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From "Free Trade" to "West is Best"

>>Anthropologist and cultural psychologist Richard A. Shweder

"Globalization" is an accordion-like concept. Its most contracted definition refers to the linking of the world's economies (e.g., free trade across borders) with the aim of promoting aggregate wealth and economic growth. Hidden within this apparently narrow definition, however, is a far more expansive idea of the ways that societies, cultures, or polities must transform themselves to be players in a global capitalist economy. The compressed idea of globalization begins with the elimination of tariffs and the free trade of goods across borders, and readily expands to include the free flow of capital and labor. A new cosmopolitan economic order is imagined, which consists entirely of global economic organizations (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank), multinational corporations, and multicultural states with open borders. According to this rather utopian vision of a "borderless capitalism," goods, capital, and labor ought to be freely marketed on a worldwide scale for the sake of global prosperity. Those who adopt such a perspective view any desire for an ancestral homeland or a national identity based on religion, ethnicity, "race," or "tribe," with associated restrictions on residence, affiliation, and trade as "illiberal," and disparage it as a form of retrograde or irrational apartheid or ethnonationalism.

An even more expansive idea of globalization goes beyond the removal of all barriers to trade, foreign investment, and the opening of borders to migrant labor. The idea becomes linked to demands for "structural adjustments" of lagging economies and for "moral adjustments" of lagging cultural traditions. The structural adjustments usually begin with the firing of an over-employed civil service and the reorganization of economic life to reduce imports and increase exports, with the aim of accumulating foreign exchange. There may also be structural adjustments in the direction of "Western" ways of running banks, enforcing contracts, paying off debts, and settling disputes. Ultimately the ideal is to model your political economy (including your legal institutions) on the example of the United States. Such adjustments may be entered into voluntarily to encourage foreign investment, or they may be mandated (e.g., by the World Bank) as necessary conditions for

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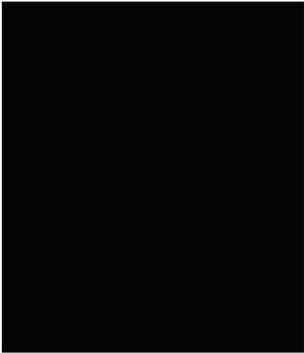
In its broadest form, however, globalization ceases to be merely an economic concept and comes to include linguistic, social, cultural, aesthetic, and intellectual adjustments as well. Fully expanded, the idea of globalization actually becomes an immodest (some would say arrogant) hypothesis about human nature and an imperial call for "enlightened" moral interventions into other ways of life in order to free them of their supposed barbarisms, superstitions, and irrationalities.

This unabashed "globalization hypothesis" makes three related claims: (1) that Western-like aspirations, tastes, and ideas about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient are objectively the best in the world; (2) that Western-like aspirations, tastes, and ideas will be fired up or freed up by economic globalization; and (3) that the world will/already has and/or ought to become "Westernized." Western-like aspirations include the desire for liberal democracy, free enterprise, private property, autonomy, individualism, equality, and the protection of "natural" or universal rights (the contemporary human-rights movement is in many ways an extension of an expansive globalization movement). Western-like ideas include the particular conceptions of gender identity, sexuality, work, reproduction, and family life embraced by liberal men and women in the United States today. They include a heavy dose of the "Protestant Ethic," which suggests that more is better and that you are not really good if you are not really rich. Western-like tastes include a preference for CNN, Visa cards, Hard Rock Café T-shirts, the Internet, and, of course, English as the language of global capitalism.

As far as I know, the true connection between globalization narrowly conceived ("free trade") and globalization expansively conceived (Western values, culture, and institutions taking over the world) has yet to be firmly established. It is quite possible that other cultures and civilizations do not need to become just like the United States to materially benefit from participation in an emergent global economy.

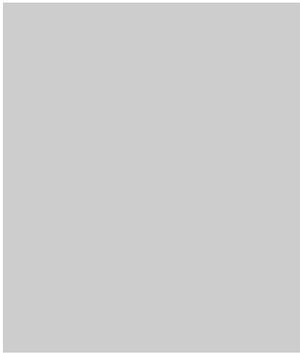
Nevertheless, in its most expansive form the idea of "globalization" seems to have once again become an ideology for moral activists, both inside and outside the academy. These activists believe that "the West is best" and that other regions of the world must either Westernize or remain poor, wretched, and morally backward. The idea that the rich nations of North America and Northern Europe have an obligation to use their economic and military power to civilize and develop the world is no less popular today than it was





100 years ago when the empire was British rather than American.

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