
Reviews

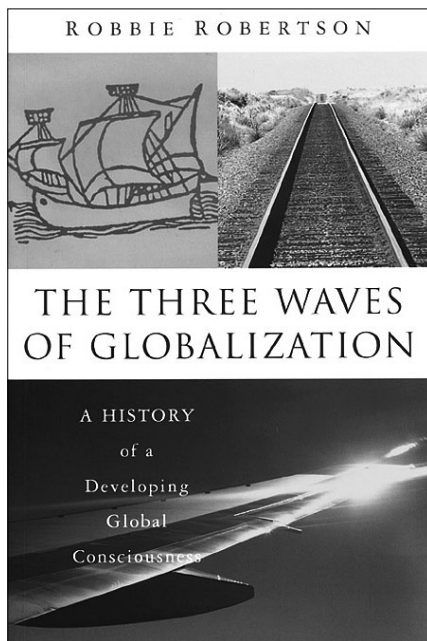
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Globalisation for whom?

***The Three Waves of Globalisation: A History of a Developing Global Consciousness*, by Robbie Robertson. London: Zed Books, 2003. 291 pp. ISBN 1 85649 1.**

THE ENDORSEMENTS for this account of globalisation are certainly effusive. Stephanie Lawson, professor of international relations at the University of East Anglia, announces that ‘this is a bold and imaginative book’ which provides ‘a very stimulating, critical contribution to the contemporary literature’. Mike Moore, former Director-General of the World Trade Organisation acclaims the author and his work without qualification – ‘at last’, he declares, ‘an historian who sees the big picture about globalisation and its



present manifestation’. My own assessment can be stated in advance. Robertson’s all-embracing, long dureé conception of globalisation provides important anthropological insights. However, the universalist scale of his narrative leads to over-generalised accounts of structural power and political opposition. In the early chapters, this is understandable; a nuanced meta-history of global humanity would require several volumes. Subsequently, however, Robertson’s anthropological universalism overlooks

the contested nature of contemporary globalisation.

For Robertson, the origins of globalisation lie in the interconnections that have slowly enveloped humanity since the earliest times. These interconnections result from the human capacity to co-operate in the use of environmental resources and in the construction of communities, clans, and civilisations.

Despite incessant conflicts, human social life is defined by a common 'unceasing struggle for survival and well-being' (p 33). In this context, the shift towards nomadic hunting and the transition from hunting to agriculture were global developments. They provided humans with the organisational capacity to draw greater value from the resources around them. In pre-historic times, humans were not aware of their global interconnectedness since the requisite technologies of literacy, commerce, transport and communications were yet to develop.

Over the last 500 years these technologies have rapidly proliferated (albeit unevenly between cultures and regions). But, the consequent transformation of human activity and human knowledge has not necessarily created global awareness. In a key passage, Robertson states that:

Instead we have viewed the world more narrowly through the spectacles of religion, civilization, nation or race. Today these old constructs continue to frustrate the development of a global consciousness of human interconnections and their dynamism (p 3).

The discrepancy between global interconnectedness and global consciousness which is identified here underpins the book's central thesis; over the last 500 years three waves of globalisation have occurred. From about 1500 regional trade networks became globally interlinked. After 1800, globalisation was intensified by the forces of industrialisation and economic expansion. After 1945, the formation of a new world order generated the third wave of globalisation. This, in turn, created the prospect of a new global consciousness centred around collective empowerment and democratisation.

Robertson argues that the first two waves collapsed 'because elites sought to frustrate democratization and re-orient globalisation toward more exclusive ends' (p 4). The first wave was driven by the confluence of agricultural development, population growth, migration and mercantile expansion. During the 1500s, these interacting forces spun outward from metropolitan regions within Europe,

India, China and Japan. The global interconnections which resulted presented opportunities for greater security and well-being. Instead, humans sought sustainability through the exclusions of religion, race, empire and commercial monopoly. These regressive developments were largely synonymous with the nationalistic imperialisms of Portugal, Spain, France, England and the Netherlands. Thus, the 1600s and 1700s witnessed the debilitating human consequences of conquest, colonisations, inter-imperial rivalry and intra-European War.

By the early 1800s, the British Empire had prevailed. Essentially, it was a worldwide trading system based on the import of cheap raw materials and food and the export of manufactured goods. The subsequent proliferation of industrial technologies enabled the United States and Germany to challenge Britain's economic dominance. Eventually, other nations forged their own paths of industrial development. This constituted the second wave of globalisation. Here, Robertson explains how the counterveiling tendencies of inclusion and exclusion played out until the latter prevailed.

From one perspective the combination of technological innovation, industrial growth and rising aggregate demand generated the potential

for inclusive globalisation. Within Europe and the Americas, for example, a general (albeit uneven) rise in living standards coalesced with the spread of political democracy. These developments contrasted with the drive toward imperial conquest and monopoly trade which undermined the first wave of globalisation.

But the second wave also contained exclusionist tendencies. During the 19th century, most of the worlds' peoples became incorporated into 'empires of disadvantage' (p 139). Robertson delineates how the European nations (followed by Japan) carved out colonies throughout Africa, South East Asia and the Pacific. Each empire was legitimised by 'scientific' theories of racial hierarchy and civilisational progress. Captive peoples were thus denied the potential benefits of economic growth and democratisation. At the same time, sharpening competition between the major industrial nations fostered the growth of vertically and horizontally integrated corporations with links to financial institutions.

As the economic health of each major nation depended upon fewer companies, colonies became a resource for cheap labour, raw materials and foreign investment. By the early 20th century, economic competition and inter-imperial rivalry had

increased military security risks within Europe. This was to have global implications. The Great War (preceded by the Russo-Japanese conflict) drew in the United States. In the 1930s, Japanese incursions into China and South East Asia corresponded with a resurgence of German militarism. The five-year conflagration which eventuated raged across two oceans and three major continents. Commercial monopoly, imperial conquest and military conflict had, once again, undermined the democratic potentials of globalisation.

Robertson's overview of first and second wave globalisation is a major intellectual accomplishment. He proves beyond doubt that globalisation is an established historical process. It is not a recent phenomenon caused by satellites, airline travel or the internet. He also demonstrates that imperial systems of conquest and exclusion are unstable over time.

However, Robertson's discussion of empowerment and democratisation is somewhat sketchy. The various potentials for inclusive, democratic globalisation are clearly delineated and explained. Unfortunately, there is less space accorded to the intellectual and political proponents of this ideal, within each wave of globalisation. This unevenness of

explanation is particularly apparent in Robertson's account of the contemporary global environment. My criticism here comes with an important qualification; Robertson's historical account of third wave globalisation is coherent and incisive.

After 1945, he argues, globalisation contained strong inclusive tendencies. Thus, the formation of the United Nations General Assembly corresponded with the disintegration of European empires and the emergence of decolonised nation states. Meanwhile, the Bretton Woods currency agreement and the North American financed reconstruction of Japan and Western Europe fostered national variants of Keynesian social democracy. On the other hand, exclusivist counter-tendencies were also at work. Major powers within the United Nations Security Council could restrict or divide the General Assembly's collective will.

After the 1949 Chinese revolution, Cold War tensions between the communist and capitalist bloc generated partisan conceptions of the new world order. The United States, for example, conflated globalisation with the economic privileges enjoyed by itself, other large industrial societies and transnational corporations. The communist bloc and 'third world'

nations were seen as a threat to international stability. The prospects for democratic globalisation worsened with the demise of Bretton Woods and Keynesian economics in the 1970s. During the 1980s, neo-liberal agendas colonised national polities and supranational institutions. This process continued after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989; Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union experienced the impact of privatisation, gangster capitalism and ethnic conflict.

Against this background, Robertson identifies three global problems. Firstly, the immiseration wrought by IMF-driven structural adjustment programmes and the corporate exploitation of 'flexible' workers threatens social stability. Global finance and transnational companies heighten the danger by pursuing fast profits rather than planned development. Secondly, in the absence of a global strategy for environmental sustainability, capitalist globalisation systematically depletes environmental resources, such as oil, water and clean air. Thirdly, the increasing scale and intensity of human interaction may become unmanageable. Mass urbanisation, diasporic migration and commercialised tourism disrupts traditional notions of identity and social belonging. In given circumstances socio-cultural dislocation may fuel

outbreaks of ethnic chauvinism and religious zealotry.

Despite these problems, Robertson is cautiously optimistic about third wave prospects. Although the first and second waves could not generate sufficient global consciousness, this pattern need not repeat itself. Third wave globalisation has a redeeming feature; it is uniquely self-reflexive.

Drawing from historian, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, Robertson writes that 'unlike societies during earlier waves of globalisation, "we do have a sense of shared prospects and the possibility of pooled efforts"' (Fernández-Armesto cited in Robertson, p 259). If this is the case then two related questions arise. Who is articulating this new global consciousness? Where are the agencies of democratic globalisation? In answer to the second question, Robertson offers support for existing supranational institutions if they can be 'reformed to serve interests wider than those they currently serve and made accountable for their actions' (p 259).

His qualified defence of the World Trade Organisation is a case in point. Although 'weak and subject to TNC manipulation it provides a platform from which to address global trade issues' (p 260). Furthermore, the

WTO could 'impose minimum human rights, environmental and social justice standards as preconditions for trading rights' (p 260). Elsewhere, a more upbeat version of this assessment is provided by former Director-General Mike Moore. In his view 'the WTO system is built upon the rule of law and respect for the sovereign equality of nations'. This is 'an open, rules-based multilateral trading system, based on democratic values'. In short, the WTO is said to be 'the most democratic international body in existence today' (Moore cited in Wade, 2004).

Robertson's qualified optimism and Moore's effusive judgements both represent wishful thinking. By contrast, expatriate New Zealand economist, Robert Wade, argues that 'there is little scope under WTO rules to permit a range of development strategies, such as state assistance to new firms and industries that are trying to establish themselves in the face of competition from mature producers elsewhere' (Wade, 2004). This reflects the supranational predominance of neo-liberal doctrine and the marginalisation of institutional, Keynesian and development economics. In this regard, Wade points out that supranational institutions 'have increasingly redefined their agendas towards the deep restructuring of

countries' domestic, social and economic arrangements – rather than stopping at discrete projects, in the case of the World Bank; or at macro-economic variables, in the case of the IMF; or at national borders, in the case of the GATT/WTO' (Wade, 2004).

Wade's bleak analysis brings me back to the first question: who is articulating the new global consciousness? Here, Robertson does not give a specific reply. Instead, he adjudges those who lack global consciousness. This is a perceived shortcoming 'among the demonstrators who have protested in recent years outside meetings of political and business leaders in Davos, Seattle, Gothenburg and Genoa' (p 263). In blunt terms, their 'protests against globalisation are mistargeted' (p 263). Robertson further claims that protesters do not appreciate the work done by NGOs to 'gain debt relief and promote better access to markets' (p 263).

These remarks are condescending and unfair. Since the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1996, indigenous groups, trade unions, feminists, ecology activists, and rural farmers have sought to redefine globalisation, not oppose it. This process includes the de-legitimisation of supranational institutions who promote neo-liberal

versions of globalisation without popular mandate. To this end, Robertson never mentions the World Social Forum project that emerged out of the WTO protests of 1999. The first gatherings were held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, 2002 and 2003. The last of these brought together for the first time the movement against neo-liberalism and that against US imperialism.

This year's conference in Mumbai, India, attracted 100,000 participants to a series of events focusing on five broad themes; imperialist globalisation, patriarchy, gender and sexuality, militarism and peace, casteism and racism, religious fanaticism and sectarian violence (Vanaik, 2004). Although Mumbai post-dates Robertson's book, the earlier gatherings deserved analysis since all participants were broadly committed to democratic globalisation.

Also missing from Robertson's account are the global contributions of Walden Bello, Jose Bové and the Zapatistas. They all share a global sense of human inter-connectedness and they each oppose exclusivist versions of globalisation. And, the urgency of their contributions points to a crucial realisation. The fate of third wave globalisation hangs in the balance.

References

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