

# The Dangers of Teaching About Globalization

Kathleen R. Smythe  
Professor of History  
[Smythe@xavier.edu](mailto:Smythe@xavier.edu)

513 745 3279

Xavier University, 3800 Victory Parkway, Cincinnati OH 45207-4444, USA

I have been part of a team-taught course titled “Globalization” twice with colleagues came from Theology and Economics. As an African historian, I have struggled with the limited explanatory power that the term “globalization” offers for our understanding of what has been happening in Africa over the last two decades. It took me some time to realize how strongly an economic framework and economic measurements defined the terms of the debate, despite the fact that faculty from multiple disciplines were involved and despite the fact that we covered other facets of the phenomenon, such as technological, religious, and cultural globalization.<sup>1</sup> And, then, I was asked to work on a presentation for an Africana Studies minor at our University. Juxtaposing the course I was teaching with the need for an Africana Studies minor was very fruitful. For, at the same time that American universities are recognizing the need to better train their students for a globalized world, Africana or Black Studies programs still struggle for resources and legitimacy, and some note a “growing movement toward race neutrality” on college campuses (Rogers, 2006: 18-22; Wilson, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

That globalization courses are on the rise while Africana Studies programs face numerous challenges at North American colleges and universities is not a coincidence. Yet, the theoretical foundations of Africana studies offer a much more promising foundation for analyzing our present and creating a better future, grounded as they clearly are in interdisciplinary. Thus, I will argue that globalization, as it is commonly conceived in the United States, even in the most interdisciplinary courses or readers, is still handicapped by its predominantly economic foundation and, that its rise as a subject on college campuses is coincident with its triumph

---

<sup>1</sup> While my critique of the term rests on its’ typical narrow interpretation, others decry its “plasticity”. See Rist 2002: 11.

<sup>2</sup> Manning Marable (2000: 10) noted in 2000 that the number of Black Studies programs numbered 800 in the early 1970s and declined to about 375 by the mid-1990s.

globally. Universities have an obligation to ensure that the trend toward internationalizing and globalizing the curriculum takes place not just under the banner of globalization but also within interdisciplinary area programs that have a tradition of requiring multiple perspectives from their very foundation. Patrick O'Meara et al (O'Meara et al, 2000: xiii) made a similar argument with the publication of their *Globalization Reader* in 2000. They reported that "the conference struck a sound balance between those who reaffirmed the centrality of the area concept to the study of international affairs and those who emphasized approaches encompassed by the term 'globalization'." Yet, they continue, that the "solid foundation of area studies" is essential to global analysis.

Universities are responding to deeper economic and communication integration by offering courses and programs in International Studies and Globalization. John Scott (2006: 32) wrote in 1998 that many well-known institutions are "espousing internationalism in their published mission statements," including the University of Michigan and Boston College. And, Karin Fischer (2008) wrote about attempts at community colleges to focus on globalization. While others noted that schools still had to work to meet student demand for greater international exposure (Krasno, 2003; Fischer, 2007) <sup>3</sup> For example, my university, Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio recently designed an International Studies major and has been teaching a Globalization course for the last seven years but has no Africana or Black Studies program. The closest thing is a Gender and Diversity Studies interdisciplinary minor. Likewise, Shorter College (in Rome, Georgia) has a Department of International Studies that offers "Campus Globalization Programs" but no similar programming or academic focus on African American or Africana history and experiences. In contrast, Princeton University has the Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance and in 2006 launched the Center for African American Studies. As Jonathon Fenderson (2009: 500) points out in a recent article, Princeton's emphasis on both African American studies and Globalization is typical of the elite schools, particularly the Ivy Leagues, that have significant resources. It is less typical of the smaller, less-resourced schools,

---

<sup>3</sup> Jean Krasno wrote in 2003 that colleges and universities in the United States "are not offering adequate courses in international relations that reflect current global affairs, nor are they meeting student demands for a curriculum that is more relevant to today's questions." "Colleges and Universities Fail to Meet Demands for Teaching International Relations" *UN Chronicle Online Edition* 60/2.

like Xavier or Shorter mentioned above. Fenderson argues that many Black Studies programs still operate in hostile environments and are in need of support.<sup>4</sup>

As North American universities become “attached more securely” to the modern corporate order, it is not surprising that globalization courses, particularly those with a strong economic component would be more visible. In discussing Bill Reading’s *The University in Ruins* book, Leonard J. Waks (2002: 280) writes that as transnational corporations and other institutions gain prominence, our institutions are “now struggling to find a new identity as relatively autonomous corporations, marketing their wares globally to individual and corporate customers.” As a result, there is a close identification on the part of students, faculty, and administrators alike with economic globalization, but not as much with cultural globalization, the challenges of national unity, or civic engagement that have been some of the hallmarks of Black Studies.

Even though globalization is clearly an interdisciplinary phenomenon, teaching it in that way is difficult because of the normative narrative. A website, “Globalization 101” sponsored by the Levin Institute, a graduate institute of the State University of New York, collects syllabi from high schools, community colleges and colleges and universities. There are about twenty courses and syllabi posted and they do demonstrate that a number of instructors are approaching this topic from a variety of perspectives, yet eight of the nineteen college and university courses were strictly economics courses (<http://www.globalization101.org/index>). And, the Levin Institute’s definition of globalization notes that “an international industrial and financial business structure” is “a defining feature of globalization” ([http://www.globalization101.org/What\\_is\\_Globalization.html?](http://www.globalization101.org/What_is_Globalization.html?)). Much of the more popular analysis, too, is economic and comes from one of the most widely-read writers on globalization in the United States, Thomas Friedman, *New York Times* columnist and author of *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, *The World is Flat* and, more recently, *Hot, Flat and Crowded*. The world he sees before him in *The World is Flat* is one of greater economic opportunity for all due to the spread of information technology and the free market economy. And it is this view that the dominant economic paradigm

---

<sup>4</sup> Some schools have just recently opened Africana Studies programs, such as Johns Hopkins University in 2004 after three decades of working for one. See Ronald Roach, “Taking Flight Internationally” *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* 24/19 (November 2007): 23-25.

promotes, as seen through the policies of the IMF, World Bank and WTO, for example. From the white, neoliberal economic perspective that dominates our international financial institutions and post-industrial economies, this post-1980 era of globalization marks something new—faster-paced integration, deeper interconnections and a level of interdependency without precedent. The assumption is that inequality and poverty are on their way out, as Robert McNamara, former President of the World Bank and Renato Ruggiero, the first Director-General of the WTO have argued.<sup>5</sup> Yet, it is obvious to anyone who has been to places other than those that form the centerpiece of his work in *The World is Flat*, such as Bangalore, India, that this is a limited perspective. Mark Rupert, political scientist at Syracuse University, decries Friedman’s narrow analysis as well, noting that in his first book, *The Lexus*, he relied heavily on *The Economist* and ads from Madison Avenue, reflecting, he argues, the class bias of both Friedman and his sources ([http: faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/merupert/Anti-Friedman](http://faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/merupert/Anti-Friedman)).

This claim that our most recent era is something new and potentially better than what has come before can only be embraced if one is not cognizant of the peoples who have not benefited from such changes. That we are in a new era is a half-truth at best and one that endangers the livelihoods, cultural and historical traditions, and human dignity of half the globe. A trip through Mississippi, Tanzania, or Haiti would suggest, instead, that the world is spiky, as Richard Florida (2005) suggests, with urban centers of hypercapitalism, the latest communication, industrial, transportation and medical technologies surrounded by vast areas that possess little of these technologies. As Rupert reports, according to the United Nations Development Program, in 1960 the 20 percent of the world’s people living in the wealthiest countries received 30 times as much income as the 20 percent in the poorest countries. In 1990, the ratio was 60 to one and in 1997, 74 to one ([http: faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/merupert/Anti-Friedman](http://faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/merupert/Anti-Friedman)).

The claim also ignores the history of those promoting globalization. As Ha-Joon Chang (2002: 7-32) points out, the narrow thinking that has dominated development economics and economic

---

<sup>5</sup> On McNamara’s philosophy see Peters (2008). Ruggiero said in 1998, “the potential for eradicating global poverty in the early part of the next century—a utopian notion even a few decades ago, but a real possibility today” thanks to the new world order, quoted in Chang, 2002: 15. He also noted that the “borderless economy” had the potential to ‘equalize relations between countries and regions.’ Reinert 2007: xviii.

history over the last two decades has paid scant attention to economic processes of the past, particularly of the now-developed countries. The result has been a push for policies for economic growth in the South that ignore the trajectories of the contemporary industrialized countries. Both the United States and Great Britain, for example, built their industrial economies through a variety of protectionist policies. In Great Britain, these included infant industry protection starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, eliminating export duties on most manufactured goods and raising duties on imported manufactured goods. While, the United States practiced protectionist measures and used tariffs extensively. Moreover, as Erik Reinert (2007: xx) points out, “development must be seen for what it has always been: the outcome of conscious and deliberate policy” not the “removal of obstacles.” Thus, promotion of market liberalization, according to history, will not result in improved economic standards for much of the globe, only those countries that have achieved economic prosperity through protected markets are likely to benefit.

Africana Studies is well-poised to critique this popular understanding of globalization. Indeed, it is a discipline that is a necessary corrective both in terms of perspective and agenda. First, regarding perspective, Maulana Karenga argues that Black Studies allows North American society to understand itself “by critically measuring its claims against its performance and its variance with a paradigmatic just society” (Marable, 2000: 16). Thus, economic claims, like those above, are subjected to historical analysis. It is a necessary correction to the short-sighted and ahistorical writing that has become the standard in our popular media and that makes it possible to claim that the world is flat. Of course, there are many writing outside of the Black or Africana Studies perspective who critique globalization from below, such as Walden Bello (1999) and John Cavanaugh (2004). They also call for political and economic change and use the perspective of those who do not benefit from current economic policies as their foundation, and thus are part of a narrower response to globalization . To the extent that they respond to the dominant economic paradigm, they are not as holistic as Africana studies can be. Thus, for the sake of the argument here, I will focus on what interdisciplinary Black Studies has to offer, while recognizing that such critiques do (and should) come from a variety of places, not just such academic programs.

From the Black Studies perspective, globalization is a cover. It allows us to dump the histories of imperialism, neo-imperialism, and oppression for a potentially more benign explanatory framework devoid of any historical foundation. As Swiss development specialist Gilbert Rist (2002: 210) argues in his book, *The History of Development*,

The talk about the ‘world community’ or ‘global village’ and the benefits of economic ‘globalization’ never ceases, but two-thirds of the planet is being increasingly separated off as the North patiently erects a wall to keep out the ‘new barbarians’. Apartheid has been abolished in South Africa, only to be reborn on a world scale.

Globalization, he argues, asserts the opposite of the truth. Thus, it is possible to interpret globalization as promoting the continued well-being of former imperial powers at the expense of formerly colonized nations. And, a brief search of newspaper use of the term suggests that it is far more frequently used in the North than in the South. A search for “globalization” in the *New York Times* on Lexis-Nexis in early March turned up fifteen articles over the past week. A search for the same term in *The East African*, a weekly publication, turned up two articles since 2006 and [allafrica.com](http://allafrica.com), a comprehensive website of hundreds of African papers, does not have “globalization” as a search term. The closest term was “capital flows.” What we see as globalization, our Southern colleagues see in more specific and historical terms.

Globalization privileges change over “repetition and restructuring,” ignoring the enduring nature of some forms of social and economic relationships, according to Ali Behdad (2005: 69). Behdad (2005: 63), professor of English, has argued “that in spite of cultural and postcolonial critics’ emphasis on the newness of today’s global flow, the condition we call globalization is not new if viewed historically in the context of colonial relations of power and other earlier world-systems preceding European hegemony since 1492.” Citing one of the earlier theorists of world systems, Janet Abu-Lughod, he continues, “Like our global village today, the thirteenth-century world-system entailed a complex web of exchanging capital, commodities, people, and ideas, a system whose demise was historically necessary for the rise of European hegemony in the sixteenth century.” While new world-systems arise, as possibly globalization is arising today, they do so in ways by which the connections and developments “laid down in prior epochs [tend] to persist

even though their significance and roles in the new system may be altered.” Behdad continues that “every world-system rests on the ruins of the previous one, and because of this, world-systems are interrelated,” and “the new system always expands and transforms the elements that it borrows from the previous one” (2005: 69). Or to put it another way, to quote David Roediger (2004: 97), “White supremacy builds on the oppressive past and operates now. Philip McMichael (2008: 273-274) argues that the colonial, development and globalization eras each embodied (and the last still does) a “rationale for their rule” that “projected a mission of enabling the improvement of humankind by use of a “universal principle: racial superiority, collective self-determination, or the self-maximizing individual. In these views, globalization is as much a continuation of relationships of domination as anything else.

If globalization is nothing new but instead a continuance of relationships of economic and cultural domination, then to teach about it without serious historical and cultural critiques, such as those above, is dangerous. A focus on only economic globalization facilitates complacency at inequalities and injustices because the assumption is that they will, assuredly, be healed with time. The obvious connections between this era and the last are clearer to historians, theologians and English professors than they are to economists. Ha-Joon Chang (2002: 7-8) argues that over the last few decades, development economics and economic history “two sub-fields of economics for which the historical approach is most relevant—have been dominated by mainstream neoclassical economics” which has rejected historical evidence in favor of theory.<sup>6</sup> Erik Reinert (2007: xxii) exclaims, “The history of economics tends to exist in splendid isolation not only from what actually happened in real economic policy, but also from what happened in neighboring disciplines.” Such evidence supports the need for discussion, research, and teaching across disciplinary lines, such as Black or Africana Studies, promotes. Claire Mercer et al (2003: 426) argue, for example, that there is much to be learned by those in development studies from the post-colonial studies field. To date, there has been little overlap, despite what appears to outsiders to be an obvious congruence.

The second contribution that Black Studies makes is by encouraging not only critical analysis but action based on that analysis. Marable (2000: 2) contends, “Black scholars who have

---

<sup>6</sup> Chang (2002: 12) asserts that issues of development “have long been obscured by ahistorical and often moralistic arguments.”

theorized from the black experience have often proposed practical steps for the empowerment of black people. In other words, there is a practical connection between scholarship and struggle.” Dominant theories of economic globalization do not encourage civic engagement. In fact, as Benjamin Barber (2007) has argued in his most recent book, *Consumed*, the triumph of global capitalism has eroded our actions toward the public good, strong communities and families. Black Studies offers both interdisciplinary analysis as well as the promise of engaged scholarship.

An essential corrective to the teaching of globalization are the perspectives and experiences of peoples whose impoverishment and dehumanization contributes to the wealth of those in power. We must reconfigure the terms of the debate. Is globalization good or bad? Is it something new or not? These are not the questions to ask.<sup>7</sup> The question is do we want to promote other values than those that predominate currently and that seem to be the drivers of the system? We need a social science and humanities that presents the experience of peoples who are not benefitting from the current economic system, one that is “more critical, corrective, holistic, and ethical...” to use Karenga’s words (2000: 16). But, just as importantly, we need courses and interdisciplinary programs that allow students to think beyond economic theory and theoretical better futures. They need to be exposed to the rich diversity of cultural, social and historical experiences of peoples of the Black worlds. Because Africana Studies is grounded in multiple disciplines, with a deep respect for history, and with a willingness to promote different values, there is more promise in the field of Black Studies as it faces our contemporary world than in globalization studies as they are currently conceived. If the academy is unable to launch critical assaults on unprecedented accumulations of wealth and power and increasing inequality under the guise of globalization, it renders itself irrelevant to much of the world’s historical and contemporary experience. We must be careful about the current trend toward globalizing the curriculum to ensure that such an approach does not prevent us from critical and interdisciplinary analysis of the most important trends of our times.

---

<sup>7</sup> David Held and Anthony McGrew (2000) frame their *Globalization Reader* by the debate between globalists and sceptics. Frank J. Lechner and John Boli (2008: 1-6) raise a number of questions in their introduction including what does the term involve and mean, is it new, is it driven by expanding markets.



## References

- Barber, Benjamin (2007). *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co..
- Behdad, Ali (2005). On Globalization, Again! Pp. 62-79 in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Ania Loomba et al (Eds.). Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Bello, Walden (1999). *Dark Victory: the United States and Global Poverty*. London: Pluto Press.
- Cavanaugh, John and Jerry Mander, Eds. (2004). *Alternatives to Economic Globalization: A Better World Is Possible*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Chang, Ha-Joon (2002). *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*. London: Anthem Press.
- Fenderson, Jonathon (2009). Toward Organizational Dialogue in Black Studies: A Critical Rejoinder to Manning Marable. *Journal of Black Studies* 39/4: 497-507.
- Fischer, Karin (2007). 'Flat World' Lessons for Real-World Students: Colleges take a hard look at how well they're preparing students for careers in a global economy. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i10/10a03502.htm>.
- Fischer, Karin (2008). Community-College Educators Focus on Globalization. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i26/26a02401.htm>.
- Florida, Richard (2005). The World Is Spiky. *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/images/issues/200510/world-is-spiky.pdf>
- Held, David and Anthony McGrew (2000). The Great Globalization Debate: An Introduction. Pp. 1-39 in *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lechner, Frank J. and John Boli (2008). *The Globalization Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).
- Marable, Manning (2000). Introduction: Black Studies and the Racial Mountain. Pp. 1-30 in *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience*. Manning Marable (Ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- McMichael, Philip (2008). *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective*. Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press.
- Mercer, Claire et al (2003). Towards a critical political geography of African development. *Geoforum* 34/4: 419-436.
- O'Meara, Patrick, Mehlinger, Howard D., and Krain, Matthew, Eds. (2000). *Globalization and the New Challenges of a New Century: A Reader*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Peters, Rebecca Todd (2008). Economic Justice Requires More Than the Kindness of Strangers. Pp. 89-108 in *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligations in Today's Economy*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co..

Rist, Gilbert (2002). *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*. Trans. Patrick Camiller. London: Zed Books, 2002.

Roediger, David (2004). How Old and New Whiteness Keep Showing Up, But Not By Themselves. Pp. 90-102 in *White: whiteness and race in contemporary art*. Maurice Berger (Ed.). Baltimore: Center for Art and Visual Culture.

Rogers, Ibram (2006). Celebrating 40 Years of Activism. *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* 23/10: 18-22.

Scott, John C. (2006). The Mission of the University: Medieval to Postmodern Transformations. *The Journal of Higher Education* 77/1: 1-39.

Waks, Leonard J. (2002). In the Shadow of the Ruins: globalization and the rise of corporate universities. *Policy Futures in Education* 2/2: 278-298.

Wilson, Robin. Past Their Prime? After 35 years on campuses, black-studies programs struggle to survive. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.  
<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/i33/33a00901.htm>.