

GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is the process whereby individual lives and local communities are affected by economic and cultural forces that operate world-wide. In effect it is the process of the world becoming a single place. Globalism is the perception of the world as a function or result of the processes of globalization upon local communities. The term has had a meteoric rise since the mid-1980s, up until which time words such as 'international' and 'international relations' were preferred. The rise of the word 'international' itself in the eighteenth century indicated the growing importance of territorial states in organizing social relations, and is an early consequence of the global perspective of European **imperialism**. Similarly, the rapidly increasing interest in globalization reflects a changing organization of world-wide social relations in this century, one in which the 'nation' has begun to have a decreasing importance as individuals and communities gain access to globally disseminated knowledge and culture, and are affected by economic realities that bypass the boundaries of the state. The structural aspects of globalization are the nation-state system itself (on which the concepts of internationalism and international co-operation are based), global economy, the global communication system and world military order. Part of the complexity of globalism comes from the different ways in which globalization is approached. Some analysts embrace it enthusiastically as a positive feature of a changing world in which access to technology, information services and markets will be of benefit to local communities, where dominant forms of social organization will lead to universal prosperity, peace and freedom, and in which a perception of a global environment will lead to global ecological concern. For this group, globalism is a term 'for values which treat global issues as a matter of personal and collective responsibility' (Albrow 1994: 4). Others reject it as a form of domination by 'First World' countries over 'Third World' ones, in which individual distinctions of culture and society become erased by an increasingly homogeneous global culture, and local economies are more firmly incorporated into a system of global capital. For this group, globalism 'is a teleological doctrine which provides, explains and justifies an interlocking system of world trade'. It has 'ideological overtones of historical inevitability', and 'its attendant myths function as a gospel of the global market' (Ferguson 1993a: 87). The chief argument against globalization is that global culture and global economy did not just spontaneously erupt but originated in and continue to be perpetuated from the centres of capitalist power. Neither does globalization impact in the same way, to the same degree, nor equally beneficially upon different communities. Proponents of 'critical globalism' take a neutral view of the process, simply examining its processes and effects. 'Critical globalism refers to the critical engagement with globalization processes, neither blocking them out nor celebrating globalization' (Nederveen Pieterse 1995: 13). Thus, while critical globalists see that globalization 'has often perpetuated poverty, widened material inequalities, increased ecological degradation, sustained militarism, fragmented communities, marginalized subordinated groups, fed intolerance and deepened crises of democracy', they also see that it has had a positive effect in 'trebling world per capita income since 1945, halving the proportion of the world living in abject poverty, increasing ecological consciousness, and possibly facilitating disarmament, while various subordinated groups have grasped opportunities for global organisation' (Scholte 1996: 53). As a field of study, globalization covers such disciplines as international relations, political geography, economics, sociology, communication studies, agricultural, ecological and cultural studies. It addresses the decreasing agency (though not the status) of the nation-state in the world political order and the increasing influence of structures and movements of corporate capital. Globalization can also be 'a signifier of travel, of transnational company operations, of the changing pattern of world employment, or global environmental risk' (Albrow 1994: 13). Indeed, there are compelling reasons for thinking globally where the environment is concerned. As Stuart Hall puts it, 'When the ill winds of Chernobyl came our way, they did not pause at the frontier, produce their passports and say "Can I rain on your territory now?"' (1991: 25). The importance of globalization to post-colonial studies comes first from its demonstration of the structure of world power relations which stands firm in the twentieth century as a legacy of Western imperialism. Second, the ways in which local communities engage the forces of globalization bear some resemblance to the ways in which colonized societies have historically engaged and appropriated the forces of imperial dominance. In some respects, globalization, in the period of rapid **decolonization** after the Second World War, demonstrates the transmutation of imperialism into the supra-national operations of economics, communications and culture. This does not mean that globalization is a simple, unidirectional movement from the powerful to the weak, from the central to the peripheral, because globalism is **transcultural** in the same way that imperialism itself has been. But it does demonstrate that globalization did not simply erupt spontaneously around the world, but has a history embedded in the history of

imperialism, in the structure of the **world system**, and in the origins of a global economy within the ideology of imperial

rhetoric. The key to the link between classical imperialism and contemporary globalization in the twentieth century has been the role of the United States. Despite its resolute refusal to perceive itself as 'imperial', and indeed its public stance against the older European doctrines of colonialism up to and after the Second World War, the United States had, in its international policies, eagerly espoused the political domination and economic and cultural control associated with imperialism.

More importantly, United States society during and after this early expansionist phase initiated those features of social life and social relations that today may be considered to characterize the global: mass production, mass communication and mass consumption. During the twentieth century, these have spread transnationally, 'drawing upon the increasingly integrated resources of the global economy' (Spybey 1996: 3). Despite the balance between its good and bad effects, identified by

critical globalists, globalization has not been a politically neutral activity. While access to global forms of communication, markets and culture may indeed be worldwide today, it has been argued by some critics that if one asks how that access is *enabled* and by what ideological machinery it is advanced, it can be seen that the operation of globalization cannot be separated from the structures of power perpetuated by European imperialism. Global culture is a continuation of an imperial dynamic

of influence, control, dissemination and hegemony that operates according to an already initiated structure of power that emerged in the sixteenth century in the great confluence of **imperialism**, capitalism and **modernity**. This explains why the forces of globalization are still, in some senses, centred in the West (in terms of power and institutional organization), despite their global dissemination. However, the second reason for the significance of globalization to postcolonial studies – how it is engaged by local communities – forms the focus of much recent discussion of the phenomenon. If globalism is not simply a result of top-down dominance but a transcultural process,

a dialectic of dominant cultural forms and their appropriation, then the responses of local communities becomes critical. By appropriating strategies of representation, organization and social change through access to global systems, local communities and marginal interest groups

can both empower themselves and influence those global systems. Although choice is always mediated by the conditions of subject formation, the belief that one has a choice in the processes of changing one's own life or society can indeed be empowering. In this sense, the appropriation of global forms of culture may free one from local forms of dominance and oppression or at least provide the tools for a different kind of identity formation. The more recent directions of globalization studies concern the development of 'global culture', a process in which the strategies, techniques,

assumptions and interactions of cultural representation become increasingly widespread and homogeneous. But, as Featherstone and Lash point out, 'only in the most minimalist sense can one speak of a "global society" or a "global culture", as our conceptions of both society and culture draw heavily on a tradition which was strongly influenced by the process of nation-state formation' (Featherstone *et al.* 1995: 2). However, global culture can be seen to be focused in mass culture, in what Stuart Hall calls a 'new globalization'. 'This new kind of globalization is not English, it is American. In cultural terms, the new kind of globalization has to do with a new form of global mass

culture' (1991: 27). New globalization has two dominant features: one is that it is still centred in the West; the other is a peculiar form of homogenization, a form of cultural capital that does not attempt to produce mini versions of itself but operates through other economic and political élites (28). The most active area of debate in globalization studies therefore appears to be the style and nature of the process by which external and internal forces interact to produce, reproduce and disseminate

global culture within local communities. This is because one of the key questions at the centre of this interaction is the nature and survival of social and cultural identity. The interpenetration of global and local cultural forces is present in all forms of social life in the twentieth century. But the extent to which globalization exhibits the effects of domination by the powerful centres of global culture, and the extent to which it offers itself to transformation by peripheral communities, is still a matter of debate.
