

The concept of globalisation



There are a plethora of factors that have played a role in influencing world politics in the 20th century. There are the political ideologies, each with their own agenda, conflicting or similar, such as Communism, Fascism, Nationalism, Capitalism and Socialism. There are the various worldwide treaties and agreements, such as the Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations and the United Nations.

Accompanying these are economic agreements, which have an ever-increasing role in world politics, like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), plus regional trade agreements and customs unions such as the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), the European Union (EU) and the Asia Pacific Economic Community (APEC). Even the two World Wars have had an influence. However, the single force that has had the greatest impact on world politics in the 20th century is Globalisation. Globalisation is a concept with many differing definitions.

Bayliss & Smith (1998, p. 15) define globalisation as the 'intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. " Globalisation is a process that entails the movement of capital, goods, services and labour around the world. Globalisation is the massive control of the world" s economy by big business, transcending national boundaries. The underlying factors in all of these definitions are that globalisation involves worldwide integration of both political and economic ideals.

Furthermore, Strachan (1998, p. 159) argues that it involves legal and cultural integration also. But does such integration undermine a country's sovereignty? Can such integration be achieved without violence and conflict? In order to answer these questions, this essay will examine the driving forces behind globalisation, its downfalls and cultural adaptability. Globalisation is an ever-increasing force, even today, as technological advances literally make the world smaller by increasing communication and decreasing travel times, or what can be referred to as the 'Communication Revolution' (Durst, 2000, p. 5).

Through massive and rapid improvements in the Information Technology industry; telecommunications, exponential increases in computing power coupled with lower costs and the development of electronic communications and information networks such as the Internet, communications are now possible almost instantaneously between any two points on the globe. The threads of global web are computers, facsimile machines, satellites, monitors and modems—all of them linking designers, engineers, contractors, licensees and dealers worldwide (Sims, 1989, p. 21).

Physical distance is now irrelevant. This improvement of communications this century from sailing ship to satellite has contributed directly to the globalisation of the world's economies and political systems (Rimmer, 2000, p. 3). This has taken place across cultural and physical boundaries, effectively eliminating the capacity of countries to isolate themselves from the rest of the world. A prime example of this is China. For most of its existence, China has kept its doors closed to the rest of the world. No outside influences reached China and it remained unchanged and untouched.

In recent times however, China has relaxed its legislation to accommodate foreign investment and trade. Its economy has improved and new information on how to do things more efficiently has been introduced. Borders no longer act as boundaries, especially with respect to the movement of information and finance. Furthermore, borders are becoming increasingly difficult for governments to define and maintain. Regional conflicts are arising everywhere; Sierra Leone, the coup in Fiji, Chechnya, Southern Lebanon and Kosovo. As a result, national governments are being forced to redefine their roles, responsibilities and policy relationships.

Thus, globalisation has raised fears that the sovereignty of nation states is being undermined. If sovereignty can be defined as the ability to exercise control without outside interference, then nation states are clearly experiencing diminished sovereignty. Governments have no choice but to recognise and work on the assumption that most issues they are required to deal with are affected by or will affect the international competitiveness of the country. Government's own responses to globalisation or the search for joint solutions to global problems have further effects on sovereignty.

Participation in international organisations or the adoption of international agreements puts limits on policy options available to governments (Rimmer, 2000, p. 5). Instead of independence, the world is now pursuing interdependence. Proponents of globalisation argue that unilateral action is not the most effective way to achieve policy goals. In combating environmental problems and international crime, the interests of individual nations can only be protected by collective action. This belief has led to competition between countries on almost all fronts.

International investment is encouraged by the activities and mobility of multinational corporations, meaning that most domestic policies such as education and training, taxation, social protection, economic regulation and labour legislation have become international. Even a country's domestic management policy is a matter of great concern to its trading rivals, because this will ultimately affect a country's efficiency and competitiveness. Therefore, government policies must increasingly be made more consistent with, or competitive to, those of their trading rivals.

Robert Reich is a strong supporter of globalisation, publishing the book entitled 'The Work of Nations'. In his book, Reich argues that it is already too late to stop globalisation. His view is supported by Joan Spero, US Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, who states that capital now moves around the world with startling speed. Each day over US \$1 trillion is traded in a global foreign exchange market that never closes. (Spero in Strachan, 1998, p. 156). Reich (1991, p. 112) argues that there is no such thing as an American product anymore, giving the example of an ice hockey stick.

It is designed in Sweden, financed in Canada, assembled in Cleveland and Denmark out of alloys patented in Delaware and fabricated in Japan and finally distributed in North America and Europe. There are many criticisms of globalisation and Edward Herman (1999, pp. 3-5) classifies his criticisms into a number of categories. Two of those are that, firstly, globalisation is undemocratic and secondly, that it is an assault on labour. In the United States, public opinion polls showed the general public was against NAFTA, even after incessant propaganda, but the mass media supported it and it was passed.

In Europe as well, polls have shown persistent majorities opposed to the introduction of the Euro, but a powerful elite supports it, so it moves forward. Globalisation has been a tool serving elite interests. This contradicts the democratic and egalitarian utopia that these regions have been relentlessly encouraging during the 20th century. Globalisation has also steadily weakened democracy because the containment of labour costs and scaling down of the welfare state has required the business minority to establish firm control of the state and remove its capacity to respond to the demands of the majority (Herman, 1999, p.).

One of the main objectives of Transnational Corporations (TNC" s) movement abroad, for example Nike manufacturing shoes in Korea, has been to tap cheaper labour sources. Labour is often cheapest, and least prone to cause employer problems, in authoritarian states that curb unions and enter into virtual joint venture arrangements with foreign capital, as in Suharto's Indonesia and PRI's Mexico. Once again, this directly contradicts government" s agendas.

Publicly, politicians speak out in support of foreign aid, human rights and equality, while behind closed doors they are endorsing and funding TNC" s operations that exploit cheap labour in third world countries. Another criticism of globalisation is that it is against the very nature of culture. Culture derives its diversity from the differences between different human communities and the distinctions between their respective geographical roots and historical experiences.

Globalisation disregards these factors and ultimately aims to treat the entire world population as if they have the same tastes, personalities, customs, traditions and language, through a universal government system. If this were to be so, the world would be a very boring, robotic, monotonous place, devoid of any form of culture. The ramifications of this are wide-ranging. Diversity, variety and room for change are lost and forgotten. Identities of oneself are lost; 'I' is replaced with 'we'. Power is placed into the hands of a select elite few, very oligarchic and undemocratic.

If a group of countries were to unite under a common government, equality would not be established. Such a grouping would encompass a wide spectrum of political views, ideologies, religions, races and colours. Instead of one whole body, there would be many minority groups. This transfers an unequal balance of power throughout the states. As the regional conflicts in East Timor, Yugoslavia and Chechnya have shown, conflict shall arise. There are too many barriers to overcome which only leads to frustration and violence. A Commission on Global Governance (COGG) has been established since 1992.

In a report published in 1995 entitled 'Our Global Neighbourhood', the commission argued that countries have to accept that in certain fields, sovereignty has to be exercised collectively (Strachan, 1998, p. 155). Once again we have a contradiction in terms; by definition, collective and sovereign are exact opposites that are mutually exclusive. Having stated all the above criticisms, it is important to mention that there is no perfect system in society today that is capable of running a country absolutely efficiently.

In fact, conflicting ideologies often correct each other. Communism corrects the equality problem of democracy and democracy corrects the problem of efficiency of communism. By choosing one system or the other, uprisal and discontent from the people is inevitable. But is it possible to combine the two? Hitler and Mussolini argued that fascism was the 'third way'; an alternative to capitalism and socialism. However, fascism led to the death of more than six million Jewish people, so it justifiable to be wary of anyone offering a third alternative.

So globalisation has had the greatest impact on world politics in the 20th century, mainly because of the technological advances in telecommunications and information technology. This is most likely to continue through this the 21st century. The criticisms of globalisation are that it undermines sovereignty, exploits third word countries and is undemocratic. However, there is no feasible alternative at this time and globalisation is already well-spread and embedded in economics and politics. For now, the world will just have to go with it.