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Globalization Processes

It's 2 in the morning and you're up trying to install a new wireless router. You're half asleep and nothing seems to be going right. Because of globalization, you can pick up the phone, call "tech support," and be greeted by a cheery, chirpy, wide-awake techie who can infiltrate your computer remotely, take charge, and get the job done. Globalization definitely has benefits.

Globalization has been one of the most controversial topics in the popular and scholarly media since the end of the 20th century. In developing societies, globalization is blamed for deepening poverty, and in developed societies, it is blamed for the loss of middle-income jobs and the increasing gap between rich and poor. In both, globalization has spawned passionate demonstrations and violent uprising.

But what is it? The easiest answer is that globalization is a set of processes through which the people on the globe are increasingly interconnected, through which the globe is becoming "a single place." What happens in one part of the globe affects the others. While nations have been involved in and influenced by other nations for a long time, this involvement now involves every nation, every person on the globe. The questions that arise from this simple but elegant proposition are as follows:

- Why is globalization happening?
- What does it mean for individuals and societies?
- How are individuals, institutions within societies, and societies coping with the changes in perspective imposed by globalization?

Although there is a lot of debate, there are some things on which most theorists agree. Globalization doesn't mean homogenization. Cultures are not expected to merge into one super culture, with all societies having the same values, beliefs, language, or even foods. Values and beliefs can't be exported and imported as easily as hamburgers, clothing, or rock and roll. For every cultural import, there is a local twist added. This is "glocalization." Products, ideas, and even global forces are influenced by and adapted to the

local contingences, customs, and interests as they spread worldwide. Globalization is more likely to mean greater emphasis on pluralism and acceptance of pluralism, not homogenization, although pluralism is resisted in many quarters around the world.

Not many theorists think that there will be one huge governmental or political structure to replace individual societal governments. Governments are increasingly challenged and find it increasingly difficult to manage their economies and to fulfill their promises to citizens. However, there is momentum in two seemingly opposite directions: Countries are breaking up into smaller, more homogeneous states, and there are more attempts to form regional political and economic alliances, such as the European Union (EU) and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). These regional alliances are taking on some of the functions of national governments, but they are a far way from becoming full federations. Global political (United Nations) and economic (World Bank, International Monetary Fund) organizations are more active and more empowered to act within the borders of sovereign countries. They are very far from merging into a global government.

No one thinks that globalization will necessarily bring about world harmony or world peace. One of the most striking trends in globalization has been the impressive move away from rule by dictators and military rule to democracy. Despite this, globalization has been accompanied by violent conflict, most visibly in the rise of international terrorism but also present in other forms of political violence and hate crimes.

It is also agreed that globalization is not just about economics, and not just about the spread of democracy or the spread of McDonalds and rock music. Globalization involves economic and political and cultural and social processes. In doing so, it necessarily involves finding common ground among the societies of the world, if we are all to inhabit this world, this literal common ground. Finding common ground wouldn't be necessary if the people of different societies, the organizations, companies, and governments of different societies, were isolationist. They are not, and it is doubtful that the days of isolationism will return for any country. The people in societies all over the world are involved with one another in many different ways. The products we create and consume; traveling to one another's countries; communicating and enjoying one another's media; using each other's resources, labor, and ideas; looking after one another's well-being; and using (and mis-using) the resources of the world increasingly involve us more and more with people from other nations, some of whom we may know, most of whom we will never meet.

People and organizations and countries are coming together to act, for their own good, and to acquire the means for survival and make a better life for themselves and perhaps for everyone on the globe. The world is changing quickly, and rapid change begets more rapid change. Former rules of international relations don't seem to fit the new realities. Common ground is necessary to determine what is good, right, and proper action of people and

societies toward one another. This applies whether you are talking about calling a “help desk” in the middle of the night, paying adequate and fair wages to workers in the United States or Brazil, or finding a way to slow down global warming while still improving the quality of life for those in human misery.

Globalization means change—change in all parts of the world, by the same processes and with many of the same outcomes as the classical sociological theorists analyzed over a hundred years ago, but on a much different scale: rationalization, anomie (normlessness), and resistance, writ large and fast.

This contemporary period of globalization is, with respect to social processes, very much like the Industrial Revolution that gave birth to what we have come to call “modernity.” It was a period of very rapid social change. This threw societies into near chaos as the traditional way of life of the agricultural society gave way to the rapid development of urban industrial life. People didn’t know how to “do” urban industrial—how to organize the great masses of people flooding into large and rapidly expanding cities. How to feed them, clothe them, and provide jobs for them was excruciatingly problematic. What in the world to do with all of the children, now that farm life and daily work on a farm or as an apprentice was no longer possible, was a critical issue. Cities grew filthy, poverty was rampant, and children roamed the streets like cats. As Charles Dickens¹ so poignantly wrote, “it was the best of times” because with the use of fossil fuels and engines, there was enough productive capacity to ensure that everyone could have enough food and clothing and shelter, but it also was “the worst of times” because people couldn’t figure out how to organize themselves, to get everyone access to food, clothing, and shelter or the means to earn them for themselves. They could not create order. This is when sociology fully crystallized as a discipline, asking, “What makes order possible?”

Two of the most prominent theorists of the era, Emile Durkheim, a French philosopher, and Max Weber, a German historian, became among the first to hold professorships in sociology. Sociologists inherited methodological and conceptual tools from each of these men, as well as from Auguste Comte, a positivist philosopher who advocated applying the tools of the natural sciences to society; Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalyst; contract theorists such as John Locke, Adam Smith, and Herbert Spencer (the sociologist who coined the phrase “the survival of the fittest”); and Karl Marx, a political economist and revolutionary.² Now sociologists are asking the same question not only of societies but of the globe.