

## Has Covid-19 brought globalization to an end?

*Martin Albrow*

Covid-19 is a human tragedy. There is no denying that. The latest figures for deaths worldwide from the virus at the time of writing (18/05/20) are 312,646 out of the total of recorded infections of 4,673,809. The repercussions for every sector of life are proving profound.

Indeed some commentators have announced that this is the end of globalization. Well, for a start, I would say that underestimates the impact of Covid-19. It is more than the end of something, it is a beginning, the beginning of a totalization, of which more later. The virus is even more total than global.

After all, the global has long been synonymous with the future of human beings on this earth. But the virus looms over the very existence of the human species and all its imaginings of personal life, of empires and existence beyond the planet. The virus penetrates the recesses of individual reality and at the same time shakes the great powers of the world to their foundations.

The child is not exempt. 'I want to go out to play with my friends' is a complaint repeated in every household, with no exceptions for class or culture. National leaders nervously check the figures of infections in their land and worry about their standing with their own citizens. China and the USA monitor ever more closely the resulting minutest shifts in their uneasy balance of power.

This is really total, when we learn that Chinese eating habits have to change and no longer will all be served from the same pot. The triple kiss on the Dutch cheeks, the Maori nose rubbing, even the cold handshake of the English, all physical contact greetings are forbidden under the 'social distancing' rules.

Actually 'social distancing' is an inappropriate name for keeping physical space between people. What a government is limiting when it prohibits close personal contact should rightly be called 'physical distancing'. It is demanding increasing space between human bodies. What might more properly be called 'social distancing', are those acts that sustain social relations over ever longer distances, currently conquering physical space as never before.

Ever increasing varieties of voice and video conversation and conferencing allow us to contact others over any distance. They are now familiar substitutes for presence in the office or even attendance at family events like weddings. These relations at a distance are however still social, indeed come much closer to the true sense of the social.

The social nature of human beings, celebrated over two millennia ago in Greece by Aristotle and in China by Confucius, now has achieved global recognition for being unlimited by presence or absence. This is true even as the virus emphasizes that also in our natures we are

all made of the same physical stuff. The body is rooted to the spot, the social can roam free from such restrictions.

We are reaching out to other human beings who could be anywhere in the world in the vivid and renewed recognition that we all belong to a single vulnerable biological species that ultimately has only science between itself and extinction.

This is the world society of the human species as it never has been before. It extends worldwide not simply through the overlapping linkages of neighbouring communities, which has always been a fact of life, but because each one of us has a real or potential link with someone else, no matter how far we are apart. The virus means we sustain our relations with our family and friends even as it forces us to keep our distance from them.

By emphasizing absence it is a paradox that the virus illuminates with still greater clarity the nature of human society. Physical contact or proximity is not of its essence, even if it provides the necessary condition for human reproduction, (at least up until *in vitro* fertilization!).

Europeans in particular, with their past experience of incessant movement of people, have long recognised that social relations are not tied to time and place. They have a special history of restlessness, a desire to leave the familiar behind that has been a regular feature of their expansionism and empire building.

This is what Michel de Montaigne, French originator of what has come to be known as the essay, observed over 400 years ago: 'I know that the arms of friendship are long enough to reach from one end of the world to the other, and especially this where there is a continual communication of offices.' And he goes on further to describe what is summed up in the old English saying 'absence makes the heart grow fonder.'

Then it appears at first glance more than a little strange that many commentators have remarked that Covid-19 means the end of globalization. What actually they mainly have in mind is an idea of globalization that restricts it largely to the economic sphere, and in particular to free trade between nations. Ever since its foundation in 1843 *The Economist* has championed free trade between nations and has seen globalization in that light since the term became prominent in the 1980s. Hence it's cover title for March 22, 'Goodbye globalisation: The dangerous lure of self-sufficiency'.

But trade between countries is not everything in the world's economy. When the OECD published a special report on globalization in 1993 it emphasized transnational firms, jumping over tariff boundaries. People migrate to find jobs. They take their tastes with them. Culture and communication are even more global than trade.

'Self-sufficiency' in fact reinforces globalization. What it means is that a product made elsewhere should be made at home. That secures the spread of the product and methods of production. Montaigne pointed that out too when he said the Chinese had printing and artillery a thousand years before his time, so why the great fuss being made then about having them in Europe.

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Perhaps we should be talking about the globalization of confusion. *The Financial Times* only two months ago featured an article by Robert Armstrong, “Coronavirus is not a crisis of globalisation”. The *FT* and *The Economist* are two of the most influential publications in the world for business news. When they advance diametrically opposed judgments on the fallout from the virus and its consequences for globalization we can only conclude something is happening that is spooking global opinion leaders.

Staying cool, consider what could be more globalized than the daily figures of the worldwide spread of the virus that Johns Hopkins University publishes and that I have used at the start of this piece? What of the worldwide interest in what happens in a city in the middle of China?

Wuhan is now a familiar place worldwide, when previously outside China most people would have been hard pressed to say which country it was in. That of course depends on global communication, as does the general knowledge that the Tokyo Olympics have had to be postponed for a year.

The Olympics of course is a prime example of the long roots of globalization, an idea with antecedents in Ancient Greece, celebrated in Athens for the first time in the modern era in 1896, and now a movement that brings sports of all kinds together in one amazing festival every four years. The global becomes local in the Games itself but is already localized worldwide as they focus the efforts of aspiring athletes, players and participants all over the world for years ahead of them.

The currents that carry globalization forward are fundamentally cultural, the spread of ideas and knowledge in particular, especially in and through science and technology. National boundaries can do little to prevent the spread of knowledge and indeed today the quest for a vaccine for the virus is a shared effort across the globe, where the claims to ownership are insignificant compared with the vast fund of shared knowledge that is at the disposal of all medical scientists from every nation.

So what price these announcements of the end of globalization? What their authors have in mind primarily are the interruptions in supply chains as countries are forced to erect barriers to travel and the movement of goods during the Covid-19 crisis. They also are thinking of the accentuation of geo-political tensions as national leaderships come under more pressure from the impact of the virus on their citizens.

Strengthening national borders, checking the flows of capital, goods and people certainly impedes the growth of international trade and the movement of people in search of work. Many have equated the rise of a single global market with globalization. Certainly there was a period when the drive towards world-wide freedom of trade, dubbed ‘neo-liberalism’ by its opponents was regarded as the core of globalization with its corresponding limitation on national governments’ options to shape their own economic policies.

But that was a notion of globalization promoted by the interests that benefited most from it, above all by the most powerful nation-state. Complete free trade between countries may result in an overall increase in benefits, but they are distributed unevenly and it is the biggest national economy that gains the most. In the nineteenth century it was the British who championed free

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trade, in the twentieth the United States used to beat the drum for that kind of globalization, now it is more often China.

In point of fact economic globalization should not be equated with tariff free trade. When a country imposes duties on imports it may also encourage foreign companies to locate production of those goods in it, thus creating new centres of local employment. What has been globalized is the product, something Coca-Cola understood early in the story of its world-wide expansion.

That kind of corporate globalization has in turn prompted another complaint, that tastes are everywhere becoming standardized, or in the words of one critic, that the world has become 'flat'. But corporate global strategy may adopt a different approach from Coca-Cola. If you go to a McDonalds in Budapest you can buy goulash, or in Beijing Sichuan double chicken burger.

Certainly the World Trade Organization managed reduction of tariffs between countries has helped the growth of supply chains that extend across the world. In the case of sophisticated manufactured products the components themselves for the assembled item, for instance a motor vehicle, may come from any number of countries. The measures countries take to lessen the impact of Covid-19 may cause interruptions in those chains, but Toyotas will continue to be sold in the United States and Mercedes in China.

Globalization goes on all the time. What doesn't happen is a reduction in the diversity of life and differences between cultures. What doesn't happen is a march to the same destination. There is no single outcome, but there is the continuing experience of multiple cultures in the same place.

Technologies of communication have brought the possibility of knowing what is happening to one's closest and dearest even when they are in another continent. They allow us to talk of events in far off places. One vivid example I used in my *The Global Age* in 1996 was of the 'milk drinking' Ganesh, the Indian god, that was seen in Delhi one day, and sightings were reported world-wide the next. *The Guardian* newspaper at the time called it 'the first example of global religious fervour propagated by mass telecommunications'.

The virus emphasizes the nature of social relationships as nothing before has done, even as it highlights the dangers of physical contact with relatives, friends and colleagues working in close proximity. The result has been worldwide transformation of the workplace, in factories, offices, shops, restaurants.

In many cases these places of employment have been closed down altogether. Venues for sport and entertainment, stadiums and theatres have become echo chambers rather than echoing to applause. The underlying principles of many institutions have been brought into question. Justice and the law are not exempt.

The principle of trial by jury has for centuries occupied a central place in the English idea of the administration of justice. The standard way this has been put into practice in a criminal case is in a single court room, where a judge presides, faced by the accused person in the dock and lawyers for the prosecution and defence. A jury of 12 persons, chosen randomly from the

general population, also sit together facing the accused. Normally members of the public will be admitted to a gallery above the court proceedings.

The way the case proceeds in open court has of course made it a favourite dramatic setting for plays and films, though at times the court empties for the parties to consult each other. The culmination of the trial, beloved by the dramatist, celebrated in the classic film *Twelve Angry Men* starring Henry Fonda, is when the jury withdraws to a separate room in complete privacy to consider its collective verdict, often a protracted discussion that can take hours or even days. Covid-19 has caused the suspension of the whole process.

Only now, eight weeks after the lockdown in the UK, are tentative attempts being made to conduct trials that observe ‘social distancing’. Jury members have to sit 2 metres apart. Lawyers and officials argue about how they can be seated when the court room has not been designed for that kind of spacing. The jury room is now too small. Another court room has to be taken over for the jury’s private consultations. The old saying ‘justice delayed is justice denied’ is taking on a new virus related meaning.

It spans the world even as it penetrates the intimate spaces of personal life. It is total in its pervasiveness and extent, beyond anything the prophets of globalization could have imagined. This is something other than globalization, distinct in its origin and in its penetration, for each individual.

Sometimes a person is affected directly, in their body. They die from catching the virus. You can’t die from catching globalization. At other times they have to stay one or two metres away from other people. This is not globalization either, though it is the advice of the World Health Organization or their government.

This is pandemic. In its incidence it is helped by globalization in the sense of the ease with which people can travel these days and therefore multiply their contacts. But it also is quite different in its comprehensive impact. It penetrates every aspect of personal and institutional life. If one wants a term that suggests a process, like globalization does, then totalization would have to be more appropriate. What we experience now is the totalizing moment in human history.

The past use of ‘total’ in writing about social and political affairs has of course been most prominent in the idea of totalitarianism. This cuts across regular thinking about types of government, because it has no direct relation to democracy. We can have open or total types of democracy in the sense that both depend on the will of the people, but in the total case, at its extreme, every institution and all aspects of personal life are subject to inspection and regulation.

The virus has brought the total moment to global society. To understand this we really have to be clear in our minds what the difference is between global and total. ‘Global’, since its rise in general use ever since the Second World War refers to the shared fate of our species on this earth. ‘Total’ means that every aspect of individual and collective life comes under scrutiny and control.

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You count, inspect and gather all the individual items together to get the total sum. You provide a cover that can accommodate everything when you go global. The total penetrates whatever there is, the global expands to ensure nothing is left out.

Covid-19 has brought the first ‘total-global’ moment, unprecedented in human experience, so far as we know from recorded history. World wars have been approximations to it, but even they have not had the comprehensive impact that the virus is having on daily life everywhere on earth.

It is common to say that nothing will ever be the same again. In this time of shock that may seem obvious. But world wars lasted very much longer than the virus has spread up to now and the world did recover enough to triple its population, double edged of course.

Many of the changes will come from the added impetus to the advance of communication technology precisely because it operates to intensify both the total and the global. Rivalry between states, competition between corporations, individual aspirations for contact and knowledge all add up to a comprehensive digitalization of life.

Whether this relentless advance of technology will actually assist or imperil the future of humankind on this earth is a question that remains to be answered after the virus crisis has passed. Our best hope is that we learn lessons from the experience that can be put to good use in averting the worst consequences of climate change. The total may yet help the global.

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