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# Globalisation in History : Varying Perspectives

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By

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One of today's most fashionable buzzwords is without doubt, Globalisation, the "G" word.<sup>1</sup> From the lay person to the politician to the academic, the frequent usage of this term currently can be easily documented. A quick reference to the offerings in the media and in academic writing, whether in the form of monographs<sup>2</sup> or journal articles, will bear this out, as will events organised in the public arena. The widely publicised clashes of viewpoints at recent international gatherings, which have led to street violence, between governmental representatives on the one hand, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as individuals unaligned to any institution on the other hand,<sup>3</sup> is testimony to the importance accorded to globalisation by elites and the general populace alike. Beginning with Seattle, the December 1999 World Trade Organisation (WTO) Conference was one of the most prominent international fora which caught the public eye, pressured to end early by disruptive protests.<sup>4</sup> Thereafter, almost all subsequent international meetings, especially those which involved the world's leading industrialised nations, known also as the G7 or G8,<sup>5</sup> saw the replication of the contrasting approaches to what the major protagonists believe globalisation has to offer - threat or opportunity.<sup>6</sup>

The very theme selected for the conference in which this paper was presented, and for many other conferences, not only in Malaysia but throughout the world in the past few years, is further evidence of how pervasive and influential this concept is. Hence, a case can certainly be made for more serious investigation of this phenomenon of globalisation, with a view to yielding enhanced understanding and thereby, more informed policy prescriptions.

The indisputable currency of globalisation does not, however, imply that there is a universally accepted meaning. It would appear that globalisation means different things to different people,<sup>7</sup> with varying focus and emphasis on the numerous facets that can be attributed to globalisation. As such, it is perhaps appropriate to examine the range of possible definitions, to assess what might be deemed more generally acceptable so as to provide for meaningful discussions which would otherwise be addressing quite different phenomenon and talking at cross-purposes.

From the purview of historians, familiar with the search for beginnings and origins in order to understand the evolution of a particular phenomenon with the intent of capturing its manifold dimensions, we can identify the distinct stages in the development of the globalisation process and the accretion of additional aspects with the passage of time. Economists, armed with a different analytical apparatus, as might be anticipated, will offer a different array of criteria to define globalisation.

Confronted with this scenario of differing conceptions of globalisation and its perceived significance in terms of its impact on the lives of many, this paper will present some historical perspectives on globalisation, thereafter briefly examine an alternative from economics which addresses globalisation in the past before exploring the congruence and/or divergence in approaches.

## **THE FIRST MILLENNIUM TO POST-WTO**

### **A BROAD DEFINITION**

If we were to define the term "global" in the broadest sense, as that intended by some users to refer to particular transactions meant to be addressed to the world beyond their own locality, then we can certainly point to many instances of early globalisation. In the economic realm, as in the sphere of trade, some obvious examples from the early centuries of the first millennium would be the

spice and silk trade - the long-distance commerce conducted largely between the continents of Europe and Asia but which also involved parts of Africa.

In fact, as some would argue, following the dictionary meaning of globalisation, "to make worldwide in scope or application", it "is a phenomenon as old as humans."<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the missionary impetus to convert and spread particular religious beliefs, considered to have universal appeal, has a long history. We can identify religions which have their genesis in Asia, finding adherents far from their places of origin. There is Christianity, beginning in West Asia in the first century of the first millennium, taking root in another continent, to the extent that, by the Middle Ages (6th to 15th centuries), to be European was to be a Christian. Within Asia, the Islamic faith has also travelled a long way from the homeland of its founder in present-day Saudi Arabia, to other parts of Asia which have adopted it as their preferred or official religion. Buddhism is another example from the first millennium of another religion which has spread to regions distant from its founder's birthplace - for instance, in geographical terms, India and Japan can by no means be deemed to be near each other. Thus, the dissemination of religious beliefs and their attendant cultural systems have spawned new worlds as in Christian Europe, the Muslim World and nations within the Buddhist realm.

Here, what may be important to note is the qualification on the word, "world", as for example, in the products meant for far-off destinations, for sale to the world market, where "world" refers the **known** world to the populations engaged in the commerce. Western demand for Asian goods in general gave rise to the fabled East-West trade, while their appetite for Chinese luxury goods in particular spawned the term "silk" road. There were two main trade routes reaching the Mediterranean world via West Asia from East Asia. According to Colin McEvedy, a historian of European history, he identified the silk route as the more northerly one which stretched from China across Central Asia and Persia to the Eastern Roman Empire - the silk road made famous by the Italian traveller of the 13th century, Marco Polo. The other, McEvedy called the spice route coming to Europe from India, crossing the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf before joining the silk route in Mesopotamia. It has to be noted that the term spice, however, obscures rather than explains the commodities of the Indian trade which included a wide range of goods traded.<sup>9</sup>

Further, McEvedy informs us when contrasting the New World (of America) with the Old World of Europe during the era of the European "Voyages of Dis-

covery", that while neither "Worlds" knew of each other's existence in the pre-Christopher Columbus period, however, the literate societies of the Old World were linked by trade routes and had a fair knowledge of each other.<sup>10</sup> And, silk goods and spices were repeatedly mentioned in contemporary sources.<sup>11</sup>

It was in the Old World of Eurasia (encompassing the continents of Europe and Asia) that ideas and beliefs accompanied the flow of commerce so that commodities, peoples and cultures travelled long distances, throughout the world of which they were aware. The implication here is that if the initial motivation for movement to lands afar happened to be economic, inevitably cultural interaction would follow. Notwithstanding which came first, a case in point, Southeast Asia as a region, has long been the recipient of cultural influences from outside, beginning with those from India and China early in the first millennium, from West Asia in the second half of the same millennium, thereafter from Europe after the 15th century.<sup>12</sup>

Back to international commerce and its dynamics, the very nature of trade imposes its own imperative, to seek contact with the wider world and other peoples. To enable the exchange of products, transport is the indispensable concomitant of trade, without which, the fruits of production cannot reach their buyers. And, as to be expected, the mode of transport preferred also influenced the trade routes selected. For, of the two major east-west paths, the sea route was more popular as the traffic along the east and west coasts of Asia - where an overlapping series of Arab, Indian, Chinese and Japanese shippers connected Cairo and Nagasaki via Aden, Calicut, Melaka and Canton - was more important in scale and steadier in flow.<sup>13</sup> Then, as now, seaborne commerce is more suitable for the carriage of bulk goods than land transport, whether road or over rivers.

In the context of international trade, the maritime world was, and is, a borderless world since oceans are much freer from the boundaries dividing populations and nations on land. The seas have long encouraged interaction among the peoples living along their shores, enabling different communities to partake in inter-continental trade. Nearer home, in Southeast Asia, French historian, Denys Lombard, has applied the idea of the Mediterranean, as a region characterised by economic and cultural exchanges, to the various seas in this region - the South China Sea, the Pacific Ocean, the Java Sea - joining each other in a seamless fashion.<sup>14</sup> We only need to conjure up the images of present-day piracy in the region, on the increase to worrying proportions, to realise the

difficulties of policing the maritime realm where national perimeters are easily ignored.

This thumbnail sketch of intercontinental migration and exchanges throughout history takes the broad definition of globalisation as an eminently feasible description of the process of interaction beyond the local by which communities encountered foreign peoples for varied purposes, from profit-making to proselytisation, and by which the human landscape in any particular locale is transformed through its acceptance of new ideas, products and technologies.<sup>15</sup> While today, the entry of American fast foods evoke emotions of great repugnance, or for that matter, outright rejections of internationally branded goods seen to be eclipsing domestic products, employment and perhaps ways of life, many Asians cannot imagine life without the chilli which arrived via the carriage of the chilli plant by Columbus from the New World to the Old and thence to Asia.<sup>16</sup> After all, curries are synonymous with vast parts of South and Southeast Asia while Korea without its kimchee would seem to be quite incongruous.

### A GLOBAL WORLD

Moving to a narrow definition of "global" which incorporates the geographical notion of including almost all of the major habitable continents of America, Europe, Asia and Africa, excluding Australasia in earlier centuries and Antarctica, the earliest phase of globalisation would be during the Early Modern period, the 15th to 18th centuries, after Ferdinand Magellan circumvented the globe in 1521 and when commerce began to be conducted across the globe. World trade during these centuries, was no longer just trade in the **known world** but now **global trade** which increasingly involved the four continents just mentioned, and which grew dramatically to merit being named the "Age of Commerce".

An additional dimension to the second definition is the concept of the integration of individual units or nation-states into the world economy. The first phase begins with both the discovery of the Americas and its mineral riches as well as the discovery of a direct sea route by Portuguese, Vasco da Gama, from Europe to Asia in the 15th century. Both breakthroughs contributed to an expansion of East-West trade and inter-continental trade between the Americas and Asia during the Age of Commerce. Before this, trade had been carried out in



regional segments. From the West, European merchants, mainly Italians, would meet and exchange products with West Asians - Turks, Persians, Arabs - in the eastern end of the Mediterranean, also known as the Levant. Thereafter, West Asians and Indians would meet in Gujerat and Malabar port cities on the west coast of India, with the subsequent regional meeting point being Southeast Asia, where Melaka ranked as one of its more well-known ports, before the last segment, the trade between Southeast Asia and the great markets of China and Japan.

International commerce, which had previously moved in regional segments, began to take on global proportions so that East-West trade did not need intermediaries. In addition, direct trade spanning three continents commenced when silver from the Americas was brought back to Spain and thereon to present-day Philippines. Another trade channel was open when the Manila galleon sailed the Pacific Ocean to link Acapulco in Mexico to Manila and onward to China, the best consumer in those days for silver bullion. The chapter entitled, "Born with a 'Silver Spoon': The Origin of World Trade in 1571", by historians D.O. Flynn and A. Giraldez in the book, *Metals and Monies in an Emerging Global Economy*, credits silver, the metal which came to be a popular and acceptable currency in Asian trade, as the major driving force in the birth of world trade. To them, it is silver which was the crucial element in the expansion of global commerce rather than the European quest for spices. Their selection of 1571 as the watershed year when global trade began is due to the foundation of Manila under Spanish rule.

**Truly global trade** dates from the founding of the city of Manila in 1571, which formed the first direct and permanent trade link between America and Asia. From this date forward, all heavily populated continents traded with each other directly and indirectly in **substantial volumes**. Silver was the *sine qua non* of this global trade.<sup>17</sup>

This is the natural consequence of the successful Portuguese and Spanish voyages to Southeast Asia and America; the subsequent discovery of silver in the famed mines of Potosi in Bolivia in 1545, joined to a third factor, the potent demand by China for this product.

Flynn and Giraldez challenge the Eurocentric bias which accords the dominant role in the making of a world economy to the Europeans.<sup>18</sup> To them, China (with approximately 1/4 of the world's population at that time) as the world's biggest customer of silver, has been neglected. As the market value of silver in

Ming China was double its value anywhere else in the world, silver provided "the underlying motivation for world trade".<sup>19</sup> A new price system of the 16th century, an international mechanism of money and currency facilitated the global exchange of goods. Tax reform in 1570s China which converted payments in rice to a fixed quantity of silver, stimulating a demand for the metal meant that China provided a crucial causal factor to kindle the expansion of global trade.

An additional and relatively important development was the advancement in sea transport technology. The Spanish galleons and the Portuguese *carriegas* were "floating fortresses" as well as "floating warehouses", enabling cargoes to be transported safely in the days of profitable piracy.<sup>20</sup> This meant that silver markets throughout the world were connected, encouraging the practice of arbitrage (buying/producing cheap and selling dear) across the continents and the seas.

Needless to say, in this "Age of Commerce", interconnectedness went beyond money and merchants. Early Modern globalisation also saw the spread of universal religions and new knowledge with scholars, pilgrims and missionaries as its agents.<sup>21</sup>

A second explosion in international commerce took place in the 19th century, consequent to the Industrial Revolution in Europe which prompted a search for markets to absorb the mass produced goods from its factories. This century also saw a dramatic escalation in demand for raw materials to fuel Europe's industrialisation. Yet another boost for world trade came with the advent of steamships, further propelled by the opening of the

Suez Canal in 1869 which reduced the distance, time and costs of voyages from Europe to Asia. Advances in communication with the invention of the telegraph also contributed in no small measure to the development of global markets. In Southeast Asia, producers of primary commodities brought the region into further integration in the world economy, selling their exports to markets in Europe and America. The industrial age was undeniably an era of great transformation making this period of globalisation one of not only enormous flows of goods and services but also substantial international capital flows and cross-border migrations.

This phase of globalisation had its political counterpart, as the 19th century was also the "Age of Empire". The creation of colonial empires brought in train not only new economic systems to stimulate the world economy but also new institutions, languages and worldviews. However, as historian T.N. Harper

reminds us, older global links remained strong, citing the example of Islamic networks which had intensified in the 17th and 18th centuries through trade, pilgrimage and the growth of tarekat orders.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequently, post World War II trade liberalisation, kindled by the negotiating rounds under the auspices of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), together with technological innovations in manufacturing and transport supplied additional boosts to world trade and shipping. The composition of trade changed from heavy and bulky raw materials as supplies for Europe's industrialisation up till World War I, thereafter with supply outstripping demand in the inter-war years and depressions in the 1920s and 1930s which prompted shifts to saving in raw material usage, post-war trade now comprised of greater amounts of finished goods with lightweight composites replacing steel. This resulted in lighter and less bulky goods requiring less transport, i.e. lower transport costs, stimulating out-sourcing and increased trade.

A further round of trade liberalisation after 1995 driven by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) inspired reductions in trade and non-trade barriers, saw big gains recorded for world trade. In the last decade of the last millennium, before the Asian crisis of 1997, financial liberalisation facilitating the rapid inflows and outflows of foreign funds which precipitated the crisis, gave a whole new dimension to the term "global village". Innovations in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have broken down barriers across traditional boundaries of national borders, enabling transfers of funds to the other side of the globe to be transacted as fast as the twinkling of an eye.

The 1990s witnessed not only the ascendancy of the free market but also the extension of the democratic model of governance with the break-up of the former Soviet Union. This presaged the convergence of economic and political systems and the accompanying social order of the capitalism. It is no wonder then that this stage of globalisation witnesses the blurring of national differences from the growing exposure to cross-border influences of an increasingly uni-polar world.

Each phase in the process of globalisation has brought the different components of the world closer, giving the concept of globalisation a different flavour at each stage. Integration of the world economy (as in self-contained units becoming parts of a whole) takes on a different character, depending on the phase under consideration. In the post-GATT and new WTO world, in a world preoccupied with the K-economy and the New Economy, it is probably



difficult to conceive of globalisation in the initial centuries of the first millennium, or even some five centuries ago with the first voyage around the world. Nonetheless, long-distance travel, commerce and all manner of interaction, economic and otherwise, are by no means confined to these days of air travel, air transport and ICT. Rather, as we have seen, these cross-border transactions are in fact, age-old phenomena.

### AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW FROM ECONOMICS

While not all economists<sup>23</sup> reject the definition - broad and/or narrow - drawn from history, their focus is naturally on the economic dimension of globalisation rather than on the non-economic facets of globalisation. A recent paper<sup>24</sup> by Kevin O'Rourke and Jeffrey Williamson acknowledges the boom in world trade after 1500 but questions whether world markets were truly integrated. Their test for an integrated world market, as in a single market where prices are almost the same in different regions, did not obtain for the Early Modern period. According to their criterion, relative prices in America, Europe and Asia did not move closer together as they should have if the world economy was becoming more integrated in these centuries, as prices did in the 19th century.<sup>25</sup> The reason for this is that markets were not open, this being the era of mercantilism, of high import tariffs and of monopoly policies by the state-supported British and Dutch East India Companies, with the result that prices did not converge. This explains why globalisation advocates currently pressure for more liberalisation, another way of working towards a world without barriers, the borderless world which promises increases in world trade, hence more benefits for all engaged in international commerce.

This raises a number of questions. Should globalisation be centred on a conception of a process geared "to make world-wide in scope and application", beginning with transactions which are intended for the world beyond one's own locale? Do we name that process which is geared "to make world-wide in scope and application" globalisation only when transactions are truly global insofar as the geographical reach includes the major habitable areas of the world and when transactions are carried out with sufficient regularity? Does globalisation have to include global economic integration?

Since it is clear that economists O'Rourke and Williamson, and those who accept their line of argument would answer in the positive to the third question

and to whom the first and second questions refer to definitions which are insufficient to make the cut, there would appear to be no common ground for agreement regarding the "G" word. However, if we turn to the pro-globalisation and anti-globalisation discourse, the non-economic dimensions which accompany economic transactions are a major concern, with the popular voice saying "no" to globalisation confined to global economic integration. This is because the use of global economic integration as the main criterion for globalisation would automatically edge out non-economic facets. Economic links do not tell the whole story, they do not countenance the impact that external influences, in the form of ideas and products, can have on the lives of many. Going back to the food metaphor employed above, whether or not chilli prices are the same throughout the world, whether chilli prices move closer together, South and Southeast Asians will still have curries on their dinner table as would Koreans include kimchee in their menus. Thus, those who opt for the broad definition of globalisation would say that the application of such a strict criterion as price convergence does not give sufficient acknowledgment to the process in which cross-border interactions, economic and non-economic, have contributed to the shaping of human existence.

### CONCLUSION

The paper has presented three possible perspectives on globalisation. It has addressed the debate on whether global economic integration accurately depicts the process of globalisation. If we associate globalisation with a borderless world, where flows of people, products and ideas encounter few barriers of entry, then the emphasis accorded to the economic aspects of globalisation would miss out important dimensions of our existence which has long drawn from other parts of the globe. Thus, a definition of globalisation which focuses strongly not only on the economic but also on purely quantitative measures, bypassing the non-economic and qualitative criteria of the interconnectedness between cultures would be found wanting by many.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> A practice which the weekly magazines have contributed for popular usage is the abbreviation of terms in vogue. *Far Eastern Economic Review* (hereafter *FEER*) editor, Nayan Chanda, coined the "G" word in the last article he wrote in the week he retired, "Globalization: You Can't Stop Life", 5 July 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> A literature search reveals that the past decade of the 1990s has witnessed a deluge of books on globalisation, spawning a veritable growth industry, reaching triple digits. From January to October 2001, 25 new titles were produced.
- <sup>3</sup> An example is Jose Bove who gained fame as the leader of France's small farmers after he vandalised a McDonald's restaurant as a protest against American economic imperialism in August 1999. This incident was prompted by US trade sanctions levied against French ewes' milk cheese.
- <sup>4</sup> The most recent G8 Summit in Genoa in July 2001 suffered from riots and street protests, similar to the demonstrations which also marked the World Bank/International Monetary Fund Annual Meeting in Barcelona in the previous month, June 2001.
- <sup>5</sup> The G7 nations comprise of the United States, Japan, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Canada, and Italy. It became the G8 in 1998 when Russia was included as a full member.
- <sup>6</sup> This is the title of well-known economist, Paul Streeten's book, *Globalisation - Threat or Opportunity*, May 2001.
- <sup>7</sup> A recurring observation noted by various writers, viz., Nayan Chanda, *FEER*, July 5 2001, deploring the "lack of clarity about the 'G' word"; Lee Poh Ping, "Different aspects of globalisation", *Star*, December 2000.
- <sup>8</sup> Nayan Chanda, *FEER*, July 5 2001. Oxford historian, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto is also of this view [www.abc.net.au/global/hitory/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/global/hitory/default.htm), 24 July 2001.
- <sup>9</sup> See maps for the following years in C. McEvedy, *The Penguin Atlas of Medieval History*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, viz., 528 CE, 737 CE, 1028 CE, 1212 CE, 1478 CE. All include the two main trade routes reaching the Mediterranean region via West Asia from East Asia.
- <sup>10</sup> C. McEvedy, *Penguin Atlas of Modern History*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, 10.

- 11 C. McEvedy, *Penguin Atlas of Medieval History*, 28.
- 12 The historiography on "Indianisation" of Southeast Asia, on the long-standing influence of China on the region, on the spread of Islam from the 8th century as well that of the impact of European cultures and institutions from the Early Modern era is extensive. The two-volumed *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* provides one of the best coverage of these processes as well as comprehensive literature surveys.
- 13 McEvedy, *Penguin Atlas of Modern History*, 10.
- 14 R. Guillot, D. Lombard, R. Ptak, eds., *From the Mediterranean to the China Sea*, 1998.
- 15 Strictly speaking, this definition applies to any movements of peoples, whether for profit or in search of a better life. This is because migrations do not just connote the demographical dimension as humans bring along with them their traditions and technologies which eventually may find their way into the lives of others.
- 16 The Portuguese and Spanish introduced other plants such a maize, tobacco, sweet potatoes and cocoa from the Americas to Southeast Asia.
- 17 Flynn & Giraldez, "Born with a `Silver Spoon'...", 272, emphasis added.
- 18 Historians of world history such as Andre Gundar Frank and J.H. Bentley see 1500 as the turning point for a "genuinely global world history" cited in K.H. O'Rourke & J.G. Williamson, 2000, "When did globaliation?" NBER Working Paper No W7632, 2.
- 19 Flynn & Giraldez, "Born with a `Silver Spoon'...", 264.
- 20 K.N. Chaudhuri, "World Silver Flows and Monetary Factors as a Force of International Economic Integration, 1658-1758", in Flynn & Giraldez, (eds.), *Metals & Monies*, 1997, 296. Chaudhuri lends support to the arguments advanced by Flynn and Giraldez by drawing attention to the importance of increased financial liquidity which contributed to "the economic integration of different and hitherto self-contained parts of the world".
- 21 For more on this, see J.H. Bentley, "Hemispheric Integration, 500-1500 C.E.", *Journal of World History*, 9, 1998: 237-54.
- 22 See his chapter, "Empire, Diaspora and the Languages of Globalism, 1850-1914", in A.G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalisation in World History*, London: Pimlico, 2002, 141-166.
- 23 Nobel prize economist, Amartya Sen, endorses the broad definition of globalisation. In his lecture in Australia in May 2001, he is of the view that

"Globalisation is neither especially new nor, in general, a folly. Over thousands of years, globalisation has contributed to the progress of the world, through travel, trade, migration, spread of cultural influences and dissemination of knowledge and understanding. To have stopped globalisation would have done irreparable harm to the progress of humanity."

- <sup>24</sup> Their paper, "After Columbus: Explaining the Global Trade Boom, 1500-1800", Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2001, gave rise to an article in the *Economist*, 25 August 2001, which posed the question, "Did Europe's 'age of discovery' give birth to an age of globalisation". The discussion for this section of the paper draws from the *Economist's* article entitled "1492 and all that".
- <sup>25</sup> See their book, *Globalisation and History: The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy*, MIT Press, 1999 and their NBER Working Paper No W7632, "When did globalisation begin?" (April 2000).



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