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Problems with globalisation

Naming the thing

There are some things which are so accepted a part of political discourse that they are taken for granted. We stop questioning them. They slide into place as background assumptions shared even between those who disagree on every other point of the debate in hand. They lie there silently, preventing other bigger issues being raised. One such taken-for-granted term in much political discourse at the moment is 'globalisation'. It is a weasel word; too frequently used perhaps, and certainly too rarely analysed politically.

In the autumn of this year, a number of reports were published on the world economy and its future, and two of them were sharply at odds. In one corner, the World Bank was optimistic in its assessment of the prospects for global economic growth and the reduction of poverty in 'developing countries' (another weasel term if ever there was one). [1] In the other corner, UNCTAD (The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) expressed concern both that growth looked likely to be too slow significantly to alleviate poverty and that the road to growth currently being adopted (and imposed) might anyway not be successful.[2] The road to growth under dispute between these two organisations is free trade. The World Bank expresses itself as supremely confident that freeing markets and trade will lead - in the long term - to the eradication of world

1 *Global Economic Prospects 1997*, World Bank.
2 *Trade and Development Report 1997*, UNCTAD.

poverty. The United Nations is sceptical; it is at least hesitant in assuming any automatic link between opening up global competition on the one hand and faster growth and diminishing inequality on the other.

A host of questions and further arguments immediately arises. How is growth being measured, for instance? and should there anyway be any assumption of an automatic association between this 'growth' and decreasing poverty and/or inequality? But what is interesting too is that - behind all these questions and the crucial issue on which the reports are in dispute - there is agreement on one thing: free trade means globalisation and globalisation means free trade. In both the reports and even more so in the commentaries upon them the two terms are taken to be synonymous. This is the unspoken, shared assumption.

In our more everyday social and political discourse we use the term globalisation in a much more general way. To speak of 'globalisation' is to give the impression that in some sense the world is becoming more interconnected. That there has been a stretching-out and a re-working of the geography of social relations. And this is undoubtedly the case. However, the very generality of this use of the word obscures the fact that what we are experiencing at the moment - certainly in economic terms - is globalisation of a particular type. There can never be 'globalisation in general' - if the world is becoming more interconnected then it is doing so, and must do so, in the context of particular power relations, and governed by particular political trajectories. What we have now is neo-liberal, free-market, globalisation. It is most definitely, if we can still use these terms, a globalisation of 'the right'.

The problem is that the generalised discourse of globalisation hides the fact of this politico-economic specificity. And it also, in consequence, hides the fact that there might be other terms on which the world's economies (and thus peoples) might be integrated.

The UNCTAD Report makes depressing reading. It points to the increases in inequality both within and between countries which have taken place over the last 25 years. The numbers are numbing: the richest 20 per cent of the world's population owns nearly 80 per cent of the wealth; the gap in income per head between the top 20 per cent and the bottom 20 per cent doubled between 1965 and 1990. If we could really grasp the enormity and the daily lived meaning of these figures we could hardly go on living in the world without doing something about it. 'Globalisation' has produced both structural divides within it and massive exclusions from it. But this is due, not to 'globalisation in general', but to its present, specifically free-market, form.

That, then, is the first point: we shouldn't talk just about 'globalisation'. If we're referring to the economics of what's happening today we should give it its proper name: neo-liberal globalisation.

Globalisation as a project

This specifying of the current form of globalisation is important for another reason too. For referring to globalisation in general gives it an air of inevitability. (Of *course,* with 'history', with improvements in the technologies of transport and communications, societies and economies become more interconnected.) Globalisation in this version is a *deus ex machina,* and we had just better get used to it.

Now, while it is doubtless the case that the potential for connectivity between different parts of the world is ineluctably increasing, the nature and the terms of those interconnections are by no means inevitable. The elision between 'globalisation in general' and 'neo-liberal globalisation' rewards the latter with the apparent inevitability of the former.

And this in turn has further effects. For this discourse of inevitability serves to hide two things. First, it hides the possibility that there might be alternatives. And second it hides the agencies, and thus the interests, involved in the production of globalisation in this form. There are real acrobatics involved here. On the one hand we are treated to a discourse of how the process will happen whatever we do, and on the other hand there are massive forces at work - from the World Trade Organisation, to the IMF, to national governments in the North and national elites in the South - striving to ensure its production. World economic leaders gather (in Washington, Paris or Davos) to congratulate themselves upon, and to flaunt and reinforce, their powerfulness and yet it is a powerfulness which consists in insisting that they (we) are powerless - in the face of globalising market forces there is absolutely nothing that can be done. Except, of course, to push the process further. It is a heroic impotence - which serves to disguise the fact that this is really a *project.*

The aim of this kind of discourse of inevitability is to render unthinkable the possibility of any alternatives. And so in the South this understanding of both the inevitability and the necessity of this form of globalisation legitimises the imposition of structural adjustment policies/ and the associated enforcement of export-orientation over production for local consumption." And in the North, similarly, the discourse of inevitability becomes the basis for decisions not only to acquiesce to globalisation in this form ('Of course we have to have "flexible" labour markets, globalisation demands it'), but also precisely to *implement* it (the signing-up to the Uruguay Round of GATT, for instance; there was stunningly little discussion about this in the UK). This rhetoric of globalisation, in other words, is not a simple description of how the world is, it is an image in which the world is actively being made.

Global double-talk

Now, the image which is evoked in this talk of the inevitability/necessity of globalisation is one of a world of mobility and movement, of networks and free flows. It is a world of unbounded spaces, and it is hailed by many with breathless exhilaration as a vision of the future.

Yet quite contrary images exist at the same time. The very people who most strongly proclaim the rightness of 'free-trade', for instance, will often - in a different political context - call up an image of defensible places, of the importance of the maintenance of borders, of a world divided by nationalisms. In one breath it is assumed that 'free trade' is self-evidently a good thing and in the very next the necessity of firm boundaries is assumed in order to control immigration. Two apparently self-evident truths, two completely different geographical imaginations of the world, are called upon in turn as the political discussion requires. And so in this era of 'globalisation' boats go down in the Mediterranean as people try to act on the proclamations of a borderless world and sail to a more prosperous future. That double imaginary - in the very fact of its doubleness - of the freedom of space (for capital) on the one hand and of tightly patrolled borders on the other, works in favour of the already-powerful. At worst, it holds out a vision of the future in which the poor and already-disadvantaged are held in place and yet invaded while capital and the already-privileged have the freedom both to roam the world and to defend our fortress

3 See many of the articles in our theme *States of Africa,* in this issue.

4 See Duncan Green 'Latin America and free trade'. Soundings number 5, pp73-S7, Spring 1997.

homes. The clash between worsening uneven development at a global level and the tensions around international migration must be a crucial one for the world's future.

I have written about these issues before.[3] And when I did so I used to refer to those on 'the far right'. It was easy to analyse the contradictory discourses of the likes of Michael Howard, or Portillo, or Mrs Thatcher. That was before May the first. It is dismaying now to pick up the same contradictions from Tony Blair. Not so long after the election he went to a European summit in Amsterdam, and returned in triumph bearing two things. First, he had enthusiastically sided with Helmut Kohl (and against Lionel Jospin) - he had recognised (and apparently welcomed) what he called globalisation (and which *we* must recognise as only one particular form of globalisation) and had joyfully succumbed to the constraints and necessities (eg the 'flexible' labour market) which it apparently imposes upon the functioning of our economy. But, second, he had also won for us 'the UK's right to control its own borders'. Global freedom of movement for some, but definitely not for others.

An internationalist globalisation?

There must be other ways to work our increasing global interconnectedness. I am not arguing either that we should retreat totally into protectionism, or that borders should be opened up to unlimited international migration. The point is rather to end the double-think that legitimises the coexistence of the reverse of both of these things.

What we need is a policy approach which asks what *kind* of globalisation we should be aiming for and which acknowledges the possibility of mixes of trade and migration policies appropriate to different situations. In every age there is a making and re-making of the spaces and places through which we live our lives: what need to be addressed are the power relations through which that restructuring takes place. At the moment, the apparent inevitability of globalisation in some form, and the skillful elision of this with the particular form which is dominant today, is blocking the possibility of having that debate.

5. For instance in *Soundings*, number 1, 1995, 'Making spaces: or, geography is political too', ppl93-208.

We need an internationalist perspective on globalisation - asking not just what is good for 'Britain' (itself already a tricky-enough concept) bur also what might, just possibly, lead to a slightly less unequal world. This is not an impossible task. For example, both Clare Short and Robin Cook have spoken in these terms: Clare Short has alluded to the pointlessness of giving aid to the poorest, on condition that they put more resources into health and education, when IMF structural adjustment programmes are imposing cuts in those very same services. (The contradictions between alleviating poverty and certain strategies for growth could not be clearer.) There are proposals for a better regulation of the conditions under which multinationals invest, and disinvest, around the world, and, in particular, for a rethink of the conditions which countries are allowed to impose upon them. Oxfam has written about the possibility of ethical standards agreements for transnational corporations, argued against the dumping of unwanted food which undermines Third World planning, and presented a case for social clauses in trade agreements to level the playing field. Indeed making 'free and fair' trade actually free and fair would itself be an improvement (though it would be by no means enough) - the UNCTAD Report underlines that the rules of 'global free trade' have been drawn up in favour of the richest countries. Trade in goods in which countries of the South have an advantage (clothing, agricultural produce) is heavily protected, while barriers are low for the high-tech goods and services which the richer countries mainly produce. Finally, a more internationalist approach to globalisation would demand a much more radical re-thinking of 'the nation' than could ever be engendered by the current mix of openness to capital and closedness to people.

Soundings has already carried a major article on the (disputed) extent of globalisation, and in this issue that debate is taken further.[6] We have also begun to address the issue of what kind of globalisation we have and should have. In this volume that debate is taken further in a number of the articles in the theme section on *States of Africa*. 'Globalisation' is one of the most important issues on the current political agenda. *Soundings* aims to ensure that it will not remain, as a term, a de-politicised, unexamined, assumption.

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6. See Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, 'Globalisation: ten frequently asked questions and some surprising answers', Soundings Number 4, Autumn 1996; and, in this issue, the article by Goldblatt, Held *et al.*