

Effects of globalization on world politics



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This paper considers the role that globalization has played in changing the nature of world politics. It explores the idea that such effects can be visualized in two separate spheres: the domestic, and the international. It pays particular attention to the role of what Risse terms 'Transnational Actors', a complex aggregation of bodies which he has placed into two main categories: firstly, that of structure, which may either formal or informal, and secondly, that of motivation, which may be 'instrumental' – i. e., constituted around the need to achieve shared membership objectives, or more general bodies constructed around the need to promote a common good. Within these two dimensions, Risse also notes the presence of sub-categories of organization, such as 'epistemic communities' and advocacy networks. (Risse 2002: pp. 255-256). What has to be considered here is whether or not the cumulative efforts of these bodies are in effect producing real change in world politics, and if so, how an such change be recognised and assessed? Ultimately, the question is whether or not the phenomenon of globalization, or its associated political effects, are the arbiters of a genuinely new form of international relations, or merely the re-working of older models and protocols. As Risse puts it, '...there is little systematic evidence to sustain claims that the transnational " society world" has somehow overtaken the " state world".' (Risse 2002: p. 255). If this is accepted, the corollary is a largely unchanged set of underlying relationships between sovereign states, with all that implies for economic interaction and the social dynamic. As Hurrell and Woods point out, '...Economic liberalization is exacerbating the gap between rich and poor within virtually all developing regions. At the same time, other elements of globalization are increasing the inequalities of political power and influence, as well as highlighting new dimensions of

inequality.’ (Hurrell and Woods 1999: p. 1) Correspondingly, it is argued here, the underlying economic nature of globalization tends to make it profoundly adaptive of established international interaction.

In the first instance, it may be helpful to give definition to otherwise vague notions of globalization, giving full consideration to the ways in which the phenomenon cuts across the political sphere. There are many such definitions to choose from, several of which offer competing or overlapping sets of characteristics: central to all of these is the idea that formerly discrete social and economic dimensions are being drawn into closer proximity and eventual convergence. For example, as Fisher and Lovell argue that , ‘ Globalisation is a process which is bringing societies that were previously economically, politically and culturally diverse into convergence. That is being achieved by a combination of the success of capitalism, the growth of a common mass culture...and the wish of people in all societies, through their rational choices, to choose the same goals.’ (Fisher and Lovell 2003: p. 256). It is the proliferation of interaction in the non-governmental spheres, both public and private, which collectively constitutes the novel dimensions of contemporary globalization. As Risse explains, ‘...the concept encompasses everything as long as human agency is involved, Yet, cross-border capital flows, international trade, CNN media broadcasts, international migration, cross-border tourism, the diffusion of values and norms, transnational social movements, INGO’s and MNC’s are quite different phenomena.’ (Risse 2002: p. 274).

Some commentators take a more benign and reductive view of the whole process. Hart, for example, argues that ‘ Properly focused, the profit motive

can accelerate (not inhibit) the transformation toward global sustainability, with nonprofits, governments and multinational agencies all playing crucial roles as collaborators and watchdogs.’ (Hart 2007: p. 3) Hart’s optimism seems to be predicated on the idea that capitalism will bring with it the twin benefits of a free market and a free society, although events have demonstrated that this is not always the case: former state capitalist models eschewed such models, and contemporary variants, such as the Chinese example, have not necessarily seen commerce and political liberalism as intrinsically linked. In fact, as the case of the journalist Shi Tao illustrates, arbiters of e. commerce such as *Yahoo*, *Microsoft* and *Google* have, on occasion, been co-opted into the repressive arms of an obdurately repressive state. The result has been a voluntary code of ethics, which, as Dickie and Waters report, has yet to prove itself in the international arena: ‘...designed to reduce the risk that their actions lead to human rights abuses in China and other countries. The principles, written in conjunction with two human rights groups, are a reaction to the fierce public criticism that all three faced two years ago for bowing to various degrees to Chinese internet controls.’ (Dickie and Waters 2008). Furthermore, as Risse indicates, there are historical precedents for doubting the efficacy of liberalized commerce in the diminution of international tensions. As he reminds us, the cumulative free-trade panaceas of pro-liberal optimists such as Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and Kant were largely displaced by the events of 1914-18. ‘...the First World War, which was fought among highly interdependent nations, discredited the idea that economic interdependence alone is a sufficient condition for peace in the absence of democracy.’ (Risse 2002: p. 257) In other words, there was

a primacy of politics which obdurately and arbitrarily overruled any supposedly benign panaceas inherent in the market.

Again, it is possible to see the reworking of much older debates within the idea of a new world order being created in this way. As Risse points out, ‘The controversy about the precise relationship between economic interests, capitalism and economic interdependence, on the one hand, and aggressive/imperialist foreign policies as well as peace and war, continues to this day.’ (Risse 2002: p. 257). The empirical contexts for such debate are various, and may be seen especially in the supplanting of the *Pax Britannica* with the *Pax Americana*, and all that implies for the continuity of an inequitable distribution of political and economic power between sovereign communities. Moreover, the apparently benign internationalism of the post 1945 environment has itself been supplanted by a far more postmodernist atmosphere, as evidenced by the actions of the UK in the Falklands Islands conflict, and both the UK and the US in Iraq. As Hurrell and Woods point out, ‘Inequality within the traditional conception of world order is a positive, restraining, and ordering force. It permits the operation of a balance of power as a substitute for the centralized authority of a Hobbesian Leviathan in domestic politics. At the same time, hierarchy in the international system, or the imbalance of power, has never meant a strict imposition of the absolute will of the most powerful state or states.’ (Hurrell and Woods 1999: p. 9) The essential point here is that the exercising of such residual power, whether through economic hegemony or more direct means, may be profoundly corrosive of more general movements towards a globalizing community. As Risse enquires, ‘Does the INGO world then represent a ‘

global civil society...or does it merely reproduce *Western* enlightenment values such as universalism, individualism, progress and cosmopolitanism? INGOs as part and parcel of a “ world culture” dominated by Western liberal hegemony?’ (Risse 2002: p. 260)

As Risse points out, ‘ Globally operating MNC’s do not all look alike, but maintain a distinct institutional features pertaining to their organizational structure and culture which originate from the national institutional environment in which the mother company operates.’ (Risse 2002: p. 261)

Just as Risse identifies this trait at a macro level from an academic perspective, so intra-industry analysts such as Hofstede have noted the same patterns of behaviour at a micro level, in attempting to isolate the visceral cultural resilience of global organizations. ‘ From a practical perspective, the cultural variables described by the model are intuitively appealing because of their.... relationship to the management process.’ (Leopold et al. 2005: p. 307). Albeit in a reductive sense, Hofstede’s taxonomies of uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity/femininity, individualism/collectivism, and long-term orientation, combine to inform us of the cultural factors which underlay supposedly seamless multinational integrations. (Hofstede 2003). Such analyses have direct political applications as well as their corporate usage: for example, the perceived Chinese intolerance of uncertainty has, it is alleged, been invoked by joint official and media interventions to choke off demand for political emancipation. As Rachman has commented, ‘...fear of “ chaos” is frequently stirred up to fend off demands for political liberalisation.’ (Rachman, 2008: n. p.)

Such distinctions may have implications far beyond the corporate context, reaching out into the world of media: this arguably, takes in the concept of the public sphere identified by Habermas and his successor theorists, as the context for a renegotiation of civil polity. Most analysts of globalization invoke the proliferation of international media channels as profoundly constructive of the phenomenon: to date however, there has been comparatively little discussion of the way in which this might genuinely engender an internationalist perspective on politics. As Adler points out, Habermas's social theory '...explained how emancipatory interests became reconstructed in both theory and practice and especially how deliberative democratic processes helped people free themselves from distorted communication.' (Adler 2002: p. 97). In other words, this aspect of globalization might be one in which its specifically emancipatory and political dimensions could be realized. As Habermas himself points out, the social realization of this sphere enabled its predominantly bourgeois actors to '... engage in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour.' (Habermas 2003: p. 27). The parallels between the historically specific inception of this process, and contemporary developments of globalization, are arguably strong. As Habermas again points out, ' The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason...' (Habermas 2003: p. 27).

There are of course a number of balancing considerations to be acknowledged before the true political significance of this can be realistically assessed. As Thompson points out, '...the exchange of information and

symbolic content in the social world takes place in contexts of mediated interaction quasi-interaction, rather than in contexts of face-to-face interaction between individuals who share a common locale.’ (Thompson, 2001: p. 87). Perhaps more significant here than the idea of ‘ locale’ is that of interest, or of the common bond inherent in relations of production – or other unifying tendencies – which might support a political reification. Nor can it be denied that there are specific aspects of Habermas’s theory which militate directly against the politicization of the global community, and in fact point to direct opposite situation. This is especially noticeable in Habermas’s idea of the ‘ refeudalization’ of the public sphere, during which the emancipatory power of the media is neutralised by the elites who control it. Robins and Webster see this as ‘...the dominance of corporative forms within which discussion is not public but is increasingly limited to technicians and bureaucrats’, through which the public sphere becomes ‘...a condition of organizational action, to be instrumentally managed – i. e. manipulated.’ (Robins and Webster 2006: p. 94). Neither can it be overlooked that in many sites of intense economic liberalization, such as in China, there appears to be a comparative absence of commensurate political change, as evidenced in the associated media and educational spheres. As Rachman indicates, ‘.... the need to recover national strength and for China to regain its rightful place in the world is a constant theme. One western professor at a Beijing university – who is generally very positive about modern China – cannot help worrying that many of his students “ seem to have been taught that an eventual war with America is inevitable”.’. (Rachman, 2008: n. p.).

In conclusion then, it may just as relevant to ascertain the extent to which ' Transnational Actors' operate as arbiters of genuine political change, as it is to demonstrate their function as organic intellectuals in a world body politic. In other words, it is one thing – as Risse has done – to show that they are a significant and diffuse element within globalization as a whole. This, it may be argued, shows that the latter are significant within the converging operation of pre-existing political systems, and does not of itself undermine the concept or operation of globalization. However, it also demonstrates that the latter merely amplifies the existing international political status quo, without substantially altering it. This is especially pertinent if economic liberalization is to continue as the essential arbiter of globalization, and any attending social changes. As Altman points out, ' From a Kantian perspective, a corporation can have no responsibility at all... it is a tool, and a good tool performs its designated function well, a good corporation maximizes profits for its shareholders.' (Altman 2007: p. 261) Neither has the onset of globalization analyses substantially undermined conventional understandings or interpretations of the manner in which states interact. As Hopf reminds us, ' Durable expectations between states require intersubjective [*sic*] identities that are sufficiently stable to ensure predictable patterns of behaviour.' (Hopf 1998: p. 176). The contrast between constructivism and realism remains as distinctive as ever, as Hopf again indicates. '...constructivism...assumes that the selves, or identities, of states are a variable; they...depend on historical, cultural, political, and social context.' (Hopf 1998: p. 176). A realist position meanwhile proposes that the state, '...in international politics, across space and time...' has a '... single eternal meaning...' (Hopf 1998: p. 176) Correspondingly, from this

perspective, the realist model is too reductive, assuming that all actors in global policy can possess only one meaningful identity, '...that of self-interested states...' (Hopf 1998: p. 176). Whether one is an adherent of the constructivist or realist school, or merely takes both into account in assessing international politics, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that sovereign self interest, and intra-state sectional interests, are still well to the fore in determining the nature of politics. In this respect, the whole phenomenon of globalization begins to appear strongly redolent of earlier, supposedly more discretely evolved systems. As Zurn points out, the process of political change through economic interdependence is conditional upon several agencies, through which is achieved an overall reduction of distance and difference. ' In a material sense, people of different societies grow closer to each other and get to know each other better. In addition, increased transnational transactions necessarily create an economic interest in the maintenance of good transnational relations. The interest of strengthened export capital is one reason for the stability of free trade since the Second World War.' (Zurn 2002: p. 239). The problem with this interpretation of events is that it appears highly evocative of pre-1914 optimism about the stabilizing influence of free-trade liberalism. Only forthcoming events will fully reveal whether or not Third Way neo-liberalism is any better placed to provide the panacea which its classical antecedent manifestly failed to do.

Meanwhile, as Risse concludes, there two substantive issues which must be addressed before what he terms ' global governance' can acquire legitimacy: the ' democratic deficit' perceived in the nature of supra-national or federalist aggregations of states such as the EU, and the obstacles which

might preclude a 'cosmopolitan democracy'. (Risse 2002: p. 269). It remains to be seen whether these achievements offset the tensions inherent in a globalizing economy.

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