

Analysis

What is globalisation?

Simon Jeffery explains the origins and meaning of the now ubiquitous term

Simon Jefferyguardian.co.uk, Thursday 31 October 2002 12.59 GMT

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It was the anti-globalisation movement that really put globalisation on the map. As a word it has existed since the 1960s, but the protests against this allegedly new process, which its opponents condemn as a way of ordering people's lives, brought globalisation out of the financial and academic worlds and into everyday current affairs jargon.

But that scarcely brings us nearer to what globalisation means. The phenomenon could be a great deal of different things, or perhaps multiple manifestations of one prevailing trend. It has become a buzzword that some will use to describe everything that is happening in the world today.

The dictionary definition is a great deal drier. Globalisation (*n*) is the "process enabling financial and investment markets to operate internationally, largely as a result of deregulation and improved communications" (Collins) or - from the US - to "make worldwide in scope or application" (Webster). The financial markets, however, are where the story begins.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the business model termed the "globalised" financial market came to be seen as an entity that could have more than just an economic impact on the parts of the world it touched.

Globalisation came to be seen as more than simply a way of doing business, or running financial markets - it became a process. From then on the word took

on a life of its own. Centuries earlier, in a similar manner, the techniques of industrial manufacturing led to the changes associated with the process of industrialisation, as former country dwellers migrated to the cramped but booming industrial cities to tend the new machines.

So how does the globalised market work? It is modern communications that make it possible; for the British service sector to deal with its customers through a call centre in India, or for a sportswear manufacturer to design its products in Europe, make them in south-east Asia and sell them in north America.

But this is where the anti-globalisation side gets stuck in. If these practices replace domestic economic life with an economy that is heavily influenced or controlled from overseas, then the creation of a globalised economic model and the process of globalisation can also be seen as a surrender of power to the corporations, or a means of keeping poorer nations in their place.

Low-paid sweatshop workers, GM seed pressed on developing world farmers, selling off state-owned industry to qualify for IMF and World Bank loans and the increasing dominance of US and European corporate culture across the globe have come to symbolise globalisation for some of its critics.

The anti-globalisation movement is famously broad, encompassing environmentalists, anarchists, unionists, the hard left, some of the soft left, those campaigning for fair development in poorer countries and others who want to tear the whole thing down, in the same way that the original Luddites attacked mechanised spinning machines.

Not everyone agrees that globalisation is necessarily evil, or that globalised corporations are running the lives of individuals or are more powerful than nations. Some say that the spread of globalisation, free markets and free trade into the developing world is the best way to beat poverty - the only problem is that free markets and free trade do not yet truly exist.

Globalisation can be seen as a positive, negative or even marginal process. And regardless of whether it works for good or ill, globalisation's exact meaning will continue to be the subject of debate among those who oppose, support or simply observe it.

A recent report in the Press Gazette, the trade magazine for journalists, dealt with attempts by a BBC focus group to throw some light on how far television audiences understand news reports.

In one clip, economics editor Evan Davies referred to "globalisation - whatever that means". A panellist replied: "Well if he doesn't what it means, how the hell are we supposed to?"

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