

Imperialist Globalisation versus Global Solidarity*

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At the risk of simplification, it can be said that globalisation (broadly interpreted as the growing interdependence of economies and societies in the contemporary world) has both a social dimension and an imperialist dimension. The social dimension consists of utilising the growing possibilities of global cooperation to promote development, democracy, peace, justice and related aspects of collective human progress. There are plenty of opportunities of this kind, even though they have been poorly used so far. The social dimension of globalisation is especially relevant in achieving world peace and disarmament, an essential precondition for social progress and indeed for human survival.

The imperialist dimension of globalisation consists of harnessing the globalisation process at the service of power and privilege. It is no surprise that this has been the dominant tendency so far, given the nature of the present world order. Indeed, globalisation has been put at the service of corporate interests and powerful governments. For one thing, the globalisation agenda tends to be reduced to the liberalisation of international trade and investment. For another, even within that agenda, there are double standards of all kinds. For instance, capital mobility is high on the agenda, but not labour mobility; intellectual property rights are a major concern, but not pollution rights; the drive for “free trade” goes hand in hand with brazen protectionism in rich countries; and so on. As for subjects such as the arms trade (virtually monopolised by the five permanent members of the “Security Council”) or aid to developing countries (dwindling year after year), they are avoided at all cost.

It is also worth noting those who are most active in pushing the imperialist dimension of globalisation are often staunchly opposed to its social dimension. The United States government, for instance, is at the forefront of the drive for global capitalism but refuses to pay its debts to the United Nations, obstructs international cooperation for

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environmental protection, ignores countless international conventions, and of course accepts no restraint in the domain of military intervention. The US government has even refused to ratify the convention on the rights of the child, accepted by all other countries except Somalia.

An extreme manifestation of imperialist globalisation is the destruction of Iraq from 1990 onwards. I don't think that the enormity of this crime has been fully grasped by the Indian public (this is partly due to the biased coverage of this issue in the mainstream media). Before the Gulf War of 1990-1, Iraq was a prosperous country and also had many features of an advanced welfare state, such as free education, extensive health services, a social security system, active participation of women in the economy and society, and virtually full employment. It was, of course, also a ruthless dictatorship. I am not singing the praises of Saddam Hussein. Indeed, I think that rapid economic development and social progress in Iraq could have been achieved in a democratic system as well. But looking at the facts, one has to admit that Iraq had achieved high standards of living under Saddam Hussein. These economic and social achievements were neatly destroyed in the first two years of the nineties. The economic infrastructure (roads, bridges, factories, electricity plants, etc.) was comprehensively bombed, and sanctions did the rest. In many ways, the sanctions were far more destructive than the bombs. It was a traumatic experience for everybody. I spent some time in Iraq during the war in 1991, and I remember someone telling me, "We don't mind the bombs, but for heaven's sake, these sanctions must stop."

The humanitarian consequences of the sanctions were well understood from the beginning, and became clearer and clearer through the nineties. Countless organisations conducted "humanitarian assessments" in Iraq from 1990 onwards: UNICEF, the Aga Khan Foundation, the World Food Programme, Harvard University, to cite a few. The findings were always the same: there are no jobs, food prices have shot up, children are dying, and so on. As early as 1991, the International Study Team (coordinated from Harvard University) estimated that child mortality rates in Iraq had roughly doubled. These and other facts were never seriously disputed, yet the sanctions continued. As

Dennis Halliday, former head of the UN humanitarian programme in Iraq, put it: “We are in the process of destroying an entire society – it is as simple and terrifying as that.”

Having said this, these events (and more recently, the outright invasion of Iraq) also led to some important manifestations of the social dimension of globalisation. While the destruction of Iraq was accomplished in the name of the “international community”, there was, in fact, overwhelming opposition to it throughout the world – especially but not only in the Third World. This opposition was largely fragmented and unorganised, yet it sowed the seeds of global solidarity against global militarism. There was a further step in that direction before and during the invasion of Afghanistan, including an unprecedented global demonstration in February 2003, when millions of people joined anti-war protests throughout the world on the same day. While these movements have not succeeded in preventing the destruction of Iraq or the invasion of Afghanistan, they reinforce other recent manifestations of global solidarity. Therein lies the hope of defeating imperialist globalisation.

There is another way of looking at these issues, based on a distinction (due to Kenneth Boulding and Anatol Rapoport) between three different modes of social interaction: coercion, exchange and integration. Coercion remains, unfortunately, one of the dominant modes of social control in the contemporary world. In fact, it has acquired unprecedented scope and ferocity with the emergence of the United States as the unchallenged superpower, dedicated to world domination by force. During the last fifteen years or so, the United States have invaded Afghanistan, destroyed Iraq, occupied Haiti, policed Somalia, embargoed Cuba, threatened China, bombed a few other countries (including Serbia and Sudan), and imposed ruthless economic sanctions on many more. Some of these interventions were initially projected as “humanitarian” affairs, but today, even this pretence is deemed unnecessary.

Exchange may be regarded as a form of social progress, compared with coercion. In fact, some of the early advocates of market exchange argued that trade had a pacifying influence: people who are busy trading tend to avoid fighting with each other. Be that as

it may, exchange has important limitations as a mode of social interaction, since it is based on give-and-take in a situation where the initial distribution of resources and bargaining power may be far from equitable. Moreover, some of the most valuable things in life, like friendship, are not exchanged but achieved on the basis of unity for a common purpose. That is what “integration” is about. Examples of international activities best pursued in the integration mode are the regulation of air traffic, the prevention of AIDS, and the protection of the ozone layer. In these activities we do not merely exchange for our own benefits. Rather, we identify with the common good of humanity.

Globalisation, as it is unfolding today, is based primarily on plain coercion or unequal exchange. It consists mainly of browbeating developing countries to make them accept patterns of economic organisation that serve corporate interests and private profit, such as unrestricted capital flows, low trade barriers and western models of “intellectual property rights”. In the process, the poor sometimes gain and sometimes lose, but this is incidental – privileged interests loom much larger.

From here there are, broadly speaking, two ways to go. One is to resist the growth of global interdependence and take refuge in national self-reliance. This is the path advocated (superficially at least) by right-wing nationalist organisations such as the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch in India. It is a recipe for stagnation, ignorance and exploitation. This backward-looking response is also how resistance to imperialist globalisation is often caricatured in the mainstream media.

An alternative, forward-looking response is to resist imperialist globalisation through global solidarity, and to cultivate the social dimension of globalisation, which is essentially based on the spirit of integration (rather than on coercion or exchange). After all, the growing interdependence of economies and societies (“globalisation” in the broad sense of the term) can serve human progress no less than corporate profit. Many urgent tasks present themselves on this front: eliminating poverty, eradicating communicable diseases, protecting the environment, defending human rights, stopping the arms trade,

expanding democracy, and abolishing the institution of war, among many others. These and related concerns receive extraordinarily little attention today, yet there are unprecedented opportunities to address them. Indeed, the technological and other developments that have facilitated imperialist globalisation (e.g. rapid advances in information technology) have also opened up many new possibilities for global cooperation. The recent wave of worldwide resistance to US militarism is an example of these new possibilities. So is the World Social Forum, in spite of all its limitations if not contradictions.

It would be naïve, of course, to expect global solidarity to flourish in a hurry within the present world order. But it does seem to me to have more of a future than the rotten structures of imperialist globalisation.