

Reimagining Globalization

Plausible Futures

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ABSTRACT

This chapter takes stock of the corpus of knowledge about reimagining globalization. It also proposes an analytical framework for discerning future globalizations. The framework consists of a set of dyadic markers: globalization and deglobalization. Between these rival narratives are four subnarratives: hyperglobalization, antiglobalization, alterglobalization, and reglobalization. Each subnarrative has moments when its appeal grows and then dips. In order to interrogate these powerful narratives, I examine historical trends, what explains them, and the extent to which they are objectified. This is a matter of who gets their story told. Whose and which knowledge comes into play?

Empirical evidence reveals that the levels of global connectedness lie somewhere between what the enthusiasts of hyperglobalization claim and what the proponents of deglobalization seek, amid deep and shallow globalization. The slowdown in the global economy in the 2020s does not signify a retreat from globalization. The data rather show sustained interconnectedness of nations and dependence on overseas suppliers. The combined effects of the coronavirus pandemic, supply-chain disturbances, Brexit, and the Ukraine War have brought both barriers to cross-border flows and inefficiencies, but not a sizable withdrawal from globalization. By all indications, the tides of globalization will continue to tack back and wash forward.

KEYWORDS

deglobalization, future studies, globalization, global political economy, neoliberal capitalism, reglobalization, scenarios

Coarsening political discourse, loss of civility within and among societies, diminishing confidence in political institutions, and unraveling of the social contract characterize our fraught times. We are ensconced in a state of acute social malaise, a pathological condition that began before the coronavirus pandemic. Its symptoms are morbidities of globalized capitalism in the twenty-first century. Wanting is sufficient creative reflection on reimagining a form of globalization that would serve human needs in a just and equitable manner.¹ Thinking anew about temporality and achieving an ethical future are sorely needed.

Reimagining the future requires exploring origination. A central question is, where does the past end, the present begin, and the future start? The answer lies in reckoning with not a dead but a living past. To this point, the novelist William Faulkner (1951: 92) famously commented, “The past is never dead. It is not even past.” This relationship may be construed as a dialogue of how the past pushes into the present. The simultaneity of the current moment and the past as it bears on the future may kindle the power of imagination.

Toward this end, I want to take stock of the corpus of knowledge about reimagining globalization. I also propose, in a preliminary way, an analytical framework for discerning future globalizations. Certainly, entering the minefield of debates in futurology is a hazardous venture. History takes unexpected twists and turns. The unintended consequences of attempting to activate knowledge as a tool for shaping the future can be dire. This is a matter of who gets their story told. Whose and which knowledge comes into play? In my use of the term, knowledge is an instrument of power. Extant knowledge about reimagining globalization and converting possible alternatives into practice is contested, with evidence for enacting them pointing in different directions.

Since the future of globalization is not foreordained, how can we know where it is headed? Analysts disagree about ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Some researchers, most of them in the positivist tradition, feed data into computer models and use the results to try to calculate globalization’s prospects. Other observers rely on intuition and turn to popular fiction to spark the imagination and unlock creative impulses. Still others, dialecticians and evolutionary thinkers, craft scenarios: extrapolations based on historical patterns and trend lines.

I adopt a combination of the second and third approaches, not linear or timeless interpretations, because, to my mind, the latter options have the greatest potential for deepening understanding. Scenarists offer plausible narratives, provoking the imagination, whereas forecasters and model builders claim that their method for planning the future is a science. In the conventional sense, the “scientific method” is faith in hard-edge empirical techniques. The problem is that it can be mechanistic: the peril lies in adopting a pseudo-scientific approach, one that employs a slot-machine methodology, superimposing an overarching template on varied conditions, making short shrift of the texture of historical and cultural conditions.

In critical usage, the payoff of pursuing scenarios lies in deriving lessons from the past, informing present-day policymaking, and propelling future responses to global crises. Keeping with this tradition, I will stake out stories and scenarios about globalization. Each one is a permutation of the core concept of globalization. The coming pages are organized around a set of dyadic markers, globalization and its counterpoint, deglobalization. They hover at opposite ends of a spectrum. Between these rival narratives are four subnarratives: hyperglobalization, antiglobalization, alterglobalization, and reglobalization. This political and economic repertoire is remarkably capacious and, to varying degrees, objectified.

MEANINGS

Globalization may be defined as a syndrome of transformative processes that compress time and space (Mittelman, 2000, 2004, 2011).² It is a historical transformation, with a profound impact on social and power relations. Accelerated by new technologies, globalization shrinks horizons and distances. Globalizing forces slice across national borders and touch down differently in myriad contexts. These structures are not entirely external to a given country or region. They are entwined with the domestic sphere. All locales and sundry institutions must respond to a constellation of globalizing pressures rooted in capital accumulation and the dynamics of competition.

From the early 1990s, scholar-activists created a competing narrative: deglobalization. Two variants of deglobalization may be compared. First, in a pioneering iteration, an avant-garde book titled *Delinking* (1990) by Samir Amin, an Egyptian-French intellectual, laid the groundwork for careful research on this path in multiple locales. A critic of culturalist understandings of capitalism and imperialism, Amin argues that Edward Said's highly acclaimed book *Orientalism* (1979) and postcolonial scholarship that followed in his tracks lacked sufficient emphasis on the material dimensions of exploitation. Amin's lacerating critique of Eurocentrism distinguishes delinking from autarky and withdrawal from the world industrial, trade, and financial systems. Delinking is a refusal to subordinate a national development strategy to the imperatives of globalization. It calls for a nation to steer its own course rather than adopt an externally prescribed route. In other words, delinking is a strategy for capturing control of a national economy—an autocentric program for reconstructing them. The goal at the global level is to work with allies to shape a polycentric system of power.

Amin and like-minded thinkers such as Walden Bello (2005), a Filipino professor and former member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines, advanced ideas for transforming a political economy with regard for the specificity

of individual countries. In Karl Polanyi's sense (1957), the aim is to re-embed the economy and institutions in society rather than to allow the economy to drive society. In this iteration of deglobalization, the guiding principle is to disengage from and then selectively re-embed into the global political economy.

To take one example: China has benefited from globalized capitalism by setting the conditions of engagement, including placing capital controls on foreign direct investment and targeting capital movements. Chinese authorities recognize the potential and limitations of this strategy and recognize the importance of their large domestic market and the far reaches of the territory. At this stage, China seeks to gain greater autonomy and manage the flow of imports, especially financial services.

In another account of deglobalization, populists on the Right have formulated nationalist economic agendas. Among them, protectionists like India's prime minister Narendra Modi favor restructuring terms of trade, levying tariffs, and safeguarding the domestic economy. These moves resemble similar developments in the Global North, where diverse economic nationalists would use the national state as a shield or barrier to constrain globalization. They are mindful that increased globalization generates winners and losers.

Strikingly, some of those left behind support illiberal, authoritarian regimes that champion deglobalization, promulgate official narratives, and construct imaginary futures. By and large, these groups yearn for a muscular leader who would restore the putative strong nation and revive its pride. They call for restrictions on immigration and are hard on minorities on the grounds that they are replacing the dominant majority—in the West, white Christians. Their actions unleash waves of violence against Muslims, Jews, Asians, the disabled, LGBTQ people, and others. Many political officials and parents support clamping down on allegedly misguided school curricula, such as teaching “critical race theory.” All these developments comport with a bevy of national protectionist measures imposed on globalization. Taken together, this constellation of forces evokes images of Germany in the 1930s, though there are major differences too, and the historical comparison should not be overdrawn.

The deglobalization scenario is evolving in full view in the 2020s. Emblematic of this scenario, the coronavirus led to pandemic lockdowns in Shanghai and other locales, reducing global transactions. Meanwhile, the 2022 Ukraine War generated a new wave of protectionism. Governments sought to secure commodities for their citizens, built barriers so as to harness exports, and incentivized businesses to reshore their factories. Barriers cascaded from country to country and sanctions on Russia further hampered supply chains. China added export restrictions on fertilizers and food crops (Swanson, 2022), which compounded shortages of supplies and amplified deglobalization. As indicated below, imaginaries and narratives are vital components of these developments.

IMAGINARIES AND NARRATIVES

Important insights derive from the idea that political communities are built by imagining solidarities. Historically, they coincided with the emergence of print capitalism. Benedict Anderson (1999) posited that this phenomenon is linked to the rise of the nation-state. He tracked this trend and enriched understanding of how the world is structured.

Subsequently, globalization researchers (e.g., Steger, 2008) have drawn on Anderson's and Charles Taylor's (2003) influential works on imaginaries and offered poignant criticism of what they call *methodological nationalism*, that is, primarily focusing on the state system to the neglect of other levels of inquiry. Closely related, *methodological territorialism* is a tendency to reify territorial boundaries and national sovereignty without sufficiently taking account of the ways in which globalizing forces penetrate national jurisdictions. For instance, the Chinese authorities sought to shut down reports from outside sources about the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. In this episode, the state cracked down on protests over economic and political reforms but could not block a sizable amount of information from entering the country. Similarly, the government has limited ability to stop cultural influences brought by education, tourism, music, and art. The point is that it is misguided to dwell on the state system without grasping the surge in cross-border flows interlinking political, economic, and cultural communities. At a level either ignored or downplayed by methodological nationalists, *global* imaginaries merit more attention than they have received. National and global imaginaries alike are representations. They are ways of perceiving identities and bonds.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the field of *international* studies is based on the premise of territoriality. Yet, with the development of innovative technologies, especially in communications and transportation, the advent of "network society" (Castells, 1996) and the emergence of a "nonterritorial region" (Ruggie, 1993), there is a shift toward a deterritorialized world. On these grounds, Jan Aart Scholte challenged "methodological territorialism"—the ingrained practice of formulating questions, gathering data, and arriving at conclusions, all through the prism of a territorial framework (1996; 1999: 17; 2005). Without swinging to the opposite extreme of adopting a "globalist methodology" by totally rejecting territoriality, Scholte calls for a "full-scale methodological reorientation," and concludes: "that globalisation warrants a paradigm shift would seem to be incontrovertible" (1999: 21–22).

To probe further into prevalent ways of thinking and talking about how globalization is unfolding, I will illuminate powerful narratives. By narrative power, I mean the ability to spin stories about historical events and what accounts for them. Narrators impart understanding of events and enable judgments.

In this vein, Robert Shiller, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, holds that narratives are “major vectors of rapid change in culture, in zeitgeist, and in economic behavior” (2019). He argues that narratives need to be incorporated into economic theory, for the ideas they convey can spread by contagion and transform economic behavior. But this begs the questions: which narratives should be selected, and why?

There are different versions of each one. Multifaceted, they comprise subnarratives and are fluid rather than fixed. Established narratives encompass clusters of stories, which may need to be elaborated. In other words, narratives are divided and include several ingredients and branches. Moreover, narratives are contested—for instance, social movements, philanthropies, and corporations are forging their own social justice narratives—and beget dueling subnarratives.

FOUR KEY SUBNARRATIVES AND GLOBAL INDICATORS

Emblematic of ways that globalization is being reimagined, I will interrogate the four key subnarratives mentioned in the introduction to this chapter: *hyperglobalization*, *antiglobalization*, *alterglobalization*, and *reglobalization*. The discussion then turns to global indicators and an illustration of how these stories are deployed in global crises.

The Subnarratives

Contending subnarratives have emerged because the tides of globalization tack back and wash forward. It is impossible to trace a neat progression. Yet analysts can toggle between advances and retreats, tensions and challenges that spawn the four subnarratives.

The first one is widely deployed by governance agencies as well as by scholars and policy intellectuals. The subnarrative of hyperglobalization depicts acceleration in cross-border flows of capital, technology, population, and cultural products. Its purveyors call attention to the degree to which the speed and reach of contemporary economic globalization differ significantly from the pace and expanse of earlier phases of globalization. Hyperglobalists examine the costs and benefits of trade integration, the consolidation of markets, and heightening global competition, as well as their political implications, including the reduction of national sovereignty and what deterritorialization means for national democracy. The hyperglobalization subnarrative has its enthusiasts (Ohmae, 1990), critics (Sassen, 1996), and revisionist commentators (Rodrik, 1997).

Hyperglobalist rhetoric is powerful because it has influenced many policymakers and civil society groups. But it is a trope inasmuch as the trend that this worldview purports to delineate cannot be proven to exist. In fact, it exaggerates certain

tendencies without giving due weight to countertendencies such as heightened divergence (e.g., in income inequality and cultural differentiation), disintegrative processes, and resistance to global convergence.

Partly owing to the extent to which the scope and scale of neoliberal globalization have disrupted ways of life and recalibrated who wins and loses in the global political economy, pronounced backlashes have emerged. They materialized at the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial meeting in Seattle in 1999, followed by protests at the annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in Washington, DC, in 2002, and several other global summits.

In the second subnarrative, these demonstrations are described as manifestations of antiglobalization, a trope that has become commonplace in the media and popular writing. By slotting the wide range of stances on globalization in two boxes—for and against—it obscures an assortment of complaints about globalizing trends that emanate from different locales and diverse positions on the political continuum. What becomes obscure are the varied attempts to engage, not evade, globalization. In fact, most of this resistance is *against* aspects of neoliberalism and *for* globalization such that it should serve social ends. In this sense, the resistance is neither *antiglobalization* nor *proglobalization*. Some social movement activists on the Left *and* proponents of free trade, such as Milton Friedman, advocate abolishing the international financial institutions themselves; others like billionaire financier George Soros want to change the direction of policy; and still others seek to transform the underside of globalization—capitalism—specifically, the relationship between market power and political authority.

Few objectors have donned an antiglobalization stance. They are not opposed to globalization *per se*. Rather, they advocate some aspects of globalization—more information, improved technology, productivity gains, and a cornucopia of consumer goods—but not others, namely, its baneful effects, including an increase in precarious employment and outsourcing jobs. The target of legions of protestors is the coupling of globalization and a neoliberal policy framework.

The prevalent imagery of antiglobalization is problematic too, because it defines a phenomenon solely as a negation. It impoverishes social criticism by mystifying what may be learned from robust debates over globalization without regard for what may be positive and affirmative about it. Pigeonholing social criticism as antiglobalization hampers the creation of alternatives. At the venues where public protests have taken place, mass movements have raised serious issues about the drawbacks to neoliberal globalization and opportunities for altering it.

Third, many critics are etching possibilities for a just, inclusive, participatory, and democratic globalization. It is upon these goals that the alterglobalization movement—for which a common metonym is *global social justice movement*—is based. Although the exact origins of the term *alterglobalization* are uncertain, its usage in French (*altermondialisation*) dates from the late twentieth century and has circulated throughout Europe and elsewhere. This social movement is for alterglobalization when it means an attempt to reshape globalizing forces so as to

mitigate their harms and distribute their opportunities in a just manner. Activists serving as propellants of alterglobalization have forged points of articulation. At the World Social Forum (WSF), in particular, networks built on earlier initiatives come together to share ideas about establishing alternatives to neoliberal globalization (Falk, 1999; Gills, 2008; Mittelman, 2004; Patomäki & Teivainen, 2004; Teivainen, 2004). While the WSF has opened political space for civil society, it remains small-scale and without appreciable forward momentum (Patomäki, 2022: 103–4).

The fourth permutation of the globalization narrative is known as reglobalization. An umbrella term, it is a reaction to nationalist populism. For some of its advocates, it is a pragmatic policy response starting at the national level and scaling up. For other reformists, reglobalization is a call for higher degrees of liberal multilateral cooperation through strengthening international institutions (e.g., Payne, 2017; Bishop & Payne, 2021; Benedikter, Gruber, & Kofler, 2022). For still others, it is a normative aspiration for transitioning to “post-neoliberal” globalization.

Reglobalization subsumes specific themes and steps. Emphases range from the economy and environment (Habicher, 2020) to technology and cultural flows (Jamet, 2020; Steger, 2021). The reglobalization subnarrative stresses ways that the pandemic has both slowed certain transnational flows such as intercontinental trade and spurred innovation, as with the globalization of services and digitalization. The difficulty is that the term *reglobalization* is imprecise. This catchword covers diverse developments and parks them under a single rubric. For reglobalization to enter the common lexicon and become a galvanizing narrative, its promoters need to sharpen this discourse and add nuance. To be credible and gain a following, this supposedly late- or post-COVID-19 trend must track more than a brief time span.

Evidence

In a 2020 paper, Daniel Esser and I sought to pin down which narrative and subnarratives are objectified (Esser & Mittelman, 2020). We juxtaposed two influential global indices, the KOF Globalization Index issued by the Swiss Economic Institute (2018a) and the DHL Global Connectedness Index (Altman, Ghemawat, & Bastian, 2018), compiled by New York University and the Barcelona-based IESE business schools, respectively. In 2022, I revisited the KOF and DHL indices, which incorporate data through 2019.

For the sake of brevity, I will focus on these two indices only, because from one study to another, the data and conclusions drawn from indicators are highly variable. Much depends on the indicator providers. Who are they? How are they trained? To whom are they accountable? How and by whom are they paid? But I digress.³ Returning to the KOF Index (KOF Swiss Economic Index, 2018b), worldwide globalization increased between 1990 and 2007, but, as one would expect, slowed during the 2008 financial crisis and the recession that followed.⁴ Despite a slight uptick in 2016, aggregate economic globalization, including financial

globalization, flat-lined between 2018 and 2019, and cross-border trade ebbed. Financial globalization then mounted, and trade integration similarly advanced; yet population flows, particularly in the tourism sector, declined.⁵

The DHL Index demonstrates that, for the world as a whole, the extent of global connectedness crested at a record high in 2017. The DHL finds that a large portion of flows of trade, capital, information, and people is domestic rather than cross-border. Empirical evidence reveals that the levels of global connectedness lie somewhere between what the enthusiasts of hyperglobalization claim and what the proponents of deglobalization seek, amid deep and shallow globalization.

The 2022 indices do not deviate substantially from prior findings. Overall global connectedness again varies considerably by both country and region, not only for those on the low end of tallies of globalization indicators but also for those at the top.

The downturn in the global economy and disruptions in supply chains due to the coronavirus pandemic do not signify a retreat from globalization. These patterns rather show sustained interconnectedness of nations and dependence on overseas suppliers. The combined effects of the pandemic, supply-chain disturbances, and Brexit have brought both blockages and inefficiencies. The contraction in global trade and relocalizing production have boosted costs. Rethinking these issues and taking into account the magnitude of the adverse consequences of adjustments in global economic interdependence may give impetus to instituting reforms, the scope of which is unforeseeable. Yet globalization continues apace; the rate varies by type and dimension. Central to these developments will be the elaboration of narratives, some of them grounded in false, others in accurate, information.

As heated controversies over disinformation illustrate, numbers—global indicators, censuses, and vote counting—are decidedly politicized rather than scientifically generated. Numerical indicators are statistical representations that can be gamed by their authors and promoters. If they eclipse Indigenous ways of producing knowledge in the Global South, datasets can become a form of epistemic displacement and accretion.

That said, can a principal globalization narrative and subnarrative be identified? With the worldwide spread of neoliberalism over the last half-century, each subnarrative has moments when its appeal grows and then dips, with uneven evidence to sustain the stories they tell. They can be simultaneously deployed in actual instances.

The Present

For illustrative purposes, let's take the case of momentous upheavals in the 2020s. Discourse brokers marshaled official and unofficial subnarratives, including many falsehoods, during this period. Noting the coronavirus's uncertain long-term impact, Laurence Boone, the chief economist at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, observed that the pandemic and the 2022 Russian

invasion of Ukraine unleashed “deglobalization forces” as a result of the imposition of new Western sanctions, the slowdown in growth and financial flows, delays in delivering supplies of commodities, and the deterioration of the environment.

Blocking the Russian central bank’s transactions from SWIFT, a network for financial transactions and payments between banks globally, is a major element in delinking. In response to this measure, Russia took steps to wall off from pressures and tried to make itself more self-sufficient.

At the same time, some policymakers and narrators are calling for more, not less, global integration. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, director general of the WTO, advocated reglobalization. In her words: “Deeper, more diversified international markets remain our best bet for supply resilience” (quoted in Wong & Swanson, 2022). Adding to this contention over subnarratives, Harvard political economist Dani Rodrik remarked: “Your interdependence can be weaponized against you.” Elaborating, he asserted that the Ukraine War has “probably put a nail in the coffin of hyperglobalization” (quoted in Wong & Swanson, 2022).⁶

THE LONGUE DURÉE

In sum: to order raging debates over the future of globalization and facilitate diagnosing strivings for a just order, this chapter offers a conceptual framework for reimagining globalization. The conceptualization consists of a matrix of two narratives, globalization and deglobalization, and four subnarratives: hyperglobalization, antiglobalization, alterglobalization, and reglobalization.

The imagined beyond conspires against the pragmatic, the here and now. It requires stretching time, seeing what is not entirely manifest, grasping what is latent. The challenge is to create a shared vision of an ethically right and politically wise world order. It requires gazing beyond the urgency of the present.

History is embarked in a liminal phase, entering an interim—a transition from a near term—to the more distant future. That is to say, the *longue durée* is not merely one undifferentiated, indeterminate period.

The path to the far term presents concrete challenges. Contingent conditions must be assessed and addressed. They include:

1. COVID-19 is a perfect global transgressor in the sense that it prompted a reassertion of borders and national efforts to check cross-border flows.
2. The coronavirus pandemic boosted innovations in digital communications technologies that enabled delocalized work across time zones and borders.
3. Shortages in commodities emanating from disruptions in supply chains exacerbated pressure brought by the Ukraine War. They also augmented demands for local sourcing and domestic production.
4. The movement of populations caused by military and political conflicts reveals the increasing importance of empathy, compassion, and toleration

of differences—more so because climate change in Central America and elsewhere continues to spawn migratory flows.

5. The specter of nuclear threat, whether deliberately or fortuitously invoked, haunts the global future.

Following the near future, when these looming challenges must be faced, the opportunity for actualizing far-reaching scenarios will be on the horizon. At that time, reimagining globalization could spur efforts to establish counterhegemony: a historical bloc that confronts the dominant form of globalization in what Antonio Gramsci (1971) called a “war of position.” Strategically, it is to be waged by an avant-garde movement that relies on persuasion through education, the media, music, art, and writing devoted to opposing and eventually ousting the hegemon. It presupposes participation in this political project by subaltern classes, which endeavor to secure consent.

Organic intellectuals can play an integral role in this struggle by propagating a common culture, enabling cohesion. This project is particularly important for organic intellectuals engaged on the battleground of ideas. Those based in the academy can contribute significantly by bolstering efforts to reimagine globalization. A vibrant field of teaching and research, globalization studies is an extension of the long history of civic education, which is intensely contested in the public arena. An abundance of initiatives are underway, a lot has been accomplished, and much more remains to be done.

NOTES

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1. I am drawing on an incisive intervention by Robert W. Cox (1976) and want to acknowledge Matthew Louis Bishop and Anthony Payne’s (2021) important contribution.

2. This succinct conceptualization is closely linked to the work of proto-globalization theorists such as the philosopher and media specialist Marshall McLuhan (1964), who coined the expressions “the media is the message” and “global village.” Pioneering formulations in globalization studies followed: among them, Giddens (1990); Harvey (1990); Robertson (1992); Sassen (1996); Scholte (2005), and Steger (2008). In parallel, Steger and James (2017) trace the genealogy of globalization research.

3. I explore these issues elsewhere (Mittelman, 2022).

4. Gygli et al. (2019).

5. See Gygli et al. (2019). The KOF Swiss Economic Institute (2018c) defines political globalization at two levels. *De jure* dimensions include the number of international, intergovernmental organizations of which a country is a member, the number of international treaties ratified since 1945, and the number of treaty partners. The *de facto* dimensions are constituted by the number of embassies, the personnel assigned to peacekeeping missions, and internationally oriented nongovernmental organizations operating in a country.

6. For more on the weight of the present on the past and implications for the future, see Tabb (2021).

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