



## The Principle of ‘Unity in Diversity’ as a Measured Response to Resurgent Nationalism: Valuing local diversity as well as global citizenship is not a contradiction

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### Abstract

*The ideological war between globalism and resurgent nationalism in recent years is seen as an invitation to take sides by many intellectuals. Demonising or dismissing followers of the new right-wing nationalism is easy, but the outcome of the Brexit referendum and the last presidential election in the USA should have taught us that ignoring the genuine arguments of this demographic is foolish and dangerous. It reflects a failure by globalists to appreciate the externalised costs of globalisation and the people who bear these costs disproportionately. Supporters of renewed parochialism and xenophobia in turn fail to acknowledge the facticity of our current state of global interdependence, and indeed the urgent need for even greater global cooperation. I will argue that tensions between the two camps arise from the fact that genuine advantages are associated with national and local diversity as well as with global cooperation and unity. In short, from a rational perspective, the purely nationalist and the purely globalist viewpoint are both incomplete, and a new higher order perspective is needed to resolve the issue. This paper is an attempt to develop such a more integrated perspective beyond nationalism and globalism. I will be drawing on some of my own research, which has shown that local cultures in Asia have been experiencing strong globalisation pressures and also have been pushing back through a range of revitalisation movements. The paper draws also on my complementary experiences of working in a number of organisations that are global, but wherein diversity is valued and retained.*

### 1. Introduction

We have been witnessing a massive nationalist reaction to globalisation in recent years, the reasons for which can be difficult to untangle. If intellectuals hastily come to the defence of the globalist position and demonise this opposite point of view, we only add to a general climate of hostility that is poisoning the prospects for rational public debate in many countries. Rather, our duty is to reveal what is really at stake in this struggle, to identify the forces that are at play, and to make proposals for how to address the underlying problems associated with ‘real-existing globalisation.’ In short, we need to present the public with alternatives superior to those offered by a legion of democracy-, journalism- and science-bashing right-wing demagogues.

I will begin by tracing the causal link between resurgent nationalism and real-existing globalisation. I will argue that the downsides of globalisation need to be addressed in two ways; at the level of political economy—by restoring and internationalising democratic structures, and at the ideational level—by drawing on ethnographic insights into the nature of the local to better contextualise our understanding of globalisation.

## **2. Nationalism: A Reaction to Real-existing Globalisation**

My own ethnographic research has looked at how nationalist or local ethno-nationalist cultural and religious movements have been reacting to globalisation in developing countries, particularly since the end of the Cold War. I have referred to these movements as ‘localisation’ movements (Reuter, 2008; 2013), and discovered that localisation movements seek not only to limit or repair the damage caused by globalisation but also the growing local influence of the nation-state. The first lesson therefore is that “nationalism” may be understood as a localisation movement operating at a nation-state scale, while similar localisation movements operating at a regional or local scale may classify the very same nation-state as a globalising force in its own right or an agent of globalisation, eroding local autonomy, social structure and culture. In Indonesia, where I have conducted most of my research, for example, a national anti-globalisation movement based on modernist Islam has recently brought down the governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama alias ‘Ahok’, an ethnic Chinese Christian, on trumped-up accusations of blasphemy against the Quran.

This religious ethno-nationalist movement coexists with local revitalisation movements in Bali and other non-Muslim majority regions. For the latter, the modern nation-state with its development agenda and general bureaucratic interventions as well as its increasing usage of Islamic identity markers are a threat to autonomy and self-determination.

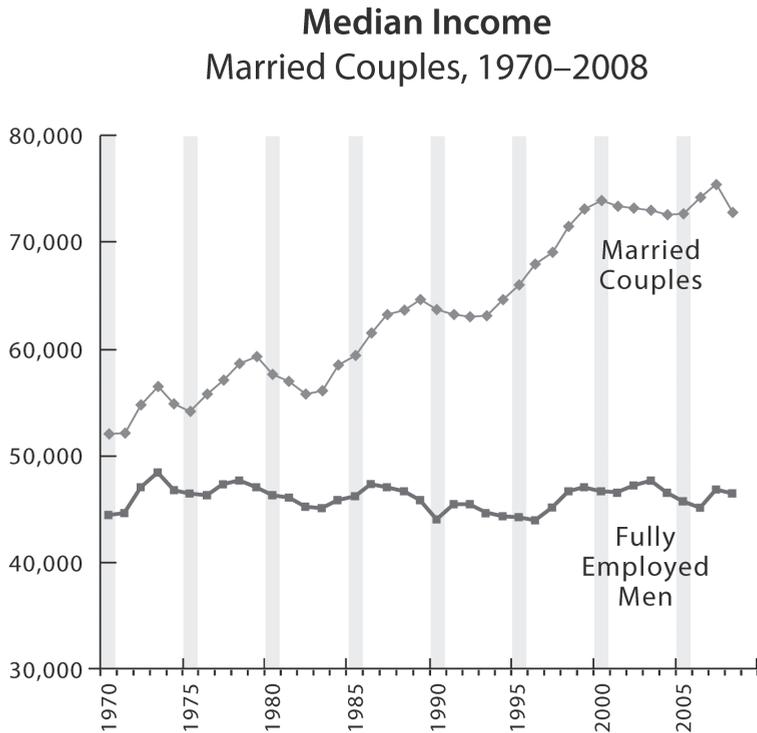
Overall, we can observe two opposing forces here, one that seeks to integrate and homogenise, and another which insists on the right to be separate and different. It is appropriate to label these forces globalisation and localisation, after the two extreme points of the scale. We need to remember, however, that nationalism is Janus-faced because it sits somewhere in the middle of this scale. It thus may simultaneously adopt a xenophobic attitude, facing out toward the global, and a globalising attitude, when facing inward toward local peoples, especially members of ethno-cultural and religious minorities. And of course, there are also movements advocating an alternative globalism, such as international revivalist Islam.

The globalising attitude many developing nation-states direct at their own local societies and citizens is in part tied up with the nation building projects of national elites, but in large part it is also a reflection of the use of the nation-state by external forces as an instrument of globalisation. For example, the structural adjustment programs mandated by the Bretton Woods institutions, IMF and World Bank, as a condition for granting credits to developing countries, would not have been implemented without the complicity of captive national elites in those countries. In short, the developing nation-state sometimes has globalised for its own cause of national integration, and at other times has acted corruptly as a servant of supernational forces.

The greater severity of this globalisation drive in developing countries with no or inadequate democratic safeguards has meant that the reaction, in the form of ethno-nationalist or right-wing nationalist movements, has happened somewhat earlier in these parts of the world than in the west. The same globalisation effects that had already stirred up public sentiment in the developing world in the 1990s are only now starting to really sting middle class people in western countries, particularly since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC). The reason is that the great democracies, often upheld as a gold standard for developing countries, have in fact been seriously undermined and become more similar to the weak democracies of the latter. David Rothkopf (2008) and C. Wright Mills (1956) before him have documented how the so-called revolving door, for example, operates in the United States to further the interests of the globalist corporate and financial elite by way of legislative capture, and how the problem has grown ever more severe.

Thomas Piketty (2014), Elizabeth Warren (2007) and others have demonstrated with compelling empirical evidence how this trend has adversely impacted on the most disadvantaged members of society but increasingly also on the middle class, as wealth concentration in the class of the superrich continues to rise dramatically at the expense of the former.

*Figure 1: Stagnating US Middle-Class Incomes  
(partly concealed by the effect of more women entering the workforce)*

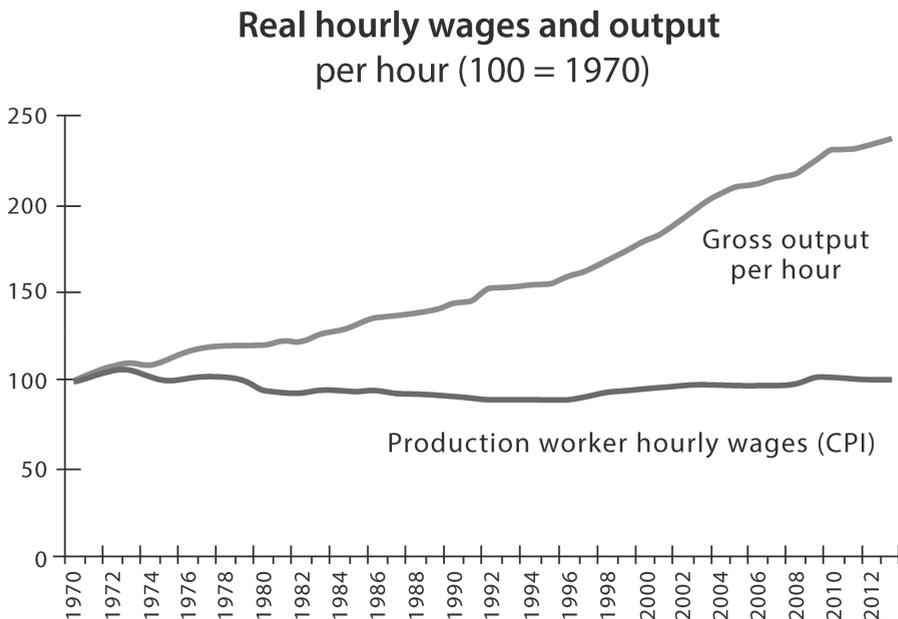


To illustrate the same revolving door problem with a European example, there is the case of former EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso, who received a lucrative job from Goldman Sachs as a lobbyist soon after the end of his term. Apparently, he had proven his usefulness in various ways, as has been revealed in documents leaked by Paulo Pena.\*

*“The worst dictatorships make the loudest claims about acting in the name of the people or nation.”*

From my own elite research in Indonesia and my extensive reading on global elites, I could list hundreds of further examples to illustrate the increasing severity and impunity of worldwide nation-state capture by global elites. It is unnecessary to present such a list, however, given that even ordinary citizens have by now absorbed enough of this kind of information to get a general idea of what is happening behind their backs, though it may be underreported by mainstream media that are also captive to private interests. People know that productivity and profits keep rising while corporate tax contributions to the reproduction of society are falling and while wages remain flat, thus lowering labour’s proportional share of the benefits of production and raising the proportion of its fiscal contribution. The result is a massive tide of distrust and anger toward captive political representatives, and a justified sense that democracy has been undermined.

Figure 2: Real hourly Wages and Output per hour  
(Wages falling behind Productivity Growth)



\* See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/29/eu-staff-petition-attacks-former-ec-president-over-goldman-sachs-job>

Some people, myself included, respond by coming to the defence of representational democracy, and have called for steps to limit the undue influence of private interests and money politics through electoral reform (Reuter, 2015a). Others however have decided to support new populist nationalist parties that promise to replace the liberal democratic system that has betrayed them with an authoritarian state in the name of an imagined ethnically 'pure' nation. As is well known from history, the worst dictatorships make the loudest claims about acting in the name of the people or nation. What most of these followers are blind to is the fact that some of the same global elites who have been busy undermining liberal democracy are now bankrolling the neo-fascist movements that want to do away altogether with what is left of democracy.

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*"The new nationalism now spreading around the globe is in many ways fraudulent and a false flag operation."*

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It is ironic and surprising at first that in this way nationalism can be weaponised to serve the same neoliberal globalist agenda it is meant to counteract. The newly arisen German alt-right party *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) is a pertinent example. Despite a public face of populist rhetoric and professed empathy for ordinary people who have been left behind by globalisation, the economic program of AfD, which few of its followers look at, can only be described as neoliberalism on steroids. The same duplicity is evident in the turnabout of many of the contemporary leaders' populist politics. One of the politicians promised to "drain the swamp" of Wall Street and criticised banking firms like Goldman Sachs for their greed and their contribution to the GFC, saying they "robbed our working class, stripped our country of wealth, and put money into the pockets of a handful of large corporations and political entities."

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*"What is needed is a New Deal that will deliver a more benevolent and inclusive form of globalisation, based on genuine participatory democracy and based also on due recognition for the intrinsic value of locally embedded and differentiated societies and their associated cultures and identities."*

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We can conclude that the new nationalism now spreading around the globe is in many ways fraudulent and a false flag operation. The sentiments it capitalises from, however, are not baseless. A large and growing number of people have indeed been left behind financially by corporate globalisation, and people are also concerned at the loss of local embeddedness, social cooperation, community and a declining sense of cultural belonging. The resulting sentiments need to be rechannelled in the direction of a struggle for genuine democracy, and for a more appropriate form of globalisation that removes the pressures for forced mobility and serves the common good.

The role of intellectuals is to inform this rechanneling process through a critique of globalism in its present form, revealing its corrosive effect on democracy and on people's wellbeing, broadly conceived, and presenting better alternatives. On the other hand, widespread liberal intellectual elites' response of shock and horror at the outcome of the Brexit referendum and the last presidential election in the USA is counterproductive. To condemn populism without due analysis and acknowledgement of its causes is to ignore and fail to address the genuine grievances to which it gives expression. It thereby helps to fuel growing anti-intellectual sentiments.

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*"A higher order understanding and synthesis is needed to overcome the unproductive polarisation of contemporary public discourse."*

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Intellectuals who support globalisation tend to do so for two reasons, either actively, because they value liberal ideals of cosmopolitan modernity, or passively, because they accept globalisation as the inevitable consequence of a relentless and irreversible historical trend in the development of human civilisation toward the formation of ever wider webs of human interdependence (cf. Norbert Elias, 1965). I have sympathy for these positions, but more is needed. The globalisation enthusiasts among intellectuals must acknowledge that 'real-existing globalisation' does not conform to their cosmopolitan ideals, that its costs are externalised, and that such costs are disproportionately borne by ordinary people who are less privileged than themselves and more so by marginalised population groups. Real-existing globalisation withholds global citizenship from the vast populations it excludes from participation. The second group of intellectuals, the globalisation fatalists, meanwhile, must remind themselves that real-existing globalisation need not be accepted with resignation, on the false assumption that globalisation *in this particular form* is natural or without alternative. Both groups must stop belittling Brexiters, Front National or AfD voters and others like them for their regressive parochialism or condemning them for their illiberal and sometimes racist attitudes. One must have the courage to look through this ugliness to see what truth lies at the heart of the matter.

On the other hand, those who give in to parochialism and xenophobia must be reminded of the facts of our state of global interdependence, and of the benefits of global cooperation. They too must learn to separate globalisation per se from globalisation as it is now manifesting, arguably still caught in an early, unregulated and hence uncivilised form, though not entirely bereft of benefits even for the most disadvantaged. Neo-nationalists must recognize the urgent need for global cooperation in view of ecological and resource-related crises that will not stop at national borders, not even if we build a wall of steel topped with machine guns. A retreat from globalisation is simply impossible, undesirable and even unimaginable, except in the event of a global eco-political collapse.

What is needed instead is a New Deal that will deliver a more benevolent and inclusive form of globalisation, based on genuine participatory democracy and based also on due

recognition for the intrinsic value of locally embedded and differentiated societies and their associated cultures and identities.

### **3. Reconciling the Global and the Local: Toward a Genuine Alternative**

Concerns in intellectual circles over the new wave of parochial and self-serving nationalism and the decline of international cooperation are justified, but often fail to acknowledge a crucial issue: The genuine need for socio-cultural diversity at national or still more local levels. A higher order understanding and synthesis is needed to overcome the unproductive polarisation of contemporary public discourse. I would like to develop such a more integrated perspective now, drawing on my anthropological research on local societies in Asia. In Asia, local societies and cultures have been experiencing strong globalisation pressures and the majority have been pushing back through a range of nationalist or local ethno-religious revitalisation movements, most of which are non-violent. I also will draw on my complementary experiences of working in a number of progressive global organisations, wherein diversity is already recognised, valued and defended despite a simultaneous commitment to the idea of global cooperation and unity.

Research on globalisation effects and localisation movements from within the discipline of anthropology, which is the iconic science of the local, conveys an important message: Cultural diversity is an essential requirement for human survival, no less so than biodiversity is essential for the health of ecosystems. 'The local', in its cultural diversity, is thus an ideal no less worthy of our support than is 'the global', which rightly points at the essential unity and equality of all humankind. One of these ideals should never be sacrificed to the other, and there is no need, because they do not contradict one another, so long as we adopt a higher order perspective based on principles of free knowledge exchange and democracy.

Anthropological research has amply illustrated how frictions and sometimes violent struggles arise at the frontiers of the global and the local (Lowenhaupt-Tsing, 2004; Reuter, 1999; 2009). What is not so well understood outside this field of research and outside the discipline of anthropology, however, is that members of "localisation movements" are not opposed to all elements of globalisation. Local people are in fact quite capable of discriminating between benefits and costs of globalisation. They embrace the social changes they perceive as beneficial, such as modern communication devices, but wish to retain the right to decide for themselves when and how they want to engage with globalisation. They object to being dispossessed by globalisation, and defend those elements of their distinct and characteristic socio-cultural lifeworld which they value and consider under threat. In short, their conservatism is overstated by critics, and sometimes also by themselves.

Furthermore, it is not widely understood that local cultural diversity and associated local knowledge are valuable and indeed essential for human survival. There has been much lip service to diversity in the form of liberal multiculturalism, even though multiculturalism is a side effect of mobility on regions with high levels of migrant influx, rather than a sustainable means of protecting localised diversity. It is only in localised settings that cultural diversity can be maintained long-term. It is also in localised settings where particular sets of cultural

knowledge evolve to be adaptive, for example, by taking the form of plural human ecologies. In short, cultural diversity is premised not on mobility, but on the ability of local people to shape their own destinies in diverse ways which take into account local ecologies, histories and cultural traditions and produce multiple alternative ways of being in the contemporary, modern world. This raises the question: how can the promotion of localised cultural diversity be reconciled with the ideal of global collaboration and unity?

The solution is to aspire for unity in diversity. This is not a contradiction in terms. Indeed, unity without diversity is meaningless, because a unity based on sameness has no communicative and rational potential. Diversity without unity also precludes communicative and rational potential. One basic fallacy is the ill-advised desire to eradicate difference until interlocutors have nothing left to say to one another, while the other fallacy is to radicalise difference to the point of eliminating the possibility for communication and cooperation, just when it is needed more than ever.

How close unreformed globalism and nationalist parochialism in fact are in their flawed logic can be easily demonstrated: For one, parochialist movements, while they seem to defend national identities and the right to be different at that level, tend to be hostile to local or individual difference within their own ranks and to insist on conformity in the name of loyalty; liberal globalism, meanwhile, manages to celebrate and to obliterate cultural difference at the same time, by confusing ephemeral multiculturalism with lasting diversity. The solution is to defend the right of local populations not just to be but to remain culturally different, and their simultaneous right to participate on an equal footing with others in a safe, open and just global sphere, where shared interests and values can be discovered through open communication and democratic processes, and enshrined in international agreements that are equally owned by all parties. That is certainly possible, necessary, and in the rational interest of the 99% of humanity who are more or less short-changed by real-existing globalisation as we experience it today.

#### **4. A Program and an Example for Alternative Globalisation**

To achieve this outcome, we need a new alternative for globalisation based on what I like to refer to as 'sovereign cooperation.' Sovereign cooperation can address the legitimate concerns of globalists and localists at the same time. Sovereignty appeals to the local perspective, in that sovereign cooperation partners have the right to be culturally distinct and free of unlawful coercion by outsiders. Cooperation appeals in a positive way to the global perspective, because sovereign cooperation unites diverse peoples as equals who nevertheless recognise their interdependence and the benefits of mutual support and insurance, and thus voluntarily cooperate on a basis of mutual respect and trust. Sovereign interlocutors need not be afraid of others, and hence they will spontaneously cooperate. They will appreciate the common ground of the human condition they share with others, and yet they will also appreciate the hard fact that their cooperation is meaningful and fruitful only where there is the freedom to be different. Sovereign cooperation recognises and safeguards those complex ties of interdependence that are characteristic of contemporary civilisation, and it also celebrates and safeguards the freedom of choice and open-ended nature of knowledge that are embodied in the diversity of human cultures.

This may seem like a rather utopian program for globalisation, but it is in fact already happening in some places. An inspiring example is international anthropology, in which I have been prominently involved over the last thirteen years. Building on a paradigm of ‘world anthropologies’ that recognises the diversity of culture within the discipline itself as an asset, the main institutions of international anthropology have made a great effort and have had considerable success in creating a level playing field where individuals and associations of anthropologists from all parts of the world can meet at eye-level to learn from one another and to cooperate on issues of shared concern (Reuter, 2011; 2012; 2015b; c).

In this sphere of interaction an ethos of equality and unity coexists with a deep appreciation for the value of diversity that is exemplary of a new ethos and practice of globalisation. Such an ethos of mutual appreciation and support also needs to be considered and applied within world politics and economics.

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