



Theme Section: Global Futures - Introduction

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Theme Section: Global Futures

Introduction

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The WTO meeting in Seattle has driven home the importance and the contentiousness of global concerns; it demonstrated the salience of globalization and the absence of consensus on the course of globalization. None of these issues – the shape of globalization, the interplay of diverse concerns and the role of different actors – are new; what is new is that now they have figured on the front pages and in the headlines, and have become a matter of public awareness and concern. The articles that follow were written well before the battle of Seattle and represent a small down-payment on the kind of studies that are likely to proliferate. In October 1997, the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, an international graduate school in development studies and the oldest development studies institute in Europe, celebrated its forty-fifth anniversary. On this occasion a series of public lectures and an international conference were organized on the theme of ‘Global futures’. The following three articles are from this collection.¹ Let me share a few reflections on the theme and briefly introduce the articles. At the cusp of the millennium there is a diverse and growing global reform movement carried on by international NGOs and civic associations, labour organizations, international institutions, governments and regional bodies, and to some extent also corporations (in bodies such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development). Its concerns are wide-ranging, from global governance and democratization, international finance and macroeconomic reform, development and ecological change, to social and cultural transformation. These are all issues that form part of the ongoing transition from national to global capitalism and of the accompanying reorganization of power relations. They are at the centre of the concerns of international political economy and also figure in development studies, a subject concerned with the struggle over the shape of collective futures. In development studies, taking a forward-

looking and policy-oriented approach has been a common premise; besides, global transformation is not a new theme in development thinking. The Global Futures project, organized at a development studies institute, accordingly takes as its premise a proactive or ‘developmental’ approach to globalization. It attempts a one-stop overview of global reform thinking, bringing together different concerns, approaches and thinkers, and representing a wide angle on global futures. One of the objectives of the project is to make global, broad-ranging conversations on futures normal: an acceptable and, in time, regular part of social science. Another objective is to adopt a big-picture approach to development questions: if development studies are to be holistic, then let us see the whole. In this context global futures function as a social science, an intellectual and political Rorschach test which reveals fundamental premises and sensibilities; they offer us a particular angle on the present and in the process reflect back on the project itself.

Futures constitute a wild card subject in which risk and appeal are closely related. There is a price to global futures, including the price of global glibness. But there is also the price of no constructive futures. Whenever futures go out of the window and a collective agenda is shattered, life doesn’t stop, it just flees in all directions. Whenever futures break down, social cohesion breaks down, with all the concomitant social and psychological ramifications. Without an enabling future, people disperse for islands of individual experience and turn to individual solutions and improvisations. This is also true on a global scale; also globally, we need hospitable futures to inhabit and nourish the imagination. At a time when globalization generates so much anxiety, insecurity and ‘resistance’, critical and constructive forward-looking approaches to global transformation may provide a welcome change.

These three articles represent different domains of and angles on global reform: international relations, macroeconomics and social movements. Richard Falk has written extensively on global reform for many years and here looks at global futures from the point of view of international law. He formulates an agenda for the democratization of global governance centred on the renunciation of force in international relations and on human rights, sustainable development, the global commons and accountability. Howard Wachtel, who is well known for his work as a labour economist and on international finance, examines various proposals for global taxes. He counsels that reform proposals must make sound economic sense: ‘Scarce reformist political capital should not be squandered on quixotic schemes.’ Wachtel critically reviews the Tobin tax on foreign exchange transactions, taxes on fixed capital and a unitary profit tax, and makes a case for a tax on direct foreign investment, to be discounted if core labour laws are upheld. Fantu Cheru is known for his work on social movements in Africa and here gives a sober

perspective on what global reform would mean concretely from the point of view of sub-Saharan African countries, in particular for peasants. To strengthen democratic movements in Africa, Cheru proposes inclusive cross-movement coalitions, South–South cooperation and improved access to information.

NOTES

- 1 The papers will come out in an edited volume: J. Nederveen Pieterse (ed.) *Global Futures: shaping globalizaton*. London and New York, Zed Books 2000.