

Globalization, Autonomy, and the Third World: The Struggle for Hearts and Minds in Guatemala and Vietnam in the 1960s

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My research focuses on the relationship between globalization and empire during the Cold War, especially in the Third World. Also known as the lesser developed countries, the Third World consists of those portions of the globe, mostly in the southern hemisphere that are non-white, poor, underdeveloped, and formerly colonized by the European great powers. As studies of globalization have traditionally neglected this region, I was especially interested in exploring the following project questions: How and in what ways are globalization and globality engaged and contested across historical moments? To what extent is the engagement and contestation of globalization and globality a struggle for or against autonomy? How does our research connect globalization and autonomy with the ideas of imperialism and empire? How do these connections and these ideas vary across time and at different globalization moments?

In researching these questions I have defined globalization, as have many others in this project, as the "spread of supraterritoriality." Although the term "supraterritoriality" may appear awkward, it emphasizes globalization's uniqueness by describing how the world has become more interconnected not just geographically but also in social space. Proponents of this view have cautioned that globalization should be distinguished from other closely related terms, such as internationalization, liberalization, universalization, and modernization. Unfortunately, the lack of a consensus about the definition of globalization has led to much conceptual confusion in the mass media and the scholarly literature. The so-called anti-globalization movement, for example, is in reality a series of globally connected protest movements that oppose a certain form of global economic integration. To use the term "anti-globalization" to describe these movements is to adopt the propaganda framework of those who endorse neo-liberalism as the only form that globalization can take. As my research demonstrates, globalization caused severe social strains in the 1960s. In undergoing decolonization, many lesser developed countries rejected the liberal world capitalist order championed by the United States (or what some scholars call the "US-led globalization project"). Third World revolutionaries did not oppose globalization (indeed the term did not even exist then), however, they did imagine a world connected in ways that would enhance the autonomy of the poor and the marginalized.

Historians do not yet agree on how to periodize globalization. Yet it is clear that globalization began to accelerate dramatically in the 1960s due to advances in communications, the spread of markets, innovations in financial transactions, the proliferation of international organizations, the invention of new global production systems, rising transworld ecological problems, and the emergence of a truly global consciousness. President John F. Kennedy's "Decade of Development" speech, for example, represented an important "globalizing moment" because it signalled a new approach to "nation building" based on modernization theory. Kennedy advocated foreign aid to win the "hearts and minds" of peoples living in "traditional societies" lest they fall prey to communism. In designing foreign aid programs, US officials promoted private enterprise, open markets, and free trade in the belief that

Third World countries could benefit by imitating the American experience. The assumption made little historical sense (the United States had been in fact highly protectionist) but the myth of liberal developmentalism conveniently served to justify the expansion of US hegemony.

My research shows that the US-led globalization project ran aground in countries such as Guatemala and Vietnam, where peasants did not embrace liberal developmentalism. Indeed, the very disorders that engulfed these countries resulted from the kind of globalization that transpired under earlier empires. The Vietnamese revolution (initially against France and then the United States) in particular provided a model of resistance that inspired others to challenge US hegemony. In advocating worldwide socialist revolution, leaders such as Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh groped for a form of globalization that would address the needs of impoverished nations. US officials, mired in ethnocentrism and paternalism, could not fathom that some peasants would willingly support this effort. Instead, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations blamed communist agitators for duping the masses. US military counterinsurgency strategies eventually undermined "hearts and minds" programs, resulting in some of the most grotesque violence of the twentieth century. The United States dropped three times as many bombs on Vietnam as were dropped in World War II by all combatants. By the 1990s, the Guatemalan counterinsurgency had taken the lives of more than 200,000, most of them indigenous peoples.

These findings suggest that globalization has not been simply a top-down affair in which the world marched harmoniously toward a neo-liberal vision. While some European countries may have embraced the American dream, "empire by invitation" did not apply to most of the Third World, which viewed the US-led globalization project as a threat to its autonomy. Although the United States suffered a military defeat in Vietnam, Third World revolutions ultimately proved incapable of stemming the tide of neo-liberalism. By the end of the Cold War, many if not most Third World countries were being forced to accept free trade and investment agreements dictated by the G7, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund. The revolutionaries of the 1960s also failed to address adequately the interests of particular subaltern groups such as women and indigenous peoples. While nationalism still remains a potent force among the lesser developed countries, many transnational activist groups, such as the pan-Maya movement emerging out of Guatemala since the end of the civil war, have begun organizing to challenge neo-liberal globalization. At the very least, the revolutionary movements of the 1960s won the political space needed to launch these efforts.