

# Globalisation – a Postmodernist Utopia?

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*The concept of globalisation refers to a process of transition and shift in the world economic-political-cultural setup. That is why globalisation is not an observed state but a process characterised by movement toward an (un)certain goal. With globalisation, the role of the nation-state is radically changed. Its power is based on law and is thus restricted to matters of sovereignty within the national borders. In relation to world society as the scene of economic gambit played by multinational and transnational corporations, the nation-state stands as the last powerful relic of the "modernist project".*

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## 1. Introduction

Terminological vagueness and ambiguity usually produces confusion in thought and chaos in reality. Confusion can lead to ecstasy or despair; chaos prevents the establishment of systematised order that every modern society strives for, even though it may, in principle, rest upon the separation of the spheres of society, politics and culture. Over the past twenty years we have witnessed the unbearable ease with which people produce concepts, paradigms and terms in philosophy, economic science, sociology, political science, and literary studies which are then transformed into delusions of everyday experience. Is it necessary to remind ourselves of the enthusiasm generated by postmodernism? Did it not seem, back in 1979, when Jean-Francois Lyotard announced the era of post-modern culture as an era of information and global society, that a balance had been struck between the conceptual insight and the real-life situation in society? The fact that the concept could mean everything and nothing soon led to its destructive inflation.

Everything that has been said here about postmodernism could soon prove true also of another, theoretically different, concept. It is clear to every-

body that we are now faced with a new enchanting concept, a new and all-encompassing *mantra* of our *fin de siècle* – *globalisation*. While postmodernism was still an exclusive myth for intellectuals, globalisation seems to possess planetary powers of delusion. The essential difference is that the latter term came from reality, to be embraced by geography and economics, while the spread of the former term was a matter of an "esoteric" group of philosophers and scholars attempting to make sense of the transition/departure from the logic of modernism or, to be more precise, from the modern-time intellectual history.

## 2. Culture – the prime mover of modern society

At the moment of "triumph of signifying culture", globalisation appeared as the continuation of the modernist project (Habermas) in a different, postmodernist, context. In contrast to globalism and globality, the concept of globalisation refers to a process of transition and shift in the world economic-political-cultural setup. That is why globalisation is not an observed state but a process characterised by movement towards an (un)certain goal. The most

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influential monograph study on globalisation, written by Martin Albrow, speaks explicitly about the abandonment of Habermasian thought patterns. Leaving the "theory of modernism" behind does not imply the acceptance of the esoteric criticism of modernism as universalism, rationalisation and enlightenment. That is why Albrow, trying to explain globalisation, calls for a reevaluation of the concept of modernism from a new perspective.

Albrow introduces the concept of figuration in his analysis of modernism, opposing it to "system" and "structure". Continuing along the lines laid by Elias, he introduces this dynamic concept in order to avoid the interpretation of modernism as an epoch-making totality or project. It is only in this sense that we can distinguish between early modernism from the late fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth century, high modernism in the twentieth century, and finally late modernism at the end of the second millennium. The figuration of this era rests upon its continuing self-renewal through constant expansion. The fine distinctions that Albrow makes to explain the origins of the concept of globalisation derive from the understanding that modernity is characterised as a complex of rationality, territorial expansion, nation-state building, and civil society. At the time of globalisation, the driving force of civilisational progress – articulated as modern culture or culture of modernism – presents itself as the zero point of the establishment of identity and difference. Focusing on art, one notes that the historical avant-garde is spent and only syncretism and epigonism remain. No "new style" is possible, as there is nothing left to refute. Debates about globalisation were originally prompted by the realisation that culture had become the inner prime mover of dynamics in modern societies. It is not surprising, therefore, that at the end of the twentieth century cultural studies appeared as an integral part of the scientific approach to globalisation. Let us mention in this context the work of people like Elias, Bourdieu ("cultural capital" theory), Hall, Giddens, Etzioni, Featherstone, and others.

### 3. The fears of small nations

A critical analysis of the concept of globalisation of the kind offered by Albrow shows in the first place that we are dealing here with fundamental social and cultural changes. Globalisation is not equivalent to Wallerstein's concept of the world economic system of capitalism. The mysterious power of that concept stems from the empirical

changes in the development of cities and the expansion of urban population throughout the planet. A new dimension of communication and technological development has led to a consideration of the phenomenon of speed as a property of global movement towards IT cities and virtual culture, made possible by the democratisation of the media and spread of the Internet. The concept of globalisation includes also "global" and "globalism". The former has to do with the realisation that the world is changing from the local and regional to the "world in itself"; the latter is an ambiguous concept of politics and economics as transnational activities – not only because of the tendency of capital to cross national borders but also because the problems of environmental protection, security and human rights are truly global.

All authoritative attempts to define the concept of globalisation (Albrow, Robertson, Beck, Lehner) mention the crossing of national borders. The first debate about globalisation focused on the scope of international political studies. Like postmodernism, globalisation is an abstract concept, all the more so as its *pathos* refers to the temporal ecstasy of the future. That is why globalising cannot have a definite objective, but it is assumed that it marks a radical break with the past (modernity as unconditional technical progress), which puts a question mark over the relation towards Other and implies the levelling of differences. The usual question posed by an individual – especially a member of a "small nation" plagued by the fear of some imaginary world government or the imperialism of the American cultural industries threatening to destroy the "genuineness" and "originality" of European culture – is how to view cultural globalisation: as standardisation/homogenisation or as a right to be different? If globalisation is nothing but the continuation of postmodernism with other means, then the fear of becoming lost in the uniformity of "world culture" is meaningless, telling us more about a reaction to delayed modernism than about the true sources of danger. The strengthening of fundamentalism (by no means only Islamic) in the world is actually a response to globalisation. That response takes the form of a return to the ideology of a "homogeneous community", be it cultural pessimism of the German New Right or the Croatian "spiritual renewal". This has been discussed by Frank J. Lechner, who takes the interesting view that modernism is an empty term which does not signify any positive values and actually makes room for the legitimate appearance of traditionalist movements striving for a return to "holy sources".

#### 4. The metaphor of McDonalds restaurants

The methodological and epistemological problems in connection with the definition of the concept of globalisation are not mere theoretical pedantry but a serious attempt at a scientific approach to the dynamic reality of economy and culture. That is why Roland Robertson's claim that the concept derives from Japanese marketing circles is similar to Virilio's view that the Internet appeared in response to the needs of American military-strategic planners at the time when the cold war was drawing to a close.

The analytical concept of globalisation advocated by Albrow is broadly applicable and easily covers the spread of religious ecstasy through the alternative "new spiritualities" (the so-called Toronto Blessing), the concentration of information technologies in the Silicon Valley, the growth of the London Stock Exchange at Canary Wharf, and the buying of a Big Mac in Beijing. The metaphor of McDonalds restaurants as a representation of globalised culture is, however, vacuous, even though it stands for something that is perceived as aversive and "primitive" by the anti-modernist movements. When the Croatian "spiritual revivalist", Rev. Anto Baković, declared a war on McDonalds restaurants in Croatia with a ridiculous assertion that the food served there was "an attack on Croatian stomachs", this was a typical "home fires" protest against the culture of globalisation. Neither can the Big Mac be seen as a bogie of globalism and US "cultural imperialism" (because food also belongs to the imaginary inventory of culture), nor can globalisation be taken as a glorification of the McDonalds corporate business.

With globalisation, the role of the nation-state is radically changed or begins to disappear. Being territorially limited, its control based on law is restricted to matters of sovereignty within the national boundaries. In relation to world society as the scene of economic gambit played by multinational and transnational corporations, the nation-state stands as the last powerful relic of the "modernist project". Ulrich Beck notes that the changed function of the modern state not only changes the functions of national policies but also affects the conduct of politics. This is not meant to be grounds for a naive expectation that the process of globalisation, with the logic of economic and technological determinism, will bring to an end the ethnic and national conflicts that now flare in different parts of the world, putting into doubt the liberal-democratic utopia of the "end of history" (F. Fukuyama). Sober political analyses confine themselves to showing that processes of

globalisation create the conditions for a truly global (world) society and states that go well beyond the territorial and national boundaries. The loss of sovereignty requires us to consider an alternative to the conflict between the world economy and individualisation.

#### 5. Global "anarchism"

Accepting globalisation as a "necessary evil" in the interest of progress poses no problem for the Western post-industrial societies; however, it poses great problems for the societies emerging from the ruins of the real socialist systems and seeking to return to their "original" values. The shock of globalisation should be overcome by a policy that will not pursue the building of a phantom world state. The proposed alternative is a world society without a state and without a world government. This global "anarchism" should respect the essential differences in cultural identities. Since globalisation reflects differently on developing or Third World countries, which have not yet completed their "first modernisation", the shock is quite severe. But the question is no longer whether one should be for globalisation or against it, since its rejection means regression and possible fall into the political and cultural abyss of backwardness and misery. The question is, rather, how to face the challenge of redefinition of the nation-state model. The integrity of the nation-state and society is not only doubtful but even threatened by globalisation. That is why the nationalist elites in some post-Communist countries play the old mournful tune and revive the hackneyed quasi-theories about "small nations" suffering oppression and possible extinction for centuries. They seek the alternative to globalisation in mythical past. In the world of "digital economy" (D. Tapscott) or "postmodernist economy" (H. Hillmann-Chartrand), any autarkic economic model is doomed to failure. The integration of national societies and states requires that most problematical and fluid "chimera" that makes possible mutual interaction and differentiation – namely, culture. It is, thus, obvious why Nejl J. Smelser – drawing on insights from cultural anthropology – speaks about culture's integrative properties in the era of globalisation. Cultural identity is not a clean slate, nor is it a primordial sign of the originality of a people in history. It is possible to preserve originality in the era of globalisation only by accepting its challenge. Even if we set aside the rhetoric of the utopian story of globalisation and ignore the indeterminacy of the concept (and the determinacy of the economic and technological interests of the profit-

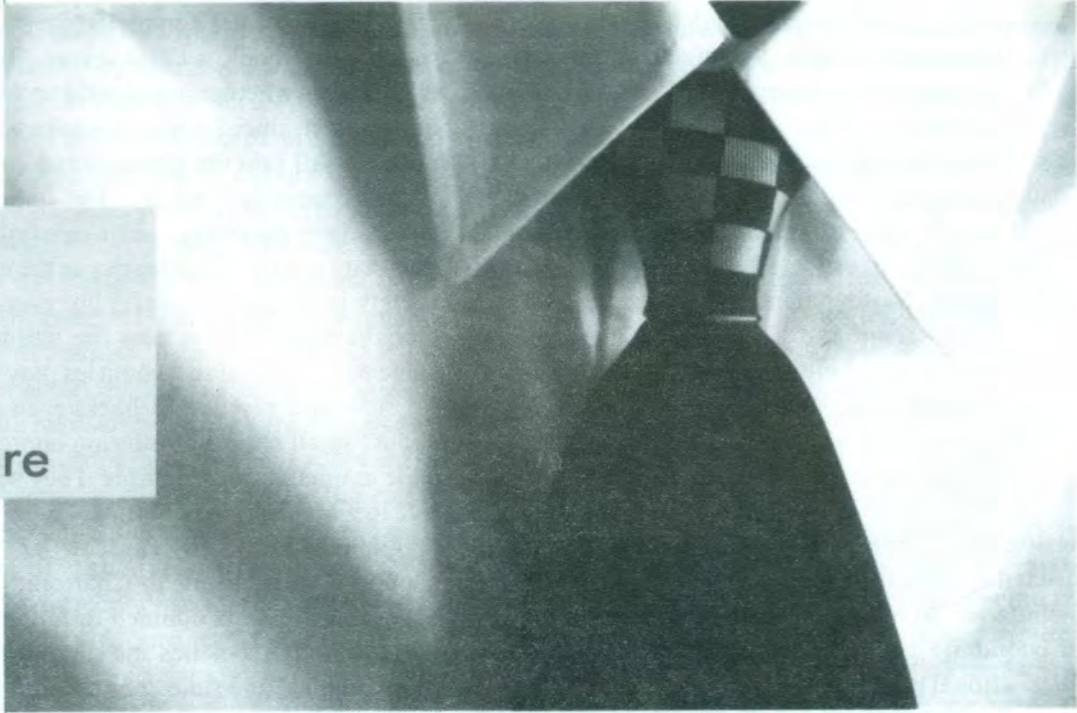
chasing developed post-industrial states, since the existence of transnational corporations has not done away with the power of nation-states and their regional associations), we cannot overlook the fact that the social sciences and the humanities, politics and culture, are witnessing a rapid disappearance of traditional values. Globalisation is not likely to wipe out the exoticism of national cuisine, folklore and

local cults, just as will not – as the naive utopians believed – wave the technological magic wand to remove the power of totem charm over nations and/or tribes. We find ourselves on the threshold of an age of transition in which nothing is as certain as Nietzsche's closing sentence of an ill-understood book whose title carry those same words: "This world is the will to power – and nothing but that." ■

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