

Review - Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism

Written by Richard W. Coughlin

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RICHARD W. COUGHLIN, SEP 6 2018

Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism

By Ian Bremmer

New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2018

Observers from both the political left (Greider, 1997) and center have worried that unchecked neoliberalism will engender a reactionary backlash that will derail the entire project of globalism. Now that Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 have brought these concerns to fruition, the next logical step for mainstream analysts like Ian Bremmer is to diagnose the failure of globalism and to consider what the pathway back from defeat may look like. This is the focus of Bremmer's *Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism*. In his account, the failure of globalism is not centered on Brexit and Trump, but emerges from a larger configuration of political and economic forces that are reshaping the politics of developed and developing countries alike.

The core argument of Bremmer's book is that globalism has left increasingly large chunks of the middle class behind in the developed world and it has not satisfied the aspirations of the rising working and middle classes for higher standards of living in the developed world either. The shortcomings of globalism have been channeled by populist politicians into different forms of an "us vs. them politics", which constitute everywhere a decidedly counter-productive response to the challenges of global capitalism. The provocations that drive us vs. them politics are deeply rooted and are likely to intensify rather than fade in the coming decades. Bremmer cites Steve Bannon's comment made following Trump's electoral victory: "...the issue now is Americans looking not to get fucked over" (9). By whom, one might ask? The answer, of course, is by *them*, a group that includes globalist elites from both the Republican and Democratic parties, the U.S.'s key trade partners, and immigrants and refugees, the most direct avatars of *them*.

It is worth considering here the core meaning of globalism, a term that Bremmer does not specify in his text. The meaning of globalism that is most relevant to his text is Manfred Steger's (2001) discussion of globalism as an ideology of globalisation. As an objective phenomenon, globalisation is simply the deepening of political, economic and cultural linkages between different regions of the world. As an ideology of globalisation, globalism purports to define what globalisation is. It is the integration of national markets into a global market. It is the result of technological development and therefore not a political choice. As such, globalism is both inevitable and unstoppable. But more than this, globalism is progressive because it advances the general good of humanity. One should not be too preoccupied by the economic dislocation of sectors of the working classes in the developed countries. These losses are more than compensated by the gains of roughly a billion people that have been pulled out of poverty by the expansion of globalism in the developing world. From a policy perspective, globalism advocates, to use a phrase coined by Angela Merkel's market conforming policies, a reflection to the globalist contention that market forces must be obeyed and anyone foolish enough to defy them is courting their own destruction.

Bremmer recognises the failure of globalism, but remains attached to its policy paradigms. He thinks the rebellion against globalisation is understandable – and that we ought not to mock or denigrate the supporters of Brexit or Trump or of other authoritarian populist movements around the world. These rebellions are responses to uncontrolled migration flows, terrorist attacks and job loss, each of which are set to intensify as a consequence of the growth of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotisation. These new technologies will produce massive job losses around the world.

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According to the UNCTAD study Bremmer cites, AI induced job loss threatens 47% of all jobs in the United States, 65% in Nigeria, 69% in India and 77% in China (45). These job losses, combined with the growing effects of global climate change, will result in larger migration flows and a correspondingly stronger desire to build walls in the developed world to keep “them” out. Increased terrorist attacks are also likely to ensue from frustrations engendered by AI induced job loss, which will compound the already extant frustrations of globalism.

Bremmer offers a brief and devastating survey of the developing world’s exposure to AI induced job loss. Countries with unfavorable demographic profiles (a high proportion of young people entering the job market), simmering internal conflicts and governments with little administrative capacity to increase public investment in education and infrastructure provision will be overwhelmed by the shock of AI induced job loss. Countries already in turmoil, like Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, Indonesia and Venezuela, may face the dangers of progressively more extensive state failure and eventual collapse.

In this context of deepening crisis, Bremmer incisively underscores the appeal of us vs. them politics. “Nationalism,” he avers, “grows from a need to reassert control by declaring shared solidarity. It promises to confront the forces that are believed to breed disorder and that compromise both personal and national sovereignty. It pledges to build strong walls to keep “them” at bay” (33). What is needed, Bremmer argues, are policies that will appease the market forces associated with AI induced job loss through the provision of human capital via public investment in education and infrastructure. These policies, he hopes, can be crafted by means of re-negotiating social contracts between citizens rather than in the emotionally satisfying project of building walls (131-160).

The suggestions that Bremmer offers – improving education policies, enhancing worker re-training schemes, restructuring taxes, experimenting with basic income policies and encouraging public/private partnerships – have a familiar ring to them. Many of these proposals have been discussed by critical observers of informational capitalism (for a good example, see Reich, 2001) who argue that enlightened social policy (often in the form of a new social contract) must consist of adapting to economic forces that cannot be changed.

Towards the end of the book, Bremmer adds a further condition to the possibility of re-negotiating social contracts between citizens and governments. Any major revisions would have to be accepted by economic elites, the real winners of globalism (166). From this point of view, the failure of globalism is thus far only about the failure of conservative or liberal globalists to hold on to power. The wealthy elite, which has grown vastly wealthier under the rule of globalism, has not encountered any economic setbacks. Indeed, they were the major beneficiaries of Trump’s tax reform. All of this prompts one to wonder why the economic oligarchs would not cast their lot with the wall builders who appear prepared to pursue the struggle against them *and* defend existing centers of wealth. Perhaps Bremmer’s analysis should be read primarily as a warning to the rich.

E.H. Carr’s (1964) distinction between utopia and reality offers a framework of assessing Bremmer’s contribution. I would contend that Bremmer’s book is a work of excessive realism. For Carr, a purely realist account of world politics – one which focuses solely on the reality of power – can only be a reflection of power relationships and will lack any substantive political vision for the future. Bremmer’s *economic* realism is that market forces and the power relationships that are invested in them are impervious to change. To gain traction and to have any possibility of realisation, utopia has to be grounded in the reality of power. But there is also a broad continuum of possibilities that stretches from the pole of reality to that of utopia. Bremmer is on the power end of the continuum, offering a limited range of possibilities for change based on what he regards to be those aspects of reality that are resistant to change.

What would be some ways around the limitations of Bremmer’s analysis? Let’s begin by noting alternatives. To cite environmental writer Samuel Fassbinder (2008), Bremmer’s analysis is steeped within a framework of capitalist discipline according to which all elements of the human and natural world have to be made subservient to the endless production of profit. Capitalist discipline is not so much a reality, in Carr’s sense of the term, as it is a world-making project. Bremmer’s analysis is mostly about how to redeem this project in the face of the difficulties that it has recently encountered. We might consider the possibility of responding to problems posed by us vs. them politics in terms of other kinds of world making projects. One such project, discussed in Fassbinder, is ecological discipline, which is focused on organising livelihoods in terms of maintaining the integrity of existing ecologies. Such a discipline

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can be found embodied in the environmentalism of the poor – the projects of rural, tribal and indigenous peoples who exist on the margins of the global economy and are fighting against the encroachments of extractive transnational corporations.

Such a perspective would represent a broader vision of who the possible agents of change are with respect to the failure of globalism. Bremmer believes that change can come from citizens, but has to be endorsed by the winners of globalisation. This discounts the possibilities of change from below or the likelihood that such change might exceed the limits of what prudent globalists regard as possible. For example, Bremmer has a discussion of the gig economy in his discussion of possible social contracts that might adapt societies to the requisites of AI induced technological change. Nowhere, however, does he offer an account of the interests of working people who are being reduced to that status of precariat, subject to more insecure modes of employment that are bereft of any sense of occupational identity. The precariat, as economist Guy Standing (2014) has written, is an emerging class that is yet to become fully conscious of its own interests. Standing and others have sketched out what these interests might consist of. They are potentially transformative.

Let us revisit, finally, the consequences of AI induced job loss in developing countries. Following Paul Rogers (2010), we can think of the beneficiaries of neoliberal globalism, spread out across different regions of the world, as the minority world, which comprised, at the height of globalism, roughly 1.5 billion people. AI induced job loss is a massive shakedown of the minority world and the remedies that Bremmer proposes to it will only save a minority of the minority world. This gets to the central difficulty of Bremmer's book, which is the disparity between the problems he outlines and the solutions that he offers. Bremmer's analysis of the failure of globalism is certainly worthy of consideration in terms of both IR teaching and scholarship, but his analysis of the possibilities for change needs to be significantly broadened.

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