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The Language of Globalization

by Peter Marcuse

The language of globalization deserves some explicit attention. To begin with, the word *globalization* itself is a nonconcept in most uses: a simple catalogue of everything that seems different since, say, 1970, whether advances in information technology, widespread use of air freight, speculation in currencies, increased capital flows across borders, Disneyfication of culture, mass marketing, global warming, genetic engineering, multinational corporate power, new international division of labor, international mobility of labor, reduced power of nation-states, postmodernism, or post-Fordism. The issue is more than one of careless use of words: intellectually, such muddy use of the term fogs any effort to separate cause from effect, to analyze what is being done, by whom, to whom, for what, and with what effect. Politically, leaving the term vague and ghostly permits its conversion to something with a life of its own, making it a force, fetishizing it as something that has an existence independent of the will of human beings, inevitable and irresistible. This lack of clarity in usage afflicts other elements of the discussion of globalization as well, with both analytic and political consequences. Let me outline some problem areas, and suggest some important differentiations.

First, the concept of globalization itself: it hardly needs reiteration in these pages that globalization is not something new under

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the sun, but is a particular form of capitalism, an expansion of capitalist relationships both in breadth (geographically) and in depth (penetrating ever-increasing aspects of human life). But there are two distinct aspects to the development of capitalist relations since 1970 that are often lumped together under the rubric of globalization: developments in technology and developments in the concentration of power. Separating *advances in technology* from the *global concentration of economic power*, and seeing how their combination has changed *class relations*, is critical both for analysis and for political strategy.

The link between advances in technology and the concentration of economic power is not an inevitable one. Computerization, the speed of communications made possible by advances in information technology, the ability to expand the span of control from one center across continents, the increased speed and efficiency of transportation (both for people and for goods), facilitating the flexibilization of production, and the automation of routine tasks are all indeed essential for the substantial increase in the concentration of economic power we are witnessing. But these advances in technology could be used in quite different ways (although it may be that, if their intended use were different, they would in fact be quite different). Advances in technology could mean either that the same quantity of useful goods and services could be produced with less effort or that, with the same effort, more could be produced. Either way, everyone would be better off, either working less or having more. That is not the way things are going, not because technology could not go that way, but because it is directed and harnessed by the power-holders to increase and concentrate their power. It has been used to change the balance of power between classes. Attention needs to be focused on this, not on the technology itself.

The distinction between *technological globalization* and *the globalization of power* is critical—not only analytically but also politically. It raises the question, “What might the other possibilities be if the two were separated?” We should speak of the existing combination of technological globalization and the globalization of power as *really existing globalization*; that would highlight the

possibilities of an *alternative globalization*. Opponents of the damaging consequences of really existing globalization, from left as well as from liberal perspectives, are divided on the appropriate response to it. The slogan from Seattle in regard to the World Trade Organization (WTO)—“fix it or nix it”—and the equivalent suggested in the Washington demonstrations in April as to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF)—“shrink it or sink it”—and the related questions about whether we want a seat at the table or a different table or no table at all show an ambivalence about goals. The issues are difficult indeed. But the realization that an alternative globalization can at least be conceived of should be an important part of the debate on goals; speaking of what we now have as really existing globalization may help to keep the broader possibilities open.

By the same token, frequent references to the diminished or vanished power of nation-states to control globalization need some conceptual and linguistic clarity. The *myth of the powerless state* is a concept that clouds intelligent analysis of what is actually going on. The importance of state action in enabling the capitalist system of the industrialized world to function is increased, not reduced, as that system spreads internationally. If states do not control the movement of capital or of goods, it is not because they cannot but because they will not—it is an *abdication of state power*, not a lack of that power. The very importance attached by international business interests to the WTO, tariff agreements, the government enforcement of contractual rights and the protection of intellectual property interests attest to the continuing if not growing importance of the national state.

Furthermore, a strong element of fetishization often creeps into the very use of the term “state,” with a very distinct political bias. It might be called the *fallacy of the homogenous state* and it appears in such formulations as those that speak of “the competitive state” (or, in my own field, the constant call for the “competitiveness of cities”) or of benefits or harms to the “states” of the North or of the South. States and cities are internally divided; what is good for one group, class, or other interest within a state or city may have very different consequences for others. Govern-

ments indeed have a certain autonomy and, in this limited sense, one may speak of states or cities as actors with interests of their own, meaning their specific political leaders and bureaucracies—or, more broadly, the regime in power; but it is even more true that governments are responsive to multiple interests and that particular interests regularly dominate the actions of most. To speak of a “national interest” usually conceals some very particular interests; to speak of states as if they represented all those living within them obscures reality.

In that sense, to speak of “U.S.” domination of international affairs—important in one sense—requires a clear distinction between those who, in turn, dominate U.S. policy and those who are excluded from its formation. The same is true of other countries, as was clear in some of the discussions in Seattle, in which individuals from countries of the South took positions strongly divergent from those of their governments. If this distinction between a state and its people is important in terms of the political and formal actions of the state, it is even more important in terms of economic representation. Those who represent states in international economic negotiations are not representing any homogeneous set of national economic interests; the homogeneity may be better considered a characteristic of the interests at the bargaining table, that is to say, clusters of businesses and financial interests perhaps diverging on a sectoral basis but similar in their class character. The key divisions are not among states, but among classes; the homogeneity is not within states, but within classes.

Other language in discussions of globalization, while emanating from its proponents, frequently slips into use by its critics and obscures what is actually happening. “Human capital,” for instance, is a twisting of meanings: calling it “labor skills” puts it in its proper context. “Governance” is a euphemism for diminished government and should be recognized as such. “Investment” may mean an expansion of productive capacity, or it may be pure speculation. “Free” markets are hardly costless, as in free public education; the true term is “private markets,” and they limit, rather than expand, most notions of human freedom. “Reform,”

of course, means privatization in its media use. "Producer services," indiscriminately used, strips the term "producer" of its social meaning. Printing stock reports should not be called "producer services;" printers are workers who operate machines, not "service providers," and stockbrokers should not be called producers if the word is to retain any real content.

These issues are not merely issues of terminology. No clear consensus has yet emerged among the various groups attempting to confront the ills produced by really existing globalization. The most moderate goals simply call for participation and transparency; the stronger liberal view asks for restructuring of the system of global institutions and regulations; radical views include both calls for eliminating global institutions entirely or replacing them with a completely different system of relations, both economic and political, within nation-states and among them. Discussions after Seattle have not yet widely coalesced around specific programmatic demands at the national level, such as actions demanded of the U.S. Congress, the U.S. trade representative, its United Nations delegate, or its representatives on various international agencies and bodies. A number of groups and many individuals are wrestling with the difficult problems of formulating goals, platforms, and specific demands for action. Demands consistent with one view are not necessarily inconsistent with other views; both commonalities of goals and differences among them, and both strategy and tactics, need further thought and clarification. Fuzziness of language may facilitate coalition formation in the short run, but more solid and long-term alliances are based on full mutual understanding. Being careful about the difference between technological globalization and the globalization of power, keeping the concept of alternative globalization on the table, dispensing with the myth of the powerless state and avoiding the fallacy of the homogenous state, and watching the traps of the Orwellian language of globalization, may all help in coming to a common agreement as to both long-term goals and next steps.