Globalization, Dead or Alive?

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In January 1848, 160 years ago, Karl Marx added the finishing touches to a remarkable document, *The Communist Manifesto*. Umberto Eco has recently commended the admirable literary style and poetic qualities of this, probably the most influential political pamphlet ever written. But more than this, we should note again its author’s amazing prescience — prescient in terms of anticipating the main points of contemporary analyses of globalization, though not in terms of forseeing globalizing trends themselves, since they were clearly evident — to Karl Marx at least — by the time he wrote. All four of the authors whose work is to be reviewed here acknowledge some degree of theoretical indebtedness to Marx, so it is worth reminding ourselves briefly of Marx’s main points regarding globalization.

In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx analyzed succinctly the globalizing tendencies inherent within capitalism: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere.”[1] He described how this process of globalization produced a leveling and loss of distinct local cultures, superseding the claims of parochialism, regionalism and nationalism: “The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country” (83). He observed how established national industries were being destroyed and new industries created, which used not indigenous raw materials but materials imported from remote regions of the globe; while the products themselves were consumed all over the world. New wants were being generated, which could be satisfied only by the products of distant countries. This globalizing movement affected not only the production of goods, but intellectual production as well, so that, for example, “from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature” (84).

Marx also identified many of the social and psychological concomitants of globalization. For instance, he noticed the high value placed upon constant change in the name of innovation; and he was sensitive to the accompanying, ever-present human anxiety:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air... (83).

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Among the many social changes that capitalism brought with it, Marx noted, for instance, the trend for expanding urban centers to dominate rural areas; the accelerating concentration of ownership of productive resources in a few hands; and the increasing employment of women since, under the imperatives of the market, “Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity” (88).

Marx emphasized that under the sway of capitalism social relations tended to degenerate into brutal competition and callous exploitation. Social relationships come to be based solely on the cash nexus, leaving “no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest” or “egotistical calculation” (82). The ramifications of these changes extend through the whole spectrum of social life. Previously honored professions and occupations, whether those of doctors, lawyers, priests, poets or scientists, are no longer respected but, disciplined by market forces, are reduced to financial contingencies. In the literature which developed around the concept, the scientists, are no longer respected but, disciplined by market forces, are reduced to no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest” or “egotistical calculation” (82).

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Rosenberg argues that Globalization Theory always suffered from serious and fundamental flaws, which were indeed inherent to the undertaking. Many of the ideas that Rosenberg canvasses in this first section were developed at greater length in The Follies of Globalization Theory (2000). This previous publication was a very short book, equivalent to a very long journal article which, as the title suggests, focused on critique of some of the most prominent exponents of globalization theory, in particular Jan Aart Scholte, Rob Walker and Anthony Giddens.

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The more ambitious Globalization theorists then attempted to use the concept of globalization as the basis for a wholesale reorientation of social theory grounded in the spatio-temporal dimension of life. But this placed a greater explanatory weight on the phenomenon of space-time compression than it could bear. As a result, these theorists...
were forced into cumulative qualifications and equivocations, which finally amounted to retraction, of their theoretical edifices: "the epochal predictions of Globalization Theory could suddenly dissolve in a sea of qualifications" (18). The results, in Rosenberg’s view, were theoretical follies, analogous to architectural follies, where the structure necessarily remains incomplete. “This phenomenon of the folly recurred so regularly in these writings that, in the absence of other explanations, it seems reasonable to conclude that it reflected a systematic flaw in the entire enterprise of Globalization Theory” (14). Thus, as Rosenberg argues persuasively, from the very beginning Globalization Theory lacked every sign of intellectual vitality: D.O.A. On the question of causality, Rosenberg concludes that the dramatic spatio-temporal phenomena of the 1990s were the result of processes of social change – and not vice versa.

Looking more specifically at the relations between globalization and state sovereignty, Rosenberg draws attention to historical difficulties with accepting the myth of the Westphalian System: the inter-state system of territorially-defined sovereign states supposedly inaugurated in Europe in 1648 at the conclusion of the Thirty Years’ War. Drawing on Marx, Rosenberg argues that under capitalism the separation of politics and economics, the domains of the state and of civil society, means that there is no necessary contradiction between state sovereignty and proliferating transnational economic linkages.

This is a shrewd argument about the relation between state sovereignty and international economic connections. But in this section of his thesis Rosenberg is in danger of slipping into intellectual folly himself. Although the putative separation of politics and economics is an essential part of capitalist ideology, as Marx pointed out, politics and economics cannot be separated, as Marx also pointed out. Nor is the state separate from civil society. As a recent wave of the feminist movement taught, even the personal is political. And there is no international political equality. Just as workers do not share equal power with their employers, so poorer nations cannot exert the same power as rich ones. The sovereignty of poorer, weaker nations is placed in jeopardy by economic pressures whether they originate from multinational corporations or the governments of dominant states (or both).

In the second part of his argument, Rosenberg explores the relation between social theories and historical explanation, demonstrating the possibility of an historical sociology as a mediating link between the two. This second section of the argument contains Rosenberg’s admirably clear reflections on bridging the gap between theory and the empirical data of history. He also explores how such an historical sociology might relate to the field of international relations through use of the theory of uneven and combined development, à la Leon Trotsky. Trotsky’s concept of uneven and combined development enables an historical sociology which incorporates international dynamics as integral to the historical process of social development.

In the final section of the argument, Rosenberg shows that globalization became the \textit{Zeitgeist} of the 1990s, the spirit of the age, as a result of a conjunction of circumstances, including most importantly the end of the Cold War and the rise of neo-liberal politics and neo-classical economics, combined with the latest communication technologies. According to Rosenberg, the Soviet collapse in the East between 1989 and 1991 and the deregulation drive in the West produced a socio-political vacuum, the rapid filling in of which created a sense of irresistible momentum, which turned out to be merely temporary. But if globalization was merely a passing \textit{Zeitgeist}, what does this say for the role of its theorists? “Globalization Theorists were led to do the opposite of what social theorists are supposed to do. Instead of acting as interpreters to the spirit of the age, they became its ideological amplifiers” (6-7). Instead of globalization, Rosenberg advocates a theoretical return to classical social theory, which in his view is solidly grounded in the work of Karl Marx.

The idea that globalization is already past its use-by date is a theme that has been developed by other writers as well, notably John Ralston Saul in \textit{The Collapse of Globalism: And the Reinvention of the World} (2005). Perhaps this should be seen as an illustration of the accelerating rate of ideational turnover in the twenty-first century: “All that is solid...” But this would not be fair to Rosenberg and others, who never believed it for a minute. Saul’s periodization differs from Rosenberg’s; he dates the era of globalization from the early 1970s through to 1995. Saul contends that despite some successes, globalization failed to deliver on its core promise of promoting world-wide economic growth, leaving in its wake the chaotic interregnum we now inhabit, characterized by a lack of clear direction for the future. To end the post-global confusion, Saul advocates positive nationalism, a revival of the humanist notion of belonging to a community, with government to provide leadership, not management, in the service of the public good.

Rosenberg’s is a dense and brilliant argument, and summary cannot do justice to its richness. Nevertheless, a few points of criticism can be raised. The claim by Rosenberg and Saul that the age of globalization is over seems prima facie to be contradicted by the continuing flow of books and articles with “globalization” in their titles (this one
What is lacking in Rosenberg’s otherwise detailed exposition of the historical conjunction of the 1990s is consideration of the role played by globalization as an ideology. Outstanding here was the use of globalization by governments and corporate interests as a threat to discipline and tool to demoralize workers and labor movements in Western countries; and its use as a threat to constrain and control non-Western governments. Trotsky wrote of “the whip of external necessity” and that whip could be heard cracking all over the world during the 1990s, wielded by neo-liberal politicians, neo-classical economists and managers of international organizations alike. What was global about the 1990s was the world-wide dissemination of this dismal discipline, displayed by Saul “crucifixion economics,” and its (no doubt reluctant) acceptance by many left-leaning politicians, left-leaning voters, social-democratic parties, trade union movements and individual workers. It is arguable that globalization was especially useful and effective as an ideology because the term did not appear on the surface to have political origins or commitments – it could give the appearance of political neutrality, but at the same time imply “non-political” forms of coercion and irresistibility. The ideological separation of politics and economics under capitalism, to which Marx called attention, comes into play here.

Another deficiency of Rosenberg’s article is that it focuses specifically on the perpetrators of the high theory of globalization. He does not examine the far larger body of literature dealing with “theories of globalization” rather than Globalization Theory. Nor does he address the large literature on globalization which treats the subject discursively and/or from particular points of view. Rosenberg’s approach is rigorously analytical and focused on questions of causation. His work concentrates only on the small range of texts which attempted to elevate globalization into an overarching social theory and to argue that globalization by the 1990s was playing a causal role in social development. This is both the strength and a weakness of Rosenberg’s analysis.

But what is to be done about globalization? Other than recommending a return to Marxian methods of dissecting it, Rosenberg has no answer to offer. But this is no doubt a deficiency of Marxian analysis generally, rather than specific to Rosenberg. Before the coming of class revolution, it is not clear that Marx could envisage any strategies available to resist capitalist globalization that are not doomed to failure.

Elliott & Lemert

A recent book, first published in 2005, which works from the premise that globalization is still very much alive, is Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert’s The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization. Not only is globalization still alive, but according to Elliott and Lemert it is set to intensify in its effects, which on the whole they see as negative and damaging for people’s well-being. Under the broad sign of globalization, the authors include, for instance, “the speed of travel, the ease of communication, the multicultural politics of the world, the new transnational economic markets” (19). The study concentrates mainly, though not exclusively, on the impact of globalization in the United States and Britain.

The focus of this study is to trace the sociological and psychological impacts of globalization. The book therefore ranges between the level of overarching social theory and generalizing social analysis, and the level of the individual’s experience of recent social developments. Whereas the orientation of much mainstream psychology has been towards individual issues and responsibility, in effect often blaming the victim, Elliott and Lemert’s mix of sociology and psychology studies the ramifications of wide social movements for the psychological experiences of individuals. The authors adopt an anecdotal approach, reporting in depth several case studies based on reality, but altered to protect the subjects’ anonymity and also to heighten the impact of the stories. In most cases the lives of these individuals have in some way been damaged by the cluster of social changes which the authors include under the umbrella of globalization. This study thus has some elements of methodological individualism – the method or approach within the social sciences which explains social phenomena in terms of the interaction of innumerable decisions and actions of individuals – but it straddles the divide between social theoretic analysis and individual reportage, and hence between the abstract and the concrete.

When it comes to sociological analysis, the authors identify three major socio-structural changes in the Western world that have impacted upon individuals’ lives and personalities. These are: commodification; the new culture politics of the political Right; and privatization. It is worth probing this section of the analysis in some detail because of the insights it can give us about where the authors are coming from in terms of their social and political commitments. Under commodification, Elliott and Lemert acknowledge the contributions of Marx, Lukacs and Habermas and write of the advent of monopolies and multinationals on the one hand, and the promotion of individualist consumerist values on the other. They portray the penetration of market
Logic into the fabric of social relations as profoundly damaging. As they see it, consumerism undermines the ability of individuals to be aware of their own needs and desires, and more importantly damages our capacity to make meaningful emotional connections with each other. In the end even the consummation of consumerist objectives – returning home with a haul of stuff from the mall – can simply turn to dust, leaving only a sense of vacuity and despair.

Elliott and Lemert also discuss the implications, for individuals and for individualism, of the political shift towards a new conservatism and a reactionary intellectual milieu. In their view the politics of the radical Right in Western societies, initiated by Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Britain, has destroyed human communities and social cohesiveness on an unprecedented scale. Transnational capitalism has promoted individualism with all the ideological means at its disposal and achieved a rapid remoulding of private and public values.

The third socio-structural feature addressed by the authors is privatization, a process associated with a worldwide transformation of the barriers between public and private spaces. “The intimate connection, forged over many years in the collective psyche, between the domain of government and the public good is today rendered a fantasy of a bygone era, as the world is remade according to capital mobility and the selling off of governmental assets to the private sector” (39). Massive privatization and deregulation have led to social exclusion for many, who are denied access to basic social provisions such as medical care and education, or even water supply. The sometimes deadly effects of the failure to provide basic facilities are masked by the rhetoric of individual freedoms. Elliott and Lemert argue that the infiltration of neo-liberal economic doctrines into the tissue of our social practices has spread the values of the market into personal and intimate life, producing calculating, isolating and deadening forms of life. “What we are suggesting is that people today increasingly suffer from an emotionally pathologizing version of neo-liberalism” (41).

Most important, perhaps, is to address what Elliott and Lemert identify as the most effective strategy available for individuals to respond to and cope with the oppressive forces of globalization impinging deleteriously on their beings. They present their prescriptions in the last chapter of the book, entitled “Surviving the new individualism: Living aggressively in deadly worlds.” The conclusions they reach are surprising, and at first more than a little disconcerting. One is reminded of the shock that Jean-Paul Sartre felt when he first read in The Wretched of the Earth Franz Fanon’s exhortations to violence on the part of the black man in order to overcome the extremely demoralizing internal psychological effects of continuous denigration within the imperialist ideologies of the white colonizers. As in so much of Elliott and Lemert’s book, the argument is presented by means of anecdotal histories of individuals. The authors present two contrasting potted biographies of two leading academics: the famous sociologist, C. Wright Mills; and the not-so-famous, but reportedly formidable, Phyllis Meadow. As Elliott and Lemert tell it, during his life C. Wright Mills was increasingly troubled, worn down and finally, it is suggested, died as a result of the stress of public opposition to his work. Phyllis Meadow, on the other hand, worked as Mills’ research assistant in the 1940s, became a prominent psychoanalyst and continued to flourish during a long life until she died of cancer in 2004 at the age of 80; among her many achievements was to found the Institute for the Study of Violence in Boston. What conclusions do the authors draw?

Elliott and Lemert underline the ubiquity of violence in the globalizing world: “Deadly worlds are violent worlds. They may not lead immediately to the death of the body, but when violence is pervasive, either in the neighborhood or across the world, that violence is experienced and has its effects” (177-8). They see the answers to the problems of globalization as emerging in the realm of psychology. According to Elliott and Lemert, “Phyllis’s aggression was rooted in her willingness to know the worlds for what they so messily are – impossible and aggressive and violent” (191); and more generally, “We will never come to terms as individuals with the new global realities if we begin with any sort of innocence about just how deadly these new worlds are” (192). In a line of argument reminiscent of Nietzsche, the only answer seems to be to get in touch with the aggressive animal instincts, which these authors regard as inherent in human nature. In the end, Elliott and Lemert see the New Individualism as the necessary hard and aggressive work of recognizing, comprehending and surviving the deadly social worlds being engendered by globalization.

The problem is that, unfortunately, Elliott and Lemert provide little or no guidance about what “living aggressively” would entail in practice. The concept remains vague and hedged about with qualifications about aggression needing to be “balanced against the love of others and the constructive desire to join them working to build a better world,” or having to be mixed with the “drive to form creative relations with others.” Does this qualify as another intellectual folly, with such prevarications amounting to retraction? Unlike Marx, who exhorted the international working class to unite and lose their chains, or Fanon, who advocated united resistance by colonized peoples against European imperialism, Elliott and Lemert’s advice to live aggressively is in danger of descending in practice to the level of occasional individualist dummy-sips.
The book is written in a relaxed, rather folksy tone, with what seems at times a lackadaisical, self-indulgent dilatoriness: one wonders if this is a sign of a New Individualism within academia. Perhaps another sign of that trend, the text has been inadequately proof-read and typos and grammatical mistakes proliferate; provoking some answering aggression on the part of the reader.

Whether or not “living aggressively” is the answer to the very real psychological pains of globalization, this book has the merit of opening up a significant field of research: the psychological effects on individuals and societies of the social, economic and cultural changes summed up by the term globalization – in particular escalating levels of anxiety associated with constant threats of global competition and the concurrent dismantling of welfare safety nets. This book will certainly not be the last word on the subject, far from it, but this is an area of research of the most pressing importance.

Flusty

Far more upbeat in tone is Steven Flusty’s De-Coca-Colonization: Making the Globe from the Inside Out, a very hopeful book about the possibilities for popular resistance to globalization. Or, more correctly, it is a reinterpretation of the nature of globalization to show that it is produced, rather than needing to be resisted, by people at the local level. At the same time it also throws into dispute the accepted distinction between the global and the local. As is already becoming clear, this book puts into question so many of the taken-for-granted assumptions of the scholarly discourse surrounding globalization that it becomes difficult to characterize its argument using the accepted terminology.

It is no doubt partly for this reason, and also because of the author’s self-confessed penchant for terminological inventiveness, that neologisms stud his prose. In the course of her perusal, the reader becomes familiar with “flexism,” “detournement,” “globalities” and “de-coca-colonization” itself, to name but a few; as well as such neophoneology as the “new world bipolar disorder,” and “prickly space.” Though a little disturbing at first, such neologisms quickly register as both novel and lively, apt as well as challenging.

This short book packs a powerful emotional impact. Its tone of buoyant optimism is infectious, so the effect is uplifting and energizing. This is not to say that the book is naive or pollyannaish. The author writes about the darker side of the globalizing world, the prevalence of gated communities in the United States and elsewhere, of the increasing official surveillance of everyday life, about September 11 in New York and terrorism. But the emphasis remains on the creative potential for people to shape and reshape globalities for themselves.

Essentially, Flusty’s argument is that globalization is created by the activities of myriad individuals, acting either as individuals or within groups. Thus agency and the power of creation reside in the hands of individuals, and individuals can make and remake globalization according to their own desires. This study thus shares some elements of methodological individualism with Elliott and Lemert’s work in The New Individualism, but the use made of individual experiences is very different. By focusing on the individual and the local, Flusty counters the dominant conceptualization of global processes as by nature, big, inevitable, irresistible, overwhelming and imposed from above. What Flusty is arguing for might be characterized simply as “globalization from below” instead of “globalization from above.” This aligns its work in some ways with that of Richard Falk, as in Predatory Globalization: A Critique (1999), with its stress on the need to build transnational civil society as a foundation for democratic global governance.

Flusty’s argument raises some interesting methodological issues. The theoretical basis of his approach to globalization could be described as methodological individualism, where social phenomena are explained in terms of the interaction of countless decisions and actions of individuals. This approach can be contrasted with methodological collectivism, which instead explains developments in society in terms of the behavior of collectivities such as classes, ethnic groups, or genders. The interesting thing about the dominant discourse on globalization is that it has been closely connected with the concepts of economic rationalism, neo-classical economics and the ideology of the free market – all of which are theoretically grounded in methodological individualism. What Flusty has managed to do is to turn methodological individualism against that dominant globalizing discourse. Flusty engenders a sense of individual empowerment by placing decision-making about the future course of globalization into the hands of individuals all over the globe. This “detournement” (a Flustysm), or reworking of individualism against the oppressive forces of “plutocratic corporatism” (another Flustysim) is one of the reasons why this book is so intellectually stimulating as well as emotionally satisfying.

Flusty’s relationship with various systemic analyses of globalization, such as Marxist approaches or neo-Marxist dependency theories, is therefore difficult; and this is something he grapples with continually, but inconclusively, throughout the book. He
characterizes his own approach as “discursive materialism.” This could easily be criticized as fence-sitting, but Flusty believes it “elegantly bridges the material/discourse divide” (p.12). It might be replied that there is nothing as inelegant as attempting to straddle a fence. The theoretical problems of the relationships or conflicts between individual freedom, discourse, and materialism are not so easily disposed of. The theoretical importance of these issues should not be minimized, but neither should the difficulty of resolving them. They have tangled up more famous thinkers than Flusty: Jean-Paul Sartre and Edward Said spring to mind. Flusty finally relies on Marx’s well-known dictum that individuals make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. Flusty also gestures toward Michel Foucault’s notion of micropolitics, seeing power not so much as external and sovereign but as immanent in and emerging through day-to-day thoughts and actions. Thus the dark forces of globalized plutocratic corporatism do exert undeniable power, but Flusty emphasizes repeatedly that even these forces themselves are the result of countless individual daily actions, and their dominance is neither inevitable nor permanent:

There are multiple versions of the world at play on the global field, and there are inarguably winners that claim the lion’s share of the spoils... All remain engaged in continuous, polyvalent, and dislocated struggles for control over symbolic and literal terrains, all work to be concretized as globalities with the power to influence (or refuse) the order of the world...It remains instead a persistently viscous planet, an arena where all manner of institutions and other hybrid social collectivities advance incommensurable globalities, plutocratic and otherwise, of their own devising (131).

Strictly speaking, Flusty does not put forward globalization from below as an alternative to globalization from above, but as a counterpart.

According to Flusty, the social work of constructing globalization “is done by the stuff of everyday life – its persons, spaces, artifacts, and, most important, the practices that constitute their relationships” (4). Such quotidian minutiae become the stuff of his analysis. To underline global interconnectedness, he tells stories about items of everyday life (or at least his everyday life): a barong shirt from the Philippines, ordering a suit from Damascus, and the intriguing Meiji Yogurt Scotch candies, redolent of the Silk Road. “At its broadest my claim is that globalization is only because it is woven through the planet’s social fabric from the ground up (or, much more correctly, from particular grounds outward) by everyday life’s hyperextension – the increasing spatial reach of emplaced social relations” (4). To highlight the possibilities of resistance, he describes in depth, for example, international opposition to Nike as a corporation, and provides a fascinating account of the Zapatista uprising in Mexico from 1994 as a movement against neo-liberalism and globalization.

No doubt Flusty’s method and line of argument, his eclectic and rather haphazard approach to theoretical underpinnings, will give little satisfaction to committed theory builders who wish to explain the phenomenon of globalization as a whole. For as Rosenberg comments in the course of the methodological reflections in his article, while noting the limited success of attempts to create a dialogue between the fields of International History and International Theory, “contrasted idioms talk intelligently but unproductively past each other.”

Nevertheless, of the three books reviewed, it is Flusty’s that gives the reader most hope for the future. His inspiring anecdotes of multicultural mixing, his cheerful upending of the methodological individualism of economic rationalism, provide a vitally needed tonic against the psychological pains of life within what are often deadly and deadening globalizing worlds.

Note