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Author(s): Colin Hay, Matthew Watson

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***The Politics and Discourse of Globalisation:
'Sceptical' Notes on the 1999 Reith Lectures***

Colin Hay and Matthew Watson

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Introduction

The contemporary debate concerning the limits of feasible public policy is invariably conducted in the somewhat sinister shadow cast by the image of globalisation. To have no opinion on globalisation is effectively to disqualify oneself from having anything to say about the way our world looks as we reach the millennium. The BBC's recent Reith Lectures are therefore wholeheartedly to be welcomed for opening a public arena in which to conduct a debate whose significance could scarcely be overstated.¹ In so doing, it offers the opportunity, if not to democratise globalisation, then at least to democratise the discussion of globalisation. Whether intentional or not, the BBC has made it possible to extend and refocus the debate beyond the narrow terms of political and academic reference in which it is so frequently cast, thereby rendering it accessible to those on whose futures it will impinge most directly. Moreover, in Anthony Giddens, the programmes' producers could have made no better choice to lead the widening of the debate within the public domain.

Beyond scepticism versus radicalism

That said, a debate requires protagonists. It is our argument in this piece that if Giddens' laudable aspiration to expand democratic possibilities within a truly global civil society is to be realised, then certain aspects of his own depiction of globalisation need to be challenged. In particular, his concern to reduce the political economy of globalisation to a simple choice between the 'radical' and the 'sceptic' view raises more questions than it answers.² Within such a dualistic characterisation, the 'radicals' argue that the world in which we live has been so reshaped by a range of new global flows that the political and economic logics which underpinned the postwar system of autonomous nation states have been rendered anachronistic. For the 'sceptics', by contrast, the empirical evidence for such flows is dubious at best. Consequently, so too must be premature claims of a borderless world of perforated sovereignty and beleaguered states.

Two issues need to be raised at this stage. The first is Giddens' questionable desire to side with the 'radicals', such is the strength of the statistical data which suggests that international markets systematically fail to clear in the manner predicted by the globalisation hypothesis.³ Although this is hardly an inconsequential point, the second we argue is more fundamental still. Giddens' chosen framing of the discussion tends to restrict the debate about the current process of economic restructuring to one about the *extent* of change to which we have thus far been subjected. To be a 'sceptic' is therefore merely to state that no change has occurred. However, if the debate were instead refocused to consider the *essence* rather than the extent of globalisation — its quality rather than its quantity — a whole range of new questions would be brought into view. Recast in such terms, scepticism need not necessarily entail a refusal to accept that the world has changed. For, it is possible both (i) *to accept that the structures of the international political economy are in the process of being reconstituted*; without (ii) *having to attribute causal influence in such a process unilaterally to globalisation*.

Put simply, the challenge to Giddens' radicalism does not only come from the sceptics of his own convenient depiction. Indeed, there are a whole range of positions which it is possible to adopt which in some sense transcend the dualism of radicalism/scepticism

which Giddens constructs. It is within this space, we suggest, that more nuanced accounts of the processes of globalisation and both the tendencies and counter-tendencies to globalisation might most fruitfully be investigated.

In what follows, we aim briefly to elucidate one such alternative, focusing primarily on the issue which forms the basis of Giddens' first lecture: the political economy of globalisation. Our argument is simply stated. When the debate about globalisation is reduced to the single question of its extent, all eyes tend to turn to the operation of a single causal mechanism. Viewed through such a perspective, globalising outcomes are routinely assumed to be an effect of the remorseless flows of capital, people and information within a single world market. What is more, such outcomes are also routinely constructed as an 'inevitable' effect. Our objections are directed principally at precisely this logic of no alternative which globalisation is so frequently held to summon.⁴ We form such objections on the basis of the following claim. Globalising outcomes are not *simply* a result of a new structure of global economic flows. How could they be, given that there is, in any case, only superficial supporting evidence that such a structure is either qualitatively novel or, for that matter, genuinely global in nature?⁵ We argue that they also result *from the ideas which prominent opinion-formers hold about such flows*.⁶ As Giddens himself notes, what is perhaps most novel and distinctive about the context in which we now find ourselves is the reflexiveness which has come with the emergence of the discourse of globalisation in the past 10 years or so.

It is, then, not merely to globalisation but also to ideas about globalisation and their role in informing political behaviour that we turn our attention in this article. Giddens' Reith Lectures present an opportune starting point for such a set of reflections, not only because of his unmistakable influence on government thinking, but also because he himself rightly points to the centrality of ideas to the process of change he charts. He argues persuasively that the "global spread of the term" is one of the most interesting aspects of the whole of the globalisation experience.⁷ That said, however, he is only half right to conclude that the idea of globalisation has "come from nowhere to be almost

everywhere”.⁸ That it now appears to be ‘almost everywhere’ we are willing to concede. That it has come ‘from nowhere’ we contest.

No political idea ever emerges in such a manner. Ideas do not simply appear from thin air. At all times they are embedded within, and conditioned by, the wider social formation of which they are themselves a part. So it is with the idea of globalisation. The image of globalisation to which Giddens appeals is located within a distinctive conceptual paradigm or system of meaning which can only be masked by assumptions that it is effectively without origin. The dominant discourse of globalisation has been promoted to the point to which it now seems to be ‘almost everywhere’ at least in part because it privileges the political interests of an ascendant social class to the exclusion of others. Such a discourse renders ‘correct’ specific views of the world by reducing them to the status of mere ‘common-sense’. But it is a distinctively western common-sense which is being normalised here; one which elevates the experience of a ‘shrinking world’, itself shared by only a limited number of (mainly) western individuals, to the status of *the* globalisation experience. Giddens is therefore jumping the gun to declare that a truly globalised world is “*our* world” in a manner which implies a homogeneity of experience.⁹ We are not all such active or willing participants in the globalisation phenomenon as he suggests; some are clearly in a better position to access a globalised experience than others. In an attempt to shed some light onto such a claim, we now turn directly to the issue of the implicit, though no less distinctive, system of meaning in which Giddens locates his understanding of globalisation.

We’re all globalised now (but some are more globalised than others)

Giddens begins his reflections on the theme of globalisation, as many have before him, with an anecdote; and, moreover, an anecdote of an increasingly familiar form. He relates the story of an anthropologist studying a community in Central Africa who finds herself watching *Basic Instinct* on video, *before* the film had been released in London. At face value this would seem perfect evidence of the ‘borderless’ qualities of a

globalised world, populated by post-national peoples and animated by a cosmopolitan culture. Yet this type of experience and the reporting of such an experience might be unpacked rather differently. Note first the palpable sense of rhetorical surprise which invariably accompanies such anecdotal illustrations. Giddens implicitly invites us to share a sense of amused discomfort that populations we have become accustomed to regard as somehow peripheral and disconnected from the capital-intensive consumer culture of the 'advanced' economies, should have such direct access to precisely the cultural texts by which we define our own identities. There is a fine line to be drawn between such collective amazement at our 'global age' and a sense of righteous indignation that peoples we tend to regard as distant and different (in short, as 'other') might have a prior claim on such western consumer staples as the latest Hollywood box-office hit movie. Globalisation, then, at least in this account, would seem to imply familiar western experiences in non-familiar non-western contexts and, moreover, that such phenomena are both experienced and reported *by westerners*.

When we consider the origins of the cultural text involved in this example, it is difficult not to question the popular depiction of globalisation as a process in which geography and history are simply dissolved by flows of commodities, capital, people and information. Geography continues to matter; indeed, arguably it matters more. For the very notion of flows, so central to arguments about globalisation, itself implies direction; direction, in turn, implies geography. In Giddens' favoured example, the mobile subject is a western academic – who, presumably, flew from London – and the text is a Hollywood movie. Such flows are clearly directional, invariably one-way. Thus, just as capital flows to contexts seen as conducive to investment returns, western consumer culture flows down gradients of affluence from those who produce to those who merely consume. Globalisation is, then, by no means experienced equally; whilst empowering for those already empowered by their access to capital and the resources it might lead them to acquire, it is, by the same token, equally disempowering to those on the receiving end.

The directionality of the flows appealed to in popular accounts of globalisation is nowhere better illustrated than in the ‘reinvented’ tradition of the Reith Lectures themselves. For here, the persistence of the national and the parochial in the face of global challenges is starkly revealed. Giddens, an international (indeed, global) academic, addresses his audience on the subject of globalisation from various points around the globe, projecting his thoughts over the ‘old’ ether of the radiowaves and, simultaneously, through the new ether of the internet. What could be more global than this? Yet, the audience for this global advocate of a global age is not exactly a random sample of a global civil society — this is, after all, a lecture for the BBC in front of an invited audience. What is more, Giddens’ choice of venues from which to address this audience (London, Hong Kong, Delhi, Washington and London again) is hardly evidence of the distantless and borderless qualities of a cosmopolitan world to which he alludes.

First, Giddens’ lectures are given a sense of narrative coherence, indeed closure, by their internal geography. Giddens’ reflections take the form of a tour. He starts at home, reflecting on the nature of the journey ahead, before setting off for foreign pastures, returning home eventually to bring his commentary to a rousing and passionate conclusion. Second, we should note that all the ‘global’ cities which form the venues for his commentaries are made accessible (at least to a trans-national business class) by means of direct flights from London, three of the four reside safely within the ‘triad’ of Europe, South East Asia and North America. This ‘triad’, of course, accounts for an ever growing proportion of supposedly ‘global’ flows. There is a clear danger, then, that in speaking of globalisation as “the way we now live”,¹⁰ Giddens may be communicating a distinctly privileged and western experience to a distinctly privileged and western audience (of tourists, trans-Atlantic commuters and the like). While the world may indeed be globalised, the experiences of some are clearly more globalised than others.

Globalisation and neo-liberal ‘common-sense’

To where does such an argument lead? Certainly not to a wholesale dismissal of the relevance of Giddens' intervention. Our aim here is not to question the significance of globalisation. Given the time and energy which governments currently spend 'responding' to its perceived imperatives that would be to indulge a most unproductive and complacent scepticism. Rather, our concerns relate to what exactly it is about globalisation that is deemed to be so significant. For Giddens, it is the assertion that "globalisation is almost not worth naming now", such is the extent to which it is "simply what we are".¹¹ For us, it is the counter-assertion that the very idea of globalisation has now come to be used as a rhetorical façade, displacing the need for active consent for further neo-liberal restructuring and the further embedding of certain forms of privilege — both within the liberal democracies of the advanced capitalist west and, increasingly, between 'the west and the rest'. Giddens' opening anecdote reveals globalisation as a series of 'natural' tendencies. Our intention in reworking that anecdote has been to point to the manner in which such tendencies are actively constructed and to demonstrate how that process of construction reflects, indeed deepens, existing patterns of material and experiential inequality.

Moreover, that process, we suggest, occurs within a wider political context of rhetorical imperatives, 'harsh realities' and 'economic necessities' which is itself increasingly immune to political contestation. It is from such a process that we see the emergence of the political logic of no alternative which remains an understated, yet no less crucial, aspect of the 'radical' interpretation of globalisation with which Giddens associates himself. If globalisation is 'just the way we are', as the radicals contend, then there would seem to be a conspicuous lack of feasible sites of resistance through which we could ever hope to become active agents in the shaping of the 'way we might become' — and, consequently, little to animate an inclusive vision of a democratic and cosmopolitan world order. Put simply, this is a world of no opt-outs. Globalisation is assumed to condition the limits of our social experience in a manner which we, as conscious political subjects, are unable to influence, leaving us radically disempowered before the juggernaut of inexorable and incessant change.

Quite clearly, such a situation is politically debilitating. However, this sense of constrained political possibility is at least partially self-imposed. Remember, the basis of our scepticism in relation to Giddens' 'radical' stance is not that which he attributes to conventional 'sceptics'. Our position is not to downplay the significance of the changing structures of the international political economy. Rather, it is to question the assumption that such change is being driven *solely* by the relaxation of barriers to market entry around the world, and a consequent quickening of the speed with which the world can be traversed by flows of capital, people and information. In addition to such effects, globalised outcomes are also being driven by the ideas which public policy-makers hold about such flows. In acting merely on the basis of the *assumption* that globalisation is the way we are, governments may well be in the process of normalising our experience of the world in such a manner.

This takes us to the crux of the matter. In the absence of the political contestation which might question, far less undermine, the radicals' depiction of globalisation, that perspective has increasingly been rendered 'correct'. For, the consequence of politicians downsizing their expectations for government in line with the globalisation hypothesis is to provide further evidence consistent with such a hypothesis. But it is much more than an analytical description of a new global age which is being affirmed in this way. By reducing the 'radical' interpretation of globalisation to the status of mere 'common-sense' through its constant repetition to the exclusion of all other voices, the discursive privileging inherent in such a dynamic has also served to lend the ideology which globalisation sustains a 'common-sense' status. Like it or not, to accept the radical stance on globalisation as unquestioningly as Giddens does is to appeal to a set of ideas which have long been taken hostage by a distinctively neo-liberal articulation of systemic 'imperatives'. Moreover, so long as such an articulation continues to be understood as just 'how things are', the political space would appear to be strictly limited for democratising globalising tendencies and rendering neo-liberal 'common-sense' once more open to question. The radical perspective on globalisation, most particularly its assumption that this is a world of no opt-outs, is therefore a key factor in circumscribing the potential scope of democratic politics in current circumstances.

Giddens concludes his series of lectures by exploring precisely this relationship between globalisation and democracy. Given the centrality of this question to our broader concerns, it is perhaps only appropriate that we too conclude our reflections by doing likewise. Once again, however, we find it possible to offer only partial support for the position which Giddens adopts.

The globalisation of democracy and the democratisation of globalisation

Here, as elsewhere, there is much to commend. Giddens deserves considerable credit for his thoughtful and sophisticated claims about the nature of democracy under conditions of globalisation. He is clearly right to differentiate between the globalisation of democracy and the democratisation of globalisation: that is, between the spread of democratic regimes or, more accurately, those claiming democratic legitimation for themselves and the democratisation of processes of trans-national governance. As he notes, the former is a very real tendency. The latter, by contrast, is at best little more than a rather fanciful and utopian vision of a (distant) future. For we are yet to devise, far less to implement, trans-national democratic institutions and processes which might ensure a reregulation of financial markets and custodianship of the environment alike. Whilst one might question the optimism which clearly underwrites Giddens' vision of a genuinely cosmopolitan world order, his recognition of the nature and immediacy of the task at hand is laudable.

Nonetheless, as with other parts of the argument, Giddens' views on globalisation and democracy are neither unproblematic, nor for that matter entirely consistent. At one level, Giddens is surely right to point to the widescale disillusionment increasingly characteristic of western democracies – reflected even in the 1997 British general election which saw a landslide electoral victory difficult to reconcile with an alarming fall in turnout. This Giddens attributes to a systematic depreciation in the faith, confidence and trust we have in our elected representatives and in the institutions of formal government

more generally. Descriptively, Giddens' logic cannot be faulted, yet there is surely something more significant underpinning this observation, something to which Giddens only briefly alludes. For, as he suggests in the introduction to his first lecture, the radical view of globalisation which he seeks to defend (and which he counterposes to the sceptics' complacent and nostalgic denial) provides politicians with a perfect alibi. "Nations have lost most of the sovereignty they once had," he writes, "and politicians have lost most of their capacity to influence events".¹² Is it any wonder, then, that the citizens of the advanced democracies should have become rather sceptical themselves about the claims made as to the democratic nature of their government? Giddens here seems to impale himself on the horns of a particularly intractable and indeed disturbing dilemma. For the very arguments he advances about the corrosive impact of globalisation on governmental autonomy at the national level can only further serve to deepen the sense of democratic disenchantment and disillusion he tellingly describes and understandably decries. If there is, quite simply, no alternative to a single vision of economic possibility in an era of globalisation then, not only is there no alternative to the attendant political blueprint which such a vision implies, there is also precious little to animate democratic competition. Democracy, at least in its national guises, would then seem to wither on the vine of globalisation, leaving radical globalists (like Giddens) to project their democratic pretensions elsewhere – notably, if implausibly, onto institutions of cosmopolitan global governance yet to be envisaged.

Conclusion

This brings us full circle, for it suggests the unwitting complicity of radical globalists in the diminution of the democratic process, at least at the national level. Authors like Giddens, we suggest, have been far too quick, however unintentionally, to provide politicians with the convenient alibi they demonstrate themselves so quick to seize — namely, that there is little else they can do. Yet, as a growing literature has charted in recent years and in copious empirical detail,¹³ much more *could* actually be done, even within the context of the changing structures of the international political economy. The

quantitative evidence makes clear that the corrosive impact of capital flight on European social models, labour-market institutions and social democratic possibilities is frequently exaggerated.¹⁴

The neo-liberal ‘common-sense’ which emerges when the radical globalisation orthodoxy is expressed in policy terms suggests that the only way in which national economies can become internationally competitive is to derive comparative advantage through exploiting ever lower labour costs. Ironically, however, this form of labour market ‘flexibility’ has largely been shunned by the most successful firms in the most competitive sectors of the international political economy. Increasingly, they have sought to compete on the basis of product quality rather than production cost. Immediately, then, it is apparent that there *are* alternatives to those routinely presented as inevitable under current circumstances. Moreover, such alternatives are not merely hypothetical; they are *already* being pursued as a source of genuine competitive advantage.¹⁵ It is, of course, unlikely that every firm within every sector of every economy would be able to follow this ‘high road’ to competitive success.¹⁶ Yet, it is a fundamental democratic priority that national electorates be given the *opportunity* to opt for such a developmental future. We may find that we try, only to fail; but in many respects that is besides the point.

What this clearly serves to indicate is the importance of the issues at stake here. What it also suggests is that we continue to live in a world of alternatives — subject perhaps only to the proviso that the radical perspective which denies the very possibility of even *thinking* about alternatives is itself contested. Whilst such a conception remains relatively unchallenged, the greatest threat to democratic political choice is not ‘the harsh economic reality’ of globalisation so much as the convenient alibi that many centre-left thinkers currently see it as providing. If politicians continue to internalise the radical globalisation orthodoxy, there may well be no alternative to processes of economic convergence which increasingly bypass national democratic structures. However, if they choose instead to resist such a position, then the parameters of the possible are both less economically restrictive and less democratically debilitating.

The choice is stark; its consequences could scarcely be more significant.

Notes

¹ A full transcript of all five of Anthony Giddens' 1999 Reith Lectures can be found on the BBC online network. The relevant web page is: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/events/reith_99.htm. All page references in the text relate to this transcript.

² Giddens, op cit., lecture 1, p. 2-3.

³ For an impression of the devastating nature of this critique see, in particular: Suzanne Berger and Ronald Dore (eds) *National Diversity and Global Capitalism*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1996; Robert Boyer and Daniel Drache (eds) *States Against Markets: The Limits of Globalization*, London, Routledge, 1996; Robert Keohane and Helen Milner (eds) *Internationalisation and Domestic Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; James Mittelman (ed) *Globalization: Critical Reflections*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 1997; Eleonore Kofman and Gillian Youngs (eds) *Globalization: Theory and Practice*, London, Pinter, 1996. In addition to these now familiar sources, see also Dani Rodrik *Has Globalization Gone Too Far?* Washington DC, Institute for International Economics, 1997; Michael Veseth *Selling Globalization: The Myth of the Global Economy*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 1998; Jonathan Michie and John Grieve Smith (eds) *Global Instability: The Political Economy of World Economic Governance*, London, Routledge, 1999; John Zysman 'The Myth of a Global Economy: Enduring National Foundations and Emerging Regional Realities', *New Political Economy*, 1996, pp. 157-84.

⁴ See also, Colin Hay and Matthew Watson *Rendering the Contingent Necessary: New Labour's Neo-Liberal Conversion and the Discourse of Globalisation*, Center for European Studies Program for the Study of Germany and Europe, Working Paper, 8.4, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University; for a condensed version of similar arguments, see, Colin Hay and Matthew Watson 'The Discourse of Globalisation and the Logic of No Alternative: Rendering the Contingent Necessary in the Downsizing of New Labour's Aspirations for Government', in Andrew Dobson and Jeffrey Stanyer (eds) *Contemporary Political Studies, 1998, Volume Two*, Nottingham, PSA, 1998.

⁵ For a representative cross-section of the literature which argues that the current processes of capitalist restructuring are not necessarily qualitatively novel, see: Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson *Globalization in Question: The International Economy and the Possibilities of Governance*, Cambridge, Polity, 1996; Paul Bairoch 'Globalization Myths and Realities: One Century of External Trade and Foreign Investment', in Boyer & Drache (eds) *States Against Markets: The Limits of Globalization*, 1996; Andreas Busch 'Unpacking the Globalization Debate: Approaches, Evidence and Data', in Colin Hay and David Marsh

(eds) *Demystifying Globalization*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999. For an equivalent cross-section of the literature which argues that such processes are not necessarily 'global' in nature, see: John Allen and Grahame Thompson 'Think Globally, Then Think Again — Economic Globalisation in Context', *Area*, 1997, pp. 213-27; Colin Hay 'Global Capitalism or National Capitalisms: The Contingent Convergence of Contemporary Capitalism', mimeo, University of Birmingham, 1999; Jeffrey A. Frankel *Regional Trading Blocs in the World Economic System*, Washington DC, Institute for International Economics, 1997; Zysman 'The Myth of a Global Economy'.

⁶ Ironically, perhaps, we might here draw upon Giddens' own concept of the 'double hermeneutic'. Here, Giddens notes that the ideas we hold about the environment we inhabit (however misconceived those ideas may later prove to be) often come to play a significant role in shaping the developmental trajectory of that environment over time. See his *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge, Polity, 1984.

⁷ Giddens, op cit, lecture 1, p. 1.

⁸ Giddens, op cit, lecture 1, p. 1.

⁹ Giddens, op cit, lecture 1, p. 1.

¹⁰ Giddens, op cit, lecture 1, p. 8.

¹¹ Anthony Giddens, cited in John Lloyd, 'Interview: Anthony Giddens', *The New Statesman*, 10.01.97.

¹² Giddens, 1999 Reith Lectures, lecture 1, p. 2.

¹³ A detail which stands in stark contrast to the casual empiricism of the convenient business school globalisation orthodoxy. For a review of the literature see Colin Hay and David Marsh 'Introduction: Demystifying Globalisation', in *Demystifying Globalisation*. For a review of the literature which focuses explicitly on the experience of globalisation in Britain, see, Matthew Watson 'Globalisation and the Development of the British Political Economy', in David Marsh et al *Post-War British Politics in Perspective*, Cambridge, Polity, 1999.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Geoffrey Garrett *Partisan Politics in the Global Economy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Ian Gough 'Social Welfare and Competitiveness', *New Political Economy*, 1996, pp. 209-32; Evelyn Huber and John D. Stephens 'Internationalisation and the Social Democratic Model: Crisis and Future Prospects', *Comparative Political Studies*, 1998, pp. 353-97; Duane Swank, 'Funding the Welfare State: Globalisation and the Taxation of Business in Advanced Market Economies', *Political Studies*, 1998, pp. 671-92.

¹⁵ Although the constraints of space forbid that such alternatives be reviewed at any length, a number of brief points can usefully be made at this stage. Perhaps most importantly, whilst the radical globalisation orthodoxy points to the 'necessity' of competing on the basis of labour costs alone, many of the most successful firms in their respective sectors are amongst the highest paying. This is because they have sought competitiveness on the basis of product quality rather than production cost. Highly structured 'internal labour markets' have therefore been encouraged in order to promote flexibility *within* the firm as opposed to flexibility in relation to the external labour market. As a consequence, productivity gains have

tended to be sourced through permanent innovation in the product cycle and not through strategic hire-and-fire decisions.

¹⁶ For one thing, the institutional capacities of distinct national capitalisms vary across both time and space. Some institutional formations will therefore be more compatible than others in sustaining competitiveness strategies which resist globalisation's perceived logic of neo-liberal convergence.