

# Global Culture, 1990, 2020

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## Abstract

Here I reflect on the main themes of Global Culture, Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity. On these themes, where are we 30 years later? I sidestep the fine print of the 1990 conversations and share notes in brief format on where I have come to in the decades that have passed. I round off with notes on the 2020 conjuncture.

## Keywords

global culture, globalization, modernity, nationalism

*Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*

Mike Featherstone (ed.)

London: SAGE, 1990.

TCS and Mike Featherstone have asked me to revisit the book *Global Culture* (1990). Revisiting inspires me to think about wider contributions of TCS. The journal and book series have brought together diverse scholars and inspired meaningful discussions. Thinking about beginnings, highlighting *Culture* was in line with the unfolding cultural turn. Highlighting *Society* has been meaningful too, more open-ended, more grounded than state or market, and a *chapeau* to social science ground zero. Highlighting *Theory* has been especially important, elevating culture discussions and cultural studies to a higher wavelength, at a safe distance from empiricism. Considering the journal over the years, this book and many others that followed, TCS has lifted the level of international conversation and has done so in a broad, inclusive way. Aside from the details of discussion, the spread, the scope, the level of critical discussion and the diversity of views are impressive. Thus, in writing this brief reflection I also have in mind a tribute to TCS. I have learned much from TCS.

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**Extra material:** <https://www.theoryculturesociety.org>

Here I reflect on the main themes of the *Global Culture* book – global culture, nationalism, globalization and modernity. On these themes, where are we 30 years later? I sidestep the fine print of the 1990 conversations and share notes in brief format on where I have come to in the decades that have passed. I round off with notes on the 2020 conjuncture.

## Global Culture

I prefer globalization *and* culture. Global culture exists, but only in a thin fashion. Elsewhere I discuss variants: transnational culture (trans-local learning, a planetary database, a global cultural supermarket) and deep culture (human software, deep background knowledge; Nederveen Pieterse, 2007).

Globalization rising as a theme in the 1980s and '90s was influenced by and preoccupied with themes such as Americanization (McDonaldization), the liberal order, global capitalism (world-system theory) and modernity (Western). In retrospect, do some TCS themes carry an air of 1990s convergence thinking? With the 'new world order', the Washington consensus, the roaring '90s, cool Britannia, and the Third Way, the 1990s was an era of convergence drives. Yet 21st-century developments have been profoundly decentering. The epochal shift from an Atlantic to a Pacific world economy, the East Asian miracle (a World Bank theme of 1993), China's rise, the rise of emerging economies and the 2008 crisis have changed the North-South world order. The adage of the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos was 'as America retreats, China advances'.

Meanwhile, a general tendency among scholars is that we extrapolate our experiences to wider, general views. American victories over Nazism and communism are 'the end of history' (1989). In developing countries, globalization may be cast as neocolonialism; in the US and UK, as neoliberalism ('neoliberalism everywhere'); in continental Europe, as strengthening international law. American experiences with race can lead to viewing globalization as 'racialization' and the formation of global ghettos. As people's experiences become diverse, scholars add variants and exceptions (such as neoliberalism with variations, transnational capitalist class with nationalist strands), yet the master paradigm remains. It remains because it is existentially grounded in experience and carries truth. But the experience is a regional, not a global, experience.

I have become more careful about using 'global'. In the sense of worldwide significance and influence – yes. In the sense of global convergence – no. We have international institutions but no one calls them global institutions. Global governance and global public goods are relevant categories but are aspirational at this stage. 'Global' is also a marketing tag and a claim that comes with universalistic undertones.

Global modernity, global capitalism, global crisis, global policing, global trends, etc., may be overdrive that closes rather than opens discussions.

In earlier work I distinguish three major paradigms of globalization and culture – differentialism (clashes are inevitable), universalism (convergence on a center) and hybridization. Agreeing with myself doesn't come natural to me, constant learning is more interesting, but years later I still find this valid. Differentialism and universalism will be around for as long as history carries on. They represent significant drives, fulfill major functions and will be reinvented time and again in different forms. But hybridization has and will have the longest life span. My article 'Globalization as Hybridization' originally appeared in *International Sociology* and then in a TCS book (1995) and has been my most widely quoted, reprinted and translated article. It comes up first in my Google Scholar record, and years after I still stand by it.

## Globalization

In 1990 nationalism came *before* globalization; in 2020 it comes *after* globalization, as comeback nationalism, a response to and renegotiation of globalization. So let's talk about globalization first. I have written a number of books and edited books on globalization, so I face the issue of TMI – too much information. Let me just share recent working notes.

First, the issue is not globalization per se (which doesn't actually exist) but how globalization is organized, not least in terms of political economy. Second, so many variables affect how globalization is organized that it presents a situation of 'opaque causality': there are no clear lines of cause and effect (Taleb, 2014). Third, unipolarity lies well behind us, multilateralism isn't doing great either and the situation since the late 1990s is multicentric globalization, which, though it may sound and feel unusual, is actually a historical normal. Fourth, the rise of Asia, 60 percent of the world population, drives many contemporary dynamics. It represents a comeback of Asia, Oriental globalization phase two (or arguably, phase four). Asia's lead is a historical normal too. Fifth, taking a long view, the two hundred years of European, then American leadership, 1800–2000, have been a historical interlude (but accompanied by major technological advances). Sixth, remember Roland Robertson's advice: don't mistake the current form of globalization for the trend (Robertson, 1992). Seventh, taken together, the interplay of worlds that make up globalization makes for a spaghetti bowl of crisscrossing networks. It cannot be modeled or mapped. We have recourse to shorthand approximations, which must be handled with care. Eighth, current conversations in the trail of American and Atlantic retreat, trade wars and Covid-19 ramifications are about deglobalization, globalization going in reverse. Of course, these are just

snapshots. Does it mean that globalization is only a linear forward movement or a one-dimensional trend that comes and goes in spurts? It is fairly easy to point to countertrends. Globalization is a long and winding road that goes way back in time. The 2020 situation is another turn in the road. Ninth, I redefine globalization as the trend of greater worldwide connectivity of people over time and the awareness of this happening. A definition that is deliberately broad and open-ended. Who knows what growing connectivity will bring?

In recent work I take a step back from ‘globalization’. I often use connectivity, which is a deeper, wider wavelength than globalization. Instead of globalization research I shift gear to global studies, which is a delta of many flows. ‘Globalization’ is burdened by so many encrustations and the overhang of 1990s themes and perspectives that I find it more productive to move on. Global studies in my view is not about boosting the global but about proportioning it. Globalization is the intersection of many wholes, each with their different centers, organizing logics and worldviews. Coincidentally, I now work in a Department of Global Studies, which helps, and my latest book is about *Connectivity and Global Studies* (2020).

## Nationalism

This is a theme with a long life-span that is now experiencing a major resurgence. It serves as a counterpoint to globalization and a platform of rightwing populism. My working notes are the following.

Nation-building and nationalism in the 19th century were expressions of globalization, were the *political form* of globalization: nation-building was unfolding the world over, inspiring anti-imperial (1848) and anti-colonial movements and peaking between 1840 and 1960. Since the mid-20th century, this has gradually made way for regional cooperation and regionalism as a major political expression and stepping stone of globalization. Twentieth-century globalization, then, includes not just glocalization but also regionalization.

Liberal market economies organized their global engagement in a way that left the field open for big corporations and banks, which has produced vast concentrations of wealth and power. Liberal democracy became neo-liberal democracy and globalization turned into neoliberal globalization. American domestic development of the 1980s (Ronald Reagan’s ‘get government off our backs’) became internationally dominant via the Washington consensus and the Wall Street-Treasury-IMF complex of the 1990s. Neoliberal globalization leaves us a world in which a handful of billionaires own as much as half the world population. Much anti-globalization, anti-globalism, left and right, is a reaction to this theatre of the absurd. Much comeback nationalism is angry nationalism that rejects ‘globalization’. But rather than criticizing permissive capitalism,

deregulation, corporate monopolies, tax avoidance, and tax havens, criticism is directed at China or at 'globalists' and misses the boat.

A license that is claimed in the domestic sphere is often extended to the international sphere: cherry picking connectivity and globalization, criticizing 'globalism' as undermining sovereignty, criticizing 'cosmopolitanism' (George Soros as a target in Hungary) and transnational divide and rule, such as Hungary and the League in Italy criticizing the EU and welcoming China.

Nationalism has a long life because states and societies are key platforms of decision-making and legislation. What institution but the state raises taxes and upholds social contracts? Like globalization, nationalism is not a problem in itself. The issue is not globalization but what kind of globalization; likewise, the issue is not nationalism but what kind of nationalism: *outward looking* nationalism, engaged in regional and multi-lateral cooperation, international law and global public goods; or *inward looking* nativist nationalism, provincialism of a complacent or an angry kind; or *hegemonic*, exceptionalist Manifest Destiny nationalism? The first is in sync with long waves of history; the second is not as important as its proponents think; and the third now recombines with hegemonic decline that does not claim and does not have a manifest destiny.

How do we interpret the shift from multiculturalism to ethnic supremacy or hierarchy, from outward-looking to inward-looking nationalism in countries such as the US (white supremacy), Britain (Brexit), Italy (anti-immigrant policies), Hungary (no to the Central European University), Israel (Jewish citizenship law, annexation of Golan Heights, occupied territories), India (Hindutva, cow vigilantism, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam), China (Xinjiang)?

The global turn is a plural turn. If we take a multicentric approach, there is no general answer. There are several. One answer is if market forces don't deliver, engage in culture war. In liberal market economies the 1990s consensus in favor of globalization has turned sour. Goldilocks globalization has changed place. The Atlantic world no longer leads. In the 21st century borders and walls of various kinds have made a spectacular comeback. The US government motto changed from 'Tear down this wall!' (1987) to 'We will build the wall!' (2016). Torchbearers of free trade, the US and Britain, turned into opponents of trade liberalization. The Trump administration withdrew from international pacts, started trade wars and imposed tariffs. The likely motto is: if we don't control the game, we break the game. The diagnosis is: does not play well with others.

In liberal market economies, the US and the UK, the background of rightwing populism is deindustrialization without a safety net and a shrinking middle class. Neoliberalism cannot address the challenge of advanced economies: how to manage industrial decline? Industrial decline and economic crisis without a safety net lead to collective anxiety. Populism in Western Europe has narrower electoral support, a narrower

agenda (anti-immigration, anti-Islam), and deindustrialization with a safety net fares better than without, although austerity policies don't help. In Eastern Europe, populism is associated with Catholic conservatism and crony capitalism.

The overall momentum of connectivity and globalization leans towards widening cooperation, but this is not a linear forward process. Collective learning gradually shifts from territorial to translocal learning, but this is not a linear forward motion. The quandary of global problems and national institutions and solutions is familiar.

## Modernity

This involves several registers. It refers to discussions that go back to the 19th century. Again, at this stage the issue is not modernity (in general) but *what kind of modernity* and what kind of perspective and discourse it is part of. Modernity in the singular, without differentiation, usually implies or comes with convergence thinking, as in postwar American modernization theory. Postmodernism, a big theme in the 1990s, gradually lost its edge. In sociology, modernities now attract more attention. TCS also went plural and changed from modernity (Featherstone, 1990) to modernities (Featherstone et al., 1995).

Modernities plural poses the question what kind of modernity, which is in sync with contemporary multicentrism, which means that new centers of influence arise, centers that follow diverse paths, emerging societies with diverse worldviews and multiple publics. This is our new normal. Goodbye centrism, universalism, convergence thinking. Goodbye two hundred years of Eurocentrism. What is the point of centrism when the center does not hold? What is the point of convergence thinking when convergence on what isn't clear? The beacon of American hegemony has long stopped shining. The master narratives have gone wobbly. In fact, it is hard to remember what they are. Free markets and democracy? Human rights? The liberal order (that is built with blood)?

Modernities plural should also go with capitalisms plural. Thus, goodbye global modernity, global capitalism, global culture. These singular categories are too static, totalizing and turn into conceptual treadmills, labyrinths with no way out. Diversity matters, diversity is generative, propels creativity. Diversity in 1990 meant multiculturalism. Diversity in 2020 has a wider radius and also refers to multicentrism. Within each center there are multiple sub-centers and peripheries (re: modernities, varieties of market economies and thinking plural see Nederveen Pieterse, 2009, 2014, 2018; re: globalization and culture see Nederveen Pieterse, 2019).

Engaging a wider database is not a matter of choice or preference. It is an existential given that is part of our collective rendezvous. Against this backdrop, I round off with some notes on the 2020 conjuncture.

## 2020 Conjecture

What are, so far, some of the outcomes of the confluence of rightwing populism and authoritarianism? A lowering of the quality of the public sphere domestically and internationally. Weaker support for international institutions and a rules-based order, hence, a greater license to act with impunity, which is on display in many arenas.

Background becomes foreground. The trend isn't new, its salience is new – white supremacy has been in the background in the US all along, Hindutva in India, and so forth. The pattern isn't new but has risen to salience because of several turnarounds. Since 2016 it includes the Atlantic countries, erstwhile trendsetters of pluralism.

Looking back, financialization and deregulation enabled rogue finance, and rogue billionaires, and dark money (Citizens United, think tanks, social media) enabled rogue politics. The Koch brothers funded the Tea Party, Sheldon Adelson, a casino magnate of Las Vegas and Macao, funded Trump, hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer funded Breitbart News and bought Cambridge Analytica (Mayer, 2016).

Rightwing populism in the US and the UK is part of a repositioning that involves a) shrinking world influence and shrinking share of world GDP, b) the cumulative effects of decades of permissive capitalism that have eroded social safety nets and government capability and have made the majority of the population vulnerable, c) a shift from establishment corporate capital to rent seeking, speculative chaos capital, d) rightwing populists promising to right wrongs (Make America Great Again, Take Back Control) while their divide and rule (more divide than rule) keeps the institutions and oligarchies that have caused the decline in place and out of view. Because central nodes of decision-making remain in place, in many ways the exercise is symbolic. Nodes of decision-making in the US include the Republican-led Senate, the Electoral College, campaign financing, and the tax system. Paul Krugman asks: why do the rich have so much power? In his view, 'to tackle inequality, we'll have to confront unequal political power as well as unequal income and wealth' (Krugman, 2020). The problem isn't just policies but institutions, which are deeply anchored.

The conjuncture comes with a culture shock that has worldwide ripples. The US is on the red list of travel to the EU per July 2020. The world leader turns into a global pariah. America First now means first in Covid-19 cases and deaths per million of population, first in disorganization and dysfunction. With only 4 percent of the world population, the US has 25 percent of Covid-19 deaths. The incapacity of the United States – wealthy, advanced, an accomplished leader in technology – to manage a public health crisis is perplexing to those who want their children to be educated at American universities or dreamt of migrating to the US. Rely on corporations for many decades and find that they are missing in action in a public health

crisis while government agencies are underfunded and inept. Add police brutality and ‘I can’t breathe’. ‘Goodbye hegemons’ is one of the remedies.

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