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John W. Meyer
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What is This?
Globalization
Theory and Trends

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Abstract
Since the Second World War, there has been a steadily increasing awareness of a global society, and of national interdependencies in this society. The catastrophes of the war (and earlier Depression) and the extraordinary violations of human rights and welfare are involved. So are rapid decolonization, and political and economic interdependencies. Consciousness of a global society, however, has led to nothing like a world state, so all the much-perceived interdependencies lead to global movements to control the national and social actors that are understood to carry the burden of social control. Thus world culture has created wave after wave of somewhat standardized national policies, committing countries to the pursuit of collective progress and individual welfare and equality, and to international cooperation. The political logic here is one of natural law, not positive law, since there is no world state. Extraordinary expansions of world political society result – an explosion in the use of science, and various principles of standardized social rationality, and dramatic emphases on individual rights, welfare, and empowerment.

Key words: globalization • sociological institutionalism • world society

In this article, I review meanings given to the common term ‘globalization.’ I emphasize uses of the term that focus on the modern rise of consciousness of a world society and of world standards about what a national or local society should be like. Globalization, in this sense, creates many pressures and opportunities for structuring and standardizing national and local societies, and thus produces waves of conformity with worldwide models. I review research on such effects, discuss the origins and nature of the cultural standards involved, and then emphasize the location of these standards in the world’s rapidly expanding educational systems.

MEANINGS OF GLOBALIZATION

Globalization, in common usage, obviously has a number of different meanings. Here, I distinguish two.
Globalization as Exchange

First, globalization refers to expanded interdependencies and rates of transaction around the world. Much of the attention goes to expanded economic exchange: rates of international trade, global production or commodity chains, flows of technology and 'intellectual property,' flows of labor and laborers, and above all else, cross-national investment patterns. On most of these issues, there is some dispute about the importance of global transactions. Seen against constantly expanding domestic economic interdependencies in most societies, international ones often do not loom so large, though there is much variation among countries and regions. A good deal depends, empirically, on how one assesses the special case of Europe. Intra-European economic transactions have certainly increased massively with the rise of the EU. But it is not clear that intra-European transactions are really to be seen as comparably international to all the others around the world.

But on the international investment issue, there is little dispute: great increases in the flows of investments are obvious, as are great increases in the volatility of these flows, and in the currency issues related to them. There are radically different assessments of the value and consequence of the flows. There are, on the left, economic perspectives stressing the impact of the economic flows on increasing inequalities and sheer dependencies in the world; the idea is that increased economic interdependence has radically different effects on core and periphery. Also more or less on the left, populist perspectives stress the dislocating or anomic effects of expanded uncontrolled dependence on (especially peripheral) local societies, with imagery about the modern 'risk society.'

In the broad liberal center, with increased dominance since the fall of the Soviet Union, there is more optimism about the benefits of increased global exchange, and about mechanisms supporting stability rather than anomic. The 'risk society' in this view is really an 'opportunity society.'

There are also conservative reactions to expanded global economic exchange. In the nature of the case, these are often local and protective in character, weakly assembled into global movements. There are fears and hopes of religious or civilizational anti-globalization movements, but as yet these are often fragmented. In any event it seems clear that much effective 'anti-globalization' activity is in fact itself organized on a global scale and addresses global issues. It may be a mistake to simply imagine that protests at conferences such as the Seattle or Genoa ones are to be called anti-globalization efforts, instead of contestations over issues that are quite global in character.

Discussions of globalization tend to emphasize economic dimensions of expanded world transactions more than is justified. They see more change in economic interdependence than really exists. More important, they understate the intensely sociocultural character of change in the modern global system.

Many of the most obvious global interdependencies are political and military in character – dramatized in light of the Second World War, the Cold War, and the nuclear age. Others relate to the world physical environment, rapid
communications processes, cultural and technical exchanges, and so on. In each of these areas, critics can see expanded inequality and dependence and risk, and centrist liberals can see growth. But it is entirely clear that change in these areas is extraordinarily great.

**Globalization as Cultural and Institutional**

Thus, a second set of meanings attached to the concept of globalization emphasizes, not expanded exchange, but a very widespread cultural consciousness: a) of interdependence and b) of local and national embeddedness in world society. The lesson was pounded home by two disastrous World Wars, a massive Depression, a Cold War, and astounding sweeping waves of destructive inhumanity.

Everywhere in the world, including in the movements alluded to above, thus, there is greatly enhanced awareness of the presence and power of a world society. Individuals increasingly frame, and are schooled to frame, their lives in light of global standards and possibilities. So do local associations, which bravely restructure themselves as organizations to compete and act in global terms. And so do national states and societies, whose policies reflect global models and standards.

This modern awareness of exposure to the risks and opportunities of a global society occurs in a distinctive political context, as has often been noted (canonically, see Wallerstein, 1974, and elsewhere). There is no strong world political system – or world state – to moderate or regulate all of the pressures. And the old empires that managed aspects of the enterprise are dead. Individuals and associations and national states are to do it on their own, with only modest protection from supra-national authority.

The effect of all this is sometimes differentiation and inequality, but also often worldwide waves of copying of fashionable institutions and policies. The world is an extraordinarily unequal place, and filled with distinctive cultures, but models of the good society are strikingly isomorphic. And changes in these models flow around the world with great rapidity: adopted often on an enthusiastic and voluntaristic basis by societies eager to progress.

Further, given the rapid rise of actual and perceived world society, the social and policy models that dominate in this society have some distinctive elements – fashion, here, is by no means random. The models that maintain prominence dramatically emphasize appropriate and positive participation of local and national societies in world society. They do not emphasize competitive, hostile, and oppositional relations, but stress the importance of civic virtue on a world scale. So it is good to open boundaries, not to close them. It is good to communicate and exchange, not to intensify (let alone militarize) conflict. Societies should be nice.

Thus two general propositions flow from our conception of globalization as a cultural and institutional process:

1) World models greatly influence national and local policies and forms. Changes in dominant world models produce changes in national ones.
2) World models stress the importance of good citizenship in world society, leading nations to at least posture as virtuous by global standards.

**WORLD MODELS AND NATIONAL SOCIETIES**

A great deal of empirical evidence supports these two propositions, in the modern world (see Meyer, 2004; Meyer et al., 1997a, for summaries). We can put the matter simply here.

First, national societies and states define themselves in standardized and virtuous ways. Their constitutions and self-depictions are remarkably homogeneous, and they espouse good citizenship in the world. They no longer emphasize particularities – commitment to a king or dynasty, a tribe or race, special Gods or religions, or a special history – but emphasize their service to their ‘people.’ Some countries, for instance, retain formal monarchies, but they no longer depict their societies and states as dedicated to serving the glory of these now-tamed entities. And while many countries have politely changed the name of their Ministry of War to Ministry of Defense, even the laggards no longer depict military success as a main aim.

Second, these ‘people’ are defined in standardized ways. Collectively, they are a society that is committed to progress – mostly economic, but also social and cultural and political. So standardized policies to achieve progress flow rapidly around the world – Keynesian policies, and later neoliberal ones, with a little intervening period in which emulating corporatist Japan was idealized. Very specific policies for progress flow – doctrines of expanded science and the public management of it, or population control policies (earlier eugenic ones, but these lost popularity in 1945), policies for social integration (earlier, sometimes social segregation), and so on (Barrett and Frank, 1999; Barrett and Kurzman, 2004).

Third, the ‘people’ are seen as modern individual persons, entitled to justice and equality and self-expansion. Policies celebrating the equal rights of women, children, the elderly, disabled people, ethnic minorities, gay and lesbian people, indigenous people, and so on flow through world society quite rapidly (see e.g. Berkovitch, 1999). Similarly, the dimensions of these rights expand: far beyond basic freedoms, humans are globally seen to have expanded political rights. And also social and economic rights – to health, education, welfare, food, work, and self-development.

It is obvious that the global commitments – adopted by nations around the world – to individual and collective progress, and national virtue in general, vastly transcend the actual global and national achievements in these areas. There is a great deal of what sociologists call loose coupling – idealized commitments to desired identities, little related to actual practices on the ground. And many empirical studies find the weakest relationships between virtuous national policy adoptions and virtuous practices. This is to be expected in an expanded and globalizing cultural frame.
It is important not to make too much of the point. The classic sociological observation – usually attributed to Durkheim – is that collective norms (like progress and individual rights, in the modern scheme) impact the practices of both those who ostentatiously subscribe to them and those who don’t. The sociologist Francisco Ramirez provides an example (e.g. Bradley and Ramirez, 1996; Ramirez and Wotipka, 2001). He and his collaborators study the modern wave of expanded female participation in universities, and discovers that this wave of change in practice occurs equally in countries that make a policy of it and those that don’t. The change, in short, supported by very strong global standards, occurs essentially everywhere.

The whole issue, related to the modern spread of human rights norms, is reviewed and discussed in a number of empirical studies (Cole, 2005; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005; Tsutsui and Wotipka, 2004). The spread around the world of human rights norms, far over and above the relevant practices, is striking.

**ORIGINS OF GLOBAL MODELS**

We see, thus, the operation of strong global models of the good society, and their impact on local and national societies. The obvious question arises of where these models come from.

Easy answers to this question stress the origins of world models in the power and interest of dominant actors in world society – the leading national states, and the leading economic structures. And plenty of this happens, as powerful forces acting in their own interest force rules on world society.

But such answers are indeed much too easy. Looking at great movements in world society, it is easy to seem them as rooted in the values of the most successful and dominant societies. The human rights and empowerment movements clearly reflect the ideas and organizational participation of dominant liberal societies. The same thing is true of the whole range of movements expanding science and environmentalism. And most of the dominant movements for expanded rationalist structuration of local and national societies have a similar character. Accounting reforms, standardization movements, movements for empowerment and decentrization, managerialisms, doctrines of transparency – all these clearly reflect dominant societies in the world.

But it is difficult to see raw power and interest at work here. And even a looser conception – of hegemony – is difficult to sustain, if this hegemony is understood to mask anything like self-interested power and interest in cultural pretension.

Consider the extraordinary global human rights movement, which certainly reflects liberal values and is certainly promulgated by activist people and organizations spinning out from liberal society (see Lauren, 1998). Note that the actual ‘actors’ reflecting power and interest are not at all in the forefront. The American and British nation-states (along with the Soviets) were very reluctant to have a declaration of human rights embedded in the United Nations,
and dragged their feet with subsequent expansions. For instance, the American national state actor refuses to sign the convention against discrimination against women, and other human rights instruments. So American society is an important source of global models – but the American state resists. And no one would suggest that the dominant world economic corporations have been leaders in the world human rights movement. They are affected by it. The logic of their own success is built on the metaphysical assumptions of individualism, which lie behind the movement. But they have in no sense been leaders taking action on behalf of the movement. The movement happened anyway.

Exactly the same point can be made about the cluster of world movements related to the environment and to the extraordinary modern expansion of scientific authority (Drori et al., 2003; Frank et al., 2000a; Meyer et al., 1997b). These movements certainly reflect the values and orientations of dominant societies – and have been pursued by individuals and associations from these societies. But the national states involved (not to mention the economic corporations) have not been in any sense prominent actors. Indeed the American national state refuses to subscribe to the elemental Kyoto Treaty, along with other global policy instruments, and has clearly resisted the most obviously needed ecological principles.

And when we turn to the global movements for the expansion of rationalistic organizational structure – the endless attacks on corruption and local culture, and the constant accounting and standardization reforms – we find exactly the same thing (Drori et al., 2006). Liberal ideas fuel these social movements, but the core powerful actors involve tend to resist (the American national state is among the least rationalized and transparent organizations that one can find).

In explaining all these social movements, it is a good idea to return to our concept of globalization. Many participants in world society – prominently including the great mass of intellectual observers, but also including leaders of states and economic firms – noticed the disasters of the 20th century. They saw a world of increased interdependence and increased disaster: wars, increasingly threatening, and ultimately threatening the whole earth; economic disasters, borne of economic nationalism; human disasters beyond comprehension; and more gradually, ecological disasters.

Taking a global perspective to such problems, these widespread forces could easily see that some sort of global collective action was called for. It was equally obvious that no simple solution was in the offing – there was no prospect of a regulatory world state.

In this situation – analogous to the development of the rather stateless 19th-century American society noted by de Tocqueville (1836) – the obvious solution lay in the creation of a strong world regulatory culture, embedded in socialized actors. The solution to problematic economic, military, political and ecological globalization, in other words, was the globalization of society and culture, which would provide some obvious social controls.
There was no way to root this culture in a positive legal tradition, absent a world state. Thus the modern globalized world culture has pronounced roots in what one might call natural law. Science provides the laws (e.g. for the environment). Rationality provides the laws (e.g. for transparent social organization). And a natural law conception of human rights provides the laws (e.g. for the rights of women).

In understanding the rapid growth of this modern world culture, it is crucial to go beyond analyses stressing the roles of powerful and interested actors – like dominant states, or great corporations. In the discussion above, actors in this very masculine American sense are rarely central to the building of world norms. Other classes of social beings – I have elsewhere called them ‘others’ to call attention to their lack of powerful and interested actorhood (Meyer, 1996) – play the dominant roles: the professions and the sciences, as one set (Drori et al., 2003); nominally disinterested governmental and (especially) non-governmental organizations as another set (Boli and Thomas, 1999). And even when the conventional state and non-state ‘actors’ are involved, they seem to be displaying their good-hearted public commitment to the world (as with Swedish demonstrations of the virtuous welfare state, or American displays of the importance of raw individual initiatives).

EDUCATION AS LOCUS AND INSTANCE OF MODERN NATURAL LAW

Much modern comparative research in the sociology of education has noted the striking tendency of the world’s educational systems to reflect common models of enrollment, curriculum, and organization. Education is an excellent instance of the globalizing processes discussed in this lecture. Curricular changes around the world copy each other rapidly (see the chapters in Benavot and Braslavsky, 2006; Meyer et al., 1992a). As an example, the current reforms in science and mathematics education flow to all sorts of countries in the world. Enrollment patterns are similarly isomorphic (Meyer et al., 1992b; Schofer and Meyer, 2005). The expanded enrollments of women, which occur in every part of the world, provides a concrete example (Bradley and Ramirez, 1996). Organizational structures parallel each other (as with university reforms, or widespread decentralization – see Baker and LeTendre, 2005). Despite all the economic and cultural variability paraded around the world, students can often rather fluidly move from one country to another, and adapt without too much difficulty.

We do not need here to emphasize the point of global homogeneity in education. The point we emphasize, rather, is the direction of the homogeneous changes involved. The natural law globalized world we live in is, as this article emphasizes, a cultural one. It is deeply rooted in various rationalistic rule systems.

And these rules systems are in good part created in, and installed in individuals by, formal education.

For this reason, educational systems have expanded, worldwide, at extraordinary rates. Primary education is almost universal, and secondary education – even
in poor countries – moves in the same direction. Mass education, in short, has simply exploded, as each individual in the world is to be taught the general principles of world society.

Rates of growth, however, are highest in tertiary – or university-level – education. And these rates of growth characterize every sort of country in the world. By and large, growth rates are independent of economic development and political characteristics of countries. And they are extreme: a country like Kazakhstan now has more tertiary students than the whole world had in 1900.

Figures 1 and 2 tell the story. Figure 1 (adapted from Schofer and Meyer, 2005) shows the simple growth of worldwide university-level enrollments, standardized on population, over the last century. It shows the extraordinary growth concentrated in the ‘globalization’ period since about 1960.

Figure 2 (adapted from Meyer and Schofer, 2005) breaks out the data by world region, thus reflecting variations in economic development. It shows that the extraordinary growth pattern we have noted characterizes every sort of country in the world.

Overall, about one-fifth of an age cohort in the world is recorded as participating in higher education. They are learning the culture of the globalized world – perhaps much more than any local culture of their own societies – and can presumably function in that world, and reinforce the standards of that world. They are, thus, both an instance and the locus of much of the cultural globalization we have discussed here.

**Figure 1** World tertiary students per 10,000 capita, 1900–2000

![Graph showing the growth of tertiary students per 10,000 capita from 1900 to 2000.](https://example.com/figure1.png)

*Source: Adapted from Schofer and Meyer (2005); original data from UNESCO and other sources.*
Figure 2  Tertiary enrollment per 10,000 capita, regional averages, 1900–2000

Source: Adapted from Meyer and Schofer (2005); original data from UNESCO and other sources.

Education seems a natural locus for the installation of a culture of high natural law in a greatly expanded set of persons now seen as endowed with enormous human rights and human capacities to manage action. In the same way, and for very similar reasons, education went through extraordinary expansion in de Tocqueville’s 19th-century America. In a society to be run by citizens of expanded power and Manifest Destiny, and in a society held together by great principles of science and natural law, education is an absolutely core institution. And so it goes in the contemporary world.

Detailed studies of changes in the curricula of mass and higher education support the same picture (Benavot and Braslavsky, 2006; Dori and Moon, 2006; Frank and Gabler, 2006; Frank et al., 2000b; Meyer et al., 1992a; see the chapters in Schissler and Soysal, 2005). In the universities around the world, science retains centrality. The humanities, and even history, tied to the old world of national and civilizational states, drop back dramatically. The winners of the 20th century are the social sciences, providing universalized natural law pictures of the good individual in the good society in the good world. In any proper university in the world, the young student can learn how societies everywhere – perhaps even in places that do not exist – should and do properly function. And obviously, a young person aspiring to legitimate and globally admired political leadership – say in an impoverished Third World country – would be best advised to study principles of social management in a university in a core country, rather than to consult with the toothless peasants at home.

The story with mass education is very similar. Countries emphasize national languages, still, but also English as the world lingua franca (Cha, 1991). They shift
their social science foci from history and geography to the social scientized and universalized subject of ‘social studies’ (Wong, 1991). They defocalize the national state (Schissler and Soysal, 2005). They focus prominently on the rights and capacities of human beings, including children themselves, with the sense that individual human capital is an essential ingredient of the societal future (Rosenmund, 2006). And of course, the canons of national history, literature, art, and culture decline in importance, with a celebration of greater global diversity (Frank et al., 2000b; McEneaney and Meyer, 2000).

CONCLUSION

Analysts who define globalization as economic in character often emphasize that it creates ‘anti-globalization’ movements. And participants in these movements often claim to be against globalization (defined economically). They say they are defending human rights, the environment, open and democratic societies, and the like.

From our point of view here – seeing globalization as a broad cultural phenomenon – these good participants, often coming from the universities, represent the essence of globalization. The utterly peripheral people who are outside the sweep of globalization, in the current world, are almost invisible. They lack the organization, resources, skills, and capacities to be counted. The visible ‘anti-globalizers’ are in fact a global and globalizing set of social movements. The schooled people involved see an environment which should be regulated by universalistic natural law principles. And they see human conditions that should be regulated in universalistic human rights terms. And they see all sorts of social corruption and irregularity and irresponsible power that should be regulated in broad rational and democratic terms.

For the most part, these protesters against globalization find rather ready audiences in world elites and elite organizations – similarly schooled to believe in general principles of rights, progress, and welfare. Both sides in these partly mock contests reflect images of a global society. And both sides get their weapons and argumentation from the schools that they all have attended.

A main implication of this argument is that all the highly globalized conflicts of the current world society will produce continued rapid increases in world structuration. Political and cultural globalization, over the last 50 years, have generated an enormous expansion of global organizational structure and global cultural elements (organized dramatically in the expansive science and professions). Every year there are newly constructed oppositions, often well legitimated culturally and organizationally. These provide the basis for further mobilization and further oppositions. Over here some moderns discover the evils of the old practice of female genital cutting (Boyle, 2002), and in response new defenses appear of the cultural rights involved. Religious and social rights groups develop claims about the evils of forced sterilization, and opposing groups claim the centrality of Asian values. Perhaps cheese should be pasteurized, or perhaps traditional production
should be respected. Perhaps an old dialect blocks the flow of modern opportunities to the young, but on the other hand perhaps old dialects themselves have something like natural rights. Perhaps homosexual practices are biologically natural, and rules restricting them violations of human rights; or perhaps societies and cultures have rights to regulate or protect traditional family life (Frank and McEneaney, 1999).

It would have been difficult to imagine, 50 years ago, the extraordinary extent to which such specific issues have risen to world-level standing in the current period. The rapid compression of world society has created a richly structured environment facilitating organization, culture, and conflict on dimensions that would have seemed most unlikely.

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