

AntiGlobos

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The movement of
the “antiglobos”—
antiglobalization
protestors—gains
momentum with
every gathering of
international elites.
Do they have a case,
as then-US president
Bill Clinton said at
that first outing
during the Seattle
WTO meeting? Or, as
Robert McNamara
argues, are they
“completely wrong
intellectually?” This
section examines
that key question.

The Ethical Challenge of Globalization

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WARSAW —“Globalization” means that we are all dependent on each other. Distances matter little now. Whatever happens in one place may have global consequences. With the resources, technical tools and know-how we have acquired, our actions span enormous distances in space and time. However locally confined our intentions might have been, we would be ill-advised to leave out of account global factors, since they could decide the success or failure of our actions. What we do (or abstain from doing) may influence the conditions of life (or death) of people in places we will never visit and of generations we will never know.

This is the condition under which, knowingly or not, we make our shared history today. Though much, perhaps everything or almost everything, in that unraveling history depends on human choices, the condition under which choices are made is not itself a matter of choice.

Having dismantled most of the limits that used to confine the potential of our actions to the territory we could survey, monitor and control, we can no longer shelter either ourselves, or those at the receiving end of our actions, from the global web of mutual dependency.

Nothing can be done to reverse globalization. One can be “in favor” or “against”



that new globality of our inter-dependency with an effect similar to supporting or resenting the next solar or lunar eclipse. But much depends on our consent or resistance to the lopsided form globalization has thus far taken.

GLOBAL GUILT | Half a century ago Karl Jaspers could still set apart neatly the “moral guilt” (the remorse we feel when causing harm to other humans — either by

what we have done or by what we've failed to do) from the "metaphysical guilt" (the guilt we feel when a human being is harmed, even if the harm was in no way connected to our action). That distinction has lost its meaning with globalization. As never before, John Donne's words—"never ask to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee"—represent the genuine solidarity of our fate, though it is as yet far from being matched by solidarity of our feelings and action.

Whenever human beings suffer indignity, misery or pain, we cannot be sure of our moral innocence. We cannot declare that we did not know, nor can we be certain that there was nothing we could change in our conduct that wouldn't avert or at least

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alleviate the sufferers' fate. We might have been impotent individually, but we could do something together, and togetherness is made of and by individuals.

The trouble is—as another great 20th-century philosopher, Hans Jonas, complained—that although space and time no longer set limits on the effects of our actions, our moral imagination has not progressed much beyond the scope it had acquired in the times of Adam and Eve. Responsibilities we are ready to assume have not ventured as far as has the influence that our daily conduct exerts on the lives of ever more distant people.

The "globalization process" entails this network of dependence filling every nook and cranny of the globe—but (so far at least) little else. It would be grossly premature to speak of a global society or global culture, let alone of global polity or global law.

A NEW SYSTEM? | Is there a global social system emerging at the far end of the globalization process? If there is such a system, it does not as yet resemble the social systems we have learned to consider the norm. We used to think of social systems as totalities that coordinated and adapted all aspects of human existence through economic mechanisms, political power and cultural patterns. Nowadays, though, what used to be coordinated at the same level and within the same totality has been set apart and placed at radically disparate levels.

The globality of capital, finances and trade—those forces decisive for the range of choices and the effectiveness of human action—has not been matched by a similar scale of the resources which humanity developed to control those forces that control human lives. Most importantly, that globality has not been matched by a similarly global scale of democratic control.

Indeed, we may say that power has "flown away" from the historically developed institutions that used to exercise democratic control over uses and abuses of power

inside the modern nation states. Globalization in its current form means dis-empowerment of nation states and (so far) the absence of any effective substitute.

A similar Houdini-act has been committed by economic actors once before, though obviously on a more modest scale than in our era of globalization. Max Weber, one of the most acute analysts of the logic (or illogic) of modern history, noted that the birth act of modern capitalism was the separation of business from the household; the “household” standing for the dense web of mutual rights and obligations sustained by village and township communities, parishes or craftsmen guilds in which families and neighborhoods had been tightly wrapped. By that separation (better named, with a bow to the famed Mennenius Agrippa’s ancient allegory, “secession”) business ventured into a genuine frontier-land, a virtual no-man’s land, free of all extant moral concerns and legal constraints and ready to be subordinated to the business’ own code of behavior.

As we know, that unprecedented moral extraterritoriality of economic activities led in its time to the spectacular advance of industrial potential and growth of wealth. We know as well, though, that for almost the whole of the 19th century the same extraterritoriality rebounded in a lot of human misery, poverty and mind-boggling polarization of human life standards and chances.

Finally, we also know that the emergent modern states re-claimed the no-man’s land that business claimed as its exclusive property. The rule-and-norm setting agencies of the state invaded that space and eventually, though only after overcoming ferocious resistance, annexed it and colonized it, thereby filling the ethical void and mitigating its most unprepossessing consequences for the life of its subjects or citizens.

THE SECOND SECESSION | Globalization may be described as the “second secession.” Once more, business has escaped the household’s confinement, though this time the household left behind is the modern “imagined household,” circumscribed and protected by the nation-state economic, military, cultural powers topped with political sovereignty. Once more, business has acquired an “extraterritorial territory,” a space of its own, which it can roam, freely sweeping aside minor hurdles erected by weak locals and steering clear of the obstacles built by the strong ones, pursue its own ends and ignore and bypass all other ends as economically irrelevant and therefore illegitimate. And once more we observe social effects similar to those met with moral outcry at the time of the first secession, only (as the second secession itself) of an immensely greater, global scale.

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Almost two centuries ago, in the midst of the first secession, Karl Marx charged with the error of “utopianism” those advocates of a fairer, equitable and just society who hoped to achieve their purpose through stopping the advancing capitalism in its tracks and returning to the starting point, to the pre-modern world of extended households and family workshops.

There was no way back, Marx insisted; and on this point at least history proved him right. Whatever kind of justice and equity stands a chance of taking root today needs to start from where the irreversible transformations have already brought the human condition.

Retreat from the globalization of human dependency, from the global reach of human technology and economic activities is, in all probability, no longer in the cards. Answers like “circle the wagons” or “back to the tribal (national, communal) tents” won’t do. The question is not how to turn back the river of history, but how to fight its pollution and to channel its flow toward more equitable distribution of the benefits it carries.

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And another point to remember. Whatever form the postulated global control over global forces may take, it cannot be a magnified replica of democratic institutions developed in the first two centuries of modern history. Such democratic institutions have been cut to the measure of the nation state, then the largest and all-encompassing “social totality.” They are singularly unfit to be inflated to the global volume.

To be sure, the nation state was not an extension of communal mechanisms either. It was, on the contrary, the end product of radically new modes of human togetherness and new forms of social solidarity. Nor was it an outcome of negotiation and a consensus achieved through hard bargaining among local communities. The nation-state that in the end provided the sought-after response to the challenges of “first secession” came into existence in spite of the die-hard defenders of communal traditions and through further erosion of the already shrinking and emaciated local sovereignties.

Effective responses to globalization can only be global. And the fate of such a global response depends on the emergence and entrenchment of a global (as distinct from “international,” or more correctly inter-state) political arena. It is such an arena that is today, more conspicuously, missing.

The existing global players are singularly unwilling to set it up. Their ostensible adversaries, trained in the old yet increasingly ineffective art of inter-state diplomacy,

seem to lack the needed ability and indispensable resources. New forces are needed to establish and invigorate a truly global forum adequate to the era of globalization — and they may assert themselves only through by passing both kinds of players.

This seems to be the only certainty — all the rest being the matter of our shared inventiveness and political practice of trial-and-error. After all, few if any thinkers in the midst of the first secession could envisage the form which the damage-repairing operation would ultimately take. What they were sure of was that some operation of that kind was the paramount imperative of their time. We are all in debt to them for that insight.



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