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Who Needs Global Studies Today?

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Global Studies programmes are in favour across the world. Their worth in being able to make students engage with contemporary challenges requires a deeper focus on actually existing forms of globalised capitalism.

The term 'globalisation' boomed in commonplace use in the 1990s. This was unsurprising; with the end of the Cold War, globalising processes substantially - if not dramatically - accelerated to create a more integrated, though fragmented and hybridised, world order.

The subsequent consequences of neoliberal economic globalisation were so regionally uneven and indeed debilitating that it led, in many cases, to calls by scholars and analysts for 'de-globalisation' as the way forward. But even here, to provide the desired alternative perspectives and policy prescriptions would require moving towards more global forms of study and research.

Scholarly perceptions of the limitations of the academic discipline of International Relations (IR) to grapple with these changes led to calls for developing the discipline of 'Global Studies'.

Several universities now offer Global Studies programmes - mainly in Western Europe, North America, Australia, some in China and Japan, and a few in India - at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels, often as a 'new' disciplinary offering. This is despite the fact that the teaching, theorising and studying of International Relations has become so much more diverse that it now requires trans-disciplinary borrowings of insights and methods from history, sociology, anthropology, and geography, amongst others. This expansion has spawned in academic circles what goes under the rubrics of International Studies, International Historical Sociology, International Political Economy, Feminist IR, Postmodernism with its discursive-textual strategies, and Postcoloniality with its rejection of 'Eurocentric' thought frames.

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If Global Studies has to be more than just a nomenclatural change, its disciplinary vantage must break from what is already happening in International Relations. If Global Studies has to arm students to think more critically and strive for needed progressive change, the nature of modernity must come in for deeper focus along with its most important characteristic: capitalism. What we today call the era of globalisation is best seen as the most recent phase of capitalist development and not something that, in its essentials, is beyond and apart from this capitalist dynamic.

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The intellectual origins of contemporary Global Studies can be traced to the publication in 1990 of Anthony Giddens' The Consequences of Modernity. Giddens attempted to make 'globalisation' a master concept of explanation. (He defined the term as "space-time compression of social relations worldwide.") Giddens failed in his project; the term remained descriptive. However, his significant demotion of the importance of the nation-state as an actor found widespread approval from scholars in the North and the South. It opened the way to recognising the contribution of a much wider network of non-state social and cultural actors and interactions in shaping the world order.

Advocates of this new approach took up Global Studies as an improvement over International Relations to study the transformative impact of Globalisation and of 'globalisation from below' (Osamytna 2009). They waxed eloquent (and continue to) about Global Studies as the first interdisciplinary - indeed a trans-disciplinary - study of global macro-processes, incorporating politics, economy, law, ecology, geography, sociology, anthropology, culture, and ethnography.

Yet, it is a revealing lapse that there is no specific reference here to the foundational and overarching themes of 'capitalism' and 'modernity' and how closely and powerfully the latter's emergence and continuity is related to the former. This is expressive of the more general 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, which has promoted the discourses of 'multiple modernities' and 'alternative

modernities'. Both these approaches downplay, where they do not dismiss, the centrality of capitalism.

The world capitalism built

The emergence of the current world order has been shaped by the expansion of pressures imposed by early capitalist industrialisers and their state practices and the consequent struggles and efforts (successful and unsuccessful) in the 'Rest' to emulate and resist. This process of capitalist development has led to the present, where simultaneously, there is the rise of transnational economic relations and states that are juridically sharpened and territorially bounded as never before.

Capitalism does not just change the world; it changes the nature of historical change itself. What then emerges are entirely new forms of inclusion and exclusion. Newer combinations of presence and absence emerge that are otherwise attributed to processes of globalisation per se.

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Given capitalism's uneven and combined character of development, it is no surprise that all modernity everywhere is mixed and hybrid in its cultural and non-cultural dimensions. Mass literacy and mass communication have led to forms of cultural production whose range of authorship, scale, variety, and originality are way beyond anything conceivable in the premodern past. Indeed, capitalism dynamises the process of hybridity itself, even as there are other sources of hybridity. There is a combination of the old and the new not just at the levels of technology, institutions, and practices -political, economic or cultural, but also ideas and values. An instance is how, in India, the caste system remains, but it serves newer functions, and its ballasts are in so many ways different from those of the past.

The capitalist character of globalisation is today the most vital factor behind the preservation of a multiple-states system. The nation-state provides vital functions in this period of neoliberalism. Intrinsic to capitalism is competition, while the market is the crucial but not always efficient coordinating mechanism. But for capitalism to properly function, a third principle of stabilisation of capitalist practices must be established. This can only come from outside the economic process itself.

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Endemic to capitalism are crises that require macro-level rectification and protection and bail-outs from the state and the states-system. Competitive tensions between capitalist Transnational Corporations (TNCs) on a global scale translate into competition and tensions between states, requiring system-level management, which often enough fails. This is precisely because competition creates winners and losers among private capitalist units. The losers look to 'their' states to protect them from the possibilities and consequences of failure. The fear or fact of losses pushes for state protection and transnational restrictions.

The 1980s supplies an instance of these tensions. German and Japanese companies began competing with the United States to manufacture and export cars, heavy-duty machinery, and advanced technological products. The politically dominant US demanded Germany and Japan maintain their exchange rates whilst its own was significantly depreciated. The subsequent Plaza Accord of 1985 helped the US to reduce its overall trade deficit significantly but contributed to pushing Japan into a so-called lost decade of low growth and relative stagnation.

One of the unintended consequences was the rise of China. Japan's turn towards Asia for export markets helped China become a powerhouse for the production and export of consumer durables. Today, the US runs a large trade deficit against a capitalist China, which will not bend to American demands to change its exchange rate. This means the US has to resort to other economic and political pressures to help its own companies and for other geo-political purposes - a path with altogether uncertain outcomes for the world order.

The consequences of capitalism

Today, we face evils unique in the annals of human history, all linked to the nature of capitalism.

There is a most obscene and historically unmatched level of wealth concentration. Income inequality and mass poverty persist. This is the consequence of a neoliberal form of capitalist accumulation worldwide. A conservative estimate of those suffering globally from 'multi-dimensional poverty' is currently 1.6 billion. This is not because of the scarcity of resources but in spite of the fact that we are past the age of global scarcity.

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Neoliberalism is a break from older forms of Keynesianism and the 'developmentalist' state. It is a much more miserly rightwing form of capitalist expansion. It can be stabilised and institutionalised only if a corresponding rightwing shift in politics and ideology exists across nations and regions. It is no coincidence that in the last fifty or so years, there has been a dramatic rise in the 'politics of cultural exclusivism', giving rise to authoritarian populisms from above and, everywhere of t more dangerously, of those from below. All these authoritarian populisms are authoritarian nationalisms that must posit an enemy scapegoat, domestic or external, on ethnic, racial, or religious grounds, either singly or in some combination.

Simultaneously, we face the prospect of surpassing ecological limits, with profound negative consequences for the delicate metabolism that connects humans with nature.

The new millennium has dramatically shown the emergence of global pandemics of a scale and frequency quite unlike in the past. Its origins and spread are connected to the steady elimination of the distance between human habitation and wildlife, the industrialisation of livestock production, the scale of global tourism by the well-off and the compulsions of mass migration by the poor, and the rise of ever-bigger urban slums and slum-like concentrations primarily in the Global South.

If these evils are directly sourced in the nature of capitalism, the last is indirectly linked. The cloud of a possible nuclear conflagration (and, with it, a nuclear winter) looms constantly over us even as that cloud periodically shifts its geographical positioning.

The end of nuclear nationalism of select global elites will require a decisive degree of erosion of the states-system itself. If, as argued here, the nation-state system is essential to stabilise the functioning of the actually existing form of globalised capitalism we have today, getting rid of this nuclear threat requires a more humane alternative to capitalism.

Will Global Studies seek to educate students to a greater awareness of these realities and thereby arm them to do something to alter current trajectories? Given the different directions its thinkers, teachers, and students can take - and some are determined to defend and deepen capitalism - one cannot be certain that this will happen. But there is nothing to stop one from continuing to hope.

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