

Globalisation introduction

The very term 'globalisation' has been the subject of intense debate. Does it describe anything coherent enough to warrant a single description, or is the portmanteau of changes that are grouped under the word misleading? Or, if some of its elements are agreed upon, does 'globalisation' describe anything novel? Is the nation state truly in decline or is this simply a misdescription of a much older force in a new guise—the dominance of some nations over others? Has global trade a truly unprecedented role within the world economy, or was the Belle Epoque in this sense more globalised than the 21st century?

Rustom Bharucha, in his essay on the Asian museum, reminds us what an uneven process globalisation can be. There are dangers, to be sure, in the establishing of 'new' Asian museums, in how they present their exhibits, what audiences they set out to foster, and how their agendas are guided by those that fund them. There are also perils in what they hide, including a history of looting, and of cultural identities moulded, at least in part, by colonial and local overlords. These dangers centre upon identity: for whom and to whom do such museums speak, who do they represent, and how? New Asian museums may also be expected to fit into the gigantic spectacle that is capitalist culture, just as most contemporary art, in its museums and biennales, does with such ease. Yet in India museums can also be found that have been completely untouched by such modernising forces: their roofs leak, their labels remain in Latin, and their audiences are unmolested by marketing but also uncared for. The two are poles apart, and it is unclear which it to be preferred.

Given such fundamental contestation over descriptions of globalisation (and these may in part be determined by the place from which one sees it), it is unsurprising that two of the selected texts dwell upon the difficulties of naming and representation.

For Zygmunt Bauman, introducing a debate on the notion of 'obscene powers' (carried in TT 51), the relevance of such a discussion cannot simply be explained by the perception that violence, the illegitimate exercise of coercion, is on the increase, but is rather to do with the increasing difficulty of saying for sure whether some act of coercion is legitimate or not. This is partly a result of the fast-changing roles of nation states and supra-national powers. As Bauman points out, it was not long ago that Milosevic and the NATO bombers of Yugoslavia could have appeared in the opposite guises of respectively villain and hero that they recently took on. Of course, there were many people for whom they did. That Milosevic now stands before a war crimes tribunal, while Bush (Senior) and Clinton do not is hardly a clear-cut matter, though naturally it would be foolish to believe that such processes are set in train by justice alone.

John Byrne, in discussing the activities and closing down of a TV station transmitting to Kurdish people, and thus putting out a message addressed to a state that does not yet exist, questions issues of representation on a most basic level. He uses Adorno's remarks about the naming of a crime, 'genocide', to highlight both the utility and the brutality of such naming. Do we now have, as Adorno predicted, debates about whether particular

crimes qualify for the category, and are those debates influenced by national interest? Rwanda, in which the term was shied away from so that intervention could be deemed avoided, gives the reply.

Byrne recommends only that we be aware of the limits of our position, and guard against any hasty imposition of our categories of understanding over that which we cannot know. In elaborating this position, he uses a particular, postmodern reading of both Walter Benjamin and Slavoj Zizek that sidesteps the Marxist politics of both authors. While it is unclear for Byrne what form resistance to globalisation should take, or even whether it should, others in this selection take a more robust stance.

George Ritzer, while acknowledging the power and usefulness of the postmodern critique, supports a fully modernist social theory, one capable of stripping away the fantastic illusions of capitalist mass culture to reveal its administered and utilitarian workings. In contrast to Baudrillard's idea of obscenity (as discussed in Bauman's essay), a condition of too much visibility in which nothing is concealed, indeed a pulsing, buzzing flux of impressions that owes something to Bergson (though it is produced not by innocence but by over-exposure to consumer society), for Ritzer the highly visible obscures much that must remain hidden. Casinos, theme parks and malls conceal their instrumental character behind diverting displays, and humanise themselves with cuddly, animated emblems. With this analysis, we may ask: for whom do these effects remain hidden? Disney fantasy looks very different from inside a giant Mickey Mouse head. For those on the wrong end of the economic processes of globalisation, the system may appear all instrumental ruthlessness, while its spectacle is both present and as remote as the gods.

For Zizek, too, examining the bombing of Yugoslavia, the global political order clearly hides its character, this time behind the oppositions it establishes. Milosevic was a fascist leader who enjoyed much popular support among Serbians, standing against a neoliberal power structure, intent on making the world safe for the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. To support one over the other is to play along with the concealment of their secret complicity: that Milosevic, like Saddam Hussein, Manuel Noriega, the Taliban... (one could go on) was a creature of the global powers before he became their enemy, and that he exploited the fundamentalist religious and regional reactions formed by globalisation itself. The solution, says Zizek, can only be transnational opposition to the system as a whole.

In the two years since Zizek's essay was published in *Third Text*, such opposition, previously building slowly, has come to global prominence, first in Seattle, and since in every place where the political and economic administrators of the global order have met. While Zizek's message was broadcast by radio, and Byrne dealt with television, it is the Internet that has been an important tool for this new oppositional politics, allowing the rapid dissemination of information and remote organisation. There is something that unites those who run the global neoliberal economy and those who oppose it: the existence of such a phenomenon, and the global consciousness it produces. Their struggle takes place over a global ideal, one founded upon free trade, transnational corporations,

and the existing forms of liberal democracy; the other on equality, the protection of the environment, and the extension of democracy. Here finally is an opposition that does oppose.