Globalization:
The Global Village and the World System

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The United Nations made “globalization” the central theme of its tenth annual Human Development Report in 1999, presenting the concept as both a promise and a threat to the world’s six billion people. Marking the symbolic close of a thousand years of history, this was a timely occasion for such a reflection on what the future held for human society and culture. In the words of the report’s authors, “Shrinking space, shrinking time and disappearing borders are linking people’s lives more deeply, more intensely, more immediately than ever before.” In fact, these processes loomed so large by the year’s end, that “globalization” had become enemy number one for the diverse group of activists that descended upon Seattle in December to wreak havoc via their protests on an assemblage of the world’s leaders meeting to discuss the future of international commerce under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

But what is globalization and why do so many people feel so passionately about it? Globalization is, in fact, a very old process, in some sense as old as human civilization itself. The Roman empire, the ancient Greeks, the ancient Chinese, the Mesopotamians, the Mongols, the Arabs, the Polynesians—the list goes on and on—all rose to prominence via their cultural and economic linkages with outside societies. Likewise, it takes no great effort to come up with a list of elements of a global culture that has been shared across far reaches of the earth for centuries, and even millennia: religions such as Christianity and Islam; lingua franca such as Latin and English; crops such as wheat, maize, and rice.

What so many people find striking about the present situation, however, is a perception that globalization is both accelerating and increasing in scope, its penetration of daily life now reaching all corners of the world. Three specific changes appear to be the most significant: new markets, new tools, and new actors.

- **New Markets.** At the close of the twentieth century, international trade in goods and services totaled more than $7 trillion. This represents more than $1000 per every man, woman, and child on the planet—a truly staggering figure, although we would be wise to remember that when measured as a percentage of the global Gross Domestic Product, the current one-fifth share traded across international boundaries is actually lower than it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. What is truly new, however, is the dramatic rise of a global capital market. Without much effort at all, someone with capital (i.e., money) to trade can do so 24 hours a day with virtually every country of the world—stocks in London, corporate debt in Japan, government bonds in Brazil, currency in Pakistan. In 1998, the equivalent of $1.5 trillion exchanged hands on the world’s currency markets alone, *each day!* The number is truly mind-blowing, especially when compared to the average daily volume during the 1970s of “just” $10–20 billion.
• **New Tools.** Nothing is more closely associated with globalization than twentieth-century developments in transportation and global communications. The most significant transportation “revolutions” occurred some time ago; these include the rise of reliable transoceanic sailing and the subsequent application of steam power to these ships, and then to their counterparts riding on rails over the land. But the twentieth century added another revolution, the jet airliner. Not a particularly earth-shattering development for transporting goods, it nonetheless revolutionized the long-distance transport of people. Now, an amazingly broad segment of humanity can afford to travel to overseas destinations, not just once or twice in a lifetime, but multiple times and for relatively short stays. Nonetheless, the great majority of us still cannot afford such travel on any sort of regular basis. Instead, we owe our close interconnection with the rest of the world to global telecommunications. The telephone, television, and now the Internet have truly shrunk the world. To cite just one example of the speed of this change, the total volume of international telephone calls more than doubled in just six years during the 1990s, from 33 billion minutes in 1990 to 70 billion minutes in 1996.

• **New Actors.** The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a dramatic transformation in the political organization of human beings, as traditional feudal, royal, and tribal systems gave way to civil states. This transition continued through the twentieth century, joined by a new force, the rise of international organizations. Three types of institutions are the most significant: with the end of the Soviet-American Cold War, *intergovernmental organizations* such as UN and the WTO are increasingly called upon to manage world political affairs and world economies; *non-governmental organizations* (NGOs), such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International, represent and actively shape international policy making through protest and lobbying; and *multi-national corporations* (MNCs), large companies which buy, produce, and sell goods and services all over the world, are now the primary players in the world economy.

Beside the fact that many of these globalization trends aren’t exactly new—the East India Company, for example, received its charter way back in 1600—the story above is complicated by an opposing movement: the assertion of local political identities and cultural distinctiveness. No place better reflects the simultaneous coming-together and splintering-apart processes now at work than Europe. Determined to put the bloody first half of the twentieth century behind them, Europeans rebounded from the second world war with a remarkable sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. It began with the creation of a European “Common Market,” which has since developed into a political-economic European Union, complete with its own parliament, flag, anthem, court of law, and now even a common currency. Late in the century, however, at the same time the two Germanies were reunited, other parts of the region were disintegrating. In some cases, most notably the former Yugoslavia, this splintering has been horrifically violent; in other cases, such as former Czechoslovakia, it was more peaceful. Even when national boundaries don’t get redrawn, the move toward a decentralization, or “devolution,” of authority can be pronounced, with the ongoing reconstruction of the United Kingdom providing the best example. And throughout Europe, many groups are seeking greater local sovereignty or protections for local identities, whether it be the promotion of the Provençale language in the south of France, the fight for Basque independence in Spain, or the blustery political rhetoric of the so-called *Lega Nord* in Italy, with its notions of a separate northern state called Padania.
Rather than a true contradiction, the simultaneous splitting-apart and coming-together of Europe and other places around the world represent two sides of the same coin. That is, expressions of local identity and sovereignty are an effort to combat, or at least temper, the powerful twin forces of globalization. Force #1 represents the spread of a world culture, the rise of a “global village” tied together by telecommunications and defined largely by mass consumerism and pop culture. Force #2 represents the political-economic side of the globalization story, something we might describe as the rise of a “world system” based on ideas of an internationally managed global marketplace, supported by industrial capitalism and representative democracy. In reality, these twin forces are closely linked, for they simply reflect the two sides of the consumption-production equation. Together they make an ambiguous mark on the world.

This ambiguity has supported two competing versions of the globalization story, both made more extreme by their opposition to the other. The first story I will call “Development,” and it goes something like this: Christian Europe emerged from the Middle Ages and rediscovered its ancient Greek roots. From these renewed roots grew the science, technology, and philosophy of the Enlightenment, out of which has sprung modern industry and democracy. Europe proceeded to spread this Enlightenment gospel around the world, admittedly making a few perhaps-unforgivable mistakes on the way. But as the 21st century rises, we can celebrate the fact that the blemishes of colonialism, slavery, fascism, and now communism are behind us, and the light that is Western Civilization can shine fully, bringing peace and prosperity to all the world. The only obstacles standing in the way of this great human achievement are jealous feelings of petty nationalism and religious or special-interest zealotry. Hence the important role for international bodies such as the UN, WTO, and World Bank to mediate the inevitable local conflict and champion the cause of liberalism (i.e., capitalism and democracy) around the world.

Standing opposed to this story is a second, equally simple story of “Dependency.” It goes like this: Christian Europe emerged from the Middle Ages by stealing a bunch of ideas from the Islamic world. Full of greed and intolerant religious fanaticism, the Europeans proceeded to conquer and pillage the rest of the planet. In some regions, they stole or inherited land depopulated by the diseases they carried with them, where they planted white-skinned colonies that survived only because of the assistance they received from the same native populations they displaced. In other regions, the Europeans were content simply to steal the capital, labor, and raw materials they needed to supply their industrial revolution back home—a revolution whose primary benefits were not greater human well-being but simply more tools (guns, steamships, etc.) to continue their conquest of the earth. In the process, Europeans wreaked environmental havoc and killed and/or enslaved millions of people, including their own. Despite the formal end of slavery and colonialism, the non-Western world remains today stranded in an ever-worsening position of dependency: indigenous cultures destroyed, local environments degraded, and entire countries destined to provide the cheap raw materials and labor for the world capitalist system. At best, reformers in the West lament their “white man’s burden,” providing aid and paternalistic assistance to their underdeveloped former colonies. Rather than nationalism, the biggest challenge facing humanity as it enters the 21st century is a world economy now dominated by MNCs. While the UN and Peace Corps might have
their place, grassroots activism and special-interest NGOs such as the World Wildlife Fund and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) are what the world really needs.

These two stories are, quite intentionally, cartoon versions of modern world history. Both are correct accounts of the past in a general sense, and the true story of world history undoubtedly lies somewhere between these extremes. As we struggle with the legacy of modern globalization, however, we also need to consider a third story, one that I’ll call “Diversity.” The problem with the first two stories is that they really aren’t two stories at all, but rather polar-opposite interpretations of the same, eurocentric tale. The Diversity alternative is one that remains unwritten, in part because it is such a difficult story to write; by design, it has no neat beginning or end, nor a clear-cut geographic center. Thus, for now at least, I am able to offer only two elements that this story would contain. First, it would be less historically and geographically arrogant than the Development-Dependency story. Neither Europe nor the Modern Age invented the Global Village or the World System. Such creatures have existed in various forms since the dawn of civilization, with centers of various reach and duration located in China, India, Arabia, central America, Polynesia, and other places as well. Second, this longer, wider view of the global past allows us to see that world systems and global villages have come and gone without obliterating local diversity, without making the world a less interesting or less humane place. In the present context, eating a Big Mac doesn’t suddenly make one an American, or even a Westerner. By the same token, my love of Kim Chee in no way makes me a Korean, nor does my love of soccer make me something other than an American. Culture runs deeper than this, and it is both more durable and flexible than we sometimes like to think.