

GLOBALIZATION

Peter N Stearns, Ph.D.

The Concept The term and specific concept of globalization are new, introduced in the 1990s (though there was an equivalent term in Japanese from the 1960s). The concept embraces the intensification of global contacts and their growing impact on local and regional affairs, and also an expansion of the range of contacts, involving for example popular culture or the environment as well as trade and diplomacy.

“New Global History” A significant group of historians, particularly but not exclusively in the United States, have embraced globalization as an important dividing point in world history. Calling themselves the “new global historians” they accept the notion that world affairs since globalization are becoming measurably different from patterns previously. Most of them identify the mid-20th century as the point at which globalization began. They urge attention not only to new technologies – mid-century is a fairly good time to locate the growing impact of jet travel for example – but also to the sweeping postwar economic agreements, particularly at Bretton Woods, that set up the International Monetary Fund and the institution that ultimately became the World Bank, as frameworks for new levels of coordination in international economy policy and the expansion of international trade. They highlight the rapid growth of multinational corporations, with production facilities in diverse locations and management coordination across various national boundaries, and the related expansion of international NGOs (such as Amnesty International, founded in 1961) as both illustration and cause of the growing hold of globalization.

Globalization Data Data examples: in 1910 there were about 3,000 real international companies. This number had doubled by 1970, but by 2000 there were 63,000. International NGOs existed in 1900 (with about 200 groups), but this numbers ballooned to 2,000 by 1960 and 4,000 two decades later. Technologies include not only jet travel but the more recent emergence of satellite based telephone and television linkages and then the Internet. Global as opposed to regional environmental impacts begin fully only in the later 20th century, along with thus far inadequate efforts to develop global policy countermeasures.

Debate over Timing Against this focus on the contemporary, various historians have suggested somewhat different approaches, notably in calling attention to earlier periods when the range of contacts among major regional societies also expanded. Four somewhat related vantage points have been presented.

A Classical Option? The first essentially argues that trade and some other contacts among societies has been increasing fairly steadily since the classical period, the age when Silk Road interactions began to link China to the Middle East and Mediterranean and also when increasing use of the Indian Ocean developed. This focus on premodern trade does not, obviously, contend that full globalization was present at that point, but that the systems and motives of transregional trade were developing so strongly that later intensifications were virtually inevitable.

From Divergence to Convergence, around 1000 CE A second approach calls attention to a major turning point around 1000 CE. Before that juncture, this argument holds, regional factors predominated. Transregional trade and travel were too limited to have much impact. Few if any people for example traversed the entire Silk Road; while goods from China reached the Mediterranean they essentially generated no mutual knowledge or influence and, while interesting, were confined to a few luxury categories. But the acceleration of trade among Africa, Asia and much of Europe, spurred particularly by Arab Muslim traders and facilitated by advances in ship design and navigational devices, produced a turning point. After 1000, mutual influences and convergences would increasingly replace divergent regional patterns, making world history overall a very different phenomenon. To be sure, the exchanges were far more limited than those that illustrate contemporary globalization, and the Americas were entirely omitted from them, but they introduced the relevant framework. Some scholars, studying this trade expansion, talk of “archaic” globalization or “proto” globalization to suggest a direct if complex connection to contemporary processes.

“Protoglobalization” after 1500 The inclusion of the Americas in what became genuinely global exchanges after 1500, and a new set of shipping improvements plus the formation of new types of business organization – the great international trading companies set up in France, Holland and Britain – unquestionably accelerated global interactions, including travel and military encounters as well as trade. Even some of the “new global” historians

group accepts the notion of a new phase, which might be described in terms of protoglobalization. For some centuries, however, limits in cultural exchanges paralleling the new trade and military contacts. Overall, however, analysis of new levels of global interaction, including the creation of new kinds of regional inequality based on positions in world trade plus what was arguably the first “world war” (the Seven Years war, 1756-63), provides further justification for an approach to globalization that would emphasize the importance of connections prior contemporary decades, with contemporary patterns emerging from, and not simply outstripping, developments in the past.

1850 as the Globalization Turning Point While a final set of historical arguments includes an effort to pinpoint the beginnings of contemporary globalization in the late 18th century, the emphasis on a series of interlocking changes around the mid-19th century establishes the most plausible alternative to a purely contemporary argument. Not only did trade and global technologies both increase after about 1850 (steam shipping, the telegraphs, plus the impact of the Suez Canal). At least partially voluntary long-distance migrations expanded. Cultural exchanges began to include popular culture, as in the globalization of soccer football. Global political organizations emerged: the first efforts to deal internationally with the control of epidemics like cholera, the establishment of new organizations to support international postal services and patent rights, the emergence of the World Court. This globalization was unquestionably Western-dominated, which would cause some societies to seek to limit contacts in the decades after World War I. But, according to these historians, a genuine, ultimately irreversible process of globalization was in fact underway, from which further developments from the 1950s would in turn emerge.

Ongoing Debate Overall, globalization historians present a number of options, encouraging a fuller understanding of the linkages but also the differentiations among several stages in the intensification of transregional and ultimately global contacts. The results situates contemporary globalization in a richer, frankly more complicated historical framework. Contentions that “real” globalization begins only recently are still possible, but they require more careful comparison to patterns in the earlier phases of transregional contact. What is distinctive, for example, about multi-national corporations compared to earlier international business organizations? How important is the undeniable expansion of international NGOs?

Fluctuations over Time The debate over when globalization began must include some cautions about impressions of inevitability (whether from the 1950s or from the 1500s). World history also shows important periods when globalization, or key aspects, clearly retreated, as some regions withdrew in whole or in part. This was true for examples in the period 1920s-1950s, when the Soviet Union, later China, and to some extent the United States, Japan and Nazi Germany sought alternatives.

Regional and Thematic Variations Other complexities involve regional diversities. Some regions arguably encounter globalization earlier than others. For Japan, decisions in the Meiji era were fundamental, but possibly globalization has affected sub-Saharan Africa somewhat more gradually. Different aspects of globalization elicit different responses. Recent polls suggest that cultural globalization generates more concern – about loss of regional identity – than political globalization does, though United States policy seems particularly wary of global political agreements. Distinctions in these aspects create additional opportunities for historical analysis of the phenomenon.

Sources

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1. Vasco da Gama: Round Africa to India, 1497-1498 CE
2. Ferdinand Magellan's Voyage Round the World, 1519-1522 CE

“The Western Hegemony, 1800-1918.” Read 2 articles on British East India Company as early multinational company.

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Suggested Reading:

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Discussion

1. What are some of the problems with periodizing globalization? What different criteria are used to define globalization?
2. What are the main regional issues within a history of globalization? What regions accepted and/or shaped globalization most readily, what regions have had more difficulty in the encounters?
3. What were limits on early modern globalization? How did empires contribute to globalization? What types of global connections did they make?
4. How have regional economic inequalities developed within global trade, from the early modern period onward? To what extent have these been remedied, and how?
5. Discuss the evolution of globalization since the mid-19th century. How does the post-World War I period fit the larger patterns?
6. What are the best arguments for seeing globalization as a major new stage in world history from the mid-20th century onward? What are the main weaknesses in this approach?
7. What is glocalization? What forms of resistance were there to globalization in the contemporary period?