

# Imperial Globalization – The Presence of the Past and the Crucible of Empire

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*Centre Director Andrew Thompson explains that if globalization is not to silence the past, we need to delve back into its history – its imperial history.*

*Admiral Zheng He. Almost a century before Christopher Columbus ‘discovered’ the Americas, Admiral Zheng He of the Ming Dynasty undertook voyages across the Indian and the Western Pacific Oceans. Photo credit: © Chris Hellier/Corbis*

‘Globalization’ is among the biggest intellectual challenges facing the humanities and the social sciences today. It is a concept that conveys the sense that we are living in an age of transformation, where change is the only constant, nothing can be taken for granted, and no-one knows what the future might bring. But globalization is also much more than that. To borrow the phrase of the historical sociologist, Mike Savage, it is an ‘epoch description’, something that seeks to define for the current generation the very meaning of social change. By thinking of ourselves as part of a globalized world, we are saying something about how over time our identity has changed. We are locating ourselves *in time*, differentiating ourselves from our predecessors, signaling a break with what went before.

Champions of globalization are invariably concerned with the present. Their notion of time is unapologetically linear. Crudely exponential assumptions about the ever-increasing pace and scale of scientific and technological change are built into globalization’s teleology, and the belief that what we are experiencing today is as much incomparable as it is irreversible. ‘History’ is thus set to mean less and less for the present generation; the sense of the future as an outgrowth of the past is becoming less and less plausible.

My argument is that to view globalization as a uniquely contemporary phenomenon prevents us from grasping its true meaning or significance. It is a view that needs to be turned on its head. To understand the causes, characteristics and consequences of the intensifying global connectivity we are witnessing in our own century, we must first recognize that globalization has a past no less worthy of study than its present. By acknowledging that past, we can bring the shape and scale of contemporary globalization into sharper perspective. We can identify why global connectivity advanced and retreated in earlier periods – so-called eras of ‘globalization’, ‘de-globalization’ and ‘re-globalization’. And we can provide a firmer basis upon which to try to anticipate where globalization might be taking us in the future.

But there is a problem. Today we are accustomed to perceive most political phenomena, including globalization itself, through the prism of the nation state. From such a perspective, closer international integration is largely a product of the interplay of different national policies. A society’s freedom to make its way in the global marketplace is contingent upon its prior ability to gain and exert its independence. If we accept this proposition, then globalization either has no history at all, or at best only a very attenuated one.

## **The Crucible of Empire**

The last century has made a fetish of the principle of national sovereignty. Yet in the grand sweep of human history it is not the nation-state that has been a constant. On the contrary, more of our global past was forged in the crucible of those great ethno-cultural entities that we call empires. Did these empires really have nothing to do with globalization?

At first sight this might seem so. Advocates of this line of thought might point to how the scramble

for colonies, the division of the world into rival empires, and violence and oppression that occurred within them, pitted cultures and people against each other.



*A map showing colonial trade routes established by imperial expansion.*

Yet this is a decidedly narrow way of looking at their relationship. ‘Empire’ and ‘globalization’ seek to explain how economies, societies and states became more closely entwined. Empires were carving out spaces in which trans-border flows of people, goods, capital, information and ideas well before the advent of container shipping, air travel, and the internet. Like nation-states, they profoundly altered the ways in which their inhabitants envisioned their societies, gauged political possibilities and carved out trade routes.



*The European empires’ transatlantic slave trade resulted in the forced migration of millions of Africans.*

And if globalization is frequently said to have been mediated by migration, what were empires if not giant systems for organizing mobility on an international scale? Their whole *raison d’être* arguably lay in the shifting of peoples between different parts of the world.

‘Empires’ and ‘globalization’ have other things in common too. They are both rightly regarded as central to the study of the world economy. Yet they both sometimes suffer from narrowly economic approaches. The forces generated by empires were as much geopolitical, religious, cultural and ideological as they were economic; so were those generated by globalization.

And both ‘empire’ and ‘globalization’ have become morally and emotionally charged. They are not just subjects for lecture halls. With their enormous media exposure, they are matters for agonized public debate. They seek to justify certain political standpoints, while undermining others.

This makes it all the more necessary to consider the implications that each has for the other.

## Imperial Globalization



*Map of the Ottoman Empire.*

If globalization is not to silence the past, we need to delve back into its history – its imperial history. We need to elucidate the relationship between the processes of international integration and those of territorial expansion. This means thinking about globalization across different empires – those carved out by the Manchus, the Mughals, the Ottomans and the Habsburgs as well as the Spanish, Dutch and the British. And it means thinking about globalization not only during periods of empire-building, but also when empires were dismantled.

What might the study of ‘imperial globalization’ offer to those concerned with the effects of globalization today?

First, it might help us to establish what, if anything, has been intrinsic to globalization over time, and

what have been its enduring features. There is much talk today of globalization's instabilities and inequalities. To what extent have such instabilities and inequalities been prominent in earlier periods of globalization? And does history suggest they have been more evident *within* or *between* states?

Second, the study of 'imperial globalization' may shed light on the extent to which 'globalization' – like 'democracy' or 'human rights' – is an expression of western values and western ways of looking at the world. Studying globalization in the context of empire requires us to de-center the concept and to look at it more closely and critically from non-western perspectives and locations.

Third, situating globalization historically refines our understanding of the very term itself. Globalization's critics feel frustrated by its lack of clarity. 'A messy idea for an anxious world' is how one commentator recently dismissed it. Globalization is, it must be admitted, a concept with fuzzy and fluid boundaries. But by looking at successive phases of globalization we can be more specific about what the concept actually means. For example, the increasing popularity of global history in university teaching programs raises the question of how we distinguish between something that is *global* – transnational phenomena that cannot be adequately understood within the framework of national historiography – and something that is more actively *globalizing* – providing a catalyst for the movement of people or goods or capital between societies and states, and thereby promoting greater interdependence.

Finally, this more expansive view of globalization may help us to think in different ways about what are felt to be its more consequential contemporary characteristics. It may even be that some of these characteristics – the irregular and uneven patterns of connectedness arising from globalization, its asymmetric benefits and unequal distributional gains, and its struggle to capitalize upon and yet at the same time control the powerful tendency of human beings to migrate – are so consequential not because they are the product of an unprecedented late-twentieth century technological revolution, but because they are so firmly rooted in our imperial past.