

Contextualizing Globalization and Culture¹

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How does one contextualize the question of globalization? Given the present state of the world and the existing deep economic and social crises, it is imperative that an ideological underpinning to every phenomenon is examined. However, a postmodernist perspective would demonstrate a suspicion to all-embracing systems of thought. This would include a suspicion of ‘totalizing theories’; an anti-foundationalism that rejects all claims to ‘absolute’ or ‘universal’ foundations of knowledge (Mathew, 2008). Postmodernism also stresses the heterogeneity and fragmented character of social and cultural ‘realities’. It also questions any attempts of any unified account of them. The attack of postmodernism on grand narratives has not stood the ‘test of time’. As Meiksins Wood (1998) states ‘even though there is an emphasis on cultural, ideological and psychological shifts, the dissolution of old certainties, the disintegration of all political foundations, the fluidity of “identities” and the “de-centred subject”; this historic rupture, however, did not usher in the post-modern epoch’ (Meiksins Wood, 1998).

In contemporary times, accumulation is the main driving force of the world economy along with what comes with it, the capital–capital competition and capital–labour exploitation; hence, it makes sense to speak of the ‘capitalist system’ rather than the ‘global market’ (Tabb, 1999). The dominant prevailing economic thought is that the market has, as its principal purpose, the service of human needs. This is further enhanced by dominance in the mainstream elite discourse of ‘the end of history’. This is marked by simplistic arguments about the ‘triumph of Capitalism’ (freedom and the market being grouped together) in the wake of the collapse of the ‘socialist’ regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, notwithstanding arguments which emphasise the restoration of capitalism in these ‘socialist’ states way before the 1989

collapse.² The argument of a globalized world is also carried out repeatedly to enforce the inevitability of globalization. However, this idea of inevitability is in itself an ideological construct and it is the product of political forces acting through the powerful lobbies of government and media (Tabb, 1999). This inevitability represents a new phase.

Globalization as a terminology has come to dominate discourse in recent times. That in itself is an anomaly, as globalization (as it is understood today, its primary feature being a more ‘active’ form of finance capital formation and function) has always been in motion since the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, the concept of globalization, as spoken of today, is not something new, but is a particular form of capitalism, an expansion of capitalistic relationships both in breadth (geographically) and, in *depth*, penetrating ever-increasing aspects of human life (Marcuse, 2000). But globalization since the 1970s has also seen two distinct aspects of capitalistic relations which are often lumped together: developments in technology and developments in the concentration of economic power (Marcuse, 2000).

Links between the two need not be inevitable. As such advances in the development of technology could benefit everyone, for the same quantity of goods and services could be produced with less effort, or more could be produced with the same effort. However, what has happened instead is that technology is increasingly being used by the power-holders to increase and concentrate their power (Marcuse, 2000).

The myth of the powerless state also figures in the mainstream language of globalization, wherein the role of state action in enabling the capitalist system to exist and function is repeatedly ignored. If the states do not control the movement of capital or goods, it is not because they

cannot but simply because they have abdicated power in the hands of corporate interests on which the state and the ruling classes are also dependent (Marcuse, 2000). Here it is important to mention that the state in a capitalist society is *the Capitalist state*. The government, then, is not a neutral arbitrator with weak powers against market forces, but a structural part of the capitalist system in which we all live (Tabb, 1999).

Even though the concept argues for the interdependence of nations, and shared nature of economies, it is a known fact that it has never been that way (Petras, 1999). On the contrary, it is the Marxist perspective of imperialism that emphasizes and explains the domination and exploitation by imperial states, multi-national corporations, transnational corporations and the predatory nature of finance capital (Petras, 1999; also see Bottomore, 1983; Clairmount, 2000; Mack, Plant & Doyle, 1979; Magdoff, 1992; Patnaik, 1999). In the historical sense, it has to be mentioned that globalization, or as Petras (1999) puts it, the transnational flow of capital, goods and technology, has taken place via three routes: through imperial and colonial conquest; via trade and investment between advanced capitalist countries; and third, via exchanges between Third World countries. The historical fact is that Latin America, Asia, Africa and the United States have a long history of several centuries of ties to overseas markets, exchanges and investments. The relationships, however, were unequal and marked by the variable of power. For example, one-third of English capital formation in the seventeenth century was based upon international slave trade (Hayter, 1981; Petras, 1999).

In today's world, data covering long- and short-term, large-scale flows of incomes at all levels show an enormous increase of inequalities not just between the First World and the rest of the world, but also between investors and workers, agro-exporters and peasants (Petras, 1999). Not only does this show collaboration within capitalists, but power relations are also clearly exhibited. International financial institutions are under the control of the First World, and a survey of major events, world trade treaties and regional integration blocs show that all these are determined and controlled by the heads of the First World (Petras, 1999). In such a context a framework of historical materialism could be a way of analysis to examine globalization and its varied manifestations (Mathew, 2010).

In historical materialism, Marx contends that the economic structure of society, constituted by its relations of production, is the real foundation of society (Shaw, 2000). A core thesis of historical materialism is that the different socio-economic organizations of production have characterized rise and fall in human history as they enable or

impede the expansion of a society's productive capacity (Shaw, 2000, p. 235). The growth of the productive forces thus explains the general course of history.³ To augment this, Marx was of the view that the various spheres and realms of society reflect the dominant mode of production and that the general consciousness of an epoch is shaped by the nature of its production (Shaw, 2000).

However, linked to the notions of class in a capitalist system is another important concept, that of alienation. In Marxist sense, an action through which (or the state in which) a person, a group, an institution or a society becomes alien to the results or products of its own activity, to the activity itself and to the nature as to how one lives can be defined as alienation (Petrovic, 2000, p. 11). Thus conceived, alienation is always self-alienation, that is, the alienation of man,⁴ of his self, from himself (from his human possibilities) through himself and through his own activity (Petrovic, 2000). As per Marx, man not only alienates a part of himself from God, he also alienates other products of his 'spiritual' activity in the form of philosophy, common sense, art and morals; he alienates products of his economic activity in the form of commodity, money and capital; and he alienates products of his social activity in the form of the state, law and social institutions (Petrovic, 2000). A question that has been widely discussed is whether self-alienation is an essential, imperishable property of man as man, or is it characteristic only of one historical stage in human development (Petrovic, 2000). Marx himself seems to have indicated that man had always been self-alienated thus far, but that he nonetheless could and should come of his own (Petrovic, 2000). The process of de-alienation has been linked to a close connection between the individual and society, so that neither can be carried out without the other, nor can one be reduced to the other (Petrovic, 2000). 'For it is possible to create a social system that would be favourable to the development of de-alienated individuals, but it is not possible to organise a society which would automatically produce such individuals' (Petrovic, 2000, p. 16).

Derivative of all of the above, one can examine the moral evaluative aspect of a cultural system interpenetrating with the actual structure of the social system through institutionalization (Parsons, 1973, p. 36). Cultural system is specifically concerned with systems of meaning, and social system is a way of organizing human action concerned with linking meaning to the conditions of concrete behaviour in the given world (Parsons, 1973, p. 36). Hence, a social system could be characterized to have a value system which is relatively integrated, characterized by a dominant pattern having direction and differentiated functions within the system (Parsons, 1973). Thus, for a

modern large society, there may be an overall general value system/pattern, and within this, there would be a subsystem/subtype which would consist of a framework of societal goals (Parsons, 1973).

This distinction or breaking away from general cultural values in itself represents an advance in conceptualization; for example, the implication that the political realm is to some degree distinct and separate from 'general culture' (Pye, 1973, p. 68). However, there is the view that 'the law of society and the law of culture (the symbolic ordering of social life) are one and the same' (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Brian, 1981, p. 54). Although these structures (of social relationship and meaning) shape the ongoing collective existence of groups, but these very constructs also limit, modify and constrain how groups live and reproduce their social existence. Thus, people are formed and form themselves through society, culture and history (Clarke et al., 1981, p. 54). The term 'culture' is a symbolic representation of an enormous amount of configurations and permutations of the dialectical processes at play in society at any given point of history (Clarke et al., 1981, p. 55).

It has to be noted that the question of internal and external coherence within and between groups has always been central both to the ways in which individuals and groups have understood themselves and to the 'varieties of rhetorical manoeuvres available to those who seek to persuade others of the importance to the group of one course of action, rather than another' (Boyne, 1990, p. 58). However, culture is also about pursuit of interests which are deemed to be vital, autonomous and specific to the agents pursuing them (Boyne, 1990). According to Raymond Williams, the meaning of culture is a response to the events which our meanings of industry and democracy most evidently define, the conditions of which were created and modified by men (Williams, 1958, p. 285). The history of the idea of culture is a record of our meanings and our definitions, which are to be understood within the context of our actions (Williams, 1958). It is a process and not a conclusion. Man's beliefs and thoughts are not independent of the individual's position in the production process (Mueller, 1973, p. 102). Man's consciousness is thus 'a product of his ongoing activities pursued within the confines of his socio-economic conditions' (Mueller, 1973, p. 102).

For Antonio Gramsci, there is crucial link between culture and politics. Gramsci was the first to stress the material nature of ideology, its existence as a necessary level of all social formations, its inscriptions in practices and its materialization into apparatuses (Mouffe, 1981). He also broke away from the conception of ideology as false consciousness, that is, a 'distorted representation of reality because it is determined by the place occupied by the sub-

ject in the relations of production and he anticipated the conception of ideology as a practice producing subjects' (Mouffe, 1981, p. 233). To Gramsci, the concept of ideology has been modified and denatured, it is ideology that changes the structure and not vice versa and it is necessary to radically change the structure (in Hoare & Smith, 1995, p. 376). To Gramsci, the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, 'as domination and as intellectual and moral leadership. A social group dominates antagonistic groups which it tends to liquidate or to subjugate, perhaps even by armed force' (in Hoare & Smith, 1995, p. 57). A social group can and must exercise leadership even before it wins governmental power. This hegemony cannot be merely restricted only to the cultural or ideological for it would extend to production. 'Economic production has and requires its own cultural and ideological conditions' (Hall, 1982, p. 17). 'Americanism' is an apt example. Gramsci describes vividly how the new production methods of Ford and Taylor depended on a profound restructuring and re-education of the moral, ethical and cultural life in America (Hall, 1982, p. 17).

This spirit has pervaded advanced capitalist pockets throughout the world. The state has not only played a formative role in drawing these class/cultural relations into a particular configuration but also stabilizes, secures, regulates and organizes this formation (Hall, 1982). These configurations represent real relations of power, consent and authority, meaning that relations of power, consent and authority are established and sustained through the cultural relations between classes (Hall, 1982, pp. 18–19). Hence, there is a rise of dominant culture which, in turn, gets 'uniform' in patterns and is sought to be extended to other regions to continue the process of subordination.

Thus, what follows is an urgent call for radical restructuring of social orders, of social thought and action (see also Mills, 1963, p. 103). For social processes to be alive for radical change, one must continue to ask that vital question: 'Why do I believe what I believe?' Hence, we must go about to find the roots of our own beliefs (Robinson, 1962). It is here that ideology comes in; it is applicable in all research (Robinson, 1962). To take an example: 'All human beings are equal' is a proposition that provides a programme for research. If the research question is to find out whether class or colour is correlated with the statistical distribution of innate ability, then this is not an easy task, for ideology has soaked right into the material we are to deal with (Robinson, 1962, p. 9). For what is ability and how can we devise a method of measurement that separates what is innate from what is due to environment? Even though many would advocate a struggle to eliminate ideology from the answer but the point

here is that without ideology, we would never have *thought* of the question (Robinson, 1962). Ideology is indispensable in the world of action in social life and a society cannot exist unless its members have common feelings about what is the way to conduct its affairs; and these common feelings are expressed in ideology (Robinson, 1962, p. 9). At a societal level, the first essential for economists or social scientists would be to 'try seriously' to combat, not foster, the ideology which pretends that values which can be measured in money are the only ones that ought to count (Robinson, 1962, p. 137).

I wish to thank the authors for their contributions, for their patience and their adherence to an unreasonable deadline. This set of articles is vast and eclectic. It covers theoretical areas such as the end of globalization; the history of development; ideas of production and reproduction in gender studies; and ideas of globalization applied to disciplines such as management and the media. The theoretical papers are backed with case studies. I also wish to thank IIM, Kozhikode and SAGE for giving me this opportunity to edit this special issue.

I dedicate this special issue to the memory of Dr Somnath Zutshi. His last article figures in this collection.

Notes

1. See also Mathew (2001, 2004, 2010).
2. The question as to the exact period that saw the 'restoration of capitalism' in the Soviet Union is a matter of debate. Many scholars view the Stalin period itself as 'the beginning of the underground capitalist economy'. However, one can state categorically that by the time Gorbachev took power, nearly 15 per cent of the Soviet economy was 'undercover capitalist economy' (see Menshikov, 1999, pp. 94–96). However, there is no dispute to the fact that the erstwhile Soviet Union (today) has seen the complete restoration of capitalism (see Vieux & Petras, 1995).
3. The productive forces, however, include not just the means of production (tools, machines, factories and so on), but also labour power—the skills, knowledge, experience and other human faculties used in work (see Shaw, 2000).
4. Gender connotations of the usage of this word is recognized. The word is being used from the source.

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