



Sapientia et Doctrina

Globalization: A Future Foretold?

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The Earth is flat, after all — at least according to some in the more popular accounts of globalization. Of course, what Thomas Friedman meant to convey with this description of globalization was the way in which the world has come to grow together, a process that expresses itself in many different areas of our lives. Globalization as a phenomenon has also been studied extensively in academic circles. A multitude of approaches and research traditions have devoted much time and effort to try to make more sense of the many transformative changes that seem to characterize our time. Most commonly, it is understood to be either an economic or a cultural process of integration.



Photo by Joachim K. Rennstich

Yet, even within my own field, political science, the concept of globalization is a contested one. For some, it is a process ignited by technological revolutions somewhere in the 1970s or after World War II. For others, its origin lies in the so-called Industrial Revolution. And for some, the mere concept of an ever-growing globalization phenomenon is questionable, as they point out to higher levels of integration some hundred years ago (for example as expressed in patterns of trade) and a recent strengthening of the nation state. What all of these approaches acknowledge, however, is some sort of “global” unit that is separate from, say, the “state,” a “region,” or some “local” unit.

The development of this global system is at the heart of my own research. Growing out of the work of not only political scientists, but also historians, sociologists, economists, geographers and even some natural (especially environmental) scientists, my work and that of my colleagues in this arena tries to uncover how such a global system could come into existence and how its basic functions have been established and work together to create what you and I experience as “globalization” today.

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ment that focuses on innovation, technology, social, and economic but also coercive (i.e., military) interactions. My most recent book, *The Making of a Digital World*, to be published later this year by Palgrave Macmillan, has used this model to test whether “globalization” as we experience it today is radically different from past patterns or so disruptive as to “break” this mode of global system formation. There, I focus on the impact of digital technologies and the way these technologies shape the systems that previously have shaped globalization. What I find is very reflective of past patterns of global system formation, indicating a continuation of the global system process as it has evolved over the last one thousand years.

This process is by no means a linear path, nor are there any forgone conclusions (or any other form of determinism). A complex system such as that at the heart of globalization is merely a platform or a stage - it allows the actors on it to act out in a certain way (or denies them others) but does not predetermine it. Having a balcony and a wall on the set does not automatically yield “Romeo and Juliet.” This might sound rather obvious but is in fact a very important question: to what

on the generational aspects of this system: as much as technology, political, and economic processes matter - in the end they do not predetermine outcomes. Those outcomes are still shaped by the decisions of individual actors, although, as the example above illustrates, the “possibility space” we encounter in our decision making is often limited by certain constraints. This pattern is captured in what I call the “Buddenbrook Cycle,” based on Thomas Mann’s novel about four generations of a Hanseatic merchant family in Northern Germany. Mann traces back the family’s rise to economic and political heights during the first two generations and its seemingly unavoidable decline in the third and fourth generation (which is unable to escape the “Buddenbrook way” of doing things). The very formula that bred much of the success in the first two generations eventually proves to be a major obstacle as the world around them changes and the previous innovators remain stuck in the now “old ways.”

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The development of this global system is at the heart of my own research. Growing out of the work of not only political scientists, but also historians, sociologists, economists, geographers and even some natural (especially environmental) scientists, my work and that of my colleagues in this arena tries to uncover how such a global system could come into existence and how its basic functions have been established and work together to create what you and I experience as “globalization” today.

This is no easy task. What we are trying to do in our work is to create a view of the bigger picture of how globalization came into existence as a system, how its key drivers shape its development and what kind of effects this has on individuals (such as you and me), groups (for example firms or religious organizations), or states over an extended period of time, including the future possibilities of all of these actors. I developed a model of global system develop-

ment that focuses on innovation, technology, social, and economic but also coercive (i.e., military) interactions. My most recent book, *The Making of a Digital World*, to be published later this year by Palgrave Macmillan, has used this model to test whether “globalization” as we experience it today is radically different from past patterns or so disruptive as to “break” this mode of global system formation. There, I focus on the impact of digital technologies and the way these technologies shape the systems that previously have shaped globalization. What I find is very reflective of past patterns of global system formation, indicating a continuation of the global system process as it has evolved over the last one thousand years.

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This has led me to the next step in my research, that focuses



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on the generational aspects of this system: as much as technology, political, and economic processes matter - in the end they do not predetermine outcomes. Those outcomes are still shaped by the decisions of individual actors, although, as the example above illustrates, the “possibility space” we encounter in our decision making is often limited by certain constraints. This pattern is captured in what I call the “Buddenbrook Cycle,” based on Thomas Mann’s novel about four generations of a Hanseatic merchant family in Northern Germany. Mann traces back the family’s rise to economic and political heights during the first two generations and its seemingly unavoidable decline in the third and fourth generation (which is unable to escape the “Buddenbrook way” of doing things). The very formula that bred much of the success in the first two generations eventually proves to be a major obstacle as the world around them changes and the previous innovators remain stuck in the now “old ways.”

This pattern of generational learning seems to be at the heart of the larger process of global system formation and would explain its relative regularity. Continuing the focus of my book, my new project focuses on the rise of “digital generations.” Contrasting “analog” generations with the emerging digital ones, I take up the ideas of the Buddenbrook cycle and develop simulations in addition to other techniques that test the concept in a variety of methodologies to test the ideas of generational learning and the impact of technologies (both physical and social) on this kind of learning.

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