



On the Conditions of Collective Action in Globalisation*

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Abstract

One must confer specific attention to “collective action” in the framework of globalisation. The article addresses this issue both at the analytical and normative levels. For the first one, it makes use of sociology. Two main problems are identified: the inequalities and imbalances that constitute globalisation are associated to globalisation; and its institutional embeddedness, that is, the way by which it can be combined with national, social and political structures. For the second level, the article uses the perspective of democratic public policies, advocating the building of a critical metanarrative about globalisation. Three axes can underpin this metanarrative: democracy, law and development.

Globalisation means a new structural framework for human action. It also means new higher standards. As Joseph Stiglitz (2006) summarised, globalisation implies an increased integration of the countries of the world; this increased integration implies an increased interdependence; and this increased interdependence implies that there must be more collective action. Therefore, we must confer specific attention to “collective action” in the framework of globalisation, whether it takes place at the governmental or non-governmental level, in the relations between states or within civil societies, and whether or not it presents itself as a specific political strategy.

This paper will address this issue and will contemplate it both at the analytical and normative levels. For the first one, it will mainly make use of sociology. For the second one, it will use the perspective of democratic public policies.

Let us look at the fundamental characteristics of globalisation. On the one hand, the compression of space-time, the greater systemic integration, the increased interdependence and the diversity and the heterogeneity of the world are facts. Facts that are neither good nor bad in themselves.

On the other hand, the record of economic globalisation in terms of growth, diffusion of innovation and decrease of the so-called absolute poverty is impressive. Trade, investment and resource mobility have been powerful development engines in many parts of the world. Along these lines, defining several issues as global issues have enabled significant progress in the conciliation of responses to critical problems, be it in the area of health and pandemics, cooperative security, or in climate change and the environment.

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From a democratic and European political perspective, the challenge of globalisation is of another kind. I would say it is a double challenge. On the one hand, it is a problem of asymmetry, that is, inequality and imbalance. On the other hand, we have the issue of institutional embeddedness, meaning the combination of the global scale of movement and mobility with the national or subnational scale of citizenship.

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The word “asymmetry” suggests that the debate about globalisation cannot be cut down to an exchange of arguments in favour or against “liberalisation”. What do we mean by “liberalisation”?

If we mean the lifting of barriers to factor and product mobility, then we must acknowledge that there are dimensions in which liberalisation has achieved great progress. And maybe the issue comes down to verifying whether that generates negative externalities or not—see the case of movement of capital; and if there are dimensions in which constraints remain or have even, in part, increased and there is room to reduce them—as it is the case with movement of workers. If barriers to liberalisation are considered in their multiplicity, then we must draw attention to the fact that the opening of international trade is still to be concluded exactly in the areas where developing countries would benefit more from. That is true for agriculture and agribusiness, where the large public subsidies to national production in the United States, the European Union and Japan distort “free trade”.

There are obvious gains in terms of analytical precision when we avoid the uncritical incorporation of ideological slogans and we resort to a clearer conceptual language. And I think we can achieve this precision if we turn to the key issues of inequality and imbalance. They both lead us to the *structure of power* of the world economic system. International trade, foreign investment and the interplay of monetary, fiscal and regulatory policies, all are arenas of the relations of power between major political actors; and organisations like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are the stage where those relations continuously take place. They articulate with other fields equally crucial, like copyright and patent law.

In analytical terms, power and inequality are, therefore, more useful angles of approach to reflect upon globalisation rather than those too close to the ideological narrative (like “openness”, “liberalisation”, “deregulation” or even “modernisation”). They are also useful to think about *action* inside and before globalisation—not least because they suggest that, even more productive than the pure protest or the purpose of “stopping it” will be to try to rebalance it, from the perspective of the global distribution of resources and opportunities.

This rebalancing is also important in what refers to the network of interdependencies that structures the world system, connecting the actors. In this network, the roles and possibilities of action of different actors like states, regional and international organisations of states, global public agencies and non-governmental organisations, are very unequal. And the course of globalisation depends highly on the balance of power between those actors and on the differential capacity of influence they hold. Therefore, a critical analysis must describe the changes in international law, both public and private, and characterise the large hegemonic institutions in the current globalisation framework (like the American Treasury or the Central Banks in the United States, the Euro Area, the United Kingdom, Japan or China, or the World Monetary Fund, or the WTO, or the main rating agencies) for what they are: sources, systems and actors of *political power*. And also, for instance, it must compare the very distinct resources, mandates and methods of agencies like the International Labour Organisation and the WTO, or the World Bank and the United Nations Programme for Development (UNPD), or the OECD and UNESCO, to render a true account of geopolitical dynamics as such.

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So, the first problem identified by an analytical approach committed to the sometimes called social market economy is this double asymmetry: the *inequalities* and *imbalances* that constitute globalisation are associated to globalisation. The second problem is its institutional embeddedness.

It is a double embeddedness. On the one hand, there is the embeddedness of globalisation in the different national structures: the social structure (the population and its resources); the normative structure (the population and its values); and the political structure (the population and its citizenship). On the other hand, there is the articulation between each one of the multiple dimensions of globalisation: and I would like to highlight the economic, geostrategic (and, in this regard, security in particular) and environmental dimensions.

Contrary to what the neoliberal ideology of globalisation claims, the economy is not the matrix dimension based on which we shall reflect upon the systemic evolution of the world. The basis to reflect upon and influence this articulation, the basis that may bind it to the preferences and decisions of sovereign actors is yet another one. It goes by the name of politics (see Silva, 2014, 2015).

Here is the challenge: how can collective action rebalance the process of globalisation, in order to pursue two objectives? The first objective is to favour the redistribution of resources and powers, in order to correct asymmetries, reduce inequalities and set positive

sum games between the actors involved. The second objective is to allow globalisation to better articulate its multiple dimensions and fit into the diversity of histories, cultures and values of the different societies. Thus set out, the challenge can be enunciated (in the wake of Dani Rodrick, 2012) as the tension between economic “hyperglobalisation” and democratic political action.

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Managing this tension implies, at least, that two key elements must be called upon. One has a cognitive and normative nature: how do we interpret and evaluate globalisation, its effects and its limits; and what consequences do we draw in terms of choices and purposes of action. Let’s call it “metanarrative”. The other element is of a practical order: assessing which key players and in which institutional frameworks the necessary global regulation of globalisation will prove to be more efficient.

From a European perspective, the main consequence of hegemonic globalisation since the eighties on doctrines and policies has been the destructuring and—to a certain extent—the loss of legitimacy of the founding narratives of economic development and post-war social consensus: Christian-democracy and social-democracy. In particular, globalisation has jeopardised what Tony Judt (2005) called the “Grand Narrative of the 20th century”: the combination of political democracy, Keynesianism and Welfare State. The difficulties of this narrative to adapt, compared to the strength of the so-called neoliberal management of globalisation, have strengthened the signs of disrupt that Donald Sassoon (1996) once described as “the great crisis of European socialism” at the end of the 20th century, and Tony Judt (2010) reported as the “exhausted language of social-democracy”. Equivalent warning signals (albeit less studied) can be found on the side of Christian democracy.

This is not the place for an ideological debate *per se* (although pertinent and necessary) about these signals. But maybe we can agree on the thematic axes around which we can (re) build a critical metanarrative about globalisation.

I see three axes. The first one is *democracy*, as the institutional armature for a participation as large as possible of people, movements and organisations in the decision-making, implementation and evaluation processes. The second one is *law*, as a system of interrelations and interdependence rules, impersonal and tending to be universal rules, based on the equality of the parts before the law. And the third axis is *development*, as an economic and social process of qualification and empowerment of actors, organisations and territories, pursuing objectives and using paths of their own choice (I follow, of course, the work by Albert Hirschman and Amartya Sen).

Globalisation needs metanarratives that grant it a positive framework. Democracy, law and development can structure that metanarrative.

“The proposal here is that we grant special attention to two of those challenges: the need to render globalisation less asymmetric and unequal; and the need to embed economic globalisation in the political and social structure.”

As for the key players, what a sociologist can say is that the dynamics of collective action around globalisation will depend crucially on the relation between three forces. One of them is the *international system*, that is the set of international relations put together by the multilateral action of sovereign states. The second one is the *supranational entities* of regional dimension, under construction. And the third one is the *horizontal networks* of social movements and organisations, in particular those of a non-governmental nature.

The reform of the international system is less a question of grand organizational engineering than a matter of adaptive rebalances and dissemination of good practices. For instance, the progress achieved in the governance of global public health issues can inspire officials in other fields. When considered in its extent and ambition, the European Union still represents a *sui generis* supranational entity. Finally, concerning non-governmental global actors, the huge opportunities of cooperation provided by the globalisation of communications and by network organisation structures allow us to conceptualize a global “public sphere”, and also to underpin a global “civil society”.

Acting inside globalisation and acting before globalisation represent challenges that are qualitatively new for societies, institutions and actors. The proposal here is that we grant special attention to two of those challenges: the need to render globalisation less asymmetric and unequal, and the need to embed economic globalisation in the political and social structure.

To face these challenges, we must act collectively, by referring to a consistent metanarrative and mobilizing different actors. I suggest that the metanarrative be built around the conceptual axes of democracy, law and development; and that we take all the possible advantage of the adjustments and gradual reforms in the international system, of the action of supranational entities (like the European Union) and of horizontal networks of civic and non-governmental organisations. May these proposals be worthy of attention and criticism.

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