Globalization

The Human Consequences

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James Mayall, *World Politics: Progress and its Limits*
Ray Pahl, *On Friendship*

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Polity

Contents

Introduction

'Globalization' is on everybody's lips; a fad word fast turning into a shibboleth, a magic incantation, a pass-key meant to unlock the gates to all present and future mysteries. For some, 'globalization' is what we are bound to do if we wish to be happy; for others 'globalization' is the cause of our unhappiness. For everybody, though, 'globalization' is the intractable fate of the world, an irreversible process; it is also a process which affects us all in the same measure and in the same way. We are all being 'globalized' – and being 'globalized' means much the same to all who 'globalized' are.

All vogue words tend to share a similar fate: the more experiences they pretend to make transparent, the more they themselves become opaque. The more numerous are the orthodox truths they elbow out and supplant, the faster they turn into no-questions-asked canons. Such human practices as the concept tried originally to grasp recede from view, and it is now the 'facts of the matter', the quality of 'the world out there' which the term seems to 'get straight' and which it invokes to claim its own immunity to questioning. 'Globalization' is no exception to that rule.

This book is an attempt to show that there is more to the phenomenon of globalization than meets the eye; unpacking the social roots and social consequences of the globalizing process, it will try to disperse some of the mist which surrounds the term that claims to bring clarity to the present-day human condition.

The term 'time/space compression' encapsulates the ongoing multi-faceted transformation of the parameters of the human condition. Once the social causes and outcomes of that compression are looked into, it will become evident that the globalizing processes lack the commonly assumed unity of effects. The uses of time and space are sharply differentiated as well as differentiating. Globalization divides as much as it unites; it divides as it unites – the causes of division being identical with those which promote the uniformity of the globe. Alongside the emerging planetary dimensions of business, finance, trade and information flow, a 'localizing', space-fixing process is set in motion. Between them, the two closely inter-connected processes sharply differentiate the existential conditions of whole populations and of various segments of each one of the populations. What appears as globalization for some means localization for others; signalling a new freedom for some, upon many others it descends as an uninvited and cruel fate. Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values – and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern times.

All of us are, willy-nilly, by design or by default, on the move. We are on the move even if, physically, we stay put: immobility is not a realistic option in a world of permanent change. And yet the effects of that new condition are radically unequal. Some of us become fully and truly 'global'; some are fixed in their 'locality' – a predicament neither pleasurable nor endurable in the world in which the 'globals' set the tone and compose the rules of the life-game.

Being local in a globalized world is a sign of social deprivation and degradation. The discomforts of localized existence are compounded by the fact that with public spaces removed beyond the reaches of localized life, localities are losing their meaning-generating and meaning-

negotiating capacity and are increasingly dependent on sense-giving and interpreting actions which they do not control – so much for the communitarianist dreams/consolations of the globalized intellectuals.

An integral part of the globalizing processes is progressive spatial segregation, separation and exclusion. Neo-tribal and fundamentalist tendencies, which reflect and articulate the experience of people on the receiving end of globalization, are as much legitimate offspring of globalization as the widely acclaimed 'hybridization' of top culture – the culture at the globalized top. A particular cause for worry is the progressive breakdown in communication between the increasingly global and extraterritorial elites and the ever more 'localized' rest. The centres of meaning-and-value production are today exterritorial and emancipated from local constraints – this does not apply, though, to the human condition which such values and meanings are to inform and make sense of.

With the freedom of mobility at its centre, the present-day polarization has many dimensions; the new centre puts a new gloss on the time-honoured distinctions between rich and poor, the nomads and the settled, the 'normal' and the abnormal or those in breach of law. Just how these various dimensions of polarity intertwine and influence each other is another complex problem this book attempts to unpack.

The first chapter considers the link between the historically changing nature of time and space and the pattern and scale of social organization – and particularly the effects of the present-day time/space compression on the structuration of planetary and territorial societies and communities. One of the effects scrutinized is the new version of 'absentee landlordship' – the newly acquired independence of global elites from territorially confined units of political and cultural power, and the consequent 'disempowerment' of the latter. The impact of the separation between the two settings in which the 'top' and

the 'bottom' of the new hierarchy are respectively located is traced to the changing organization of space and the changing meaning of 'neighbourhood' in the contemporary metropolis.

The successive stages of modern wars for the right to define and enforce the meaning of shared space is the subject of the second chapter. The past adventures of comprehensive town planning, as well as the contemporary tendencies to fragmentation of design and to building for exclusion, are analysed in this light. Finally, the historical fate of Panopticon as the once favourite modern pattern of social control, and particularly its present irrelevance and gradual demise, are scrutinized.

The topic of the third chapter is the prospects of political sovereignty – and particularly of the self-constitution and self-government of national, and more generally territorial, communities, under conditions of globalized economy, finance and information. At the centre of attention is the widening discrepancy of scale between the realm of institutionalized decision-making and the universe in which the resources necessary for decisions and their implementation are produced, distributed, appropriated and deployed; in particular, the disabling effects of globalization on the decision-making capacity of the state governments – the major, and still unreplaced foci of effective social management for the greater part of modern history.

The fourth chapter takes stock of the cultural consequences of the above transformations. Their overall effect, it is postulated, is the bifurcation and polarization of human experience, with shared cultural tokens serving two sharply distinct interpretations. 'Being on the move' has a radically different, opposite sense for, respectively, those at the top and those at the bottom of the new hierarchy; with the bulk of the population – the 'new middle class', oscillating between the two extremes – bearing the brunt of that opposition and suffering acute existential uncertainty,

anxiety and fear as a result. It is argued that the need to mitigate such fears and neutralize the potential of the discontent they contain is in its own turn a powerful factor in the further polarization of the two meanings of mobility.

The last chapter explores the extremal expressions of that polarization: the present-day tendency to criminalize cases falling below the idealized norm, and the role played by criminalization in offsetting the discomforts of 'life on the move' by rendering the image and the reality of alternative life, the life of immobility, ever more odious and repelling. The complex issue of existential insecurity brought about by the process of globalization tends to be reduced to the apparently straightforward issue of 'law and order'. On the way, concerns with 'safety', more often than not trimmed down to the single-issue worry about the safety of the body and personal possessions, are 'overloaded', by being charged with anxieties generated by other, crucial dimensions of present-day existence – insecurity and uncertainty.

The theses of the book do not amount to a policy statement. In the intention of its author it is a discussion paper. Many more questions are asked here than answered, and no coherent forecast of the future consequences of present-day trends is arrived at. And yet – as Cornelius Castoriadis put it – the trouble with the contemporary condition of our modern civilization is that it stopped questioning itself. Not asking certain questions is pregnant with more dangers than failing to answer the questions already on the official agenda; while asking the wrong kind of questions all too often helps to avert eyes from the truly important issues. The price of silence is paid in the hard currency of human suffering. Asking the right questions makes, after all, all the difference between fate and destination, drifting and travelling. Questioning the ostensibly unquestionable premises of our way of life is arguably the most urgent of the services we owe our fellow

humans and ourselves. This book is first and foremost an exercise in asking and prompting the asking of questions – without the pretence that it is asking the right questions, all the right questions, and, most important, all the questions that have been asked.

1

Time and Class

'The company belongs to people who invest in it – not to its employees, suppliers, nor the locality in which it is situated.'[1] This is how Albert J. Dunlap, the celebrated 'rationalizer' of modern enterprise (a *dépeceur* —'chopper', 'quarterer', 'dismemberer' – in the juicy yet precise designation of the CNRS sociologist Denis Duclos)[2] summarized his creed in the self-congratulating report of his activities which Times Books published for the enlightenment and edification of all seekers of economic progress.

What Dunlap had in mind was not, of course, the simple question of 'belonging' as just another name for the purely legal issue of ownership, an issue hardly contested and even less in need of restating – let alone such an emphatic restating. What Dunlap had in mind was, mostly, what the rest of the sentence implied: that the employees, the suppliers and the spokesmen of the community have no say in the decisions that the 'people who invest' may take; and that the true decision-makers, the investors, have the right to dismiss out of hand, and to declare irrelevant and invalid, any postulates which such people may make concerning the way they run the company.

Let us note: Dunlap's message is not a declaration of intent, but a statement of fact. Dunlap takes it for granted that the principle it conveys has passed all the tests which economic, political, social and any other realities of our times might have set or make proper to examine its viability.

It has by now entered the family of self-evident truths which serve to explain the world while themselves needing no explanation; which help to assert things about the world while themselves no longer being seen as assertions, let alone contentious and arguable assertions.

There were times (one would say 'not so long ago', if not for the fast shrinking span of collective attention, which makes even a week not just a long time in politics, but an exceedingly long stretch in the life of human memory) when Dunlap's proclamation would have seemed by no means obvious to all; when it would have sounded more like a war-cry or a battlefield report. In the early years of Margaret Thatcher's war of annihilation launched against local self-government, businessman after businessman felt the need to climb rostrums of the Tory Annual Conference to hammer out again and again a message they must have thought to be in need of hammering out because of sounding uncanny and bizarre to yet untuned ears: the message that companies would gladly pay local taxes to support road building or sewage repairs which they needed, but that they saw no reason to pay for the support of the local unemployed, invalids and other human waste, for whose fate they did not feel like carrying a responsibility or assuming an obligation. But those were the early years of the war which has been all but won a mere two dozen years later, at the time Dunlap dictated his credo, which he could rightly expect every listener to share.

There is not much point in debating whether that war was malevolently and surreptitiously plotted in smoke-free company boardrooms, or whether the necessity of war action was visited on unsuspecting, peace-loving leaders of industry by changes brought about by a mixture of the mysterious forces of new technology and the new global competitiveness; or whether it was a war planned in advance, duly declared and with its goals clearly defined, or just a series of scattered and often unanticipated warlike

actions, each necessitated by causes of its own. Whichever of the two was the case (there are good arguments to be advanced for each, but it may well be that the two accounts only seem to be in competition with each other), it is quite probable that the last quarter of the current century will go down in history as the Great War of Independence from Space. What happened in the course of that war was a consistent and relentless wrenching of the decision-making centres, together with the calculations which ground the decisions such centres make, free from territorial constraints – the constraints of locality.

Let us look more closely at Dunlap's principle. Employees are recruited from the local population and – burdened as they might be by family duties, home ownership and the like – could not easily follow the company once it moves elsewhere. Suppliers have to deliver the supplies, and low transport costs give the local suppliers an advantage which disappears once the company changes its location. As to the 'locality' itself – it will, obviously, stay where it is and can hardly change its location, whatever the new address of the company. Among all the named candidates who have a say in the running of a company, only 'people who invest' – the shareholders – are in no way space-tied; they can buy any share at any stock-exchange and through any broker, and the geographical nearness or distance of the company will be in all probability the least important consideration in their decision to buy or sell.

In principle there is nothing space-determined in the dispersion of the shareholders. They are the sole factor genuinely free from spatial determination. And it is to them, and to them only, that the company 'belongs'. It is up to them therefore to move the company wherever they spy out or anticipate a chance of higher dividends, leaving to all others – locally bound as they are – the task of wound-licking, damage-repair and waste-disposal. The company is free to move; but the consequences of the move are bound