

# Contested Globalizations: Social Movements and the Struggle for Global Democracy

Author(s): Jackie Smith, University of Notre Dame

---

The concept of globalization is a highly contested one. But at the core of the idea is that the world is becoming more interconnected along a number of important and often distinct dimensions. Many contemporary political movements reflect conflicts over the nature and emphasis of global integration. As global economic and political institutions come to influence an ever-greater scope of social life, this conflict over the nature and direction of globalization has escalated and come into sharper focus. Following analysts writing in the *Global Civil Society Yearbook*, we might identify four major responses to globalizing processes. Predominant are the "neo-liberal" globalizers who emphasize the economic dimension of global integration. These are pure "free traders" who favour global integration, especially economic ties, without qualification. Neo-liberals might also be called "market fundamentalists," since they generally prefer policies that prioritize market dynamics over public policy-making in decisions about the distribution and allocation of resources.

Many people and groups support some forms of global integration, but they emphasize forms of international co-operation that protect human rights and enhance the capacities of peoples to live healthy, fulfilling, and dignified lives. While their vision of globalization is less homogeneous and therefore less clearly defined than that of neo-liberals, what these actors share is a commitment to democratic forms of global integration. They actively seek transborder co-operation that enhances democracy and human rights. I, therefore, refer to them as "democratic globalizers." Democratic globalizers approve of global integration that leads to greater equity and fosters the development of international law. Democratic globalizers comprise a loosely connected network of groups and individuals who are consciously seeking ways to create global level structures to maximize democratic values, but they also consist of actors working at more local levels who may not have a fully articulated vision of how their local work relates to a global struggle for democratic governance.

Alongside these two pro-integration visions, we find two anti-globalist visions. Proponents of one of these anti-global visions may be called "selective globalizers." They favour global integration only when it suits their own particular interest (or the interests of their clients), remaining indifferent to any negative consequences for others. They pursue a regressive or exclusionary vision of globalization that seeks to maximize globalization's benefits for privileged groups, often at the expense of others' needs or preferences. The other anti-global perspective consists of "rejectionists," or those who oppose all forms of globalization as infringements on national or local autonomy and cultures. They are seen in both right-wing nationalist and religious struggles, such as those fueled by groups like al Qaeda as well as among others on the left or right who reject all global agreements on principle without offering a vision of how to address global crises that demand international co-operation.

To the extent that pro-globalization visions fail to capture the support and imagination of more of the world's peoples, the anti-global visions will become more attractive to more groups who feel their basic needs and interests are threatened by global changes. The tension between a need for some sort of global coordination or framework for co-operation and the desire to maintain some group

autonomy or control over the nature of integration demands that we find ways to support more inclusive and accountable forms of global integration from those that predominate today.

My research explores the history of popular attempts to promote more inclusive, democratic visions of globalization over the predominant market-based, neo-liberal one. It seeks to better understand how social movement efforts might contribute to promoting a vision of globalization that enables multiple identities and values to flourish. In other words, I ask whether movements to protect legitimate group interests and autonomy can help transform neo-liberal globalization. If we understand the broad array of groups mobilized to promote various progressive change agendas as part of a diverse and loosely connected grouping of democratic globalizers, we might gain some insights into how this network might strengthen the prospects for a global system that is more inclusive and democratic than its neo-liberal alternative.

Throughout modern times, the world has seen a variety of attempts by people working across national borders to affect change at the national and interstate level. They have shared ideas and analyses, cultivated solidarity networks to support their respective struggles, and increasingly have built more formal and sustained structures for transnational exchange and co-operation. They have promoted goals such as the abolition of slavery, the expansion of worker rights and other international human rights, the elimination of war and colonialism, and the promotion of socialism and democracy.

In a variety of ways, transnational activists have sought to reorient the distribution of economic and political power in the global system. While the specific issues on which they focus have varied, they all have somehow sought to limit states' capacity for waging war, to promote human rights as a protection against the arbitrary use of state power, or to expand access to political and economic resources by marginalized groups. Occasionally they have adopted explicitly multilateralist aims, seeking to build formal interstate institutions that could check the activities of individual governments. Over time, the major emphases of transnational activism shifted, building upon the lessons of prior activism. Prior to 1945 most transnational activism focused on defining the boundaries of state authority, and this was reflected in movements to end slavery and colonialism, to limit war-making, and to expand government protections for workers. The post-war period saw renewed attention to fostering multilateral co-operation, particularly within the new United Nations system. The 1980s saw a specialization of activity within the United Nations in response to issue-specific global conferences and other attempts at international coordination. This enhanced opportunities for citizens' groups to mobilize transnationally, and many new organizations emerged in this era to promote global agendas. Finally, the most recent post-1990s era is characterized by global justice activism that is less closely tied to the UN system. In fact, many contemporary organizers are ambivalent about the UN, and they are less likely than their predecessors to promote multilateral co-operation.

This historic overview shows that an important source of social movements' strength is the fact that modern governments and institutions depend upon the consent of the governed for their authority. To the extent that global institutions lack mechanisms to obtain popular consent, they face a democratic deficit that threatens to undermine their legitimacy. Thus, governments and international officials can find common cause with social movement actors. Indeed, many of the aims of the United Nations and other global institutions — such as promoting human rights and peace, enhancing economic development and equity, and ending practices that degrade the environment — correspond with the goals of social movements. Here aspirations for globalization and autonomy are complementary. In fact, the history of activism shows that people have learned new ways of expressing concerns for autonomy within a globalized context.

I conclude from this analysis that those seeking a peaceful and equitable world order should worry about the shift in transnational activism away from multilateralist visions of globalization. Given what we know about this history of relations between social movements and multilateralism, we can argue that the future of global institutions like the United Nations will depend upon vibrant transnational social movements. However, in recent years we have seen the rise of an anti-democratic backlash against democratic globalizers, whereby advocates of anti-globalist visions are seeking to restrict public deliberation about global policy. This is happening even as global decisions have increasingly important implications for local practices. By excluding the vast majority of people, neo-liberal globalizers are fanning the flames of anti-globalism, encouraging support for those selective globalizers — who would seek to exploit the weaknesses of others to advance their own interests — or for the rejectionists who resist global integration of all kinds. The inherent tension between globalization and autonomy will, under these circumstances, generate violent responses — just as authorities have chosen to use violence against those wanting to challenge neo-liberal dominance in global policy arenas.

The effectiveness of global institutions requires greater legitimacy for global institutions, which in turn requires responsiveness to demands for greater equity, inclusion, and transparency. If governments and other authorities really hope to limit the possibilities for violent conflicts, they should step up efforts to enhance the formal organization of public participation in global policy debates. Building upon these lessons will require a more conscious effort by activists to cultivate allies who will help them promote democratic and inclusive multilateral institutions. It will also require more systematic efforts to enhance democracy within social movement organizations themselves. Many groups are seeking to do this, but they face important resource constraints among other obstacles. Governments, for their part, will need to reclaim some of their authority to govern capitalist markets so that democracy can flourish. They must recognize the fundamental weakness of global institutions that deny citizens any meaningful role even though their legitimacy ultimately depends upon popular acceptance and accountability.