

So, whatever happened to the idea of globalisation?

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, JAN 21 2011

I have never been a fan of Globalisation. This is why I've not been distressed to see how quickly it seems to have vanished from the IR shelves, as it were. What is interesting is that not too many questions have been asked as to why it has disappeared from the discipline's life so quickly – and, more importantly, what the whole infatuation with the idea tells us about IR and, as importantly, about ourselves.

A personal experience first got me thinking about the hole in our intellectual lives that the notion Globalisation presented.

Let me explain. In 1997/8, at the time of the Asian financial crisis, South Africa experienced mini-crises around its currency, the Rand. My son, Daniel, then seven, came back from school and asked me if I knew what was happening to the currency. I replied in some vague and, probably, absent-minded way but then Dan confidently retorted, "Gee, Dad, haven't you heard of Globalisation. That's affecting the Rand." My immediate response was a father's pride. "Wow, I have a genius of a child. Surely he is going save me from the pecuniary embarrassment promised by my choice of profession".

But, then, I thought a bit deeper. What kind of word captures conversations on a play-ground – the kind of word that organises the news into simple frames which youngsters can easily understand? I remembered, too, my own childhood interest in the field and the confusion everything seemed to be until, one day, I heard about something call the "Cold War".

Since then I've always laid the two ideas – Cold War and Globalisation – down alongside each other. Large frames – meta-theoretical frames, if you like – which enable us to order and explain the confusing nature of a rapidly changing world. The problem with framings like this – is how quickly they get to use us, the observer or analyst. So, instead, of carefully trying to explain an event – like the mini-crisis round the Rand in 1977/8 – picking out its details, we hide behind the idea and use it to explain an increasing number of events. So, everything is explained by Globalisation or, in a previous period, by the idea of the Cold War.

This is why Globalisation was so easily used by ideologues. This happened in South Africa where a slew of books appeared which trumpeted both the victory and the virtue of free market economics, the successful ending of apartheid, and the country's integration into the emerging international system under the banner of "Globalisation". The same cry was taken up by think-tanks and an army of economists with aspirations to be public intellectuals. Globalisation was suddenly the order of the analytical and policy day. Conferences were held on every conceivable topic and these were linked to the brand-appeal of Globalisation. In this way, Globalisation represented everything but meant nothing. Mostly, as far as I could tell, none of the local champions of the idea had read David Held's work or, indeed, that of other serious writers in the field of what one might call "Globalisation Studies".

Their's was a rather simple-minded notion of Globalisation: one in which markets matter most. Happily for its champions it coincided with the policy inclinations of the Clinton Administration and, later, with Blair's Britain. In this form, Globalisation was little more than an ideology – an analytical term devoid of objectivity, or what Harry Truman called a "Weasel Word" – an idea taken by the Australian writer, Don Watson.

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The theme was taken up by the country's national research foundation which included the idea of "Globalisation" as one of the themes of research that they would support. Several fierce exchanges with the responsible bureaucrats failed to convince them to abandon their policy on this theme which seemed to be based on a utilitarian version of John Kennedy's idea – namely, "ask not what Globalisation is, but ask only what Globalisation can do for your country".

At about this time, I forbade the word in my classes – especially in the first year. This censorship became a kind of comic routine. I would tell the students that there was only one world – which began with a G and ended in an N – that they could use in the class — this was the word, GRAHAMSTOWN, the name of the provincial city where Rhodes University, where I was teaching at the time, is located!

As I explained the ban to the students I would, in the interests of pedagogy, say that I thought it in their interests to forbid the word. Only by thinking about the world, rather than busking – by means of clichés – their way through it, could they really get to grips with IR. I would also tell them that in the aftermath of the Cold War two major issues had arisen which was feeding the frenzy around the verboten term. First, an ideological project fed by Francis Fukuyama's notion that history had ended and, secondly and separately, the digital revolution which had created a created a time and space compression – to paraphrase David Harvey. This is not an original idea but one I borrowed from my friend, Ken Booth.

Now, happily, it seems the Globalisation has run its course. Gone from the local conversation and largely gone too from the discipline's lexicon. What will replace it? Any guesses?

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