Mexico and the global problematic: power relations, knowledge and communication in neoliberal Mexico
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Chapter Two

GLOBALISATION AND SOCIETY

It is more congruent with the facts to think that there is no guaranteed progress or evolution without the threat of involution and retrogress. (Ortega y Gasset: 1993: 102, Translation mine)

Contemporary Global Context

Disperse and complex as the analysis of contemporary globalisation and the manifestations of the global problematic is, it nevertheless remains a human endeavour. This accounts for the importance of gaining understanding of a process which is entirely within the human domain and intellect. In the interstice between the global and local scales a conventional concept rests: the modern nation state. Its definition in social sciences makes reference to four of the main component parts of any nation state or national assemblage: territory, population, government, and the ability to enter into relations with other nation states. Without one of these components, a nation state fails to be constituted properly within the context of contemporary globalisation and the international arena (like a bike without tires). Under the context of contemporary globalisation, these are the main component parts that make the nation state social assemblage what it is.

Different arrangements among territorial, government, and other social assemblages exist depending on the particular geographical, political, or international situation that these assemblages are subjected to during a certain time in history. The singular conditions experienced in differentiated social territories are at the same time what shape the identity and capabilities of a nation state as a more complex social assemblage. The possibility of serious disruptions – deterritorialisation – in the proper adjustment between the social assemblages composing a nation state is a condition that changes depending on social territories and their specificity of events.

In the case of Tibet, we see a government in exile aspiring to become nation state, struggling against its conflicting counterpart, in this case China. This conflict also affects the nature of the Tibetan nation state at the international level. In this situation, the government social assemblage is necessary in the constitution of any modern nation state, and without it nations fail to become fully functional. This condition forces the Tibetan government to interact, with overwhelming asymmetries or disadvantages, with other nation states. If the example of contemporary Tibet works to exemplify the problems related to the lack of consolidation of a government assemblage (interpersonal networks and institutional organisations), territorial disputes that bring violent
conflict also generate deep disruptions to nation state formation and consolidation. This is visible in the former Yugoslavia between Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. The capabilities of these countries to interact without overwhelming asymmetries with other nation states in the international arena were restricted by unstable territorial and political conditions.

Beyond a poor constitution of government, disrupted social territories, and borders that affect the actual capabilities of a nation state on an international scale, there are also disruptions of the social assemblage composed of population. Partial or complete displacement can be the consequence of violent conflict, as evidenced by the more than four million displaced people in Colombia. Similar conditions of instability can be found in Palestine, Sudan, and in many other examples of such conditions suffered and replicated in differentiated social territories around the world. All disruptions mentioned here destabilise or deterritorialise the identity of a nation state and its social territories, and affect the international capabilities of these assemblages in their natural field of interaction – the international arena – a field where national sovereignty plays a fundamental role. In the case of Mexico, these types of disruption are present to a certain degree. First, the government lacks legitimacy among a significant part of the population. Second, massive Mexican transnational migration is an expression of disruption in terms of the national population. The increasing number of internally displaced people due to violence also adds to the crisis. Third, Mexico currently endures two difficult and violent boarders, to the north with the US and to the south with Central American countries. To set a determinate scope on the idea of globalisation and the international community, the following section will elaborate on economic, political, and social theories used to describe contemporary global societies.

**Contemporary Globalisation Social Assemblages**

It can be suggested that contemporary globalisation contains numerous populations of social assemblages shaping the global process. Labour unions, governments, civil associations, NGOs, political parties, the military, social classes, (etc.), share the fact of being social assemblages with component parts, but also of having their own capacities as wholes in determinate space-scale dimensions (1). Social assemblages have limited component parts that are linked by necessary relations to make whole what they are (e.g. a labour union without workers is not a labour union). However, the relations as assemblages between constituted labour unions and state bureaucracy or other organisations is contingently obligatory and needs the consideration of empirical questions. It is with these uncertain exteriority relations between constituted assemblages that this dissertation research focuses on how to approach the issue of the global problematic and its intensification in Mexico.
The Cold War and New World Order Assemblages

I consider contemporary globalisation as a period covering approximately three decades from 1980 to 2010. Within this period two historical events can be thought of as having been highly influential in contemporary global society and its historical transformation. First, the end of the Cold War, which affected the international geopolitical balance and discourse, and opened the door to different language reductions (e.g. the use of the word terrorist instead of communist as appointed enemies of US hegemony). Secondly, the inception of new communication technologies in society, which affected social, economic, and political assemblages worldwide.

The end of the Cold War reached its maximum manifestation with the emotive ‘fall’ of the Berlin Wall in 1989. However, the restructuring policy known as Perestroika was the component that provoked the Soviet Union to crumble. The communist political systems of organisation de facto ‘collapsed,’ confronting the world with the need for a new international and geopolitical order capable of adjusting to these international historical events. The weakness of the international multipolar model that temporally emerged after the breakdown of the Soviet Union advanced another international process: contemporary global society migrated from a bipolar (US versus USSR) geostrategic political world system, based on nuclear balance and deterrence, to a unipolar world system guided solely by the US and its military and economic power (Jalife-Rahme: 2007). The unipolar model or ‘new world order’ led by the US and its allies in the international arena (including Israel and Great Britain) is materially fed and ideologically propelled by a form of capitalism that has come to be regarded as neoliberalism.

Radical libertarian US economist Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics are known for being prominent ideologues and articulators of the economic and social model of neoliberalism, adopted by US national and foreign policy during contemporary globalisation. During the 1980s, Friedman functioned as the advisor to Reagan’s republican administration, while in the UK Frederic von Hayek served a similar role to Thatcher’s government. One of the central aims posed by radical libertarian ideology is to dismantle and reduce the control of the nation state apparatus over economic policies and assets, resources and means of production, which at the same time give way to private property and investment while displacing other types of ownership (e.g. public or collective, communitarian property). The neoliberal project is underscored by a political democratic background, which is based on the idea of freedom (2).

Radical libertarianism departs from a type of utopia. Behind the principle that man needs to be free without causing harm to others, the private individual, the true entrepreneur, does not need ethical principles or state regulation to conduct his activities – since the market is perfect – but
instead relies on a legal system that prevents abuses and sorts out conflict (Hinkelammert: 1995). Friedman claims that the state figure is an onerous activity for society at large, and that public administration performs inefficiently, expensively, and corruptly. The main problem with contemporary libertarianism, however, is similar to the one of the model that preceded it, and which has been amply criticised, namely the absence of accountability and transparency in non-government/private enterprise activities.

Unfortunately, libertarian thinkers do not resolve the fact that political corruption turns into industrial corruption when private hands manage the resources, wealth, and profit produced by society at large (e.g. corporations). The radical libertarian model applied since the 1970s (e.g. in Chile since 1973) shows a lack of fundamental ethical principles and swaps too easily to exclusively pragmatic, materialistic intentions and desires. The product of this monetised and materialistic political and economic system derived from radical libertarian ideology and rationality is a dehumanised state and a society obsessed with accumulation and security. Johan Galtug explains the result of implementing radical libertarian economic systems on a global scale after the end of the Cold War in the following terms,

… there is structural violence brought about by the rapid expansion of the market system all over the world. A basic aspect of that system is monetization, meaning that what is required for basic needs satisfaction is available only against money, not labor, for instance. With less than one dollar per day the basic needs for food, clothes, shelter and health care cannot be met. As a result people die, probably now to the tune of 100,000 per day, of under/mal-nutrition, -clothing and housing and the lack of health services for the diseases that follow, because they are also monetarized and unsubsidized. At the same time wealth accumulates at the top. Many people hate this. (Galtung: 2002)

Radical libertarian rationality can turn the individual blind to fundamental aspects of life; ideas such as uninterested sharing (not only through inheritance or philanthropy), reciprocity (not only focusing on gain and profit), and respect for life and difference can sometimes be considered revolutionary and against progress, capitalism, and civilisation. Radical libertarianism is a totalising ideology that imagines the police and military institutions as the only way to maintain the advances of capitalism and liberty against any perceived anti-modern backwardness, tradition, fundamentalisms, or for that matter, lack of agreement. It is an ideology that stops negotiating and starts imposing specific values behind the facade of moral superiority and human progress.
The Marxist view of the process of the destructive creation of capitalism seems to have been inserted into the equation that permits the destruction of whatever resembles the public, and moves towards the creation of a libertarian society based on commodity exchange in a monetised and privately owned world. This model has been challenged in political, economic, and social realms around the world. Strategic social resistance and active struggles against the imposition of radical libertarianism and neoliberal social systems of organisation is a historical characteristic in contemporary globalisation, as seen with mobilisations alternative to economic globalisation (e.g. EZLN- Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, Occupy Wall Street, Movimiento de los Indignados).

Parallel to the political and economic ideological processes, another historical event of high signification for contemporary global society was the advent of new communication technologies, with the Internet placed securely at the top of the agenda. The Internet’s association with an information revolution in the 1990s is often explained by its innovative capacities (interactivity) that contrasts with conventional media (i.e. radio, television); noteworthy is the relative easiness and speed with which society, governments, and businesses on a global scale have adopted these interactive technologies. The inception and adoption of new communication technologies in society increase the speed, mobility, and quality of communication, amounting to an authentic revolution at a global scale. The optimistic view of technological developments in specific communications, however, is obscured by diverse problems associated with issues such as the widening of digital divides and other secondary negative effects. For example, a ‘new’ form of polarisation occurs when society, or rather asymmetrical global societies, which had already been historically divided by wealth, are suddenly polarised further by unequal access to technological and informational resources; whereby these resources cannot be used for economic and human development.

The optimism brought about by the end of the Cold War and the communication revolution contrasts with the historical facts and collective memory accumulated in recent decades. The end of the Cold War and the impressive technological evolutions since have not been able to abate the harsh experience of poverty and violence in societies and national territories. On the contrary, within contemporary society the possibility to live in dignity and security remains rather unstable. Economic polarisation has intensified throughout world regions and within rich and poor nation states, regardless of any technological advances or economic growth. Beyond social problems associated with poverty alone, international and national conflicts have raised concerns in contemporary world societies due to their intensity and brutal violence. The tragedy in the former Yugoslavia, genocides in Rwanda, the invasion of Iraq, and the conflict in Colombia are all
unfortunate examples that have been witnessed during contemporary globalisation.

Tracing some early warning signs of the new problematic after the end of the Cold War, in 1993 the German economist Franz Hinkelammert identified the new ways and forms adopted by those groups-assemblages and forces that resulted from the new geopolitical arrangement after the ‘victory’ of capitalism over communism. Following Hinkelammert, one of the problems brought about by the ‘new world order’ global paradigm is the increase in exclusion among social groups and nations, triggered by the enactment of neoliberal policies worldwide. He continues by saying that this exclusion, mainly of Third World populations, directly affects the First World. One of the effects is migration, which forces the construction of walls to make enclaves in economically privileged regions: ‘Fortress Europe,’ ‘Fortress US.’ The Berlin wall did not let people out; the new walls will not let people in. Hinkelammert indicates that the walls will rise between Europe and North Africa, between Western Europe and the ex-communist countries, and between Mexico, the Caribbean, and the US (Hinkelammert: 1995).

Fifteen years after Hinkelammert’s formulations there is a wall being built between Mexico and the US. There is a wall located between Spain (Europe) and Morocco (North Africa), advanced during the José Maria Aznar conservative administration in Spain (1996-2004). However, Hinkelammert mistakes the location of the third wall, which he places within European territory between Western and ex-communist countries. Instead, this wall can be seen in Israel between the Jewish state and the Arab world. Despite the end of the Cold War and technological advances, the contradiction and lack of agreement in contemporary globalisation is evident in the example of the walls. A global world that was reunited in 1989 is to be split again, now under different paradigms and contradictions. The contemporary social and international divide is mainly at an economic level instead of being set by different political and ideological positions and beliefs.

In theoretical terms, we can see how social assemblages change and mutate, and therefore shift the place where ‘walls’ dividing territorial assemblages are localised. A new geopolitical composition also brings about a new spatial distribution of the main social assemblages participating in the process of contemporary globalisation. The walls can be seen as the strategy to constitute differentiated territorial social assemblages; the walls are a material component that keep the appearance of difference between the exterior and interior of separated territories.

**After Contemporary Globalisation**

The Cold War global assemblage was characterised by a bipolar system and the post-Cold War period is characterised by a unipolar world model. After the period I have labelled as contemporary globalisation (1980-2010), the world system may be forming a multipolar model. In the last thirty
years, the countries leading the newly formed world system or ‘new world order’ have been constantly reproducing social and political contradictions on a global scale in order to impose specific and often biased market conditions in different times and territories, something paralleled only to authentic imperialist policies (e.g. Hardt and Negri: 2000). The retrogression produced by neoliberal globalisation processes and the homogenisation this entails has made room for counter processes. For instance, multipolarity in the process of deglobalisation (Jalife-Rahme: 2007) is one form that the process of mutation of economic globalisation has taken during the last three decades.

The prime example of deglobalisation is the case of oil and gas. During the ‘new world order’ period oil resources were highly concentrated in the hands of a few transnational firms (e.g. Texaco, Exxon, Shell, Chevron). However, towards the end of the first decade of the current millennium, ninety-five per cent of the global reserves of oil and gas were under the control of state companies from countries such as Russia, China, Iran, and Venezuela. This transition left private corporations with a meagre five to ten per cent of the oil and gas reserves and resources to use for speculation (Jalife-Rahme: 2007). In this context, if contemporary economic globalisation has been characterised by financial alchemy performed by the Anglo-American banking system, Jalife-Rahme tells us that after contemporary globalisation and the process of deglobalisation is triggered, we will see the return of political oil and gas chemistry as the ruling asset in the international arena. This benefits emergent nation states like Brazil, Russia, India, and China (the co-called BRIC grouping) in particular.

The period after contemporary globalisation will probably be characterised by multipolarities in the international political and geostrategic arenas, while ideally on the economic front the international community will increase the power of anti-imperialist politics. Contemporary globalisation has been problematised by different scholars and thinkers. In recent times, experts such as Giddens (1991), Klein (2008), Harvey (1990, 2006), and many others, have offered useful descriptions and understandings of global social processes.

Risk Society
In the early 1990s Giddens elaborated on the notion of risk – or manufactured risk – in post-traditional societies to frame the characteristic mindset of contemporary modern society. Giddens traced the obsession with the notion of risk typical of modernity as it hatched during the seventeenth century, and studied its effects in a highly technological modern society. Within the post-Cold War international political environment, many round tables and debates addressed the intensification and emergence of new forms of violent conflict and the effects of the global problematic (violence and poverty) worldwide, highlighting the notion of risk (Beck: 1992).
What are the consequences of managing society under the premises of manufactured risk? In this regard, it can be said that the idea of risk is connected to a modern entrepreneurial mind where gain and loss (gambling) regulate decision making. The norm within a risk society schema is not moral or ethical, but pragmatic, similar to what libertarian philosophy proposes. This pragmatism based on the idea of risk is harmonious with modern capitalist practices. That is why Giddens regards our contemporary global period as the intensification of the modern instead of a radical change in the social paradigm triggered by new technology, or as some other authors suggest when speaking of post-modernity, another term profusely debated in the 1990s.

In Giddens’ account, the contemporary global period is not different from the modern reflexive one that can be traced to Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Smith, and Kant. The way to understand the value of goods/commodities and the rules of exchange and socialisation does not vary under the perspective of risk; on the contrary, it intensifies the modern principle of competition and gains found in capitalism and post-traditional societies. Hence, the idea of manufactured risk in contemporary society reinforces the status quo set by the ‘new world order’ imposed after 1989, and which is based on the modern principles elaborated before and during the European Enlightenment (Giddens: 1991).

The Rise of Disaster Capitalism

For Naomi Klein, the practical utility of manufactured risk and the uncertainty associated with it have been taken as opportunities to profit from tragedy. In her book The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism (Klein: 2008), disaster capitalism is outlined as the way in which natural and human disasters are dealt with by certain interest groups in order to make economic gain and profit and to dismantle public property in favour of private ownership. In addition to the monetary and economic aspects of this strategy there are ideological components. In order to transfer public wealth to private corporations, the idea behind disaster capitalism is to enable shock tactics or to benefit from shocking events (e.g. tsunami, military coup) in order to actually appropriate the process deceptively called ‘reconstruction’ of a destroyed area or society, thus finishing the job of the original disaster by obliterating what is left of the public sphere. Sassen’s formulations (2006) come close to this view of globalisation when she asserts that the global process is mainly one that reinforces the denationalisation of the modern nation state by losing control of strategic domains and privatising its public assets. However, Sassen does not single out disasters as the core element in the functioning of economic power groups, something central to Klein’s argument.

Klein and Giddens offer two practices – disaster and risk respectively – found in contemporary society for accumulating wealth, practices which have been articulated continually in
economic and political realms to materialise the migration from public to private property schemas in society. Nonetheless, there are other ideas that explain the current situation experienced in contemporary society.

*Flexible Accumulation by Dispossession*

Two years before Klein’s publication of the *Shock Doctrine*, Harvey published *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (2006). In this book, Harvey proposes a similar formulation about the unethical and excessively pragmatic economic approach to development sustained by diverse power groups, interpersonal networks, and organisations in the control of wealth. In particular, he elaborates on the notion of *flexible accumulation by dispossession*. Different from Klein’s hypothesis of disaster capitalism, Harvey points to *debt* as the main strategy for achieving an international capitalistic accumulation of wealth.

This focus on debt draws on the figure of Milton Friedman and his followers. Several economists linked to Friedman’s political and economic agendas were in charge of the international financial institutions forming the ‘Washington Consensus,’ and other important US based and international organisations, responsible for managing massive financial debt in many developing countries during the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Mexico, Argentina, Indonesia). Debt can be used at the international level to manipulate national wealth by controlling interest rates, while domestically borrowing generates debt by credit that is given to certain groups of the population, encouraging national corruption. The negative effects of flexible accumulation by dispossession, as Harvey explains, are poverty and a weakening of social and collective apparatuses aimed at controlling and accounting for the activities of economic forces. Following Harvey, this system of accumulation by dispossession produces severe disparities and asymmetries in the social realm, with dire consequences for the population, which is dispossessed of vital and monetary resources.

Harvey’s contribution to the global debate was first proposed in his earlier work *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), where he presented the notion of time/space compression: the world appears to be ‘shrinking’ due to rapid developments of new communication technologies (e.g. satellites) and the increment in speed in transportation achieved during the twentieth century. Harvey explored the new global paradigm but from a different perspective: he identified the increase of speed in human activity and transportation capabilities as a social factor that shaped the contemporary global assemblage, the terms of the condition of post-modernity. The modern space composition under the pressure of intensified speed brings change and adaptation at all levels of social organisation and therefore interaction. Harvey, from a Marxist understanding of the social, highlights several material consequences of the prevalent ways of life and politics during the early
1990s, hinting at the possible changes in the processes of dispossession and accumulation. Harvey’s work helps us think about globalisation and post-modernity as a new device for cartographers, geographers, and thinkers due to deep reconfigurations in the material world.

Global Scapes

The prevalence of an understanding of globalisation as a process related to international economic integration, and as an intensification of human activity, communication, and interaction, is widespread in academic and economic realms. However, there are other approaches to understanding globalisation that are different from the eminent economic and socio-political accounts. Other approaches beyond the idea of risk, disasters, speed, and processes of denationalisation are visible in Arjun Appadurai’s abstract assessment of globalisation (1990). Appadurai interprets and describes the process of globalisation as global *scapes* where human imagination plays a crucial role in linking and interconnecting them. Dissecting the idea of globalisation into its important components, he identifies five such scapes: *ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes*. In this way Appadurai relates all these spheres of human existence in a more coherent ensemble. People, information, technology, economy, and ideology encompass what Appadurai reads as globalisation.

Different from the pragmatic approach proposed by Giddens and the Marxist account made by Harvey, the idea of using a multidimensional, abstract analysis to approach globalisation, such as that offered by Appadurai, poses a specific problem. By adopting a more complex understanding of the global process, the question remains of how to find a suitable *unit of analysis* other than the nation state that allows for a multidimensional and abstract understanding of contemporary globalisation. This concern is not minimal and it rests at the core of the possibility of properly defining the idea of globalisation for future social science and humanities research.

Global Crises

Looking further at the problem of identifying a suitable unit of analysis for approaching globalisation, we might cite Martin Shaw (1994) who, from an internationalist point of view, presents a possible alternative. Shaw emphasises the importance of the concept of global crises (natural or human made) in order to better understand the development of globalisation and global societies. He points out that, “the emergence of global society is, however, beset by contradictions. Indeed one of the principal ways in which we can identify a global society is by the development of global crises” (Shaw: 1994: 2). He continues,
Global crises matter not merely because of their widespread harmful effects to human beings – poverty and unemployment, pollution and drought, disposition and genocide. They are important too because it is through such crises that we can increasingly identify global society and the development of its institutions. Through an understanding of crises we can begin to grasp the forms which global society is taking and the processes transforming it in the present historical period. (Shaw: 1994: 2)

Shaw’s views on globalisation are valuable for this research because they form part of the general argumentation that the development and management of global crises is a fundamental approach to global processes as a whole. In this regard, but with some fundamental differences to Shaw’s approach, I advocate in this work that the concept of the global problematic, set over and against the notion of global crises, is a suitable unit of analysis to address contemporary global processes. The main difference between global crises and the global problematic is that the global problematic may be thought of as a matter of intensification, contrary to the idea of an outbreak that can be associated and is implied in the notion of crises. Crises may be regarded as extraordinary events in society, while the global problematic is actually a permanent condition experienced in different intensities, sometimes in the intensity of a crisis.

Before going into the properties and characteristics of the so-called global problematic in detail, I will briefly touch upon one additional view of globalisation as a means to reach a resolution of how to define and set a unit of analysis for our contemporary global process, suitable to be used under the analytical tools provided by assemblage theory principles.

*Mechanics of Globalisation*

Majid Tehranian’s definition offers a more mechanistic and maybe more analytical understanding of globalisation. Tehranian (1998) describes the global process as a process with elements and engines, focusing on the parts and material-organisational components that help globalisation realise its permanent entelechy. He states,

Globalization is a process that has been going on for the past 5000 years, but it has significantly accelerated since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Elements of globalization include transborder capital, labour, management, news, images, and data flows. The main engines of globalization are the transnational corporations (TNCs), transnational media organizations (TMCs), intergovernmental organizations
(IGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and alternative government organizations (AGOs). From a humanist perspective, globalization entails both positive and negative consequences: it is both narrowing and widening the income gaps among and within nations, intensifying and diminishing political domination, and homogenizing and pluralizing cultural identities. (Tehranian in Riggs 1998: 1)

This view of globalisation provides a practical understanding of the process without ignoring its complexity. It points at specific institutions and elements (social assemblages) that can be traced and studied to understand the global process. It looks at the parts that constitute the global process as a whole. In this context, the present dissertation research is aimed at observing the exterior of some of the social assemblages mentioned by Tehranian, which are component parts of the more complex whole constituted by society at large.