



Globalization and Its Discontents

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The buzzword ‘globalization’ is used in many different ways to mean many different things. Inevitably, what are thought to be its discontents vary accordingly.

World-systems theory has generally held that an early form of globalization came into being as early as the sixteenth century, with the vast European conquests in the hitherto unknown New World, the turning of the Pacific into what the Spanish rulers called *mare clausum*, the lockhold on trans-Asian maritime commerce by, successively, the Portuguese, the Dutch, and eventually the British, and the subjection of the western shores of Africa to a vast, cruel trans-Atlantic trade in human flesh. Some decades back, world-systems theory also posited as a central phenomenon the division of the world into cores/metropolises with overweening military and economic power, and in receding planetary circles around them, subordinated semi-peripheries and Pluto-like outer-peripheries. I have a good deal of sympathy with this large, historical, and Marxist-derived perspective.

Those, however, who think globalization is really something modern have different ideas. One view is that globalization (politically speaking) was born with the normative standardization of the nation-state around the world. Here the decisive period is 1911–19, when the Ottoman, Hohenzollern, Ching, Romanov, and Habsburg ‘multinational’ empires were undone. In that decade, the age-old normalcy of monarchy came to an abrupt end (politically active monarchs lingered only in scattered locations, like Japan and Ethiopia, but for not very long). With it went any means of long-term continuation of the colonial order (created

overwhelmingly by monarchical states). Perhaps the clearest sign of this was that the UK, one of the victors of World War I, lost one quarter of its ‘home’ territory, what came to be Éire, within five years of the war’s end. Sinn Féin was already a household term in colonial Burma, whose young patriots translated the name (*Thakin*) and applied it to themselves. As for France, the other major European victor, the same ‘five years war’ saw the beginnings of a modern form of resistance both in Vietnam and Algeria — a sign that the discontents of this form of globalization were producing effective political oppositions. More powerfully and deeply, the normative hegemony of the nation — there were no more multinational empires inside Europe itself — was gradually understood to be fundamentally incompatible with colonialism, which could therefore no longer be regarded as a permanent condition, but rather as a period of tutelage for eventual emancipation of new ‘normal’ nation-states. Within forty years the French and British empires were largely gone, and with astonishingly little violence — although with big exceptions like Vietnam, Algeria, Kenya, and Cyprus, to say nothing of Ireland.

The ground had been laid for this new nation-state order for more than a century, starting with the explosion of new independent ex-colonial states in the Americas (from 1776 to about 1830), followed by struggles all over Europe from about 1820 onward. Its culmination — the

Margaret Corcoran
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oil on linen
46 x 61 cm
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formation of the League of Nations — also required the elimination of serious dynasticism. The striking thing about the League was that it was, as intended, a global political institution — and, historically, the first of its kind. South America was there, along with China, Japan, Thailand, and even, quite soon, Lenin's ostensibly supranational Soviet Union. The only significant power outside it from the start was the petulant United States; in the 1930s the main fascist powers — Germany, Japan, and Italy — withdrew from it, but they could not destroy it. One notes certain dates of birth: Mussolini 1883; Tojo 1884; Hitler 1889 (and one could add perhaps Stalin, 1879). These figures grew to adulthood in the last decades of the old system. They all shared twisted versions of nineteenth-century empire. But they were aberrant transitional figures. After their crushing defeat, the United Nations quickly came into being. Stalin put Byelorussia and the Ukraine into it, and made no attempt to incorporate (aside from the small Baltic states) the League's eastern European nations into the Soviet Union. Mao's China wanted in as well. The US was now the major player in the institution. Indonesia was the only country to leave and it was back within two years, when Sukarno was overthrown in a torrent of blood by the incoming Suharto dictatorship. No longer did anyone reject the normative order for which the UN stood. Decolonization swelled the UN's numbers to more than four times the League membership, and 'micro' nation-states, such as Nauru or St. Lucia, for the first time could be accepted. By the 1960s it was becoming plain that the age-old system of territorial conquest had become obsolete. Nation-states could break up into smaller pieces, but they could not expand except in the most marginal ways.

A third view of globalization focuses, with many variations in emphasis, on the century between 1848 and 1945, opening with *The Communist Manifesto* and the attempts to

create a Workers' International. Marx was the first person to see and to demonstrate that industrial capitalism was a ravenous global force far more powerful than any given empire or nation; and also the first person to come to the conclusion that it could only be effectively combated on the same global stage. Combated is really the wrong word to use; Marx believed that it could and would be overcome, dialectically, through revolution, by a new world order based on the socialization of the means of production. His successors in the Comintern and also Trotsky's Fourth International understood they were engaged in a global political struggle. This was not just official piety or rhetoric; it was a struggle they took seriously. The Soviet Union was conceived originally, not merely as a supranational polity and economy, but as one with no permanent borders, and with a vast transnational constituency. This state of affairs did not end till the Comintern was abolished by Stalin, to be replaced later by the 'European' Cominform. Independent national-communist states emerged in Asia and Europe in the late 1940s. Although today we tend to emphasize the *volkisch* and nationalist aspect of Fascism, in its heyday it followed the Soviet Union in seeing itself as a global political force, with adherents in many countries — not excluding Ireland. The so-called 'Free World' after 1947 can, in many respects, be seen as a late variant on these original models. All this implied what Habermas has called 'world domestic politics'.

The most recent conceptions of globalization largely stress the 'unprecedentedness' of the transformations especially of the past two decades. The points discussed here are familiar: the collapse of any serious form of Communist or even Socialist state, as well as the collapse of any formal, institutionalized radical global politics; the 'revolution' in communications made possible by the rapidly spreading use of computer

William Orpen
*Reflections: China
 and Japan*
 1902
 oil on canvas
 40.5 x 51 cm
 Collection Hugh Lane
 Municipal Gallery of
 Modern Art, Dublin



technology; massive transnational migrations from the Third World; the hegemony of Free Market liberalism around the globe; transnational corporations of huge size and world-wide operations; movements of finance capital on a colossal scale and at lightning speed; the linguistic domination of American English; the apparent consolidation of the European Community with the Maastricht agreements; and last, but by no means least, the position of the United States as world-hegemon, dwarfing all other nation-states in its military, political, economic, technological, and pop cult power. Also, one is tempted to add to this list, in the scale of its hypocrisy.

That list looks spectacular, but distinctions have to be made. For example, the really huge migrations into Western Europe from the Third World took place between 1945 and 1973 — on the scale of twenty million

people. In the US, however, it began only in the 1970s, when the annual intake was larger than even the highpoint immigration years around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. France actually had higher immigration rates than the US in the fifty years before World War I. There are two significant differences between then and now. First, the movement has been ever more increasingly from Asia, Africa, Spanish America and the Middle East, rather than from Eastern Europe (understood in the widest sense). Second, the migrants are no longer fleeing empires, but 'their own' nation-states. It is still worth noting their means of transportation are simply upgraded versions of what was already around in the aftermath of World War I — the airplane, gasoline-fuelled motor vehicles, steamships, and railways.

It is easy to forget that in the late nineteenth century the telegraph already made near-



Gino Severini
*Quaker Oats –
Cubist Still Life*
1917
oil on canvas
62 x 51 cm
Estorick Collection of
Modern Italian Art, London

1 The Republic of Ireland helped crucified East Timor to join the UN. No country in Europe did more, and no country did it so unselfishly and so 'globally'; but what if the East Timorese had been Buddhist or Muslim, rather than Catholic?

instantaneous communication around the world not only feasible but quite cheap. By the twenties, state, commercial, and personal 'ham' radio already had the same reach. Hollywood has been around for almost a hundred years. A century and a half ago, Sir James Bowring, with a panache that Madison Avenue still cannot better, had proclaimed that 'Free Trade is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is Free Trade.' And until about 1900 imperial Britain was more genuinely free market than the USA has ever been. It is also easy for people without much historical memory to overlook the scale, speed, and speculative character of finance capital as it had already developed a century ago — witness the celebrated works of Hobson, Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg and others. What is really unprecedented is primarily the current hegemony of the United States, the largest debtor in world history; 'globalization' is simply an academic-bureaucratic euphemism for that hegemony.

If this diagnosis of globalization is accurate, what are its peculiar social, political, and cultural outcomes — including its discontents? Many of these can be listed under the terms 'dispersion', 'fragmentation', 'localization'. It is striking, for example, that as 'globalization' speeds up, the number of new states in the UN increases, inevitably by the break-up or fragmentation of other states. The most spectacular example is the former Soviet Union.¹ Tibet, Taiwan, Kurdistan, Assam, Western Sahara, West Papua all wait in line. It is not at all clear that transnational capital will find such entities that much easier to deal with than Turkey, Indonesia, Morocco or even China. For all its weaknesses, the nation-state remains an indispensable institution through which those who so wish can work to restrain today's 'evil empire', helping to create compliance with the elementary rules needed to preserve the planet from environmental disaster, and from the worst

instruments of violence. One can see this need from looking at the history of labour's struggles; a myriad of strikes, slowdowns, demonstrations, fistfights and sabotage were the indispensable first steps. But the gains could only be made durable when they were incorporated into generally applicable legal statutes, and when bureaucracies with enforcement powers had been created. When a statute was in place forbidding the use of child labour in mines, and mine-owners had to fear prison if they disobeyed, this kind of abuse really did largely come to an end.

When I first went to study about Asia in the United States, over forty years ago, there was still a unified Hit Parade of popular music, New York City still had several reasonable newspapers, and television was ruled by the hegemonic triumvirate of CBS–NBC–ABC. All of this has long disappeared. The popular music world has been completely fragmented, with a dozen or more mini-Top Tens — Rhythm and Blues, Bluegrass, Rap, Soul, Blues, Dixieland, Folk, Rock-folk, Reggae, and so on. Intensification of advertising, technical development, and the rise of vast conglomerates, have enormously extended 'consumer choice'. The most striking outcome is that the listener can stay tuned twenty-four hours a day to specialized niche-stations which play only the kind of music she likes. She is no longer 'forced' to listen to the wide spectrum which in music means the 'public sphere'. Niche-marketing has had a further strange consequence. In the 1960s, when Gil Scott-Heron's foundational 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' came at you out of the blue, sandwiched between something by Sinatra and something by Earl Scruggs and his Kentucky Bluegrass band, it still could be felt as a riveting personal cry in the wilderness. But niche-ing has made it quite feasible to have 'The Revolution' and its grandchildren on all the time, so that it has lost its aura and faded into the tundra of



The Great Bear



background music. The local competitors of *The New York Times* have been driven out of business, but the paper of record is still a provincial newspaper, though it has been proliferating ‘niche’ sections alarmingly. The triumvirate of old TV conglomerates has now less than a third of viewers’ loyalty, because their ‘broad general public’ is decayed and my own TV offers me, if I wish to pay, more than 150 channels, virtually all of which are ‘niche’ in one form or another. The great public institution of the cinema has long been in decline. The experience of watching, as an eleven-year-old in Waterford, the latest *Lone Ranger* at the local Savoy, along with shawlies, shame-faced young priests, mothers and snivelling children seeking some warmth in winter, hordes of pubescent boys and girls; or of watching *The Battle of Algiers* in the 1970s, in a cinema located in my small town’s small black section, is difficult to find any more. Roars of the audience, advice to the hero or heroine, curses at the villains, and repartee between the viewers, have been replaced by the solitude of home-watching via videotapes, DVD and so on. In the shops, these too are arranged strictly on the niche basis, except for the most recent. Home, hotel room, privacy: the places farthest from politics, from the crowd, and from public solidarities.

There are obviously parallel transformations in the political sphere. When I was a modestly radical student in the 1960s, I went quite often to the Free Speech Movement’s Berkeley campus, and devoured the local radical rag, famously entitled *The Berkeley Barb*. The rag’s editors were, I think, real socialists of a sort; but what struck me then was the contrast between their editorials calling for solidarity in what would later be termed a ‘rainbow coalition’, and the contrary implications of the layout of the rest of the paper, which had sections for gays and lesbians, later separated from each other, for women, for blacks, for Chicanos, for workers, for Native Americans, for Asian-Americans, for

environmentalists, for health food devotees, and so on; and each of these sections seemed to the reader a world of its own. This niche-ing process, which also has had its good sides, to be sure, has since developed ever more broadly. The American political system has adapted to the process, making fragmentary local concessions to this group or that. Yet at the same time, for three decades now, electoral participation has been in steady average decline; political scientists continue to debate what this means — mass alienation, or not? The political parties are a shadow of what they were a generation ago, single-issue campaigns proliferate, while the informal ‘permanent government’ silently consolidates itself.

These processes also have their analogue in the global arena. I have described the trend variously as the rise of internet, email, and long-distance nationalism. The vast population flows across national borders and generally in the direction of the richest and safest countries in the North are creating sizeable numbers of people for whom citizenship and nationality are largely distinct. A spectacular, and less serious aspect of this, is that a millionaire Canadian computer-mogul not so long ago ran against Lech Walesa for the presidency of Poland. Less spectacular, and a little more serious, are rich Mexicans in New York, running for the mayoralties of their hometowns in Oaxaca and Michoacan out of Manhattan apartments. But most significant — and this develops with the steady rise of dual or even triple nationality — is making use of global information and financial networks and facilities to play politics in the countries they have, for various reasons, abandoned. The famous examples are the global reach of the Tamil Tigers through the Tamil diaspora especially in Europe and North America; the destruction of the Babri mosque in India, which led to the worst sectarian violence since partition, steered by the World Hindu Council with headquarters in Britain; and most recently Al-Qaeda. One

could say that networks of this type existed in earlier decades, with the Irish republican operations in England and the United States as fitting examples. But the differences are striking. In earlier times the dog was usually wagging the tail, the activists in the homeland directing appeals for support in the diaspora; but this condition threatens to change to one where the overseas tails wag the home dogs. Croatia in the 1990s is an especially clear example.

Thus, diaspora identity politics typically means a divorce between nationality and citizenship. The new 'citizen' pays taxes, obeys the law and maybe votes once in a while in his country of chosen exile; but his real politics — which can mean propaganda, arms-running, financial interventions — are done in a place where he is not accountable, not arrestable, not taxable, and probably does not even bother to vote. This political type has been enormously stimulated by computer technology and the internet, where it is possible, twenty-four hours a day, to keep up almost instantaneously, with persons thousands of miles away, or to intervene in events at any moment he wishes. Furthermore, the crucial nets are typically self-enclosed niches. So one does Tibet twenty-four hours a day on *Tibetnet*; Sri Lanka on *Tamilnet*. The crucial thing is the contrast with even the most one-sided newspaper: the absence of a 'general public'. On the Armenian net one need never read a single thing from an Azerbaijani, but in the newspaper there is always the chance of a letter to the editor from an angry resident of Baku. These niches do not inevitably promote a delusional and even paranoid politics, but they certainly form a friendlier space for them than the older forms of public mediation. A Slovenian student of mine, an immigrant to Australia, has been studying the diasporic Croatians, Serbians, and Slovenians in that country; and his findings suggest that these people often have deluded visions of their faraway motherland, and are often more sectarian

and bigoted than the folks back home. It would be easy to find examples of the same thing among Irish in the United States, Ukrainians in Canada, Filipinos in the Netherlands, Iranians in Sweden, and the like. It is also quite likely that into these long-distance nationalisms are channelled the frustrations of immigrant marginality in the country of residence. Is it possible that the US — where about fifteen million immigrants arrive every decade — has so low a rate of electoral participation because many newcomers, and probably even their children, live their political passions out on the screens in their homes? Al-Qaeda is by no means a 'nationalist' movement, and its fanaticism is nothing novel in the world. But it is self-enclosed in the new hi-tech manner.

Finally, there is globalization, understood simply as America's domination of the planet to an extent never achieved by any previous power. There is no question about US military muscle; its economic power is formidable, but rests on the inflow (until 2001) of about one billion dollars a day in foreign deposits and investments, and the biggest external debt in world history. Much is made of the might of Hollywood, but it is likely that its impact is mainly among the young, and that it fades as the young grow older. In any case, as Gramsci argued long ago, real hegemony rests on a mix of force and consent. This consent in turn rests, Joseph Conrad showed us, on its self-representation of universalist ideas. The US has for long had two big ones — Liberty/Freedom and Equality. Freedom was a trump in the American hand in the Cold War; Equality remains a powerful symbol against bondage, against discrimination, against aristocratic privilege and the rest. These are by no means Ideas-Just-For-Export. In the 1950s, after South Africa, the United States was the second most unequal major society in the world. Within the Western world it was almost certainly the most sexist and homophobic. But by the early 1970s most of its formidable system of segregation had collapsed; women's

emancipation (within limits) followed, then that of gays and lesbians. In both cases, the US example of self-emancipation has had vast, and mostly good, consequences in other countries.

But Freedom and Equality are in fact not natural dancing partners, and have a complex dialectical relationship to each other. Today the United States has the second largest prison population in the world (after China) in which black males make up a monstrously disproportionate part — one generation after desegregation. Freedom (of choice) has been used to cripple trade union solidarity; the same freedom has created an economic inequality far beyond that of any other advanced industrial country. In some industries, CEOs have been making almost 420-times the wages of their basic workers. In the huge battle over abortion, it is characteristic that the pro-legal abortion forces describe their position quite successfully in terms of ‘Freedom of Choice’ (the unborn foetus of course has none). Their adversaries, successfully deploy ‘pro-life’ (which is also the equality of the foetus) while typically being stalwart supporters of a death penalty which is nearly obsolete in all other advanced countries. It is no matter for surprise that these aporias and paradoxes are even more apparent in the US’s global activities. This suggests that this conception of globalization isn’t in fact fully globalized. During the Cold War — fought in part in the name of Freedom — the US created or gave heavy backing to many frightful régimes, including for a time those of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, South Africa, South Korea, Chiang Kai-shek’s Taiwan, Indonesia, South Vietnam, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Mobutu’s Congo, Marco’s Philippines, even quasi-apartheid Israel. Directly, or through its proxies, Washington killed far more foreigners than any other country in the world. In the 1960s and 1970s it dropped a higher tonnage of bombs on Laos

(population five million) than were dropped on Germany and Japan combined in World War II. Things have become more difficult since the collapse of the Soviet Union. North Korea is not an American creation and has a sizeable nuclear arsenal; Saddam Hussein would have disappeared twenty years ago in the Iraq–Iran War if the US had not rescued him and his poison-gas-armed forces. Support for Israel’s aggressiveness could be defended in the Cold War as essential to containing ‘totalitarian’ Soviet advances; today it looks more like spinelessness before the powerful domestic Jewish-Israeli lobby. The language of ‘We’ll do it ourselves, no matter what anyone says / We’ll do whatever we need to keep what we have’ is the language of apartheid South Africa, not a true hegemon.

Part of Freedom was always Free Markets, in spite of the fact that historically the US has mostly been protectionist. The Bush administration’s flagrant tariff-defence of the outmoded and inefficient American steel industry, the huge anti-free market subsidies for American agribusiness, gravely undermine the ideological power of Free Markets everywhere. It is too easy to interpret all this as ‘You open your markets to us; but we won’t open ours to you.’ During the Asian and Mexican financial crises, Washington endlessly and piously denounced cronyism, lack of transparency, corruption, and so on in the name of truly Free Markets. But recent financial scandals in the United States dwarf anything that transpired in Seoul, Bangkok, Mexico City or Jakarta. Furthermore, Korean and Indonesian presidents have come to trial, the former Mexican president fled overseas, and the Thai prime minister was actually formally indicted. No one expects Vice-President Cheney, let alone President Bush, to experience a similar legal fate. Speaking of equality and freedom is more chancy when the United States, with 5 per cent of the world’s population, produces a quarter of its gas emissions, and brusquely

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rejects the Kyoto Protocol. The US is also a major part of that 20 per cent of the world's population which controls 8 per cent of the world's assets. This level of inequality in the global frame far exceeds any domestic ratio anywhere, and in any nation-state would be completely intolerable. A further difficulty is that most historical studies have shown that the successful industrial powers were, for most of their history, highly protectionist; and that more and more contemporary research is showing that the forcible introduction of neo-liberal free market policies has been ruinous for many Third World countries. None of this is lost on the rest of the world, even if it is not understood by many in the United States.

Blowback in different forms is bound to arise. Among these are foreign resistance to the anti-free market doctrines of 'intellectual property rights'. Pirating on a huge scale is the commonest practice. But India and Brazil, against huge American pressure are producing generic anti-AIDS drugs that their populations desperately need. This trend will certainly continue. Then there is the enormous proliferation of NGOs in the last two decades, including many based in the United States. With their international networking and their low institutionalization, these organizations are harder to bully and

bribe than are many heads of states and governments. We also now have the return of nationalism and protection of local industries from American penetration, visible in parts of America, as well as in Europe. One symbol of cultural revitalization is Al Jazeera, which is far more open to conflicting views than any American television network, and has huge appeal in the Arab world. After an initial battering by CNN, Thailand has responded by producing its own world news programme which is far better than CBS or NBC. The creative places in world cinema are not in Hollywood but in Taiwan, Iran, even Thailand. And there are the global political movements symbolized by the words Seattle, Genoa, Rio. It is astonishing just how vulnerable this new world-system is at its technological — therefore, its financial — centre. A teenager in Manila can create a computer virus that costs the speculators of Wall Street many millions of dollars. Anarchism is not dead; it is only beginning to realize its new-found opportunities. The distance between Hegemon and Rogue State is shorter than many people are accustomed to think. ■

This is a version of a lecture given at the Notre Dame Irish Studies Summer Seminar in 2002.