

What does “Global” mean in the Arts?

Well, I hope Dave and I did not throw too much at you in the first day of class! My objective on the first day was to introduce some basic themes that we will be working with in rest of the course (at least with the social sciences and humanities component).

First, I wanted to make clear the importance of approaching “global” issues from both the arts and the sciences. Bottom line: we cannot understand global issues without an understanding of both the arts and the sciences and how they relate to each other. Second, I wanted to introduce the importance of agency and how individuals, groups and states, and the international system as a whole, can all be sources of global problems and can all have an impact on each other. We will be coming back to this basic framework in both the climate change and GMO units. Third, I wanted to reflect on the relationship between science, society, and social discourse or the “spirit” of the times. How we think about global issues, and issues like climate change and GMOs, is a product of a larger mix of social discourse and culture, scientific discoveries made in our time, and social norms and ways of thinking about issues. It is the same today. We have to understand global issues as a subject that is embedded in this larger social context.

Then it was on to the nature of the term “global” itself. There is a lot going on here. We have tended to think of “global” issues in rather human-centered materialistic or mechanical ways (trade flows or multinational corporations or cell phone use) instead of a conceptualization of the planet earth as a single unit of analysis (a “one world”) that includes all species and ecologies. In fact, perhaps it should include everything out to the magnetosphere of the planet, or beyond to the solar system (or at least the Sun). It is also crucial to think of “global” in the sense that an issue or event can actually or potentially affect the entire planet (although not

necessarily in a uniform way). And so, I made the argument that “global” needs to be thought of as another level of analysis and a new level of thinking, which is distinct from other terms associated with the “system” level of thinking (such as “globalization” and “international”). These terms tend to focus mostly on the interaction between humans and human systems (social, economic, and political). Global issues include but transcend humanity and human society: they have implications across all life forms, ecological systems, and future generations of these life forms and systems.

Finally, a big part of global issue phenomenon is the understanding that human activity is now having a global impact on all life forms, ecological systems, and future generations of those life forms and ecologies. Global issues, in turn, have an influence on human activity, including the transformation of social organizations, the erosion of the state, the rise of global markets, the rise of global governance, and the rise of international civil society. Ultimately, global issues are having an increasing impact on all of us.

The History of the “Global”

My purpose here was to reflect on the notion that our time is not the first time that people have marveled at the “globalization” of the world or human activity. “Globalization” has a history and this is a big part of how global issues are addressed in the social sciences and humanities. I offered some significant markers or moments:

Migration of Homo Sapiens 50,000 years ago: proto-globalization

World religions

World trade

1492 Columbus (just one example in a long line of explorers of many different origins) bumps into a Caribbean island and German geographer Martin Behaim built the first known globe as a representation of the earth.

1522 first circumnavigation of the earth

1851 first world's fair

1865 creation of first global regulatory agency (International Telegraph Union)

1866 first permanent transoceanic telegraph cable

1884 first global co-ordination of clocks (GMT)

1930 first global radio broadcast (King George V opening the London Naval Conference to six continents)

1944 The word "globalize" first appears in the Merriam Webster Dictionary

1955 first MacDonalD's restaurant

1957 first intercontinental ballistic missiles

1962 launch of first communications satellite

1963 first direct dialing of transborder telephone calls

1968 "Earthrise" photograph of earth from moon orbit (Apollo 8)

1971 first electronic stock exchange opens (US NASDAQ)

1972 first global ecological conference (UN Conference on the Human Environment)

1976 launch of first direct broadcast satellite

1977 first commercial use of fiber optic cables

1987 appearance of Antarctica ozone layer hole

1991 introduction of world wide web

2000 the world possessed 850 million telephone connection points, 1.1 billion television receivers, 60,000 transborder corporations, 16,500 transborder citizens organizations

There were two points here. The “global” has a history, and so we must reflect not only on how much has changed, but also on the fact that in some ways, the “global” or “globalization” are not as new as we sometimes make them out to be.

Levels of Analysis

So how did we get here (in terms of global issues, I mean)? Why do things happen? What are the agents of change? Different levels of analysis give us different ways of examining issues, but also different explanations for the question “why do things happen?” and “who are the agents of change?”

The traditional view is that these agents of change can be divided into three levels: the individual (people make things happen), the state/group (states and groups of people make things happen), and the system (things happen because the system determines the nature of actor beliefs and preferences). By using this framework, we can generate different hypotheses for events and phenomena in the human world.

So maybe today we need to think beyond this to a new, fourth level: the individual, the state/group, the system, and the global (which transcends humanity and human society to include the planetary ecology, all living things and ecological systems). In any case, these levels of analysis compel us to recognize three things:

- 1) The origins of any global phenomena can be explained in different ways (using different levels);
- 2) The impact of these phenomena will be felt at different levels;
- 3) Actions taken at any one level can have an impact on other levels (i.e., if an international agreement on greenhouse gas emissions is signed it will impact Canadian policy and law and us as individuals).

Science and Society and Projection and Prediction

I then went on to make the observation that everything we are going to discuss in the course (including the science) is embedded in a particular interaction of the scientific, the social, and the discourse/public dialogues of our time. This is true of all periods. It was the case with H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds and the nuclear war threat of the Cold War. And it is the case with Climate Change today.

Our "Zeitgeist" (or "spirit of the times") today is grounded in the notion that we are all going to die (this is not a revelation, so perhaps more significant is how we are going to die and how soon). As Stephen Hawking has said, "I do not think the human race will survive the next thousand years." But this is not unique in a world that seems to find many ways of foreseeing its end (quickly and slowly). The following are all recent predictions:

- Social collapse due to unsustainable practices and failure to adapt to environmental pressures (*Collapse* by Jared Diamond)
- Infectious Disease (movies like *Outbreak*)
- Sub-atomic particle experiment Chain Reaction (particle accelerators create unnatural particles that would collapse matter, or create black holes (*Our Final Hour* by Martin Rees)
- Nano-robots (Michael Crichton thriller *Prey*)
- Rogue planets (“Planet X” or “Nibiru”) or black holes
- Shifting magnetic poles (The movie *The Core*)
- Super volcanoes: huge long term volcanic eruptions that coincide with large extinctions (*Volcano*)
- Climate Change (the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*)
- Climate Flip: sudden, rapid change (a flip every two millennia)
- Killer Asteroids (*Deep Impact and Armageddon*)
- Mayan Doomsday calendar
- Galactic Alignment

Of these, only four have a basis in sound science: social collapse, infectious disease, asteroid strikes, and climate change.

The result: a time of global extinction angst. We have to be aware of this when we consider global problems because they inform our belief systems, intuitions, value systems and everything else that frames and influences our thought processes on global issues. We need to understand the science and the society in order to understand the whole, how we perceive it, and how we react to it.

The “Global” Phenomenon

I finished with an overview of the main “forces” of “the global” or “Globalization.” Of course, people think about globalization differently:

“[Globalization is] the process of increasing interconnectedness between societies such that events in one part of the world more and more have effects on peoples and societies far away.” (John Baylis and Steve Smith, political scientists)

“Globalization refers to all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society.” (Martin Albrow, sociologist)

“The world is becoming a global shopping mall in which ideas and products are available everywhere at the same time.” (Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Harvard Business School)

A crucial thing to remember is that globalization is a contested concept: that is, not everyone agrees that it is happening in the ways that others suggest, and not everyone agrees it is inevitable, a good thing, or that there are no alternatives to it. These debates are a big part of the social sciences and humanities.

I reflected briefly on the components of globalization from a social sciences and humanities viewpoint.

Global Economics: economists spend a lot of time on subjects like trade, finance, MNCs, regulatory regimes. State borders are increasing permeable to economic activity, to the point that domestic economies and international economy are one and the same. For some economists, industrialization develops new contacts within and across societies, changing social, political, and economic relationships. These contacts expand due to mutual benefit and interest, and new forms of social, economic, and political organization follow: globalization is therefore economic modernization on a global scale.

Global Politics: Political scientists spend a lot of time studying power and the nature of globalization, with particular attention to diplomacy, trade agreements, institutions, treaties and law, and military forces. For political scientists, globalization is about patterns of power, influence, and transborder activity.

Global Networks: Geographers and other spatially oriented studies such as Communications focus on aspects of globalization like world wide direct dialing, the world wide web, e-mail, global television, mobile phone networks, global space, and global time. The concept of the “Global Village” (introduced by Marshall McLuhan) argued that advances in communication enabled one to see events around the world as they unfolded. Time and space were being compressed. This was later referred to as the “death of distance.”

Global Cultures: Sociologists and Anthropologists are interested in how globalization is creating a homogenous, cosmopolitan global culture filled with world icons of music, corporate logos, and cuisine (like sushi). But they are also interested in anti-globalization backlashes, such as those described by Benjamin Barber in his book Jihad versus McWorld.

Global Migrations: Human geographers study the movement of peoples from push/pull factors that are wholly or partially related to globalization. These include fleeing hardship, war, and persecution as well as the attraction of opportunity, stability, and safety.

Global Politics: Political Scientists are also interested in international civil society, a mix of non-state actors based on religious, ideological, commercial, or activist motives. Perhaps a “World society” (as John Burton would describe it) based on the increasing interconnectedness of societies through trade, communication, and travel creates new actors and processes

beyond the state, requiring new common understandings and norms.

We will be revisiting most of these ideas when we look at the social sciences and humanities dimensions of climate change. In the meantime, enjoy the physical and life sciences of climate change!