

GLOBALIZATION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Keywords: Age of Divergence, globalization, Great Convergence, Great Divergence

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Summary

It is generally recognized that a phenomenon known as “globalization” is rapidly altering lives in every corner of the planet. However, here is little scholarly agreement about how to define globalization and when it began. This essay argues that it is necessary to define globalization broadly, including the interactions of political, cultural, social, and biological aspects, as well as the more obvious economic ones, in order to trace its historical development. After reviewing various starting points that researchers in different disciplines have proposed, the essay distinguishes remote “beginnings” from critical “tipping points” and identifies three major tipping points that led to the present process of global convergence: the consolidation of Asian and Indian Ocean networks beginning about a millennium ago, the new sea routes opened by European expansion about five centuries ago, and the Industrial Revolution of two centuries ago. It suggests that the past millennium during which societies came closer together may be distinguished from the rest of human history which was dominated by divergent forces that divided human communities from each other.

1. What is Globalization?

The word “globalization” as been used to describe the phenomenally rapid expansion of many sorts of global interaction. It seems appropriate both to restrict the term to the current stage of these integrative processes and to recognize that contemporary globalization has long historical roots, many of which were regional rather than worldwide. The “history of globalization” in this essay thus refers to the many steps leading to the current stage. Although some scholars have proposed terms such as “proto-globalization” or “archaic globalization” to describe these earlier stages, such

language has not gained general acceptance. This essay uses the term “convergence” to describe the underlying processes of integration that prefigure contemporary globalization. It argues that for most of human history convergent forces bringing people together were much weaker than divergent ones that isolated people and that the point at which convergent forces surpassed divergent is the appropriate starting point of the history of globalization.

Contemporary globalization and its historical antecedents include many analytical separable forms of convergence. For understandable reasons, most analyses of recent globalization concentrate on economic factors. The great importance of the free flow of goods and currencies in promoting and sustaining global integration is beyond dispute. However, there are many other factors that are a part of globalization and have shaped its historical development. The first is political. Both today and in earlier times trade has been hindered, helped, and regulated by political systems. The development of the institutions, legal systems, and regulatory bodies that serve (or hinder) the growth of international trade and settle disputes among nation-states has a long history. A second form of non-economic globalization is cultural and social. Peter Berger has identified four streams of contemporary global culture that have relevant historical antecedents: a global business culture, a global academic culture, a popular secular culture, and a popular religious culture. Framing the phenomena differently, other social scientists like John Keane have written of a new “global civil society,” with long historical roots. Less obvious perhaps is a fourth form of globalization – biological, which includes the movement and mingling of people, animals, plants, and microorganisms (such as those causing epidemics). Underlying all forms of globalization are underlying technologies, including systems of transportation and communication and the knowledge systems that underlie them.

The history of globalization has involved complex interactions among these economic, political, socio-cultural, and biological factors. Economic crises had political repercussions and vice versa. Cultural and social realities promoted or disrupted political and economic integration. Pandemics from the Black Death to the influenza pandemic of 1919-20 drastically reordered regional circumstances, while human migration promoted cultural diversity and interaction. Thus, the challenge of historicizing the process is to bring together the different disciplinary approaches in a framework that shows their intersections.

2. When did Globalization Begin?

Although no consensus exists, social scientists and historians have proposed many different starting points for the history of globalization. Practitioners of some academic disciplines, economists in particular, are inclined to shorter timeframes, whereas historians are likely to describe a much longer process. Besides disciplinary proclivities, the debate about a starting point sometimes reflects ideological debates over Marxism or cultural wars over Eurocentrism. Some scholars have also shown how discussions of globalization connect to or mirror earlier debates about modernization, underdevelopment, and the rise of the West. Most proposed starting points center on one of three historical events: the Industrial Revolution about 1800, Western maritime expansion around 1500, or the integration of Asia around 1000 or earlier.

Many analyses place the relevant beginnings in very recent times. The first of Tom Friedman's influential books on globalization, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, puts the dawn of globalization in the early 1990s triggered by the end of the Cold War and the explosion in use of the Internet. In his sequel, *The Earth is Flat*, Friedman moves the date forward to the beginning of the 21st century. Those dates, of course, are for globalization properly so called; Friedman notes in passing that the larger process went back to 1945, when the world was able to resume economic and political efforts at integration dating from the early 1800s that had been disrupted by the world wars and the Great Depression.

2.1. The Industrial Revolution

In concentrating on trends during the past two centuries in the Western world, Friedman is in good company. In *The World Economy: Historical Statistics* (2003) and other works economist Angus Maddison calculates that Europe's GDP increased 563%, compared to an increase of only 363% over the previous *three* centuries, demonstrating the tremendous acceleration industrialization produced. (In the United States the GDP grew over 4000% in the nineteenth century.) Many other economists would agree, seeing the maturing the early British Industrial Revolution as the great accelerant of global convergence. Historian Bruce Mazlish in *Conceptualizing Global History* (1993) points out that contemporaries as diverse as Thomas Carlyle and Karl Marx recognized industrialization as inaugurating a new era in human history. The *Communist Manifesto* (1848) waxed eloquently on the revolutionary turning point in history that was then underway. Others of a more political bent, stress the emergence of the nation-state, constitutions, nationalism, and the beginnings of a rudimentary system of international governance at Vienna and later at Berlin. Writing during the Second World War, economist Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation* (1944) also identified the nineteenth century as the great turning point in modern history, citing the birth of the mature free-market system and the peace-promoting politics of the "Concert of Europe."

2.2. The rise of the West

Without disputing the Industrial Revolution's huge importance in accelerating global interaction, other historians and social scientists have argued that global convergence started earlier. Stressing somewhat different matrices of events, they put the critical shift around 1500. Some believe it resulted from the Iberian-led "Maritime Revolution," which initiated more direct connections among Europe, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, and which, by a momentous accident, opened up regular contacts with the American continents as well. Others stress the critical importance of cultural changes associated with the Italian Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the development of early modern science. Like the thoughtful observers of the early Industrial Revolution, many contemporaries in Europe in the 1500s sensed that their era was a turning point, citing the triumph over geographical barriers, the explosion of knowledge, and the influx of new wealth as evidence of the birth of the modern era. Like the Industrial Revolution, this beginning point occurred in the Atlantic and was European-led.

Since the Italian Renaissance Western historians have identified the period around 1500 as the beginning of the "modern" era. Until recently most advocates of this dating were

specialists in Western history with limited knowledge of other parts of the world, who, consciously and unconsciously, assumed European superiority. The time when scholars could write volumes celebrating European triumphs over the seas and over non-Western peoples is now past, but old paradigms die hard. Even scholars who are more broadly trained and characterize themselves as specialists in “world,” “global,” or “international” history may still opt for 1500 as the key watershed. Thus, most world history textbooks designed for the American market still use 1500 as a dividing point.

Behind the popularity of 1500 are several fairly distinct arguments. For example, Geoffrey Gunn, a specialist in Asian history and international relations, identifies the period from 1500 to 1800 as the age of “first globalization,” basing his characterization on the mutually beneficial new intellectual and cultural exchanges between East and West in this period. Others point to the entry of the Americas into the Eurasian world as the key point, while still others emphasize 1500 as beginning of the rise of the West or of the rise of the global system of capitalism.

One of the most widely read and most sophisticated efforts to explain the rise of the West is historian and economist David Landes’s *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998). Landes carefully frames his argument in a global context and explicitly and vigorously rejects assumptions about innate Western superiority. There are solid objective reasons, Landes argues, for European ascendancy, which he links to the mastery of science, a Weberian work and savings ethic, and especially the ability to learn from and borrow from other societies.

Well before the term globalization had been coined, social scientist Immanuel Wallerstein argued with great rigor for placing the origin of “the modern [or capitalist] world-system” in sixteenth-century Europe’s expansion, citing both its global reach and its innovations in economic organization. Well versed in non-Western societies and rejecting the validity of a West/non-West dichotomy, Wallerstein was seeking in the capitalist world-system an explanation of the inequalities that had come into being, though ironically his efforts to account for Western hegemony have been criticized for privileging Western dynamism.

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Biographical Sketch

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