economic and social modernization, then we must anticipate future disputes between 'Western' and 'Asian' values over issues like human rights, gender, and religion.

We hope that these arguments for and against the dominant way of representing globalization will cause you to think deeply about the utility of the concept of globalization in explaining contemporary world politics. The chapters that follow do not take a common stance for or against globalization. We shall end by posing some questions that we would like you to keep in mind as you read the remaining chapters:

- Is globalization a new phenomenon in world politics?
- Which theory discussed above best explains globalization?
- Is globalization a positive or a negative development?



- Is globalization merely the latest stage of capitalist development?
- Does globalization make the state obsolete?
- Does globalization make the world more or less democratic?
- Is globalization merely Western imperialism in a new guise?
- Does globalization make war more or less likely?
- In what ways is war a globalizing force in itself?

We hope that this introduction and the chapters that follow help you to answer these questions, and that this book as a whole provides you with a good overview of the politics of the contemporary world. Whether or not you conclude that globalization is a new phase in world politics, whether you think it is a positive or a negative development, or whether you conclude that it

doesn't really exist at all, we leave you to decide. But I think it important to conclude this chapter by stressing that globalization—whether a new form of world politics, merely a new name for an age-old set of features, or something else—clearly is a very complex phenomenon that is contradictory and difficult to comprehend. Not all people in the world share a view of globalization as a progressive force in world politics. It is not one thing. How we think about politics in the global era will reflect not merely the theories we accept, but our own positions in this globalized world. In this sense, how we respond to world events may itself be ultimately dependent on the social, cultural, economic, and political spaces we occupy. In other words, world politics suddenly becomes very personal: how does your economic position, your ethnicity, gender, culture, or your religion determine what globalization means to you?

## Further Reading



There are several good introductory guides to the globalization debate. A comprehensive discussion is found in **A. McGrew and D. Held** (2007), *Globalization Theory: Approaches and Controversies* (Cambridge: Polity Press). See also **D. Held and A. McGrew** (eds) (2003), *The Global Transformations Reader*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity Press). **J. A. Scholte** (2005), *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan) offers a good overview of aspects of globalization. Also see **C. el-Ojeili and P. Hayden** (2006), *Critical Theories of Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

**A. McGrew and P. Lewis** (1992), *Global Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press) is a good collection of essays about global politics and contains some very relevant chapters on the relationship between the three theories discussed above and globalization. **R. Robertson** (1992), *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage) is a very widely cited survey of the relations between globalization and global culture. **J. N. Rosenau and E.-D. Czempiel** (1992), *Governance without Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) is a good collection of essays dealing with the political aspects of globalization. **C. Enloe** (2007), *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield) is a good analysis from a leading feminist of the connections between globalization and various forms of violence. **K. Mahbubani** (2013), *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World* (New York: PublicAffairs) provides an interesting analysis of the argument that a power shift is needed to reflect new global political realities.

We would also point you to other books in the Rowman & Littlefield series on 'globalization' edited by **M. B. Steger and T. Carver**, in particular **S. Krishna** (2008), *Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-first Century* and **V. M. Moghadam** (2008), *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*.

Excellent critiques of the globalization thesis are **J. Rosenberg** (2002), *The Follies of Globalization Theory* (London: Verso), **D. Held and A. McGrew** (2002), *Globalization/Anti-*

globalization (Cambridge: Polity Press), **B. Gills** (ed.) (2002), *Globalization and the Politics of Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), **B. K. Gills and W. R. Thompson** (eds) (2006), *Globalization and Global History* (London: Routledge), **Joseph Stiglitz** (2003), *Globalization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin) and (2006), *Making Globalization Work* (New York: W. W. Norton), **R. Falk** (1999), *Predatory Globalization: A Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press), **L. Weiss** (1998), *The Myth of the Powerless State* (Cambridge: Polity Press), **P. Hirst and G. Thompson** (1999), *Globalization in Question*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity Press), **T. Barkawi** (2006), *Globalization and War* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield), and **R. Kiely** (2007), *The New Political Economy of Development: Globalization, Imperialism, Hegemony* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

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