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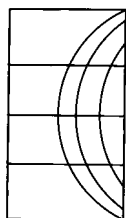
Neil J. Smelser

Pressures for Continuity in the Context of Globalization

Introduction

The starting-point for my observations is two assertions repeated in the 'globalization' literature almost to the point of tedium: (1) contemporary and anticipated developments (economic, technological, demographic, political, social and cultural) in the world are creating some version of a new international or global society; (2) this new society is advancing at the expense of nation-states, which are increasingly losing control over their own fortunes.

These assertions are true, in a general way. But we are not certain about *in what ways* they are true, how *radical* or *total* the posited changes are, and *to what degree* the human condition and organized social life will be affected. In these remarks I hope to contribute to these specifications. And the general import of my remarks is to counter the 'whole new world' view by stressing some sources of continuity. At the same time, I want to assure the reader that I am not simply taking up a counter-polemic, but correcting the historical record, which is *always*, in cases of social change, a mixed picture of continuity and discontinuity. I do so from a sociologist's point of view.

Two Guiding Corollaries

My analysis is shaped by two master corollaries. As I lay them out, readers will realize that my approach is neither as spectacular nor as entertaining as might be hoped, but I believe these two assumptions offer a greater degree of realism than much contemporary thinking does.

First corollary: future changes will be incremental and gradual rather than either/or and revolutionary. Much current commentary on the present

and future state of the world is pervaded by the evocation of very general dichotomies. Among these are 'modern vs post-modern', 'modernity vs globality', 'age-of-the-nation-state' vs some age of an internationalist, post-national world. Most of these dichotomies carry an implicitly oppositional, zero-sum logic; that is to say, the more of one pole, the less of the other. In addition, the literature on globalization has produced a number of myths or slogans of a totalistic sort – for example, 'Time and Space Have Disappeared', 'Saving Planet Earth', or 'The New World Order' (Ferguson, 1991).

I lose patience with such dichotomies and slogans. The principal basis for this impatience is that human civilization, in coping with the many massive changes involved in the process of internationalization, will not start anew but will make use of what it knows, and much of what it knows is embedded in the experience, culture and institutions as we have developed them in modern industrial society. Moreover, these will be adapted rather than discarded wholesale and recreated *de novo*. Two examples – one historical and one contemporary – will make my point:

- In the late 19th and early 20th century the beginnings of the modern welfare state are best interpreted as (1) state reactions to the excesses and injustices created by unrestrained capitalism and (2) political efforts to deal with the threat of class conflict. But the welfare state did not displace capitalist institutions; it was added onto them. Even radical socialist societies did not obliterate the economic and social institutions they aimed to obliterate; they tried to do so but never with complete success.
- We have seen and will see the appearance of 'global cultures' among international civil servants, corporate and financial groups, scientific professionals, nationals living abroad and worldly-wise tourists. At the same time, these people remain parts of other cultures, and are simultaneously local, national and global in their outlooks. As was the case of the growth of national cultures, the growth of 'global culture' melds with existing regional and subnational traditions. Hannerz is correct in his perception that:

> There is now a world culture, but we had better make sure that we understand what this means. It is marked by an organization of diversity rather than by a replication of uniformity. No total homogenization of systems of meaning and expression has occurred, nor does it appear likely that there will be one any time soon. (Hannerz, 1990: 237)

Second corollary: complexity is the master theme that links past and future. At the end of the 20th century we heard – and will hear – global characterizations of that century – the century of the nation-state, the century of North American hegemony, the destructive century, the tragic century, the century of extremes (see Hobsbawm, 1994). All of these have their threads of truth, but they are all oversimplifications. Regarding the 20th century

through the eyes of a sociologist, I would characterize it as an age of messiness, or an age of noise – certainly an age of increasing complexity. On all fronts we observe this:

- The world's nations have increased in number and variety, mainly after the post-Second World War collapse of the colonial empires.
- The social structures of the world have become more specialized and differentiated from one another – and in that way fragmented from one another. I refer not only to the continuing differentiation of economic and social structures within nations, but also to the march of international specialization as well.
- Through accelerated migration of peoples the world's population has become more intermingled, and many countries are experiencing an increase in diversity if not multiculturalism within their borders.
- The cultural and religious life of the world has also become more diverse, not only through internal changes in culture and religion (for example, the spread of fundamentalism in many of the world religions), but through a vigorous reassertion of cultural impulses via ethnic, linguistic, regional and lifestyle movements.

On all counts, then, the world has become vastly more complex, messy and incomprehensible – that is, less able to be characterized by single descriptors. The psychological consequences of such changes are increased levels of ambiguity and uncertainty and – with those – a sense of loss of control. It might even be argued that the vast proliferation of 'extremes' in the 20th century – extremes seen in ideologies of political, religious and social movements – might be interpreted as inspired by the world's messiness and complexity; that is, as longings for simpler, more predictable communities and societies in a world in which they cannot realistically be created.

Are there any reasons to believe that this messiness and noise will not continue into the 21st century? I see no reasons, and would predict that among the greatest difficulties that our descendants will have to confront will be the continuing outmodedness and irrelevance of their understandings, occasioned by an increasingly complex world, part of which is its increasing globalization.

The Globalization of Normative, Legal and Governance Systems

It has become almost orthodoxy in contemporary writings to refer to the erosion of governance by the nation-state. This presumably has happened because of the increasing interdependence of national economies imposed by the logic of the global economy (including the international monetary system), and the proliferation of new loci of decision-making involving

intergovernmental and international organizations (e.g. the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, international environmental agencies and other international non-government organizations [NGOs]). Reviewing the diversity of these transnational penetrations, Held concluded that '*the operation of states in an ever more complex international system both limits their autonomy (in some spheres radically) and impinges increasingly upon their sovereignty*' (Held, 1995: 135; italics in original).

This diagnosis is, in a general way, a correct one, but like all sweeping assessments, it requires specification and refinement. With respect to the familiar kinds of economic penetrations – arising from the economic impact of decisions made by powerful nations, world inflation, shocks such as the OPEC price crisis of 1973, and fluctuations in international currency rates – it is true that these are 'external' to nations and that national governments are often unable to prevent or control them. At the same time, it must be remembered that the *responsibility* for dealing with these penetrations remains with nation-states. That is to say, national governments are the agencies that have to cope with the consequences (for their domestic populations) of the vicissitudes of the world economy. The correct diagnosis is that sovereignty of nation-states is increasingly *taxed* in the context of globalization. However, the state retains its sovereign power. The difference is that its ability to control events affecting its people is increasingly diminished. There has been, however, very little by way of handing over or transfer of sovereignty to supranational groups and agencies.

Similarly, the decisions made by supranational agencies continue, by and large, to be filtered through the apparatus of the nation-state. The extent to which such international agencies have spread has been remarkable. Working from figures presented in the 1998–9 *Yearbook of International Organizations*, Haas (2001) counted some 6000 international organizations at the end of the 20th century. Of these, some 264 (170 in 1962) were organizations whose members were states (international governmental organizations, or IGOs), such as the United Nations and the Caribbean Community; another 5766 (1542 in 1962) were private associations with international objectives (NGOs), such as Médecins Sans Frontières and the European Confederation of Free Trade Unions. Some 72 percent of these organizations represented a regional rather than a universal constituency.

What are the normative relations of these organizations to the nation-state? As for the NGOs, they are by and large cooperative associations, many of which do not make collective decisions, and when they do, these decisions are not even binding on their own members, much less anyone else. IGOs, however, vary along a dimension which Haas describes as extending from 'organizations' to 'institutions'. Organizations are interest-based collectivities without power; institutions assume a certain level of autonomy, and an ability to bind their members by majority vote. The most remarkable

transition from organization to institution is the EU, but that is almost the only example. A few others, such as the IMF, rely on strictures, which, if not adhered to, result in very adverse economic and political consequences; for this reason, these can be regarded as semi-coercive in character. Most other IGOs are voluntary and rely on their members' willingness to conform. A true world government would clearly be a fully developed institution, with a capacity to exercise binding power over its member units, but the world, as yet, has produced nothing close to a world government.

Even when cooperation at the national level is obtained, different states adapt the policies to their own economic circumstances, cultures and political systems and evolve their own 'policy styles' (see Jänicke and Weider, 1997; Richardson, 1987). In all cases, however, the state *mediates* in a de facto way – i.e. as the effective *agency* of normative control – between the supranational agencies and the people and groups who are affected by the influence locally, even though the origin of the normative influence originates externally to the state.

As long as 50 years ago, in the study of bureaucracies, behavioral and social scientists discovered two fundamental 'distortive' tendencies in such organizations. The first is that orders and directives emanating from the top management are selectively filtered as they come down the line and gradually tailored to the purposes and 'cultures' of workpeople who are affected by them. The second is that information that moves up the line is also processed, largely by omission but sometimes by outright misrepresentation. Both tendencies arise from the territorial and self-protective interests of the workpeople who occupy places at the lower part of the pyramid of authority in the bureaucracy. A more recent research tradition dealing with the implication of government laws, regulations and official policy directives has also demonstrated the frequent diversion and occasional sabotage of programs through bureaucratic resistance, prolonged bargaining, weak implementing capacity and other factors (see Bardach, 1977). Such 'processing' activity also appears to happen to extra-national events, rules and regulations as they penetrate national and local scenes.

Another ramification of this line of argument concerns the perceptions and lives of the ordinary citizens of nations. In many cases the situations of these people are profoundly affected as transnationally generated forces work their way into their lives. But because those influences are filtered through local agencies of control – officials of governments, banks and others – the influences *appear* to emanate, as they always have, from local, intermediate or state authorities. If citizens are asked in the abstract if global forces are affecting them, they will no doubt answer in the affirmative; but because of the mediating processes I have mentioned, they have more difficulty in perceiving and specifying these effects in the everyday flow of their lives.

To conclude this particular line of reasoning, it is possible to offer one

comment on the 'fate of the state' as globalizing tendencies have continued to accelerate. It is not correct simply to say, as Held does, that globalization reduces states' autonomy and sovereignty. It does this in one sense, by introducing forces and interventions on the nation-state that are external, not of their own making, and frequently beyond their efforts to control directly. However, insofar as these forces and implications create a more complex and demanding environment for the nation-state, they also make for a *more activist* nation-state – this activism being demanded by the environment itself. Thinking along these lines had led me to the paradoxical conclusion that as globalization proceeds, we are witnessing a simultaneous *decline* and *increased salience* of the nation-state (Smelser, 1997).

While on the subject of forces augmenting the salience of the state, I cannot conclude without a brief discussion of this aspect of international terrorism, which has moved center-stage in the world's preoccupation since September 11, 2001.

Contemporary international terrorism is frequently described as above all stateless, even though some states have engaged in terrorist activities and we are also familiar with the idea of state-sponsored terrorism. By 'stateless' is meant that it is not executed through states' armed forces; it is, rather, a network of networks that transcend state boundaries, and moves fluidly from space to space in its strategic activities. Terrorism can be described as typically a war of non-state organizations against states. These circumstances make it more difficult for states to counter terrorism by conventional military means because they are relatively unreachable as moving and semi-visible targets. In addition, subterranean networks are out of range of institutions of truce, international diplomacy, alliances and treaties, all of which are state-conducted alternatives to warlike violence.

Terrorism, then, would seem to be one of those forces leading toward the erosion of the state and its institutions.

Paradoxically, however, the current flurry of ongoing activities has *increased* the salience of states and state–state relations. In its response to September 11, the US conducted a high-technology war against a state apparatus that supported terrorism (Afghanistan) before engaging in a direct effort to disable the Al Qaeda organization. In it ongoing effort, the US and other countries are dealing mainly with *other nation-states*, whether to bully them, to gain their cooperation, or to maintain friendships with them. States turn out to be almost the only available avenue in the effort to contain and control international terrorism. In the case of the Middle East, it is widely believed that the creation of a Palestinian *state* will be a positive step in the direction of controlling terrorism in that region, i.e. by bringing Palestine into the world of states and state influence. All these considerations imply that, however restricted states are by loss of control over many previously held powers, they are shored up by the most recent vicissitudes of international war and violence.

The conclusion is that all those activities associated with the world as a system of nation-states – including diplomacy, the representation of national interests in a world-system of nations and international negotiation – will not be displaced but will continue alongside new integrative arrangements as we move into and through the 21st century. The imperfections of the 'relations-among-nations' systems of stabilizing will also remain. We will continue to have difficulty in controlling international terrorism, in imposing standards of human rights internationally, in controlling international terrorism, and in intervening in domestic ethnic 'cleansings' and wars. Furthermore, the threat of catastrophic nuclear war may re-emerge in full sway once again, as more countries attain the capacity for nuclear attack and the current system of stabilization under essentially one nuclear superpower gives way to a multiplicity of them.

The Globalization of Culture, Values, Religions and Cosmologies

Let me begin by stressing a major continuity between the 20th and the 21st centuries, a continuity that is seldom acknowledged and sometimes denied. This is the extension of the impulse we know generally as 'modernity' with all its components – the press toward economic growth, intensified economic competition, further rationalization of technology and organization, the democratic impulse and the 'individualization' of collective and communal value-systems. It is necessary to underscore this continuity, because so many who propose the alternative of postmodernism regard modernity as now passing from the scene, to be supplanted by something socially and culturally different. Those diagnoses are plainly wrong; modernity is here to stay.

In making this assertion I am joining two of my sociological colleagues, S. N. Eisenstadt and Richard Münch. Eisenstadt (1992) has posited the ideas of 'modernity as a new civilization' and 'the construction of multiple modern civilizations'. By this he means that the 20th century has produced an identifiable culture of modernity, with its origins in the West, to be sure, but in itself a precipitate and amalgam of different historical experiences. It includes development, rationalization, citizenship and some variant of democracy. It has conquered the world, and continues to affect both those regions of the world in which it originated and the less developed countries that struggle to modernize and close the gap. But it is not a unitary force. It combines with local, national and regional traditions to produce many variants according to context but which will have modernity as a core ingredient.

Along similar lines, Münch (2000) has carried Weber's sociology forward, and traced the impulse of modernity, which he calls – after Parsons – 'instrumental activism', through the histories of Great Britain, France, Germany and the US. All these countries have fully incorporated the

principle of modernity, but with different combinations of innovating agents, social structures and cultural traditions. Münch sees no abatement of this rationalizing impulse, and in fact regards the globalization of both the economy and social institutions as an extension of it.

Both Eisenstadt and Münch are correct in their diagnoses. My only addition would be that the principle of modernity has accelerated to a greater degree than ever before, with the complete domination of world capitalism, the rationalization of the world through information technology and the creation of new and more sophisticated forms of monitoring and controlling the social process.

In addition to this extension of modernity, we should also expect the same type of increasing complexity and diversification of *cultural* life that we will find at the social-structural level. This complexity manifests several principles:

- As a rule, the international spread of values and religion is slow and resistance is strong. In making this assertion, I refer to the process by which new values and religions become *embedded* in indigenous cultures. Values and beliefs, like information in general, can travel fast, and can be transmitted by media and computer-based information systems instantaneously. At the same time, the degree to which they generate fundamental processes of cultural and religious change is limited. Quantitatively, the major spread of religion at the present time is through the process of evangelism (for centuries a globalizing impulse) and the spread of religious fundamentalism. In many cases these efforts are assimilated to local resistances to modernization, or into extreme nationalistic forms (Hutchinson, 2001). The major picture worldwide is the endurance of the great religious traditions – Christianity, Islam and the great Asian religions.
- Within this continuity, however, we will observe a continuing if not accelerating process of 'accommodation of the real world' on the part of the great religions. Ernst Troeltsch uncovered a great truth about religion in his classic study of the Christian churches. He argued that while the churches insisted on the preservation of absolute values and principles, their history showed an evolution in the face of changing social, political and cultural circumstances. He concluded, 'the Christian ethic of the present day and of the future will . . . be an adjustment to the world situation' (Troeltsch, 1931, Vol. 2: 1013). His point may be generalized: despite recurrent assertions of orthodoxy and fundamentalism, all the world religions will continue to evolve and become more internally diverse as they contend with their new religious environments in a world dominated by the ramifications of global change.
- We will also witness a continuation of the dramatic spread of the 'new religious movements' which have proliferated in the last third of the 20th

century. This development has produced thousands of new movements, some borrowing religious ideas from non-indigenous sources (Tibetan Buddism brought to the West, for example), and others resembling more traditional 'cults' or 'sects'. The precise extent of this development is difficult to establish, because some movements deny that they are religious. Barker (2001) estimates that there are approximately 1500 such movements in the West, with several thousand more in Latin America, the former Soviet Union and Asia. Some estimates suggest as many as 10,000 new religious offshoots in Africa. The causes of these movements are complex and elusive, and among these causes are no doubt disaffection with traditional religions and resistance to modernism. Quantitatively, however, the number of participants in these movements is typically very small – no more than 50 or so followers. Only very few, such as the Soka Gakkai and scientology, can claim an international membership in the millions. Despite the fact that these movements float mainly on the surface of the world's cultures and do not penetrate them deeply, they still contribute to their contemporary complexity.

- The last third of the 20th century has also witnessed a dramatic increase in the development of quasi-religious, subnationalist, local movements based on a mix of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural considerations (Gurr, 1994). I refer to the 'nationalistic' movements in Wales and Scotland, the Basque phenomenon, the resurfacing of fissiparous ethnic tendencies in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and similar phenomena in other areas of the world. We have also witnessed a growth of solidary groupings based on social movements pressing for recognition, status and rights, or advocating a cause such as women's rights, peace, or antagonism to nuclear power. Some of these new solidarities, being local in impulse, seem inconsistent with globalization, particularly if they engender demands for the economic and linguistic independence of ever-smaller political units. Yet we cannot write them off as some kind of cultural throwback. They are real; they express genuine aspirations of peoples, and they 'add their value' to the increasing cultural complexity of the contemporary world.

I find no reason to believe that these four lines of development will not continue into the next century. This expectation is consistent with a principle – based on much comparative research by social scientists and historians – that periods of rapid economic, social and cultural change are likely to generate religious turmoil, utopian movements and revolutionary ideas. The reason for this is that eras of rapid change are eras of confusion, in which accepted meanings, understandings and interpretations of the world are being continuously outmoded. The turmoil is best interpreted as a continuous search for new meanings, redefinitions, simplifications of the unfamiliar and

ways of forging new solidarities when older ones are undermined. If there is one story to be told about the 21st century, it will be the story of rapid social change, perhaps more rapid than anything the world has ever witnessed. It follows that we should expect the cultural consequences of such change.

So the name of the cultural game for the world of the future will be greater diversity and complexity. This conclusion is not entirely my own. Roland Robertson, one of the leading theorists of globalism, acknowledged this reality a decade ago (Robertson, 1992), and Beyer recently spoke of 'global religious pluralism . . . in which absolute visions live side by side' (Beyer, 2001). While agreeing with this formulation, I would like to qualify the phrase, 'side by side'. This phrase connotes a kind of peaceful coexistence. In a religiously diverse situation, however, that outcome is only one of several. I envision the following possibilities in the 21st century.

- *Sectarian conflict:* One of the hallmark of religious (and to a lesser degree, cultural) systems is a tendency to develop internal solidarity and exclusiveness, as well as antagonism to those outside the fold. Insofar as this tendency is realized, we are confronted with a clash of absolutes – situations of non-compromise that hover on the edge of extreme hostility. This is the model that informed Huntington's controversial predictions that the great religions of the world would become the basis for the great battlegrounds of the world in the coming era (Huntington, 1996). It is also the model that informs the kind of sectarian conflict and domination that results in the tragic episodes of 'ethnic cleansing' which characterized the 20th century and which continue. Insofar as this tendency is dominant, the scenario is a future of religious warfare.
- *Mutual tolerance:* This is Beyer's 'side by side' model. There are historical precedents for this model. The history of denominational religion in the US, for example, beginning with the separation of church and state, is a history of religious competition, to be sure, marked by episodes of bitter conflict, but also one of increased toleration among denominations. The history of religion in India is a mix of bitter, often violent conflict, but increasing acceptance of religious diversity. One of the promising aspects of world development for this scenario is the increasing – if halting – spread of world literacy and education. One of the strongest correlates of religious tolerance has been level of education, and we may be confident that if we have more of the latter we will have more of the former.
- *A new cleavage:* 'religious' or 'not religious'. One variation on the 'mutual tolerance' scenario is the evolution of a world-religious situation in which the decisive differences would not be between competing religious systems, but whether an individual, group, or society is religious or spiritual in a general sense, or whether it is secular. According

to this scenario, groups and churches of different religious persuasions would tend to respect one another for their 'religiosity' and tend to tolerate differences among themselves in the context of the underlying similarity. Perhaps the most plausible future division would be between groups with more traditional spiritual values on the one hand and the carriers of the 'religion of modernization – professionals, researchers, scientists, and intellectuals who write secularized and unconditionally universalistic versions of the salvation story, along with the managers, legislators, and policymakers who believe the story fervently and pursue it relentlessly' (Meyer et al., 1998: 174) on the other. The most problematic aspect of this scenario is whether the carriers of different spiritual traditions can maintain the level of mutual tolerance and solidarity among themselves.

- *A unitary world religion:* This would be the development of a 'religion of globality', or what Robertson suggests as the cultural/religious counterpart of 'the world as being in and of itself a single community . . . or at least having the potential for so becoming' (Robertson, 1993: 407). Such a religious belief would encompass all of humanity, and would presumably be the legitimizing counterpart of a pervasive and durable world social and political organization. There are historical examples of such universalistic religions ('the Kingdom of God') which, however, never became universal, and there are stirrings of the universalistic impulse in some parts of contemporary Catholicism and some East Asian religions (Robertson, 1993). I regard this as the most remote of the four scenarios for the coming century, largely because the forces of social-structural and cultural diversity and conflict are most likely to be the dominating ones.

Consistent with the themes of diversity, complexity and messiness that have dominated this article, I conclude by saying that no one of these four cultural scenarios will be *the* one, but that we will find continuing vitality for all of them in the decades to come. The great challenge for our descendants will not be to come to terms with a wholly new historical situation, but to find themselves continuously taxed by the pains of ambiguity, ambivalence, uncertainty, and the struggles to adapt to all of these by fashioning new structural and cultural syntheses. There is a great deal of drama in these struggles, but it is the drama of continuing flux rather than the drama of a brave new world.

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