WFES 1:1 2010

Globalization in a Structuralist Perspective

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Abstract

The author engages in a polemic with a structuralist perspective on globalisation. Whereas acknowledging the fact that the particular perspective has dominated the globalisation debate in recent years, he assumes a highly critical stand towards that view. In the authors' eyes, there is no evidence sufficient to support not only the structuralis thesis itself but also any deterministic approach towards globalisation. However, determinism – albeit of its multiple faces – still enjoys enormous popularity within the academic milieu, and even seems to be shared by the circles that consistently disagree on any other subject. In the end, it is argued the third wave of globalization requires a great deal of reflection at the level of ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Structuralism has so far been a dominant perspective applied in research on globalization. According to the structuralist view, globalization is taken for granted and seen as a manifestation of some deterministic logic. Most often, it is either technological or economic determinism or both employed together. Aside from the two, there are also other types of determinism favored by researchers. For example, since the publication of Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, other determinisms (e.g. cultural ones) have become fashionable. McGrew defines that perspective as 'thick', because structural determinism works in an imperative way.

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In other words, particular causes always lead to certain effects. The final result may always be predicted in advance.

Those who adhere to the structuralist perspective strive to capture phenomena in their focus in a holistic or systemic way. It is widely acknowledged that systemic thought usually reflects those features of reality that are controllable. Cioran argues that only the superior speaks on behalf of any system. In his view, that is the reason why each system is totalitarian, while, on the contrary, fragmented thought remains free (Cioran 1999: 18).

1. 'History Has no Libretto'

In extreme forms of structuralism, there is no space left for any form of indeterminism. The iron logic of any determinism is additionally reinforced by social institutions. According to this theory, a single actor is completely irrelevant, and the only agent which is important is social structure; 'the structure is the only actor of social action' (Walsh, ct. by Reed 2005: 294). Certainly, such a way of thinking can be described as radically objectivistic since it aims to portray 'processes without people'. As a consequence, globalization is seen as a highly anonymous and teleological process.

Such a form of structuralism appears so abstract that it could only be considered relevant at the ideological level. However, we cannot focus our attention only on the extreme version of structuralism. Such thinking could lead us to falsely believe that structuralism per se is plain and infertile theoretical ground. Quite the contrary, there are more productive forms of structuralism (albeit in certain cases one might wonder whether those specific approaches should be classified as 'structuralist'). Let us consider, for instance, the case of 'constructivist structuralism' or 'structuralist constructivism' (Szacki 2002: 891–893). Some eminent scholars, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, are known for having pursued such theoretical hybrids (Jasińska-Kania et al. 2006: 631–728). In my opinion, those two prominent figures should rather be associated with the configurative perspective, though mild inclinations towards structuralism are indeed noticeable in their works.

Nevertheless, I do not intend to further discuss the meanders of structuralism as my objective is to expose one fundamental assumption, which, quite interestingly, happens to be shared by opposing groups within the academic milieu. I presume that the careful reader might have already guessed that the above description of determinism relates to the rights of historical determinism, which is taken directly

from dogmatic Marxism. However, it is very much astonishing that well-known opponents of Marxism use a similar approach in their works. To give an example, let me quote from Aron's work on industrial society: 'The overarching phenomenon of our times is not socialism nor capitalism, nor state intervention nor free enterprise; it is the massive development of industry and technology, and the factories of Detroit, Billancourt, Moscow or Coventry are its consequence and its symbol. … No nation, and no party rejects or can consciously reject industrial civilization, a necessary condition not only for mass standards of living, but also for military power' (Aron 2005: 9–10).

In other words, Aron sees industrial society as neither bourgeois nor liberal but technological and organized in a military-like manner, with 'conscription, mass levies, total mobilization of material, human and spiritual resources belong[ing] to the essence of modern society, industrial and democratic as well' (Aron 1966: 303).

Similar logic can be traced in numerous statements by influential globalization theorists. Let us quote another definition of globalization to illustrate our claim: 'In a more narrow sense, it [globalization] represents an accelerating integration and interweaving of national economies through the growing flows of trade, investment, and capital across historical borders… All of these is leading to globality – a highly integrated world economy. Work will be increasingly networked across national boundaries; comparison shopping will take place on a worldwide basis; a growing share of economic output will take place in a single, flexible global market; and time and space will be further compressed' (Yergin, Stanislaw 2002: 383).

It must be indicated that the idea of structural necessity is the essence of the structuralist perspective. It could also be described as a specific form of faith in the universal mode of development, or rather 'progressive development'. That scholarly tradition was fiercely attacked by Isaiah Berlin, following in the footsteps of his intellectual master Alexander Hercen, according to whom 'history has no libretto' (Hercen, ct. by Gray 2006: 111). Nonetheless, I would like to strongly emphasize once again that there are manifold structuralist approaches that actually enhance the globalization debate. The Marxism-related theory of the world economy introduced by Wallerstein provides a forceful example. In that particular theory, the logic of history is simply reduced to accumulation of capital, to which other processes of all subsystems (including culture, which serves as a mere decoration to the system) are subordinated. On the other hand, the theory proves to be quite viable when applied to the analysis of the real and constantly changing world, as it depicts the hierarchy of wealth, shows how it is related to the hierarchy of power, and asserts that all relations are dynamic (Wallerstein 1974). Not surprisingly, the theory, while being a subject

of frequent criticism, is also recurrently employed in globalization research, even though Wallerstein considers the concept of globalization to be unnecessary, because of its inadequacy.

Generally speaking, it would be impractical to negate the existence of structures and structuring trends, which are evident in the form of structures of power, coercion, domination, ruling etc. While not contradicting the systemic nature behind the mode of operation of global structures, we should not forget about national, regional and local politics, whose existence proves that various agencies are able to effectively exercise their impact. But the role of such agencies is largely absent from the picture sketched from the structuralist perspective.

2. Structuralism and Polish Experience

In Poland, a number of specific objections that add to the criticism of the structural perspective can be identified. First of all, let us recall how the communist system in this country evolved: from totalitarianism through autocracy to disintegration. Obviously, no inevitable laws of history played any part in the downfall of the system. It eventually collapsed under the pressure of a mass social movement represented by the Solidarity trade union, although this thesis is questioned by Stephen Kotkin, writing that in 1989, there was the implosion of the system: 'this is less a story of dissidents, so-called civil society, than the bancruptcy of a ruling class – communism' establishment, or 'uncivil society' (on the cover) (Kotkin 2009).

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that social demands voiced at that time were quite infeasible: the concept of workers' participation may serve as an example. According to this idea, enterprises were supposed to be run only by workers' councils. Not surprisingly, all these ideas were forgotten by the beginning of 1990, just a few months after they were approved during the Round Table talks.

It is true that global interdependencies played a significant part in the surrender of communism to capitalism in the battle of those two political systems. However, even that event contradicts the laws of historic materialism, according to which communism was to succeed capitalism as the more advanced stage of social development. To put it short, Polish post-1989 experience clearly proves that there was actually a space for indeterminism.

Marxist determinism was soon to be replaced by a mirror-like thesis of the 'end of history' by Fukuyama. The theory, once immensely popular and influential,

rapidly began to lose its appeal in the 2000s, as the efforts by the U.S. government to introduce liberal democracy and a free market in Iraq turned out to be a failure. Notably, Fukuyama himself admitted that many of his original concepts formulated in the early 1990s had not endured the test of real politics. Eventually, both variations of determinism, which we may call 'red' and 'white', have been discarded by history, which continues to live as it always has.

There seems to be no sensible reason to replace one type of determinism with another considering that in real life neoliberalism often goes along with authoritarianism, the prime examples of which are Chile under Pinochet, Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew, and the communist party in China. As Gray commented, 'Because they were on the opposite sides during the Cold War, it is often assumed that neoliberalism and Marxism are fundamentally antagonistic systems of ideas. In fact, they belong to the same style of thinking and share many of the same disabling limitations. For Marxists and neoliberals alike it is technological advance that fuels economic development, and economic forces that shape society. Politics and culture are secondary phenomena, sometimes capable of retarding human progress; but in the last analysis they cannot prevail against advancing technology and growing productivity' (Gray 2005: 2).

3. Technological Determinism

In this section, I will discuss several issues concerned with globalization. At first, we will focus on the simple fact that the development of information technology enables people to communicate in a swifter and more efficient way than ever before, which results in growing velocity in financial market transactions. This is frequently employed as an argument supporting the thesis of inevitability of global market expansion. Advocates of that thesis seem to forget that this type of expansion occurred as early as the 19th century and was abruptly frozen in the 1914–1945 period. Thus, while focusing our attention on structures, we should not neglect the role of social agencies. People, prompted by their beliefs, are likely to take advantage of opportunities offered by globalization, but in doing so they would not necessarily follow the paths envisaged by the proponents of determinism of any color.

Neither strict determinism nor strict indeterminism is capable of supplying a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon of globalization. All we can say is that globalization increases the capacity for technological, material and financial flows,

and as a result various arrangements, which used to be unattainable, are viable now. Who is going to take advantage of new opportunities is another question. There are numerous factors responsible for the success or failure of such an endeavor: human values and beliefs, as well as the capabilities of institutions and organizations. Setting the wheels of history in motion requires prior activation of powerful social forces. For that reason, while structures should by no means be ignored, it is the interplay between structures and social agencies that must be considered in any analysis of globalization. The results of such an interplay are always difficult to predict: social agencies may either adapt to existing structures or modify them or even strive to remove them. Extreme structuralism should be abandoned because it carelessly portrays social processes as driven by anonymous and deterministic logics, shaping the world in a manner similar to the way engineers design and build machines. The world of humans simply does not operate according to such a mechanistic mode.

For centuries people and their culture had been subjugated by forces of nature. That relationship, however, reversed at some point between the 15th and 16th centuries. From that time onward human reason and culture began to dominate nature. The process of subjugating nature by culture strongly accelerated with the third scientific and technological revolution which was the driving force behind the third wave of globalization.

The faith in the power of reason has a long history. The first great scientific revolution took place in ancient times (Russo 2005). However, it was not until the Enlightenment that the faith in reason became a widespread belief. Saint-Simon was enthused with the prospects of an industrial society, seeing it as a miraculous opportunity for the salvation of humankind. There is a striking resemblance between Saint-Simon and Comte's delight with railways, Lenin's obsession with electrification and modern-day neoliberals' infatuation with the Internet. They were (or still are) all mesmerized by material manifestations of the myth of modernity, equally realistic and illusive. Nowadays Gray does not hesitate to compare Saint-Simon and Comte to dull bureaucrats of the International Monetary Fund, naming the latter heirs of positivism. Moreover, he claims that the present-day followers of the positivistic thought are even more dogmatic than their historic fathers (Gray 2006: 64). The two famous French philosophers, along with Turgot and de Condorcet, were convinced that history could be reshaped into a linear form, without any cycles and turning points, simply by the application of science and technology. A similar belief emanates from the words and actions of contemporary neoliberals.

Throughout the 19th century the belief in history being inevitable met with no serious contest. The foundation of that worldview was thoroughly shaken by the

events of the 20th century. However, at the end of the past century that belief again became invigorated. Undoubtedly, we do not observe a naïve fascination with the science and technology of the 19th century since we are now all aware of their darker sides. On the other hand, there is still a great deal of enthusiasm over advancements in technology, especially in the field of information and communication technologies (ICT). While we can benefit enormously from the development of new technology, we must also remember that it negatively affects many aspects of our lives, including family life. Parents who trustingly placed their children under the care of teachers, are watching their 'abdication' today. Teachers, instead of teaching, are placing children under the care of television and other electronic media. The process of teaching is thus becoming increasingly impersonal (Postman 2002: 202–218).

Technological determinism is a concept that seeks to explain how science and technology determine social, economic, political, cultural and ecological changes. Since the mid-1960s, such ideas have gained prominence, although they have taken different forms. At first, they took the form of the industrial society theory formulated by Raymond Aron in the 1950s, and then the post-industrial society theory formulated by Daniel Bell in the 1960s. Currently, the information society or knowledge society theses, which identify science and ICT as major drivers of change appear to be dominant theoretical propositions built around the concept of technological determinism. Interestingly, Bell, while recognizing the crucial role played by scientific and technological revolution, remained critical of extreme technological determinism, pointing to the growing importance of social and cultural factors (Bell 1976). Thirty years later Bell still holds that view and expresses his disappointment with what he describes as the degeneration of spiritual life in post-industrial society. He argues that, with the demise of the bourgeois ethos, which was essentially rational, society is falling prey to anti-Enlightenment projects, exemplified by phenomena such as hedonism, narcissism and the collapse of religion. Even the fundamental issue of identity has become the subject of marketing manipulation. However, in this rather gloomy picture, Bell is still able to see a ray of hope, arguing that post-modernism, which in his opinion strongly reflects the aforementioned pathologies of contemporary society, is a losing side in the culture wars that replaced the class wars of the 20th century (Bell 2007). This, however, does not change the direction of reasoning of most theorists. And despite other theories and concepts, for example those introduced by the Neo-Malthusian group of scientists, mainstream discourse with its simplistic explanations provided by technological determinists, still prevails. The message is clear: 'We're living longer, healthier, more comfortable lives, on a cleaner planet', as the title of the book by

Goklany bluntly states (Goklany 2007). Should we accept such statements literally, they are certainly true, yet apparently not entirely satisfying to the people of our times.

4. Structural Impairment

Margaret Archer uses the term 'structural deficiences' to refer to a combination of the following four segments of reasoning: 1) inherent technological determinism, 2) evolutionism, 3) functionalism, and 4) universalism. I see all these features in a structuralist perspective, which I reject, at least in its extreme version (Archer 1990: 99).

Above I wrote about technological determinism, which in its extreme form may be viewed as a version of fatalism. When it comes to universalism, which is associated with structuralism, there is also no doubt, although the idea of universalism does not rest solely on the concept of ICT development. But there is the main 'background' idea which is strongly associated with the notions of 'information society' and 'knowledge society'. The idea of a knowledge society is used to describe a society in which white-collar workers and so-called 'experts' constitute the leading class together. It should also be noted that the notion of knowledge society is linked with high expectations in social sciences. Peter Drucker noted that in former times much smaller changes caused 'severe intellectual and spiritual crises, rebellions and civil wars' (Drucker 2001: 442).

An important question in this case is whether scientists have been seduced by science and technology or simply recognized the importance of these processes. There is no denying that science and technology are vitally important, but the problem begins when we start thinking about them in terms of seduction. Many reports about the information society confirm this statement. The most solid confirmation can be found in the thesis that the very appearance of a new technology determines its usage, and in fact the course of history. According to this vision, man is only an additional factor to non-personal forces and processes that are embedded in science and technology. Undoubtedly, the suggestion about scientists being seduced by science and technology is justified by the growing panoply of theories about different types of societies: nomadic, agricultural, industrial, technological, and post-industrial, in addition to the information society and the knowledge society.

Now I will move to discuss the concept of evolutionism, which, in my opinion, is another structural impairment. Here the question is to what extent history is only

an adjunct to the history of technology. There are some statements and predictions that try to reinforce this thesis. Let me quote one of them: 'The digital planet will look and feel like the head of a pin. As we interconnect ourselves, many of the values of a nation-state will give way to those of both larger and smaller electronic communities. We will socialize in digital neighbourhoods in which physical space will be irrelevant and time will play a different role' (Negroponte, ct. by MacGillivray 2006: 264). It is assumed that technology should change everything, even the current understanding of geopolitics. For centuries geopolitics was dominated by factors such as geography, land, sea, climate, air, and natural resources, but now, according to that theory, technological innovations constitute international relations even in the political sphere (Jean 2003: 132–144). In this way we have reached the fourth feature of structural impairment – functionalism.

Before we move to the next section, a distinction must be made between the notion of 'defining' and 'determining' technologies. Andrzej Mencwel, when discussing the impact of technology on culture, comes up with a simple idea: 'defining' cannot be synonymous with 'determining' because there is no technology that determines the whole sphere of culture. The anthropological concept of culture consists of a variety of factors: material and ideal, objective and subjective, technical and symbolic, etc. Mutual relations between these factors are dynamic and historically variable and cannot be confined to a single pattern. Undoubtedly, the defeat of the 'base and superstructure' metaphor, especially in its universalistic and deterministic version, should caution against making similar paraphrases (Mencwel 2005: 388).

How should we respond to technological determinism and in general how should we deal with it? Firstly, the impact of science and technology on social life cannot be denied. Secondly, research should show to what extent people make use of science and technology in accordance with their values and interests, and to what extent technology is imposed on them against their will. If, for example, we were able to learn to be sensitive to the lack of democracy when totalitarianism was dominant, there is no reason not to learn to be sensitive to technological dominance. After all, there must be a specified scale of threats, especially in global terms. The global utility of ICTs should be countered with their global threats. It is not irrational to question the wrong usage of ICT if we consider that society is a collection of free people who decide when and how to enjoy the benefits of science and technology in accordance with their values.

When discussing these issues, the normative dimension of judgments must be constantly present. However, it is worth remembering that this sensitivity should not be 'allergic' – the theses of technological determinism are profoundly embedded

in Western culture, where faith in science and technology has often evolved into a utopia.

After all, we have already learned some lessons from history. There is no reason to fall into fatalism. The development of technology itself does not mean that it will be used in the future. We may note the optimistic fact that the construction of the atomic bomb, for example, although it was used in 1945, did not lead to a nuclear war later in time. We may formulate similar expectations with regard to other areas of technology.

Norbert Elias writes, ' The cause of war lies not in weapons... It lies in the masses of human beings themselves who see in other people competitors or enemies. These groups, which are common in all nations, want to exercise power over others and, above all want to have military superiority' (Elias 2003: 5).

The number of concerns and warnings is growing because technology enters our lives directly, for example through the manipulation of human genes. Philosopher Peter Singer warns, 'Such a situation raises the danger that rich elites will be able to buy their offspring… physical and intellectual superiority over others who will not be able to bear such expenses. As a result, social divisions… may take a biological form. Moral authorities… or even a religious revival… will not solve this problem. The market for human embryos, sperm and genetic technology should be governed by the state' (Singer 2007: 5).

5. Communication Technology: Information 'Straight from Hell'

The increasing use of communications technology leads to some disturbing developments. As Ryszard Kapuściński wrote, 'We receive information straight from hell: In Bangladesh there are only floods; in Afghanistan Buddhist stupas are being constantly destroyed, the Rwanda massacres are taking place continuously, in Pakistan the drug industry thrives, and so on. A recipient of such information has the impression (illusion) that he lives in a perfect world, a new utopia, which is surrounded by hostile forces. The Third World itself becomes a source of danger to him, so he creates a 'wall' in his defense: 'I have to dissociate myself from the criminal world…' (Kapuściński 2003: 118).

The mood of optimism which I mentioned above fades even more when it comes to the realm of the military. Although the world has not been destroyed by a nuclear

war, there are many other wars, particularly local and domestic. In these wars more people are killed than in the conventional wars of the 20th century (Hassner 2002). Similarly, interventions in the area of ecology or sustainable development produce mixed results.

Although the atmosphere of crisis is present almost everywhere, in social sciences 'the mood' is rather moderate. In fact, the words 'crash' and 'crisis' are rarely used. As I mentioned before, in this field there are high expectations associated with the so-called 'network society'. In the network society, apart from horizontal market linkages and vertical hierarchical linkages, there are also network linkages/ connections. A society based on such network connections is supposed to be more active than all the previous types of societies. It is hoped that the network will be more efficient than the hierarchy.

Williams says that 'Networks alter conditions of labor, work, and action – all three. In all of them, networking starts processes that alter the context of further technological change, and, by starting processes, networks therefore"act" as well as "build" and "labor"' (Williams, ct. by Castells 2004: 445).

Networks also existed under previous – 'pre-electronic' (Joel Mokyr) – technologies, but they did not exceed a certain threshold size and complexity; they were less effective. Currently, the idea of a network society is associated with a shift in attention to a qualitatively new interdependence in which dominance is accompanied by parallel processes of counter-dominance and interaction of cultures.

The rapidly growing computer and internet access is a good indicator of changes in the area of information and communication technology. The entire e-business in 2001 contributed only 1.25% to the world's GDP and the internet business accounted for 0.1% of global GDP. In the 1970s a decision was made to create a 'new international information and communication order'. As an initiative by UNESCO, in 1980 a committee headed by Sean McBride unveiled a report entitled 'Many Voices, One World'. At the next session of UNESCO in Belgrade later that same year, a resolution concerning the regulation of ICT and information flow was approved. The resolution included the following recommendations: 1) to eliminate the inequalities and imbalances and 2) to eliminate the negative effects of monopolies, public and private, and their excessive concentration (MacBride-Roach 2000: 288).

It should be added that this initiative had no real impact on the changing situation. By the 1980s deregulatory trends began to dominate in global politics. In the end, an alternative American initiative (the United States withdrew from UNESCO in 1984) was adopted for the creation of an International Program for the Development of Communication. Communication technology has raised powerful

political repercussions. The idea of the New Information Order was recognized as a factor adding to geopolitical stratification, because 'The Other' was defined as inferior, while databases became the source of total dependency, due to the fact they would solely shape the mindsets of future generations (Said 2001: 43).

6. The Global Village Theory is a Mistake

Technology and globalization are often discussed in the context of a causal relationship. However, if this relationship were true and simplistic, it would be highly unfavorable. In the case of American society, it is legitimate to say about a state of 'technological intoxication' whereby people are overwhelmingly fascinated with technology, which is treated more like toys and a myth.

Undoubtedly, there is a causal relationship between information technology and communications, cheaper transport and organization of markets, production, trade, etc. Cliford Geertz wrote, 'Technology development, especially communications technology, tied the whole world by a uniform information network and uniform causality very strongly, similarly to the well-known fluttering butterfly wings causing a storm over the Pacific Ocean on the Iberian Peninsula – the situation which changes in one place can cause changes in any part of the world' (Geertz 2003: 308).

Europe has managed to build a society without the threat of disaster; it has managed to kill destiny and at the same time announce the victory of the artificial over the natural (Sloderdijk 2007: 2). From a normative point of view, it is therefore permissible to accept the thesis about technological determinism but only in its moderate form. An extreme approach should be rejected, not only because it is connected to fatalism, but because the impact of science and technology on globalization is double-faceted. In fact, we permanently recognize the contradictory consequences of technological progress. Take, for example, the notion of the global village introduced by Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian scientist from the University of Toronto. In my opinion, this idea is a big mistake because it overestimates the communitarian role of the media. The truth is that people feel more confused now than when they lived in a real village. What surrounds man is not a village where everyone knows everyone, but rather a supermarket, airport and a railway station.

7. The Implications

When dealing with technology, no one denies the existence of contradictions. Paul Virilio wrote, 'The Internet is both the best and the worst thing. It may constitute almost unlimited progress in communication and may at the same time constitute a disaster (Virilio 2006: 101). Science can serve those in power (government), who are almost always ready to impose unity. However, we cannot settle for this observation. The progressive globalization of thought (referring to humanism) calls for reflection.

At the end of this paper we should stress the implications of the third wave of globalization for knowledge, social theory, beliefs and values (worldview). In the area of epistemology, the process tells us to be less optimistic than the West has been for the past 200-plus years. This is precisely the reason why reflection is needed. In the area of ontology, the divergence of time and space (the two phenomena which have always been coherently connected) leads to an observation that is as interesting as it is appalling. If there was no solid ground of support, then the uncertainty, disorder and chaos would demonstrate that we cannot organize the global space properly. Finally, in the area of methodology, there is a need to impose multidimensional analyses on the surrounding world.

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