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# GLOBALIZATION

A Very Short Introduction

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
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Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai  
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

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Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published as a Very Short Introduction 2003

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

ISBN 13: 978-0-19-280359-7

ISBN 10: 0-19-280359-X

9 10

Typeset by RefineCatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk  
Printed in Great Britain by  
Ashford Colour Press Ltd., Gosport, Hampshire

# Chapter 1

## **Globalization: a contested concept**

In the autumn of 2001, I was teaching an undergraduate class on modern political and social theory. Still traumatized by the recent terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, most of my students couldn't quite grasp the connection between the violent forces of religious fundamentalism and the more secular picture of a technologically sophisticated, rapidly globalizing world that I had sought to convey in class lectures and discussions. 'I understand that "globalization" is a contested concept that refers to sometimes contradictory social processes,' a bright history major at the back of the room quipped, 'but how can you say that the TV image of a religious fanatic who denounces modernity and secularism from a mountain cave in Afghanistan perfectly captures the complex dynamics of globalization? Don't these terrible acts of terrorism suggest the opposite, namely, the growth of parochial forces that undermine globalization?' Obviously, the student was referring to Saudi-born Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, whose videotaped statement condemning the activities of 'international infidels' had been broadcast worldwide on 7 October.

Struck by the sense of intellectual urgency that fuelled my student's question, I realized that the story of globalization would remain elusive without real-life examples capable of breathing shape, colour, and sound into a vague concept that had become *the*

buzzword of our time. Hence, before delving into necessary matters of definition and analytical clarification, we ought to approach our subject in less abstract fashion. I suggest we begin our journey with a careful examination of the aforementioned videotape. It will soon become fairly obvious why a deconstruction of those images provides important clues to the nature and dynamics of the phenomenon we have come to call 'globalization'.

## Deconstructing Osama bin Laden

The infamous videotape bears no date, but experts estimate that the recording was made less than two weeks before it was broadcast. The timing of its release appears to have been carefully planned so as to achieve the maximum effect on the day the United States commenced its bombing campaign against Taliban and Al Qaeda ('The Base') forces in Afghanistan. Although Osama bin Laden and his top lieutenants were then hiding in a remote region of the country, they obviously possessed the hi-tech equipment needed to record the statement. Moreover, Al Qaeda members clearly enjoyed immediate access to sophisticated information and telecommunication networks that kept them informed – in real-time – of relevant international developments. Bin Laden may have denounced the forces of modernity with great conviction, but the smooth operation of his entire organization was entirely dependent on advanced forms of technology developed in the last two decades of the 20th century.

To further illustrate this apparent contradiction, consider the complex chain of global interdependencies that must have existed in order for bin Laden's message to be heard and seen by billions of TV viewers around the world. After making its way from the secluded mountains of eastern Afghanistan to the capital city of Kabul, the videotape was dropped off by an unknown courier outside the local office of Al-Jazeera, a Qatar-based television company. This network had been launched only five years earlier as



1. Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden addressing a global audience on 7 October 2001.

a state-financed, Arabic-language news and current affairs channel that offered limited programming. Before the founding of Al-Jazeera, cutting-edge TV journalism – such as free-ranging public affairs interviews and talk shows with call-in audiences – simply did not exist in the Arab world. Within only three years, however, Al-Jazeera was offering its Middle Eastern audience a dizzying array of programmes, transmitted around the clock by powerful satellites put into orbit by European rockets and American space shuttles.

Indeed, the network's market share increased even further as a result of the dramatic reduction in the price and size of satellite dishes. Suddenly, such technologies became affordable, even for low-income consumers. By the turn of the century, Al-Jazeera broadcasts could be watched around the clock on all five continents. In 2001, the company further intensified its global reach when its chief executives signed a lucrative cooperation agreement with CNN, the leading news network owned by the giant multinational corporation AOL-Time-Warner. A few months later, when the world's attention shifted to the war in Afghanistan, Al-Jazeera had already positioned itself as a truly global player, powerful enough to rent equipment to such prominent news providers as Reuters and ABC, sell satellite time to the Associated Press and BBC, and design an innovative Arabic-language business news channel together with its other American network partner, CNBC.

Unhampered by national borders and geographical obstacles, cooperation among these sprawling news networks had become so efficient that CNN acquired and broadcast a copy of the Osama bin Laden tape only a few hours after it had been delivered to the Al-Jazeera office in Kabul. Caught off guard by the incredible speed of today's information exchange, the Bush administration asked the Qatari government to 'rein in Al-Jazeera', claiming that the swift airing of the bin Laden tape without prior consultation was contributing to the rise of anti-American sentiments in the Arab

world and thus threatened to undermine the US war effort. However, not only was the perceived 'damage' already done, but segments of the tape – including the full text of bin Laden's statement – could be viewed online by anyone with access to a computer and a modem. The Al-Jazeera website quickly attracted an international audience as its daily hit count skyrocketed to over seven million.

There can be no doubt that it was the existence of this chain of global interdependencies and interconnections that made possible the instant broadcast of bin Laden's speech to a global audience. At the same time, however, it must be emphasized that even those voices that oppose modernity cannot extricate themselves from the very process of globalization they so decry. In order to spread their message and recruit new sympathizers, antimodernizers must utilize the tools provided by globalization. This obvious truth was visible even in bin Laden's personal appearance. The tape shows that he was wearing contemporary military fatigues over traditional Arab garments. In other words, his dress reflects the contemporary processes of fragmentation and cross-fertilization that globalization scholars call 'hybridization' – the mixing of different cultural forms and styles facilitated by global economic and cultural exchanges. In fact, the pale colours of bin Laden's mottled combat dress betrayed its Russian origins, suggesting that he wore the jacket as a symbolic reminder of the fierce guerrilla war waged by him and other Islamic militants against the Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan during the 1980s. His ever-present AK-47 Kalashnikov, too, was probably made in Russia, although dozens of gun factories around the world have been building this popular assault rifle for over 40 years. By the mid-1990s, more than 70 million Kalashnikovs had been manufactured in Russia and abroad. At least 50 national armies include such rifles in their arsenal, making Kalashnikovs truly weapons of global choice. Thus, bin Laden's AK-47 could have come from anywhere in the world. However, given the astonishing globalization of organized crime during the last two decades, it is quite conceivable that bin Laden's rifle was part of an illegal arms

deal hatched and executed by such powerful international criminal organizations as Al Qaeda and the Russian Mafia. It is also possible that the rifle arrived in Afghanistan by means of an underground arms trade similar to the one that surfaced in May 1996, when police in San Francisco seized 2,000 illegally imported AK-47s manufactured in China.

A close look at bin Laden's right wrist reveals yet another clue to the powerful dynamics of globalization. As he directs his words of contempt for the United States and its allies at his hand-held microphone, his retreating sleeve exposes a stylish sports watch. Journalists who noticed this expensive accessory have speculated about the origins of the timepiece in question. The emerging consensus points to a Timex product. However, given that Timex watches are as American as apple pie, it seems rather ironic that the Al Qaeda leader should have chosen this particular chronometer. After all, Timex Corporation, originally the Waterbury Clock Company, was founded in the 1850s in Connecticut's Naugatuck Valley, known throughout the 19th century as the 'Switzerland of America'. Today, the company has gone multinational, maintaining close relations to affiliated businesses and sales offices in 65 countries. The corporation employs 7,500 employees, located on four continents. Thousands of workers – mostly from low-wage countries in the global South – constitute the driving force behind Timex's global production process.

Our brief deconstruction of some of the central images on the videotape makes it easier to understand why the seemingly anachronistic images of an antimodern terrorist in front of an Afghan cave do, in fact, capture some essential dynamics of globalization. Indeed, the tensions between the forces of particularism and those of universalism have reached unprecedented levels only because interdependencies that connect the local to the global have been growing faster than at any time in history. The rise of international terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda represents but one of the many manifestations of

globalization. Just as bin Laden's romantic ideology of a 'pure Islam' is itself the result of the modern imagination, so has our global age with its obsession for technology and its mass-market commodities indelibly shaped the violent backlash against globalization.

Our deconstruction of Osama bin Laden has provided us with a real-life example of the intricate – and sometimes contradictory – social dynamics of globalization. We are now in a better position to tackle the rather demanding task of assembling a working definition of globalization that brings some analytical precision to a contested concept that has proven to be notoriously hard to pin down.

## Toward a definition of globalization

Since its earliest appearance in the 1960s, the term 'globalization' has been used in both popular and academic literature to describe a process, a condition, a system, a force, and an age. Given that these competing labels have very different meanings, their indiscriminate usage is often obscure and invites confusion. For example, a sloppy conflation of process and condition encourages circular definitions that possess little explanatory power. For example, the often-repeated truism that 'globalization [the process] leads to more globalization [the condition]' does not allow us to draw meaningful analytical distinctions between causes and effects. Hence, I suggest that we use the term *globality* to signify a *social condition* characterized by the existence of global economic, political, cultural, and environmental interconnections and flows that make many of the currently existing borders and boundaries irrelevant. Yet, we should not assume that 'globality' refers to a determinate endpoint that precludes any further development. Rather, this concept points to a particular social condition that, like all conditions, is destined to give way to new, qualitatively distinct constellations. For example, it is conceivable that globality might be transformed into something we could call 'planetarity' – a new social formation brought about by the successful colonization of our

solar system. Moreover, we could easily imagine different social manifestations of globality: one might be based primarily on values of individualism and competition, as well as on an economic system of private property, while another might embody more communal and cooperative social arrangements, including less capitalistic economic relations. These possible alternatives point to the fundamentally *indeterminate character* of globality; it is likely that our great-grandchildren will have a better sense of which alternative is likely to win out.

Conversely, the term *globalization* should be used to refer to a *set of social processes* that are thought to transform our present social condition into one of globality. At its core, then, globalization is about shifting forms of human contact. Indeed, the popular phrase ‘globalization is happening’ contains three important pieces of information: first, we are slowly leaving behind the condition of modernity that gradually unfolded from the 16th century onwards; second, we are moving toward the new condition of (postmodern) globality; and, third, we have not yet reached it. Indeed, like ‘modernization’ and other verbal nouns that end in the suffix ‘-ization’, the term ‘globalization’ suggests a sort of dynamism best captured by the notion of ‘development’ or ‘unfolding’ along discernible patterns. Such unfolding may occur quickly or slowly, but it always corresponds to the idea of change, and, therefore, denotes the transformation of present conditions.

Hence, scholars who explore the dynamics of globalization are particularly keen on pursuing research questions related to the theme of social change. How does globalization occur? What is driving globalization? Is it one cause or a combination of factors? Is globalization a uniform or an uneven process? Is globalization extending modernity or is it a radical break? How does globalization differ from previous social developments? Does globalization create new forms of inequality and hierarchy? Notice that the conceptualization of globalization as an ongoing process rather than as a static condition forces the researcher to pay

close attention to shifting perceptions of time and space. This explains why globalization scholars assign particular significance to historical analysis and the reconfiguration of social space.

To argue that globalization refers to a set of social processes propelling us towards the condition of globality may eliminate the danger of circular definitions, but it gives us only one defining characteristic of the process: movement towards greater interdependence and integration. Such a general definition of globalization tells us very little about its remaining qualities. In order to overcome this deficiency, we must identify additional qualities that make globalization different from other sets of social processes. Yet, whenever researchers raise the level of specificity in order to bring the phenomenon in question into sharper focus, they also heighten the danger of provoking scholarly disagreements over definitions. Our subject is no exception. One of the reasons why globalization remains a contested concept is because there exists no scholarly consensus on what kinds of social processes constitute its essence.

Despite such strong differences of opinion, however, it is possible to detect some thematic overlap in various scholarly attempts to identify the essential qualities of globalization processes. Consider, for example, the following five influential definitions of globalization. They suggest that four distinct qualities or characteristics lie at the core of the phenomenon. First, globalization involves the *creation* of new and the *multiplication* of existing social networks and activities that increasingly overcome traditional political, economic, cultural, and geographical boundaries. As we have seen in the case of Al-Jazeera television, the creation of today's satellite news corporations is made possible by the combination of professional networking, technological innovation, and political decisions that permit the emergence of new social orders that transcend parochial arrangements.

Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.

Anthony Giddens, Director of the London School of Economics

The concept of globalization reflects the sense of an immense enlargement of world communication, as well as of the horizon of a world market, both of which seem far more tangible and immediate than in earlier stages of modernity.

Fredric Jameson, Professor of Literature at Duke University

Globalization may be thought of as a process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions – assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact – generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power.

David Held, Professor of Political Science at the  
London School of Economics

Globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.

Roland Robertson, Professor of Sociology at the  
University of Pittsburgh

Globalization compresses the time and space aspects of social relations.

James Mittelman, Professor of International Relations  
at American University

The second quality of globalization is reflected in the *expansion* and the *stretching* of social relations, activities, and interdependencies. Today's financial markets stretch around the globe, and electronic trading occurs around the clock. Gigantic shopping malls have emerged on all continents, offering those consumers who can afford it commodities from all regions of the world – including products whose various components were manufactured in different countries. To return to our initial example, we now know that the spatial reach of Osama bin Laden's organization rapidly expanded during the late 1990s. Aided by new technology and economic deregulation, terrorist cells sprang up in dozens of nations on all five continents, ultimately turning Al Qaeda into a global terrorist network capable of planning and executing attacks on a heretofore unimaginable scale. The same process of social stretching applies to less sinister associations such as non-governmental organizations, commercial enterprises, social clubs, and countless regional and global institutions and associations such as the United Nations, the European Union, the Association of South East Asian Nations, the Organization of African Unity, the Common Market of the South, Doctors Without Borders, Amnesty International, the Union of Concerned Scientists, the World Economic Forum, Microsoft, and General Motors, to name but a few.

Third, globalization involves the *intensification* and *acceleration* of social exchanges and activities. The Internet relays distant information in mere seconds, and satellites provide consumers with real-time pictures of remote events. As Anthony Giddens notes in his definition, the intensification of worldwide social relations means that local happenings are shaped by events occurring far away, and vice versa. In other words, the seemingly opposing processes of globalization and localization actually imply each other. The 'local' and the 'global' form the endpoints of a spatial continuum whose central portion is marked by the 'national' and the 'regional'.

To elaborate on this point, let us return to the example of Osama bin Laden. It is reasonable to assume that his terrorist strategy is being shaped continuously by technological breakthroughs achieved in American and Indian computer labs, as well as by political and military decisions made in Washington, DC, Brussels, and other parts of the world. At the same time, the activities of US politicians, military engineers in the United Kingdom, and Israeli secret service agents are significantly impacted by Osama bin Laden's strategy. The often-repeated phrase that 'globalization compresses time and space' simply means that things are getting faster and distances are shrinking dramatically. As the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells has pointed out, the current rise of the global 'network society' would not have been possible without a technological revolution – one that has been powered chiefly by the rapid development of new information and transportation technologies. Proceeding at an ever-accelerating pace, these innovations are reshaping the social landscape of human life.

Fourth, the creation, expansion, and intensification of social interconnections and interdependencies do not occur merely on an objective, material level. As Roland Robertson notes in his definition, globalization processes also involve the subjective plane of human consciousness. Hence, we must not forget that globalization also refers to people becoming increasingly conscious of growing manifestations of social interdependence and the enormous acceleration of social interactions. Their awareness of the receding importance of geographical boundaries and distances fosters a keen sense of becoming part of a global whole. Reinforced on a daily basis, these persistent experiences of global interdependence gradually change people's individual and collective identities, and thus dramatically impact the way they act in the world.

It seems that we have now identified some of the essential qualities of globalization. This allows us to offer the following definition:

**Globalization refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant.**

## More areas of contestation

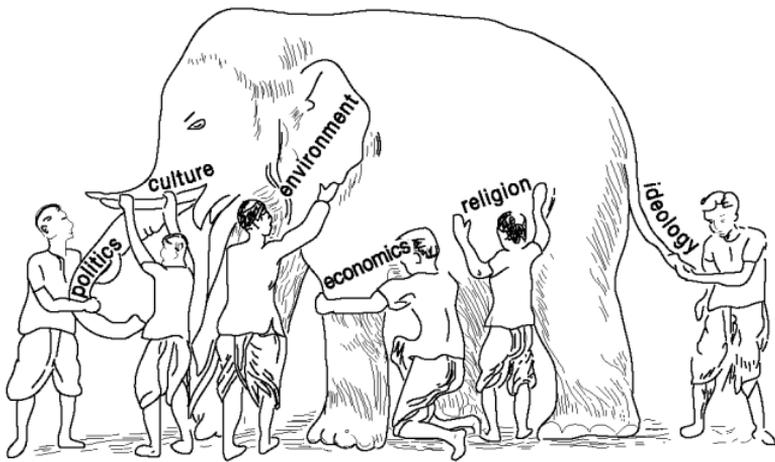
Although we arrived at an adequate working definition of globalization by drawing out some common insights that appear in other influential definitions, we must not lose sight of the fact that there still remain several areas of contestation. After all, globalization is an uneven process, meaning that people living in various parts of the world are affected very differently by this gigantic transformation of social structures and cultural zones. Hence, the social processes that make up globalization have been analysed and explained by various commentators in different, often contradictory ways. Scholars not only hold different views with regard to proper definitions of globalization, they also disagree on its scale, causation, chronology, impact, trajectories, and policy outcomes. For example, the academic dispute over the scale of globalization revolves around the question of whether it should be understood in singular or differentiated terms. This notion of 'multidimensionality' appears as an important attribute of globalization in our own definition; still it requires further elaboration. The ancient Buddhist parable of the blind scholars and their encounter with the elephant helps to illustrate the nature of the academic controversy over the various dimensions of globalization.

Since the blind scholars did not know what the elephant looked like, they resolved to obtain a mental picture, and thus the knowledge they desired, by touching the animal. Feeling its trunk, one blind man argued that the elephant was like a lively snake. Another man,

rubbing along its enormous leg, likened the animal to a rough column of massive proportions. The third person took hold of its tail and insisted that the elephant resembled a large, flexible brush. The fourth man felt its sharp tusks and declared it to be like a great spear. Each of the blind scholars held firmly to his own idea of what constituted an elephant. Since their scholarly reputation was riding on the veracity of their respective findings, the blind men eventually ended up arguing over the true nature of the elephant.

The ongoing academic quarrel over which dimension contains the essence of globalization represents a postmodern version of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Even those scholars who agree that globalization is best thought of as a singular process clash with each other over which aspect of social life constitutes the primary domain of the phenomenon. Some scholars argue that economic processes lie at the core of globalization. Others privilege political, cultural, or ideological aspects. Still others point to environmental processes as the essence of globalization. Like the blind men in the parable, each globalization researcher is partly right by correctly identifying *one* important dimension of the phenomenon in question. However, their collective mistake lies in their dogmatic attempts to reduce such a complex phenomenon as globalization to a single domain that corresponds to their own expertise.

To be sure, one of the central tasks for globalization researchers consists of devising better ways for gauging the relative importance of each dimension without losing sight of the interconnected whole. But it would be a grave mistake to cling to a one-sided understanding of globalization. Fortunately, more and more researchers have begun to heed this call for a genuine multidimensional approach to globalization that avoids pernicious reductionism. Since globalization contains multifaceted and differentiated processes, it is safe to say that virtually no areas of social life escape its reach. Or is it?



## 2. The globalization scholars and the elephant.

Before we come to this important conclusion, let us consider several objections raised by those scholars who belong to the camp of the 'globalization sceptics'. These objections range from the accusation that fashionable 'globalization talk' amounts to little more than 'globaloney' to less radical suggestions that globalization is a much more limited and uneven process than the sweeping arguments of the so-called 'hyperglobalizers' would have us believe. In many ways, the most radical globalization sceptics resemble the blind scholar who, occupying the empty space between the elephant's front and hind legs, groped in vain for a part of the elephant. Finding none, he accused his colleagues of making up fantastic stories about non-existent things, asserting that there were no such animals as 'elephants' at all.

However, evidence pointing to the rapid intensification of worldwide social relations is mounting. Hence, I will not attempt to refute those few globalization sceptics who go so far as to deny its existence altogether. On the other hand, I am rather sympathetic to the notion that globalization may be a geographically limited and uneven process. As I will argue myself in subsequent chapters, large segments of the world population – particularly in the global

South – do not enjoy equal access to thickening global networks and infrastructures. In that sense, then, globalization is associated with inequality. Nevertheless, even if it can be shown that the intensification of social interconnections and interdependencies appears to be concentrated in the economically advanced countries of the global North, it would still be entirely justified to engage in extensive ‘globalization talk’. After all, the existence of patterns of rising interdependence in the global North does reflect a partial globalization trend, one that is likely to have significant impacts on other regions of the world.

In my view, the most challenging question that has emerged from the camp of globalization sceptics is the following: is globalization primarily a phenomenon of the modern age? Critics would respond to this question in the negative, adding that the concept of globalization has been applied in an historically imprecise manner.

**Globalization** In a nutshell, this thoughtful group of sceptics contends that even a cursory look at history suggests that there is not much that is ‘new’ about contemporary globalization. Hence, before we explore in some detail the five main dimensions of globalization in subsequent chapters of this book, I suggest we give this weighty argument a fair hearing. Indeed, such a critical investigation of globalization’s alleged novelty is closely related to yet another difficult question hotly debated in the fledgling field of globalization studies. What does a proper chronology and periodization of globalization look like? Let us turn to Chapter 2 to find answers to this question.