

An Anthropologist at Davos

Civilization Reimagined from the Top of the World

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This essay offers a relational interpretation of global governance since the 1960s. I trace how interacting ideas, events, and worldviews shape global strategies for governing relationships with the global South. Specifically, prescriptions of modernization via capitalism invariably involve a reimagining of Western civilization.

I first look at findings and claims by anthropologists and other “skeptics and realists” that have challenged the universal formula of market-based development. By the turn of the century, the insights and misgivings of academics and philosophers have been assimilated into the thinking of global institutions and efforts to humanize the effects of globalization.

Second, I show that a global event—“the rise of Asia”—triggered a turning point in the worldview of elites assembled at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2007. As a participant, I offer a rare ethnographic window on a *mise-en-scène* where philanthropists, celebrities, and politicians promoted “stakeholder capitalism” and nongovernmental humanism to solve problems of global poverty and global health. New optics on China’s intervention into Africa sharpened the contrast between the West’s multilateral form of pastoral geopolitics and the transactional strategy of Chinese state capitalism. I end by suggesting that the Davos discourses are interpretations guided by a warped mirror and wonder whether in 2007 the globalists were ready to grasp an alternate civilizational vision on the horizon.

In January 2007, I was invited to the WEF, an annual meeting of global elites, in Davos, Switzerland. As my plane descended into snowy Zurich, a banner bearing the legend “Shining India” fluttered in the wind. An alliance of the Indian government and Indian industries had decided to launch an “India Everywhere” campaign from Davos, to announce the arrival of India to the global stage. But on the serpentine drive up to the vertiginous alpine hideout, I was reminded of Thomas Mann’s (1924) *The Magic Mountain*, a novel that was first published in the aftermath of the First World War. The protagonist Hans Castorp’s trip to a tuberculosis sanatorium in Davos was also a spiritual journey through which Mann explores the elusiveness of the Western ideals of humanism, democracy, and tolerance in civilized society. Approaching the less lofty realm of an economic summit, I wondered whether global movers and shakers would envision cures for the ills of the world.

That year, the theme at Davos was “Shaping the Global Agenda, the Shifting Power Equation.” The topic recognized fluctuant relationships between institutions and individuals, profit and philanthropy, nation-states and networks, but most dramatically between North Atlantic powers and the new mega-states. The new engagement was registered by a pronounced Asian presence at the forum. Charismatic Indian executives dazzled the crowds with their fluent English and *savoir faire*. Staid Chinese bureaucrats, who reported cascades of statistics indexing China’s manufacturing prowess, otherwise kept mostly to themselves. But their circumspection could not disguise the fact that China was perceived to be the challenge in shifting geopolitics. It seemed that 2007 would turn out to be a momentous event for reimagining the liberal world order.

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For centuries, civilizational imaginations have been about domination and submission, the superior culture reigning over the barbarian or backward one. “Civilization” denotes a high level of cultural, economic, and political achievement prevailing over a topography, inclusive of one or more separate states. While civilization is clearly a specific imagination, an ambitious state does not become “civilizational” unless it is able to materialize its influence over smaller states by projecting and spreading its cultural, financial, and material values. Today, a domineering state often sustains its international position not only by claiming superior cultural values but by wielding its financial, technological, and scientific powers over smaller and poorer nations as well. Nevertheless, in a contestation for global supremacy, forging a civilizational imagination has always been an irreducible strategy for shaping an overarching symbolic order and sustaining its hold over a multinational community.

Any project of transnational governance is invariably entangled with a civilizing mission of bringing core values from the global center to the global peripheries. In the post-World War II era, the United States as the victorious world power established the United Nations with the mandate to ensure global peace and security by bringing together nation-states. The United Nations forms the core of a system of “global governance” with associated institutions (e.g., the World Bank, the IMF, etc.) and regional organizations (e.g., NATO, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). In addition, the yearly summits of Western

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powers (e.g., the Group of 7 industrial nations) and gathering of political, corporate, and cultural elites at the WEF (since 1971) are venues for managing North-South relations. In these stratospheric brainstorming sessions, Western values of progress, capitalism, and democracy guide elite problem-solving policies. Also, beyond the global institutions, Western academics, politicians, and pundits—with their theories about modernization, economics, politics, and cultures—engage in the diffuse intellectual work of reimagining Western civilization that is sustained by the liberal world order.

With the notion of “imagined community,” Benedict Anderson (1982) argues that as historically rooted empires collapsed, they were replaced by nation-states imagined into being by its subjects—also imagined—as belonging to a modern polity. In particular, “print capitalism” was the medium through which particularistic ideas, names, and icons circulated, enabling disparate peoples to imagine their newly shared belonging to a single nation. But during the same era of early to late modernity, accelerating flows of capital, technology, media, and ideas also informed the imperial imaginations of transnational communities, such as the British Empire (formative years 1600s–1990s) and the American Empire (late 1880s–present). As Timothy Mitchell (2002) notes, the “rule of experts” includes expertise in the government of cultural others. But in the postwar world, the cast of experts has proliferated to include academics, journalists, and other advocates who—in a diversity of venues—have variously helped to shape a Western vision of the modern world.

Since the 1960s, the United States has been singularly successful (over and above its military means) at spreading particularistic values such as individualism, freedom, and equality in order to invite, induce, and integrate relationships with smaller and poorer nations. Vibrant American popular culture has been an extremely effective form of worldwide influence. Frederic Jameson (2000) cynically compared it to a candy coating that helps others to tolerate—or even enjoy—the “poison of American cultural hegemonic form.” J. S. Nye Jr.’s (1990) “soft power” describes a more multifarious form of cooperative power, one with the ability to influence others’ preferences through attraction. I extend his concept by focusing on the special enticements that American modernity and its vision of the future offer: a vision that has—by persuading people the world over to celebrate and embrace American exceptionalism—somewhat mitigated overseas resentment of American economic domination, technological prowess, and military might.

Elite institutions and actors also play a critical role in the articulation of the key ideas and projects that have driven the American civilizational wave at the vanguard of North Atlantic civilization, or “the West.” From the 1950s onward, the Western imagination of civilization has played with different underpinnings of a liberal world order—from an emphasis on material progress and mass consumption to one of optimism, common humanity, and individual freedom. To put it another way, Western civilizational narratives envision the right of or-

dinary people, beyond the state, to determine the moral value of shared humanity in global times.

This essay offers a relational interpretation of global governance since the 1960s. Classic anthropology takes a functional view of relationality and exchange as the fundamental human practices that sustain culture (Graeber 2014; Mauss 2011 [1954]).

Expanding beyond “culture,” my approach shares the insights of quantum theory that envisions objects becoming manifest only when they interact with other objects (Rovelli 2018). I argue that interactions and interrelationality among disparate things and observations weave contemporary situations of globality. The “global assemblage” concept (Collier and Ong 2005) claims that colliding global and local forces crystallize emerging situations that are the focus of contemporary anthropological inquiry.

In this essay, I trace how interacting ideas, events, and worldviews shape global strategies for governing relationships with the global South. Specifically, prescriptions of modernization via capitalism invariably involve a reimagining of Western civilization.

I first look at findings and claims by anthropologists and other “skeptics and realists” (Kalb 2005:8) whose findings of cultural struggles and resistances in developing countries challenged the universal formula of market-based development.

While one cannot claim direct causal links between specific ideas and policies, these on-the-ground findings generated misgivings about the universal formula of modernization and capitalism advanced by global policy makers. Christina Garsten and Adrienne Sörbom (2018) have noted the limits of “discreet diplomacy” at the WEF, where top thinkers engage political and corporate elites. Nevertheless, by the 2000s, mounting reports on growing poverty, inequality, and dislocation in the developing world have been assimilated into Davos efforts to mitigate the effects of global capitalism.

Second, I show that a global event—the rise of Asia—triggered a turning point in the worldview of elites assembled at the WEF in 2007. Alain Badiou conceptualizes an event as a rupture that “succeeds in representing a part which is previously unrepresented” (McLaverly-Robinson 2014). As a participant, I offer a rare ethnographic window on a *mise-en-scène* where philanthropists, celebrities, and politicians expounded on the virtues of stakeholder capitalism and nongovernmental humanism to solve problems of global poverty and global health. The new optics on China’s intervention into Africa sharpened the contrast between the West’s multilateral form of pastoral geopolitics and the transactional strategy of Chinese state capitalism. I end by suggesting that the Davos discourses are interpretations guided by a warped mirror but that by 2007 the globalists were ready to grasp an alternate civilizational vision on the horizon.

From Modernization to Neoliberalism-Plus

The settling of the first sites on the Northern American continent was framed, in Christian terms, as a God-inspired

“errand into the wilderness.” According to Parry Miller (1956), this pious phrase refers to an ambiguous mission broadly interpreted as an adjustment of European Puritanism by the elected few in a new frontier. Born out of subsequent white conquest of the entire continent and justified as the playing out of uniquely American virtues and providential manifest destiny, the notion of American exceptionalism gained traction. Articulated in opposition to class-stratified Old Europe, the trope of American exceptionalism emerged as a mix of religious mission, self-reliant individualism, manifest destiny, and imperial impulses that envisioned freedom as liberal pluralism. The Founding Fathers’ motto, “out of many, one,” sought to replace ethnic and religious loyalties with liberal ideas and fellow citizenship. American civilizational discourse emphasizes abstract principles—human freedom, equality, and improvement—over cultural particularities. But US history did not always live up to these ideals, and the legacies of white supremacy, native defeat, deep slavery, and fear of immigrants have endured. In the early twentieth century, Franz Boas, the founder of American anthropology, along with Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ella Cara Deloria, first publicly challenged American biases about race, nationality, gender, and sex by promoting a vision of common humanity (King 2019). However, this moral battle had just begun at home, while abroad, the message of American civilization claimed racial, cultural, economic, political, and technological superiority over other nations.

As the triumphant power ending World War II, the United States became a global beacon for a reconstituted European political liberalism that could be exported to the world at large. During the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union (1947–1991), a nation that was led by a Boston “Brahmin” elite and guided by generic Christianity proposed a universalizing democracy to face off with international communism (see, e.g., David Halberstam’s [1993] *The Best and the Brightest*). American ideals of liberty, equality, freedom, and progress were widely circulated in a bid to outpace communism as a competing ideology for nation-building, regional influence, and world unity.

From the mid-twentieth century onward, American elites propelled a powerful modernization discourse that linked the acquisition of material progress with spiritual transcendence for “backward” nations. In the early months of the Second World War, President Roosevelt planted the seeds of the United Nations: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. When the United Nations was established in 1945 with headquarters in Manhattan, it powerfully cemented the global role of the United States as a beacon of modern humanity. The UN charter enfolded fundamental principles for underpinning the universal rights of individual liberty, equality, and development in a postconflict world. With Hollywood’s help, American soft power in the form of glamour and consumerism—movies, music, fashions, and technologies—spread across the world. Growing up in postcolonial Malaysia, I was educated in a

British convent; but American jazz, pop songs, and Broadway musicals were the ambient echo of the arriving future.

American academics played an intellectual role, programmatically spelling out both the thinking and the steps for how to get other nations, old and new, to an American-style modernity. In the 1950s–1960s, Harvard professors spun out “modernization theory” as a prescription for decolonizing countries to achieve economic progress (Gilman 2003). The modernization doctrine inspired many postcolonial leaders, whether with capitalist or socialist inclinations (the Shah of Iran, President Suharto of Indonesia). They proposed an American model of universal development based on the adoption and proliferation of rational decision-making, private property, free markets, and democracy. By embracing such key variables, poor countries could gradually climb the ladder toward becoming capitalist, developed, and free, even if as poorer versions of the First World.

Walter W. Rostow (1960), a Harvard economist who served as national security advisor to both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, laid out five basic stages of economic growth through which poor countries would shift from “traditional society” to takeoff, drive to maturity, and ultimately enter into an age of high mass consumption. Broken-down peasant societies can transition to economic takeoff if people were to copy the rational, maximizing, self-improving, entrepreneurial models of Western success. Social scientists undertook research in agrarian countries to test the hypothesis that through the proliferation of entrepreneurial behavior, the rearing of *homo economicus* rational actors, and the instituting of modern firms, the economic modernization in agrarian regions would be secured and sustained. Scholars such as Clifford Geertz (1969), who believed that peasant cultural traditions were an obstacle to rational economic transformation, gave support to Rostow’s formula of a cultural “shortcut” to modernity for impoverished rural countries. In short, what modernization theory promises is an alternative path to development than that offered by a communist state-driven developmental strategy (Gilman 2003:196).

But new ideas against modernization theory were sparked by the intensification of the Vietnam War. I arrived in the United States in 1970 and plunged into student protests spilling onto Broadway. The campus-based antiwar movement was led by professors. At Columbia University, many classes were suspended and professors (from anthropology, history, and sociology) conducted teach-ins on the plaza. Revolts and resistances against market economies became the themes of peasant studies. A Marxist anthropology proliferated studies on oppression, rebellion, and migration as the outcomes of agrarian capitalism in the developing world (Mintz 1974, 1986; Scott 1976; Wolf 1997). In *Sweetness and Power*, Sydney W. Mintz (1986) discusses how slavery and sugar plantations fed European and American consumer and working patterns and thus the formation of modern capitalist society. Since then, myriad ethnographic studies of agrarian labor and dislocation show that developing areas are still locked into peripheral positions to feed capital accumulation in “core” countries; such findings

contribute to the modeling of the world systems theory (Wallerstein 1976).

Thus, despite Rostow's early optimism, too many poor countries simply could not translate, mimic, or adequately institute the liberal norms and forms advocated by American advisers: to install modern infrastructures, let alone to embrace liberalizing ideas in their governance and society. Despite the infusion of expertise and funds distributed through US-affiliated organizations such as the World Bank, the rosy promise of capitalist development did not pan out, and in many agrarian countries, the implementation of rational, liberal policies actually increased and further entrenched inequalities. Millions of people who were suddenly unable to sustain agrarian livelihoods flooded to cities and industrial zones (see, e.g., Ong 1986). Astute scholars such as Samuel Huntington (1996) have long doubted the notion of modernization as either a convergent or an inevitable force over the planet.

Indeed, modernization discourse was interwoven into American postwar activities conducted mainly in Asia. The Second World War was brought to an end by the United States dropping hydrogen bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and then occupying Japan (1945–1952). During the Cold War, the United States engaged in the Korean War (1950–1953) and the Vietnam War (1968–1975), aided in the Untung coup against President Sukarno in Indonesia (1965), and “contained” communist China (1945–1972). In other words, modernization theory was the ideological counterpart to multiple military engagements meant to stem a perceived rising tide of communism, which American intelligence officials feared would make Asian countries fall like dominos in a row. An American sphere of influence in the Asian continent was vital to the containment of the Soviet Union and China.

Unsurprisingly, and inseparable from America's professed civilizational mission to spread democracy, the United States established hundreds of military bases in the so-called free world over the past 70 years. As the twentieth century ended, resentments sowed by military bases on foreign soil—Subic Bay, the Philippines; Okinawa, Japan; the Demilitarized Zone, the Korean Peninsula—have become a form of acknowledged “blowback” (Johnson 2001). American occupation of Japan and South Korea did indeed provide the infrastructural basis and capitalist organization to launch Asian success stories of electoral politics and industrial capitalism.

But the globalization-capitalism trajectory has uneven and often disastrous effects in different regions of the world. As early as the 1960s, there appeared signs that the Western civilizational promise of progress through capitalism was not working well in the global South. Critics such as Andre Gunter Frank (1967) went so far as to charge that European *laissez-faire* capitalism “underdeveloped” (“open veins”) postcolonial Latin America. A few decades later, Arturo Escobar (2011), in a sweeping indictment, argued that American-styled development had not only failed to bring progress to the continent but reinforced oppression and inequality by residual feudal colonial institutions. In Africa, anthropologists studied widespread

cultural resistances and obstacles to globalization. In South Africa, a resurgence of religious practices sought to thwart the disruptions of casino capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Ignorance about rural cultures often led to the failure of developmental projects (Ferguson 1994). Inequality and suffering rose most dramatically in the postcolonies of Africa and Latin America, where weak governments embraced market reforms wholesale (Kalb 2005:17; Mbembe 2001).

Globalization, however, has helped modernize some megastates. Market reforms in China and the disintegration of the Soviet Union provided an opening for the United States to globalize a neoliberal reform package. The Washington Consensus (1989) pushed economic prescriptions including stock markets, private property, the influx of Western capital, and flourishing civil society. Following IMF economic restructuring in both communist giants, Francis Fukuyama (1992), a political scientist at Stanford, hastily claimed that the West had won the historical battle between capitalist and communist ideologies. The WEF became an important venue for ideologically synchronizing new marketizing nations under the globalizing West.

For a decade or so, Russia welcomed American dollars and some form of privatization, but the deepening inequalities could not be mitigated by the use of neoliberal accounting (see Collier 2011). The People's Republic of China was more astute and selectively adopted neoliberal thinking, making it subservient to its own form of “graduated sovereignty”; that is, the government boost marketed development but rejected democratic ideals in favor of centralized planning and state capitalism (Ong 2006, 2008). As discontent with the neoliberal model mounted in the 1990s (Stiglitz 2002), the megacountries—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—came together to form a competitive bloc (BRIC), but in big nation networks (G8–G9), North Atlantic countries still imagined China and Russia as allies, though slightly contrarian.

In the developing world, the failure of the model of modern nation-building was met by mounting protests and insurgencies against ongoing racial domination by the global North. Postcolonial theory maintains that the deep histories of Western colonialism have left enduring legacies of racial exploitation and disadvantage in ostensibly postcolonial times. Having suffered grievously under the rule of the British Crown from 1858 to 1947 (see Dalrymple 2019), India, until recently, professed a socialist identity and stanchly resisted market liberalization as the solution to widespread poverty and deeply rooted cultural, social, and political inequalities. Pankaj Mishra (2017) proclaims that white racial domination has spawned the current array of right-wing movements and vengeful nationalisms in the developing world. He argues that white hegemony is imperiled, engaged in a desperate final struggle with a worldwide burst of racial anger. The recent adoption of capitalist marketization has also grown a huge Indian middle class with aspirations for alternative identities shaped by consumption and emigration (Appadurai 1996).

These events—increasing indebtedness in the developing world, the rise of BRIC—built momentum for an “inclusive

growth” paradigm in global financial institutions. World Bank documents began to integrate a broader concept of poverty (World Bank 2005). The softening of market reforms by pro-poor policies (referred to as Washington-plus or neoliberalism-plus) created the political space for dealing with postcolonial protests and desires. Assimilating a variety of criticisms about neoliberalism and postcolonialism, institutions of global governance became preoccupied with forgiving debts and forging humanitarian governance in low-income countries.

Humanitarian Governance

By the end of the twentieth century, Western civilizational imagination had moved away from its former focus on nation-building toward a far fuzzier conception of a common humanity. Harking back to the UN declaration of human rights in 1948, the embrace of human rights as the prime Western policy agenda for the world has gained momentum since the late 1970s. As mentioned above, human rights in 1989 were girded to the neoliberal agenda of the Washington Consensus prescriptions for debt-racked countries. Another strand of human rights in global governance emerged from civil and cultural forces that come with living in a globalizing multiethnic and multiracial world; white supremacy was no longer so secure or tenable. Some academics and activists turned to Kant’s writings on cosmopolitanism and perpetual peace (see Wood 1998) as an anchor for efforts to reframe civilizational discourses around more inclusive international relationships. David Held, a London School of Economics political theorist who had been mentored by renowned sociologist Anthony Giddens (also an advisor to the Blair government), theorized an irrefutable link between capitalism, democracy, and cosmopolitanism within the new global order. Held and his compatriots argue that the infrastructures of global capitalism provided support for the growth of a worldwide civil society (Held et al. 1999).

Thus, a renewed imaginary of Western liberal leadership, articulated by philosophers and activists, replaced the perception of barbarism in the peripheries with the image of a humanism shared with the affluent West. Leading thinkers advocate the need to enlarge moral inclusion (Moyn 2010)—in the sense of “our” obligations toward less privileged others—and elaborate the rise of a global civil society shaped by a nongovernmental organization (NGO)-connected world (Chandler and Baker 2004). The ideological reimagination of foreign relations as a series of moral problems was led by France. Its own histories of slavery and colonialism had been supplanted after World War II by a national narrative of the state as champion of universal human rights. Inspired by the motto of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” (drawn from the French Revolution in 1789), the French investment in universal values premised on the concept of shared humanity (despite racist realities) matched that of the United States and sought to project moral leadership worldwide.

But in the 1990s, the specter of genocide returning to the European continent was raised by the massacre of Muslims and

other minority groups in Bosnia. Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the United Nations, articulated a UN mandate that gave political legitimacy to “humanitarian intervention,” or cross-border defenses of human rights regardless of national sovereignty. President Clinton was reluctantly pressured to support NATO’s bombing on Serbia because of its actions in Bosnia. But Harvard professors, including Michael Ignatieff (1997), attempted to justify such actions as the squaring of warrior honor with modern conscience by confronting ethnic wars. While North American liberals celebrated the West’s moral mission to protect the rights of noncitizens, critics in the developing world viewed militant humanitarianism as a covert strategy for Western countries to violate the sovereignty of other nations. Given widespread fear of military incursions in the name of humanitarianism, NGOs increasingly became the primary vehicles through which the humanitarian moral principle to protect life for its own sake was pursued.

Thus, human rights became the language of international legitimacy, its idioms fundamentally moral, not ideological. Apparently neutral NGOs would take on the burden of addressing social inequalities that nation-states failed to resolve. The question was, how could Western advocates promote human rights without recourse to an authoritative universalism, but rather, as a transnational discourse to be invoked in multiple cultural contexts? Shifting approaches, Ignatieff (2000) calls for a “humble humanism,” which offers “capacity-building” to people from different cultures and equips each to demand rights and freedom in their local vernaculars. The language of human rights, he argues, joins the global and the multicultural in a single interconnected civilization of “religious synchronism.” As a flexible idiom, the moral vernacular of human rights offer minorities, women, and children a claim against oppression and a plea for help. At its most abstract, human rights discourse constructs recipient and protector as moral human beings indebted to each other, without, we may add, tackling the thorny issues of political economic domination. There is perhaps the influence of anthropological arguments that moral principles should constrain market systems, as popularized by *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* by David Graeber (2014).

As Samuel Moyn (2010) notes, to invest in human rights battles is to be caught up in an endless Sisyphean burden of righting human injustices and doing good everywhere. Thus, he locates the global appeal of human rights in “the image of another better world of dignity and respect, even when human rights seem to be about slow and piecemeal reform” (4). In the realm of imagination, the human rights vernacular has survived because other political ideologies imploded. If human rights avoided failure, “it was most of all because they were widely understood as a moral alternative to bankrupt political utopias” (Moyn 2010:5). Humanitarian civilization is justified as moral interventions into problems of life and living and rooted in universal beliefs of our shared humanity.

Such ideals of mutuality, Michel Foucault observes, became crystallized through the politics of pastoral power in Western civilization. He defines pastoral care—leaning into the shepherd

metaphor—as concerned with the care of individuals—that is, as a humanistic form of continuous governance that may or may not involve the role of the state (Foucault 2000:300). Didier Fassin (2007), a founder of *Doctors without Borders*, has called “humanitarianism as a nongovernmental government” that is best exemplified by the paradigmatic NGO delivering selfless care to a variety of conflict zones.

But if humanitarianism and pastoralism seek to remake communities, how would such projects be translated or received across a highly uneven geopolitical landscape? What do recipients in multiple contexts targeted by Western largess think about being dependent on and patronized by Western liberal guidance on questions of life and living? The most zealous forms of humanitarianism are often inseparable from supremacist assumptions and biases of race, gender, and nationality and often enacted as a form of domineering patronage and dominating compassion similar to that meted out by religious orders, NGO workers, and ordinary donors (see, e.g., Malkki 2015; Ong 2003; Redfield 2013). Any project to produce a community through care would face grudging tolerance if not political resistance by people already enmeshed in and inclined toward other networks of mutuality. As non-Western nations become more affluent and assertive, skeptics view human rights as atonement for Western states that continue to benefit from overseas patronage, exploitation, and domination. Humanitarianism in its different iterations was to be continually tested and mocked as Western fantasies of global leadership.

The Multicultural Scene at Davos

The WEF describes itself as “the foremost global partnership of business, political, intellectual and other leaders of society committed to improving the state of the world.” According to the WEF participants directory, in 2007, 24 heads of states, many politicians, 500 corporate chieftains and their spouses, and hundreds of media representatives and academics were brought together as “world citizens.” Founder Klaus Schwab (2008) sought to articulate the conscience of global capitalism, espousing not only open borders of exchange and mutual benefit; corporations were urged to recast themselves as world citizens—that is, to move beyond the interests of corporate stakeholders alone and to consider the interests of worldwide society at large. Often criticized as a high-end party for Western capitalist elites, the WEF has increasingly invited noncorporate and nonstate leaders to network and generate aspiring ideas, such as open borders, conscientious capitalism, and most recently at the 2020 WEF, the challenges of climate change (Gelles 2020).

The 2007 WEF I attended seemed to mark something of a turning point in a broader movement away from global business as usual toward a concerted grappling with the challenges posed by rising powers. I had never before been in such an elite ecosystem peopled by a dizzying combination of global leaders, their acolytes, and would-be successors. It was a capitalist fiefdom, attended mainly by some 2,400 people, half of whom were mainly corporate chieftains and their partners, the other

half made up of professors, technology experts, and civil society entrepreneurs. Corporate bosses cut deals, and emerging entrepreneurs sought to raise funds from venture capitalists. The fur-donned and pearl-wearing wives of networking husbands attended their husbands’ panels. Corporate-decor rooms were bedecked with hothouse orchids. Nonbusiness folks participated to help shape understanding of major challenges and issues such as education, health, and poverty. Some businessmen brandished copies of Jared Diamond’s books on the collapse of civilizations. Were these intimations that the arrival of megastates may upset the applectart?

In fact, self-paying global managers underwrote the cost of the entire meeting, which included paying for media representatives and academics (many from US business schools) like me to fly in business class. Two hundred and fifty academics had been gathered to help political and economic leaders better understand challenges and issues that shape the global agenda. My invitation had come out of the blue a few months earlier. A WEF officer called me from New York; my name had been suggested by anonymous advisors. She later visited me in Berkeley, where we briefly discussed my work, some of which she had read in preparation for the interview. I deduced that the forum was beginning to include more thinkers about East Asia. Indeed, during my visit, the only other Asian American academic (besides business school folks) I met was an expert on the Chinese state.

In his welcoming comments, Klaus Schwab declared that the theme of the 2007 meeting was “The Shifting Power Equation”: from technological producers to customers; from corporate responsibility to sustainability; and from developed to emerging markets. The reorientation was also geopolitical, “from the West to Asia.” North Atlantic values of democracy and diversity were to resonate with multinational leaders forging alliances as “stakeholders of global society.” He urged the North Atlantic movers and shakers to forge “collaborative opportunities” with their counterparts from China and India.

Squeezing through the crowded rooms, I practically rubbed shoulders with people I have only read about in *The New York Times*: Laurie Tyson (then dean of the London School of Economics business school and an adviser to the Clinton administration), Harvard President Lawrence Summers, presidential hopeful John Kerry, and Christine Lagarde, then a French minister of commerce who would later head the IMF. I witnessed white male bantering between the UK chairman of Reuters Niall FitzGerald, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, and rock band U2’s star Bono. I shared passing comments with Gavin Newsom, the future governor of California. I participated in an urban sustainability design competition in which then mayor of London, Boris Johnson, was a participant. Neither of our respective team won; the prize went to the design of a green city in the Amazon (good luck!). I was recruited for a game-playing exercise on how to rapidly arrive at a cross-cultural win-win strategy to resolve an urgent world-spanning crisis. Ivy League business school professors armed with rational-choice thinking dominated the conflict resolution in an enactment that



Figure 1. My World Economic Forum badge.

was self-gratifying and entirely unreal. I was able, however, to catch a glimpse of advocates at work by attending panels focused on philanthropy and capitalism.

The relentless snowing outside intensified the experience of being enclosed in a giant greenhouse. Each day, you donned a hooded coat and boots and brought your fancier gear and heels in a bag. To gain access to the vast complex, I wore a plastic badge imprinted with my image (fig. 1). While waiting to enter security gates like those in airports, I saw—at a safe distance—a lone heavily garbed individual in the snow carrying an anti-WEF sign.

On the opening night, India threw a boisterous Bollywood-style reception in a grand mansion with colorful strobe lights playing over the facade and courtyard. During the day, more sedate halal meals were hosted in turn by the United Emirates Republics and Malaysia (petrodollars were making their presence felt). I met enthusiastic Indian businessmen, including an executive of the largest distributor of motorcycles in India. New York media personalities were well represented, from TV anchors to print journalists to museum curators; they air-kissed and marveled at running into each other outside the Big Apple. Young social entrepreneurs and artists from the developing world, who have been designated future global leaders, reveled in their new status. For an evening concert, a young Chinese cellist played Tchaikovsky's *Variations on a Rococo Theme*. The multicultural exuberance seemed newish, but 2007 was turning out to be a critical moment for rethinking Western hegemony. Outside, the snow fell steadily on a pleasure dome of power-lust, high finance, and big dreams of a better world.

The Optics of China in Africa

German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the 2007 WEF meeting with this surprising remark: "For the past 200 years, we got used to a Eurocentric view of the world, but today we can see that this type of overview is over." She went on to say that the rise of China, India, and Russia pose questions that the United States has not yet begun to address.

Other leaders raised the looming presence of China but had different takes on what it meant for US hegemony. At a more enclosed panel, Laura Tyson warned economists of "the Big Bad Wolves lurking in the forest: I do worry how the US will respond to the fact that its hyperpower status in terms of finance and wealth has to be reduced over the next 25 years." At another meeting, Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, said that the United States was still strong and benign, facing off rogue states (e.g., North Korea) and nonstate actors (Al Qaeda). But he saw an emerging alternative order, "or is China too occupied by domestic problems and prefers to ride on coattails of US power?"

This recognition of a geostrategic shift from the West to Asia was received with reassurances from Asian industrialists (India) and bureaucrats (China) at the meeting. The chairman of Bharti Enterprises (India's leading telecom conglomerate) reassured the West that now that India was dealing with its own poverty, "the West has a big burden lifted off its shoulders." The spokesman from China's State Council placated Davos by saying that China's would be a harmonious and peaceful rise that will benefit all countries. Despite these reassurances not to rock the boat, the Western optics of the two Asian megastates were very different. India's flashy celebration of its global arrival signaled its easy fit—as "the world's largest democracy"—within the Davos arrangement. As corporate and political leaders sought to articulate a strategic vision with which to respond to shifts in global power balance, China's growing influence in Africa sparked a direct challenge to Western hegemony.¹

Indeed, WEF 2007 was a coming-out story for the first-ever Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, held in Beijing the previous year. During the three-day Davos meeting, vivid images of African wildlife flickered from ubiquitous wall videos. Stunning depictions of galloping zebras, ambling elephants, and skyrocketing giraffes formed a dramatic background to China's creation of the China-Africa Development Fund, with its promise of US\$1 billion initial funding that was expected to grow in multipliers, and rapidly.

Among Western observers, there was fear of a renewed scramble for Africa as the great powers repeat the nineteenth-century rush on the continent; but in a global competition to strip Africa of its vast natural resources, the stakes are even higher than before. The outcomes have included environmental degradation, human rights abuses, and widespread corruption. China is the latest—though enormously powerful—entrant. In the post-Washington Consensus spirit of a debt jubilee, Western firms representing roughly two-thirds of the total foreign direct investments in Africa and the majority of foreign direct investments in former colonies (Turner 2007). Clearly, from the Chinese point of view, trade—not aid—is the more useful mechanism for helping Africa to raise standards of living while also giving China access to its raw materials. The Chinese intrusions are reminiscent of earlier North Atlantic colonialisms that have now ended. But

1. For a WEF view, see Hadinia (2007).

while Western firms also work with repressive governments and create environmental, economic, and social havoc, this mode of capitalist appropriation often appears excusable because the Chinese state proclaims a win-win transactional approach in contrast to the carrot-and-stick method still favored by the West (i.e., aid in return for democratic improvements, such as girls' education, female political representation, etc.). The Chinese intrusion raised the question of whether the West's neoliberal-plus model is also a form of transactionalism, albeit newly moralized.

Philanthro-Capitalism: "Doing Good While Making Profits"

Leaders such as Tony Blair, who had recently stepped down as the prime minister of Great Britain, considered China's rise to be one of the most significant global challenges of the twenty-first century. It seemed a moment after which Western influence could no longer emanate mainly from one giant country (the United States) but would instead need to be dispersed through a complex network of nonstate institutions as well. The US Agency for International Development was out, and NGOs were in. The reasoning was that state and nonstate actors could jointly pursue global agendas and global values for a robust version of political liberalism in contrast to the authoritarian powers emerging on the horizon. The new platform for aiding and regulating the global South would bypass intergovernmental realms by bringing representatives of government, business, academia, and civil society to work collaboratively on sustaining Western global interests. Already existing public-private modalities can become vehicles for sustaining what I call a pastoral biopolitics in the governance of troubled regions. But the language has shifted from "we the West have models for you to emulate" to "we intervene to help solve practical problems before they become global ones." Out of this new strategy emerged philanthropic programs such as "global health" (see below).

The founder of the WEF, Klaus Schwab, provided the theoretical frame for this new approach in the WEF participants directory. He declared the WEF to be "the foremost global partnership of business, political, intellectual and other leaders of society committed to improving the state of the world." In a time when the role of the nation-state has diminished and the sphere of influence of business has inexorably widened, he offered a model of "global corporate citizenship/corporate social responsibility," in which companies need to view themselves as stakeholders alongside governments and civil society in the world (Schwab 2008). This model of stakeholder capitalism is supposed to succeed the shareholder model of profit maximization that has led to incredible inequality and planetary emergency.

In remaking capitalism for the global good, Western celebrities perform a big role by staging supranational initiatives and institutions as the solution to the world's disasters. Technocratic globalists, for example, reconceptualize poverty as an

opportunity rather than an obstacle to capitalism. The global "bottom of the pyramid" is no longer a static layer of entrenched poverty; instead, it is to be reconsidered as the final frontier for "doing good while making profits." The poor are recast as "social entrepreneurs" who can launch microbusinesses on microloans. Rock celebrities who had raised funds for the 2001 tsunami victims had rode the posttsunami momentum to increase the possibilities of nonstate global aid. British musicians such as Sir Bob Geldof, a singer who participated in the Live Aid concert for famine relief, initiated worldwide media fundraising events to broadcast global poverty. British fundraisers noted "the silent tsunamis" hitting Africa in the form of entrenched poverty, famine, and disease (see "The G-8 and Africa: Rhetoric or Action?" at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?185319-1/8-africa-rhetoric-action&eventp185319&playEvent>). The United Kingdom and the World Bank led efforts to end a "debt trap" afflicting poor nations that spent more on interest than on health, education, and infrastructure.

At WEF 2007, self-identified "philanthropreneurs" was a new buzzword as celebrities promoted opportunities for a new model of for-profit giving. An innovative capitalism depended on entrepreneurs developing a Rawlsian kind of self-realization in relation not only to smallholders but to people at the bottom of the pyramid as well. In his *Theory of Justice*, John Rawls (1971) argues that personal growth is tied to economic justice. Managers of any organization need to improve moral scores by pulling up the "least advantaged" if it does not hurt others (shareholders?). Celebrities at the forum sought to ignite a Rawlsian conscience among Western financiers, managers, and consumers, articulating a formula that links doing good with making profit, thus raising personal scores of justice. In the words of Bob Geldof, "the [media] pornography of poverty" had to be stopped by innovating business ethics.

Geldof remarked in an interview with *Business Guide to Switzerland*, "Profits are ethical. It is when you exploit individuals or the environment that the profits become unethical, but there's nothing wrong with making money. . . . You can invest in human capital like health and education, which in turn gives you a healthy educated population, which leads to a dynamic economy, which gives everyone a better life." Bono, Geldof's compatriot in rock music, advocated a venture capital model of philanthropy that made judicious investments with returns on lives. The previous year, Bono had launched money-making lines—*Product (Red)* and *Edun*, centered on African-made garments—that tied charitable donations to consumer purchases, blurring the distinction between the two. Bono had recruited talk show queen Oprah Winfrey to his cause, and at the 2007 meeting he was drumming up investors from more American companies such as Gap and Apple. This cause-related marketing was intended to entice Western consumers by "making ethical fashion sexy" to Western teens and middle-aged women, the target purchasers.

Against the backdrop of China pouring money into Africa, Bono and Tony Blair pushed for debt relief in the continent or a Marshall Plan for African poverty. On a BBC blog of the

meeting, “World Economic Forum: The Promise of Africa” (https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/davos07/2007/01/the_promise_of_africa.shtml), Bono said, “Twenty million children have gone to school [last year] as a result of resources freed up from debt cancellation. Corruption is Africa’s number one problem, above HIV Aids, Malaria and TB. Just ask your African friends. But there is also corruption north of the equator. If [Africans] sell us orange juice instead of oranges, we slap a tariff on; if they sell chocolate instead of cocoa, we slap a tariff on. This is corruption.” The British pair viewed Africa as the battleground for holding onto Western hegemony but with nonstate philanthro-entrepreneurs in the lead. The British contingent for for-profit philanthropy included luminaries such as Sir Richard Branson, a billionaire business magnate who founded the Virgin Group. British anxieties about China were reflected in an image in *The Guardian* mocking Chinese ass-kissing in the Savannah.

The advocacy drive in Africa was led by the troika of Bono, Blair, and the American megaphilanthropist Bill Gates (see fig. 2). The Gates Foundation had already given over \$100 million to malaria research because there were no market incentives for developing vaccines and medicines for malaria, TB, yellow fever, acute diarrheal illnesses, or respiratory illnesses. In an interview, Gates said, “We want the world to allocate its resources knowing that the death of a child in a poor country is every bit as tragic as that of a child in a rich country. The principle that every human life has equal worth guides us to reduce the suffering that comes as a result of inequality” (Gates 2007). Besides a focus on global pandemics, the Foundation took the lead in shifting from giving money to developing vaccines to training experts and building governing systems.

I attended the 2007 WEF panel “Delivering on the Promise of Africa,” which Gates dominated. He announced that in the midst of a global focus on HIV/AIDS, he wanted to “make malaria sexy.” He planned to shift from giving money for vaccine development to training health experts and building health-care systems in African countries. During the Q&A session, I asked Gates whether his administrative and infrastructural interventions intruded on the sovereignty of poor



Figure 2. The World Economic Forum troika: Bill Gates, Tony Blair, and Bono of the band U2. Credit: AP Photo/Keystone, Laurent Gillieron, 2005.

nations. He responded, “We train experts who will contribute to their own countries.” But given the vast sums of money involved and its capacity to draw health workers away from local government agencies, observers have charged that the Gates Foundation largess ultimately undermined African state capacities (Garrett 2007). Others warned that the mega-foundations expended vast sums of money that seemed to be shaping their own foreign policies (Katz 2007). Indeed, the nonstate-driven multilateralism exemplified by the Gates Foundation seems to divert attention away from the destructive effects of Western companies in the continent. I worry that in the near future, some small failing African states will become de facto wards of the Gates Foundation.

But African leaders in the audience defended Gates’s largess. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia, emphasized the coordination of foreign governance structures with the priorities of the host country. She said, “We desire autonomous development. Dependence on aid is short term. Aid will lead to trade.” Thabo Mbeki, president of South Africa, added another angle, that foreign philanthropy was preferable to foreign loans. “We need a radical increase in every respect: teachers in math, science, nurses, doctors, engineers, all sorts of people, so that we don’t have to go to Paul Wolfowitz, to borrow money from his World Bank and then hire consultants from him to tell us how we should spend it.” Wealthy foundations, in other words, helped liberate poor countries from global debts. By shifting away from foreign aid that comes with “political strings attached,” the nonstate philanthropic model seeks to promote civilizational values that modulate what was still a carrot-and-stick approach.

It was clear that the strong British contingent at Davos 2007 provided intellectual firepower to launch the donor platforms for remaking the world. Culture warrior Tony Blair believed in the trans-Atlantic doctrine of muscular liberal interventionism.

He argued that “power over global issues can only be effectively wielded today by global alliances, based on global values.” This “muscular multilateralism” called for a new alignment of moral cause and strategic interest: as Blair put it, “Indeed, the very consequence of interdependence is the necessity to intervene, in coalition with others, in order to prevent danger or injustice that may originate outside our borders but ultimately will affect us within them.”

With Western NGOs and philanthropic agencies as custodians in a system of pastoralism, small states can build the proper infrastructure for local governance: “everything else . . . fails unless the system of self-government and therefore self-help are brought into being.”²² Such mobilization of nonstate

2. Blair goes on: “The proper infrastructure of government—functioning commercial and legal systems, health and education ministries that can actually administer, economic authorities that have real authority; police and military that perform the tasks they should under proper rules of governance—these things often seem less exciting and motivating than direct intervention to cure disease or alleviate poverty, but in reality they are the life blood of true progress for nations struggling to be nations.”

Western institutions and wealth could also confront problems of climate, Africa, and wealth imbalances (Blair 2007). Blair noted that NGOs, foundations, and philanthropies form new constellations of authority that will possess powerful means for advancing common global (Enlightenment) values of tolerance, openness, and justice in the world. The implicit point was that unlike China's strictly transactional approach (our investments for your resources), robust Western multilateralism would guide small states to adopt a values-based agenda (human rights, women's rights, and political freedom). Rawlsian distributive justice was thus inveigled into a narrative of civilization reconceived as a custodianship of pastoral geopolitics.

In the early 1970s, Harvard historian Niall Ferguson considered the US sponsorship and engagement with a rising China to be a major plus, premised on collaborations and win-win gains that he dubbed "Chimerica," the core of a stabilizing "New World Order" (Ferguson 2004). But at the 2007 WEF meeting, the first intimations of an alternate model of global governance were in play.

A Warped Mirror?

Discourses of globalization are stories that reflect the ideals, contradictions, and delusions of liberal civilization. Besides key ideas that informed the triumphalist view of liberal global governance, the fierce interrogations of its failures and deficiencies by critics at home and abroad also go into the making of liberal mythology.

Like liberal thinkers, progressive critics also seek conceptual clarity in a binary concept of the world as divided between global institutions and global masses. In 2000, Michael Hardt and Anton Negri published *Empire*, a neo-Marxist critique. The book became a rare academic bestseller by claiming that the manifestations of a coming global revolution as placeless "multitudes" generated by the neoliberal empire will bring about its collapse. The authors' revolutionary fervor is blind to the realpolitik that the majority of industrial workers were located in China and that their labor was building the rise of Chinese state capitalism (Ong 2012a). Another antiglobalist book is *Winners Take All* by Anand Giridharadas (2018). He argues that corporate titans and retired political leaders express a hypocritical ethos of "making a difference" through social impact investing (social entrepreneurship, nonprofit projects) without calling for a redistribution of power or fundamental systemic change. Such sweeping critiques ignore the powers of sovereignty that shape the interaction of capital and labor domestically, as well as direct the resurgence of the nation abroad. Indeed, postcolonial scholars tend to blame domestic failures more on foreign and global elites than on national leaders and institutions.

We can recognize some material and political benefits of Western influences. Humanitarian interventions have produced some undeniable improvements to global health and reduced global poverty, as exemplified by the Gates Foundation. At best, free-floating liberal values have inspired and empowered subjugated women (in wealthy and developing

nations), ongoing resistances against authoritarian rule (from Brazil, Columbia, Thailand, Myanmar, Hong Kong, etc.), struggles by racial, ethnic, and refugee minority groups in megastates (e.g., India, China, United States, Russia), and a multitude of youthful protests against racial, national, gender, and sexual discriminations in myriad countries. As a weak universal, human rights provides a common language of making claims and renegotiating relationships between citizens and their oppressive governments the world over. In many cases, the human rights vernacular and moral objections to discriminations based on a group's inherited elements have now become powerful ways to curb state power and to build solidarity on the investment in a common humanity.

But Western efforts to align moral certitudes with strategic interests can be a problematic guide to reimagining civilization. The soft power of the liberal world order sometimes gave license to the exercise of hard power. American programs to promote democracy were reinforced by the humanitarian impulse to override sovereignty in the name of liberal values. Besides the bombing of Serbia mentioned above, the United States later invaded Iraq. And backed by a 2005 UN General Assembly doctrine of "responsibility to protect," the United States justified bombing Libya to protect the citizens of Benghazi. Weaker countries are entirely warranted in their fear of US intervention to rescue brutalized citizens. Nevertheless, political liberalism, when exercised solely as soft power, can offer institutional alliances that support the development of flourishing economies and societies everywhere.

Looking back from the vantage point of 2020, the "globalism" that American civilizational institutions promoted has been thrown into doubt by recent events—9/11, unending wars, technological competition, the US-China trade war, and the coronavirus pandemic. Under President Trump, the United States withdrew from the Paris Agreement on climate change and from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, both networks that uphold Western values, standards, and goals for global security. In the midst of a major pandemic, the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization is yet another instance of a retreat from global leadership. The new assertiveness of China on the global stage—in trade, art, health, construction, 5G technology, climate change, and space exploration—has further curtailed the influence of American "globalism." For the past century, even when all else seemed in question, we have informally considered free markets, political freedoms, social justice, and personal autonomy to be the "weak universals"—in the sense of their being pervasive, though nonlegal, values and norms—that have shaped the modern global era.

Theories, themes, and prescriptions are cultural forms that diagnose and order our liberal system, are stories we tell ourselves about ourselves—paraphrasing Clifford Geertz (1973:448)—about what we want to believe are true. Such public lessons as to what is good, fair, and human, enacted in fields of tension, involve the sport of prestige that can spiral into "status bloodbath" (Geertz 1973:436). As I have illuminated above, the WEF is an arena wherein diverse truth claims engage in a game

of power that leads to a certain resolution (Foucault 1994:297–298). Not surprisingly, protests and pronouncements in the halls of stratospheric power are full of contradictions, inconsistencies, and even delusions. They shape a warped mirror that guides our imagination for managing North-South relations.

Before departing Davos, I chatted with Timothy Garton Ash, a world-renowned Oxford professor of modern European history and a columnist for *The Guardian*. I noted that Asian views of global change were missing at the summit. As I recall, Ash rather dismissively replied, “Are there any?” Even in 2020, Ash still frames global change in terms of epochs that have been most meaningful to the West. In a news column, he notes that we are in a “Cold War 2” moment and calls on China to return to a “pragmatic, evolutionary strategy” for its “peaceful rise” in the late twentieth century (Ash 2020). But can a “Davos man’s” view of civilization versus nationalism prevail, and can muscular stakeholder capitalism meet the challenge of China’s assertive state capitalism? Western leaders need to come down from the mountain and recognize that they no longer have a monopoly on ways to describe the global future. In retrospect, a prime Western European ideologist such as Ash had not considered the possibility that views outside Western civilization could count.

Since 2013, Beijing leaders have been conjuring up a Chinese civilizational imagination based on discourses of “a Chinese dream” at home and of a peaceful rise overseas. First articulated by President Xi Jinping and elaborated by thousands of Chinese academics, China’s vision of a world order is underpinned by the megainfrastructure Belt and Road Initiative that funnels material aid and know-how to dozens of developing countries (see Ong 2017). Chinese leaders cite not values of common modern humanity in the twenty-first century but ancient tropes of “All under Heaven” (*Tianxia*), the Silk Road, and Ming voyages (early fifteenth century). A distorting mirror of historical Chinese suzerainty frames the contemporary megastate’s project to territorialize the watery peripheries and corral neighboring countries into an emerging China-centered topology (French 2018; Ong 2017, 2020a). A half-century of theorizing global governance has proven elusive to top thinkers in the West, but 2007 marked the broadening of their horizon to engage an alternate Chinese vision in a multipolar world.

Comments

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“In the words of Bob Geldof, ‘the [media] pornography of poverty’ had to be stopped by innovating business ethics.” I read this as the crescendo of Ong’s sweeping account of the “civilizational imaginations” that global superpowers and business

leaders cultivate to entrench and extend their power. Ong shows us that capitalism is as much a dream machine as it is a system of extraction. Even as the establishment rejects one pernicious form of cultural production—poverty pornography—it leans into yet another, fabricating an ethical consumer capitalism. This centering of cultural production at the WEF at Davos is the strongest part of Ong’s essay. Lest we think the forum is simply an occasion for geopoliticking—cutting deals, making contacts, and so on—Ong shows us that a symbolic order is in play.

The Geldof quote is compelling for another reason, however. It puts into relief a problem that fundamentally threatens any commentary on the WEF: the media pornography of wealth. How does one even begin to talk about something like the WEF, whose power (its essence?) stems precisely from people’s desire to talk about it? Consider a celebrity gossip website, which drudges up inane and private bits of information about entertainment personalities—shameful intrusions into their privacy that nevertheless keep those celebrities relevant and captivating. The “wealth pornography” lurking behind discourse about Davos suggests that the forum might be two contradictory things at once: merely “a high-end party for Western capitalist elites” and a vital space for understanding and making a new world order.

As Ong makes clear, Davos is a staging ground for the public elaboration of future imaginaries. Like a Milan fashion show, whose cuts and fabrics and colors will eventually touch down in your local department store (albeit several years later and stripped of any revolutionary potential), Davos offers a chance to see the latest fashions in global governance headed your way. It offers a crash course in emergent buzzwords: “philanthropreneurs,” “stakeholder capitalism,” and so on. All who were around at the time of the 2007 WEF will recall with discomfort these many feel-good schemes, including the slogans and gimmicks that emblazoned our products. This same feel-good politics drove much of the discourse within the technology sector, in which Google’s “Don’t Be Evil” commitments greased the skids of our every web search. However, the interesting picture that Ong paints is of a *vulnerable* Western bloc, whose upbeat “philanthro-capitalism” led by Bono, Gap, and Tony Blair is no sooner rolled out than it is put off balance by a competing form of predatory geopolitics—this one advanced by Chinese industry and government.

I am largely sympathetic to Ong’s overarching account of this shift in global governance paradigms—the symbols that organize it, the timelines and events that pushed it forward, and so on. (I found it curious, however, that the meeting was positioned as a pivot toward Asia and yet so few Asian dignitaries were apparently invited, as Ong explains.) There were factors Ong omitted possibly for space constraints, including structural adjustment programs, white supremacy, oil, or any number of others. But the sweeping nature of the account means that it can be difficult to discern which factors ultimately *should* be in the picture. In a sense, it can be hard to disagree with an essay so expansive in scope—what evidence might contest a story operating at such a scale?

My own interests in the WEF—particularly in light of the risk of wealth pornography that threatens these very words I write—lie in sorting through the lived world of the WEF as an institution. There, we might get to the bottom of what it means, what it does, and what its limitations and weaknesses are. I'm compelled by Christina Garsten and Adrienne Sörbom's (2018) book-length account of the WEF, *Discreet Power: How the World Economic Forum Shapes Market Agendas*. Through careful, detailed ethnography of various parts of the organization, they describe who drives the WEF forward, what their motivations and ways of speaking are, which infrastructures support them, and more. The WEF may put on a show in Davos, but it also employs real people swamped with emails, who meet up in hotel lobbies, and so on. Here I am at home as an ethnographer. I am ready to learn about civilizational imaginaries from the hem of a gown, a champagne toast, or the pronouncement of a business magnate. But not as general signs of extravagance and wealth—as a hem in relation to other hems, *that hem*, interpreted in the flow of life.

It turns out that the question of whether Davos is a mere show or if it has substance is the heart of the matter, though. The organizers of the WEF believe themselves to be at the leading edge of an emergent civilization—consider the “Davos Equation: security plus prosperity equals peace” (Garsten and Sörbom 2018:11)—but our sense of their importance is precisely what they need. The WEF's authority in fact is fragile and must be constantly built and rebuilt (Garsten and Sörbom 2018:17). Its power is “discreet”—it cultivates secrecy to enhance its allure and, according to Garsten and Sörbom's research subjects, informal conversations on the side are the most significant at Davos. But they *would* say that, wouldn't they? Ong effectively agrees with Garsten and Sörbom, who argue that the WEF is at base a broker for ideas. It facilitates communication and “distributes visions” (Garsten and Sörbom 2018:75), while positioning itself as a neutral platform for the staging of these visions—all with apparent success. That is, contradictorily, the WEF is all about seduction and performance on one hand and all about discretion and secrecy on the other. This is what makes it so potentially dangerous as an institution. Reading Ong's essay and Garsten and Sörbom's book, I feel newly alarmed at its fundamentally undemocratic power.

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Three Stories and a Key Issue

Ong's work has consistently focused on big (hi)stories and large issues while keeping an ethnographic eye for the small story and the telling detail. She does that again here, much to our delight. My comment will point at tensions in her conceptual and historical vision. But I start with two anecdotes of my own on the

contradictions of cosmopolitan governance. Since 1997 I have been involved in “democracy” and its associated academic knowledges, in particular in postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe but also in Russia and Asia and elsewhere. “Democracy” was surely a “pastoral” Western imperialist endeavor of the kind Ong discusses. I imagined that I would be able to lean against that imperialism with some postcolonial and anti-capitalist weight.

In the late 1990s, I directed a program at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna (IWM), an Institute for Advanced Study specializing in East-West exchanges within Europe framed within a critical globalist agenda. My program was concerned with the social consequences of economic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. Funding came from various layers of the Austrian state seeking to regain a “Danube monarchy” type of influence over the postsocialist East, as well as from the Ford Foundation. US liberal philanthropic institutions had been shell shocked by the return to power of the (post) communist parties in Poland and Hungary after initial “shock therapy” in the mid-1990s. To their surprise, however, these parties had turned deeply neoliberal, seeking Western investments, property rights, and liberal democracy of the narrowly procedural type, hardly caring about deepening social inequality and mass misery. I was disbursing small grants among social policy researchers, including anthropologists, to make them work on issues of poverty and inequality with fresh empirical research and advocacy. The founding director of the IWM, a Polish philosopher with high-profile Western relations and close to the Vatican, did not prolong my contract in the early 2000s after I caught him siphoning off money earmarked for anthropological projects in poor Romania so as to pay for business-class tickets for his influential “pastoral” brokers in the United States.

Like Ong at the WEF, I used to meet high-profile Western democratic ideologists such as Timothy Garton Ash at our conferences in the Hofburg and at other prestigious venues in the old Imperial city of Vienna located so beautifully between East and West. At one of those meetings I told Ash and others that the ever deepening inequalities in Central and Eastern Europe would blow back in the form of illiberal authoritarianism—as shown by my ethnographic research in these years (e.g., Kalb 2002, 2005, 2009, 2022). He and his circles had little time for “social issues,” and he shrugged his shoulders. Post-socialism for them was all about liberalism and “marketization.” The “losers” of transition were just that, losers. In the later 2010s, Garton Ash and his ilk would loudly decry the rise of illiberal “populism,” as well as the “civilizational rhetoric” of neonationalist states such as Hungary and Russia. But there were few *mea culpas*.

I stuck to my “critical globalist” role at Central European University (CEU), the George Soros–founded and –funded graduate university in the social and human sciences in Budapest. Soros was the ultimate “inclusive” cosmopolitan philanthropist-financier in those years and already then a hate object for the emergent illiberal Right. Soros was prominent at

the WEF even though absent in Ong's story. CEU had opened a new department for sociology and social anthropology in 2003, and I was one of its first senior hires. The then rector of the university, the philosopher Yehuda Elkana, sought to develop a "critical, globally contextual universalism." Well before Viktor Orbán announced the *Lex CEU* (April 2017) that banned the university from Hungary, Soros and his associates, in a bid to respond to the financial crisis and the declining credibility of the "efficient markets" hypothesis, had organized an open meeting to discuss his plans for an "Institute for New Economic Thinking." By then I had gained a certain local reputation as a critical anthropologist of postsocialist transitions, capitalism, and global governance, and I had lectured and published on financialization and other relevant topics (Hann and Kalb 2020; Kalb 2013; Visser and Kalb 2010). When I entered the university building to join the meeting, I was stopped by a uniformed guard who asked for my name and then told me the meeting was canceled. Surprised, I said I would have a look myself. She then physically barred me and told me to leave. That meeting was indeed happening; a day later, I received an apology about "this unfortunate confusion" from the CEO of the university. The "Institute" was subsequently located in London and not in Budapest, where it engaged critical economists with global star status such as George Stiglitz and Adair Turner. It never invited any economic anthropologists. An early participant later criticized it for being just another neoliberal think tank in disguise (Mirowski 2014).

I fundamentally agree with Ong's relational epistemology: "objects become manifest only when they interact with other objects." "Global assemblage" is potentially a useful concept to describe the ways "colliding global and local forces crystallize." I add that this is not just about collision but particularly also about "contradictory collusion," which brings us closer to a dialectical approach (see also Campbell 2021) and teaches us more about the complexities of capitalism. This leads to my challenge to her. Like Pankaj Mishra, whom she cites approvingly, it is unclear in her narrative whether the relational frictions she discusses are really about race and civilization or rather about capital and class and their dynamic ideological and imperial intersections. Reading her piece, one could forget that the WEF is a forum for ruling-class engagement with the contradictions of global capitalism, rather than with civilizational or racial domination and conciliation. Is "the West" a civilization? Is capitalism perhaps a civilization? Is liberalism a civilization? If answered in the affirmative, it must be a "thin" one. Is "Western capitalist civilization" "particularistic," as Ong argues forcefully in the introduction? Or is it potentially universalist as long as its political liberalism is "exercised solely as soft power," as she ventures at the end? If so, Xi and Putin would disagree. As may Orbán, Erdogan, and Modi. What about Trump? I am writing this comment as a global imperial war is being waged in Ukraine with "civilization and barbarism" as mythologies deployed from all sides. The historical and theoretical issues that Aihwa Ong addresses are more pertinent than ever. The WEF of 2007 seems almost in another world. And that

"inclusive" WEF turned out to be less predictive than the annual Munich security conference of the same year, where Putin openly announced his anti-Western, antiliberal, "civilizational" project. The "shy" Chinese of 2007, described by Ong, would follow suit and declare an "unlimited friendship" with Putin's Russia just before the latter began its military assault on its Western-aligned neighbor (February 2022). Giovanni Arrighi (1994) would not be surprised about state capitalisms in lethal collision once more in the twenty-first century. Interestingly, I read an earlier draft version of Ong's paper (2020), where the author seemed more sharply critical of "Western civilization" than in this final one, more skeptical of the claims of "political liberalism," if I am not mistaken.

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The "humanization" of international development discourse and policy that Aihwa Ong saw at the 2007 Davos summit is an aspect of a deeper shift. In the twentieth century, humanity—at least that part of it that was in a position to voice its views—largely believed in development, or progress. Although people disagreed on what constituted it, the disagreements largely concerned the organization of society. The material underpinnings of progress looked remarkably similar between the followers of Walter Rostow and Soviet planners. The basic belief that hard work and more knowledge led to a better future was also shared between capitalist and socialist versions of progress. Going to school every morning in the Soviet Union, I passed a mural depicting the globe with three heads representing men of different races against the background of a soaring rocket, captioned "PEACE LABOUR FREEDOM EQUALITY FRATERNITY HAPPINESS" (see fig. 3).

By the turn of the century, these tenets were being increasingly questioned, not just by academic critics of development, such as Arturo Escobar, but more broadly in Western societies. Besides the spectacular failure of development promises in most low-income countries, this was probably due to a combination of growing distrust toward science and experts, fears about the environment, and the slowing of social mobility in the West, where living standards were no longer increasing at the rate experienced by the two post-World War II generations. Combined with demands for democratic participation and transparency, declining Western interest in the postcolonial world in the absence of Cold War rivalry, and state withdrawal under neoliberal policies, these shaken beliefs translated into abandoning infrastructure projects in favor of small-scale "participatory development."

Yet while this approach may have been touted at Davos, its efficacy was already being roundly questioned by academics such as David Mosse and Anita Abraham, who highlighted, respectively, the involutory nature of project logic and the risk



Figure 3. Yakov Gitis, Aleksei Shteiman, and Zaven Darbinyan, “Science for Peace.” Dubna Commercial Centre, Dubna, Russia, late 1950s or early 1960s. Photo by Yokki. Source: Дубна—Википедия (wikipedia.org). Published under Creative Commons license: Creative Commons—Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported—CC BY-SA 3.0. Store on the Meshcheryakov street in Dubna, Moscow oblast. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meshcheryakov_Street_Store_Dubna.JPG.

of “participation capture” by locally dominant groups. More ominous signs that the approach was not working well were coming from the ground. In the year of the Davos meeting Ong describes, I witnessed the last days of the German development aid organization GTZ in Muang Sing, northern Laos. GTZ had been trying to implement small-scale, participatory agriculture and tourism projects in this poor and remote corner of the country for years. By the mid-2000s, however, its appeal to locals had been eclipsed by the arrival of Chinese investors who were setting up rubber plantations, offered contracts to local farmers, and brought such accoutrements of modernity as scooters. For most, the enticements of the cash economy far outweighed the appeal of discussions with Europeans about the next phase of a village project.

The civilizing mission, at least in its material aspects, was coming back, driven by the globalizing reach of Chinese capital. As a growing number of ethnographies have since shown, the Chinese engineers and workers who build roads, dams, mines, and railways around the world have no doubt that infrastructural modernization and hard work are the only way forward, that people must adjust their ways to lift themselves out of poverty, and that if they do so their lives and those of their children will improve. Not only in the minds of Chinese investors but also of their staff, there is little question of what is backwardness and what is development. They know it when they see it.

This vision of the future restores the faith in progress that its American and European torchbearers professed 40 years earlier but appear to have dropped. This time, it comes without the redemptory discourses of a shared humanity predicated on either freedom or equality, in its Rostowian or Soviet guises. It does hold out the promise of individual success but does not

offer any mitigation of the communal anger stoked on behalf of real or perceived losers. On the contrary, what Ong calls the transactionalism of the Chinese state—or of the United States under Trump or Hungary under Orbán—comes combined with a nationalism that posits that the state’s ultimate aim is to maximize the interests of the nation at the expense of others. Despite the win-win rhetoric, the underlying conviction is that the world is a zero-sum game. You must develop and become strong, because if you are backward you will be crushed. Even the space race is back.

In this discourse, tropes like “All under Heaven” are not genuine reconceptualizations of human civilization, which continues to be measured on the same scales of material affluence, military strength, and territorial order as it was under late colonialism. Rather, they are instruments of what Ong has earlier called the “reenchantment of culture,” a way for the authoritarian state to create the illusion of a secure identity in an insecure world, to kindle suspicion of any universalism, and to justify its citizens’ yearning for supremacy over others.

Biao Xiang

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The world after the Russia-Ukraine war is set to become more divided. Some commentators warn of a new Cold War, but we may be heading toward something worse. The Cold War was organized as competition between political ideals by nation-states

that were domestically coherent. But the new confrontation may be between military powers that are incapable of offering convincing ideologies or national well-being.

How, after 30 years of rapid expansion of an inclusive global market and an accompanying universalist ideology of human rights, have we reached this stage? Ong's timely article provides some glimpses of likely causes. The post-Cold War order, which she characterizes as "neoliberal-plus," turns out to be vulnerable because it is both expansive and yet unconnected to specific social settings. Rather than adapting the neoliberal-plus vision to concrete local conditions, global elites have strived to make the entire world fit that vision. Finance, NGOs, philanthropy, the cultural industry, and militant humanitarian intervention form a network of global governance. Societies outside this network of governance become targets for neoliberal conversion or military action. Yet as powerful as it appears, the system is incapable of addressing internal contradictions such as inequalities and racial tensions. Nor can it handle structural challenges such as the rise of China.

The neoliberal world order is also vulnerable because it is moralistic. As Ong writes, dominant "Western civilizational narratives envision the right of ordinary people, beyond the state, to determine the moral value of shared humanity in global times." International relations are imagined as moral problems. Wars are justified as humanitarian intervention. Yet moralism fails to address issues of political economy. It shames dissidents as morally inferior. Thus, the widespread disillusionment, hurt, and distrust, as evidenced by the rise of the Far Right in Europe, populism in the United States, ultranationalism and even terrorism in different parts of the world.

While the West has led this hegemony for the last 30 years, it alone could not have sustained it. We should not forget that Vladimir Putin was rubbing shoulders with Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder. In other words, while that global hegemony is now being undermined, it is not due to the sudden rise of forces outside it. In this context, it is critical to examine the role of non-Western societies, and China in particular, in maintaining—and challenging—that hegemony.

In China, public perception of the world changed dramatically following 2008. The period from 1980 to 2008 was dominated by a desire to join the Western-led world. Indeed, "total Westernization" was a popular proposal as a motto for Chinese reform in the 1980s. The pro-US stance during Jiang Zemin's presidency (1989–2002) remains one of his most controversial legacies. And as Ong notes, as late as 2007, India was still trying hard to assure the world that its rise would not upset the established order.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was a turning point. The numerous disruptions to the Olympic torch relay in many North American and European cities may seem comparatively trivial, but it convinced many Chinese that the West was not ready to accept them as equals. The editorial "A Letter to Westerners" in a commercial magazine in south China, issued immediately before the Olympics, captures the mood well:

We so earnestly and sincerely hoped to join you and go forward hand-in-hand. But sadly, these unfortunate incidents

[during the torch relay] bring to mind your law of the jungle, when we see you vulgarly exploiting the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity that we have just come to believe in. You have no way of comprehending the harm it causes us to see these glittering, beautiful terms destroyed. . . . We know that the thought of 1.3 billion Chinese living a good life will terrify some of you. (*Business Weekly* 2008:11)

US-China relations hit a new low during the Trump administration. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech, "Communist China and the Free World's Future" (July 23, 2020), was a declaration of a new Cold War. The notion of Chimerica, which envisioned an integrated economy between China and the United States, was originally celebrated by both sides. But Chinese commentators came to reject it, arguing that it implied an unequal division of labor, with the United States controlling finance and technology and China contributing manufacturing capacity and a consumption market. Chimerica enthusiasm has been replaced by the chilly determination for economic and technological decoupling.

Behind the apparent rupture in Chinese public perception, however, is a continuity: a fixation with the United States as the defining factor in China's relations to the world, either as the model to emulate or as its chief rival. As I have argued elsewhere (Xiang 2009), Chinese public perception of the world became narrower following the end of the Cold War, when the Three Worlds theory, the Bandung spirit, and Ya-Fei-La (Asia-Africa-Latin America) solidarity were replaced by a Western-centered image of the world. Today, the Chinese civilizational discourse is more about emphasizing China's "uniqueness" than developing a global vision to transcend and encompass the West. China's ambition appears to be to replace the United States as a hegemon by following the US model—namely, achieving dominance through economic and military muscle. In short, US dominance is being challenged, but no new hegemony is being envisioned. This may explain why the current interregnum is chaotic and potentially violent.

A global transformation for a more sustainable future requires a new hegemony in the Gramscian sense. That new hegemony must address the popular demands that the existing neoliberal hegemony has failed to accommodate. These demands have given rise to populism, authoritarianism, and ultranationalism, as well as various socialist initiatives. In seeking a progressive hegemony, we need anthropological research that brings together global political economy and grassroots concerns.

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On the other side of the security air lock at the 2007 WEF in Davos, the anthropologist spots a single protestor braving the endless snow. While the self-proclaimed architects of the global

order play rational choice games to solve problems generated in that order, the figure holds a sign whose anti-WEF slogan is drowned out by the splashy receptions that announce Asian arrival to the world stage. As celebrities, politicians, and captains of industry tinker with new modes of ensuring the stability of the postwar global order, they devise new articulations of philanthropy and capitalism. Ong arrives with an invitation to attend as an anthropologist, ostensibly to offer an Asian perspective that might be incorporated into a vision of a global order that might contend with the tectonic geopolitical shifts already taking place: an Asia whose rise is met with a mix of mockery and anxiety in the halls of stratospheric power.

In the juxtaposition of the lone protestor and the self-congratulatory gamification of global problems, Ong figures the WEF in the encounter of two ironic universalisms at the scene of their immanent collision. Each, for Ong, is losing traction, especially with apparent Chinese designs on the African continent. By 2007, the vision of capitalism, morality, and postideological, poststatal global governance that the WEF roundly promotes as a new round of ethical and innovative thinking appears to be running out of steam.

The relentless promotion of the universal values of humanism, liberalism, and capitalism at the WEF, for Ong, only underscores a sea shift in the fracturing of universalism, strong or weak, itself as an operable basis for an already eroding geopolitical status quo. The WEF's promotion of such apparently enduring values—the most recent iteration in decades, if not centuries, of a broader Euroamerican project—appears instead as a fever dream. It offers the WEF as a showy interactive exercise in imagining the conditions of ethical capitalist work that is nonetheless sustained by the sedimentation of a political order shaped through commercial, institutional, and military infrastructures.

Outside, the lone protestor, disappearing into layers of coats, stands for another eroding universal. The figure seems in this moment to represent, for Ong, the fantasy of Hardt and Negri's prophesied mass uprising. The "placeless 'multitudes' generated by the neoliberal empire [that] will bring about its collapse" here are embodied in the ineffectual protest of one person, excised from the gameplay of global affairs by security checks and roundly ignored by the air-kissing power brokers who carry their heels in bags past them. Perhaps one way of understanding this protest is not as an impotence of resistance but as a misunderstanding of the terrain and format of the political in a world where institutions like the WEF are perhaps less about imagining new visions of global order and more about imagining (or fantasizing) that a global order could be invented in the optimism of tycoons and philanthropists, meeting once a year to pop champagne and congratulate each other on their visionary bravery. That is, the loneliness of protest bespeaks an enduring analytical investment in the dialectic scene of stratospheric power and its empowered reaction in the multitude, its spectacular resistance. What if, challenges Ong, the Forum is a red herring, a trap into an outmoded sense of where power is and how it operates?

In this light, Ong poses both the WEF, where the gathered marvel over their ability to fabulate new world orders, and the meager protest of it as exercises that are both "self-gratifying and entirely unreal." That is, the new universalisms through which a shifting geopolitical scene are to rise, as well as the theory-hope for a revolutionary mobilization against it, are parochialized in the same instant. Or at the very least, the triumph in either agonistic position in this dyad of empire of innovation versus uprising mass consciousness deflates precisely as they trip over shifts in which other visions of international order, sustained by other figurations of capital, trade, and military might, find their way into the snowy pleasure dome.

Ong reminds us that anthropological insight must dwell in the practices, encounters, and assemblages through which global visions emerge, collide, and are reconfigured. If, for the assembled luminaries, the WEF is the center of a universe, Ong seems to suggest, in the grand tradition of political anthropology of Southeast Asia, that they are more like the center of a galactic polity. The notion describes a Javanese idiom of political influence and territory, in which political authority is like "a torch with its light radiating outward with decreasing intensity" (Tambiah 2013 [1977]:509). The light is exceptionally bright at its tight center and yet fades quickly and unevenly. Certainly it does not shine bright enough to blot out other galaxies, with their own petty universalisms. Instead of a settled world order, then, Ong figures the WEF as a site in which the late twentieth-century humanist universalism of what used to be called "the West" finds itself, instead, one galaxy among others.

If I begin with two universalisms, I close with a juxtaposition of, to borrow Ong's term, two "warped mirrors." Even in its own terms, the WEF is not a singular postideological scene but the stage for a "game of power" in which, faced with the rise of China and other perturbations to the philanthro-capitalist optimism theorized by, of all people, Bono in 2007. The WEF's "protests and pronouncements . . . shape a warped mirror." This mirror shines toward another: the increasingly muscular invocation by Chinese leadership of a grand civilizational arc that leads from a premodern political universe centered around the defunct Empire to a global future firmly centered around Beijing. If Ong reflects on this collision of global futures to remark on the horizons of a multipolar world, what might it mean, in addition, to imagine that future in the interplay of mirrors and torches, galaxies and universals?

Reply

Civilizational Imaginaries

The comments enrich debate on how elites deploy the rhetoric of civilizing projects in competing regimes of global governance. I appreciate questions about how anthropology

and its concepts and methods can illuminate understanding of our unsettling world.

First, while my essay focuses on civilization imaginaries along the Western-China axis, I am aware of similar fissures in Eurasia. Donald Kalb mentions neoliberal transformations in Eastern Europe that might have triggered the shocking Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Kalb mentions the Soros-funded Central European University (CEU) in Budapest to facilitate the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Specifically, the university introduces an American-style international in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In 2001, I joined a CEU summer seminar on nationalism co-organized by Pál Nyiri. Participating scholars from Eastern Europe and Russia framed nationalism in strictly Orientalist terms. In retrospect, I doubt that I, Nyiri, and other outsiders managed to pry open the study of nationalism to include the effects of global forces (see Ong 2005). In the following decades, Hungary promoted a Christian “Western world” against non-white immigrants. I have long argued that neoliberal reforms can ignite nationalist feelings.

This essay maintains that the 2007 WEF marked the beginning of the waning of a North Atlantic worldview. On the horizon, China as an emerging idea and power began to bend Western thinking about systems of global governance. By 2008, China began to assert its global status, but my perspective is a bit different from Xiang Biao’s account.

In 2007, WEF provided the platform to launch the arrival of the BRIC nations as junior partners in a US-led world order. Indian officials and capitalists were quick to reassure the Davos crowd that India’s rise would not upset the established neoliberal order. In sharp contrast, the low-key posture of the China delegation helped deflect attention from the country as it made steady progress into Africa.

A year later, the global financial crisis emboldened China to broadcast its own unique vision. After two decades of entwining Chinese and American economies (Chimera), China had become a true rival. The 2008 Beijing Olympics staged China’s global arrival in spectacular fashion. Elite Chinese actors began to attract international attention. Avant-garde artists leapt onto the world stage, filmmakers competed with Hollywood, and major scholars proposed “the China method” for analyzing geopolitics (Ong 2012*b*, 2018). Domestically, Nyiri notes, “the reenchantment of culture” allowed “the authoritarian state to create the illusion of a secure identity.” Diverse flows—Confucius institutes, high-spending tourists, university students—began to channel Chinese soft power overseas.

Ethnography and Interpretation

Should ethnography delimit the breadth of anthropological claims? More “at home as an ethnographer,” Colin Hoag is skeptical of the “expansive” scope of my essay. (Note that Alfred Kroeber, Claude Lévi-Strauss, etc., as well as archaeologists and sociolinguists, have all made sweeping statements about “civilization.”) The point of anthropology is not to feel too “at home”

anywhere. The discipline has always connected direct observations to big issues of social change.

Essays and commentaries (rather than books) can more directly engage interdisciplinary questions of contemporary living. My recent essays illuminate how scientists, architects, and artists can have a disproportionate impact on politics, culture, and society (Ong 2011, 2012*b*, 2018, 2020*b*). At the WEF, I seized on the rare opportunity to observe how elite smooching (that cannot be dismissed as mere “wealth pornography”) and politicking shape approaches to global problems.

Anthropology is as much about a style of analysis as about collecting ethnographic evidence. The interpretation of culture, Clifford Geertz maintains (1973), hovers above the hard surfaces of life. We widen our lens beyond on-the-ground observations to interpret how everyday dreams, schemes, and machinations can shape circumstances beyond the immediate locale. Critically, Donna Haraway (1988) reminds us that given our particular positions, observers can only claim a “privileged, partial perspective.” Research-driven truth claims invariably instigate counterclaims that contest, complement, and refine our efforts at grasping fleeting realities.

By playing with scale and perspective, my angle of analysis holds that the substance of research is not a given place (a Balinese village, an economic institution) but an emerging context. The “global assemblage” concept (Collier and Ong 2005) identifies the space of inquiry as a milieu crystallized by the interaction of disparate objects. In any site, the situated interplay of global and local objects generates variable conditions of possibility that are contingent and uncertain and cannot be predetermined as simply “contradictory” by the fixed lens of dialectics, as Kalb recommends. For instance, the WEF-fest brought together powerful industrialists, flamboyant celebrities, but also discrete Chinese officials in a Western bubble that entrapped “an outmoded sense of where power is and how it operates,” Jerry Zee remarks.

Mirrors and Galaxies

Kalb asks what notion of “Western civilization” is deployed, and what is “particularistic” about it? As spelled out in the essay, “civilization” is a material-symbolic construct. Civilization as a political economic power holding sway over satellite nations is inseparable from the cultural production of ideas, affects, discourses, and activities that sustains the infrastructure of domination.

I argue that the post-World War II US-led civilizing order was potentially universalist as long as its political liberalism was exercised solely as soft power both low and high—that is, a mix of popular capitalist culture and modern human values. Since the 1960s, morality, individualism, and shared humanity have been the hallmarks of Western rhetoric. International venues such as the WEF powerfully disseminated Western discourses of liberalism, freedom, justice, and humanitarianism, both to spread democracy and to mitigate the ravages wrought by the globalization of capitalism. At Davos, I observed the

promotion of a pastoral-style capitalism that, it was believed, would protect human rights against not only predatory corporations but also the overweening state. Liberal aspirations based on respect for human rights and civil society are what make Western civilization, though predicated on global capitalism, “particularistic.”

By contrast, the Chinese state, invigorated by its mastery of capitalism and technology, articulates a different vision that puts the polity, not modern humanity, at the heart of its civilization. Chinese leaders have begun to invoke the historical metaphor “All under Heaven” (*tianxia*) to describe China’s global aspirations. Zee aptly invokes Stanley Tambiah’s concept of the “galactic polity.” Heavenly ideas of mandala and/or *tianxia* continue to inform Asian statecraft from Myanmar and Thailand to China. While such civilizational self-descriptions are distinctive, I cannot agree with Xiang that the current ascendancy of China would be “nonhegemonic.”

Western movers and shakers looking through their warped mirror almost failed to discern a new galaxy on the horizon. China’s constrained performances at the 2007 WEF—“hiding capabilities and biding time”—were part of a multistage long game of global expansion. By 2012, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched to open up Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific to China’s commercial and military ambitions. BRI and the Community of Common Destiny plan to build world-spanning “networks of coercive capability, consensual inducement, and legitimacy” (Doshi 2021:5). Chinese ambitions to dominate regions—“the global South,” “developing economies,” and so on—like Western hegemony also integrates racism into their geopolitical system. In *The Specter of Global China*, Ching Kwan Lee (2017) reveals that racist beliefs and practices animate labor relationships in Chinese corporations relocated to Zambia.

Political Liberalism Matters

Collectively, the comments pose questions of the how and where of resistance to civilization projects. To Zee, the single protestor standing in snow drifts outside the WEF dome seems to represent the waning of antiglobalist movements. By 2007, strict security in Davos had managed to keep out big protests. But more significantly, the “placeless multitudes” celebrated in Marxist accounts were considered irrelevant. In realpolitik, situated dissidents are more likely to make meaningful social change.

Calling for a robust critique of political liberalism, Kalb’s focus is the hypocrisies and hubris of liberal elites in the West. But we should not thereby throw out classical liberal ideals of freedom and equality as essential foundations of modern humanity. Indeed, countries unmediated by twentieth-century ideals of civil and human rights have permitted states to inflict immense suffering on multitudes of the truly oppressed. Despite decades of socialist revolutions, the People’s Republic of China is a dictatorship of the state (not the people). The very absence

and refusal of liberal ideals shapes distinctive features in its political culture:

China’s approach to development and progress is entirely materialistic, an attitude enhanced by an official communist adoption of Marxist materialism. Nyiri points out that “development” as a material calculus (industrial productivity, living standards, etc.) is uncoupled from redemptory discourses about a shared humanity based on freedom and equality.

Chinese authoritarianism entrenches precepts of political hierarchy, loyalty, and order (glossed as “harmony” and “security”), making officials accountable to their superiors, not directly to the people (Dickson 2021). The state is selectively responsive to threats of mass social unrest but not to appeals for an autonomous civil society. “Penetrative infrastructural power” (L. H. Ong 2022), including digital surveillance systems, infiltrates society and invades lives.

Overseas, this overreaching statism aims to build economic and commercial infrastructures in order to draw “backward” peripheries under the vast umbrella of Chinese civilization. But like an actual star, the galactic polity waxes and wanes, so China’s quest for hegemony may be wavering.



Figure 4. “MADE IN CHINA” solo show by Badiucao. DOX Center for Contemporary Art, Prague, 2022. Credit: ko-fi.com.

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As the 2007 Davos world image began to fray, neoliberal-plus reforms have actually strengthened red-in-tooth-and-claw nationalism in Eastern Europe (Nyiri). In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in the name of defending territorial sovereignty and rejecting “Westernness.” Plunged into an existentialist nightmare, Europe has joined a new US-led global strategy to shape geopolitical regions by expanding military alliances (NATO, QUAD, and AUKUS). In response, China gambles on reshaping the balance of power in a no-limits alliance with Russia. Badiucao, a Chinese artist in exile, registers his protest by fusing the faces of Presidents Xi and Putin as a specter of global autocracy (see fig. 4).

Globalism has failed, galaxies are colliding. In time, we may come to miss the “feel good, do good” optimism born of the 1980s–1990s affluence and widely celebrated at Davos into the new century. But even in 2007, to an anthropologist, the WEF world order stitched together by stakeholder capitalism and celebrity philanthropy seemed a mirage.

—Aihwa Ong

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