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Globalisation: Cultural Imperialism or New Individualism?

Globalizacja — imperializm kulturowy czy nowy indywidualizm?

ABSTRACT

The article is a voice in the discussion on globalization and attempt to answer the question whether it is neutral in terms of cultural description of the geopolitical realities of the 21st century, or normative vision of some form of life? The statement was constructed on the basis of a critical review of contemporary social theory, in which globalization is seen as a process of transforming not only the institutions and organizations, but also the very fabric of identity and personal life. In conclusion, we formulated the thesis of the two ways in which globalization has made in the sphere of culture. The first is the homogenization, where it promotes the same for all values, the same patterns of consumption. The second is diversification, feed to the extraction and creation of nationalism, the search for individuality, identity building (often constructed based on the tradition). Individual culture reconstruct their specificity, endemising transnational cultural forms, and therefore should pay attention not only to the global institutionalization of worldly life, but also the location of globality. The task of the future of social theory is, therefore, critical examination and analysis of the social conditions in which the global media can both strengthen and weaken national culture and identity.

Artykuły i rozprawy

Articles and Dissertations

ABSTRAKT

Artykuł jest głosem w dyskusji na temat zjawiska globalizacji i próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy jest ono neutralnym pod względem kulturowym opisem geopolitycznych realiów XXI wieku, czy też normatywną wizją pewnej formy życia? Wypowiedź skonstruowano na podstawie krytycznego przeglądu współczesnej teorii społecznej, w której globalizacja jawi się jako proces przekształcający nie tylko instytucje i organizacje, lecz także samą tkankę tożsamości i życia osobistego. We wnioskach końcowych sformułowano tezę o dwóch sposobach, w jakich dokonuje się globalizacja w sferze kultury. Pierwszy to homogenizacja, w której promuje się te same dla wszystkich wartości oraz wzory konsumpcji. Drugi to dywersyfikacja doprowadzająca do wyodrębniania się i tworzenia nacjonalizmów, poszukiwania odrębności, budowania tożsamości (często opartej na konstruowanej tradycji). Poszczególne kultury rekonstruują swą specyfikę, endemizując ponadnarodowe formy kulturowe, w związku z czym należy zwrócić uwagę nie tylko na globalną instytucjonalizację światowego życia, ale również na lokalizację globalności. Zadaniem przyszłej teorii społecznej jest zatem krytyczne badanie i analizowanie warunków społecznych, w których globalne media mogą zarówno wzmacniać, jak i osłabiać narodowe kultury i tożsamości.

The article discusses globalisation and attempts to answer the question of whether globalisation is a culturally neutral description of geo-political reality of the 21st century or a normative vision of a particular lifestyle. The article has been written on the basis of a critical review of a modern social theory that perceives globalisation as a process transforming not only institutions and organisations but the very notion of identity and personal life as well. Globalisation has become a widely accepted way of thinking in scientific circles; it is used to describe many social, cultural and geo-political phenomena. In fact, the notion of globalisation has become so overexploited that it has almost lost its meaning. However, the answer to the question of whether globalisation truly denotes the world without boundaries, the networked world, turbo-capitalism and uniformity of life becomes far more complex should the main theories on globalisation itself be considered.

Approaches to globalisation

Global sceptics question the claims that we are witnessing a comprehensive shift towards a profound integration of the world. Statistics on trade and investment show that at the end of the 19th century there was a surge in economic flows then an intensification of international interactions in the 20th century, but otherwise the world has not changed drastically. The sceptics who contradict the proponents of globalisation and maintain that the world looks very much the same as in the not so distant past have adopted a similar approach. The concepts proposed by Paul Hirst and Graham Thompson constitute a particularly interesting standpoint on the critical approach to globalisation. Hirst and Thompson had been analysing world investment flows for 25 years and as a result have rejected practically all of the statements of globalisation. They did admit the cultural interactions and communication among countries have intensified, however they have never reached the level of a truly global economy. Moreover, multinational global corporations are not in fact 'global'— these are simply concerns that operate in a given country and are the headquarters of international branches.[1] The sceptics claim that it is regionalisation and not globalisation that shapes the world economy. Due to intense regionalisation of such trade areas as the European Union or North America, the world economy becomes increasingly less and not more global. What is more, countries do not lose their sovereignty, on the contrary, internationalisation must conform to the rules and regulations of the countries that embrace the concept and is subject to their control.[2]

Anti-globalists claim that globalism strengthens international corporations and facilitates financial speculation, entrenches inequality, weakens democracy, supports Western imperialism and the Americanisation of the world, destroys the environment, brutalises the public sphere and violates state structures. This opinion is rooted in the neo-Marxist conviction that capitalism supports a pathological expansion that aims to increase the geographical coverage of

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[1]   P. Hirst, G. Thompson, *Globalization in Question. The International Economy and the Possibilities of Governance*, Cambridge 1999, p. 15–16.

[2]   Ibidem.

Western markets and corporations. As a result, globalisation is often perceived as a process enforced from higher up and its outcome as a kind of standardisation. The weakness of this opinion lies in the fact that it cannot fully circumstantiate its own social criticism. Anti-globalists have a tendency to focus on economic integration processes and ignore social, cultural and political transformations thus neglecting how globalisation is shaped and what factors prevent its dispersion.[3]

The radical concept of globalisation emphasises the benefits it brings for democracy and the alternatives to centralised government resulting from global financial markets and the development of pop culture all over the world. This does not connote that the radical globalists are not concerned with the current distribution of wealth and economic power, however they believe that globalisation is a positive, beneficial and inevitable phenomenon. According to Kenichi Ohmae, one of the best-known Japanese radical globalists, the emergence of the global economy and its swift development heralds the end of the nation state, as countries no longer have at their disposal the effective financial tools necessary to manage their own economies.[4]

Global supporters of transformation claim that globalisation portends 'restructuring' in economy, politics, culture and personal life. This does not foretell the arrival of a brand new era (as believed by radical globalists) but the adjustment to the world that transforms the already existing structures and changes the relationship between national and international issues as well as the internal and external ones. David Held is one of the most sophisticated supporters of this standpoint. Held claims that globalisation "has neither weakened nor diminished the authority of the state but has simply transformed it in the following areas: the extent of global networks, the intensity of global ties, the speed of global flows and the tendencies of global co-dependence."[5] According to Held, globalisation is definitely responsible for 'stretching' social relations as decisions or events taking place in one part of the world definitely exert an influence on what happens elsewhere.[6]

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[3]   A. Elliott, *Współczesna teoria społeczna*, transl. P. Tomanek, Warszawa 2011, p. 376.

[4]   K. Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State. The Rise of Regional Economies*, New York 1995, p. 183.

[5]   D. Held, *Global Transformations*, Cambridge 1999, p. 10.

[6]   Ibidem.

Social theory vs. globalisation

It seems that all aspects of social life, beginning with finance, economy, shopping malls to consumption of goods, are influenced by globalisation. However, despite the fact that global sceptics had to cede a lot of intellectual and political ground to radical globalists, there are still many issues that are being questioned by modern social theory. For instance, there is the question how deep are the global networks, flows and processes and whether they are really global or relate solely to what is happening in the West. Although globalisation does bring about many technological and economic changes in such cities as New York, Sidney or Singapore these changes are less obvious in Belgrade, Warsaw or Sophia. How does the notion encompass the Third World societies? Is it a culturally and politically neutral description of the geo-political reality of the 21st century or a normative vision of a particular lifestyle? The initial conclusion is that globalisation transforms not only institutions and organisations but the very notion of identity and personal life as well.

Thus the key issue is how individuals cope with corporate and network pressure exerted on their identity. And what are the relations between identity and the society itself? It seems that globalisation is a source of a new type of individualism rather than standardisation of life both in individual and social perspective.

There are three institutional phenomena that shape and influence the way individuals experience globalisation: consumerism, neo-liberalism and privatisation. The language we use to describe individualism is suffused with expressions denoting possessions, ownership, control and market value. As Richard Sennett says the culture of globalisation has its own short-sighted logics. He claims that the flexibility demanded from employees by huge international concerns unveils the true face of globalisation and promotes the dominant concept of an individual as a disposable entity. It seems however that Sennett did not carry out a critical analysis of how deeply the global ethos of the short-term approach is entwined within the emotional sphere of an individual.[7] This all-encompassing fear of becoming

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[7]   R. Sennett, *Korozja charakteru, osobiste konsekwencje pracy w nowym kapi-talizmie*, transl. J. Dzierzgowski, Ł. Mikołajewski, Warszawa 2006, p. 205; R. Sennett, *Kultura nowego kapitalizmu*, transl. G. Brzozowski, K. Osłowski, Warszawa 2010, p. 116.

redundant, of lagging behind in the quest to improve the private and professional life is the driving force behind this 'new individualism'. This particular individualism is rooted in a new cultural imperative of being faster, more productive, more flexible, more resourceful and better than ever in self-improvement and not just occasionally, but on the on-going basis. This imperative makes social life experimental and places in the foreground the excitement of new individualism. The emotional costs are high, however, and many personal stories quoted by Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert are full of confusion, fear and depression. This emotional turmoil is not restricted to individuals as the new individualism is first and foremost the consequence of a very intense globalisation. Ironically, by removing traditional state boundaries, globalisation provides an absolute freedom to do whatever people want, on the other hand, the world where everything is allowed has become a truly depressing one.[8] The fact is that the fear inseparably linked to making choices has been separated from practical and ethical guidelines on how to act. The individuals seduced and charmed by this new individualism are under a threat of incurring changes so quickly and so completely that their identity may become redundant. The reality is that we are lost and we do not belong.

The relation between identity and society seems to relate mostly to the networked world, that is, communication. For a long time social theorists thought that the social space is linked with the functioning of the nanny state. Space was a significant aspect of the society and both these terms had been capitalised in the categories of clear boundaries, territories and maps. Once the western countries have entered e-commerce stage, space has once again become a blurred notion in social theory. Anthony Giddens wrote about "the separation of time and space, the extension of social relations onto long space-time dimensions."[9] David Harvey has formulated "time-space compression in the post-modern conditions."[10] Paul Virilio spoke

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[8]   A. Elliott, Ch. Lemert, *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization*, London 2006, p. 188.

[9]   A. Giddens, *Europa w epoce globalnej*, transl. M. Klimowicz, M. Habura, Warszawa 2009, p. 256.

[10] D. Harvey, *Neoliberalizm. Historia katastrofy*, transl. J.P. Listwan, Warszawa 2008.

about the 'annihilation of space' in our era of digital capacities.[11] All these concepts gained a lot of publicity in social theory. However, defining space in purely virtual categories, stretching it to the point where the very category of distance disappears, means that social theory faces the risk of neglecting these logical functions and social contexts that actually organise spatial-social relations. Manuel Castells, a Spanish social theorist fully aware of these problems, has defined space as flows and has emphasised the close relationship between identity and authority, personal and political life. In his opinion, to be able to understand space flows in modern, networked societies it is necessary to define "targeted, repetitive and programmable sequences of exchange and interactions between physically separated positions occupied by social actors."[12] This in turn means that all aspects of modern economic networks—the infrastructure, the size, the complexity and mutual information flows all over the world differ from each other and their characteristics depend on the country and culture they take place in.

There is no doubt that the internal networks linked to globalisation will exert a dominant influence on the relations between identity and the society in general. However, the basic objection to Castells' society theory is its claim of omnipresence. It relates mostly to the techno-worlds of Microsoft, Apple and Google and ignores millions of people inhabiting the third world countries who are excluded from the information era. Networked societies are the ones that create new forms of social exclusion and cultural polarisation.[13] The thesis on cultural imperialism claiming that it is the result of communication globalisation is tricky to uphold. The critics insist it does not have consistent consequences. John B. Thompson claims that despite the increasing control of large corporations over modern communication networks, nations interpret media coverage in new ways. Notwithstanding whether we watch American series such as The Sopranos or Six Feet Under in Asia, listen to hip-hop in China or surf the Net in Lagos, there are numerous hidden assumptions, discourses,

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[11] P. Virilio, *Bomba informacyjna*, transl. S. Królak, Warszawa 2006.

[12] M. Castells, *Społeczeństwo sieci*, transl. M. Marody, K. Pawluś, J. Stawiński, S. Szymański, Warszawa 2007, p. 412.

[13] Ibidem, p. 414.

norms, values and ideologies that serve as a prism for interpreting media coverage and products. According to Thompson this indicates that the advent of globalisation does not portend the end of cultural diversity. Similarly, John Tomlinson, a media specialist, claims these media products are always interpreted in local context, which inevitably alters the content. The acceptance of this approach does not belie the fact that cultural imperialism seriously threatens many local cultures. It is believed that new global communication systems create hybrid cultures. Globalisation of electronic media, as suggested by Tomlinson, may have a pluralist influence on identity since global networks cause simultaneously the continuation of earlier social practices and their renouncement which in turn questions the accuracy of cultural imperialism.[14]

Final conclusions

Globalisation is a complex, not yet thoroughly examined issue operating in many spheres. Personally, I am inclined to support the thesis that at least in the sphere of culture, globalisation manifests itself in two ways. On one hand, it means homogenisation, particularly in the area of pop culture promoting the same values and consumption patterns for everyone. On the other, it means diversification resulting in the emergence of nationalism, the quest for distinctiveness and identity often built on traditional values. Particular cultures reconstruct their unique character and modify supranational cultural forms in endemic environment. Thus, attention should be paid not only to global institutionalisation of the world but also to the attempts to give local character to global aspects. Benjamin R. Barber calls these two spheres the jihad and McWorld; one is driven by provincial fantasies, the other by universal markets.[15]

Thus the role of the future social theory is to analyse and research social conditions as the global media may either weaken or strengthen local cultures and identities.

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[14] J. Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism. A Critical Introduction*, London 1991, p. 61.

[15] B. Barber, *Dżihad kontra McŚwiat*, transl. H. Jankowska, Warszawa 2004, p. 10.

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