Who Made the World This Way? An Introduction to Global Studies

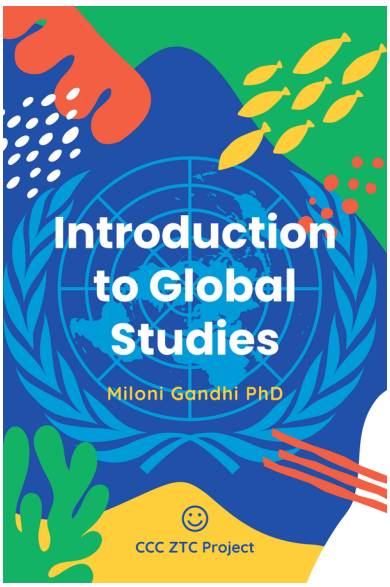
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Social Sciences

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Who Made the World This Way?
An Introduction to Global Studies

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I am grateful to these authors for doing the work first, making it openly available, and creating a resource that helped inspire the development of this book. Open educational resources are at their best when they allow educators to build on one another's work, rethink it for new students and new moments, and keep the conversation moving forward.

This book is a substantially different work, with a new nine-chapter structure, narrative architecture, analytical framework, pedagogical approach, contemporary scholarship, case studies, examples, learning activities, and extensive newly authored material.

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Program Page



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2. **Progress checks.** The manuscript was checked at approximately 40%, 60%, and 80% completion to catch and correct accessibility issues in production.
3. **Specialist review.** Once the manuscript was complete, an accessibility expert conducted an accessibility check.
4. **Remediation.** The author and the project manager who conducted the earlier progress checks worked together to remediate the issues identified by the accessibility expert.
5. **Final check.** The resource underwent another full check by the accessibility expert before the book was deemed ready for publication.

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This statement was last updated August 2026

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A Note on Known Limitations

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AI and Fair Use

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Specifically, AI use was prompt-engineered to align with our educational goals and informed by Open Educational Resources (OER), scholarly materials, and other openly available educational content. The purpose of this tool was to assist with brainstorming, generating potential examples, identifying organizational structures, suggesting learning activities, and helping authors overcome common challenges associated with drafting and revising educational materials.

The AI's role was limited to ideation and preliminary content generation. All AI-generated material underwent extensive review, revision, verification, and editing by the course authors. Faculty members evaluated content for accuracy, clarity, inclusivity, accessibility, relevance, and alignment with course learning outcomes. In many cases, AI-generated text served only as a starting point and was substantially modified, expanded, reorganized, or rewritten during the development process.

We also recognized that AI systems can reflect biases, inaccuracies, omissions, or outdated information. For this reason, no content was accepted without human review and independent verification. All factual claims, educational recommendations, examples, and references were evaluated against current evidence, professional standards, and the authors' subject matter expertise. Responsibility for the content ultimately rests with the human authors, not the technology used during development.

Our use of AI mirrors how many professionals increasingly use emerging technologies in education and the workplace: as tools that can enhance efficiency, creativity, and productivity while still requiring critical thinking, ethical judgment, and expert oversight. By incorporating AI transparently and responsibly, we sought not only to improve the development process but also to model thoughtful technology use for students navigating an increasingly digital and AI-assisted world.

Finally, we believe that innovation must be balanced with a commitment to equity and accessibility. Throughout the development process, all content was reviewed to ensure it met accessibility standards and supported diverse learners. AI-assisted drafting was only one component of a much larger process that included faculty collaboration, scholarly review, accessibility evaluation, and continuous revision. The result is a resource that reflects both the opportunities offered by emerging technologies and the enduring importance of human expertise in teaching and learning.

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- This cautious approach is consistent with guidance. that encourages transformative use, transparency, and limiting output that could inadvertently mirror protected content.

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About the Book

Welcome to the Book

There is a particular kind of textbook sentence that seems almost designed to make your eyes glaze over.

It usually begins with something like, “Globalization is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon…”

Technically true. Also, perhaps not the most exciting way to begin a conversation about a world containing nearly eight billion people, hundreds of languages, shifting borders, global supply chains, political revolutions, migration, TikTok, climate change, international soccer, K-pop, multinational corporations, refugee movements, street food, artificial intelligence, religious traditions, global pandemics, fashion, war, tourism, protest movements, remittances, disappearing glaciers, and the phone probably sitting next to you while you read this.

Global studies deserves better.

My goal in creating this book was never simply to produce another textbook. I wanted to create a book that students would actually want to keep reading, but also one that might interest someone who wandered into it without ever enrolling in a global studies course. I wanted the scholarship to be rigorous without making the world sound boring, because the world is many things, but boring is rarely one of them.

This book therefore begins from a fairly simple proposition: global studies becomes most interesting when we stop treating the world as a collection of disconnected countries and begin looking for the relationships between them.

A cup of coffee can become a story about colonialism, labor, climate, trade, and consumer culture. A smartphone can lead us from mineral extraction in Central Africa to manufacturing networks in East Asia, corporate headquarters in California, international shipping routes, digital surveillance, and electronic waste. A family photograph can open questions about migration, borders, citizenship, identity, and belonging. A plate of food can reveal histories of empire, ecological change, cultural exchange, inequality, and extraordinary human creativity.

Once you start looking at the world this way, it becomes difficult to stop.

That is the spirit of this book.

You will encounter theories here because theories give us tools for seeing patterns that might otherwise remain invisible. You will encounter history because almost nothing in the contemporary world makes complete sense without understanding how we got here. You will encounter statistics, institutions, governments, social movements, markets, cultures, communities, and individuals because global problems almost never operate at only one level.

But you will also encounter contradictions.

Globalization can connect people while deepening inequality. Migration can create extraordinary opportunities while producing profound loss. Technology can democratize knowledge and expand surveillance at the same time. International institutions can solve problems that no country could manage alone while reproducing inequalities in political power. Economic growth can improve millions of lives while placing enormous pressure on the planet that sustains them.

Global studies lives inside those tensions.

One of the goals of this book is therefore to resist easy answers. The world is full of people offering those already.

Instead, I hope these chapters encourage you to ask better questions.

- Who benefits?
- Who decides?
- How did we get here?
- What systems connect events that initially seem unrelated?

- Whose voices are missing from the story?
- What changes when we examine an issue from another part of the world?
- And perhaps most importantly: what could be different?

You do not need to agree with every argument you encounter in these pages. In fact, I hope you do not. Education becomes much more interesting when disagreement leads to investigation rather than disengagement.

What I hope you carry away instead is curiosity.

I hope that long after you have forgotten a vocabulary term or the date of an exam, you find yourself reading a news story and wondering about the history behind it. I hope you notice the country printed on the tag of your shirt and think about the person who made it. I hope you hear a political claim and ask what evidence supports it. I hope you travel somewhere and become curious about the forces that shaped the place rather than simply photographing it. I hope you encounter an unfamiliar tradition and respond first with curiosity rather than judgment.

Most of all, I hope you begin to recognize how profoundly connected your own life is to people and places you may never see.

That realization can be uncomfortable. It can also be exhilarating.

Because once we understand that the world was made through human choices, institutions, conflicts, compromises, movements, and relationships, we also begin to understand something else:

The world can be remade. So welcome.

There is a lot to talk about.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you

Books may have one author's name attached to them, but they are almost never created alone.

This one certainly was not.

My deepest thanks go to the people whose ideas, encouragement, conversations, friendship, feedback, and willingness to listen to me talk about education have shaped both this book and the thinking behind it. To my family of course, for always supporting my unusual endeavors around the world! And now for the folks whose technical expertise pushed this book to the finish line.

To Shagun Kaur, thank you for making this entire project happen and pushing me to do better because you knew I could. To Natalie Latteri, PhD, thank you for your thoughtful perspective, your support, and the kind of intellectual companionship that makes ambitious projects feel possible. To Debbie Lee, thank you for your continued support throughout this work and choosing our department to be a part of this project. To Jyothsna Viswanadha, thank you for telling me not to super stress about this and knowing that somehow it would get done.

And to the many colleagues, students, educators, friends, collaborators, and international partners whose questions and perspectives have shaped the way I understand the world, thank you. Some of the ideas in this book began in classrooms. Others emerged during workshops, research projects, long flights, conference conversations, meals, field visits, unexpected detours, or discussions with people whose experiences challenged something I thought I understood.

Those encounters matter.

I am especially grateful to my students, past and present. Teaching global studies continually reminds me that the best questions are not always the ones scholars expect. Students notice contradictions. They ask why systems work the way they do. They connect ideas across chapters that textbooks sometimes insist on separating. And occasionally they ask a question that sends the professor back to the reading list. That is exactly how education should work. I am also grateful to the educators, librarians, open-education advocates, researchers, institutions, and organizations whose work makes openly accessible knowledge possible. This book exists within a much larger community committed to the idea that excellent educational resources should be available to more people, not fewer.

Finally, thank you to the readers.

Whether you are reading this because it was assigned for a class, because you teach global studies, because you stumbled across the book online, or because something in these pages made you curious enough to keep going, you are now part of the conversation too.

I hope the book gives you some answers. I hope it gives you even better questions. And I hope you keep asking them.

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About the Author

Biography



Miloni Gandhi PhD is an educator, researcher, international education specialist, and founder of Experience International LLC whose work sits at the intersection of global studies, education, leadership, technology, and cross-cultural exchange. Her PhD is in Social Social Science and Comparative Education from the University of California at Los Angeles. Go Bruins!

Her career has taken her across classrooms, international programs, research initiatives, professional exchanges, and collaborative projects involving participants and institutions from around the world. Her work has included international education, faculty development, leadership programming, workforce and professional skills development, responsible artificial intelligence, educational policy, and the design of learning experiences intended to help people understand global challenges from multiple perspectives. She has participated in and contributed to international programs including the East-West Center's Asia Pacific Leadership Program, the Fulbright International Education Administrators Program in Japan, the Council of American Overseas Research Centers Faculty Development Seminar in Senegal, and the Fulbright Specialist Program in Peru amongst others. Her work has also included collaborations and projects connected to international organizations, universities, nonprofits, and education initiatives in multiple regions of the world.

She is the founder of Experience International LLC, through which she develops international education, training, research, facilitation, and consulting projects. Across this work, one theme appears repeatedly: some of the most important learning happens when people are encouraged to move beyond familiar categories and examine how their experiences connect to larger global systems.

That philosophy also shapes this book. Rather than approaching global studies as a collection of countries, definitions, and institutions to memorize, Gandhi approaches it as an invitation to investigate relationships: between local lives and global systems, history and the present, culture and power, individual choices and structural forces. She believes that rigorous scholarship and engaging writing are not opposites, and that students should not have to choose between a textbook that teaches them something and a book they actually enjoy reading. This book is an attempt to do both.

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1: YOU ARE ALREADY GLOBAL

This book is being tested and co-created in real time by feedback from the students of De Anza College Global Studies 1 Fall 2025 using an **Open Pedagogy approach** to textbook writing.

Learning to See the Connections



Figure 1.1: Skyscrapers streets and green spaces in a panoramic view emphasizing globalization and interconnectedness. (Photo by Joshua Rawson-Harris on Unsplash).

Seeing the World Through Connections

Look at whatever is closest to you right now. Maybe it is your phone. A cup of coffee. Your laptop. A hoodie. A pair of sneakers. Something you ate on the way to class. At first glance, it probably does not look like the beginning of a Global Studies textbook.

Now look again.

Your phone may have been designed in one country, assembled in another, and built with minerals extracted somewhere else entirely; before it reached your hand, it likely passed through transportation systems, regulatory environments, corporate supply chains, financial networks, and communications infrastructures spanning multiple borders. The apps you use connect you not only to friends and entertainment, but also to companies, governments, advertisers, data centers, political movements, creators, and cultures scattered across the world. Your coffee has a story too. Its beans may have been grown thousands of miles away by farmers whose livelihoods are shaped by commodity prices, local weather patterns, land-use decisions, trade agreements, and access to global markets. Shipping networks move the beans, corporations roast and brand them, retailers position them inside particular consumer cultures, and you may drink the final product without ever seeing the places, people, or systems that made your morning routine possible.

Pull one thread and the world begins to appear

That is what Global Studies asks us to do.

Global Studies is an interdisciplinary field devoted to understanding the relationships among people, places, economies, political systems, cultures, technologies, and environments. It asks us to move constantly between scales: from one person to a population,

from one object to a supply chain, from one community to an international system, and sometimes from one seemingly tiny decision to consequences that ripple across the planet.

This book is not primarily about memorizing facts about different countries. Facts matter, of course, but Global Studies asks us to do something more difficult and considerably more interesting: **learn how to see connections, trace their histories, evaluate their consequences, and recognize the power relationships embedded within them.** Throughout this book, we will repeatedly ask: How are these things connected? How did those connections develop? Who shapes the rules governing them? Who benefits? Who carries the risks or costs? Whose perspective may be missing? What changes when we look at the same issue from somewhere else?

One of the central concepts we will use to answer those questions is **globalization**. Throughout this book, globalization refers to the acceleration and intensification of connections, interdependence, and exchange across borders and across distance (Steger, 2023). Those connections may involve goods, money, information, technology, migration, political ideas, environmental consequences, religions, music, food, fashion, disease, labor, or social movements, and they rarely operate in isolation from one another. Globalization does not mean that everyone becomes equally connected, that national borders somehow disappear, or that cultures collapse into a single global sameness; nor does it mean that the relationships created through global integration are necessarily fair, voluntary, or equally beneficial.

Connection and equality are not the same thing

A factory worker, a corporate executive, a consumer, and a shareholder may all participate in the same global supply chain while experiencing it from radically different positions of power. A country that has contributed relatively little to global carbon emissions may nevertheless face severe climate consequences. A person may consume cultural products from around the world while another person still lacks reliable internet access. Globalization therefore produces both opportunity and vulnerability, mobility and immobility, exchange and exclusion. Those tensions are not exceptions to globalization. They are part of the story.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- explain what Global Studies examines and how it differs from related fields;
- distinguish among global, international, regional, and transnational phenomena;
- apply interdisciplinary thinking to a contemporary global issue;
- recognize globalization as a long historical process rather than a recent invention;
- explain the importance of time-space compression to globalization;
- identify major economic, political, and cultural motivations for increasing global connectivity;
- apply several important Global Studies theories to real-world cases;
- explain the basic institutional architecture of the contemporary global system; and
- evaluate globalization as a process producing both opportunities and unequal outcomes.

A Question to Carry Through This Chapter

If the world is more connected than ever, why do those connections still affect people so differently?

Keep that question nearby. We are going to keep coming back to it.

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1.2: How did the Field of Global Studies Develop?
1.3: How Global Studies Thinks
1.4: How Did the World Become So Connected?
1.5: Connections
1.6: Your Global Studies Toolkit

1.7: Test Drive the Theories
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1.1: Overview

Wait, How Did That Get Here?

Globalization becomes easier to understand when we stop imagining it as something happening somewhere far away and begin looking for it in ordinary life. Take a smartphone. A smartphone is simultaneously an economic object, a technological object, a cultural object, a political object, a social object, and an environmental object. Its production depends on minerals, specialized labor, manufacturing, transportation, finance, intellectual property, software, electricity, telecommunications infrastructure, and consumer markets, while its use connects people to social networks, entertainment, education, political movements, businesses, news, surveillance systems, advertising, and one another.

A Global Studies scholar looking at that phone might ask:

- Where did its raw materials originate?
- Who assembled it?
- Who owns the technology?
- Which governments regulate it?
- What labor conditions made its production possible?
- What energy is needed to manufacture, charge, and connect it?
- What happens to the device when it becomes electronic waste?
- Who can afford the newest technology, and who cannot?
- How has this device changed friendship, work, education, politics, or culture?

None of those questions belongs entirely to one academic discipline, and no single answer is sufficient on its own. Taken together, however, they begin to reveal the dense network of economic, political, social, environmental, historical, and cultural relationships that makes the device possible.

That gives us the first mindset practice we'll use throughout this book:

> Do Not Stop at the Thing in Front of You. Follow the Connections.

Global Studies asks us to move beyond the obvious. A T-shirt is not only clothing. It is cotton, water, agricultural labor, textile manufacturing, design, fashion, transportation, trade policy, advertising, consumption, and eventually waste. A banana is not only food. It is agriculture, land, labor, colonial history, transportation, supermarkets, corporate power, and environmental change. A song is not only entertainment. It may involve migration, language, identity, technology, intellectual property, streaming platforms, cultural influence, corporate ownership, and global fandom. The ordinary world is full of global systems hiding in plain sight, and the more closely we look, the less ordinary those systems become.



Figure 1.1.1: Globalization Has Infrastructure. The objects we encounter as consumers often conceal enormous physical networks of ports, ships, warehouses, roads, railways, workers, and logistics systems. Globalization may feel invisible in everyday life, but much of it depends on infrastructure that is anything but invisible. (Free to use under the Unsplash License; Photo by Wolfgang Weiser on Unsplash)

Globalization Is a Process

People have exchanged goods, beliefs, technologies, knowledge, diseases, foods, artistic traditions, and political ideas across distance for thousands of years. Contemporary globalization is therefore not important because humans suddenly started connecting with one another; what has changed dramatically is the **speed, scale, density, and reach** of those connections (Steger, 2023).

A message that once took weeks or months to reach another continent can now arrive almost instantly. A person can fly across an ocean in hours. Money can move between financial markets in seconds. A fashion trend can spread across multiple countries almost immediately. A disease can travel internationally before health authorities realize an outbreak has begun. A factory shutdown in one country can interrupt manufacturing somewhere else because global production systems depend upon components, raw materials, and logistics networks spread across multiple locations. One concept that helps us understand this transformation is **time-space compression**, a term associated particularly with geographer David Harvey's analysis of the ways changing transportation, communications, and economic systems alter our experience of time and distance (Harvey, 1989; Warf, 2008). A letter carried by ship, a telegraph message, an international telephone call, an email, and an instant message may connect the same two places, yet each belongs to a radically different technological environment in which distance is experienced, valued, and negotiated in different ways. The physical distance between two places has not changed but our experience of that distance has. Technology does not erase geography, it changes what geography means.

Wait. Did Geography Disappear?

Not even close. California and India are no nearer to one another than they were three hundred years ago. What changed is the infrastructure connecting them. A journey that once required months may now take hours; a message that once traveled by ship can arrive almost instantly; money can cross borders in seconds. Time-space compression does not eliminate geography. It changes what distance allows, prevents, costs, and means.

Connection Is Not the Same as Access

It can be tempting to describe globalization as if everyone simply becomes more connected over time. Reality is much messier. People have dramatically different access to mobility, technology, money, education, political influence, infrastructure, and security, meaning that the same global system can feel liberating to one person and restrictive to another. A person with a powerful passport may travel across many national borders with relatively little difficulty, while another person faces complicated visa requirements, closed routes, or dangerous migration journeys. A multinational corporation can move investment and production between countries in search of lower costs, favorable regulations, or strategic advantages. An individual worker

generally cannot relocate nearly as easily. Some communities have access to high-speed digital networks and sophisticated infrastructure. Others lack reliable electricity. Some consumers can choose among products sourced from around the world. Others struggle to access basic food, medicine, or clean water. Globalization therefore involves both **interdependence** and **inequality**, and those two conditions are not opposites. In fact, some of the world's most unequal relationships are also among its most deeply interconnected (Ritzer & Dean, 2022; Steger, 2023).

The Global Studies Lens

One way to make sense of complicated global questions is to examine them through several dimensions at once. A Global Studies analysis might ask:

- **Historically:** How did this situation develop, and which earlier events or structures still matter?
- **Economically:** Who produces, trades, pays, owns, works, and profits?
- **Politically:** Who makes the rules, who benefits from them, and who has the ability to enforce or challenge them?
- **Culturally:** What beliefs, identities, traditions, meanings, or practices are involved?
- **Socially:** Which people and communities are affected, and how do those effects vary?
- **Environmentally:** What happens to land, water, energy, climate, animals, or ecosystems?

These dimensions do not operate independently; rather, they overlap continuously, so that changes in one domain can reshape several others.

Consider a cheap cotton T-shirt. Economically, it belongs to a global supply chain. Socially, its production involves workers, wages, working conditions, and communities dependent on particular industries. Politically, trade rules, minimum-wage laws, tariffs, labor protections, and environmental regulations help determine where it is made. Historically, the global cotton economy is connected to colonialism, slavery, industrialization, and long histories of international trade. Culturally, clothing expresses identity, taste, gender, status, belonging, and difference. Environmentally, cotton farming, textile dyeing, shipping, washing, and disposal all consume resources and create waste.One T-shirt. Six lenses. That is the Global Studies approach.

Try It!

Global in Your Backpack

Choose one object you have with you.

Without researching it yet, make your best guess about its global story.

- Where might its materials come from?
- Where might it have been produced?
- What kind of labor was involved?
- What technology made it possible?
- How did it travel to you?
- Why did you want it?
- What happens when you no longer want it?

You do not need the correct answers yet.

The point is to notice how many questions appear once you begin pulling the thread

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1.2: How did the Field of Global Studies Develop?

Whats in a Name?

Global Studies sometimes has a naming problem.

It sounds a lot like International Studies, International Relations, Area Studies, or Transnational Studies. These fields overlap, borrow from one another, and frequently study some of the same events, yet they differ in the scales they emphasize, the questions they prioritize, and the kinds of connections they are most interested in tracing (Smallman & Brown, 2015; Steger & James, 2019). One way to understand the difference is to imagine several researchers studying migration between Mexico and the United States.

- An **International Relations** scholar might focus on relationships between the two governments: immigration agreements, diplomacy, border enforcement, security policy, or cooperation between states.
- An **Area Studies** scholar might develop deep expertise in Mexico, Latin America, U.S.-Mexico border communities, or the languages, histories, politics, and cultures of a particular region.
- A **Transnational Studies** scholar might focus on what actually moves across the border: people, money sent home through remittances, businesses, family relationships, identities, political activism, communication networks, or cultural practices.
- A **Global Studies** scholar may ask how all of these processes connect to larger systems involving labor markets, inequality, climate, trade, colonial histories, technology, culture, law, and human mobility.

The difference is not that one field has discovered the “correct” way to study the world, the difference involves **scale, emphasis, and perspective**.

Area Studies: Go Deep

Area Studies develops detailed knowledge about a particular geographic or cultural region, often by combining history, language, literature, politics, economics, religion, anthropology, geography, and other fields in order to understand a place on its own terms rather than merely as part of somebody else's global story. A scholar may study Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Central Asia, or another region through several disciplines at once. This depth is extremely valuable. Global Studies depends upon people who actually know particular places well, because without that expertise it becomes far too easy to make sweeping claims about “Africa,” “Asia,” “the Global South,” or “the Middle East” as though enormous and internally diverse regions contained one coherent experience. They do not. Area studies keep us from trivializing regions to a single story.

To learn more about the dangers of reducing people or places to a single narrative, watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, The Danger of a Single Story, which explores how stereotypes and incomplete narratives can shape perceptions of cultures, regions, and people.

International Relations: Watch the States

International Relations traditionally emphasizes relationships among governments. Its questions include:

- Why do states cooperate?
- Why do they fight?
- How do alliances work?
- What happens when governments sign treaties?
- How do states pursue security and economic interests?
- What role do organizations such as the United Nations play?

International Relations remains enormously important to Global Studies, particularly when we study war, diplomacy, international institutions, trade, and security. But Global Studies does not assume governments are the only actors worth watching. Corporations, migrants, activists, cities, Indigenous nations, international organizations, communities, social movements, technologies, and even ecosystems can shape global outcomes in ways that may reinforce, bypass, or challenge state power.

Transnational Studies: Follow What Crosses Borders

Transnational Studies pays particular attention to processes that move across national boundaries. Migration is transnational. So are multinational companies. Religious networks may be transnational. Organized crime can be transnational. Social movements may organize across multiple countries. Families themselves may become transnational when members live in different countries but continue to share money, care, responsibilities, culture, and identity. A transnational phenomenon crosses borders but it does not necessarily affect the entire planet. This distinction matters because the scale at which we define a problem influences the scale at which we imagine solutions.

Global Studies: Put the Connections Together

Global Studies is especially interested in phenomena that connect multiple places and systems across large scales, but it also asks how those global systems are experienced differently in particular communities. Climate change is global because its causes and consequences operate at planetary scale. International finance is global because events in one major financial center can affect markets and economies elsewhere. Digital platforms can operate globally even when governments regulate them differently and users experience them through highly local cultures. Global supply chains may connect mines, factories, ports, warehouses, companies, governments, and consumers across several continents, creating relationships among people who may never know one another exist. Global Studies asks how those connections fit together.

Global Does Not Mean Everyone Experiences the Same Thing

Calling a phenomenon “global” does not mean its effects are evenly distributed, nor does it mean every place participates in the same way or possesses the same ability to shape the system. Climate change is global but its effects are not identical everywhere. The internet is global in theory, but access is neither universal nor equal. International trade connects almost every economy but countries and their citizens occupy very different positions within global production and finance. A useful Global Studies habit is therefore to move constantly between two scales.

Zoom Out

What larger system is operating?

Zoom In

What does that system look like in a particular place, community, or person's life?

The global scale can reveal patterns that disappear when we look only at one location, but the local scale reveals experiences, differences, and forms of agency that disappear when we look only at the world as a system. Neither view is complete on its own and Global Studies needs both.

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1.3: How Global Studies Thinks

I just can't be contained

Global problems have an annoying habit of refusing to stay inside academic departments. Climate change is not only an environmental problem. It is also an economic problem, a political problem, a health problem, a technological problem, a migration problem, and a justice problem. Food insecurity is not simply the result of whether enough food exists. It also involves prices, land ownership, transportation systems, climate, conflict, household income, gender, public policy, labor, history, and political power, all of which interact in ways that can turn a local shortage into a regional crisis or a global price shock. Migration is not only about borders. It is also about jobs, families, war, identity, climate, colonial histories, inequality, culture, law, and the very uneven ability of people to move. This is why Global Studies is interdisciplinary. It borrows ideas, methods, and questions from many fields in order to understand problems that refuse to fit neatly into one of them. Scholars use several related terms to describe different degrees of collaboration across academic fields. Choi and Pak (2006), whose framework has been applied well beyond health research, distinguish among multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches.

Multidisciplinary: Put Several Perspectives at the Table

A **multidisciplinary** approach brings different academic perspectives to the same problem.

Imagine studying a burrito.

A historian might ask how ingredients such as maize, rice, beans, beef, spices, or dairy arrived in the regions where they are now eaten. An economist might investigate food prices, agricultural production, restaurant labor, wages, transportation, or supply chains. An anthropologist might ask what the meal means culturally and how cuisine changes through migration. An environmental scientist might examine water use, fertilizer, cattle production, packaging, or greenhouse-gas emissions. A political scientist might investigate agricultural subsidies, immigration law, food safety rules, labor regulations, or trade agreements. Each discipline notices something different, and because each begins from its own concepts, assumptions, and methods, several useful explanations may emerge from the same object. A multidisciplinary approach allows those perspectives to sit beside one another.

Interdisciplinary: Study the Relationships Between the Perspectives

An **interdisciplinary** approach goes further. Instead of simply collecting perspectives, it asks how they interact. How does immigration policy affect agricultural labor? How does climate change affect crop prices? How have colonial histories shaped land ownership? How do agricultural subsidies influence which foods become inexpensive? How does migration transform cuisine? How does consumer demand affect environmental practices? The object has not changed. The analysis has deepened. Interdisciplinary thinking begins when we stop treating economic, political, cultural, historical, and environmental explanations as separate stories and begin asking how one story reshapes another.

Transdisciplinary: Build New Ways of Understanding the Problem

A **transdisciplinary** approach moves across or beyond conventional academic boundaries, especially when the problem being studied is too complex to be adequately understood through the assumptions or methods of existing disciplines alone. Sometimes a problem becomes important enough that scholars, practitioners, communities, and institutions develop new fields or frameworks specifically to understand it. Global health is one example. Climate justice is another. Food systems studies, sustainability studies, migration studies, and development studies similarly combine knowledge from many traditional disciplines. In some cases, people outside universities also become essential knowledge producers. Farmers, community organizers, Indigenous knowledge holders, public-health workers, migrants, engineers, artists, or local governments may understand aspects of a problem that cannot be discovered from academic research alone, particularly when lived experience, local ecological knowledge, or community memory reveals relationships that formal data does not capture. That matters because knowledge itself has a geography. Not every useful answer comes from the same kind of institution.

Global Studies Is Not Intellectual Pokémon

The point is not to “catch” as many disciplines as possible. A complicated answer is not automatically a good answer. The goal is to identify which perspectives actually help us understand the problem and then examine how those perspectives connect, reinforce one another, contradict one another, or expose something another field has overlooked. Sometimes economics will explain a great deal. Sometimes history changes everything. Sometimes a cultural practice makes no sense until we understand religion, identity, or colonialism. Sometimes environmental change becomes the missing piece. The Global Studies task is to decide what we need to see.

Intersectionality: Connections Exist Inside People Too

Global systems do not affect everyone within a category in the same way. “The experience of migrants” is not one experience. Neither is “the experience of women,” “the experience of workers,” “the Global South,” or “young people.” Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term **intersectionality** in her analysis of the ways antidiscrimination law could fail to account for experiences shaped simultaneously by race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). The framework has since become influential across numerous fields for examining how systems of power and inequality interact. A person's experiences may be shaped simultaneously by race, class, gender, nationality, language, legal status, disability, religion, sexuality, geography, or other dimensions of social position. Those factors do not simply stack on top of one another like separate layers. They interact.

Consider refugees. People displaced by war may share the legal condition of seeking safety outside their country, but their experiences can differ dramatically depending on nationality, ethnicity, gender, wealth, language, disability, age, religion, family status, and the policies of the country where they seek refuge. Two people may flee the same conflict and encounter radically different opportunities, restrictions, risks, or forms of public sympathy once they cross a border.

Applying an Intersectional Perspective

Key Questions of Intersectionality

Intersectionality gives Global Studies one of its most important questions:

- Which people are we actually talking about?
- What disappears when we speak too generally?

Try it!

One Problem, Many Questions

Choose one topic:

- TikTok.
- Chocolate.
- Climate migration.
- Sneakers.
- COVID-19.
- Bottled water.

Write one historical question about it. Then one economic question. One political question. One cultural question. One social question. One environmental question. (You should have 6 questions in total).

Now identify the two questions that seem most connected. That connection is where interdisciplinary thinking begins.

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1.4: How Did the World Become So Connected?

Hello? Can you hear me?

Imagine trying to send a message from California to India in 1750. Now imagine doing it today. The geographic distance is roughly the same, the experience of distance is not. That difference sits at the heart of the history of globalization. Humans have exchanged goods, technologies, stories, religious beliefs, artistic traditions, foods, scientific knowledge, diseases, and political ideas across distance for thousands of years. What changed over time was not the existence of connection itself, but the **scale, speed, density, and reliability** of the networks through which those connections moved (Osterhammel & Petersson, 2005; Steger, 2023).

The history of globalization is therefore not a straight line in which societies simply become more connected until someone eventually invents the internet. Networks expand. Networks collapse. Empires rise and fragment. Technologies alter what movement is possible. Political systems open routes, close routes, tax routes, protect routes, or seize them. People adopt what travels, resist it, modify it, combine it with local practices, or sometimes have it imposed upon them.A better question than "When did globalization begin?" may therefore be: **How did human societies become capable of maintaining relationships across increasingly large distances?**

Early Settlements: Connection Begins with Surplus

One of the great transformations in human history occurred as communities increasingly adopted agriculture and permanent settlement. Agriculture did much more than change what people ate. By producing food surpluses large enough to support populations beyond those directly involved in farming, settled societies created conditions for occupational specialization, urban development, political administration, organized religion, military systems, and increasingly complex forms of exchange (Steger, 2023). Some people farmed. Others became merchants, craftspeople, builders, administrators, healers, religious leaders, or soldiers. Specialization encouraged exchange. Exchange encouraged routes. Routes encouraged interaction. Complex societies emerged independently in many parts of the world, including Mesopotamia, the Nile Valley, the Indus Valley, China, Mesoamerica, the Andes, and regions of Africa, each developing its own political institutions, agricultural systems, technologies, cultural traditions, and forms of long-distance exchange. The point isn't that one civilization "invented globalization." It is that increasingly complex societies created more reasons, and more capacity, to connect.

The Silk Roads: There Was Never Just One Road

Did you imagine literally one Silk Road before today? In the past folks used to say the silk road, but newer scholarship has evolved to recognize the silk road for what it truley was, the Silk Roads. The phrase **Silk Roads** describes an enormous network of land and maritime routes that linked societies across East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, Southwest Asia, Africa, and Europe rather than a single continuous road (UNESCO, n.d.). (Can you imagine if it was literally just one silk road? That would be a lot of traffic!) Most merchants traveled only part of the network, buying and selling goods that would continue onward through other traders, caravan cities, ports, and markets. Silk moved.So did horses, spices, metals, ceramics, textiles, technologies, artistic styles, religious beliefs, scientific knowledge, and languages. Pathogens moved too. Trade routes are never only economic corridors; once merchants, migrants, pilgrims, diplomats, soldiers, craftspeople, and travelers begin moving through them, they also become channels through which ideas, technologies, identities, belief systems, and disease circulate (Abu-Lughod, 1989; UNESCO, n.d.). Cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara flourished because they occupied strategic positions inside these networks. From a conventional European-centered map, Central Asia can appear remote or peripheral but from the perspective of the Silk Roads, it sits squarly in the middle of all the action. Sometimes changing the map changes the story.

The Indian Ocean: Globalization by Sea

The Silk Roads receive enormous attention in many Western accounts of premodern exchange, but they were only one part of a much larger story. For centuries, maritime networks across the Indian Ocean connected East Africa, Arabia, Persia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China, creating a vast commercial world in which merchants used seasonal monsoon winds to plan voyages and port cities became multilingual, multicultural centers of exchange (Abu-Lughod, 1989; UNESCO, n.d.). Spices moved. Textiles moved. Ceramics moved. Metals, ivory, timber, food crops, religious ideas, technologies, and people moved.

Islam spread through many Indian Ocean communities not only through political expansion, but also through trade, scholarship, migration, marriage, and the formation of merchant communities. Long before European fleets came to dominate many oceanic routes, the Indian Ocean already contained sophisticated networks of commerce and cultural exchange. Global history looks different when we stop assuming Europe must always occupy the center of it.

Empires and Connectivity

Large empires also created conditions for long-distance connection. The Roman Empire, for example, built roads, ports, administrative systems, legal structures, and communication networks that connected large portions of Europe, North Africa, and Southwest Asia. Soldiers, merchants, officials, religious ideas, languages, and goods moved through these networks with greater regularity than would have been possible under more fragmented political systems. But empire is not simply another word for connectivity. Empires often create extraordinary levels of integration by standardizing law, taxation, administration, transportation, or language across large territories, yet those same systems are rarely politically neutral: the infrastructures that facilitate exchange can also enable conquest, extraction, forced labor, cultural suppression, and the concentration of wealth and authority. Connectivity tells us that people are linked. It does not tell us whether the relationship is just.

The Mongol Moment

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Mongol political authority extended across enormous portions of Eurasia. The initial conquests were extraordinarily violent, producing destruction on a scale that should not be romanticized. Yet the political order that emerged later also made some forms of long-distance trade and communication more reliable by connecting enormous territories through related systems of governance, taxation, protection, and communication (Abu-Lughod, 1989). Merchants traveled through large regions under shared political authority. Diplomats crossed enormous distances. Artisans, religious leaders, technologies, scientific knowledge, and goods circulated across Eurasia. Communication networks became faster. This period illustrates one of globalization's recurring paradoxes: **Greater connectivity does not necessarily emerge through peaceful or equal relationships.** Sometimes systems become more connected precisely because powerful actors impose a common political framework.

When Worlds Collided

Beginning in the late fifteenth century, European maritime expansion intensified connections among the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia, creating exchanges whose consequences fundamentally reshaped global history. Plants, animals, foods, technologies, diseases, people, and capital crossed oceans in what historian Alfred Crosby described as the **Columbian Exchange** (Crosby, 1972). Potatoes moved from the Andes and transformed diets thousands of miles away. Tomatoes traveled from the Americas and eventually became central to cuisines that now seem unimaginable without them. Horses transformed transportation, warfare, and ways of life for many Indigenous societies. Sugar cultivation expanded rapidly andat the same time so did devastating disease. Indigenous populations in the Americas experienced catastrophic demographic losses after exposure to diseases such as smallpox and measles, compounded by warfare, displacement, forced labor, and colonial violence (Crosby, 1972).

European empires seized land, imposed political authority, reorganized local economies, extracted resources, spread European languages and Christianity, and redirected trade to serve imperial interests.The transatlantic slave trade forcibly transported millions of Africans to the Americas, creating vast wealth while inflicting profound and lasting human suffering (Eltis & Richardson, 2010). Enslaved Africans and their descendants also transformed the cultural worlds of the Atlantic through language, religion, foodways, music, agricultural knowledge, political resistance, and community formation.

This was globalization but was also conquest. The histories cannot be separated nor should they be forgotten.

Steam, Steel, and Wires

Industrialization dramatically changed the speed and scale at which global systems could operate. Steamships moved people and goods faster than sailing vessels. Railroads connected inland farms, factories, mines, and cities to national and international markets. Telegraph cables allowed information to travel much faster than the people who sent it. Factories produced goods at scales earlier generations could scarcely imagine. Financial networks increasingly connected businesses and investors across borders. Millions of people migrated within countries and across oceans. Industrialization also intensified colonial extraction, as rapidly growing economies demanded raw materials, labor, energy, and new markets. Industrial technologies generated extraordinary economic growth and transformed everyday life, but they also produced dangerous working conditions, child

labor, environmental pollution, overcrowded cities, and widening inequality. Once again, connection and power grew together (Osterhammel & Petersson, 2005; Warf, 2008).

From Telegraph to Fiber-Optic Cable

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries compressed time even further. Radio. Commercial aviation. Container shipping. Satellites. Computers. The internet. Mobile phones. Cloud computing. Artificial intelligence. Each innovation changed what could move, how quickly it could move, and who could participate in the networks it created. The standardized shipping container may seem far less glamorous than a smartphone, yet it transformed global trade by making goods easier and cheaper to transfer among ships, trucks, trains, ports, and warehouses. Fiber-optic cables made enormous volumes of information move across oceans at extraordinary speed. Commercial aviation transformed migration, tourism, business, and family relationships. Smartphones bundled multiple global infrastructures into a device small enough to fit inside a pocket.



Figure 1.4.1: **Compressing Time and Space.** Commercial aviation did not make the planet physically smaller, but it radically reduced the time required to move people across enormous distances. Transportation and communication technologies continually reshape the experience of geography, helping produce what scholars describe as time-space compression. (Photo by CK Chen on Unsplash).

The history of globalization can therefore be read partly as a history of expanding networks and intensifying time-space compression (Steger, 2023; Warf, 2008).

But it should never be told as a simple story of progress. Some connections were chosen. Some were imposed. Some generated tremendous prosperity. Some produced devastating exploitation. Most did several things at once. Like I like to say, two things can be true at the same time. That complexity is not a problem with Global Studies but it is exactly the reason we need it.

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1.5: Connections

Everyone wants Connections

Technology can make connection possible but it does not explain why humans keep building connections in the first place. Across history, societies have traded, migrated, conquered, exchanged ideas, formed alliances, traveled, colonized, communicated, and created networks for thousands of different reasons. Although the specifics change from one place and period to another, these motivations can be organized broadly around economic, political, and cultural drivers of connectivity (Steger, 2023).

We Want Things

Resources are distributed unevenly across the planet. Different places possess different climates, minerals, agricultural products, technologies, labor forces, transportation routes, skills, and forms of knowledge, which means that few societies can produce everything they want or need on their own. Trade creates access. Food. Energy. Metals. Timber. Technology. Manufactured goods. Labor. Capital. Luxury products. Knowledge. Economic exchange can create genuine mutual benefits, particularly when different societies specialize, share technologies, gain access to scarce resources, or expand markets. But exchange can also create dependence. Imagine two countries trading with one another. One exports a valuable mineral. The other transforms that mineral into advanced technology and sells the finished product for far more money. Both participate in trade.Both are connected. But that does not mean they capture equal value from the relationship (Frank, 1966; Wallerstein, 2004).

This is why Global Studies does not stop at the observation that trade occurs. We follow the exchange further, examining how ownership, technology, bargaining power, infrastructure, labor, regulation, and historical relationships shape who gains what. Who controls the resource? Who sets the price? Who owns the technology? Who performs the labor? Who controls transportation? Who receives the highest profits? Connection tells us that a relationship exists. Power tells us what kind of relationship it is.

We Want Power

Political connections can emerge voluntarily. Governments form alliances. They sign treaties, join international organizations and coordinate trade. They cooperate on transportation, health, security, environmental protection, or communication. Political integration can reduce barriers and make interaction easier, especially when states agree to shared rules that allow people, goods, money, or information to move more predictably. But political connection can also be imposed. Think conquest, colonization, occupation, forced assimilation or unequal treaties and imperial rule. Throughout history, large political systems have introduced shared legal codes, currencies, administrative practices, languages, roads, taxation systems, or measurements that made communication and exchange easier across large territories. Those systems increased connectivity. At the same time, they also concentrated authority. The key question is therefore not simply: Does political integration connect people? It is: Who defines the terms of the connection?

We Want Ideas (and Sometimes We Want Other People to Want Ours)

Culture moves whenever people do even if not explicit. Religions travel. Languages travel. Music travels. Food travels. Fashion travels. Political ideologies travel. Technologies travel. Stories travel. Human beings continually borrow from, adapt, remix, imitate, resist, and reinterpret one another, which is one reason cultural traditions are rarely as isolated or “pure” as people sometimes imagine (Pieterse, 2009). Cultural exchange can produce extraordinary creativity. Musical traditions combine. Languages absorb words. Recipes evolve through migration. Religions encounter new local practices. Artistic forms cross borders and return transformed. Yet cultural movement also occurs inside unequal systems of power. A language may spread because merchants find it useful, because migrants carry it with them, or because a colonial government imposes it through education and administration. A religious tradition may expand through voluntary conversion, political authority, or both. A multinational entertainment company may distribute a particular cultural product around the world because it controls access to the platforms through which audiences encounter it. Later in this book, we will return to a deceptively difficult question: When is cultural movement exchange, when is it adaptation, and when does power turn it into something else?

Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces

Globalization is not inevitable. Some forces draw societies together and these are commonly described as centripetal forces. Examples are shared institutions, economic interests, transportation infrastructure, political alliances, languages, religions. These are collective identities and communication networks that encourage integration. Other forces however push societies apart. These are centrifugal forces such as conflict, economic inequality political fragmentation, nationalism, discrimination, competing identities and economic crises. Even resistance to outside influences pushes people apart. The balance between these forces changes over time, which is why globalization should never be imagined as a straight arrow pointing inevitably toward “more.”

Borders open. Borders close. Governments join international agreements. Governments withdraw from them. Supply chains become more international and later get reorganized. Cultural practices spread rapidly while others become symbols of local resistance. The history of globalization looks less like a single upward line and more like a series of waves. Keep that image in mind. We will need it later.

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1.6: Your Global Studies Toolkit

We all need Tools

The world is complicated. Theories help us decide what to notice. Think of theories as different settings on a camera lens. One may bring economic inequality sharply into focus while another draws our attention toward culture, colonial history, institutions, or relationships among systems; because every lens foregrounds some features while pushing others into the background, no single theory can capture the whole picture. That is why Global Studies uses several. A theory is not simply a guess. It is a framework for recognizing patterns, organizing evidence, asking questions, and constructing explanations. The point is not to memorize a definition and match it to a vocabulary question.The more useful skill is being able to say: This theory helps explain an important part of the problem but here is what it does not explain as well. That is what we are going to practice.

World-Systems Theory: Where Are You in the System?

World-Systems Theory examines the global economy as a historically unequal system structured through relationships commonly described in terms of core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral positions (Wallerstein, 2004). Core economies tend to possess powerful financial institutions, advanced technologies, major corporations, high-value industries, and significant influence over global trade and finance. Peripheral economies have historically been more likely to supply raw materials, agricultural commodities, natural resources, or lower-wage labor. Semi-peripheral economies occupy positions between the two and may simultaneously depend upon more powerful economies while exercising economic influence over less powerful ones. Consider a smartphone. The device may be designed by a company headquartered in California. Its components may be produced across East Asia. Assembly may occur in another country. Minerals may be extracted in parts of Africa, Latin America, Asia, or elsewhere. Marketing and financing may be controlled from major global cities. World-Systems Theory asks why different stages of production are geographically distributed in this way and why the activities associated with design, finance, intellectual property, and branding frequently capture more value than resource extraction or assembly labor.

This theory helps us see: structural inequality within the global economy.

This theory may miss: differences within countries and the ways governments, firms, workers, and communities can sometimes alter their positions over time.

Globalization Debates: How Global Is Globalization?

One influential way of organizing debates about globalization distinguishes among broadly hyperglobalist, skeptical, and transformationalist positions (Held et al., 1999).

- Hyperglobalist perspectives emphasize the growing importance of global markets, technologies, institutions, corporations, and cultural networks. From this perspective, many forms of economic and social activity increasingly operate beyond the boundaries of individual states.
- Skeptical perspectives argue that globalization is sometimes exaggerated. Governments still control citizenship, taxation, law, education, security, borders, and many aspects of economic policy, while much international trade and migration occurs within particular regions rather than through one seamless global system.
- Transformationalist perspectives take a more complicated position. Globalization is real and powerful, but rather than simply erasing state power, it transforms the ways governments, corporations, communities, and individuals operate.

Think about social media. A platform can connect users across the planet. That looks hyperglobal. Governments can regulate, tax, censor, restrict, or ban platforms. That looks much more skeptical. Those same governments may use digital platforms for diplomacy, surveillance, public communication, propaganda, or political campaigning. That is transformational.

This framework helps us see: that globalization itself is debated rather than universally understood in one way.

It may miss: the enormous differences among economic, political, cultural, environmental, and technological forms of globalization.

Dependency Theory: Independence From Whom?

Dependency Theory emerged partly from efforts to explain why political decolonization did not necessarily eliminate unequal economic relationships between former colonies and wealthier industrial economies (Frank, 1966). A country may control its own government while still depending heavily on foreign loans, technology, investment, manufactured goods, multinational firms, or access to markets controlled elsewhere. Lets think about coffee. A coffee-producing country may export beans. Companies somewhere else may roast, package, brand, advertise, distribute, and sell the final product for a much higher price. The growers participate in the global economy. Yet much of the value generated by the final product may accumulate elsewhere. Dependency Theory asks why some economies remain concentrated in lower-value activities and whether international economic relationships can reproduce those patterns over time.

This theory helps us see: how unequal economic relationships can survive formal political independence.

This theory may miss: situations in which countries successfully diversify, build new industries, negotiate better terms, or use global markets strategically.

Cultural Imperialism: Whose Culture Travels Furthest?

Cultural Imperialism focuses attention on the relationship between cultural circulation and unequal power, particularly when powerful industries, languages, or media systems gain disproportionate influence across borders (Tomlinson, 1991). Think Hollywood films, streaming services, advertising, English-language media, consumer brands, social media, popular music. All these examples can carry assumptions and cultural practices across borders. But cultural movement is rarely entirely one-way. K-pop, anime, Bollywood films, Afrobeats, Turkish television dramas, Latin music, and countless other cultural forms have developed audiences far beyond their places of origin. Cultural Imperialism therefore encourages us to ask more sophisticated questions than simply:

- Where did this culture come from?

We should also ask:

- Who owns the platform?
- Who controls distribution?
- Which cultural products are easiest to monetize?
- Which languages gain the largest audiences?
- Who owns the audience data?
- Who receives the profit?

This theory helps us see: culture as a form of power rather than merely a collection of interesting differences.

This theory may miss: the creativity and agency involved when audiences adapt, remix, reinterpret, or reject what they receive.

Critical Global Political Economy: Follow the Money and the Power

Critical Global Political Economy examines how markets and political authority shape one another rather than treating “the economy” as something separate from institutions and power (Frieden et al., 2017). Consider fast fashion. A garment may involve agricultural producers, textile mills, factory workers, shipping companies, designers, social-media advertising, online platforms, warehouse employees, consumers, investors, and waste systems. A political-economy perspective asks:

- Who determines labor standards?
- Who sets environmental rules?
- Who decides where production occurs?
- Why are some forms of labor compensated much more highly than others?
- Where do profits accumulate?
- How do trade agreements or tax systems help produce those outcomes?

This approach helps us see: that markets are constructed through political rules and institutions.

It may miss: cultural meanings or individual experiences unless those are deliberately brought into the analysis.

Postcolonial Theory: Is the Past Actually Past?

Postcolonial Theory examines how the institutions, hierarchies, representations, and systems created through colonialism can continue to shape societies after formal colonial rule ends (Loomba, 2015). Many contemporary political boundaries were created or reshaped through colonial rule. European languages remain official languages in countries far from Europe. Patterns of trade established during colonialism continue to influence contemporary economies (like why so many colonial powers still retain the only direct non stop flights to and from their former colonies). Museums still hold objects acquired under imperial systems. Educational institutions may privilege some intellectual traditions while treating others as folklore, tradition, or local knowledge. Formal colonial empires may have largely disappeared, but many of the political boundaries, economic hierarchies, linguistic systems, educational institutions, land arrangements, and assumptions about whose knowledge counts as authoritative were not erased simply because a flag changed or independence was declared. Postcolonial Theory therefore asks: Whose history gets told? Whose knowledge counts as expertise? Whose map are we using? Whose language became “international”? Who gained land, wealth, or political authority through colonial rule? What survived independence?

This theory helps us see: the persistence of colonial power after formal colonialism.

This theory may miss: newer forms of power that cannot be explained primarily through colonial history.

Systems Thinking: What Happens Next?

Systems Thinking focuses on relationships, feedback loops, delays, and consequences among interconnected parts of larger systems (Meadows, 2008). A change in one area can generate consequences somewhere else, those consequences can trigger additional responses, and the resulting feedback may eventually intensify, redirect, or partially reverse the original change. Climate change offers an obvious example of the effect are seen across areas. Higher temperatures can affect rainfall. Changing rainfall can affect agriculture. Agricultural disruption can influence food prices. Economic insecurity can contribute to migration. Migration can influence elections and border policy. Political responses can change environmental regulation. Those policies may then affect future emissions. That is a feedback loop. Systems Thinking therefore encourages us to move beyond asking only: What caused this? and begin asking: What else changes when this changes?

This approach helps us see: interdependence, ripple effects, and feedback loops.

It may miss: power unless we deliberately ask who has the ability to shape the system, absorb the damage, or redirect its consequences.

Why Use More Than One Theory?

Because reality cheats. A single global problem may involve colonial history, economic inequality, cultural power, environmental change, political institutions, and systems effects simultaneously. Different theories can therefore produce different but equally useful insights. The goal is not to identify the one theory that is secretly correct. The goal is to build the strongest explanation.

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1.7: Test Drive the Theories

Theories in Action

Theories behave beautifully when they are sitting quietly in separate textbook paragraphs. The world is less cooperative. Most global problems can be interpreted through several theories at once, and the challenge is not to guess which theory the textbook author secretly had in mind, but to decide which framework reveals something useful and what remains hidden when we rely upon it.

Case 1: The $8 T-Shirt

Imagine a shirt designed by a company headquartered in one country, made with cotton grown somewhere else, sewn in another country, advertised through social media, transported across an ocean, purchased cheaply, worn a few times, and eventually discarded.

- A World-Systems approach might ask where the high-value and low-value stages of production occur.
- A Critical Global Political Economy approach might examine wages, regulation, corporate ownership, taxation, and profits.
- A Postcolonial approach might ask whether the geography of contemporary textile production reflects older histories of colonial extraction, plantation agriculture, industrialization, or unequal trade.
- A Systems Thinking approach might connect fashion consumption to labor, water use, chemical pollution, transportation, climate, and waste.

Which theory gives you the strongest explanation? What becomes visible when you combine several?

Case 2: K-Pop Goes Everywhere

South Korea's popular-music industry has developed substantial audiences across borders through entertainment companies, social media, streaming services, highly organized fandoms, and transnational cultural networks (Jin, 2016). Does this challenge older claims that cultural globalization primarily moves outward from the United States?

- A Cultural Imperialism approach might investigate who controls the streaming platforms and distribution infrastructure.
- A Globalization Theory approach might ask whether K-pop reflects hyperglobalization or a more complicated transformation of global culture.
- A Political Economy approach could examine entertainment companies, intellectual property, contracts, and profits.
- A cultural approach might emphasize hybridization: musical forms crossing borders, interacting with other traditions, and returning in altered forms.

So is K-pop cultural globalization? National soft power? Corporate strategy? Or Cultural hybridity?

Possibly all of them.

Case 3: A Pacific Island and a Changing Climate

Many small island states have contributed relatively little to historic global greenhouse-gas emissions while facing substantial risks associated with sea-level rise, extreme weather, water insecurity, and other climate-related changes (IPCC, 2022). Systems Thinking connects energy use, climate, migration, economics, sovereignty, food systems, and international law. Critical Political Economy asks which economies benefited most from carbon-intensive industrial development. Postcolonial Theory may help explain why states with small populations often possess far less political and economic power than the countries whose historical emissions have contributed most to contemporary climate change. The difficult question becomes: What does “shared global responsibility” mean when responsibility has never been shared equally?

Case 4: Your Phone

Take out your phone. Choose any three theories from this chapter. Apply each one. If three theories produce three different stories about the same device, congratulations. That is exactly the point.

The Catch

Theory should make reality more understandable, not force reality to behave. If your evidence does not fit the theory perfectly, don't twist the evidence until it does. Ask instead: What does this theory explain well? Where does it struggle? Would another framework help? That is analysis.

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1.8: Who Built the Rules?

How History Impacts us Now

Globalization does not run itself. Ships cross oceans because ports, customs agencies, insurance systems, maritime law, transportation infrastructure, currencies, and governments make international trade possible. People cross borders through systems of passports, visas, airlines, immigration law, and agreements among states. Money moves through banking and financial institutions. Governments negotiate standards governing trade, health, security, intellectual property, transportation, communications, labor, human rights, and the environment. Globalization therefore has institutions. Much of the institutional architecture governing contemporary international life took shape after the devastation of World War II, when political leaders confronted a difficult question: could states build systems capable of making cooperation more predictable while reducing the economic and political instability that had contributed to global conflict?

Bretton Woods: Rebuilding the Economic Rules

In July 1944, delegates representing 44 countries met at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, to design a framework for postwar international economic cooperation and reconstruction. The conference produced the Articles of Agreement for the International Monetary Fund, or IMF, and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which became the core institution of what is now the World Bank Group (World Bank, n.d.). Today, the IMF describes its core functions as promoting international monetary cooperation and financial stability through policy advice, financial assistance, and capacity development (International Monetary Fund, n.d.). The World Bank initially focused heavily on postwar reconstruction and later became a major development institution providing financing, technical assistance, and research related to infrastructure, poverty reduction, health, education, governance, and other areas (World Bank, n.d.). Both institutions reflected an increasingly important realization: Economic crises do not always stay inside national borders. Financial instability can spread. Currency problems can disrupt trade. Debt crises can affect neighboring economies and international markets. Cooperation therefore became part of economic management.

The United Nations: Can Countries Build a System for Cooperation?

The United Nations formally came into existence in 1945 after the UN Charter was negotiated and adopted in San Francisco, reflecting the postwar effort to create a global organization for international cooperation and peace (United Nations, n.d.). Over time, the UN system expanded far beyond traditional questions of war and peace. Its agencies and institutions became involved in refugees, food, public health, development, labor, education, culture, children, human rights, humanitarian crises, and environmental issues. That does not mean the United Nations functions as a world government. States remain sovereign. Nor does it mean the organization can always compel powerful countries to cooperate. The UN Security Council itself contains substantial inequalities in institutional authority, including veto power held by its five permanent members (United Nations, n.d.). Global governance is rarely neutral. That is precisely why it deserves study.



Figure 1.8.1: Who Built the Rules? The United Nations is one of the most visible institutions created in the post-1945 international order. Such institutions provide spaces for cooperation, negotiation, and rule-making, but Global Studies also asks whose histories, interests, and distributions of power are embedded within them. (Photo by Maxim Klimashin on Unsplash).

Trade Gets Rules Too

Governments also attempted to create more predictable rules for international commerce. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, known as GATT, was signed in 1947 and became the principal multilateral framework for trade liberalization before the World Trade Organization, or WTO, was established in 1995 (World Trade Organization, n.d.). Regional forms of integration also expanded. The European integration project eventually developed into the European Union, one of the world's deepest experiments in supranational political and economic cooperation. Member states remain independent countries while sharing rules and institutions in areas where they have agreed that cooperation produces collective benefits. This is supranationalism: states retain sovereignty but voluntarily share some decision-making authority through institutions operating above the national level.

Liberal for Whom?

Many of the institutions created or expanded after World War II became part of what scholars often call the liberal international order. Here, liberal refers broadly to a system emphasizing international cooperation, rules-based institutions, relatively open trade, and, in many interpretations, market-oriented economies and representative political institutions. Supporters argue that this order created mechanisms for cooperation, encouraged trade and investment, supported reconstruction and development, and provided institutions through which states could manage disputes. Critics ask a different set of questions.

- Who designed these institutions?
- Who received the greatest voting power?
- Which countries obtained permanent authority within the UN Security Council?
- Whose economic assumptions shaped international lending programs?
- Which states were already wealthy and influential when the rules were written?
- Whose interests were presented as “international” interests?

These questions do not require us to decide that global institutions are either entirely beneficial or fundamentally illegitimate. They require us to examine the distribution of power inside them.

The Cold War Complicates the Story

The world after World War II did not develop under one unified political order. The United States and Soviet Union emerged as rival superpowers, and their political, economic, ideological, and military competition shaped international affairs for much of the

second half of the twentieth century. Military alliances formed and economic blocs developed. Proxy wars occurred in multiple regions. Governments faced intense pressure to align with one side or the other. Yet many newly independent countries rejected the idea that they should simply choose between Washington and Moscow. The Non-Aligned Movement, formally established in 1961, became an important attempt by states in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and elsewhere to preserve greater autonomy within a polarized Cold War system. This history also helps explain the older phrase Third World. Originally, the term had a political meaning connected to countries outside the two dominant Cold War blocs. Over time, however, it became a crude shorthand for poorer countries and was frequently used in ways that flattened enormous differences among societies. Contemporary scholarship more commonly uses the phrase Global South, though that term also describes an extraordinarily diverse collection of countries, histories, political systems, and economic positions. Labels can help us see patterns but they can also hide them (remember the Danger of a Single Story?).

Neoliberal Globalization

During the late twentieth century, many governments adopted policy approaches associated with neoliberalism, including privatization, deregulation, trade liberalization, and greater reliance on market mechanisms (Harvey, 2005). At roughly the same time, changes in transportation and communications made international production increasingly practical. Container shipping reduced the complexity and cost of moving goods. Computers allowed corporations to coordinate activities across distance. Telecommunications linked offices, factories, suppliers, and markets. International financial networks expanded. Companies increasingly divided production among multiple countries, allowing a product to be designed in one place, financed somewhere else, built from components made across several regions, assembled in another country, and sold around the world. The multinational corporation became one of globalization's most powerful actors. States still mattered, but states were no longer the only institutions capable of organizing economic relationships across vast distances.

Is the Postwar Order Breaking?

That question now sits near the center of many Global Studies debates. Brexit challenged one of the world's deepest regional integration projects. Strategic competition between the United States and China has reshaped debates about trade, technology, manufacturing, supply chains, and security. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine disrupted energy markets, food systems, security relationships, and international institutions. Governments have become increasingly concerned about dependence on foreign suppliers for semiconductors, medicines, energy, critical minerals, food, and strategically important technologies. Institutions and groupings outside the traditional Western-led order have also gained influence, raising questions about whether global power is becoming more diffuse. These developments are consistent with a broader contemporary environment in which globalization continues alongside renewed nationalism, geopolitical competition, and pressure to reorganize international economic relationships (Steger, 2023). Does this mean globalization is ending? Not necessarily. Countries can become more politically suspicious of one another while remaining economically interdependent. A government may restrict one kind of trade while encouraging another. A corporation may relocate a factory from one country to another without abandoning international production. Governments may attempt to regulate digital networks that continue to operate across borders. Globalization can change shape without disappearing. That distinction matters. We will return to it in Chapter 9.

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1.9: Globalization, Glocalization

What do we actually do with Connection?

We have now used the word globalization quite a lot. So let's make sure we know what we mean. Throughout this book, globalization refers to the acceleration and intensification of connections, interdependence, and integration across borders and across distance (Steger, 2023). The emphasis on process matters. Globalization is not one event. It unfolds through trade, migration, technology, finance, political institutions, transportation, labor, environmental change, communication, cultural exchange, and many other forms of interaction, which overlap so extensively that changes in one domain often reshape several others. It also does not produce one universal outcome. Globalization does not mean that everyone becomes equally connected, that governments disappear, that national borders lose all relevance, that cultures become identical, or that every form of global integration benefits everyone involved. The global and local continually reshape one another. That brings us to one of the most useful concepts in this course.

Glocalization: The Global Rarely Arrives Unchanged

Sociologist Roland Robertson used glocalization to describe the intertwined relationship between global processes and local adaptation rather than treating the “global” and “local” as simple opposites (Robertson, 1995). McDonald's provides the classic example. The golden arches may be recognizable in many countries, but the menus are not identical. Products change according to local tastes, religious practices, dietary expectations, ingredients, and marketing strategies. Yet glocalization extends far beyond fast food. A global musical genre may be performed in a local language. A television format developed in one country may be remade for another audience. Fashion may combine globally circulating silhouettes with locally significant textiles. Religious traditions may develop distinctive practices as they enter new cultural environments. Social-media platforms used across the world may carry intensely local humor, political movements, languages, identities, and debates. The global does not simply erase the local. Sometimes global connection produces new versions of it.

Global, Meet Local

Glocalization is one reason globalization rarely produces perfect sameness. A global restaurant chain may redesign its menu around local religious practices and tastes. A streaming platform may operate worldwide while commissioning programs in Korean, Hindi, Spanish, Turkish, or Yoruba for particular audiences. A global fashion trend may arrive in Lagos, Seoul, Mumbai, Los Angeles, or Jakarta and emerge looking distinctly local.

The thing travels, but it does not remain untouched. People receive global influences, reinterpret them, combine them with existing practices, reject parts of them, and sometimes send the transformed version back into global circulation.

This is one of globalization's recurring surprises: connection does not necessarily erase difference. Sometimes it creates new forms of it.

Hybridization: Culture Is Not a Copy Machine

Cultural hybridization emphasizes the ways cultural forms are mixed, adapted, and reconstituted as they move among societies rather than simply being copied from one place to another (Pieterse, 2009). Culture rarely moves unchanged from one place to another. People interpret what they encounter through existing values, tastes, histories, and social relationships, which means cultural movement is almost always accompanied by some degree of selection, reinterpretation, adaptation, or resistance. People remix, reject, borrow, transform, combine and invent. Food makes this exceptionally visible. Fusion cuisine anyone? Indian Chinese? It's delicious by the way but no actual Chinese restaurant would serve Manchurian, Hakka Noodles, or in the case of the US, General Tsao's Chicken. A dish may emerge in one region, travel through migration, encounter new ingredients and consumer expectations, and eventually develop versions that would be unfamiliar to people in its place of origin. Which version is authentic? That question turns out to be much harder than it first appears. Chapter 2 will spend much more time with it.

Cosmopolitanism: How Large Is Your Community?

Global connection also raises moral and political questions. If our decisions affect people far beyond our immediate communities, do our responsibilities extend beyond those communities as well? Cosmopolitanism is a long tradition of thought organized around the idea that human beings belong to a moral community larger than the nation-state (Schattle, 2009). That does not mean local or national identities become meaningless. A person can be deeply connected to a neighborhood, city, culture, religion, language, region, or nation while also recognizing that people elsewhere possess dignity and rights that matter. These attachments do not have to cancel one another out. As stated earliers, two things can be true at the same time.

Global Citizenship

A related concept is global citizenship. Global citizenship is not usually a legal citizenship in the way nationality is. It is an orientation toward living within an interconnected world (Schattle, 2009). A global-citizenship perspective begins from the recognition that choices that feel private or local, what we buy, how we travel, what technologies we use, which policies we support, may be embedded in systems whose labor, environmental, political, and social consequences unfold far beyond our immediate field of vision. What we buy can affect workers somewhere else. What governments do can affect people beyond their borders. Energy consumption can contribute to environmental change elsewhere. Technologies developed in one country can reshape political life in another. Awareness is not the same as responsibility but it is where responsibility starts.

Rooted and Global at the Same Time

Global Studies does not ask students to become detached observers floating somewhere above the planet. It's quite the opposite actually. Everyone experiences globalization from somewhere. A family. A language. A neighborhood. A culture. A country. A migration history. A social position. A set of opportunities and constraints. The challenge is not to become a “citizen of nowhere,” but to understand more clearly how our somewhere is connected to other somewheres, especially when the relationships linking them are uneven. A wealthy tourist and a refugee both cross borders but their mobility is not equivalent. A multinational executive and a migrant agricultural worker both participate in globalization but their power within it is not the same. Global citizenship is most useful when it makes those differences easier to see rather than allowing the language of connection to hide them.

Before You Leave This Section

Look again at the object you considered at the beginning of this chapter. By now, you should be able to ask more difficult questions about it.

- What historical networks made it possible?
- Which forms of power structure its production?
- Which institutions regulate it?
- Which culture surrounds it?
- Who has access to it?
- Where do its environmental costs appear?
- What changes when it enters another society?

If the object now looks more complicated than it did before, good. You are starting to see globally.

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1.10: So What?

The Global Autopsy

You began this chapter by looking at an ordinary object. Now we are going to take that exercise further.

Choose one thing you actually used today.

It might be:

- a phone
- a coffee
- a pair of sneakers
- a T-shirt
- a chocolate bar
- a lipstick
- a medication
- a video game
- a burrito
- a song
- a social-media platform
- or something else entirely

Your task is to conduct a Global Autopsy. Don't worry. Nothing has to die. The point is to take something familiar apart conceptually until the economic, political, cultural, historical, social, and environmental relationships inside it become visible. Also, this is a thinking exersize. You won't be turning anything in unless your professor asks you to.

Step 1: Follow the Thing

Where did it originate? Where were its materials, ingredients, or components produced? Where was it grown, coded, recorded, designed, assembled, or manufactured? How many places may have been involved before it reached you? A product that appears to come from one country may contain a much more complicated geography. Find it.

Step 2: Follow the Money

Who owns the company, brand, platform, patent, or intellectual property? Where does the highest-value work occur? Who receives the largest share of the final price? Who receives the smallest? Where does profit accumulate? The place where something is produced is not necessarily the place where most of its value is captured.

Step 3: Follow the People

Whose labor is involved? Whose knowledge? Whose culture? Who transports it? Who sells it? Who consumes it? Who may be invisible by the time the product reaches you? Global supply chains are full of people who disappear from the final story. Bring some of them back.

Step 4: Follow the Rules

Which governments, laws, trade agreements, institutions, standards, or digital platforms shape how your object is created and moved? What happens at borders? What rules govern labor? Who protects intellectual property? Who decides what may be sold? What would happen if one important rule changed?

Step 5: Follow the Footprint

What land, water, energy, minerals, transportation, packaging, emissions, or waste are involved? Where do those environmental costs appear? Are the people consuming the final product living in the same places as the people experiencing pollution, extraction, water stress, or waste? Often they are not. That distance matters.

Step 6: Change the Lens

Analyze your object through at least three Global Studies lenses. Historical. Economic. Political. Cultural. Social. Environmental. What becomes visible through one lens that another leaves out? Which two lenses seem to interact most strongly?

Step 7: Test Drive a Theory

Choose one theory from the Global Studies Toolkit. What does it help you see? What does it fail to explain? Now choose a second theory. Does the story change? Which gives you the stronger explanation? Would combining them work better?

Step 8: Find the Missing Person

Every global story leaves someone out. Whose perspective is easiest to overlook? The farmer? The miner? The factory worker? The migrant? The truck driver? The warehouse employee? The community living near a waste site? The Indigenous nation whose land contains the resource? The person who cannot afford the final product? The person whose data made the platform profitable? Finding the missing person often changes the story. Sometimes it changes the question.

Step 9: Zoom Out

What larger global system is your object part of? Trade? Migration? Digital technology? Global finance? Climate change? Food systems? Culture? Energy?

Step 10: Zoom Back In

Return to yourself. Why did you buy, use, listen to, eat, wear, or download this particular thing? Did convenience matter? Price? Identity? Habit? Advertising? Culture? Need? Global systems may be enormous, but they eventually arrive somewhere very small: a shopping cart; a screen; a closet; a meal; a hand. That is where systems become lived experience.

The Point

Your object is not really the assignment. The connections are. The goal is to move from seeing an isolated thing to seeing a network of relationships and then to ask how history, power, culture, economics, politics, society, and the environment shape that network. For the rest of this book, we are going to keep doing versions of this exercise. Only the objects are going to get bigger.

From Things to Culture

We began with objects, systems, and the question of connection. But some of globalization's most powerful movements cannot be packed inside a shipping container. Languages travel. Religions travel. Recipes travel. Music travels. Fashion travels. Stories travel. People travel. And when culture moves, it rarely arrives unchanged. People reinterpret what they encounter, adapting it to new places, combining it with existing traditions, commercializing it, resisting it, celebrating it, protecting it, or arguing over who has the right to claim it. That leaves us with the next question: What happens when culture crosses borders? That is where Chapter 2 begins.

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1.11: Discussion

Lets Talk About it

1: Globalization - Overhyped or Underestimated?

People routinely make sweeping claims about globalization: “Borders do not matter anymore.” “The world is becoming one culture.” “Globalization benefits everyone.” “Globalization is ending.” “Technology has made geography irrelevant.”

Choose one of these claims. Your job is not simply to agree or disagree. Instead, decide:

What part of the statement is true? What part is misleading?

Use at least two ideas from Chapter 1 to complicate the claim. Then create a better one-sentence version of the statement.

For example, instead of simply saying “Borders no longer matter,” you might conclude that borders matter differently depending on what or who is trying to cross them.

Peer response: Find one classmate whose revised claim differs from yours. Identify one situation where their interpretation works better than yours.

2: Who Gets a Seat at the Global Table?

Imagine that a new international body has been created to make decisions about global artificial intelligence governance. There are only ten seats at the table. Who should get them? You might consider:

- governments
- technology companies
- scientists
- workers
- students
- civil-society organizations
- Indigenous communities
- countries from the Global South
- environmental experts
- artists
- educators
- people whose data trains AI systems
- or groups of your own choosing

Choose the ten voices you think should be represented and explain your reasoning. Then answer the harder question: Who did you leave out, and what could go wrong because they are missing?

Finally, connect your answer to Chapter 1's discussion of global governance and the question: Who gets to write the rules?

3: Can You Be Global Without Becoming the Same?

Consider something cultural that has traveled across borders: a food, fashion trend, television format, sport, religious practice, dance, musical genre, beauty standard, meme, holiday tradition, or another example. Do not simply describe where it came from. Instead, consider what happened to it after it traveled. Did people preserve it? Modify it?Commercialize it? Mix it with something else? Argue about its authenticity? Reject it? Claim it as their own?

Then answer: Does globalization make cultures more alike, or does it sometimes create more cultural variation? Your response should use glocalization or cultural hybridization, but your example should be different from those used in the chapter.

Peer response: Find someone whose example points toward the opposite conclusion from yours and explain whether the two cases can both be true.

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1.12: Assignments

Work on it

1: The Globalization Reality Check

The Question

How well does a popular claim about globalization hold up when we actually look for evidence?

For this assignment, find a claim about globalization in contemporary media, political discourse, advertising, social media, or popular culture.

Possible claims might include:

- “Made in America.”
- “The internet connects everyone.”
- “China makes everything.”
- “Remote work means location no longer matters.”
- “Globalization is dying.”
- “Free trade makes products cheaper.”
- “Social media created a global culture.”
- “Buying local avoids global supply chains.”

You may also identify your own.

Part 1: Capture the Claim

Provide the quotation, headline, advertisement, post, or statement. Explain what the claim seems to suggest about how the world works.

Part 2: Investigate It

Use at least three credible sources, including at least one data source or institutional source. Look for evidence that supports the claim, complicates it, or contradicts it.

Part 3: Give It a Global Studies Fact Check

Rate the original statement as:

- Mostly accurate
- Accurate but misleading
- Partly true
- Mostly wrong
- Impossible to answer without more context

Then defend the rating.

Part 4: Rewrite the Claim

Replace the original statement with a version that is more accurate without becoming unreadable.

Final Reflection

Answer: Why are simple stories about globalization so appealing when global systems are rarely simple?

Suggested length

900–1,100 words.

2: Rewrite the Rules

Scenario

You have been invited to redesign one feature of a global institution.

Choose one:

- United Nations
- UN Security Council
- International Monetary Fund
- World Bank
- World Trade Organization
- NATO
- European Union
- another major international institution approved by the instructor

You are not writing a report explaining what the organization does. Instead, assume the institution already exists and ask: What is one important feature of its rules or decision-making structure that you would change?

Part 1: Find the Rule

Identify one specific institutional feature.

Examples might include: voting power; veto authority; membership; representation; leadership selection; lending conditions; dispute settlement; decision-making procedures; or another significant feature.

Explain how it currently works using credible sources.

Part 2: Who Benefits From the Current Arrangement?

Identify at least two actors who benefit from the existing arrangement and at least two who may have less influence.

Avoid assuming that every institution simply divides into obvious “winners” and “losers.”

Part 3: Rewrite It

Propose one concrete reform.

Don't just say “Make it fairer.” Explain exactly what changes.

Part 4: The Unintended Consequence

Every reform produces tradeoffs. Identify at least one serious problem your own proposal could create.

Part 5: Make the Case

Conclude with: Is your reform still worth doing? Why?

Suggested format

1,000–1,250-word policy brief.

3: Globalization Field Notes - Find It Without Leaving Home

Purpose

Global Studies does not require getting on an airplane. For this assignment, spend approximately 45–60 minutes observing one ordinary public or commercial space available to you.

Possibilities include: a grocery store, shopping center, restaurant district, campus, public transit station, pharmacy, farmers' market, library, neighborhood commercial street; or another accessible location. You are not tracing one object as in the Chapter 1 activities. Instead, you are observing patterns.

Part 1: Observe

Record evidence of global connection that you notice. For example: languages, foods, brands, clothing, money-transfer services, religious symbols, imported products, international media, migration, technologies, advertisements, transportation, cultural mixing, or signs of global environmental awareness. Aim for at least ten observations. Photographs are optional and should not include identifiable people without permission.

Part 2: Sort the Evidence

Afterward, organize your observations into patterns. Which examples seem primarily: economic? cultural? political? social? environmental? Which refuse to fit into only one category?

Part 3: Find the Surprise

Choose the observation that surprised you most. Research enough to explain why it is there.

Part 4: Find What You Could Not See

Now consider what globalization in this space remained invisible. Could you see labor conditions? Migration histories? Ownership? Shipping routes? Environmental costs? Government policies? Digital infrastructure? Probably not. Explain why the visible evidence only tells part of the story.

Final Reflection

Answer: If someone walked through this place without a Global Studies lens, what would they fail to notice?

Suggested format

800–1,000 words plus field notes.

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1.13: Key Terms

Words to know

- **Area Studies:** An interdisciplinary approach focused on developing deep knowledge of a particular geographic or cultural region.
- **Centrifugal forces:** Political, economic, cultural, or social forces that contribute to fragmentation, separation, or weakening of shared institutions, identities, or relationships.
- **Centripetal forces:** Political, economic, cultural, or social forces that encourage integration, cooperation, common identity, or stronger connections.
- **Cosmopolitanism:** The idea that moral responsibilities and human community can extend beyond one's own nation or immediate political community.
- **Critical Global Political Economy:** An approach examining how markets, governments, corporations, laws, institutions, labor systems, and political power interact to shape the distribution of resources and wealth.
- **Cultural hybridization:** The creation of new cultural forms through mixing, adaptation, reinterpretation, and exchange among different cultural traditions.
- **Cultural imperialism:** An approach that examines how unequal political, economic, or media power can influence which cultural products, languages, values, and ideas circulate most widely.
- **Dependency Theory:** An approach that examines how unequal economic relationships can make less powerful economies dependent upon wealthier states, markets, technologies, or institutions.
- **Global citizenship:** An orientation toward living in an interconnected world that recognizes relationships and responsibilities extending beyond national borders.
- **Global Studies:** An interdisciplinary field that examines interconnected processes, systems, and relationships across multiple places, populations, institutions, and scales.
- **Globalization:** The acceleration and intensification of connections, interdependence, and exchange across borders and across distance.
- **Glocalization:** The process through which globally circulating products, practices, institutions, or ideas are adapted to particular local contexts.
- **Hyperglobalist perspective:** A perspective emphasizing the increasing power and importance of global markets, technologies, corporations, institutions, and networks, sometimes at the expense of state authority.
- **Interdependence:** A condition in which people, economies, governments, institutions, or systems depend upon and affect one another.
- **Interdisciplinary:** An approach that integrates insights from multiple disciplines and examines the relationships among them.
- **International Relations:** A field concerned primarily with relationships among states, governments, international organizations, and other actors in the international political system.
- **Intersectionality:** A framework for examining how different systems of social identity, inequality, and power interact rather than operating independently.
- **Liberal international order:** A term commonly used for the collection of post–World War II institutions, rules, alliances, and norms associated with international cooperation, relatively open trade, and rules-based relations among states.
- **Multidisciplinary:** An approach that brings perspectives from several disciplines to the same issue without necessarily integrating those perspectives.
- **Neoliberalism:** A broad political-economic orientation emphasizing markets, privatization, deregulation, trade liberalization, competition, and greater mobility for capital and investment.
- **Non-Aligned Movement:** A movement formally established during the Cold War through which states, many of them recently decolonized, sought greater political autonomy rather than formally aligning with either the United States-led or Soviet-led blocs.
- **Postcolonial Theory:** An approach examining how colonial histories continue to influence contemporary politics, economics, borders, culture, language, land, institutions, and systems of knowledge.
- **Skeptical perspective on globalization:** A perspective arguing that claims about globalization can be overstated and that states, borders, regions, and national institutions continue to play powerful roles.
- **Supranationalism:** An arrangement in which states voluntarily share some authority or decision-making through institutions operating above the national level.
- **Systems Thinking:** An approach that examines relationships, feedback loops, delays, ripple effects, and interdependence among parts of a larger system.

- **Time-space compression:** The changing experience of geographic distance as innovations in transportation and communication reduce the time required to move people, goods, money, or information.
- **Transdisciplinary:** An approach that moves across or beyond traditional academic disciplines to create more integrated ways of understanding a problem and may include knowledge from communities, practitioners, or other nonacademic sources.
- **Transformationalist perspective:** A perspective holding that globalization is substantially reshaping political, economic, and social life without simply eliminating states or national institutions.
- **Transnational:** Describes actors, relationships, movements, or processes that cross national borders without necessarily operating at a planetary scale.
- **World-Systems Theory:** An approach associated with Immanuel Wallerstein that understands the global economy as a historically unequal system commonly described through core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral positions.

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1.14: References

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2: SOCIO CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF GLOBALIZATION

What Happens When Culture Crosses Borders?



Figure 2.1: Street Food. Almost every culture has some, and it's some of the most unique in each. But one cultures street food is sometimes seen on high end menus in other countries. Is that fair? Lets get into it below. (Photo by Emerson Ward on Unsplash).

A song recorded in Seoul becomes the soundtrack to a teenager's afternoon in São Paulo. A family recipe carried across an ocean changes because one ingredient cannot be found in the new country, and, a generation later, the altered dish has become a cherished marker of family identity. A fashion designer draws on patterns rooted in a community thousands of miles away; a word moves from one language into another; a dance circulates through social media so rapidly that millions of people reproduce it without knowing where it began. Culture has always traveled, but globalization has transformed the speed, scale, visibility, and power relationships through which that movement occurs. The result is not a world in which cultural differences simply disappear. Globalization can produce similarity, certainly: the same brands, films, platforms, musical genres, architectural styles, and consumer habits now appear across extraordinarily different places. Yet the movement of culture rarely works as a straightforward process in which something leaves one society and arrives unchanged in another. People interpret what they encounter through local histories, languages, identities, memories, inequalities, and aspirations. They borrow selectively, reject strategically, combine unexpectedly, and sometimes transform an imported cultural form so substantially that it becomes difficult to describe it as either entirely "foreign" or entirely "local" (Appadurai, 1996; Pieterse, 2009).

Cultural Exchange and Cultural Tension

This is why culture offers one of the clearest windows into the contradictions of globalization. The same processes that allow communities separated by enormous distances to encounter one another can also intensify debates over ownership, authenticity, cultural preservation, and power. A cultural exchange that one person experiences as creative collaboration may be understood by another as appropriation. A global entertainment industry can expose audiences to languages and histories they might never otherwise encounter while, at the same time, concentrating extraordinary influence in a relatively small number of corporations and digital platforms. Migration can strengthen cultural traditions by carrying them into new communities even as displacement, assimilation pressures, or language loss threaten other forms of cultural knowledge.

These tensions matter because culture is not simply entertainment, food, clothing, or artistic expression. Culture helps people understand who they are, where they belong, how their communities remember the past, what they value, and how they interpret the world around them. It is expressed through physical objects and artistic practices, but it is also embedded in institutions, relationships, customs, languages, religious practices, social expectations, and systems of knowledge. When culture moves, therefore, ideas about identity and belonging move with it.

Chapter 1 introduced globalization as a network of economic, political, technological, environmental, and cultural relationships that increasingly connect people across borders. This chapter follows one part of that network more closely by asking a deceptively simple question: What actually happens when culture crosses borders?

Answering that question requires moving beyond the idea that cultural globalization is merely the spread of Western or American culture around the world. American cultural industries remain enormously influential, but the contemporary cultural landscape is far more multidirectional. Korean popular music and television circulate globally; Japanese anime has shaped visual cultures far beyond Japan; Nigerian Afrobeats moves through clubs and streaming platforms across continents; Indian cinema and fashion operate through vast transnational audiences; Latin American music regularly reshapes global popular culture; Turkish television dramas reach audiences across multiple regions; and migrants, diasporas, Indigenous communities, artists, influencers, and ordinary social-media users continuously produce cultural connections that cannot be reduced to a single center and a passive periphery.

The more useful question, then, is not simply where does culture come from? It is also: Who has the power to circulate it, who changes it, who profits from it, whose version becomes visible, and whose contribution disappears from the story?

Throughout this chapter, we will move from the basic mechanics of cultural diffusion toward the more complicated processes of adaptation, hybridization, glocalization, appropriation, resistance, preservation, and cultural sovereignty. We will examine the ways migration carries culture across borders, the growing power of digital platforms and algorithms to determine what becomes globally visible, and the tension between celebrating cultural exchange and recognizing the inequalities that can shape it. Food, music, fashion, language, popular culture, and Indigenous knowledge will help us see that globalization does not simply connect cultures. It continually renegotiates the boundaries between them.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- explain culture as a dynamic system of material practices, social relationships, beliefs, values, institutions, and knowledge rather than as a fixed collection of traditions
- identify major forms of cultural diffusion and explain how migration, trade, media, technology, and global institutions facilitate cultural movement
- distinguish among cultural diffusion, glocalization, hybridization, cultural homogenization, and cultural imperialism
- analyze the relationship between globalization and identity, including the ways diaspora communities negotiate belonging across multiple cultural contexts
- evaluate how economic and political power influence which cultural forms gain global visibility and which are marginalized
- analyze the role of digital platforms, streaming services, recommendation systems, and social media in accelerating and reshaping cultural exchange;
- examine debates surrounding cultural appropriation, appreciation, ownership, authenticity, and commercialization
- explain why Indigenous knowledge, language, heritage, and cultural sovereignty complicate the assumption that cultural circulation is always beneficial
- assess whether contemporary globalization is producing a single global culture or a more complex landscape of cultural convergence, difference, and hybridity.

By the end of the chapter, the question may no longer be whether a global culture exists. A more interesting question is what kind of global culture is being created, whose voices participate in creating it, and whether increased connection necessarily produces greater cultural equality.



Figure 2.2: Culture Does Not Sit Still. Global culture moves through migration, tourism, commerce, media, food, fashion, language, and everyday urban life. Places such as Seoul's Myeongdong district reveal how local identities and global influences continually meet, overlap, and reshape one another. (Photo by Harry Angara on Unsplash).

2.1: Culture in a Global Context
2.2: How Culture Travels
2.3: When the Global Meets the Local
2.4: Global Culture?
2.5: Culture in Your Feed
2.6: Whose Culture Is It Anyway?
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2.1: Culture in a Global Context

What is Culture Anyway?

We use the word culture so casually that its complexity can be easy to overlook. We describe food as cultural, speak of workplace culture, identify cultural traditions, debate popular culture, and sometimes use culture almost as a synonym for nationality or ethnicity. Yet culture encompasses far more than the visible practices through which a group is recognized from the outside.

At its broadest, culture refers to the learned and shared systems through which people create meaning and organize social life. It includes languages, beliefs, values, norms, rituals, artistic practices, religious traditions, foodways, clothing, music, stories, and forms of knowledge; it also includes less immediately visible assumptions about family, authority, gender, time, education, community, morality, success, nature, and belonging. Anthropologists have long emphasized that culture is learned rather than biologically inherited and that it provides systems of meaning through which people interpret social life. Globalization scholars add another crucial insight: cultures are not self-contained units but are continually shaped by encounters, movement, media, markets, migration, and imagination across borders (Appadurai, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999).

This last point is especially important. Cultures are not sealed containers, nor are individuals simply representatives of neatly bounded cultural groups. Every society contains differences of generation, region, religion, gender, class, race, ethnicity, political perspective, language, and personal experience. Cultural practices change as people migrate, encounter new technologies, form relationships, respond to political events, participate in markets, or deliberately challenge inherited expectations. What we call “tradition” may itself be the product of centuries of earlier exchange. For that reason, it is often more useful to think of culture as an ongoing process of meaning-making than as an inventory of customs.

Artifacts, Sociofacts, and Mentifacts

One traditional way of introducing cultural analysis divides culture into three interconnected categories: artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts. The categories are imperfect, they overlap constantly, but they help us see how cultural systems operate at multiple levels.

Artifacts are the material expressions of culture: objects that people create, use, wear, build, exchange, preserve, or display. Clothing, architecture, tools, paintings, religious objects, musical instruments, books, jewelry, smartphones, and food can all function as cultural artifacts. Yet objects do not possess meaning independently of the societies that produce and interpret them. A piece of cloth may simultaneously function as clothing, a marker of social status, evidence of artistic knowledge, a religious symbol, a family heirloom, an economic commodity, and an expression of political identity. When that same object crosses borders, its meaning may change again.

Consider something as familiar as denim jeans. Their history links cotton production, industrialization, labor, mining, global manufacturing, youth rebellion, fashion marketing, and transnational consumer culture. Today jeans may be interpreted as ordinary clothing in one setting, fashionable luxury in another, a symbol of Westernization somewhere else, or simply a practical garment with little conscious cultural meaning at all. An artifact, therefore, can reveal global connections precisely because its significance is never reducible to the object itself.

Sociofacts are the structures, institutions, and patterns of social relationships through which people organize collective life. Families, schools, governments, religious institutions, marriage practices, legal systems, economic relationships, political organizations, and systems of social hierarchy all contain cultural dimensions. Sociofacts matter because globalization does not circulate objects and entertainment alone. Ideas about education, childhood, work, family, citizenship, gender roles, professional behavior, governance, and even what counts as a successful life can move across borders as well.

Sometimes these exchanges occur voluntarily. Students studying abroad may adopt new academic practices; migrants may combine family expectations from different societies; organizations operating internationally may alter workplace norms to accommodate multiple cultural contexts. At other times, institutional practices travel through unequal relationships, including colonization, missionary activity, economic dependency, development programs, or international governance. Consequently, cultural globalization cannot be understood only by asking whether people around the world watch the same television programs or buy the same products. We must also ask whether institutions and social expectations are becoming more similar, whose models are treated as universal, and what happens when imported social practices encounter local systems of authority and

meaning.

Mentifacts are the ideas, beliefs, values, symbols, and systems of knowledge that shape how people interpret reality. Religious beliefs, political ideals, ethical systems, concepts of beauty, understandings of gender, historical memory, attitudes toward nature, and beliefs about individual and collective responsibility all fall within this broad category.

Mentifacts are particularly important because their movement is often less visible than the movement of physical goods. An imported product can be photographed and counted. An idea may gradually enter public discourse, become incorporated into education, influence law, or change how a younger generation interprets identity without an obvious moment of arrival. Ideas such as democracy, nationalism, human rights, consumerism, feminism, environmentalism, racial hierarchy, religious revivalism, and individualism have all traveled across borders, but none has simply reproduced itself identically everywhere. Each has been interpreted through existing cultural and historical circumstances.

Appadurai's work on global cultural flows is especially useful here because it emphasizes that ideas, media, technologies, finance, and people move through overlapping but uneven transnational landscapes rather than through one coherent process of cultural transmission (Appadurai, 1996). This process of reinterpretation is one reason global cultural exchange produces such unpredictable outcomes. The movement of an idea does not guarantee agreement with it, and exposure does not necessarily produce assimilation. Communities may embrace some elements of an incoming cultural form while rejecting others, combine them with existing practices, or deliberately mobilize local traditions in resistance.

Culture Is Learned, Shared, and Contested

Culture is learned through socialization: through families, schools, religious communities, friendships, media, workplaces, neighborhoods, and the countless interactions through which people come to understand what is considered ordinary, desirable, respectful, forbidden, beautiful, embarrassing, sacred, or valuable. Yet describing culture as "shared" should not imply universal agreement.

Every society contains arguments over culture. Generations disagree about tradition. Communities debate language, religion, gender, clothing, sexuality, education, art, historical memory, and national identity. Migrants may feel pressure to preserve practices that relatives in their countries of origin are themselves changing. Governments may attempt to define an "authentic" national culture even when the population is linguistically, ethnically, or religiously diverse. Communities whose cultural practices were once stigmatized may later watch those same practices become commercially fashionable when adopted by more powerful groups.

Culture, in other words, is both something people inherit and something they continually negotiate. Globalization intensifies that negotiation because people encounter more cultural influences, more rapidly and through more channels, than at almost any previous point in human history. Tomlinson (1999) argues that globalization transforms the relationship between culture and locality, loosening the assumption that cultural experience is necessarily contained within a single geographic territory.

Some encounters are deeply transformative. Others are fleeting. Some produce admiration, collaboration, or creative experimentation. Others generate anxiety, exclusion, backlash, or deliberate efforts at preservation. Before we can understand those consequences, however, we first need to understand **how culture moves**. That is the subject of the next section: cultural diffusion.

Think About It!

Look around the space you are in right now and identify three objects, practices, ideas, or technologies that connect you to places beyond your immediate community. For each one, consider: Where did it originate? How did it reach you? Has its meaning or use changed along the way? You may discover that answering even those three questions is considerably harder than identifying an object's country of origin. That difficulty is precisely where the study of cultural globalization begins.

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2.2: How Culture Travels

Cultural Diffusion

Culture has never stayed put. Long before social media, streaming platforms, commercial aviation, or container shipping, people carried languages, beliefs, technologies, recipes, musical traditions, religious practices, clothing styles, and social customs across enormous distances. Traders crossed deserts and seas. Empires expanded and contracted. Pilgrims moved between sacred sites. Armies conquered new territories. Enslaved people were forcibly displaced. Scholars traveled between intellectual centers. Migrants rebuilt communities far from home. Families adapted familiar traditions to unfamiliar surroundings.

What has changed under contemporary globalization is not the existence of cultural movement but its speed, density, reach, and complexity. Today, a cultural form can circulate through several channels at once. A musical style may travel through migration, become commercialized by a global record label, spread through a streaming platform, be remixed by artists in another country, and then return to its place of origin in a transformed version. A religious practice may move with a diaspora community while also being discussed online by people who have never visited the community that developed it. A fashion trend may be inspired by a local tradition, reproduced by a multinational corporation, debated on social media, and eventually reclaimed by the people whose cultural practice helped inspire it. Culture does not simply move from Point A to Point B. It travels through networks.

Geographers and cultural scholars often use the term cultural diffusion to describe the spread of cultural practices, ideas, technologies, symbols, or institutions from one place or population to another. The concept belongs to a broader family of diffusion theories concerned with the ways innovations and practices move through social systems. Everett Rogers's influential work on the diffusion of innovations, although developed primarily to analyze how innovations are adopted, similarly emphasizes the importance of communication networks, social relationships, time, and context in explaining why some innovations spread rapidly while others do not (Rogers, 2003). For cultural globalization, diffusion gives us a useful starting vocabulary. But the word *spread* can make movement sound smoother and more neutral than it actually is. Culture may travel through migration, commerce, curiosity, coercion, conquest, institutional power, media, or technology. Those routes matter.

Cultural Hearths: Where Does a Cultural Practice Begin?

A cultural hearth is a place associated with the development or early concentration of a cultural practice, technology, belief system, or social innovation. The idea can be useful. It should also be handled carefully. Human history is rarely neat enough to give every cultural practice a single birthplace. Innovations often emerge through contact among multiple communities, and practices may develop independently in different places. Even when historians can identify an early center, later versions may have been altered so dramatically that tracing a straight line from "origin" to "destination" obscures more than it reveals.

Still, thinking about cultural hearths helps us ask an important Global Studies question: Why do certain places become unusually influential in the production and circulation of culture?

Historically, major trade routes, imperial capitals, religious centers, port cities, universities, and densely populated commercial regions often functioned as cultural crossroads. Baghdad during the Abbasid period, Timbuktu as a center of scholarship and trade, Constantinople at the intersection of Europe and Asia, and cities such as Cairo, Venice, Delhi, Guangzhou, and Samarkand all became sites where languages, goods, ideas, artistic practices, scientific knowledge, and religious traditions interacted. Contemporary cultural hearths operate differently, but geography still matters. Seoul has become a major center for music, television, beauty, and fashion industries. Lagos has become globally influential in music, film, and visual culture. Mumbai remains a powerful center of cinema and popular culture. Los Angeles continues to exert enormous influence through film, music, entertainment, and celebrity industries. Tokyo has long shaped global design, gaming, animation, fashion, and consumer culture. Istanbul, Mexico City, São Paulo, Bangkok, Johannesburg, Dubai, Beirut, and countless other cities participate in cultural production that crosses national borders.

Increasingly, however, cultural hearths are not only physical places. A gaming community, fan network, diaspora social-media account, Discord server, streaming platform, or online creative collective can also function as a site where new cultural forms emerge and circulate. Globalization has not eliminated geography. It has layered digital spaces onto physical ones.

Relocation Diffusion: Culture Moves Because People Move

One of the oldest and most important forms of cultural movement is relocation diffusion: culture spreads when people themselves move from one place to another. Migration is therefore one of the central engines of cultural globalization. Transnational migration scholarship emphasizes that migrants often sustain economic, cultural, social, political, and family relationships that cross state borders rather than simply leaving one society and assimilating completely into another (Vertovec, 2009).

When people migrate, they rarely leave culture behind. They carry language, religion, food, music, family expectations, celebrations, political ideas, memories, habits, and forms of social organization. Some practices are deliberately preserved. Others change quickly because the surrounding environment changes. A migrant family may substitute ingredients in a traditional recipe because familiar foods are unavailable. Children may speak one language at school and another at home. Religious communities may alter worship schedules to fit work patterns in a new country. Clothing may change in response to climate, social expectations, or professional norms. A holiday that once passed almost unnoticed may become more important in diaspora because celebrating it helps maintain a sense of collective identity.

This is one of globalization's recurring paradoxes: distance can sometimes strengthen cultural attachment. Practices that felt ordinary in a country of origin may become symbols of belonging once people live elsewhere. Food, music, clothing, religious ceremonies, festivals, and language can take on heightened emotional significance because they connect migrants to family histories, memories, or imagined homelands.

At the same time, diaspora cultures are rarely frozen copies of the places migrants left behind. They are shaped by new surroundings, new generations, intercultural relationships, political conditions, and contact with other communities. That means relocation diffusion often produces something more complicated than preservation. It produces new cultural forms.

Contagious Diffusion: Culture Spreads Through Contact

Contagious diffusion occurs when a cultural practice spreads broadly through direct interaction, often moving from person to person without depending primarily on formal institutions or social hierarchies. Historically, contagious diffusion could occur through marketplaces, neighborhoods, trade routes, military contact, religious gatherings, schools, festivals, or interpersonal relationships. Today, digital technologies have dramatically accelerated this process.

A dance challenge can spread through millions of users in a matter of days. A slang term can move from a relatively small community into global popular usage. A recipe can circulate through short-form video platforms and suddenly appear in restaurants half a world away. Memes, jokes, aesthetic styles, political slogans, beauty trends, and musical fragments can reproduce themselves across networks faster than researchers can document them.

Yet digital diffusion creates a strange problem. The faster culture travels, the easier it becomes to lose track of where it came from. Users may encounter a hairstyle, phrase, musical sample, fashion practice, or dance only after it has been reposted hundreds of times. The cultural originator disappears behind the circulation of the content itself. That raises questions traditional diffusion models did not fully anticipate: Who gets credit? Who gets paid? Who becomes visible? Who is treated as innovative, and who is treated merely as the source material?

Hierarchical Diffusion: Culture Travels Through Power and Influence

Not all cultural forms spread evenly through populations. Hierarchical diffusion occurs when a cultural practice moves through influential individuals, institutions, cities, or social groups before reaching a wider population.

Fashion offers an obvious example. A style may emerge in a small creative community, be adopted by celebrities or designers, appear in major media outlets, and then be reproduced by mass-market retailers. In other cases, trends move in the opposite direction: practices originating in working-class, youth, racialized, Indigenous, migrant, or underground communities are adopted by elite institutions and later presented to broader audiences as fashionable or innovative.

Hierarchical diffusion reminds us that cultural circulation is rarely separate from status and power. Celebrities, governments, corporations, universities, media organizations, religious institutions, and political movements can all amplify certain cultural forms. Platforms add another layer. Recommendation systems on TikTok, YouTube, Spotify, Netflix, Instagram, and other services now help determine which cultural products become visible to huge audiences. These systems do not merely reflect popularity. They participate in creating it. A song does not need to travel physically from city to city if an algorithm places it in front of

millions of listeners overnight.

This raises a distinctly contemporary question: Is algorithmic visibility a new form of cultural hierarchy?

Stimulus Diffusion: The Idea Travels, Even When the Form Does Not

Another useful concept is stimulus diffusion, which occurs when the underlying idea or principle behind a cultural practice spreads even though the original form is not copied directly. This type of diffusion may be one of the best ways to understand contemporary cultural globalization.

A society may encounter an unfamiliar cultural practice, borrow certain elements, reject others, and produce something that looks quite different from the original. Fast-food companies provide simple examples. Global restaurant brands regularly modify menus to fit local religious practices, dietary preferences, tastes, and expectations. The basic business model may travel globally while the actual food becomes localized.

But stimulus diffusion extends well beyond commercial brands. Musicians borrow production techniques rather than entire songs. Designers incorporate silhouettes, materials, or methods into new styles. Activists adopt protest tactics developed elsewhere while adapting messages to local political conditions. Educators borrow institutional models and transform them to fit local systems. Religious movements may adopt technologies or organizational strategies without adopting the beliefs associated with the societies where those technologies developed.

The result is neither pure imitation nor complete independence. It is adaptation.



Figure 2.2.1: Culture Moves Through Networks. Markets are not simply places where goods change hands. They are spaces where languages, tastes, clothing, technologies, religious practices, fashions, and ideas encounter one another. Cultural diffusion often occurs through exactly these ordinary networks of movement and exchange. (Photo by Zoshua Colah on Unsplash).

Diffusion Is Not the Same as Acceptance

One of the most important misconceptions about cultural diffusion is that exposure automatically leads to adoption. It does not. People reject cultural influences all the time. Governments ban media, regulate clothing, restrict religious practices, censor online platforms, or promote official languages in response to perceived foreign influence. Parents and younger generations argue about changing social norms. Political movements mobilize around the defense of “traditional values.” Communities may resist commercial development or tourism because they fear loss of cultural heritage. Language revitalization movements deliberately push back against dominant languages.

Culture does not spread across an empty surface. It encounters people with their own histories, institutions, beliefs, inequalities, and interests. Appadurai’s (1996) model of overlapping global flows is useful precisely because cultural movement does not produce a single predictable outcome.

This means the study of cultural diffusion ultimately leads us toward a more complicated idea: Globalization does not merely spread culture. It creates encounters. And encounters produce negotiation.

Who Gets to Travel?

There is another reason we should be cautious about describing culture as though it simply flows freely around the planet. People do not. A wealthy tourist may cross borders easily while a refugee faces detention. An international student may have access to educational mobility unavailable to someone with the same academic ability but a different passport. Artists from some countries can tour internationally with relative ease, while others encounter expensive visas, travel restrictions, currency barriers, or political scrutiny. These inequalities shape cultural globalization. Digital technology partly disrupts this inequality. A musician may reach an international audience without leaving home. A writer can publish globally. A crafts cooperative can market products online. Migrants can maintain daily contact with relatives across continents. But digital access creates its own hierarchies, including unequal internet infrastructure, language dominance, censorship, surveillance, platform regulation, and unequal access to devices and payment systems.

So even when culture appears to move freely, it is worth asking: What infrastructure made that movement possible? Who controlled the route? Who was excluded from it?

A Useful Model, But Not the Whole Story

The language of relocation, contagious, hierarchical, and stimulus diffusion gives us a useful starting point because it helps explain different pathways through which cultural practices move. But these categories should not tempt us into imagining that culture moves in predictable straight lines. Imagine a music genre that begins in one city. Migrants carry it abroad through relocation diffusion. Friends and fan communities spread it through contagious diffusion. Famous performers and record companies amplify it through hierarchical diffusion. Musicians elsewhere adopt some of its techniques while producing a new sound through stimulus diffusion. Streaming platforms then recommend all of these versions globally, while fans debate who deserves credit and whether the new versions still belong to the original cultural tradition.

By the time the genre has become “global,” asking where it belongs may no longer produce a simple answer. That is precisely where the next stage of cultural globalization begins. Because once cultures meet, people do not simply choose between “foreign” and “local.” They mix them. They reinterpret them. They argue about them. And sometimes they create something entirely new. That brings us to glocalization and cultural hybridity.

Think about it!

Choose one cultural practice you encounter regularly such as a musical genre, clothing style, food, television program, religious practice, beauty trend, slang term, sport, meme, or social-media trend, and trace its journey. Was it carried by migration? Spread through direct contact? Amplified by a celebrity or corporation? Recommended by an algorithm? Adapted into a local form? Then ask the harder question: At what point does a cultural practice stop being “borrowed” and become part of somewhere else?

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2.3: When the Global Meets the Local

Glocalization, Hybridity, and the Myth of Cultural Purity

If cultural diffusion were the whole story, globalization would be relatively easy to explain: ideas, products, and practices would begin in one place, travel elsewhere, and gradually spread. But cultures rarely behave that neatly. When people encounter something new, they do not simply absorb it unchanged. They interpret it through what they already know, adapt it to local expectations, combine it with existing traditions, reject parts of it, and sometimes transform it so completely that the result no longer belongs comfortably to a single place. This process is one of the most important features of cultural globalization. It is also why the idea of a perfectly "pure" culture becomes difficult to defend once we look closely at history. Languages borrow words. Religions absorb local customs. Foods change when ingredients, climates, and tastes change. Music evolves through contact among different communities. Clothing incorporates technologies and aesthetics that may have traveled across several continents. Even traditions that appear ancient and fixed may reflect centuries of migration, trade, conquest, intermarriage, adaptation, and exchange. As Pieterse (1994, 2009) argues, globalization is not simply a process of homogenization. It also produces hybridization: new cultural combinations that emerge through contact among previously separated or differently positioned cultural forms. Culture is not a museum display sealed behind glass. It is a conversation. And globalization makes that conversation louder, faster, more visible, and sometimes more contentious.

Glocalization: Global Forms, Local Meanings

One of the most useful concepts for understanding this process is glocalization. The term combines *globalization* and *localization*. It refers to the way global ideas, products, institutions, or cultural forms are adapted to fit local contexts. Sociologist Roland Robertson used the concept to challenge the assumption that the global and the local operate as opposites. Globalization, in his account, frequently involves the production and reconstruction of locality itself (Robertson, 1992, 2012). A global form enters a particular place, but it does not remain exactly what it was. Take global restaurant chains. A company may operate in dozens of countries under the same brand, but its menus often vary substantially. Religious dietary practices, local tastes, ingredient availability, cultural preferences, and national food traditions all shape what is sold. The corporate structure is global. The experience is localized.

The same process appears in entertainment, education, fashion, politics, religion, and media. A television format may be licensed globally but rewritten around local humor, social expectations, and political sensitivities. A global fashion trend may be adapted to local modesty norms or climate. International universities may adopt similar degree structures while preserving distinct classroom cultures. A political slogan that emerged in one national context may be borrowed elsewhere but reinterpreted around a completely different history. Glocalization therefore reminds us that globalization is not simply something that happens *to* local cultures. Local actors actively shape what globalization becomes. That agency matters.

Hybridity: When Categories Stop Behaving

Closely related to glocalization is cultural hybridity. Hybridity refers to the creation of cultural forms that combine influences from different traditions, regions, or histories in ways that produce something new.

A hybrid cultural form is not merely a copy of one culture layered awkwardly on top of another. It may emerge through long-term interaction, migration, colonization, trade, intermarriage, artistic experimentation, or popular creativity. Music provides countless examples. Entire genres have emerged from the meeting of musical traditions, technologies, languages, and diasporic communities. Food does the same thing. So does architecture. So does language.

Hybridity is visible whenever a cultural form cannot be understood adequately by asking which single nation or group "owns" it. That can make people uncomfortable. We often prefer clean categories because they make identity easier to explain. We call something Indian, Korean, Nigerian, Mexican, French, Arab, American, Indigenous, or European as though those labels describe completely separate cultural systems. But cultures are rarely so tidy. A person may grow up speaking several languages, eating foods associated with multiple traditions, listening to music produced across continents, practicing a religion shaped by both local and transnational influences, and identifying simultaneously with a neighborhood, ethnic group, nationality, diaspora, profession, generation, and online community. Globalization does not necessarily erase identity. It often multiplies it.

Translation, Not Photocopying

Cultural globalization is often described as though somebody presses “send” in one country and an identical cultural package appears somewhere else.

That is rarely what happens.

Culture is translated as it travels. People encounter a song, recipe, television format, religious practice, fashion, technology, or sport through the histories and expectations they already possess. They keep some parts, alter others, mix them with local practices, argue about them, commercialize them, reject them, or turn them into something the original creators never anticipated.

What arrives may therefore be recognizably global without being culturally identical.

That is the difference between circulation and copying.

The Myth of Cultural Purity

Discussions of globalization frequently invoke the language of cultural loss. Sometimes that concern is entirely justified. Languages disappear. Communities lose access to sacred sites. Commercial development can displace traditional practices. Dominant media industries can overwhelm smaller cultural producers. Colonial governments have deliberately suppressed Indigenous languages, religions, clothing, names, and systems of knowledge. Cultural preservation therefore matters. But preservation becomes more complicated when it relies on the assumption that authentic cultures are those that never change. Very few cultures meet that standard.

Consider food. Tomatoes are now so closely associated with Italian cuisine that imagining Italian food without them feels strange, yet tomatoes originated in the Americas. Chili peppers became deeply integrated into cuisines across South Asia, Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Africa after arriving from the Americas through early modern global trade. Potatoes transformed diets across Europe and beyond. Coffee traveled from East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula into a global commodity and social ritual. Tea moved through trade, empire, taxation, labor, and colonial agriculture before becoming embedded in national traditions far from its earliest cultivation. What we now treat as traditional cuisine is often the historical result of globalization. That does not make the traditions less meaningful. It makes their histories more interesting.

Diaspora: Belonging Across Borders

A **diaspora** is a population dispersed from a place of origin that maintains some form of connection (real, imagined, historical, emotional, political, religious, or cultural) to that place. Modern transnationalism scholarship similarly challenges the assumption that migration simply transfers people from one self-contained national society into another (Vertovec, 2009). Diasporas challenge the assumption that culture and territory fit neatly together. A person can participate in a national culture without living in the nation associated with it. A community can maintain language, cuisine, religion, music, political interests, and family networks across several countries at once. Second- or third-generation members of a diaspora may feel deep attachment to a place they have never lived. At the same time, diaspora identity is rarely a simple continuation of an original culture. Living elsewhere changes it. A Sikh community in California, a Senegalese community in Paris, a Filipino community in Dubai, an Armenian community in Los Angeles, or a Chinese community in Peru develops within a particular local environment. Its traditions are shaped by host-country law, education, labor markets, racial categories, neighboring communities, generational change, and relations with the country of origin. The result may be a form of identity that is simultaneously rooted and mobile. This can create tension. People in diaspora are sometimes accused of being “not authentic enough” by those in the country of origin while also being treated as foreign in the society where they live. That creates a difficult question: How many generations does it take before a culture becomes local?

Authenticity: Who Gets to Decide?

Few words create more trouble in cultural globalization than authentic. We use authenticity to describe food, clothing, music, art, religious practices, tourism experiences, and even people. But authenticity is rarely neutral. Suppose a restaurant changes a traditional dish to appeal to local tastes. Is it less authentic? What if the change was made by immigrants from the culture itself? What if the dish developed in diaspora and does not exist in exactly the same form in the country of origin? What if

tourists demand a more “traditional” version of a cultural performance than local people actually practice in daily life? What if a younger generation deliberately transforms a tradition because they want it to reflect contemporary identity? Authenticity is often treated as though it were an objective fact. In practice, it is frequently a claim about authority. Someone is deciding which version counts. That someone may be a community elder, scholar, government, museum, restaurant critic, tourist, religious leader, brand, influencer, or member of a diaspora. And those actors may disagree. This does not mean authenticity is meaningless. Communities have legitimate reasons to protect cultural practices from distortion, exploitation, or misrepresentation. But authenticity should be approached as a question rather than a label: Authentic to whom, under what circumstances, and according to whose authority?

Hybridity Is Not Always Equal

It can be tempting to celebrate hybridity as evidence that globalization brings people together. Sometimes it does. Creative exchange can generate extraordinary art, music, food, language, fashion, and new forms of identity. But not every cultural mixture occurs under equal conditions. Colonialism produced hybrid cultures. Colonialism was not an equal exchange. Enslaved people created extraordinary cultural forms under conditions of forced displacement. Indigenous communities sometimes adopted elements of colonial religions or languages because refusing them was dangerous or impossible. Migrants may alter names, clothing, accents, or religious practices in response to discrimination. A corporation may borrow imagery from a marginalized community and earn millions from it while the community itself receives neither credit nor compensation. Pieterse’s hybridity framework helps us recognize mixture, but mixture alone does not tell us whether the process was just (Pieterse, 1994). Hybridity tells us that cultures mix. It does not tell us whether the mixing was fair. For that, we have to study power.

Cultural Homogenization: Is the World Becoming the Same?

One of the oldest fears about globalization is cultural homogenization, the idea that distinctive local cultures will gradually disappear as the same consumer goods, media, languages, and lifestyles spread around the world. There is evidence supporting this concern. Global cities can begin to look surprisingly similar. International brands appear in airports, malls, and shopping districts across continents. English dominates large portions of international business, science, higher education, aviation, and digital communication. Global entertainment companies distribute the same films, television programs, music, and celebrity culture to enormous audiences.

Yet homogenization has never been complete. The same product may carry different meanings in different places. Global brands are localized. Consumers reinterpret media. Local artists respond to global forms. Governments defend cultural industries. Minority communities revive languages. Young people combine global influences with intensely local identities. Robertson’s glocalization framework and Pieterse’s theory of hybridization both complicate the assumption that globalization simply replaces diversity with uniformity (Robertson, 2012; Pieterse, 2009). A teenager in Nairobi, Bogotá, Seoul, or Kuala Lumpur may use the same social-media platform while participating in entirely different linguistic, religious, political, and cultural worlds. Shared infrastructure does not automatically produce shared culture. Globalization may produce greater similarity at the level of platforms and products while simultaneously generating greater diversity at the level of interpretation and identity. Both processes can happen at once, or as I like to say, two things can be true att the same time.

So What Does the “Global” Actually Do?

The language of globalization sometimes makes the global sound like a force descending from above. But “the global” is produced through millions of local decisions. People decide what to borrow. Creators decide what to remix. Parents decide what traditions to teach their children. Governments decide which languages receive official status. Platforms decide which content to recommend. Consumers decide what to buy. Communities decide what they want to protect. Migrants decide what to preserve and what to change. Of course, those decisions are made under unequal conditions, and some actors possess far more power than others. But the global and the local are not opposites. They constantly produce one another. That is why globalization is less like a giant cultural blender and more like an ongoing negotiation in which people repeatedly decide what to adopt, resist, reinterpret, and claim as their own. And once we recognize that culture is being negotiated rather than merely transmitted, another question becomes unavoidable: Who has the power to make their version of culture global? That is where we turn next.

Think About It!

Choose something you consider culturally “authentic.” It might be a food, song, garment, holiday, religious practice, language, art form, or tradition. Investigate its history. Has it changed over time? Did any of its ingredients, materials, technologies, or ideas originate elsewhere? Have migrants or younger generations adapted it? Are there disagreements about what the authentic version should look like? Then consider: Does change make a tradition less authentic, or is change part of how traditions survive?

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2.4: Global Culture?

Who Gets to Define Global Culture?

Culture moves, mixes, mutates, and surprises us. But it does not move through a vacuum. Some languages travel farther because they are attached to powerful states, large markets, or global institutions. Some films reach hundreds of millions of viewers because they have massive distribution networks behind them. Some creators can turn a regional style into an international trend almost overnight because a platform, celebrity, record label, fashion house, or entertainment company amplifies it. Other communities produce extraordinary cultural work that remains largely invisible outside a local or diasporic audience.

This is where cultural globalization becomes inseparable from power. The question is no longer only how culture travels. It is also: Who gets the microphone? Who decides what becomes globally visible? Who is treated as sophisticated, modern, aspirational, or universal? Whose culture is labeled traditional, exotic, backward, niche, or ethnic? Who gets paid when cultural practices circulate? Who gets credit? Who gets translated, streamed, promoted, and exported—and who gets reduced to raw material for someone else's version of it?

These questions sit at the heart of debates over global communication because cultural exchange has always involved a tension between structure and agency: global media systems can privilege some producers over others, but audiences are not passive recipients and continually reinterpret what reaches them (Demont-Heinrich, 2011).



Figure 2.4.1: Culture Has Gatekeepers. Cultural globalization happens through markets as well as communities. Advertising, entertainment firms, media companies, fashion houses, and digital platforms possess very different capacities to make particular images and lifestyles visible across borders. Global visibility is therefore not the same thing as cultural neutrality. (Photo by Julien on Unsplash).

Cultural Imperialism: When Influence Becomes Dominance

One of the classic concepts used to describe unequal cultural power is cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism refers to the dominance of one society's cultural products, values, symbols, institutions, or media over others, especially when that influence reflects broader economic or political inequalities. Scholars have long used the concept to analyze the way powerful media systems can shape transnational cultural flows, even as more recent scholarship has complicated older models that treated audiences as simply absorbing whatever dominant media industries sent them (Demont-Heinrich, 2011).

The idea became particularly influential in debates about the spread of Western (and especially American) media, consumer culture, advertising, fast food, fashion, film, television, and popular music. At first glance, the argument seems obvious. Hollywood films have circulated globally for decades. American brands became symbols of modern consumer culture in many parts

of the world. English dominates important sectors of international business, higher education, science, aviation, and digital communication. This matters because culture does more than entertain. It carries assumptions about what a desirable life looks like. A film can normalize certain family structures, beauty standards, gender roles, forms of consumption, or ideas about freedom. An advertisement can make one lifestyle appear modern while another seems outdated. A language can become associated with professional advancement while a local language is treated as something useful mainly at home.

Cultural imperialism asks us to notice that these processes are not always reciprocal. But the concept has limits. It can imply that audiences are passive. They are not. People interpret media through local histories, languages, social norms, political contexts, and personal experience. They parody, reject, localize, remix, reinterpret, or simply ignore imported cultural products. That tension between structural inequality and audience agency is one reason cultural imperialism remains useful but insufficient as a complete explanation of global culture (Demont-Heinrich, 2011).

Americanization: Still Powerful, No Longer the Whole Story

For much of the twentieth century, discussions of cultural globalization often centered on Americanization, and there were good reasons for that. The United States developed extraordinary global influence through film, television, music, advertising, consumer brands, universities, technology firms, sports, and military and political power. For many people around the world, the visible face of globalization looked distinctly American: blue jeans, Coca-Cola, Hollywood, McDonald's, MTV, Nike, Disney, the English language, American universities, American internet companies, and American social media platforms.

That influence remains substantial. But if we stop there, we misunderstand the cultural world students actually inhabit. The contemporary global cultural landscape is far more multipolar. South Korean music and television have become globally influential. Japanese anime and gaming have shaped generations of audiences. Nigerian and Ghanaian music circulate through global streaming networks. Indian cinema reaches vast transnational publics. Latin American music repeatedly reshapes global popular culture. Turkish television dramas have developed enormous audiences across multiple regions.

Global cultural power is still unequal. It is just less simple than before.

Soft Power: When Culture Does Political Work

Culture can also function as a form of soft power. Political scientist Joseph Nye developed the concept to describe influence generated through attraction rather than coercion or payment: countries may gain international influence when others find their culture, values, institutions, or public image appealing. Soft power matters because governments understand that cultural influence can have political effects. A country whose music, films, universities, food, sports, language, or public image are widely admired may find it easier to attract tourists and international students, support exports, cultivate diplomatic relationships, or improve its reputation abroad. Yet soft power is not something governments can simply manufacture on command. A cultural product may become popular for reasons entirely unrelated to state policy, and audiences may admire a country's artists while strongly criticizing its government.

The Hallyu Effect: When Culture Becomes Strategy

South Korea offers one of the most widely studied examples of contemporary cultural soft power. The global spread of Korean music, television, film, beauty, food, and fashion is often described through the term Hallyu, or the Korean Wave. Scholars have examined Hallyu not simply as entertainment but as an important source of South Korean soft power and international image-building (Lee, 2009). Hallyu's rise cannot be explained as a government project alone. Its global success emerged from interactions among state cultural policy, private entertainment companies, artists, international fans, commercial markets, and digital platforms. Fans translate content, create fan accounts, organize events, learn Korean, remix dances, and form communities across national boundaries. Soft power does not travel only from governments to audiences. Audiences participate in producing it.

Q-Pop: When Global Influence Becomes Local Identity

In Kazakhstan, **Q-pop** emerged as a localized popular-music movement influenced in part by K-pop aesthetics, production systems, performance styles, and fan cultures while incorporating the Kazakh language and local cultural references. Studies describe Q-pop as a form of cultural glocalization in which international pop styles are adapted to Kazakh linguistic, social, and

cultural conditions rather than simply copied (Zholamanova & Oh, 2025). The genre is particularly associated with the group Ninety One, whose rise helped establish Q-pop as a recognizable cultural movement. Scholars have linked Q-pop to debates over youth culture, language, nationalism, identity, and post-Soviet cultural transformation (Danabayev & Park, 2020; Zholamanova & Oh, 2024). It reflects diffusion, glocalization, and hybridity, while also connecting cultural globalization to national identity. A cultural form influenced from abroad can sometimes reinforce local identity rather than weaken it. That is the opposite of what simplistic theories of cultural homogenization would predict.

Global Culture Is Not a One-Way Street

Older models of cultural globalization often looked something like Center → Periphery. Powerful countries produced culture. Everyone else consumed it. There is still truth in that model. Global entertainment markets remain highly concentrated. Large companies control distribution. English-language media enjoys enormous advantages. Wealthy countries possess greater resources for production and promotion. But contemporary global culture increasingly looks more like a network. A Nigerian musical style can shape a British artist. A Korean group can borrow from African American musical traditions. A Colombian artist can collaborate with a Puerto Rican producer and reach listeners around the world. A Japanese visual style can influence European animators. A Kazakh group can borrow Korean pop aesthetics while using those forms to strengthen Kazakh-language youth culture. It does not mean cultural exchange has become equal but it means inequality now operates inside a much more complicated web.

Global Platforms: The New Cultural Gatekeepers

Once upon a time, cultural gatekeeping was easier to identify. Editors decided what books were published. Studios decided what films were distributed. Record labels decided which musicians received contracts. Television networks decided which programs entered homes. Those gatekeepers still matter, but now platforms matter too. Streaming services and social-media platforms do not merely host cultural content. They organize visibility. Recommendation systems decide what appears next. Search rankings determine what gets found. Playlists can dramatically expand a song's audience. Language settings can widen or limit reach. Content-moderation rules can suppress or amplify particular forms of expression. Research increasingly treats recommender systems not simply as neutral technical tools but as cultural systems whose design assumptions and ranking practices can reproduce social and cultural bias (Gupta et al., 2022; Hamidy, 2024). These are cultural decisions disguised as technical ones.

Algorithmic Culture

Algorithms increasingly influence what people hear, watch, read, buy, and imitate. That means they also influence what people understand as popular. Suppose millions of users are shown the same song. The song becomes more popular. Because it is popular, the platform recommends it more often. Now popularity feeds itself. The algorithm is no longer simply measuring culture. It is helping structure cultural attention. This creates extraordinary opportunities. A musician recording from a bedroom can reach millions. A diaspora creator can speak directly to a global audience. A small-language community can build an international network. But the same systems can create new inequalities. Content in dominant languages may have advantages. Material that fits familiar commercial categories may be easier to recommend. The architecture of a platform can quietly influence the architecture of culture.

The Strange Life of "World Music"

Even our labels reveal power. Consider **world music**. It sounds inclusive. But music from the United States or Britain is rarely classified simply as "world music." It is pop, rock, hip-hop, country, or electronic. Meanwhile, music from Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East has often been grouped into one broad category that essentially means **music from somewhere else**. Some cultural products are treated as universal. Others are marked as culturally specific. Global Studies asks us to notice who gets to occupy the category of normal.

Who Gets Called Modern?

Cultural power also shapes ideas about modernity. For centuries, colonial and Eurocentric narratives treated Western societies as modern and others as traditional. The distinction provided ideological support for empire because, once one society was classified as advanced and another as backward, domination could be reframed as civilization or development. Similar

assumptions can persist in subtler forms. A glass skyscraper is treated as modern architecture. An Indigenous building method is treated as heritage. A Western business suit is interpreted as professional. Traditional clothing is interpreted as ceremonial. English is described as globally useful. A local language is described as culturally important. Notice the difference, one category is associated with the future, the other with preservation.

Cultural Resistance

People do not simply accept global cultural hierarchies. They resist them. Communities revive endangered languages. Artists deliberately use Indigenous or minority languages. Movements reclaim clothing once stigmatized under colonial rule. Museums face demands to return cultural objects. Creators refuse categories imposed by global markets. Parents establish heritage-language schools for diaspora children. Preservation does not always mean freezing culture, sometimes survival depends on reinvention.

Cultural Power Is Not Just About Countries

States are not the only actors that wield cultural power. Corporations do. Platforms do. Museums do. Universities do. Fashion houses do. Sports leagues do. Influencers do. Tourism industries do. Diaspora communities do. And sometimes a teenager with a phone unexpectedly does. Formal power and cultural influence do not always align. A smaller country can generate enormous cultural influence. A marginalized community can create a style that becomes globally dominant without gaining proportional economic power from it. A platform headquartered in one country can influence cultural visibility across the entire world.

The Cultural Power Test

When analyzing a cultural form, ask five questions: Who created it? Who amplified it? Who changed it? Who profited from it? Who received credit? Those answers are often different. And the distance between them tells us a great deal about power. That is where cultural exchange begins to blur into cultural extraction.And that brings us to another of globalization's most difficult questions: When does borrowing become appropriation?

Think About It!

Pick one globally popular cultural product and apply the Cultural Power Test. Are the people who created it, amplified it, profited from it, and received credit the same people? If not, what does the difference tell you about cultural power?

Ideas Travel Too: Religion, Ideology, and the Problem with Civilizational Boxes

Not everything that travels through globalization can be worn, eaten, streamed, or downloaded.

Ideas travel too.

Religions have moved across borders for thousands of years through migration, pilgrimage, trade, conquest, missionary activity, empire, diaspora, education, and now digital communication. Christianity emerged in the eastern Mediterranean before becoming a global religion. Buddhism moved from South Asia through trade and political networks across much of Asia. Islam spread across an enormous geographic space through merchants, migration, political expansion, scholarship, and religious communities. Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, Indigenous, and countless other religious traditions have similarly been reshaped as communities move and encounter new social environments.

Globalization therefore does not simply spread religions. It changes the contexts in which religions are practiced. A religious community in diaspora may become more deliberate about preserving traditions precisely because it is surrounded by different ones. Younger generations may blend religious practices with new national identities. Digital platforms now allow sermons, rituals, debates, religious education, and religious communities to circulate across borders almost instantly.

Political ideologies travel in similar ways. Liberalism, nationalism, socialism, communism, feminism, environmentalism, anti-colonialism, human rights, religious nationalism, and democracy have all crossed borders, although never as perfectly packaged exports. Ideas are translated, contested, adapted, resisted, and combined with local histories. Much like music or food, political

ideas become glocalized.

This makes one influential argument about culture especially worth examining.

In the 1990s, political scientist Samuel Huntington argued that major post-Cold War conflicts would increasingly occur along the boundaries of large cultural or "civilizational" groupings rather than primarily between competing political ideologies or economic systems (Huntington, 1993, 1996). His framework became enormously influential, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, because it seemed to offer a simple map for understanding conflict in a complicated world.

The simplicity is also the problem.

Civilizations are not internally uniform actors. "Islamic," "Western," "Hindu," "Sinic," or other enormous civilizational categories contain countries, languages, political movements, classes, ethnicities, religious interpretations, and individuals with profoundly different interests. Critics including Edward Said argued that treating civilizations as coherent blocs risks turning extraordinarily diverse populations into opposing camps and can make political conflict appear culturally inevitable when its causes may also involve colonial histories, territory, state power, inequality, economics, or strategic interests (Said, 2001).

Globalization gives us evidence for both cultural friction and cultural mixing. Religious nationalism can harden boundaries, while diaspora communities can create identities that cross them. Political movements can mobilize cultural difference, while artists, migrants, students, businesses, and families create relationships that make supposedly separate civilizations surprisingly difficult to separate.

That tension gives us a better question than whether civilizations are destined to clash:When does cultural difference become a source of conflict, and when do political actors make cultural difference into one?

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2.5: Culture in Your Feed

Algorithms, Influencers, and the New Global Street Corner

For most of human history, cultural exchange required movement through physical space. People met in ports, markets, religious centers, universities, neighborhoods, borderlands, cafés, and city streets. Now imagine compressing all of that into a screen you check before breakfast. Your feed may contain a Korean skincare routine, a Nigerian song, a Mexican recipe, a Palestinian embroidery tutorial, an American political meme, a Japanese fashion aesthetic, a Brazilian dance, and a creator in Jakarta explaining a trend that started somewhere else entirely. This looks like spontaneous global culture. It is not. What appears in your feed is shaped partly by the people you follow and partly by systems you cannot see: algorithms, advertising markets, recommendation engines, moderation rules, platform business models, creator strategies, national regulations, and enormous quantities of behavioral data. The result is one of the strangest cultural institutions humans have ever built. Billions of people now gather in digital spaces that feel personal but are privately owned, globally networked, commercially optimized, algorithmically organized, and culturally consequential. The street corner has gone global. But someone owns the street.



Figure 2.5.1: Culture in the Algorithmic Feed. Social-media platforms allow cultural forms to circulate globally at extraordinary speed, but what becomes visible is not determined by audiences alone. Algorithms, platform design, advertising systems, influencers, and corporate ownership help determine which cultural products are amplified and which remain difficult to find. (Photo by Swello on Unsplash)

That distinction matters. A cultural form can spread because millions of people genuinely enjoy it and because a platform's architecture rewards the kind of content it represents. Both can be true at once. Cultural popularity is real, but visibility is also engineered.

From Mass Media to Personalized Culture

For much of the twentieth century, mass media operated according to a relatively straightforward model. A newspaper printed one edition for thousands or millions of readers. A television network broadcast one schedule to everyone within its reach. A radio station selected a playlist and transmitted it outward. Audiences could choose among channels, publications, or stations, but within each of those spaces, large numbers of people generally encountered the same cultural material at roughly the same time. Media institutions decided what would appear, and audiences decided whether to watch, read, or listen.

Digital platforms changed that relationship dramatically. Instead of asking only, “What should we broadcast to everyone?” platforms increasingly ask, “What should we show you next?” The difference may sound minor, but it represents a major transformation in how culture circulates. Two people can open the same platform at the same moment and encounter almost entirely different cultural worlds. One person may see political commentary, cooking videos, and soccer highlights. Another may see beauty tutorials, K-pop performances, travel clips, and videos explaining obscure historical events. Neither feed is simply

a neutral sample of everything available. Each has been assembled through a combination of user behavior, platform design, commercial priorities, social networks, and algorithmic recommendation.

Research on the platformization of cultural production shows that platforms increasingly influence not only distribution but also how cultural products are produced, monetized, measured, and adapted (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Duffy et al., 2019). Every pause, click, replay, share, search, or scroll can potentially become another signal about what might hold your attention. Over time, the platform develops a constantly changing model of what it predicts you will watch next.

This produces a strange feedback loop. You train the algorithm through your behavior. The algorithm then structures what you encounter, which can influence what you become interested in, what you recognize, what you discuss, and eventually what you click on again. You train the algorithm. The algorithm also trains you.

Welcome to the Attention Economy

Human attention has economic value, which means that keeping people engaged has become one of the central goals of the digital platform economy. A platform generally benefits when you stay longer, scroll farther, watch another video, click another recommendation, or return several times during the day. The longer you remain, the more advertisements you may see, the more behavioral information can be gathered, and the more opportunities the platform has to refine predictions about what might keep you engaged in the future.

This creates what is often described as an attention economy: an environment in which companies, creators, advertisers, political organizations, and cultural producers compete for one of the most limited resources human beings possess. There are only twenty-four hours in a day, and only so much of that time can be spent watching, reading, listening, clicking, shopping, or reacting. Platforms therefore have strong incentives to identify material that can interrupt whatever you were doing and persuade you to remain.

That incentive matters culturally because the material most likely to circulate is not necessarily the material that is most accurate, thoughtful, beautiful, representative, educational, or socially valuable. It may simply be the material that keeps people watching. Anger can do that. Surprise can do that. Beauty can do it. Conflict, fear, humor, desire, controversy, novelty, and outrage can all become powerful tools for capturing attention. So can a cat falling dramatically off a sofa.

The important point is not that platforms intentionally make everything outrageous or trivial. Many serious, educational, creative, and socially valuable forms of cultural production circulate through digital platforms every day. The deeper issue is structural. When visibility is influenced by engagement, cultural producers learn that certain kinds of material are more likely to travel than others. The cultural logic of a platform therefore emerges partly from its economic logic.

The Algorithm Does Not “Know” What Is Good

People frequently talk about algorithms as though they possess taste. “The algorithm loved this song.” “The algorithm buried my video.” “The algorithm knows me too well.” The language makes algorithms sound almost human, as though a mysterious digital critic were sitting somewhere deciding whether a video is clever, a photograph is beautiful, or a song deserves to become popular.

That is not really what is happening. Algorithms do not listen to music the way humans do, laugh at jokes, experience beauty, understand religious symbolism, or decide that one cultural tradition deserves more recognition than another. They operate according to signals, classifications, predictions, and objectives created within particular technological and commercial systems. A recommendation system may respond to patterns such as whether people click on something, how long they watch it, whether they replay it, whether they share it, and what they do immediately afterward. These signals can become proxies for relevance or engagement even though they are not the same thing as artistic quality, social importance, truth, or cultural significance.

For cultural producers, this creates a new kind of uncertainty. Scholar Kelley Cotter describes influencers as participating in a “visibility game” in which creators attempt to interpret and respond to the rules encoded in platform algorithms (Cotter, 2019). Those rules are rarely completely visible. Creators watch their analytics, compare successful and unsuccessful posts, study changes in audience behavior, listen to other creators, and develop theories about what platforms might currently be rewarding.

Creators once adapted primarily to audiences, editors, producers, publishers, galleries, broadcasters, or other human gatekeepers. Those actors have certainly not disappeared. But cultural producers may now also adapt to the technological systems standing between themselves and their audiences. Visibility becomes something that must be continually negotiated

with both people and platforms.

When Culture Learns to Please the Algorithm

Imagine you are a musician. You discover that listeners frequently skip songs with long instrumental introductions, so you begin shortening the introduction. Then you notice that songs containing a memorable fifteen-second segment circulate particularly well through short-form video. Perhaps listeners use that segment for dances, comedy clips, transitions, or memes. When you write your next song, you may begin imagining that future moment of circulation before the song has even been released.

At that point, the platform has entered the creative process.

This influence extends far beyond music. Video creators adjust the opening seconds of their work because they know they have very little time to prevent viewers from scrolling away. Restaurants design visually dramatic dishes partly because photographs and videos circulate online. Cafés create walls, lighting, murals, and décor that photograph well. Tourist destinations build installations or viewing areas that encourage visitors to produce recognizable images. Fashion brands plan launches around influencer exposure and social-media timing. Publishers think about whether books will attract online communities. Political candidates learn to communicate through the formats, rhythms, and emotional styles favored by particular platforms.

None of this means that algorithms have completely taken over human creativity. Artists still experiment. Musicians still write strange songs. Directors still produce difficult films. People still create cultural material because they love it, because they have something to say, because they want to preserve a tradition, because they want to make people laugh, or because they simply enjoy making things. Yet the conditions surrounding cultural production have changed.

Researchers describe this transformation as the platformization of cultural production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2021). Platforms have become infrastructures through which cultural products are discovered, distributed, evaluated, monetized, and sometimes even conceived. Culture is still made by humans. Increasingly, however, humans make culture while imagining how machines will sort it.

The Rise of the Influencer

Few figures capture the cultural consequences of digital globalization as clearly as the influencer. Influencers occupy an unusual position somewhere between celebrity, entrepreneur, cultural producer, advertiser, friend, critic, salesperson, entertainer, and tour guide. They may become famous without ever appearing in a traditional film, television program, magazine, or recording contract. Their primary stage is the platform itself.

Crystal Abidin's research on internet celebrity shows how social media transformed ordinary users into highly visible cultural producers whose fame depends partly on sustained interaction and the strategic presentation of everyday life (Abidin, 2018). This presentation may look casual, but it often requires significant planning. The morning coffee, outfit, vacation, skincare routine, grocery trip, restaurant visit, family moment, or supposedly spontaneous recommendation can all become part of a carefully maintained public identity.

Influencers may specialize in beauty, travel, gaming, politics, books, parenting, food, education, fitness, finance, religion, fashion, comedy, or almost any other aspect of contemporary life. Their influence often comes from a sense of intimacy that traditional celebrity culture struggled to reproduce. Followers may encounter the same creator every day, hear personal stories, watch major life events unfold, exchange comments, and gradually develop the feeling that they know the person behind the account.

That intimacy is economically powerful because it can make commercial recommendations feel different from conventional advertising. Traditional advertisements usually announce themselves as advertising. Influencer culture often blurs recommendation, entertainment, friendship, aspiration, expertise, and marketing. You follow someone because you like their clothes. Then their travel. Then their apartment. Then their skincare. Then perhaps the coffee machine placed conveniently on the counter behind them.

At a certain point, culture and commerce begin to look remarkably similar.

Authenticity, Sponsored by Someone

Influencer culture depends on a difficult paradox. Creators are expected to appear authentic while simultaneously turning that

authenticity into something commercially valuable. Followers often want creators to feel genuine, spontaneous, relatable, and personally trustworthy. Brands, meanwhile, value influencers precisely because that trust can be converted into attention, sales, visibility, or cultural prestige.

Duffy and Hund (2019) describe an authenticity bind in which creators face contradictory expectations surrounding visibility, relatability, commercialism, and self-presentation. Become too polished and followers may accuse you of being fake. Become too commercial and they may stop trusting your recommendations. Reveal too little and you may seem distant. Reveal too much and your private life becomes part of the commodity you are selling.

This contradiction becomes particularly important from a Global Studies perspective because influencers increasingly function as informal cultural translators. They introduce audiences to food, clothing, languages, neighborhoods, travel destinations, beauty practices, social movements, religious customs, music, and everyday life in societies that their followers may never visit themselves. A thirty-second video may become someone's first encounter with a particular city, tradition, community, or country. Sometimes these encounters expand cultural understanding. A creator may explain the historical meaning of a garment, introduce viewers to artists who would otherwise remain unknown outside their region, or challenge stereotypes about a community. At other times, complicated societies may be reduced to beautiful backgrounds, unusual foods, colorful markets, or aesthetically pleasing traditions stripped of their social context. Sometimes both things happen in the same thirty-second video.

The Influencer as Cultural Middleman

Imagine an influencer visits a traditional market while traveling abroad. They film local food, try on clothing, interview a vendor, photograph craftspeople, and post the experience to several million followers. The audience loves it. Viewers share the content, comment enthusiastically, search for the destination, and perhaps begin planning trips of their own. Tourism might increase. Artisans might gain customers. A local business might suddenly receive international orders. Viewers may become genuinely curious about another society and seek out additional information.

Those possibilities are real, and they demonstrate why digital platforms can sometimes provide communities with forms of visibility that would previously have been difficult or impossible to achieve.

But visibility raises another set of questions.

Return to the Cultural Power Test. Who created the cultural practice being shown? Who preserved it? Who filmed it? Who selected the camera angle and narration? Who owns the account where millions of people encountered it? Who gained followers? Who earned advertising or sponsorship revenue? Who became the recognizable face associated with the story? The answers may not all point to the same person or community. This is what makes the influencer such an important cultural middleman. Influencers can connect communities with enormous audiences, but the person facilitating that connection may become more visible than the people whose lives, traditions, labor, or creativity are being represented. An influencer can amplify a community. An influencer can also become the center of a story that did not begin with them. The Global Studies question, therefore, is not simply whether representation is positive or negative. It is who controls the representation, who benefits from it, and what happens when cultural visibility itself becomes a form of economic power.

Viral Does Not Mean Global

The language of digital culture often encourages us to confuse popularity with universality. A video "goes viral." A song becomes a "global hit." A meme seems to appear everywhere. Millions or even billions of views can create the impression that everyone on Earth is participating in the same cultural moment. But viral does not necessarily mean global, and global does not mean evenly distributed. A cultural trend can receive millions of views and still represent only a narrow slice of the world's population. Your feed is not the world. It is a highly selective window into it, assembled through systems that respond to language, geography, social network, platform choice, government regulation, commercial priorities, and individual behavior. Two people sitting beside each other can open the same app and encounter completely different cultural universes. One may be immersed in Korean dramas, Formula One, Indian cooking videos, and American political commentary. The other may see almost none of those things. Someone using the same platform in Jakarta, Lagos, São Paulo, Seoul, Delhi, or rural California may experience yet another digital environment.The internet connects societies, but connection does not produce identical experiences. Digital globalization creates overlapping cultural worlds rather than one universal global feed.

One Internet? Not Really.

It is tempting to speak about “the internet” as though it were a single global space. Technically, networks connect across borders at extraordinary scale, and people separated by thousands of miles can communicate almost instantly. Yet the cultural experience of being online varies enormously depending on where someone lives, what services they can access, what languages they speak, how much connectivity costs, and what governments or corporations regulate their digital environment.

Some governments block particular services or restrict access to certain forms of content. Some platforms dominate national markets while barely existing elsewhere. Some populations rely heavily on messaging applications for communication, commerce, news, and community life. Others spend more time on short-video platforms, social networks, search engines, or locally developed services. Some digital ecosystems operate under extensive state regulation, while others are structured primarily through the power of private corporations.

Infrastructure also matters. Billions of people experience substantial differences in internet affordability, speed, reliability, and access. A student with a high-speed fiber connection and several personal devices inhabits a different digital world from someone sharing one mobile phone among family members while carefully managing expensive data. Even when both technically have “internet access,” their ability to stream video, produce content, participate in online education, run a business, or maintain a constant digital presence may be radically different.

Digital globalization therefore does not eliminate geography. It reorganizes it. Borders did not disappear. They acquired Wi-Fi.

The Global South Is Not Just an Audience

One of the most misleading stories about digital globalization imagines technology flowing in a single direction: technologies are supposedly invented in wealthy countries, cultural trends emerge in major Western cities, and the rest of the world gradually adopts them. This story treats enormous portions of humanity as consumers rather than producers of digital culture.

Actual digital cultures are much more complicated and much more interesting.

People throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and other regions do not simply receive a finished version of “the internet.” They build platforms, invent forms of digital commerce, adapt technologies to local needs, create online humor, produce music, develop political communities, build fan cultures, participate in gaming economies, and transform global platforms through their own languages, aesthetics, and social practices.

Research on China’s Kuaishou platform, for example, demonstrates how algorithmic platforms created new visibility for cultural producers in smaller cities and rural communities often excluded from elite cultural industries (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). The example complicates the assumption that meaningful cultural innovation must originate in global metropolitan centers. Digital platforms can sometimes allow people outside traditional centers of media power to create audiences of their own.

Of course, greater visibility does not automatically eliminate inequality. Platform access, monetization, censorship, infrastructure, language hierarchies, and algorithmic visibility still shape whose voices travel furthest. But digital globalization should not be imagined as the technological center broadcasting outward to a passive periphery.

It is a network of cultural production in which people everywhere modify the technologies, styles, and meanings that pass through their societies. Digital globalization does not simply bring “the internet” to peripheral places. People in those places build their own digital cultures.

Aesthetic Globalization

Spend enough time moving through social media and something strange begins to happen. A café in Los Angeles, Seoul, Bangkok, Mexico City, Nairobi, or Copenhagen may look surprisingly familiar. The furniture changes slightly. The menu changes. The language on the wall changes. Yet the carefully arranged lighting, minimalist décor, dramatically plated food, photogenic corner, and strategically placed plants can begin to resemble one another.

Platforms accelerate what we might call aesthetic globalization: the rapid international circulation of visual styles that become recognizable across enormous geographic distances. Minimalist cafés, carefully arranged food, neutral-toned interiors, luxury travel photography, makeup tutorials, sneaker culture, unboxing videos, and “day in my life” videos all appear in locally distinctive

forms, yet they often share visual conventions that make them instantly understandable to audiences elsewhere.

These aesthetics do not necessarily erase cultural difference. In many cases, global visual languages are combined with highly local materials, traditions, foods, fashions, or architectural styles. But the ways those differences are presented can become increasingly standardized. The camera angle is familiar. The editing rhythm is familiar. The lighting is familiar. The sequence of the travel video is familiar. Even the supposedly spontaneous moment may follow a visual grammar audiences already know how to read.

This produces an interesting contradiction. Digital platforms make it possible for people to encounter extraordinary cultural diversity, but they may also encourage that diversity to be presented through increasingly recognizable formats.

Even cultural difference can acquire a global visual grammar. The unfamiliar becomes globally legible by looking strangely familiar.

When the Global Gaze Comes Home

Cultural globalization is often described as a process in which images of places travel outward to distant audiences. Digital platforms add another step to that process: the circulating image can return home and begin changing the place it originally represented.

Consider a café that becomes popular because influencers photograph it. At first, the photographs simply document the space. Then the owners notice which corners appear most frequently online. Perhaps they redesign the lighting, repaint a wall, add a mural, introduce a visually dramatic drink, or rearrange furniture so customers can photograph themselves more easily. More influencers arrive. The images circulate farther. The café becomes increasingly organized around its online representation.

The same process can happen at the scale of neighborhoods, restaurants, beaches, markets, museums, hotels, and tourist destinations. A place develops a recognizable digital identity, visitors arrive seeking the version they have seen online, and businesses begin adjusting to meet those expectations. New shops appear. Prices change. Architecture is renovated. Particular foods, crafts, or experiences receive more attention because they photograph well. Residents discover that outsiders possess surprisingly specific expectations about what their neighborhood is supposed to look like.

Culture is therefore no longer simply represented online. Online representation can reshape physical culture.

The global gaze does not only look outward. Eventually, the places being watched may begin looking back at the screen and changing themselves in response.

Virality and Cultural Context Collapse

Global circulation can make culture visible at extraordinary speed, but speed carries a cost. Cultural objects, images, practices, and symbols can travel much faster than the histories and explanations that originally gave them meaning.

A joke travels without its context. A religious symbol becomes decorative. A political slogan becomes merchandise. A dance becomes a trend. A traditional recipe becomes a “hack.” A ceremonial garment becomes an aesthetic. A gesture that means one thing in one community may be interpreted completely differently somewhere else. This is one form of cultural context collapse: material created within one social setting suddenly circulates among audiences who do not share the assumptions, histories, relationships, or cultural knowledge that made the original meaning understandable.

Context collapse is not always harmful. Cultural forms have always traveled, changed, and acquired new meanings. People borrow from one another, reinterpret ideas, mix traditions, and create new cultural forms. That is part of how culture works. The problem emerges when circulation creates the illusion that cultural practices can be fully understood without the histories attached to them.

A dance may have an identifiable creator. A textile pattern may belong to a long artistic tradition. A religious symbol may carry sacred meaning. A recipe may reflect histories of migration, colonialism, poverty, celebration, adaptation, or survival. When the cultural object circulates without those histories, audiences may encounter only the most visually appealing or easily reproducible portion of the story.

The faster something travels, the less explanation may travel with it.

Translation...and the Things That Do Not Translate

Digital globalization creates extraordinary possibilities for communication across linguistic boundaries. Fans subtitle television programs that have not yet received official translations. Diaspora communities explain traditions and expressions to audiences living thousands of miles away. Creators translate jokes, interviews, political speeches, recipes, songs, and cultural debates. Automated translation tools increasingly allow people who do not share a language to communicate almost instantly.

These technologies dramatically expand the range of cultural material people can encounter. A viewer no longer necessarily needs to speak Korean to watch a Korean drama, Spanish to follow a creator in Colombia, Arabic to encounter commentary from Cairo, or Japanese to participate in a fan community centered on Japanese media.

Yet translation is never simply the mechanical replacement of one word with another. Languages encode histories, relationships, social hierarchies, humor, emotion, and cultural assumptions. A joke may depend on wordplay that disappears when translated. A religious concept may not have an exact equivalent in another language. A term of respect may communicate a social relationship that English grammar does not easily capture. Slang may sound completely different once translated into formal language.

Even excellent translation therefore involves interpretation. Someone must decide which meaning to emphasize, which explanation to add, which cultural reference requires clarification, and which ambiguity cannot be fully preserved. Something always changes when meaning crosses a linguistic boundary. That does not make translation a failure. It makes translation one of the central creative processes of globalization. Global culture emerges not because meaning travels perfectly, but because people continually negotiate these imperfect translations.

The Power to Be Seen

Digital platforms are often celebrated for democratizing cultural production. Anyone with a connected device can potentially write, photograph, record, upload, comment, remix, or publish. Compared with an earlier media system in which a relatively small number of publishers, television networks, record companies, newspapers, studios, and galleries controlled access to enormous audiences, this change is significant.

But the ability to publish is not the same as the ability to be seen.

Millions of pieces of content may be uploaded while only a tiny fraction receive widespread attention. Some creators already possess large audiences. Some can afford professional equipment, advertising, staff, or promotion. Some operate in languages that reach enormous global markets. Others depend on recommendation systems whose workings they cannot fully observe. Platform moderation, advertising rules, monetization systems, copyright policies, and algorithmic ranking can all influence who becomes visible.

Siciliano (2022) argues that platformized cultural production can create new infrastructural forms of gatekeeping even as older barriers to participation decline. In other words, digital platforms may remove one gatekeeper while creating another. A creator may no longer need to persuade a television executive or magazine editor to publish their work, but they may still need to navigate recommendation systems, platform rules, monetization thresholds, and changing standards of visibility.

The door is open. The spotlight is not equally distributed.

From a Global Studies perspective, this distinction is crucial. Asking whether people have access to digital platforms tells us only part of the story. We must also ask whose voices become visible, whose remain difficult to find, who controls the infrastructure of discovery, and how those patterns intersect with older inequalities involving wealth, language, geography, race, gender, citizenship, and political power.

Cultural Labor Behind the Screen

The glamorous image of digital creativity can make it easy to forget that online creativity is labor. A successful photograph may have required hours of planning. A short video may involve research, scripting, filming, lighting, editing, music selection, captioning, translation, and several failed versions before the final thirty seconds appear on a viewer's screen. Creators also perform forms of labor that audiences rarely see. They research trends, negotiate sponsorships, answer emails, manage contracts, respond to followers, moderate comments, deal with harassment, monitor analytics, learn changing algorithms, maintain relationships with brands, track income, and continuously generate new material in order to remain visible.

The pressure can be relentless because platform visibility is rarely permanent. A creator who stops producing may quickly disappear from followers' feeds. A format that worked last year may suddenly receive little attention. A platform may change its recommendation system, moderation rules, monetization policies, or preferred content format with little warning.

This means platform labor can create extraordinary opportunities while remaining economically precarious. Some creators build businesses, reach global audiences, support themselves through work they enjoy, or gain forms of cultural influence that would have been almost unimaginable in an earlier media system. Others invest enormous amounts of unpaid labor while receiving little income or visibility. A creator can spend years building an audience. Then the rules change. Visibility falls. Income disappears.

The cultural economy suddenly looks less like fame and more like work.

Global Studies Lens: Follow the Infrastructure

Digital culture becomes easier to analyze once we stop treating viral content as though it simply appears. Every cultural object moving through a platform has a history and an infrastructure behind it. When analyzing a digital cultural trend, begin with the obvious question: Who made it? Then keep going. Where did it circulate? Which platform made it visible? How did people encounter it? Who owned that platform? Who earned money from its circulation? Which advertising systems, recommendation algorithms, or sponsorship arrangements helped it travel? What regulations shaped where it could appear? Who interpreted, translated, copied, criticized, or remixed it? Then look beneath the content itself. Who possessed the devices necessary to participate? Who had affordable connectivity? Who had enough bandwidth to upload or stream video? Which languages were supported? Who had access to digital payment systems? Who had the time, training, safety, and resources necessary to become a creator rather than simply a viewer? These questions transform a viral video from a piece of entertainment into a Global Studies problem because they reveal the larger structures hidden behind the screen. The internet may make cultural circulation feel almost weightless. A video appears. A trend spreads. A song travels. A style becomes fashionable. Yet underneath that apparent simplicity are data centers, communication networks, smartphones, labor, corporate ownership, advertising markets, national regulations, language hierarchies, payment systems, algorithms, and profound inequalities in access and visibility. Following the infrastructure allows us to see all of them.

Think about it!

Look at the first twenty pieces of content recommended to you on a platform. Which countries, languages, communities, and cultural forms appear? What is absent? Then ask: Why did you see these twenty things instead of twenty others?

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2.6: Whose Culture Is It Anyway?

Appreciation, Appropriation, and the Business of Borrowing

Culture travels because people borrow. That is not a problem. In fact, if humans had never borrowed from one another, most of what we think of as culture would barely exist in recognizable form. Music evolves through exchange. Languages absorb foreign words. Recipes change when ingredients move. Designers study unfamiliar materials and techniques. Religious traditions interact. Artists experiment. Borrowing is one of the engines of cultural creativity. So why do some forms of cultural borrowing produce admiration while others produce anger? The answer is that cultural exchange does not happen outside history. When cultural forms cross boundaries, they carry histories of empire, race, migration, discrimination, inequality, commercialization, and ownership with them. The object may travel easily. The history does not disappear.

Cultural Appropriation: More Than Borrowing

Cultural appropriation is commonly used to describe the adoption or use of cultural elements by people outside the community associated with them, particularly when the relationship involves unequal power, inadequate acknowledgment, distortion, commercialization, or use of practices that a community considers sacred or restricted.

The key word is not simply borrowing.

It is power.

Calling every cross-cultural interaction appropriation would make the concept nearly useless. The difficult cases are those in which cultural material moves upward through an unequal hierarchy: a marginalized community develops a practice, a more powerful actor adopts it, the cultural meaning is stripped away, and the adopter receives prestige or profit that the original community does not. Fashion scholarship has examined precisely these tensions surrounding traditional and Indigenous cultural expressions (Lee, 2019; Gebru, 2021).

The Double Standard Problem

A community may be stigmatized for its clothing, hairstyle, accent, food, religion, or language. Then a more socially powerful group adopts the same practice. Suddenly it becomes fashionable, interesting, edgy, worldly, or chic. The practice did not change. Its social position did. This is why appropriation often cannot be understood solely through individual intention. Good intentions matter they just do not settle the argument.

Fashion: Inspiration, Collaboration, or Extraction?

Fashion operates through reference and borrowing. But the question becomes more difficult when an influence is rooted in a community whose cultural expressions have historically been marginalized or whose cultural knowledge carries sacred or restricted meanings. Gebru (2021) argues that conventional fashion-law assumptions fit Indigenous cultural expressions poorly because many are collectively held and culturally restricted rather than individually authored in the manner assumed by conventional copyright law. A design may belong collectively to a people. Knowledge may pass between generations. A motif may signal kinship, place, ceremony, status, spirituality, or historical memory. No single individual “invented” it. That does not mean nobody owns it. It may mean the law is asking the wrong question.

Traditional Cultural Expressions

International policy increasingly uses the term traditional cultural expressions for traditional designs, music, stories, symbols, performances, rituals, and artistic practices maintained within communities over time. A fashion company can look at an Indigenous textile motif and see a design. A community may see genealogy. The company sees a pattern. The community sees memory. The company sees inspiration. The community may see property. Those perspectives are not interchangeable. Something can be legal to copy and still ethically exploitative.

Mexico, Indigenous Textiles, and Global Fashion

Indigenous textile traditions in Mexico have become a highly visible site of appropriation debates. Researchers examining Mexican Indigenous designs argue that describing commercial reproduction as simple inspiration can obscure relationships among cultural identity, traditional knowledge, economic inequality, and global profit (Barragán-Esqueda & Barragán-López, 2022). An artisan may spend days producing a textile rooted in generations of cultural knowledge. A multinational company can reproduce the visual idea industrially. The company reaches global consumers. The original artisan may remain economically precarious. The cultural element traveled. The economic value did not necessarily travel back. That is cultural globalization and global inequality occupying the same piece of fabric.

Sacred Is Not the Same as Stylish

Not every cultural object is equally available for borrowing. Communities may distinguish between cultural expressions intended for broad public use and those reserved for particular ceremonies, families, social roles, initiates, or spiritual purposes. A sacred song is not simply a song. A ceremonial object is not simply décor. A religious symbol is not merely a graphic. A ritual is not simply entertainment. Removing an object from its context can transform what it means. Sometimes that transformation is harmless. Sometimes it is the harm.

Music Has Always Borrowed

Music makes appropriation debates especially complicated because musical history is full of borrowing, adaptation, collaboration, sampling, fusion, imitation, and reinvention. Research on Nigerian hip-hop, for example, shows how artists combine global hip-hop conventions with local language practices, creating new forms of linguistic and cultural identity rather than simply copying an American genre (Omoniyi, 2006). Reggae provides another example. As reggae traveled internationally, non-Jamaican performers sometimes adopted elements of Jamaican Creole as part of performing recognizable reggae identity (Gerfer, 2018). When an artist adopts a culturally specific accent to sound more authentic, are they honoring the tradition, performing an identity, commercializing it, or perhaps doing all three? Context matters.

Appreciation Versus Appropriation

Students often want a rule. Unfortunately, Global Studies is going to disappoint you. There is no universal equation. But there are better questions. Consider the historical power relationship connecting the groups, whether the cultural element retains connection to its original meaning, whether community participation or consent was relevant or obtained, whether creators were credited, who received economic benefit, and what happened to the source community afterward. These questions do not guarantee agreement. They produce a better conversation.

Collaboration Changes the Question

Instead of asking Can we use your culture?, the question can become Can we create something together? Community members become designers rather than references. Artisans become partners rather than invisible suppliers. Communities can refuse uses they regard as inappropriate. The difference between appropriation and collaboration is often visible in who gets to say no.

Food: Can Anyone Own a Recipe?

Who owns hummus, curry, dumplings, ceviche, barbecue, biryani, or a taco? The answer is often nobody, several communities, and history—all at once. Yet food can still reveal unequal power. An immigrant community's food may be dismissed as smelly, strange, cheap, or unhealthy. A generation later, an upscale chef "discovers" it. The dish is redesigned, renamed, photographed, and sold for three times the price. The problem is not that someone cooked the food. The interesting question is: What changed when the social status of the cook changed?

Museums: When Borrowing Becomes Possession

Some of the most consequential appropriation debates involve objects sitting quietly inside museums. Collections across Europe

and North America include objects acquired during colonial expansion, archaeological expeditions, missionary activity, military conquest, unequal trade, and other encounters whose terms are now contested. The contemporary movement for restitution or repatriation asks whether certain objects should return to the societies or communities from which they originated. The question is no longer How did this artifact travel? It becomes: Did it have a right to leave?

The Cultural Borrowing Test

When evaluating cultural borrowing, examine the history connecting the groups, the meaning of the cultural element in its original context, whether it is public or restricted, whether source communities participated, who received attribution and economic benefit, how substantially the cultural form changed, and what consequences followed for the source community. Then ask: Would the exchange look different if the source community had equal power?

Exchange or Extraction?

Cultures cannot survive without exchange. The challenge is not preventing cultural borrowing. It is creating exchanges that recognize history, respect community authority, distribute benefits fairly, and allow cultural creativity without pretending power does not exist. Perhaps the most useful distinction is not between borrowing and not borrowing. It is between exchange and extraction. Exchange creates relationships. Extraction removes value.

Think about it!

Find a real example of cultural borrowing involving fashion, music, food, language, art, or social media. Do not begin by deciding whether it is appropriation. Apply the Cultural Borrowing Test and then argue whether the case is best understood as appreciation, adaptation, collaboration, appropriation, commercialization, extraction or some combination

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2.7: The Global Plate Questions to Pique your Pallete

Migration, Memory, and Who Gets to Call Food Authentic?

Food may be the most delicious archive of globalization. A meal can contain evidence of migration, colonization, trade, religion, labor, climate, empire, class, memory, adaptation, and family history, sometimes all on the same plate. Think about a dish you consider traditional. Now start pulling at the threads. Where did the ingredients originate? Who cultivated them? How did they travel? Which empire, trade route, migration stream, or agricultural system helped bring them together? Was the dish always prepared this way? Did someone substitute an ingredient because the original one was unavailable? Did a migrant community change it? Did restaurants change it again? Did tourists decide which version looked most authentic? Suddenly dinner becomes a Global Studies problem.

You Are Probably Eating Globalization

Many foods now treated as obvious markers of national identity are themselves products of long histories of cultural exchange. Italian cuisine without tomatoes? Indian or Thai food without chili peppers? Irish history without potatoes? European desserts without chocolate or vanilla? These combinations feel almost impossible to imagine today, yet tomatoes, potatoes, chili peppers, cacao, and vanilla originated in the Americas and entered cuisines elsewhere through the transformations associated with European expansion after 1492. Historian Alfred Crosby described this movement of plants, animals, pathogens, and people between the Americas and Afro-Eurasia as the Columbian Exchange (Crosby, 1972). The point is not that these cuisines are less authentic because ingredients once came from elsewhere. Quite the opposite. Their histories remind us that tradition itself can be the result of globalization. Sometimes tradition is simply change that has had enough time to become familiar.

Sugar: The Sweet Side of a Very Bitter History

Not every ingredient traveled peacefully. Sugar's transformation into a global commodity was inseparable from empire, plantation agriculture, and slavery. Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* traces how sugar moved from a luxury into an ordinary part of European diets while tying consumption to plantation labor and exploitation in the Caribbean (Mintz, 1985). A spoonful of sugar can link land, labor, empire, trade, consumption, and culture. The eater experiences sweetness. The global system behind the sweetness may involve coercion. Food is cultural. Food is also political economy.

Migration Moves Kitchens

Migrants carry recipes, techniques, preferences, utensils, rituals, and memories. Food can provide continuity when almost everything else changes. Research on migrant communities repeatedly finds that foodways become important ways of expressing belonging and maintaining identity across borders (Sweeney Tookes, 2015; Marino, 2018; Sayadabdi & Howland, 2021). But migration rarely reproduces food perfectly. Ingredients are missing. Prices differ. Work schedules change. Children develop new tastes. Recipes adapt. In her study of Barbadian migrants in Atlanta, Sweeney Tookes (2015) found that migrants altered traditional dishes because ingredients and lifestyles had changed, yet adaptation itself became part of maintaining Barbadian identity. Culture survives partly because people are willing to change it.

The Recipe Is Not the Memory

Suppose your grandmother made a particular dish every Sunday. You move abroad. You cannot find the same ingredient, so you substitute another. Your child grows up eating your adapted version. Thirty years later, that version is the family tradition. Which one is authentic? The grandmother's? Yours? Your child's? All three? Research on South Asian diasporic identity similarly treats culinary authenticity as something performed through reinvention rather than simply reproduced from a fixed original (Dalal, 2024).Authenticity becomes an identity question: Authentic to whose life?

When Food Becomes More Important After Migration

Something strange often happens in diaspora. A dish that was simply dinner at home becomes identity abroad. Research on Bulgarian migrants in London found that preparing banitsa became an important way of performing national belonging even when the ingredients used in Britain were not Bulgarian (Ranta & Nancheva, 2019). The ingredients became less local. The meaning became more national. Studies of Iranian migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand similarly demonstrate how food choices become strategies through which migrants present and negotiate identity (Sayadabdi & Howland, 2021).

"Ethnic Food" Is a Very Strange Category

Why is American food often simply called cuisine while Italian, Chinese, Mexican, Indian, Thai, Ethiopian, or Vietnamese foods are grouped under "ethnic food"? Everyone has ethnicity. Every cuisine has history. Donna Gabaccia's *We Are What We Eat* documents how immigrant cooks, grocers, restaurateurs, and entrepreneurs profoundly reshaped American foodways while immigrant foods gradually became mainstream American eating (Gabaccia, 1998). Pizza may once have signaled Italian immigrant identity. Now it can simply mean Tuesday. Food crosses cultural boundaries so successfully that we sometimes forget it crossed them at all.

The Immigrant Restaurant as Cultural Institution

An immigrant restaurant can be a business, gathering place, translation site, introduction to a culture, source of employment, family enterprise, and place where cuisine is reinvented for a new audience. Yet restaurateurs must negotiate contradictory customer expectations. Diners may want food that is adventurous but not too unfamiliar. They may demand something "authentic" while simultaneously preferring dishes adapted to local tastes. Customers may ask immigrants to make food more authentic to an imaginary version of immigrants' own culture.

The $4 Dish and the $24 Dish

A food sold cheaply by migrants may be dismissed as greasy, smelly, foreign, or street food. Then a higher-status chef takes similar ingredients. The restaurant has exposed brick. There is a plant in the corner. The menu uses words like deconstructed, heritage, elevated, and inspired. The dish is now $24. Nothing is inherently wrong with culinary experimentation. The question is why some cooks are allowed to transform food into prestige while others are expected to remain custodians of authenticity. Krishnendu Ray's work on immigrant restaurateurs demonstrates that cuisines occupy different positions within hierarchies of prestige and price (Ray, 2016). A cuisine can move upward socially even when the people associated with it do not experience the same mobility.

Fusion: Culinary Genius or Cultural Crime?

Fusion itself is hardly new. Human foodways have been hybrid for centuries. Migration, empire, war, trade, colonization, intermarriage, and urban life repeatedly brought culinary traditions together. Peruvian Nikkei cuisine developed through Japanese migration and Peruvian culinary traditions. Tex-Mex emerged through layered borderland histories. Caribbean cuisines reflect Indigenous, African, European, South Asian, and other histories. The better question is not whether fusion is authentic. It is: What history produced the mixture?

National Cuisine Is Often a National Story

Countries contain enormous regional, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and class diversity. Which foods get selected to represent an entire country? Appadurai's influential study of cookbooks in India demonstrates how the idea of a national cuisine can be actively constructed by bringing diverse regional traditions into a shared national framework (Appadurai, 1988). National cuisine is not simply what people happen to eat inside a border. It is also a story a nation tells about itself. The nation gets placed on a plate, but somebody selected the menu.

Curry: One Word, an Entire Continent or Stephen?

Well, excluding basketball, the globally recognizable term curry can flatten extraordinary culinary diversity. There is no single Indian curry. Regional cuisines vary radically in ingredients, techniques, religion, climate, and history. Yet international markets prefer simple categories. Recent scholarship uses curry itself to challenge ideas of a single authentic South Asian culinary identity, emphasizing multiplicity, reinvention, and diaspora (Dalal, 2024). A complex cultural world crosses a border. The receiving market simplifies it. Then the simplified version becomes globally recognizable.

Pizza Has a Passport Problem

Pizza is unmistakably associated with Italy. But pizza is also American, Brazilian, Japanese, Argentine, and nearly everywhere else people have decided dough, sauce, cheese, and local imagination should spend time together. A cultural form can remain connected to its place of origin while also becoming genuinely local elsewhere. Belonging does not always require exclusivity.

Digital Foodways: Grandma Is on WhatsApp

Recipes once traveled through family instruction, migration, cookbooks, restaurants, and television. Now they circulate through YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, food blogs, diaspora forums, and video calls. Research on Italian migrants in London found that digital food practices helped create new forms of transnational culinary belonging (Marino, 2018). A migrant can video-call a parent while cooking, photograph the result, ask an aunt what went wrong, order a spice online, watch six versions of the recipe, and then ignore all of them and do what grandma said.

Food Can Build Bridges, but Don't ask it to do too much

Sharing meals can create meaningful intercultural contact. But enjoying someone's food does not necessarily mean respecting the people who make it. A society can enthusiastically consume immigrant cuisine while discriminating against immigrants. People can love tacos and oppose Mexican immigration. They can enjoy Middle Eastern food while accepting stereotypes about Middle Eastern communities. Culinary multiculturalism is not the same thing as social equality. Sometimes the stomach crosses the border before politics does.

The Smell of Belonging

Immigrant children often learn quickly which foods are considered acceptable in public. A lunch that smells familiar at home may attract ridicule at school. Children may ask parents not to pack particular dishes. Years later, the same cuisine may become trendy. Food can carry pride and embarrassment simultaneously. Something rejected at age twelve may become cherished at thirty. (Shout out to the humble durian and cilantro). Identity does not move in a straight line either.

Would You Eat That? Food, Disgust, and Cultural Relativism

Imagine two plates. On one sits a lobster, cracked open and served with butter. On the other sits a bowl of roasted crickets seasoned with chili and lime.

Depending on where you grew up, one may look like dinner and the other like a dare.

Yet neither reaction is biologically inevitable. What counts as normal, delicious, disgusting, sacred, forbidden, or simply "not food" is something cultures teach us.

This is why food offers such a useful lesson in cultural relativism, the practice of attempting to understand beliefs and behaviors within the cultural context that gives them meaning. Insects have long been consumed in many societies, and researchers have documented roughly 1,900 edible insect species used as food worldwide (van Huis, 2013). The Food and Agriculture Organization has likewise examined insects as established components of diets and livelihoods in different regions and as one possible source of protein with different environmental demands from conventional livestock production (van Huis et al., 2013).

The interesting Global Studies question is therefore not whether eating insects is objectively strange. It is why some foods

become culturally categorized as desirable while others become nearly unimaginable.

Consider the lobster. In contemporary fine dining, lobster can signal luxury. Historically, however, its cultural status was far less glamorous. Food changes meaning. So do ingredients, recipes, and the boundaries of what people consider edible.

Globalization makes those boundaries even messier. Foods travel through migration, colonialism, trade, tourism, social media, restaurants, and changing consumer tastes. Sushi moved from relative unfamiliarity to mainstream consumption across much of the United States. Chili peppers originated in the Americas but became so deeply incorporated into cuisines across Asia that it is now difficult to imagine many of those cuisines without them. Diaspora communities modify dishes when ingredients are unavailable, restaurants adapt recipes to new markets, and foods once dismissed as foreign can suddenly become fashionable.

Which leaves us with a deceptively simple question:

When we say another culture eats something “weird,” what are we actually describing: the food, or ourselves?



Figure 2.7.1: Eating Is Cultural. Food is nourishment, but it is also memory, identity, ritual, pleasure, status, family, religion, and social practice. What people classify as delicious, ordinary, celebratory, forbidden, or disgusting is learned within cultural contexts rather than universally shared. (Copyright; Photo by MChe Lee on Unsplash)

Who Gets to Sell Authenticity?

Tourists frequently want to “eat like a local.” Restaurants advertise traditional cooking. Food tours promise authenticity. Cooking classes sell cultural experience. This can create economic opportunities. It can also encourage communities to perform versions of themselves that outsiders already expect. Authenticity becomes a product. The market does not simply respond to culture, it can influence which version of culture gets preserved and performed.

Can a Food Have Citizenship?

Food can belong to a region, religion, ethnic group, city, family, diaspora, several countries, or a historical community that existed before current borders. Claims about food are often claims about history. Saying “this dish is ours” may also mean: We were here. Our ancestors made this. Our community survived. Our culture matters. Food becomes edible territory.

The Global Plate Test

When analyzing a supposedly traditional dish, trace its ingredients, the historical processes that brought them together, the labor involved in producing and serving it, the communities that claim it, the ways it has changed, who receives prestige for preparing it, and what memories or identities it carries. Once you can answer those questions, you are no longer studying lunch. You are

studying globalization.

Think about it!

Choose one food you consider part of your own family, cultural, regional, or national tradition. Trace its ingredients and history. Then answer: What does this food tell us about the difference between cultural tradition and cultural purity?

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2.8: Culture Under Pressure

Language Loss, Heritage, and the Fight to Remember

Globalization can make cultures more visible. It can also make them disappear. A language can gain new speakers because migrants or fans encounter it online; another can lose speakers because children are educated almost entirely in a dominant national or global language. A craft can find international buyers through social media while also becoming detached from the community that created it. A ritual can be documented globally while becoming less central to everyday life at home.

What happens when cultural change is not simply transformation?

What happens when something is at risk of being lost?

That question takes us from cultural diffusion to cultural survival.

What Does It Mean for a Culture to Be "At Risk"?

Cultures rarely disappear in one dramatic moment. More often, cultural loss happens gradually, through a weakening of transmission from one generation to the next. Fewer children learn a language well enough to speak it comfortably. Fewer young people have opportunities to apprentice with a craftsperson. A ceremony that was once part of community life is performed less frequently. Knowledge about plants, water, weather, farming, hunting, or healing remains with older generations but is not fully passed onward. This makes cultural loss difficult to recognize while it is happening. A tradition may still exist, but perhaps only a handful of people know how to practice it. A language may still have speakers, but few of them may be children. A craft may still be displayed in museums or sold to tourists even though fewer community members know how to make it. The question is therefore not simply whether something still exists. It is whether people retain the ability to carry it forward.

UNESCO uses the term intangible cultural heritage to describe living cultural practices including oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, social practices, knowledge about nature, and traditional craftsmanship. Importantly, UNESCO's framework does not imagine these traditions as objects that must remain permanently unchanged. Intangible cultural heritage is continually recreated by communities as they respond to their environments, histories, and changing circumstances (UNESCO, 2003). That distinction matters. Safeguarding culture does not mean embalming it. A culture is not alive because it looks exactly as it did one hundred years ago. It is alive because people continue to know it, practice it, debate it, modify it, and pass it onward.

Language Is More Than Vocabulary

It is easy to think of a language as a collection of words that can be translated into another collection of words. If that were all language contained, language loss would be unfortunate but relatively simple: preserve a dictionary, record the pronunciation, translate the stories, and much of what mattered would remain. Languages carry much more than vocabulary. They contain humor, metaphors, oral histories, family relationships, religious concepts, political memories, ecological knowledge, social expectations, and ways of describing experiences that may not map neatly onto another language. The words people use for relatives can reveal how a society understands kinship. Terms for landscapes, plants, animals, seasons, or water can preserve knowledge accumulated through generations of living in a particular environment. Stories and jokes can depend on sounds, references, or double meanings that disappear when translated.

For that reason, the disappearance of a language involves more than losing a communication system. It can also weaken a particular way in which generations have interpreted and organized experience.

Scholarship on endangered languages emphasizes that survival depends heavily on intergenerational transmission. Languages remain strong when people have reasons and opportunities to use them in ordinary life, not merely when they appear in dictionaries or archives. Schools, families, governments, workplaces, media systems, religious institutions, and community organizations can all influence whether a language remains socially useful and culturally meaningful (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

A language survives because people speak it to one another.

Languages Usually Do Not “Just Die”

When a language begins disappearing, explanations often focus on individual choices. Young people supposedly lose interest. Parents supposedly stop teaching it. People move to cities. A dominant language simply becomes more useful. Those explanations may describe what happened, but they do not necessarily explain why. Language shift frequently has a history of power behind it. Colonial governments imposed imperial languages on colonized populations. Schools have punished or shamed children for speaking Indigenous or minority languages. Nation-building projects have promoted a single national language as a symbol of unity while treating linguistic diversity as backward, divisive, or inconvenient. Employers have rewarded fluency in dominant languages. Courts, universities, bureaucracies, and media institutions have often operated primarily through the languages of politically powerful groups. Under those conditions, language choices become connected to survival and opportunity. Parents may encourage children to speak a dominant language because it provides greater access to education or employment. Migrant parents may reduce the use of a heritage language because they fear their children will experience discrimination or because they want them to integrate successfully into a new society. These decisions can be perfectly rational. That is precisely why the politics surrounding language loss matter. If one language provides access to education, employment, government, media, and social status while another is stigmatized or excluded from public life, the choice between them is not entirely free. Families make decisions inside systems they did not create. Languages therefore rarely “just die.” They are often pushed toward the margins long before the final generation stops speaking them.

The Schoolroom Can Be a Cultural Battleground

Imagine entering school as a child who speaks one language with parents and grandparents, only to discover that another language dominates the classroom. Teachers use it. Textbooks use it. Tests use it. Successful students are expected to master it. Perhaps your home language is tolerated. Perhaps it is ignored. In harsher systems, it may be actively discouraged or punished.

Even without an explicit prohibition, the message can become clear. One language is associated with education, professionalism, intelligence, and modernity. The other belongs at home.

Now extend that message across several generations.

Grandparents speak the heritage language fluently because it was the language of everyday life. Their children understand it but become more comfortable in the dominant language because that is what they use in school and work. The next generation understands conversations but responds in the dominant language. Their children know greetings, food names, affectionate expressions, perhaps a song or two.

No single family member decided to destroy the language. Yet the chain of transmission gradually broke.

This is one reason language revitalization movements often focus heavily on children. Documentation matters, but a language cannot survive primarily as material preserved for scholars. Children need opportunities to hear it, speak it, make mistakes in it, play in it, argue in it, text in it, learn mathematics in it, make jokes in it, and eventually raise another generation in it. Revitalization succeeds most meaningfully when the language returns to life rather than merely to the archive (Fishman, 1991; Hinton et al., 2018).

Prestige Can Kill Quietly

Not every language shift begins with a government prohibition or a teacher punishing a child. Sometimes prestige does much of the work. One language becomes associated with rural life while another represents urban opportunity. One belongs in the household while another belongs in universities and professional settings. One appears in international entertainment, science, technology, and business. The other may be spoken primarily by older relatives or within a geographically limited community. Over time, people learn which language appears to open doors. Parents may then decide that emphasizing the dominant language will give their children greater opportunities. They may be correct. A child who speaks the nationally or globally dominant language may have access to more schools, employers, media, and social networks. The problem is not the parent’s decision. The deeper problem is the unequal system surrounding it. A society creates enormous pressure toward language shift when cultural continuity appears to compete with economic mobility. That is why prestige can be such a powerful force. A language does not need to be officially banned if people gradually learn that speaking it carries fewer rewards, less recognition, or greater stigma.

Global Languages: Problem or Opportunity?

Global languages bring enormous benefits. Shared languages allow scientists to collaborate across borders, diplomats to negotiate agreements, migrants to navigate new societies, students to study internationally, businesses to trade, and people who grew up thousands of miles apart to speak directly to one another. The existence of widely shared languages is not itself the problem.

Nor is multilingualism a threat to cultural diversity. Human beings are perfectly capable of speaking more than one language, and multilingual societies have existed throughout history. A person can communicate internationally in one language while maintaining family, community, or regional life in another. The problem arises when institutions effectively require people to trade one language for the other.

If a child can receive a strong education only by abandoning a heritage language, or if professional advancement requires that a minority language disappear from public life, then linguistic integration comes at an unnecessary cultural cost. The goal does not have to be isolation from global communication. It can instead be additive multilingualism: gaining linguistic opportunities without treating an existing language as something that must be discarded.

The important question, then, is not whether societies should have global languages. They already do. The question is whether governments, schools, workplaces, media systems, and communities make it possible for people to participate in global life without surrendering linguistic diversity.

Diaspora Languages: Use It or Lose It?

Migration creates especially complicated conditions for language transmission. First-generation migrants may arrive in a new country speaking their heritage language fluently because it was the language of childhood, schooling, family, or community life. Their children grow up in a different linguistic environment. They may understand the heritage language but prefer the language spoken at school and among friends. By the third generation, fluency may decline sharply. The pattern can seem almost predictable. Grandparents speak. Parents understand. Children know greetings, affectionate phrases, curse words, and the names of foods. But diaspora language loss is not inevitable. Diaspora communities create institutions specifically designed to keep languages in circulation. Weekend schools teach reading and writing. Religious institutions provide spaces where heritage languages remain socially meaningful. Grandparents maintain relationships with grandchildren through video calls. Parents establish household rules about which language is spoken at home. Musicians, comedians, writers, podcasters, and online creators deliberately incorporate heritage languages into contemporary cultural forms. These efforts illustrate one of the recurring contradictions of globalization. Migration can weaken the everyday environment that sustained a language, yet globalization also provides technologies and transnational networks that allow speakers separated by geography to remain connected. A child growing up thousands of miles from a parent's country of origin can now hear relatives speaking the language every week, watch entertainment produced in it, communicate with cousins, follow creators, listen to music, and encounter communities of speakers online. Globalization produces some of the pressure. It can also become part of the solution.

The Internet Can Kill a Language and Save One

Digital life creates another powerful linguistic hierarchy. Large languages usually have enormous online ecosystems. Users can search, shop, stream, play games, use voice assistants, read news, access government information, and communicate through thousands of applications without leaving the language. Smaller languages may have none of that infrastructure.

If a young person cannot easily type a language on a phone, search for information in it, find entertainment in it, or communicate with friends through it, the language becomes increasingly disconnected from important parts of everyday life. Digital invisibility can therefore intensify language shift. A language may survive in conversations with grandparents while disappearing from the spaces where younger generations spend much of their time. But digital technology can also be turned in the opposite direction.

Communities can record elders, build dictionaries, create searchable archives, develop fonts and keyboards, produce podcasts, subtitle videos, create language-learning applications, host virtual classes, build social-media communities, and connect speakers scattered across different countries. A language that once depended almost entirely on geographic proximity can acquire a transnational digital community. This does not mean technology automatically saves endangered languages. A language app cannot substitute for a community of speakers, and a digital archive cannot recreate everyday conversation by itself. Technology is a tool whose cultural consequences depend on how communities use it. The internet can contribute to linguistic disappearance. It can also give communities new tools for refusing it.

Revitalization

Language revitalization refers to deliberate efforts to strengthen a language that has lost speakers or has disappeared from important areas of everyday life. The goal may involve increasing the number of speakers, expanding the settings in which the language can be used, reconnecting younger generations with older speakers, or rebuilding institutions that allow the language to function beyond ceremonial occasions.

Successful revitalization therefore involves more than teaching vocabulary. Communities may establish immersion schools, language nests for young children, adult education programs, teacher-training programs, community classes, radio stations, television programming, public signage, music, digital content, dictionaries, and new terminology for contemporary life.

The emphasis on contemporary life is important. If a language can describe traditional ceremonies but not school assignments, technology, popular music, relationships, humor, politics, or ordinary teenage life, young speakers may still find themselves moving constantly into another language.

The Māori and Hawaiian revitalization movements demonstrate that language decline is not always irreversible. Both have relied heavily on community activism and educational institutions designed to restore intergenerational transmission, although revitalization remains difficult, politically contested, and incomplete (Hinton et al., 2018).

A revitalized language does not need to return to exactly the form it had before decline began. It needs speakers who can carry it somewhere new.

Documentation Is Not Transmission

Imagine that researchers make an extraordinary record of an endangered language. They record fluent speakers. They document grammar. They collect stories. They create a dictionary. They preserve songs, conversations, oral histories, and pronunciation in a digital archive. Something enormously valuable has been accomplished. But the language can still stop being spoken. That distinction sits at the heart of cultural preservation. Documentation preserves evidence that a cultural practice existed and can provide resources for future learning. Transmission keeps the practice moving from one person and one generation to another. UNESCO's safeguarding framework therefore includes documentation but also emphasizes education, protection, transmission, and revitalization (UNESCO, 2003). A recording of a ceremony is not the same thing as a community continuing to perform it. A photograph of a craft is not the same thing as an apprentice learning to make it. A dictionary is not the same thing as a grandparent speaking to a child. Documentation preserves evidence. Transmission preserves practice. Both matter. They are not the same thing.

Heritage Is Alive

Intangible cultural heritage is sometimes discussed as though communities inherit sealed packages from the past and their responsibility is to prevent anything inside from changing. Living culture does not work that way. A weaving technique can incorporate new materials. A festival can move to a new location. A food tradition can change when ingredients become unavailable. A storytelling tradition can move from an evening gathering to a podcast. A community may modify a ceremony because its members now live across several countries. Traditional ecological knowledge can adapt as ecosystems themselves change. A weaving technique, dance, festival, food tradition, storytelling practice, ceremony, way of managing water, body of medicinal-plant knowledge, or traditional boatbuilding technique can all constitute living cultural heritage. What makes them living is precisely the fact that people continue practicing and interpreting them.

Research on traditional ecological knowledge similarly emphasizes that such knowledge is not simply an archive of facts from the past. It develops through relationships among people, communities, and environments and continues adapting as those relationships change (Berkes, 2018). A tradition therefore does not become fake simply because it changes. The greater danger appears when communities lose the ability, resources, place, or authority to decide how the tradition changes themselves.

The UNESCO List Problem

International recognition can be extremely valuable for cultural survival. A tradition recognized as important heritage may receive funding, publicity, educational support, government protection, or renewed interest among younger generations. Recognition can also give communities leverage when arguing that a cultural practice deserves institutional support. But recognition can

change the thing being recognized. Once a tradition becomes internationally famous, tourists may arrive specifically to see it. Governments may incorporate it into national branding campaigns. Businesses may reproduce its visual elements. Performances may be scheduled around visitor seasons. Particular versions of a tradition may become standardized because those are the versions institutions officially recognize. A practice that once existed primarily within community life can begin functioning simultaneously as heritage, tourist attraction, national symbol, cultural commodity, and international spectacle. None of these outcomes automatically destroys the tradition. New visibility may provide precisely the resources needed for its continuation. Yet visibility also creates new audiences, incentives, and authorities. This creates the UNESCO List problem: recognition may help preserve a cultural practice while simultaneously helping transform what is being preserved. The question is not simply whether a tradition receives international attention. It is whether the people who created and maintain it retain meaningful control over what that attention does.

When Heritage Becomes a Tourist Attraction

Tourism can provide powerful economic support for cultural practices. Visitors purchase crafts, attend performances, hire local guides, stay in community-owned accommodations, visit workshops, take classes, and pay for cultural experiences. Income from tourism can make it economically possible for people to remain in a craft or performance tradition that might otherwise be difficult to sustain. But markets also send signals. Visitors may prefer one style of craft over another. A particular dance may attract larger audiences. A ceremony may be too long for a tour itinerary. A complicated story may be difficult to explain in fifteen minutes. Objects may need to become smaller, cheaper, lighter, or more decorative in order to sell.Slowly, cultural practices can begin adapting around the expectations of outsiders.

Again, adaptation itself is not necessarily the problem. Cultural traditions have always responded to changing environments and audiences. The more important Global Studies question is who controls the adaptation. If community members decide how to modify a performance while maintaining meanings they consider important, that is very different from an outside tourism company demanding changes because a more photogenic version sells better.

The issue is therefore not authenticity versus change. It is agency within change.

Frozen in Time

Minority and Indigenous cultures often encounter an especially unfair version of the authenticity test. They are expected to remain visibly connected to an imagined traditional past in order to be considered culturally legitimate. A community uses smartphones? Perhaps outsiders say it has become too modern. An artist experiments with synthetic materials? Not traditional enough. An Indigenous musician combines an ancestral language with hip-hop? Someone questions whether the music is authentic. A traditional craftsperson changes a design for contemporary use? The object may suddenly be treated as less culturally pure. Dominant cultures are rarely subjected to the same standard. No one claims that American culture ceased to exist when people stopped riding horses to work or that French culture became inauthentic when French musicians began using electronic instruments. Powerful cultures are generally allowed to change without having their legitimacy questioned. Expecting marginalized cultures to remain frozen in an earlier historical moment is therefore not neutral respect for tradition. It can reproduce a colonial idea that Indigenous or minority peoples belong primarily to the past. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights to maintain, control, protect, and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and cultural expressions (United Nations, 2007). The word develop matters alongside maintain and protect. Cultural survival requires the freedom to continue becoming something.

Who Gets to Preserve Whom?

Museums, universities, archives, governments, and researchers often possess resources that communities facing cultural loss may not have. They can fund fieldwork, digitize materials, maintain climate-controlled archives, record endangered languages, preserve photographs, and make cultural materials accessible to future generations. Those resources can be invaluable but preservation immediately raises questions about authority. Who owns the recording once an interview has been archived? Who determines whether sacred or private material can be viewed publicly? Who writes the description attached to an object? Who decides which spelling of a community name appears in a catalog? Who controls photographs taken decades earlier? Who can reproduce them in a book, exhibition, or commercial project?

These are not minor administrative questions. They determine whether preservation supports community authority or transfers authority elsewhere.

Work on Indigenous data sovereignty and governance has increasingly emphasized that information about Indigenous peoples should not simply be treated as material available for unrestricted institutional control. The CARE Principles, for example, emphasize collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility, and ethics when Indigenous data are collected and governed (Carroll et al., 2020). Related scholarship on Indigenous data sovereignty asks institutions to reconsider who should determine how knowledge about communities is collected, stored, interpreted, and reused (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). Preservation without community authority can become another form of extraction. A culture survives in an archive, but the people whose culture it is may lose control over the archive.

Museums Are Changing Too

Museums grew historically through systems that often placed institutions in the role of authoritative preservers and interpreters. Objects arrived in collections through archaeology, purchase, donation, colonial administration, scientific expeditions, missionary activity, and sometimes outright coercion or theft. Once inside the museum, specialists determined how objects would be classified, displayed, described, conserved, and interpreted.

Those practices are increasingly being challenged.

Many museums and archives are reconsidering relationships with source communities and experimenting with collaborative curation, consultation, repatriation, community access, shared authority, and restrictions on materials that communities consider sacred or culturally sensitive. These changes are uneven and often contested, but they represent a meaningful shift in how preservation itself is understood.

The emerging principle is deceptively simple: preserving culture should not mean institutions speaking for communities whenever communities can speak for themselves.

Museums are increasingly shifting from preserving culture for communities toward preserving culture with communities.

That preposition matters because it changes who possesses authority.

The Last Speaker Problem

Stories about endangered languages often become most visible when journalists announce that only a few fluent speakers remain. The “last speaker” provides a dramatic image of cultural loss: one person seemingly carrying an entire linguistic world.

But by the time a language reaches its last speaker, the central crisis occurred decades earlier.

The crucial moment may have been when children stopped learning the language at home, when schools shifted entirely to another language, when families migrated away from their communities, when employment required use of a dominant language, or when discrimination made speakers reluctant to pass the language to their children.

Focusing only on the final speaker can therefore make language loss appear mysterious and inevitable. A better Global Studies approach moves backward through the story.

What happened to education? What happened to land? Did people migrate voluntarily or under pressure? Which languages were rewarded in employment? Was the language recognized by the government? Could speakers use it in schools, courts, media, or public services? Did parents fear their children would face discrimination for speaking it?

Once those questions are asked, language loss begins to look less like cultural accident and more like social history.

The final speaker is not the beginning of the story. They are one of its last chapters.

Heritage and Climate Change

Cultural practices do not exist somewhere outside the physical world. They are practiced in particular landscapes, ecosystems, seasons, waters, forests, coastlines, and communities. Climate change therefore threatens cultural heritage as well as infrastructure and ecosystems. Rising seas may threaten culturally significant coastal places. Wildfires can damage landscapes central to ceremonial practices. Changing rainfall patterns can disrupt agricultural traditions. Species migration or decline

can affect hunting, fishing, gathering, and medicinal knowledge. Displacement can separate communities from places where knowledge has historically been practiced. Traditional ecological knowledge makes this connection especially visible because cultural knowledge often develops through long relationships with particular environments (Berkes, 2018). If the timing of seasons changes, species disappear, or people are forced from ancestral territories, the knowledge associated with those environments may become harder to practice and transmit. Indigenous climate scholarship has emphasized that climate change cannot be separated from longer histories of colonialism, dispossession, and environmental transformation. Communities may therefore confront new climate pressures on top of older disruptions to land and cultural continuity (Whyte, 2018). Culture lives somewhere. When place changes, culture changes with it.

Who Decides What Is Worth Saving?

Not everything receives equal preservation. Some endangered languages receive government funding while others receive almost none. Some historic buildings are restored at enormous expense while other culturally significant places disappear. Some archives are digitized. Some remain in boxes. Some traditions are taught in schools, promoted internationally, and celebrated as national heritage. Others receive little recognition. That raises an uncomfortable question: Who decides? Heritage may appear to be something societies simply inherit, but institutions continually select which parts of the past deserve official recognition. Governments designate monuments. Museums choose what to collect. UNESCO recognizes particular forms of heritage. Universities determine which languages and histories receive scholarly attention. Tourism boards decide which traditions represent a destination. Selection inevitably reflects power. A practice associated with a politically dominant group may be treated as national heritage, while a practice associated with a marginalized group may be described as regional, ethnic, informal, or even backward. A state may enthusiastically celebrate Indigenous clothing while resisting Indigenous political claims to land or autonomy. A government may promote a minority dance for tourism while failing to support the language in which its songs were originally performed. Heritage is therefore never simply discovered. It is also selected, and selection is an exercise of power.

Cultural Survival Is Not Cultural Stasis

The language of preservation can accidentally create the impression that the ideal cultural tradition is one that never changes. But unchanged culture is usually dead culture. A living language invents words for new technologies and experiences. A living musical tradition experiments with new instruments and genres. A living craft responds to different materials and markets. A living food tradition changes as people migrate and ingredients become available or unavailable. A living community argues about what tradition means and which parts should be carried forward. Cultural survival is therefore not a project of returning communities to an imaginary moment before globalization. Such a moment may never have existed anyway. Cultures have always encountered neighbors, migrants, technologies, political changes, environmental shifts, and new ideas. The key issue is agency.

Can communities continue transmitting cultural knowledge? Can they determine which elements they want to maintain, which they want to change, and which they may choose to abandon? Do they possess the land, resources, institutions, legal authority, and social space necessary to make those decisions? UNESCO's understanding of intangible cultural heritage as continually recreated supports this more dynamic approach to safeguarding (UNESCO, 2003). Cultural continuity does not require perfect repetition. It requires the capacity to carry meaningful practices forward. A better definition of preservation is therefore not "Keep everything exactly the same." It is: Keep communities able to carry it forward.

The Cultural Survival Test

When a government, museum, international organization, tourism program, university, nonprofit, or community announces that it is preserving a culture, the existence of a preservation program tells us relatively little by itself. The more revealing questions concern what happens to the people who actually practice the culture. Are younger generations learning the language, craft, ceremony, ecological knowledge, or artistic practice? Do they have enough time and economic security to learn it? Do teachers and elders have resources to transmit it? Does the community still have access to the land, water, plants, animals, buildings, or sacred places required for the practice?

Then ask about authority. Who decides how the tradition changes? Who controls recordings, archives, photographs, and data? Who decides what can be shared publicly and what should remain private? Does commercialization provide resources to practitioners, or do outsiders capture most of the economic value? Language matters too. Can the tradition continue within its own linguistic framework, or is it increasingly interpreted only through a dominant language? Technology can present the same kind of double edge. Does it create new possibilities for transmission, or does digital exclusion accelerate disappearance?

The final question may be the most important: Is the culture allowed to evolve? A preservation effort that keeps objects intact while removing community control may conserve evidence without sustaining culture. A stronger approach protects the ability of communities to transmit, govern, reinterpret, and develop their own cultural practices. That is the difference between preserving something about a community and supporting cultural survival.

Global Studies Lens: Follow the Disappearance

When someone explains cultural loss by saying, “Young people just aren’t interested anymore,” that should be the beginning of the analysis, not the conclusion. Ask what happened before the loss of interest.

Was there colonization? Did schools change language policies? Were people displaced or encouraged to migrate? Did economic opportunities move elsewhere? Did discrimination make a cultural practice embarrassing, dangerous, or economically costly? Did people lose access to land or culturally important ecosystems? Did tourism transform a practice into something primarily performed for outsiders? Did the language fail to develop a significant digital presence? Then move one step deeper. Who had the power to create those conditions?

That is where cultural disappearance becomes a Global Studies problem. What initially appears to be an individual cultural preference may actually sit at the intersection of political authority, economic incentives, migration, colonial history, environmental change, education policy, technology, and global markets. People do sometimes decide that they no longer want to continue a cultural practice, and communities have the right to make that choice. Cultural survival should not become another demand imposed from outside. But we should be cautious about describing cultural disappearance as free choice when the available choices were structured by inequality. Follow the disappearance far enough and you often find power.

Think About It!

Choose an endangered language, threatened cultural practice, or revitalization movement. Investigate not simply what is disappearing but why. Then ask: Is the goal to preserve the past, or to make it possible for the culture to have a future?

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2.9: Not Just Heritage

Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Sovereignty, and Who Gets to Know What

TL;DR

Globalization loves knowledge, especially when that knowledge can be measured, patented, scaled, monetized, digitized, or turned into a policy brief. Indigenous knowledge systems do not always cooperate with those rules. They may be oral rather than written, relational rather than individual, place-based rather than universal, sacred rather than publicly available, and transmitted through communities rather than universities. They can contain sophisticated knowledge about ecosystems, agriculture, fire, medicine, navigation, climate, governance, and social relationships, yet they have historically been dismissed as superstition, folklore, or “traditional wisdom” while Western scientific systems were treated as the neutral definition of legitimate knowledge. Then something strange happens. A global institution discovers that an Indigenous practice works. A pharmaceutical company becomes interested in a medicinal plant. Climate researchers recognize the value of traditional ecological knowledge. Conservation agencies begin discussing Indigenous land stewardship. A university digitizes oral histories. A tourism company markets Indigenous spirituality. And the knowledge once dismissed as primitive suddenly becomes valuable. The question is no longer simply whether Indigenous knowledge will survive globalization. It is: Who gets to use it? And perhaps even more importantly: Who gets to decide? (If you aren't sure what TL;DR means - it means too long, didn't read and summarizes key points).



Figure 2.9.1: Knowledge Is Something People Do. Textile traditions can carry technical knowledge, ecological knowledge, aesthetic systems, histories, identities, and community relationships across generations. Treating such practices only as “heritage” can obscure the fact that they remain living and evolving knowledge systems. (Photo by Sophia Simoes on Unsplash).

The distinction between preserving culture and freezing culture matters. A living knowledge system is allowed to change. People adapt techniques, respond to new conditions, teach younger generations differently, adopt technologies, enter markets, reject markets, collaborate, and innovate.

The question is not whether Indigenous or local knowledge remains perfectly unchanged.

The harder question is whether the people who hold that knowledge retain meaningful authority over what happens to it.

What Do We Mean by Indigenous Knowledge?

There is no single Indigenous knowledge system. Indigenous peoples around the world possess distinct languages, territories,

histories, political systems, ecological relationships, spiritual traditions, and ways of producing and transmitting knowledge. Treating all of this as one category can reproduce the simplification we are trying to challenge. Still, scholars use terms such as Indigenous knowledge, traditional knowledge, and traditional ecological knowledge to describe systems developed and maintained through long relationships among communities, land, ecosystems, history, and cultural practice. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights to maintain, control, protect, and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions (United Nations, 2007). That is a much stronger idea than Indigenous knowledge is useful. It says Indigenous peoples possess authority over their knowledge.

Different Ways of Knowing

Modern universities train us to recognize certain markers of expertise: credentials, peer review, published research, replicable methods, quantitative measurement, and written evidence. These standards can be enormously valuable. But they are not the only ways humans have produced reliable knowledge. A community living within the same ecosystem for generations may recognize subtle changes in water, plants, animals, soil, fire, weather, and seasons that a short research project cannot easily capture. This does not mean every traditional belief is scientifically correct. Nor does it mean Western science and Indigenous knowledge are opposites. That binary is too simple. The more interesting question is what happens when different knowledge systems encounter one another. Can they communicate without one automatically being placed above the other?

When "Evidence" Has a Cultural History

Science aspires toward universal methods. Scientific institutions nevertheless have histories. Colonial expansion did not merely seize land and labor. It also collected knowledge. European botanists cataloged plants used by Indigenous peoples. Explorers mapped territories already known to local communities. Museums removed objects. Anthropologists recorded languages and ceremonies. Researchers transformed community knowledge into publications. In many cases, Indigenous people appeared in the final record as subjects rather than experts. The knowledge was extracted. Authority moved elsewhere.

The Columbus Problem of Knowledge

There is a recurring pattern: a community knows something, an outsider observes it, the outsider publishes it, and the world celebrates the discovery. This is the intellectual version of arriving somewhere people already live and announcing that you found it. We might call this the Columbus Problem of Knowledge. It occurs whenever recognition flows more readily to the institution that validates knowledge than to the community that produced it. When does knowledge become legitimate? When a community has practiced it for centuries? Or when someone with institutional authority writes it down?

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) refers broadly to cumulative knowledge, practices, and beliefs concerning relationships among living beings, environments, and communities that develop through long-term interaction with particular ecosystems (Berkes, 2018). This knowledge may include seasonal cycles, species behavior, water systems, soil, fire, plant cultivation, weather, food systems, and sustainable resource management. It may also include ethical obligations. When can something be harvested? How much? Who is responsible for maintaining the resource? What should be left for future generations? To know something may also mean being responsible for it.

Fire: When Suppressed Knowledge Comes Back

For generations, many Indigenous communities used carefully managed burning practices to maintain ecosystems, encourage particular plants, reduce accumulated fuels, and support culturally important species. Colonial governments often suppressed those practices. Today Indigenous fire stewardship and cultural burning are increasingly recognized in ecological research and wildfire-management discussions. Research demonstrates that traditional burning practices can support biodiversity and ecosystem restoration (Lake et al., 2017). Notice the irony. A practice is prohibited because it is considered backward. Decades later, institutions rediscover its ecological value. The challenge is ensuring that recognition does not become a second round of extraction.

“Thanks for the Knowledge. We’ll Take It From Here.”

Institutions may say: Indigenous knowledge matters! Wonderful. Then they remove the useful pieces from the relationships that gave them meaning. A government may want the fire technique but not Indigenous land rights. A corporation may want the medicinal plant but not community control. A conservation organization may want ecological knowledge but not political sovereignty. A university may want oral histories but not restrictions on who can access them. This is knowledge extraction. The knowledge is welcomed. The authority of the knowledge holders is not.

Biopiracy

Biopiracy refers broadly to commercial use or patenting of biological resources and associated traditional knowledge without appropriate authorization, recognition, or benefit-sharing. Imagine a community has used a plant medicinally for generations. Researchers learn about the plant. A company isolates a compound. The compound becomes a commercial product. Who owns the innovation? Conventional patent law struggles with this problem because traditional knowledge may be collective and centuries old rather than individually invented and newly documented. Ironically, the fact that knowledge has existed for generations can make it difficult to protect under systems designed to reward recent individual invention.

Neem, Turmeric, and the Politics of “Discovery”

Patents involving traditional uses of neem and turmeric became famous disputes over whether supposedly novel inventions actually relied on long-established South Asian knowledge. In the turmeric case, India successfully challenged a U.S. patent concerning wound healing by documenting prior knowledge. The cases helped motivate efforts to document traditional knowledge so patent offices would recognize that it already existed. But notice the paradox. Communities may have to place knowledge into databases in order to prevent someone else from claiming to have invented it. Protection and exposure can happen simultaneously. Just because you might have been today day's old when you discovered something, doesn't mean a billion other people hadn't already had that knowledge before you!

Knowledge as Property Versus Knowledge as Relationship

Global intellectual-property rules are generally designed around ownership. Traditional knowledge may not work that way. It may not belong to one person. It may not be intended for sale. It may not be transferable. Some knowledge may not be appropriate for outsiders to know at all. This creates a clash between knowledge as property and knowledge as relationship.

Not Everything Is Open Source

Open data. Open science. Open archives. Open education. Open knowledge. Expanding access often has enormous benefits. This textbook itself is an Open Educational Resource. But not every form of knowledge should necessarily be open to everyone. Some Indigenous knowledge is sacred. Some belongs to particular ceremonial roles or communities. Some carries responsibilities that cannot be separated from access. The global norm of openness creates another ethical question: Who gets to decide what should be shared? The answer cannot automatically be whoever has the scanner.

Google It? Maybe Not.

Digitization can preserve languages and oral histories. It can also make restricted knowledge difficult to control. A recording created for one purpose may be copied indefinitely. AI systems may ingest publicly available cultural material. Traditional designs may become training data. Ceremonial knowledge can circulate outside its intended context. The internet solves one preservation problem and creates another.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

This has contributed to growing interest in Indigenous data sovereignty, the principle that Indigenous peoples should have authority over data relating to their peoples, territories, cultures, and knowledge. Kukutai and Taylor (2016) argue that data governance is deeply connected to sovereignty because data shape policy, representation, resources, and self-determination.

Who owns the dataset matters. Who defines the categories matters. Who gets counted matters. Who interprets the results matters.

CARE, Not Just FAIR

Open-science communities frequently discuss FAIR data: Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable. Indigenous data scholars have added another set of priorities through the CARE Principles: Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics (Carroll et al., 2020). FAIR asks: Can the data circulate? CARE asks: Should it? and under whose authority?

Climate Change: Everyone Suddenly Wants Indigenous Knowledge

Climate change has increased international interest in Indigenous environmental knowledge, and there are excellent reasons for this. Indigenous communities often possess generations of detailed knowledge concerning local environmental conditions, adaptation, and ecological relationships. Whyte (2018) argues that Indigenous climate-change scholarship also requires attention to colonialism, responsibility, sovereignty, and justice rather than treating Indigenous knowledge merely as technical information available for outside use. There is a danger in valuing Indigenous peoples primarily because their knowledge may help solve problems largely produced by industrial societies. That is a very convenient form of respect.

Knowledge Without Land?

Many Indigenous knowledge systems are inseparable from territory. A plant name makes sense because the plant grows somewhere. A seasonal practice depends on a landscape. A story may describe a particular mountain, river, migration route, or species. A community cannot continue fishing knowledge without access to fishing grounds. Agricultural knowledge cannot continue if farmers are displaced. Protecting knowledge while destroying the conditions that sustain it is not preservation.

Buen Vivir: Development From Somewhere Else

Indigenous knowledge can also challenge dominant ideas about development. Buen Vivir, associated with Indigenous intellectual and political traditions in the Andes, challenges the assumption that development must always mean increasing production and consumption. Instead, it emphasizes relationships among people, communities, and the natural world. Its incorporation into political and constitutional debates in Ecuador and Bolivia has generated both innovation and contradiction (Gudynas, 2011; Kauffman & Martin, 2014). Theory can travel in more than one direction.

Global Studies Has an Epistemology Problem Too

Global Studies claims to value multiple perspectives. Excellent. But whose scholarship appears on the syllabus? Whose theories are described as universal? Who becomes a case study? Who becomes a theorist? If Indigenous communities appear only when we discuss Indigenous issues while European or American scholars explain capitalism, democracy, development, identity, and globalization for everyone, the hierarchy remains intact. Some people produce theory. Others provide examples. A genuinely global field should challenge that distinction.

The Difference Between Inclusion and Tokenization

A course can include one Indigenous reading. A government can invite one Indigenous speaker. A corporation can create one advisory committee. A climate conference can open with a land acknowledgment. None of these actions are necessarily bad. But representation does not automatically redistribute power. Did participants influence the decision? Could they veto the project? Were recommendations adopted? Were they compensated? There is a difference between having a seat at the table and having power over what is served.

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent

The principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) is central to contemporary debates over Indigenous authority. Each word matters. Free means consent should not be coerced. Prior means consultation should occur before decisions are effectively

final. Informed means communities require meaningful information. Consent means participation should mean more than being told what will happen. Instead of We have decided. Please comment, FPIC asks whether communities possess meaningful authority in the decision itself.

Technology Is Not Automatically the Enemy

Indigenous communities use drones, GIS mapping, social media, podcasts, satellite imagery, smartphones, digital archives, AI tools, and online language education. Technology can help document land claims, monitor deforestation, preserve languages, connect diasporas, and organize political campaigns. The relevant question is not: traditional or modern? It is: Who controls the technology, and what is it being used for?

Do Not Romanticize Indigenous Knowledge Either

In trying to correct centuries of dismissal, outsiders can swing too far and portray Indigenous knowledge as inherently pure, peaceful, ecological, or spiritually enlightened. That is also a stereotype. Indigenous peoples are human communities. They disagree, innovate, engage markets, use technology, move to cities, and participate in politics.Respect does not require romanticization. The goal is not to replace Indigenous knowledge is primitive with Indigenous knowledge is magical. The goal is to recognize it as knowledge and respect the authority of the people who produce it.

Knowledge Sovereignty

Cultural sovereignty includes the ability of communities to determine what knowledge is shared, what remains private, who can use it, how it is represented, how benefits are distributed, how future generations inherit it, and how it changes. The issue is not simply whether knowledge survives. It is whether communities retain the power to govern its survival.

The Indigenous Knowledge Test

When an institution claims to use Indigenous knowledge, ask which community holds the knowledge, who has authority to share it, what relationships give it meaning, whether the community agreed to its use, whether Indigenous knowledge holders are recognized as experts, who benefits economically, whether the community can restrict future use, whether territorial relationships are protected, who controls recordings and digital copies, and whether the knowledge actually influenced the decision. Then ask perhaps the most revealing question: If the community says no, can the project still proceed? If the answer is yes, the arrangement may involve consultation. It does not necessarily involve sovereignty.

Think about it

Imagine researchers discover that a plant used medicinally by an Indigenous community contains a compound with enormous commercial potential. A pharmaceutical company develops a life-saving drug.

Who should benefit: the researchers, the company, the Indigenous community, the country where the plant grows, or humanity?

Now make the case harder. What if the community never wanted the knowledge made public? Does the potential to save lives override cultural authority?

Your answer should address knowledge, rights, benefit, consent, power, and responsibility.

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2.10: So, Is There Such a Thing as Global Culture?

Global Citizen Global Culture?

You made it through cultural diffusion, diaspora, K-pop, Q-pop, algorithms, cultural appropriation, pizza, Indigenous knowledge, language loss, and at least one argument about who gets to call something authentic. So now we can return to the deceptively simple question sitting underneath this entire chapter:

Is there such a thing as global culture?

The easiest answer would be yes. People around the world watch some of the same films, listen to some of the same artists, wear some of the same brands, use some of the same platforms, follow some of the same sports, and participate in cultural trends that can cross continents in hours. Surely that looks like global culture. But then things get messy. The same song means different things to different audiences. The same global brand changes from one market to another. Migrants transform traditions rather than simply reproducing them. Diaspora communities create cultural forms that belong fully to neither an imagined homeland nor a host society. Platforms distribute similar technologies but produce different cultural environments. Indigenous communities participate in globalization while asserting rights to keep some forms of knowledge from circulating at all.

The harder we look, the harder it becomes to find one global culture.

What we find instead is global cultural interconnectedness.

Those are not quite the same thing.

Globalization Does Not Equal Sameness

Scholars have long debated whether cultural globalization produces homogenization, differentiation, or combinations of both. There is evidence for convergence. Walk through major shopping districts around the world and many storefronts look familiar. Open a streaming platform and globally recognizable franchises appear. Visit an international airport and the architecture of consumption may feel strangely interchangeable. But similarity is not the same thing as cultural sameness. Pieterse argues that treating globalization simply as homogenization misses the proliferation of hybrid cultural forms created through cross-cultural interaction (Pieterse, 1994, 2009). The global does not necessarily erase the local. It frequently gives the local new material to work with.

Think Back to Q-Pop

If globalization simply produced homogenization, the spread of K-pop might lead audiences elsewhere to consume Korean culture unchanged. Instead, Kazakh musicians drew on aspects of K-pop and produced something locally meaningful. The global cultural flow helped generate cultural difference. Robertson's concept of glocalization captures this interaction: global and local processes are mutually constitutive rather than simple opposites (Robertson, 1992, 2012). In plain language: The global arrives. The local says: Interesting. Then it changes it.

Appadurai's Messy World

Arjun Appadurai offered one of the most influential frameworks for cultural globalization by describing overlapping transnational "scapes" through which people, technologies, finance, media, and ideas circulate (Appadurai, 1996). These flows do not line up neatly. Migrants may move one way, money another, media another, political ideas another, and technology another. A person may live in Dubai, communicate daily with relatives in Kerala, watch Korean television, work for a European company, send remittances through a global financial platform, follow Indian politics, and participate in an online gaming community with members on four continents. Which culture is that person in? The question starts to sound inadequate.

Culture Without Geography?

We often imagine cultures geographically: Japanese culture, Mexican culture, Nigerian culture, French culture, Kazakh culture. These labels remain useful. But global cultural life increasingly produces practices that are not neatly contained within national borders. A diaspora community may have institutions in several countries. An online fandom may have no meaningful physical center. A musical genre may emerge through collaboration among artists on different continents. Tomlinson uses the idea of deterritorialization to describe how globalization can loosen the assumed connection between culture and fixed geographic territory while still leaving place meaningful (Tomlinson, 1999). Culture has not become placeless. But place is no longer always enough to explain culture.

Your Cultural Life Is Probably Already Transnational

Where was the last song you listened to produced? Where was your device designed? Where was it manufactured? Where is the company that owns the streaming service headquartered? What language was the song in? Who recommended it? Was the recommendation made by a person or an algorithm? Now do the same with your last meal, your clothes, a film, a beauty product, a political idea, or a meme. It quickly becomes difficult to separate the local from the global.

Global Culture Is Uneven

Some people travel easily. Others cannot. Some speak globally dominant languages. Others use languages barely supported by digital systems. Some creators possess access to global distribution networks. Others remain invisible. Some communities profit when their culture circulates. Others watch outsiders profit from it. Culture may circulate globally. The ability to shape its circulation does not.

The Center Is Moving...or Multiplying

Cultural power no longer fits comfortably into one center-periphery model. The United States remains enormously influential. But Seoul matters. Lagos matters. Mumbai matters. Istanbul matters. Mexico City matters. Tokyo matters. Dakar matters. Jakarta matters. Diaspora communities matter. Digital communities matter. Perhaps we are not witnessing the disappearance of cultural hierarchy so much as the emergence of multiple centers of cultural production. Networks can still have powerful hubs.

Algorithms Complicate the Map Again

Digital platforms create an odd possibility: Globalization can increase cultural diversity at the system level while decreasing diversity in an individual's experience. Millions of choices exist. The recommendation system keeps giving you the twelve it thinks you like. Welcome to globalization.

Difference Does Not Always Disappear Under Connection

Globalization can intensify identity. Migration can make traditions more meaningful. A global language can inspire revitalization movements. Foreign cultural influence can stimulate local cultural production. Global tourism can renew interest in heritage. Diasporas can become highly involved in homeland culture and politics. Globalization can produce both cosmopolitanism and nationalism, mixture and boundary-making. Contradictions are not glitches in globalization. They are part of the system.

Cosmopolitanism: Belonging Beyond One Place

Cosmopolitanism broadly describes openness toward people, ideas, identities, and obligations extending beyond one immediate national or cultural community. Ulrich Beck argued that globalization requires a cosmopolitan perspective capable of recognizing transnational risks, identities, institutions, and relationships rather than imagining societies solely as separate national containers (Beck, 2000). But cosmopolitanism is also unequal. A person with several passports, disposable income, and international mobility may experience transnational life as freedom. A migrant without legal status experiences it very differently. Global belonging is easier with the right passport.

And Yet, the Local Still Matters

Neighborhoods matter. Families matter. Languages matter. Land matters. Religious communities matter. National laws matter. Schools matter. Borders matter. Even digital culture has physical infrastructure: servers, energy systems, cables, mines, warehouses, workers, and states.The global does not float above the world. It is built from connections among actual places.

Culture Is Not a Souvenir

It is tempting to treat culture as the colorful part of globalization. Economics gives us trade. Politics gives us states. The environment gives us climate change. Culture gives us music and food.

But culture shapes what people consider legitimate, how societies define belonging, whose knowledge is trusted, which languages carry prestige, what people consume, how communities remember, what counts as modern, who is considered an outsider, and what people believe is worth protecting.

Culture is not decoration sitting on top of globalization.

It is one of the systems through which globalization is interpreted.

So, Is There a Global Culture?

Yes.

And no.

There are global cultural infrastructures, global platforms, global consumer brands, global genres, global languages, global fandoms, and global conversations. But there is no single global culture replacing all others. Instead, globalization produces a constantly changing cultural landscape in which convergence, hybridity, resistance, localization, inequality, preservation, and reinvention happen at the same time. A more useful conclusion is not: The world is becoming one culture. It is: Cultures are becoming increasingly entangled. Entanglement is not the same thing as sameness.

The Global Culture Test

When you encounter a claim that globalization is “destroying culture” or “bringing the world together,” ask what is crossing borders, how it is traveling, how it is changing, who controls its visibility, what it means to the people using it, who profits, who can participate, who rejects or reshapes it, what is being preserved or forgotten, and who has authority to decide what happens next. Then ask: What would this story look like from somewhere else? That question may be one of the most important habits Global Studies can teach.

From Culture to Economy: Follow the Money

There is one clue we have encountered repeatedly throughout this chapter. Culture travels through markets. Streaming services sell access. Fashion houses monetize aesthetics. Restaurants turn identity into enterprise. Tourism sells cultural experiences. Influencers monetize attention. Pharmaceutical companies may commercialize traditional knowledge. Migrants send money across borders while carrying culture with them. Even efforts to preserve culture require resources. So if culture moves through globalization, money is rarely far behind. That brings us to Chapter 3. There, we shift from asking: How does culture cross borders? to: How does money? And just as culture turned out to be much more political than it first appeared, the economy will turn out to be much more human.

Final Reflection

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked:

What happens when culture crosses borders?

Now we can give a better answer.

It spreads, changes, mixes, becomes local, becomes global, becomes profitable, becomes controversial, disappears, returns, gets translated, gets misunderstood, gets protected, gets stolen, gets reinvented, becomes someone's memory, becomes someone else's business, and occasionally becomes everyone's dance challenge.

Culture crosses borders.

But it never crosses them empty-handed.

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2.11: Discussion

Food for thought

Discussion 1: Your Algorithm Has a Culture

Examine the first ten pieces of content recommended to you by the platform you use most frequently. Which countries, languages, communities, identities, and cultural forms were visible? What was absent? Which material appeared commercial? Use at least three concepts from this chapter to analyze your feed. End by answering: Does your feed expose you to the world or to a carefully selected version of it?

Discussion 2: Authentic According to Whom?

Find a real controversy involving claims of cultural authenticity in food, music, fashion, language, religion, tourism, diaspora identity, popular culture, or heritage. Identify at least two groups who disagree about what counts as authentic. Analyze who has authority to define authenticity, how historical change shaped the practice, and whether migration or globalization altered it. Do not begin by choosing a winner. Explain why authenticity became contested.

Discussion 3: Should Everything Be Shared?

Choose a case involving Indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage, museum collections, traditional design, sacred knowledge, genetic resources, language documentation, or traditional ecological knowledge. Consider the argument that knowledge benefits humanity when it circulates freely, then consider the argument that communities possess cultural sovereignty and may have legitimate reasons to restrict access. When, if ever, should the global public's interest in knowledge outweigh a community's right to control it? Address power, consent, benefit, and authority.

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2.12: Assignments

Assignment 1: The Cultural Passport

Choose one cultural object or practice that has traveled internationally. Possible examples include a musical genre, garment, beauty practice, sport, television format, food, dance, slang term, religious practice, meme, or design tradition. Construct its Cultural Passport by tracing where it emerged, how it crossed borders, which diffusion processes helped it travel, how at least two communities changed it, who helped amplify it, who profits from it today, debates over authenticity or ownership, and whether globalization strengthened, weakened, or transformed its connection to its place of origin.

Your submission may take the form of a 1,200–1,500 word analysis, interactive timeline, illustrated story map, podcast, or short documentary. The strongest projects will show that a cultural form does not simply travel. It accumulates histories as it moves.

Assignment 2: The Global Plate Autopsy

Choose one dish that matters to you personally, culturally, regionally—or simply because you enjoy eating it. Perform a Global Plate Autopsy by investigating where its major ingredients originated, the historical processes that brought those ingredients together, migration, colonialism, trade, or labor systems connected to the dish, how recipes changed across generations or borders, competing claims about authenticity, who produces key ingredients today, how the dish is marketed and valued, and whether different cooks receive different levels of prestige for preparing versions of it.

Then answer: What does your dish reveal about globalization that the recipe alone cannot tell us? Use at least four scholarly or authoritative sources.

Assignment 3: The Cultural Power Investigation

Choose one cultural phenomenon that became internationally visible within roughly the last decade. Do not write a conventional report explaining why it became popular. Investigate its power structure by asking who created it, who amplified it, who changed it, who profited from it, and who received credit. Then Follow the Infrastructure: Which corporations, platforms, states, migration networks, entertainment industries, technologies, or institutions helped move it?

Finally evaluate: Does this case demonstrate cultural democratization, cultural inequality, or both? Connect your analysis to at least three other dimensions of Global Studies, such as economics, politics, technology, migration, history, inequality, or environment.

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2.13: Key Terms

Words to know

- **Algorithmic culture:** Cultural production and consumption increasingly shaped by computational recommendation, ranking, and visibility systems.
- **Artifacts:** Material objects through which cultures express meaning.
- **Attention economy:** An economic environment in which human attention becomes a scarce resource that businesses seek to capture and monetize.
- **Authenticity:** A claim about whether a cultural practice or product is considered genuine or legitimate; authenticity is often contested.
- **Biopiracy:** Commercial use or patenting of biological resources or associated traditional knowledge without appropriate authorization or benefit-sharing.
- **CARE Principles:** Indigenous data-governance principles emphasizing Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics.
- **Cultural appropriation:** Adoption or use of cultural elements across group boundaries under circumstances involving questions of unequal power, context, consent, attribution, commercialization, or harm.
- **Cultural diffusion:** Movement of cultural practices, ideas, technologies, symbols, or institutions between places or populations.
- **Cultural hearth:** A place associated with the emergence or early concentration of a cultural practice or innovation.
- **Cultural homogenization:** Reduction of cultural difference through the spread of common products, institutions, media, or practices.
- **Cultural hybridity:** Creation of new cultural forms through interaction among multiple traditions or influences.
- **Cultural imperialism:** Unequal cultural influence through which powerful societies or institutions dominate transnational cultural production and circulation.
- **Cultural sovereignty:** Authority of communities to maintain, interpret, transmit, transform, and govern their own cultures and knowledge.
- **Diaspora:** A dispersed population maintaining historical, cultural, emotional, political, or social connections with a place of origin.
- **Deterritorialization:** Weakening of the assumption that culture and identity are necessarily tied to one fixed geographic place.
- **Glocalization:** Adaptation and reinterpretation of global forms within particular local contexts.
- **Hallyu:** The Korean Wave: the transnational circulation and popularity of South Korean popular culture.
- **Hierarchical diffusion:** Cultural diffusion through influential individuals, institutions, organizations, or social hierarchies.
- **Indigenous data sovereignty:** The principle that Indigenous peoples possess authority over data concerning their peoples, territories, cultures, and knowledge.
- **Indigenous knowledge:** Diverse knowledge systems developed and transmitted through Indigenous relationships among people, place, history, environment, and cultural practice.
- **Intangible cultural heritage:** Living cultural practices and knowledge including oral traditions, rituals, performing arts, craftsmanship, and knowledge concerning nature.
- **Language revitalization:** Deliberate efforts to increase use, transmission, and social vitality of an endangered or marginalized language.
- **Mentifacts:** Beliefs, values, ideas, symbols, and systems of knowledge through which people interpret the world.
- **Platformization:** Growing influence of digital platforms, infrastructures, markets, rules, and algorithms over cultural activity.
- **Q-pop:** A Kazakh popular-music movement influenced partly by global and Korean popular culture while developing distinctive Kazakh-language and cultural forms.
- **Relocation diffusion:** Cultural movement that occurs because people themselves migrate.
- **Sociofacts:** Institutions, relationships, norms, and organizational structures through which collective life is organized.
- **Soft power:** Influence produced through attraction, culture, reputation, values, and legitimacy rather than coercion.
- **Stimulus diffusion:** Diffusion in which an underlying idea is adopted and transformed rather than copied directly.
- **Traditional cultural expressions:** Cultural forms such as designs, stories, music, symbols, performances, and rituals maintained collectively or intergenerationally.
- **Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK):** Knowledge, practices, values, and relationships developed through long-term interaction with particular ecosystems.
- **Transnationalism:** Sustained relationships, identities, institutions, and practices operating across national borders.

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3: SHOW ME THE MONEY

Follow the Money



Figure 3.1: Currency from around the World. (Photo by Jason Leung on Unsplash).

Think back to the objects, foods, technologies, and cultural connections we have been tracing throughout this book. There is another question we can ask about almost every one of them: Who paid for it and who made money from it? Show me the money is a fitting title for a chapter on economics. After all the world we know would be so different if we weren't chasing dollars, yen, or pesos.

The phone in your hand contains minerals extracted in one country, components manufactured in several others, intellectual property owned somewhere else, and software developed by workers who may never encounter one another. Your clothes may travel farther before reaching your closet than you will travel in a year. A cup of coffee can connect farmers, commodity traders, shipping companies, currency markets, retailers, and consumers across several continents before you take the first sip.

None of this movement happens accidentally. It takes place within a global economy shaped by markets, governments, corporations, workers, financial institutions, technologies, trade agreements, and historical relationships that determine what moves across borders, under what conditions, and for whose benefit.

Economic globalization refers broadly to the growing integration of national economies through flows of goods, services, capital, technology, information, and labor. Yet describing the global economy as simply becoming “more connected” misses much of what makes it interesting. Connections can create enormous opportunities while simultaneously producing new dependencies; policies that lower prices for consumers can disrupt industries elsewhere; corporations can organize production across continents while workers remain governed by very different labor laws; and financial decisions made thousands of miles away can reshape employment, food prices, housing markets, or public spending in communities that had little voice in making them.

Economic globalization is therefore not merely a story about trade. It is a story about power, rules, risk, opportunity, and distribution.

The Global Economy Is Changing

For several decades after the Second World War—and especially from the late twentieth century onward, many policymakers treated increasing economic integration almost as an inevitable direction of history. Tariffs declined, trade expanded, corporations constructed increasingly elaborate global supply chains, finance moved rapidly across borders, and production was reorganized around the possibility of obtaining labor, materials, or expertise wherever they could be acquired most

efficiently. The twenty-first century has complicated that story. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed just how vulnerable highly optimized supply chains could become when factories closed, transportation networks stalled, or critical goods suddenly became scarce. Intensifying geopolitical competition has encouraged governments to reconsider whether efficiency should always take precedence over security. Climate change has disrupted agriculture, transportation, energy systems, insurance markets, and industrial planning. Meanwhile, artificial intelligence, automation, digital finance, and e-commerce are transforming not merely how goods are exchanged, but what counts as economically valuable in the first place.

As a result, governments and firms are experimenting with strategies such as friendshoring, nearshoring, supply-chain diversification, industrial policy, and strategic investment in industries considered essential to national security. The language may sound technical, but the underlying question is straightforward: How much economic interdependence is desirable when the same connections that create prosperity can also create vulnerability? At the same time, countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East are pushing for greater influence over institutions and rules that were largely constructed during an earlier era of global economic power. Expanding South-South trade, the growing prominence of BRICS+, debates over reforming institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and competition over emerging technologies all suggest that economic globalization is not disappearing so much as being renegotiated. And renegotiation inevitably raises another question: Who gets to write the next set of rules?

Economics Is Never Just Economics

One of the recurring lessons of Global Studies is that the categories we use to organize the world—economic, political, cultural, environmental, technological—are analytically useful precisely because the real world refuses to stay inside them. Consider a semiconductor factory. Economically, it produces high-value technology and employment. Politically, governments may subsidize it because computer chips have become strategically important. Environmentally, semiconductor manufacturing requires substantial quantities of water and energy. Socially, it creates particular kinds of skilled labor markets. Technologically, its products become essential components of everything from smartphones to medical equipment to weapons systems. Change one piece of the system, and effects can ripple outward. That is why this chapter will examine economic globalization not simply as a collection of markets but as a system of relationships linking production, finance, labor, governments, institutions, corporations, technologies, and consumers. We will examine the remarkable expansion of the global economy over the past half century, but we will also investigate its contradictions: why economic integration can generate wealth without distributing it evenly; why markets depend upon political rules even when they are described as “free”; why neoliberalism became enormously influential and equally controversial; and why institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and WTO continue to provoke debates about authority, representation, and fairness.

We will then bring those ideas down to earth through two very different cases. First, the evolution from NAFTA to the USMCA allows us to examine what economic integration actually does to workers, firms, consumers, and governments across borders. Then, in our Big Tech case study, we will investigate a newer form of global economic power, one in which platforms, algorithms, data, intellectual property, and enormous concentrations of corporate wealth increasingly shape the rules of economic life. Because once you begin following the money, the global system looks different. And, as you may already have discovered by this point in the book, that is usually where the interesting questions begin.

Guiding Question

How does the global economy create prosperity and opportunity while simultaneously producing vulnerability, dependency, and unequal power, and who gets to decide how those benefits and costs are distributed?

Learning Objectives

- Explain how goods, services, labor, technology, finance, and capital circulate through the global economy.
- Trace the major changes that have shaped economic globalization during the past five decades.
- Explain the basic ideas associated with global capitalism and neoliberalism while distinguishing economic theory from particular policy choices.
- Identify the roles played by major institutions including the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization.
- Evaluate competing interpretations of trade liberalization and regional economic integration through the NAFTA/USMCA case.
- Analyze how digital platforms and Big Tech firms are reshaping economic power in the twenty-first century.

- Apply a Global Studies lens to ask not only whether economic globalization produces growth, but **who benefits, who bears the risks, who writes the rules, and what alternatives might exist.**

3.1: Introduction - Our Global Economy
3.2: Background - Five Decades of Economic Globalization
3.3: Theories and Concepts - Global Capitalism and Neoliberalism
3.4: Cheat Sheet On International Organizations
3.5: At Home and Abroad - NAFTA, USMCA, and the Great Trade-Off
3.6: Follow the Money Follow the Power
3.7: Big Tech Interactive Case Study and Mini Research Missions
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3.1: Introduction - Our Global Economy

Start with Dinner

Think about your most recent meal.

Maybe you cooked it yourself. Maybe someone handed it to you through a drive-through window. Maybe it came from a dining hall, a restaurant, a delivery app, a convenience store, or the back of your refrigerator at an hour when your better judgment had already gone to sleep.

Whatever you ate, chances are that dinner had a passport.

The ingredients may have been grown in several countries; the fertilizer, farm equipment, or seeds used to produce them may have originated somewhere else; the packaging could contain petroleum or wood products drawn from yet another set of economies; and the cookware, refrigerator, truck, shipping container, smartphone app, payment processor, and energy infrastructure involved in getting that food to you connect the meal to networks stretching far beyond the place where you actually ate it.

Even the money changed hands through systems that may be surprisingly global. A tap of a credit card or phone can activate banks, payment networks, data centers, currency systems, and corporate accounts operating across multiple jurisdictions.

Suddenly, dinner is not just dinner.

It is a tiny window into the global economy.

Something as ordinary as a bowl of noodles makes the point particularly well. Wheat was first domesticated thousands of years ago in Southwest Asia and subsequently spread through migration, conquest, trade, settlement, and agricultural exchange until it became one of the world's major crops. Today, wheat is grown on several continents and traded through global commodity markets, meaning that a food with ancient regional origins has become embedded in an economic system whose geography is extraordinarily difficult to contain within any single country. The interactive element below shows who grows the most wheat around the world...wheat that then gets turned to noodles,

Interactive Map of Global Wheat Production

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this Interactive Content online

You can hover over the countries or use the list on the right to click on countries to see how much wheat was produced. Unfortunately this box is not accessible. This box will NOT print up in pdfs

But wheat alone does not make noodles. Someone plants and harvests it. Someone processes it into flour. Someone manufactures machinery, produces packaging, monitors food safety, transports ingredients, designs logistics systems, stocks shelves, writes software, manages payments, serves customers, and moves money. Some of these people work only a few miles from one another; others may participate in the same economic process while living on opposite sides of the planet.

This is what economic globalization looks like when we zoom in.

It is not one thing moving around the world. It is multiple flows, goods, labor, services, information, and finance, interacting at the same time.

And once those flows interact, something interesting happens: economic relationships become increasingly difficult to describe as simply “domestic” or “international.” A company may be headquartered in one country, raise capital in another, purchase materials from several others, outsource services elsewhere, employ migrant workers, sell to customers globally, and report profits through still another jurisdiction. The final product may carry a national brand, yet the economic system that created it is profoundly transnational. That complexity is the starting point for understanding the global economy.

Global Goods: Made Where, Exactly?

For much of human history, most things people consumed were produced relatively close to where they lived. Long-distance trade certainly existed, but transportation was expensive, communication was slow, and producing a single ordinary object through dozens of geographically dispersed locations would have been extraordinarily difficult. Industrialization changed those possibilities. Container shipping, commercial aviation, refrigeration, telecommunications, computerized logistics, and increasingly sophisticated transportation infrastructure made it possible for firms to divide production into stages and distribute those stages across countries. Rather than manufacturing an entire product in one location, companies could place different parts of production wherever labor, expertise, natural resources, infrastructure, regulation, taxation, or proximity to markets made that stage advantageous.

Economists describe this broader separation of productive tasks as a division of labor. At a global scale, however, the concept becomes far more complicated than workers specializing in different jobs inside the same factory. Entire cities, regions, and countries may specialize in particular parts of production, generating what are often called global supply chains or global value chains. Consider a smartphone. The minerals inside it may originate in Africa, Latin America, Asia, or Australia; sophisticated components may be manufactured in East Asia; software may be developed by multinational teams; assembly may occur in another country altogether; intellectual property may belong to a corporation headquartered elsewhere; and the finished device may then be sold in markets throughout the world.

So where was the phone “made”?

The answer depends on what we mean by *made*.

Was it made where the minerals were extracted? Where the chip was fabricated? Where the components were assembled? Where the software was written? Where the product was designed? Or where the company that ultimately captures a large share of the profit is legally headquartered? Those are not trivial questions. They reveal one of the most important characteristics of contemporary economic globalization: Production can be geographically dispersed while ownership and profit remain highly concentrated.

Global Labor: People Move Too

Goods cross borders, but so do workers.

Labor migration has long been part of the global economy, from merchants, agricultural laborers, sailors, artisans, and enslaved people in earlier periods to today's engineers, nurses, construction workers, agricultural laborers, domestic workers, academics, technology specialists, hospitality workers, and seasonal migrants. Some people move because international labor markets offer opportunities unavailable at home. Others move because economies have been disrupted by conflict, environmental change, political instability, demographic pressures, or lack of employment. Often several motivations operate simultaneously, making the familiar distinction between “voluntary” and “forced” migration far less tidy in practice than it appears in theory. The result is a global labor system characterized by an apparent contradiction:

Capital and goods often move across borders more easily than people do.

A corporation may shift investment from one country to another rapidly, yet a worker seeking to follow that employment encounters passports, visas, immigration law, recruitment systems, border enforcement, professional licensing, and political debates over belonging. Migrant workers also connect economies through **remittances**, while their movement redistributes labor, knowledge, and skills across regions.

Global Services: The Product Does Not Have to Fit in a Shipping Container

Economic globalization is easy to visualize when we imagine cargo ships stacked with containers. Services are trickier. You cannot load financial analysis, customer support, accounting, graphic design, tutoring, software development, insurance processing, or legal research onto a ship. Yet technological change has allowed many of these services to become globally traded. India became a major center of business-process outsourcing, while the Philippines developed one of the world's largest BPO industries, aided by widespread English fluency, an educated workforce, digital infrastructure, and significant international wage differences. This model created opportunity and controversy simultaneously. For firms, outsourcing could reduce costs and provide access to skilled workers. For workers, global service industries could provide employment and professional mobility. Yet wage disparities, difficult schedules, workplace stress, and unequal bargaining power raised an uncomfortable question:

If two people possess comparable qualifications but receive dramatically different wages because they live in different countries, what exactly is the market valuing, the skill, the work, or the geography?

Artificial intelligence makes this question even more complicated. AI systems increasingly perform or assist with customer service, translation, coding, research, design, writing, and data analysis. Technological change rarely eliminates “labor” as a category; instead, it changes which tasks humans perform, where that work occurs, and how its value is determined.

Global Finance: Money Moves Fastest

Goods move quickly. Information moves faster. Money can move almost instantaneously. Finance refers broadly to the management, lending, investment, and movement of money and financial assets. International financial integration allows firms to borrow, governments to issue debt, individuals to remit money across borders, investors to finance new enterprises, and capital to move toward opportunities. But financial integration also means trouble can travel. The 2008 global financial crisis demonstrated this vividly. Problems originating in U.S. housing and mortgage markets became embedded in financial products owned by institutions around the world. As losses accumulated, banks and investors discovered that geographic distance did not protect them from financial interdependence. China, for example, responded to the global downturn with an enormous stimulus program of approximately four trillion yuan (Wong, 2011). The broader lesson is simple: Global networks can transmit prosperity. They can also transmit panic.

Put the Flows Together

Return to our bowl of noodles.

The goods include wheat, oil, packaging, equipment, and spices.

The labor includes farmers, transportation workers, engineers, warehouse employees, managers, restaurant workers, and possibly migrants.

The services include logistics, insurance, telecommunications, accounting, software, retailing, and payment processing.

The finance includes investment, loans, currencies, credit systems, commodity prices, and corporate finance.

Now add governments, regulations, climate conditions, conflicts, exchange rates, corporations, and algorithms predicting consumer demand.

That is the global economy. Not a single line from producer to consumer, but a system whose parts continually interact.

Interdependence Does Not Mean Equality

Two actors can participate in the same supply chain while possessing radically different bargaining power. A multinational corporation may have many possible suppliers. A worker may have one employer. A wealthy state may access finance at favorable rates. A poorer economy experiencing crisis may have considerably fewer alternatives. Globalization therefore creates interdependence, but interdependence may be highly asymmetrical. This distinction will matter throughout the chapter.

Global Studies Lens: Follow More Than the Product

When you encounter an economic story, trace at least five things:

1. The product: What is being exchanged?
2. The labor: Who performs the work?
3. The money: Who pays, invests, and profits?
4. The rules: Which laws and institutions govern the exchange?
5. The risk: Who absorbs the cost if something goes wrong?

Profits and risks do not always travel together.

That may be the most revealing clue in the entire system.

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3.2: Background - Five Decades of Economic Globalization

Fifty Years That Rewired the World

Imagine taking a snapshot of the global economy in 1975. China was governed through a largely state-directed economic system and remained relatively isolated from international markets. The Soviet Union and its allies maintained an economic bloc structured largely around socialist planning. There was no World Wide Web, no smartphone, and no instantaneous global logistics platform. By the early twenty-first century, firms could design products in one country, finance them through global markets, manufacture components in several others, assemble them elsewhere, and sell them almost everywhere. That transformation was not automatic. It required political decisions, technological innovations, institutional rules, and corporate strategies.

1978: China Opens the Door, But on Its Own Terms

Following Mao Zedong's death, Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese reformers introduced policies associated with reform and opening. Agricultural reforms expanded household decision-making, Special Economic Zones encouraged foreign investment and export manufacturing, and Chinese firms gradually became integrated into global supply chains. China did not simply replace socialism with laissez-faire capitalism. The state remained a powerful economic actor, investing in infrastructure, influencing credit, maintaining major state-owned enterprises, managing industrial development, and controlling important elements of foreign economic participation. This matters because China became one of the greatest beneficiaries of globalization without adopting the exact model of market liberalism that many policymakers assumed globalization required.



Figure 3.2.1: **Globalization Remade Places.** Shenzhen grew from a relatively small city into a major manufacturing and technology center as China became deeply integrated into global production networks. Photo by ダモリ on Unsplash)

1989–1991: One Economic World?

Between 1989 and 1991, communist governments collapsed across much of Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union dissolved. Many successor states introduced privatization, price liberalization, foreign investment, and other market reforms. Yet the phrase transition to a market economy hides enormous complexity. Markets require enforceable contracts, financial regulation, property rights, legal institutions, competition policy, and political choices over how previously public assets are distributed. Removing one system is not the same thing as successfully constructing another.

The 1990s and 2000s: Welcome to Hyperglobalization

Several transformations converged during the 1990s: China's industrial integration; post-socialist market transitions; falling trade barriers; financial liberalization; containerization; telecommunications; and the internet. Baldwin (2016) argues that earlier globalization dramatically reduced the costs of moving goods, while modern communications technologies reduced the cost of coordinating complex production across distance. Production could now be sliced apart. Economists often describe the period from the late 1980s through the global financial crisis as hyperglobalization, during which trade, finance, investment, and global value chains expanded especially rapidly (Rodrik, 2011). Many emerging economies experienced enormous income growth during this period, particularly in Asia (Milanovic, 2016). But the gains were not evenly distributed.

The Famous Elephant in the Room

Milanovic's work on global income distribution helped popularize what became known as the “elephant curve.” One simplified interpretation was that many people in emerging economies gained substantially during globalization, while the very wealthy also experienced large gains; some lower- and middle-income populations in wealthier states saw slower income growth. The larger lesson matters more than the shape of one graph: Inequality between countries and inequality within countries can move in different directions simultaneously.

The Institutions Behind the Market

Markets do not globalize themselves. The IMF, World Bank, GATT/WTO, European integration, NAFTA, and numerous bilateral and regional agreements constructed rules that made international economic activity more predictable. Rodrik (2011) identifies a fundamental tension among deep economic integration, national sovereignty, and democratic choice. Governments may want all three but they cannot always maximize them simultaneously.

2008: The Machine Shudders

The global financial crisis exposed the vulnerability created by financial interconnectedness. Institutions throughout the world were linked through lending, securities, insurance, debt, and investment. The crisis demonstrated that: Interdependence works in both directions. Global networks transmit opportunity. They also transmit instability.

The 2010s: The Backlash Becomes Political

The crisis did not end globalization. But political skepticism increased. Brexit, U.S.–China trade conflict, debates over deindustrialization, and criticism of international economic institutions reflected growing questions about who benefited from decades of integration. These reactions cannot be attributed to trade alone. Automation, financialization, domestic labor policy, tax structures, and regional inequality also mattered. Globalization interacted with all of them.

2020: When Efficiency Met a Pandemic

COVID-19 exposed the vulnerability of supply chains optimized almost entirely around efficiency. Just-in-time production minimized inventories and redundancy. That worked beautifully until factories closed and transportation networks stalled. Governments and companies began asking a new question: Not just: Where can we produce this most cheaply? But: What happens if we cannot get it at all?

From Globalization to Re-globalization?

The 2020s have produced: nearshoring; friendshoring; China+1 strategies; industrial policy; and strategic investment in semiconductors, clean energy, critical minerals, and other sectors. Supply chains are not simply disappearing. They are being rewired. Economic efficiency now shares the stage with: resilience; security; and sovereignty.

The Rise of a More Multipolar Economy

The global economy has also become more geographically diverse. China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Gulf economies, and other emerging powers have expanded their influence. South-South trade has grown. BRICS+ has expanded. Alternative development-finance institutions and China's Belt and Road Initiative reflect attempts to influence or supplement older global economic arrangements. The debate is increasingly not simply whether countries should join globalization. It is: Who gets to shape globalization?

Technology Changes the Meaning of Economic Geography

Containerization changed physical trade. The internet changed services. Cloud computing altered business infrastructure. Artificial intelligence may reorganize global labor again. But AI itself depends on physical infrastructures: semiconductors, data centers, electricity, minerals, workers, intellectual property, and capital. The cloud sounds weightless. It is actually full of buildings.

Key Takeaway

Economic globalization since the late twentieth century resulted from the interaction of political transformation, technological innovation, market reform, international institutions, and corporate restructuring. Globalization is not disappearing. Its geography and rules are changing.

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3.3: Theories and Concepts - Global Capitalism and Neoliberalism

Capitalism Is Not the Same Thing as “The Economy”

The economy is not capitalism. Human beings had economies long before capitalism existed. Capitalism is one historically specific way of organizing economic life. Although scholars disagree over precise definitions and origins, capitalist economies generally involve substantial private ownership of productive assets, market exchange, wage labor, investment, and capital accumulation (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Harvey, 2005). Capitalist markets also depend upon public institutions. Contracts require enforcement. Corporations require legal recognition.Property requires definition. Banks require rules. Competition requires some framework governing monopoly. Even private ownership requires a public authority willing to recognize it. The useful question is therefore not whether government participates in capitalist economies. It does. The question is: How, for whom, and with what consequences?

Markets Are Not Capitalism Either

Markets existed long before modern capitalism. Contemporary capitalist economies also contain households, public services, nonprofit organizations, and community systems that do not operate as ordinary markets. Ostrom (1990), for example, demonstrated that communities can develop sophisticated systems for governing shared resources that fit neither simple privatization nor centralized state control. Capitalist countries also vary enormously. The United States, Germany, Sweden, Singapore, and Japan are all capitalist economies, yet their labor systems, welfare institutions, corporate governance, education systems, healthcare structures, and relations between states and markets differ significantly.Hall and Soskice (2001) describe these differences through the influential framework of varieties of capitalism. There is no single capitalism. There are capitalisms.

If Capitalism Is the System, Neoliberalism Is an Argument About How to Run It

Neoliberalism refers broadly to a family of ideas and policies favoring market competition, private enterprise, economic liberalization, and limitations on direct state management of many forms of economic activity (Harvey, 2005). Policies associated with neoliberalism may include: deregulation; privatization; trade liberalization; financial liberalization; fiscal restraint; and marketization. The concept describes a direction in economic governance, not a perfectly standardized policy package.

Where Did Neoliberalism Come From?

During the Great Depression and postwar period, Keynesian ideas supported increased governmental management of economic demand (Keynes, 1936). Critics such as Friedrich Hayek argued that centralized economic planning could not replicate the enormous amount of dispersed information communicated through prices and individual decision-making (Hayek, 1944, 1945). Milton Friedman similarly emphasized competitive markets, monetary stability, individual choice, and skepticism toward government intervention (Friedman, 1962). The crises of the 1970s, especially stagflation helped create a political opening for these ideas (Harvey, 2005). By the 1980s, governments led by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan pursued significant market-oriented reforms.

There Is More Than One Way to Imagine a Global Economy

Debates about globalization are partly debates about how economies should be organized.

Economic liberalism generally emphasizes markets, private property, competition, trade, and the movement of goods and capital across borders. From this perspective, international economic integration can expand markets, encourage specialization, lower prices, attract investment, and generate growth. Neoliberalism developed as one particularly influential late-twentieth-century version of this broader tradition, emphasizing privatization, deregulation, trade liberalization, and a larger role for markets in

allocating resources.

That position has never gone uncontested.

Economic nationalism, sometimes associated with mercantilist or protectionist traditions, begins from a different concern: national economies are also sources of political power, security, employment, and social stability. Governments may therefore protect strategic industries, restrict imports, subsidize domestic production, regulate foreign investment, or pursue industrial policies even when doing so reduces some of the efficiencies promised by unrestricted markets. Contemporary battles over semiconductors, electric vehicles, critical minerals, and supply-chain security illustrate how quickly governments rediscover economic nationalism when strategically important industries are involved.

Critical political economy and **s**tructuralist or dependency approaches raise another objection. They ask whether formally open markets actually connect participants from equal starting positions. If some countries control finance, technology, intellectual property, global brands, and high-value industries while others remain dependent on commodity exports or low-wage production, increasing integration may reproduce existing hierarchies rather than erase them.

None of these perspectives provides an automatic answer to every economic problem. Instead, they reveal that arguments about tariffs, free trade agreements, industrial policy, foreign investment, development banks, and global supply chains are rarely arguments about economics alone. They are also arguments about what governments owe their citizens, how much inequality societies will tolerate, which forms of dependence create vulnerability, and who should be allowed to write the rules of the global economy.

The debate, then, is not simply markets versus government.

Every global market already has rules.

The political question is whose rules they are.

The Washington Consensus

John Williamson (1990) coined the term Washington Consensus for a set of reforms that included fiscal discipline, tax reform, trade liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and property-rights protections. Structural-adjustment programs supported by international financial institutions sometimes attached similar reforms to loans. Supporters argued reform was necessary where economies faced unsustainable fiscal arrangements, inflation, debt, or inefficient state enterprises. Critics argued that the design and sequencing of reforms could impose enormous social costs, especially where local institutions were weak or reforms were imposed too rapidly (Stiglitz, 2002). Both things can be true: An economy may require reform. A badly designed reform can make a crisis worse.

The Strongest Case for Markets

Markets provide important mechanisms for coordinating decentralized information (Hayek, 1945). Competition can pressure firms to improve. Decentralized experimentation can promote innovation. Economic choice can support individual autonomy (Friedman, 1962). Trade and market participation have also accompanied extraordinary development transformations. Yet East Asian development complicates the assumption that governments succeeded by simply stepping aside. South Korea and other economies combined global-market participation with substantial public direction of finance, industrial development, technology, education, and exports (Amsden, 1989; Wade, 1990). Markets mattered. States mattered. Institutions mattered.

When Markets Work, and When They Don't

Market failure occurs where private economic decisions fail to reflect broader social costs or produce competitive outcomes. Pollution creates externalities. Monopoly undermines competition. Information may be asymmetric. Public goods may be difficult to finance through ordinary private exchange. Governments fail too. Regulators can be captured. Public agencies can become inefficient. Corruption can distort decisions. The conclusion is not: Markets good. Government bad. Or vice versa. It is: Institutions matter.

Capitalism Has a History and That History Is Not Neutral

The historical growth of capitalism became deeply entangled with colonial conquest, plantation agriculture, coerced labor, territorial dispossession, slavery, and resource extraction (Robinson, 1983; Williams, 1944). Colonial economic structures often persisted beyond formal empire through land ownership, infrastructure, commodity dependence, and financial relationships. Economic history leaves infrastructure behind. It also leaves power behind.

Racial Capitalism

Cedric Robinson's concept of racial capitalism asks us to examine how processes of capital accumulation developed through already differentiated populations and racialized labor systems rather than imagining capitalism and racial hierarchy as historically separate phenomena (Robinson, 1983). The framework shifts attention from isolated discriminatory acts toward accumulated structural conditions involving land, labor, migration, education, housing, credit, and inherited wealth.

Who Owns What Matters

Income comes from labor. But ownership also produces income. Rent. Dividends. Interest. Royalties. Capital gains. Profits. Piketty (2014) drew renewed attention to how concentrated capital ownership can reproduce economic inequality over time. The question is deceptively simple: If ownership generates income, who begins with ownership?

Who Owns a Place? When Geography Becomes Intellectual Property

Ownership gets even more interesting when the valuable asset is not exactly a company, a building, or a piece of land. Sometimes it is a place name. Consider Champagne. Darjeeling tea. Tequila. These names do more than tell you what a product is. They tell you something about where it comes from, and that geographical association can have enormous economic value. This creates a wonderfully strange globalization question: Can a place become intellectual property? Not exactly. Nobody owns the town, mountain, valley, or region simply because a product is associated with it. But governments and international legal systems can protect certain geographical names from being used by producers who do not meet specified conditions. These protections are generally known as geographical indications, or GIs.

The World Intellectual Property Organization defines a geographical indication as a sign used for products that originate in a particular place and possess a quality, characteristic, or reputation linked to that geographical origin. Unlike an ordinary trademark, which usually identifies a particular company, a GI can generally be used by qualifying producers within the designated region who follow the relevant production standards.

So Darjeeling is not simply a clever marketing word that any tea company can place on a package. Where the GI is legally protected, producers must meet the rules connecting the tea to the designated Darjeeling region and its production standards. WIPO specifically uses Darjeeling as an example of producers being able to prevent tea grown elsewhere from being marketed under that protected geographical name. India formally registered Darjeeling Tea as a geographical indication in 2004. Suddenly, geography has become part of the product's economic value.

Terroir: When Place Becomes Part of the Product

The underlying idea is older than modern intellectual-property law. The French concept of terroir describes the relationship among a product, its physical environment, local practices, and the knowledge accumulated in a particular place. Soil, climate, altitude, plant varieties, production techniques, and generations of human expertise can all contribute to qualities that consumers associate with a region. Wine provides the classic example, but the basic idea extends far beyond wine. What makes a place distinctive may include its ecology, but it may also include cultural practices and forms of knowledge developed over generations. WIPO notes that geographical indications are often connected to traditional knowledge because products associated with particular places may rely upon techniques and practices transmitted within communities over time. This is important because globalization often appears to make geography less important. Products circulate internationally. Supply chains stretch across continents. Corporations can relocate production. Consumers can order goods from almost anywhere. Geographical indications move in the opposite direction. They say: Place matters.

Elizabeth Barham (2003) describes this tension through the French system of *appellation d'origine contrôlée*, or AOC. Systems of

origin labeling connect local ideas about terroir to global markets and international intellectual-property rules. A product becomes globally tradable partly because its value is legally anchored to a particular locality. That is a fascinating reversal. Globalization can make products seem placeless. Then markets create a premium for products whose identity depends on being very specifically placed.

A Label Can Be an Economic Development Strategy

Why would producers want this kind of protection? Because reputation has value. If consumers are willing to pay more for a product associated with a particular location, producers in that location may be able to retain more of the economic value generated by the name rather than watching unrelated firms elsewhere appropriate its reputation. WIPO describes GIs as potentially providing competitive advantages, greater added value, stronger branding, and expanded export opportunities. This is why geographical indications are sometimes promoted as tools for rural development. Instead of competing only through low prices in global commodity markets, producers may compete through distinctiveness. A particular food, beverage, textile, craft, or agricultural product can become tied to a story about landscape, heritage, knowledge, quality, and authenticity. That can potentially support farmers, artisans, small businesses, tourism, and regional identity at the same time. In theory, everybody gets to keep the charming village and earn more money. You have been in this class long enough to know there is probably a complication coming. There is.

The Tequila Problem

Tequila is one of the most useful cases because it demonstrates both the promise and the limits of place-based protection. Tequila is deeply associated with particular regions of Mexico and with the production of blue agave. Its geographical indication is one of the best-known outside Europe. Yet Sarah Bowen and Ana Valenzuela Zapata's research shows that simply protecting a geographical name does not automatically guarantee equitable economic or environmental outcomes for everyone living in the region (Bowen & Valenzuela Zapata, 2009). Bowen (2010) later compared the tequila production system in Mexico with Comté cheese production in France and found that the developmental effects of geographical indications depend heavily upon the institutions surrounding them. Rules about how quality is defined, who participates in decision-making, how producers organize collectively, and whether smaller farmers possess meaningful bargaining power can shape who actually captures the benefits. In other words, protecting the word Tequila does not by itself determine who earns the money. Large firms may possess greater processing capacity, marketing power, access to export markets, legal expertise, or influence over certification systems. Smaller producers may technically operate inside the protected region while possessing far less ability to capture the premium associated with the product. This takes us directly back to the question we have been asking throughout Chapter 3: Who captures the gains? A geographical indication may protect a local product from outsiders while still leaving substantial inequalities inside the locality. Place matters. But so does power within the place.

Is This Resistance to Neoliberal Globalization, or Another Market Strategy?

Here is where this case becomes especially useful in a section about neoliberalism. Place-based designations are sometimes presented as alternatives to anonymous global commodity markets. Rather than turning every agricultural product into an interchangeable good competing primarily on price, they allow producers to emphasize local history, environmental conditions, craftsmanship, and cultural knowledge. That sounds like resistance to globalization. Except geographical indications also work through markets. They transform authenticity, heritage, and reputation into forms of economic value. Producers obtain legal protection, differentiate their products, build brands, and attempt to command higher prices from consumers. That means GIs can simultaneously challenge one feature of globalization while embracing another. They resist the idea that products should be completely placeless commodities, but they often do so by making place itself commercially valuable. This tension is similar to one Karl Polanyi identified more broadly. Markets do not simply exist independently of society. They become embedded within social institutions, rules, histories, and political struggles (Polanyi, 1944). Place-based designations attempt to embed economic exchange in local culture and geography, but they still operate within wider national and global markets.

Bowen's (2010) research is particularly important here because it challenges the assumption that creating a market premium alone will automatically produce equitable rural development. Successful and relatively inclusive GI systems may require collective institutions, public regulation, meaningful participation by producers, and policies that prevent powerful actors from capturing most of the benefits. Markets can reward place. Institutions determine a great deal about who gets rewarded.

Authenticity Has Politics Too

There is another complication. Who decides what counts as authentic? A certification system must draw boundaries. It identifies the geographical area, specifies permissible ingredients or techniques, defines production standards, and determines who is authorized to use the protected name. Those choices can preserve knowledge and prevent imitation. They can also freeze one version of tradition into law. Cultural practices are rarely static. Recipes change. Communities migrate. Technologies evolve. Producers disagree. The supposedly ancient tradition being certified may itself reflect decades or centuries of adaptation and exchange. So when governments or producer associations certify an “authentic” product, they are not merely discovering authenticity.

They are also helping define it. That makes geographical indications more than marketing devices. They are forms of agri-food governance, using law and certification to decide how the relationship among products, places, communities, and markets should operate. This is why the case fits Global Studies so well. A label on a bottle or package can contain questions about international trade, intellectual property, rural development, environmental sustainability, inequality, cultural heritage, state regulation, and consumer identity all at once. It is a very ambitious little sticker.

Global Studies Lens: Follow the Name

The next time you encounter a product whose value depends heavily on where it supposedly comes from, do not stop at the label. Ask who defined the geographical boundary, who is legally entitled to use the name, whose knowledge or traditions created the product's reputation, who controls certification, who has access to global markets, and who captures the price premium. Then ask the question that should now feel familiar: Who benefits, and who may be excluded?

Geographical indications can help communities protect valuable local knowledge and prevent outside producers from appropriating a reputation they did not create. They can also support rural development and give producers a way to compete in global markets without competing exclusively on price. But those benefits are not automatic. As Bowen's work demonstrates, the consequences depend upon the institutions surrounding the designation, the distribution of bargaining power within the supply chain, and the ability of smaller producers to participate in defining and governing the system (Bowen, 2010). The lesson is larger than Champagne, tequila, or tea. Globalization does not always erase place. Sometimes globalization makes place more valuable than ever. And once a place becomes valuable, the familiar questions return: Who defines it? Who protects it? Who sells it?And who gets paid?

From Industrial Capitalism to Financial Capitalism

Financialization describes the growing influence of financial markets, motives, institutions, and practices throughout economic life (Krippner, 2005). Corporations increasingly focus on shareholder value, debt structures, stock markets, acquisitions, and financial returns. Households encounter financialization through mortgages, retirement accounts, student loans, credit, and insurance. Finance can support productive investment. It can also create systemic instability.

Follow Financialization to the Grocery Store

Financialization can seem extremely abstract until we follow it into something ordinary, like food. Agricultural commodities such as wheat, corn, coffee, and soy circulate not only through farms, processors, ports, and supermarkets but also through sophisticated financial markets.

Commodity futures originally developed partly to help producers and buyers manage uncertainty about future prices. Over time, however, agricultural markets have also attracted banks, investment funds, asset managers, and other financial actors whose involvement connects food production more closely to global finance. Clapp (2014) describes this process as increasing the distance between financial decisions and the farmers, consumers, and food systems ultimately affected by them, while Isakson (2014) shows how financial practices have become increasingly embedded across agrifood supply chains.

This does not mean that financial investors single-handedly determine food prices. Weather, harvests, war, energy costs, transportation, currency movements, government policy, trade restrictions, and consumer demand all matter.

The more useful insight is that a bushel of wheat can now exist simultaneously as food, a farmer's livelihood, an export commodity, a futures contract, an investment position, and a matter of national security.

That is financialization in miniature. The global economy does not merely move products. It also builds increasingly complex ways to finance, insure, trade, speculate on, and extract value from their movement.

Then Your Data Became an Asset

Zuboff (2019) uses the term surveillance capitalism to describe an economic logic in which behavioral data are collected and transformed into predictions or interventions with commercial value. Digital platforms provide services. Users provide attention, behavior, and data. The economic exchange is far more complicated than a simple purchase.

So What Exactly Is Neoliberalism Criticized For?

Critics focus on several different problems. Inequality Growth can occur without equal distribution (Harvey, 2005; Piketty, 2014). Public Goods - Markets may not allocate essential services in ways societies consider ethically acceptable. Commodification - Polanyi (1944) argued that treating labor, land, and money exclusively as commodities can generate profound social disruption. His double movement describes the recurring push between market expansion and demands for social protection. Democracy and Market Power - Harvey (2005) connects neoliberalism to changing distributions of political-economic power. Rodrik (2011) argues that deep globalization, complete national sovereignty, and unrestricted democratic choice may conflict. Globalization therefore raises not only economic questions but democratic ones. Who writes the rules?

But Be Careful: “Neoliberalism Did It” Is Not an Explanation

A theory should identify mechanisms. When someone invokes neoliberalism, ask:

- Which policy?
- What causal mechanism?
- What alternative explanations?
- Technology?
- Demography?
- War?
- Domestic politics?
- Institutional weakness?
- Historical inequality?

Global Studies becomes stronger when theories become tools rather than slogans.

Capitalism ≠ Neoliberalism ≠ Globalization

Table 3.3.1: Capitalism, neoliberalism, globalization

Concept	What It Describes	Core Question
Capitalism	A broad economic system involving private ownership, markets, wage labor, investment, and capital accumulation	Who owns and how is production organized?
Neoliberalism	A family of ideas and policies favoring expanded market mechanisms and reduced direct state control	How much should economic activity be organized through markets?
Globalization	Increasing cross-border interconnectedness	How extensively are societies connected?

Conceptual Toolkit

- Market-Liberal Lens: Markets coordinate dispersed information and support competition, entrepreneurship, and choice (Friedman, 1962; Hayek, 1945).

- Keynesian Lens: Market economies can experience prolonged instability and inadequate demand, requiring public stabilization (Keynes, 1936).
- Polanyian Lens: Markets remain embedded in societies, which may demand protection when market expansion produces severe social disruption (Polanyi, 1944).
- Racial Capitalism Lens: Capital accumulation developed historically through differentiated populations and unequal systems of labor and power (Robinson, 1983).
- Institutional Lens: Economic outcomes depend upon the institutions organizing markets, governments, communities, firms, finance, and labor (Amsden, 1989; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Ostrom, 1990).
- Global Studies Lens: Follow Ownership, Rules, and Power Ask:
  - Who owns?
  - Who works?
  - Who writes the rules?
  - Who captures the gains?
  - Who carries the risk?

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3.4: Cheat Sheet On International Organizations

Meet the Rule Makers

Too Many Acronyms? You Are Not Alone. If you are reading through this book and having a hard time keeping some of the key players straight, welcome to international affairs. UN. IMF. WTO. WHO. EU. AU. ASEAN. NATO. At some point, global governance begins to look less like political science and more like someone dropped a bowl of alphabet soup onto the international system. The better questions are:

- What problem was the organization created to solve?
- What can it actually do?
- Who has influence inside it?
- Why do people argue about it?

International organizations exercise different kinds of power: legal authority, financing, expertise, agenda setting, reputation, and networks (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Hurd, 2018).

What Exactly Is an International Organization?

International institutions make repeated cooperation easier by reducing uncertainty, providing information, and establishing stable rules and expectations (Keohane, 1984). Yet they are not merely neutral meeting spaces. Barnett and Finnemore (2004) argue that international bureaucracies also exercise authority through expertise, rules, and classification. Institutions do not merely respond to global politics. They help organize how global politics is understood.

The IMF: Call This One When the Economy Is on Fire

The International Monetary Fund helps monitor national economies and provides financing to governments experiencing external financial difficulties. Its lending frequently includes conditionality, meaning governments agree to policy reforms in exchange for assistance (Vreeland, 2007). Supporters argue that financing without reform may simply postpone crisis. Critics argue that austerity and adjustment measures can impose significant costs on vulnerable populations (Stiglitz, 2002; Vreeland, 2007). IMF voting power is weighted substantially according to quotas rather than simple one-state, one-vote equality, creating continuing debates about representation and legitimacy (Woods, 2006). Remember: Crisis + currencies + stabilization + conditions.

The World Bank: Development Is Expensive

The World Bank focuses more heavily on long-term development, infrastructure, poverty reduction, technical assistance, and institutional capacity. Historically, World Bank lending was involved in many structural-adjustment debates. Critics questioned standardized policy prescriptions and unequal borrower-creditor relationships (Stiglitz, 2002; Woods, 2006). The contemporary institution has also evolved substantially in response to such criticism. Remember**:** Development + infrastructure + poverty reduction + long-term financing.

The WTO: Welcome to the Rulebook

The WTO provides a framework for multilateral trade agreements, negotiations, monitoring, and dispute settlement. It does not “run” trade. It provides rules under which governments conduct it. The WTO also illustrates the distinction between formal equality and actual bargaining power. States may possess membership rights while differing enormously in negotiating capacity and economic leverage (Narlikar, 2005). Its dispute-settlement system also demonstrates that formal institutional authority depends upon continued political support from member governments (Hurd, 2018). Remember**:** Trade rules + negotiations + disputes.

The United Nations: The World's Biggest Group Project

The UN encompasses diplomacy, peace and security, humanitarian work, development, human rights, public health, refugees, and numerous specialized agencies. The General Assembly reflects sovereign equality through one-state, one-vote rules. The Security Council embodies a very different principle through the veto authority of five permanent members. The UN therefore contains both: sovereign equality and great-power privilege. Questions of legitimacy become especially important where institutional structures reflect the geopolitical order of 1945 more closely than contemporary distributions of population and regional influence (Hurd, 2018; Zürn, 2018).

The WHO: Viruses Do Not Respect Borders

The WHO coordinates international public health through expertise, surveillance, standards, and technical guidance. But, it remains dependent upon state cooperation for data and implementation. International organizations are often criticized for not exercising authority that governments never actually delegated to them.

The EU: Integration...But Make It Intense

The European Union represents a much deeper form of regional integration. Authority exists across European, national, regional, and local institutions, producing what scholars call multilevel governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). The EU demonstrates that sovereignty can be shared rather than simply retained or surrendered.

ASEAN: Cooperation Without Becoming Europe

ASEAN emphasizes consensus, non-interference, gradualism, and sovereignty. Acharya (2014) argues that regional institutions emerge from distinct political histories rather than simply reproducing European models. Consensus encourages participation. It can also make collective action difficult.

The African Union

The AU reflects African efforts to build continental institutions around integration, development, peace, security, governance, and collective influence. Regional governance is not simply something the Global North does *to* everyone else. States throughout the Global South create rules, norms, and institutions too.

Nongovernmental Organizations

NGOs generally cannot pass binding international law. They exercise influence through: expertise; services; information; networks;reputation; advocacy; and public pressure. Keck and Sikkink (1998) describe **t**ransnational advocacy networks through which actors coordinate across borders and increase political pressure.

Not All Power Looks Like a Vote

International power may be:

- **l**egal;
- financial;
- expert;
- reputational;
- agenda-setting;
- or networked (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Vreeland, 2007).

The Representation Problem

Global governance mixes several principles simultaneously: one state, one vote; weighted voting; great-power privilege; expert authority; market power; civil-society advocacy. These principles frequently clash. Zürn (2018) connects increasing international authority to growing political contestation and questions about democratic legitimacy. So whenever someone says: "The international community has decided…" ask: Which part? Who voted? Who funded? Who had veto power? Who provided expertise? Who was missing?

Global Studies Lens: Follow the Authority

Ask: Who created the organization? Who funds it? Who votes? Who can veto? Who supplies its expertise? Who must follow its rules? Who can ignore them? Who holds it accountable?

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3.5: At Home and Abroad - NAFTA, USMCA, and the Great Trade-Off

Three Countries Walk Into a Trade Agreement...

Canada.

Mexico.

The United States.

Three neighboring countries with very different wages, development histories, regulatory systems, and economic structures decide to make trade dramatically easier.

What could possibly get complicated?

Quite a lot.

When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) entered into force in 1994, it created one of the world's most consequential regional trade frameworks, linking economies that were already deeply interconnected but remained strikingly unequal in income and productive structure.

Supporters argued that reducing trade barriers would enlarge markets, increase investment, lower prices, stimulate exports, and make North American firms more competitive in a rapidly globalizing world. Critics warned that companies would relocate production to take advantage of lower wages and weaker regulations, that manufacturing employment would decline in some regions, and that economic integration would intensify existing inequalities rather than erase them.

As it turned out, both sides saw parts of the future.

That is one reason NAFTA remains such a useful case. It is not a simple story of success or failure. It is a story about how the same economic policy can produce gains and losses at the same time, how national averages can conceal intensely local disruptions, and how the distribution of benefits matters just as much as the overall size of those benefits.



Figure 3.5.1: Trade Agreements Become Infrastructure. North American integration depends on highways, warehouses, factories, ports, and border crossings through which goods and components move repeatedly between countries. (Public Domain; U.S. Customs and Border Protection via Wikimedia Commons).

Trade Agreements Do More Than Lower Tariffs

Trade agreements are often discussed as though governments simply agree to "trade more." In reality, they establish complicated institutional frameworks governing tariffs, investment, intellectual property, agriculture, services, dispute settlement, and, increasingly, labor, environmental, and digital standards.

Economists have long argued that reducing trade barriers can increase efficiency by allowing firms to specialize, expand into larger markets, and purchase inputs from lower-cost producers, while consumers may benefit from greater variety and lower prices (Krugman, Obstfeld, & Melitz, 2018). Yet even classical trade theory contains an important warning. Jacob Viner (1950) distinguished between trade creation, in which preferential trade shifts economic activity toward more efficient producers, and trade diversion, in which an agreement redirects trade away from a more efficient outsider toward a less efficient member of the bloc.

So even before we ask who gains or loses politically, trade agreements have built-in complications.

NAFTA Did Not Start the Story

NAFTA also did not appear out of nowhere. Canada and the United States were already highly integrated, and the two countries had signed a bilateral free-trade agreement in 1988. Mexico, meanwhile, had already begun shifting away from its earlier, more protected model of economic development after the debt crises of the 1980s, joining the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1986 and pursuing broader market-oriented reforms before NAFTA came into existence (Moreno-Brid, Rivas Valdivia, & Santamaría, 2005).

That historical context matters because NAFTA did not single-handedly "open" Mexico to the world economy. What it did was deepen and institutionalize a transformation already underway, making economic integration more difficult to reverse and creating a much more predictable environment for cross-border production and investment.

The Car That Crossed the Border Before It Became a Car

The automobile industry offers perhaps the clearest illustration of what happened next.

A vehicle assembled in North America may contain components that have crossed national borders multiple times before the finished car reaches a dealership. An engine part may be produced in the United States, shipped to Mexico for assembly, combined with components manufactured in Canada, and then returned to the United States for final sale.

The old image of trade one country manufactures a finished object and another country imports it—becomes inadequate.

Instead, firms operate through regional value chains, dividing production into stages and locating those stages where particular combinations of wages, skills, infrastructure, logistics, supplier networks, and market access are most advantageous. Gereffi, Humphrey, and Sturgeon (2005) show why this matters: value chains are not just production arrangements but systems of governance through which firms coordinate suppliers and capture different portions of economic value across locations.

This means a product labeled "made in North America" may have no single meaningful national identity.

It was made by a system.

More Trade Does Not Mean Everyone Wins

That system created clear economic benefits. Trade among the three countries expanded enormously after NAFTA, firms gained access to a continental market, and industries such as automobiles, electronics, and agriculture became deeply integrated. Consumers gained access to less expensive products, while exporters gained access to larger markets.

But the crucial analytical mistake is to assume that more trade automatically means everyone experienced the gains in the same way.

They did not.

Research on NAFTA generally finds relatively modest aggregate effects on the enormous U.S. economy, while also documenting substantial adjustment costs for particular workers, industries, and communities (Caliendo & Parro, 2015; Congressional Budget Office, 2003). More broadly, research on import competition demonstrates that trade shocks can have surprisingly persistent local effects. Workers do not always move easily to new industries, and regions dependent upon manufacturing can experience long-term declines in employment, earnings, and labor-force participation when major industries contract (Autor, Dorn, & Hanson, 2013).

This difference between the aggregate and the local is essential.

Imagine an agreement that slightly increases national income but causes a town's largest employer to close. From the perspective of national economic statistics, the policy may still appear beneficial. From the perspective of a worker who loses a twenty-year job, a pension trajectory, and the economic stability tied to a local industry, the experience looks entirely different.

Both perspectives can be correct because they are measuring different levels of reality.

Averages Have Never Had to Pay Rent

This is why averages are politically deceptive.

Millions of consumers may benefit a little from lower prices without ever consciously attributing the savings to a trade agreement. A smaller number of workers may lose substantially, and those losses are concentrated, visible, and life-altering. Rodrik (2018) emphasizes that this asymmetry matters because political mobilization does not necessarily follow the distribution of aggregate economic gains. People organize most intensely around losses they can see and feel.

In other words, the politics of trade are not simply about whether the national economy gained.

They are about who noticed.

Which Mexico?

Mexico's experience illustrates the same problem in a different form.

NAFTA helped transform Mexico into a major manufacturing and export platform, and northern industrial regions became deeply integrated into U.S.-centered production networks. Industries such as automobiles and electronics expanded, and foreign investment increased.

Yet the benefits were uneven across regions and workers. Northern border areas generally gained more from manufacturing integration than many southern regions, while wage convergence with the United States remained far more limited than some early supporters had hoped (Hanson, 2003; Moreno-Brid et al., 2005).

So asking whether “Mexico benefited” from NAFTA is not analytically precise enough.

Which Mexico?

A factory worker in Monterrey?

An engineer in Querétaro?

A maize farmer in Oaxaca?

A multinational supplier near the border?

A small business in a region that attracted little export investment?

Countries do not experience globalization as single units.

People experience it through places, industries, jobs, and institutions.

Agriculture Shows the Same Pattern

Agriculture makes this even clearer. NAFTA opened markets in ways that created substantial opportunities for some Mexican exporters, especially producers of fruits, vegetables, and other high-value agricultural products. At the same time, smaller-scale farmers producing staple crops such as maize faced increased competition from highly productive U.S. agriculture operating within a very different system of capital, infrastructure, technology, and government support (Yúnez-Naude, 2003; Zahniser et al., 2015).

Again, several outcomes could occur at once. Mexican consumers could benefit from lower food prices. Mexican exporters could expand into the U.S. market. U.S. agricultural producers could increase sales. Yet particular rural communities could experience severe adjustment pressures.

A national headline such as “Trade Increased” tells us almost nothing about that complexity.

Consumers Count Too

Consumers also matter, although they often disappear from political debates. Trade can increase household purchasing power by lowering the price of clothing, electronics, food, appliances, automobiles, and other goods. Fajgelbaum and Khandelwal (2016) show that trade's distributional effects depend not only on income and employment but also on what different households consume. This creates a strange but important possibility: the same person can be harmed by globalization as a worker and helped by globalization as a consumer. They may also hold retirement savings invested in multinational companies benefiting from trade, pay taxes that fund adjustment programs, and live in a community experiencing industrial decline. Human beings are economically inconvenient in this way. We occupy multiple roles at once.

Labor Rights and the Race to the Bottom

This is also why trade debates become especially difficult when they turn to labor standards. Critics of NAFTA warned that companies could use international differences in wages and regulation to pressure workers and governments, creating a race to the bottom in which countries compete for investment by weakening labor protections or keeping wages low.

The real evidence is more complicated. Companies choose locations based not only on wages but also on productivity, infrastructure, logistics, skills, access to suppliers, political stability, energy costs, and market proximity. Still, the underlying bargaining problem is real: capital is often more mobile than labor, giving firms a degree of leverage that individual workers rarely possess.

NAFTA's labor side agreement attempted to address some of these concerns, but critics widely regarded its enforcement mechanisms as weak (Compa, 2001). That criticism would later help shape the renegotiation of the agreement.

The Environment Crosses Borders Too

Environmental debates followed a similar pattern. Critics worried that firms would relocate environmentally harmful production to jurisdictions with weaker rules, while supporters argued that rising incomes, technological diffusion, and deeper cooperation might eventually improve environmental performance.

Research on trade and the environment generally suggests that both dynamics are possible. Greater economic activity can increase pollution through a scale effect, while changes in production methods, technology, and industrial composition can reduce some forms of environmental damage (Copeland & Taylor, 2004).

NAFTA therefore did not simply remove government from the economy.

It created new forms of governance, including environmental and labor institutions designed to manage the consequences of integration.

That is one of the most important lessons of the case.

A so-called free-trade agreement is still a document full of rules.

NAFTA Became Bigger Than NAFTA

By the 2010s, NAFTA had become something larger than the agreement itself. It became a political symbol into which frustrations over globalization, outsourcing, deindustrialization, immigration, wage stagnation, and corporate power could be poured.

That symbolic role created analytical problems because not every manufacturing job lost after 1994 disappeared because of NAFTA. Automation reduced labor demand in many industries. China's entry into the WTO in 2001 created a much larger import shock for many U.S. regions than trade with Mexico did. Corporate strategy changed. Technology changed. Domestic policy changed.

Autor et al. (2013) document the particularly substantial regional effects of Chinese import competition, reminding us that "globalization" is not one single process.

NAFTA mattered.

But it did not explain everything.

Monocausal explanations are tempting because the real economy is exhausting.

Enter USMCA: Same Continent, New Rules

By the late 2010s, the politics surrounding NAFTA had changed enough that the agreement was renegotiated and replaced by the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement, or USMCA, which entered into force in 2020.

The most interesting thing about USMCA is what it did not do.

It did not dismantle North American economic integration.

Instead, it revised the rules governing that integration.

The automobile sector provides a clear example. USMCA raised regional content requirements, meaning a larger share of a vehicle must be produced within North America to qualify for preferential tariff treatment. It also introduced labor-value requirements linking portions of automobile production to workers earning specified wage levels.

This is significant because it complicates the idea that modern trade agreements are simply about removing government restrictions. Governments are now using trade agreements to shape where production occurs and under what labor conditions.

In other words, the policy evolved from pure liberalization toward something closer to managed integration.

Labor Rights Became Trade Policy

USMCA also strengthened labor provisions in Mexico and introduced the Rapid Response Labor Mechanism, which allows alleged violations of freedom of association and collective bargaining at specific facilities to be investigated and addressed more directly.

That innovation reflects a broader shift in trade governance.

Older agreements often treated labor standards as peripheral to economic integration.

Newer arrangements increasingly recognize that if markets are integrated while labor protections remain weak or uneven, political backlash becomes much more likely.

The Agreement Had to Catch Up With the Internet

The same evolution appears in digital trade. NAFTA was negotiated before the internet became central to economic life. USMCA includes extensive provisions addressing electronic commerce, data flows, digital services, and cross-border transactions that scarcely existed when the original agreement was written.

The economy changed.

The agreement had to change with it.

So Is USMCA Better?

That still depends on who is asking.

Workers may value stronger labor-enforcement mechanisms. Automakers may face higher compliance costs. Governments gain more influence over regional production. Consumers may benefit from continued integration while potentially absorbing some higher costs created by stricter rules of origin.

That is why evaluating a trade agreement with one adjective, good, bad, successful, disastrous**,** usually tells us more about the speaker's priorities than about the policy itself.

Trade Agreements Do Not Remove Politics

The deeper lesson is that trade agreements do not remove politics from markets.

They embed politics inside the rules that markets follow.

They determine which goods qualify for preferential treatment, what standards firms must meet, which labor rights are enforceable, how disputes are resolved, and what forms of production governments want to encourage.

A trade agreement therefore does not eliminate rules.

It chooses them.

And those choices distribute opportunity.

Global Studies Lens: Ask Who Adjusts

This is why the most useful question is not whether globalization creates winners and losers in some abstract sense. Nearly every major economic transformation does that.

The stronger question is:

Who is expected to adjust, and what resources do they possess to do so?

A multinational corporation can reorganize a supply chain.

A worker cannot instantaneously acquire a new profession.

A firm can move capital.

A family cannot always move away from a mortgage, community, school system, and social network.

A consumer can change brands.

A town that loses its major industry cannot reinvent itself overnight.

Economic theory often assumes that resources eventually move toward more productive uses.

Human lives happen during the eventually.

That is where public policy, institutions, and political choices enter the story.

NAFTA and USMCA therefore teach us something much larger than the mechanics of North American trade. They show how economic integration produces real gains while distributing those gains unevenly; how national averages can hide local disruption; how regulation and markets remain inseparable; and how political backlash can reshape globalization without

necessarily reversing it.

The debate over North American trade was never really about whether borders should exist or disappear.

It was about what should be allowed to cross them, under whose rules, and with what protections for the people whose lives are reorganized in the process.

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3.6: Follow the Money Follow the Power

From Dinner to the Global Economy

We began this chapter with something deliberately ordinary: dinner. A bowl of noodles did not look like an international system. It looked like lunch. Yet the moment we followed the wheat, the labor, the transportation, the financing, the technology, the regulations, the energy, and the companies involved in getting that meal onto a table, the simplicity disappeared. That is one of the central lessons of economic globalization. The systems shaping everyday economic life are often most powerful precisely when they are least visible. A consumer sees a product; a Global Studies student learns to see the network behind it.

That network includes farms, factories, warehouses, ports, migrant workers, banks, investors, trade rules, energy systems, digital infrastructure, governments, and corporations, all connected through flows that can span continents. The economic value created through those networks can be enormous, but the benefits, risks, and bargaining power embedded within them are distributed very unevenly. Economic globalization is therefore much more than increased trade. It also involves the movement of capital, labor, technology, services, data, corporate power, and risk, together with the institutions that establish the rules governing those flows. Once we begin to see those connections, the global economy stops looking like a neutral background condition and starts looking like something that has been designed, negotiated, contested, and repeatedly rebuilt.

Can Markets Be Redesigned? The Fair Trade Experiment



Figure 3.6.1: The Beginning of the Value Chain. Commodity chains begin with producers whose bargaining power may differ sharply from that of traders, processors, brands, and retailers. Fair Trade attempts to change some of those terms. (Photo by Candes J on Unsplash).

If economic systems are designed, negotiated, and repeatedly rebuilt, then one question follows naturally: Can the rules of a market be deliberately changed to distribute its benefits differently?

Fair Trade represents one attempt to do exactly that.

Fair Trade initiatives grew from concerns that small producers of commodities such as coffee, cocoa, bananas, and handicrafts often entered global markets with relatively little bargaining power while firms farther along the supply chain captured much larger shares of the final value. Different Fair Trade systems use different rules, but mechanisms can include price protections, producer premiums, labor standards, organizational requirements, certification, and longer-term relationships between producers and buyers. Research suggests that Fair Trade can generate meaningful benefits under some conditions, although those gains vary significantly across commodities, places, producers, and certification systems (Dragusanu, Giovannucci, & Nunn, 2014). And that ambiguity is exactly why Fair Trade belongs in a Global Studies chapter.

It does not abolish markets. It attempts to rewrite some of the rules governing participation in them. That makes Fair Trade both practical and politically complicated. Certification can cost money. Not every producer can enter premium markets. Benefits may be distributed unevenly. Producers may still depend upon consumer demand in wealthier countries. And the existence of a special label promising better labor or production standards raises an awkward question about everything sitting beside it on the shelf. If ethical treatment requires a special sticker, what have we accepted as normal everywhere else? Fair Trade therefore asks a larger question than whether buying one bag of coffee makes someone a responsible consumer.

How much justice can be built into a market without changing the deeper distribution of power inside that market?

Globalization Was Built and It Is Being Rebuilt

Over the past five decades, the architecture of the global economy has changed dramatically. China's reform and opening helped reshape global manufacturing, while the collapse of Soviet-style economies expanded participation in international markets. Trade liberalization, containerization, telecommunications, finance, and the internet made it possible for production to become increasingly dispersed across borders, creating an era of hyperglobalization in which efficiency, specialization, and integration were often treated as economic goals in themselves. That system produced remarkable outcomes. Hundreds of millions of people experienced rising incomes, consumers gained access to extraordinary varieties of goods, technologies spread rapidly, countries industrialized, and supply chains became vastly more sophisticated.

But the same system also produced vulnerabilities that were easier to ignore during periods of stability. The 2008 financial crisis demonstrated how quickly instability could travel through interconnected markets. Political backlash in the 2010s revealed that aggregate economic growth could coexist with intense local disruption. COVID-19 showed how a supply chain designed almost perfectly for efficiency could become dangerously fragile when a critical link failed. Geopolitical competition has since pushed governments to rethink whether the least expensive supplier is always the most desirable supplier. As a result, the global economy is not simply becoming less global. It is becoming differently global. Friendshoring, nearshoring, industrial policy, strategic investment, digital sovereignty, and supply-chain resilience all suggest that governments are trying to reorganize integration rather than abandon it. The old question was often how to make markets more global. The newer question is increasingly which global connections are worth depending on, and under what conditions.

That is a much more political question.

Markets Do Not Float Above Politics

This shift takes us directly back to one of the major conceptual lessons of the chapter: markets do not exist outside politics. Capitalism does not mean the absence of government. Neoliberalism is not the same thing as capitalism, and globalization is not the same thing as neoliberalism. Markets themselves depend upon institutions that define property, enforce contracts, regulate banks, determine labor rights, manage environmental costs, establish competition rules, and decide who bears responsibility when economic activity causes harm. Once we recognize that, the familiar argument between “markets” and “government” becomes much less useful. Real economies contain both, but they also contain communities, households, firms, nonprofits, international organizations, labor unions, courts, financial institutions, and increasingly digital platforms that perform functions once associated only with states or conventional markets. That is why the institutional question matters so much. The IMF, World Bank, WTO, United Nations, European Union, ASEAN, African Union, national governments, civil-society organizations, multinational firms, and workers all participate in the governance of the global economy, but they do so with very different kinds of authority.

Some possess money. Others possess legal authority, expertise, market access, data, labor, moral legitimacy, or simply the ability to walk away from a negotiation. Power does not always announce itself with a flag. Sometimes it appears in a loan agreement, a trade rule, a corporate contract, or an algorithm no worker can inspect. That is still power.

NAFTA, USMCA, and the Problem of Uneven Gains

The NAFTA and USMCA case made these tensions visible at a regional scale. North American integration created real economic gains, but those gains were distributed unevenly across workers, consumers, firms, industries, and regions. The lesson was not that trade is inherently harmful or inherently beneficial. The lesson was that aggregate prosperity and individual experience can diverge sharply. A policy can increase total economic output while creating serious losses for particular communities. A consumer can benefit from cheaper goods while the same person's community loses manufacturing employment. A country can become

a major export platform while regional inequality persists. A worker can gain a job through integration while still facing weak bargaining power or stagnant wages.

This is why the language of “winners” and “losers” is often too simple. Economic life is more tangled than that. USMCA also showed that economic integration does not remain frozen. The newer agreement did not dismantle North American trade; it revised the rules around regional production, labor, and digital commerce. In doing so, it revealed a broader shift from the assumption that globalization means removing rules toward the recognition that globalization always involves choosing rules. The political question is therefore not whether markets will be governed. They already are. The question is who gets to govern them, and whose priorities are embedded in the rules.

Then the Economy Went Digital

Digital globalization complicated everything again.

Big Tech firms do not merely sell into markets. Increasingly, they operate the infrastructures through which other people reach markets, communicate, work, advertise, create, and exchange information. Network effects can make platforms more valuable as they grow, while data and algorithms can generate forms of economic power that older industrial models did not fully anticipate.

Your data can cross a border even when you do not. A platform can operate globally while workers remain regulated locally. An AI system can feel immaterial while depending upon mines, chips, energy grids, data centers, engineers, and hidden workers scattered throughout the world. A company can generate enormous economic value inside a country without having the kind of physical presence traditional tax systems were designed to recognize.

The digital economy therefore brings us back to the same questions we encountered with trade, finance, labor, and development, only in a new form. Who owns the infrastructure? Who writes the rules? Who does the work? Who receives the profit? Who bears the risk? Who can challenge a decision? And who is missing from the room? These questions are not new. The technology is.

The Questions That Travel

Those questions form the analytical spine of this chapter, but they are also useful far beyond economics. Whenever you encounter a global issue involving trade, AI, migration, climate, finance, energy, labor, development, or technology, it is tempting to begin with a verdict. Is globalization good? Is capitalism bad? Should markets be free?

Those questions are too large and too blunt to get us very far. A stronger approach asks which form of globalization is being discussed, which institutions govern it, which rules shape behavior, what historical conditions produced the system, what realistic alternatives exist, and who benefits or loses under each arrangement.

Most importantly, it asks: for whom? That question changes almost everything.

A supply chain that looks efficient from the perspective of a corporation may look precarious from the perspective of a worker. A financial reform that looks necessary from the perspective of a creditor may look devastating from the perspective of a household losing a subsidy. A digital platform that looks innovative from the perspective of a consumer may look monopolistic from the perspective of a competitor and opaque from the perspective of a regulator.

The goal of Global Studies is not to eliminate those competing perspectives. It is to hold them together long enough to understand the system producing them. That is why the recurring questions of this chapter matter so much. We have repeatedly asked who owns, who works, who writes the rules, who captures the gains, who carries the risk, and who controls the infrastructure through which everyone else participates. Once those questions become habit, the global economy stops looking like an abstract force. It becomes visible as a collection of human institutions, historical choices, technologies, relationships, and struggles over power. And that realization matters because systems built through political and economic choices can also be changed through political and economic choices.

Follow the Power

The global economy is not finished.

It is being renegotiated right now.

The interesting question is not whether globalization will continue, but what form it will take next, whose interests will shape that form, and whether the institutions governing it can distribute opportunity, responsibility, and risk more fairly than the ones we inherited.

We started by following the money.

By now, you should know what usually comes next.

Follow the power.

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3.7: Big Tech Interactive Case Study and Mini Research Missions

Introduction

Throughout this chapter, you've explored the major ideas behind economic globalization, including global capitalism, neoliberalism, regional trade agreements, and the growing influence of multinational corporations. One of the most significant developments of the twenty-first century has been the rise of digital platforms that operate across national borders. Companies such as Amazon, Apple, Google, Meta, Microsoft, TikTok, and Uber connect billions of users worldwide, yet they often operate within legal systems that were designed for a much less interconnected world.

In what follows, you'll examine the opportunities and challenges created by the global digital economy. By adopting different stakeholder perspectives, you will explore how governments, corporations, workers, and consumers balance innovation, economic growth, privacy, labor rights, and regulation. Rather than searching for a single correct solution, your goal is to evaluate competing priorities and propose practical approaches to governing an increasingly interconnected digital world.

Interactive Case Study Big Tech, Big Borders: Who Runs the Global Digital Economy?

TL;DR:

The digital economy is everywhere. But regulation? That's still stuck in customs. While Big Tech platforms—from Amazon to TikTok—go global in seconds, countries are struggling to catch up. Data privacy, gig worker protections, and digital taxes are *all over the map* (literally). So how do we let people thrive in the global marketplace *without* letting platforms operate like lawless empires?

In this case study, you'll step into the shoes of key players—tech giants, governments, gig workers, digital consumers, and more—and try to shape the future of global digital rules. Are you ready to fix the internet?

Note: All quotes are hypothetical statements that a person in each of these roles would say and is not based on any one person.



Figure 3.7.1: "The Cloud" Has Hardware. Digital markets depend on physical servers, cables, electricity, minerals, land, and workers. Global digital capitalism remains rooted in material infrastructure. (Photo by Eric Stoynov on Unsplash)

The digital economy can feel weightless because we encounter it through screens. It is not. Platforms and AI systems sit on top of physical infrastructures whose ownership, location, energy use, labor, and regulation are themselves global economic questions.

BACKGROUND: The Global Internet Has Outgrown the National Rulebook

Imagine if every country had different road rules—but Amazon delivery trucks, Google satellites, and TikTok trends still drove through them all at top speed. That's basically the situation right now with Big Tech. While the internet connects billions of people and allows seamless transactions across borders, laws and protections haven't kept up.

The result?

- Tech companies shop for the softest regulations.
- Governments try to set rules—but fear losing investment or digital access.
- Workers get squeezed in the gig economy.
- Citizens' data gets stored, sold, and shared with little oversight.

And here's the kicker: any country trying to regulate risks "losing out" economically. But countries that don't regulate risk losing **control.** So what's the move?

Meet the Players

Choose your role. Then figure out what *your* ideal digital economy would look like—and how far you're willing to compromise.

1. Big Tech Executive (Think: Meta, Google, Uber, Amazon, TikTok)

You represent a powerful platform with users and profits across 100+ countries. You say you're connecting the world, empowering small businesses, and driving innovation. Regulation? Sure... as long as it doesn't slow growth.

> "Our platforms run on scale. We need consistent global frameworks—not 195 separate rulebooks and 27 tax bills."

2. Government of a Small but Growing Nation (e.g., Kenya, Chile, Philippines)

You want digital access, economic growth, and jobs—but you're also worried about tax avoidance, local job losses, and cultural control. You don't want to scare off Big Tech... but you also don't want to become their playground.

> "If we regulate too hard, they leave. If we don't, our workers and data get exploited. Where's the win?"

3. EU Digital Regulator

You've led the charge globally on data privacy (hello, GDPR) and are now targeting AI, gig work, and antitrust enforcement. But getting everyone to agree even within Europe—is like herding cats.

> "The global internet needs global guardrails. But we can't let Big Tech write the rules for us."

4. Gig Worker (Driver, Coder, Delivery Rider, Content Moderator)

You use tech platforms to earn a living, but with little to no benefits, job security, or legal protection. You love the flexibility, but the lack of rights? Not so much.

> "I want freedom. But I also want healthcare, fair pay, and someone to call when I'm treated unfairly."

5. Global Consumer / Digital Creator

You love access to global services, cheap streaming, fast delivery, and the ability to earn money online. But your data privacy feels

shaky, and you're worried about surveillance, misinformation, and platform power.

> "I want choices, not monopolies. I want access, not exploitation. Is that too much to ask?"

6. Global Tax Justice Advocate / Economist

You study how tech companies shift profits to low-tax havens while making billions from users worldwide. You're pushing for fair taxation models and digital transparency.

> "Big Tech makes global money—they should pay global dues. We can't run public services on exposure and vibes."

The Global Fault Lines

Let's break down the big flashpoints in today's digital economy.

1. Data Privacy

Where should your data be stored? Who owns it? Should a platform follow local privacy laws—or just their home country's?

- The EU has strict data rules (GDPR); others are catching up.
- Countries like India and Brazil want *data localization* (data stays inside borders).
- Tech firms want global user data in one big cloud.

2. Gig Work & Labor Rights

Gig workers in Kenya often get paid less than those in California—for the same job on the same platform. And most have no health benefits, job security, or formal rights.

- Who's the employer? The platform? The algorithm?
- If workers live in one country and the company is based in another, who's responsible?

3. Digital Taxation

Tech giants often pay little to no tax in the countries they operate in by using international loopholes.

- In 2021, 130+ countries agreed on a global digital tax deal—but enforcement is a mess.
- Developing nations argue the deal still favors rich countries where Big Tech is headquartered.

4. Platform Power & Global Rules

Platforms set their own terms. Want to use Facebook? Agree to 50 pages of T&Cs. Want to sell your art on Etsy? Accept their algorithmic ranking. These platforms act like mini-governments—without elections.

- Should there be a global internet constitution?
- Who gets to make the rules—and who gets to enforce them?

The Dilemma

How do we allow people to benefit from the global digital economy—without letting tech giants dodge taxes, gig workers fall through the cracks, and governments lose control of their digital borders?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Break into groups by role—or mix it up. Debate, collaborate, or negotiate. Your end goal? A Digital Economy Charter that all players

can *mostly* live with.

1. Who should set global digital rules: Nations? The UN? A tech consortium?

- Should there be a new global internet body?
- What happens if countries disagree?

2. Can companies follow *local* rules without compromising *global* scale?

- What if India bans something that the UK allows? What's the platform supposed to do?
- Should tech firms be forced to operate "national versions" of their apps?

3. How should we classify gig workers and who should protect them?

- Should platforms treat all workers as employees? Or is there a new category needed?
- What are the minimum rights everyone should have, globally?

4. Should Big Tech pay taxes *where their users are*, or where they're headquartered?

- What would a fair digital tax model look like?
- How could we stop "tax haven tourism"?

5. Should countries be allowed to keep their citizens' data inside their borders?

- Is data localization protectionist or essential?
- Who owns your data in a global system?

6. If your player could rewrite the rules of the internet, what's the *one* law you'd pass?

- What problem would it solve?
- Who would love it and who would hate it?

Final Challenge: The Digital Charter

In a mixed group of players, write a Digital Economy Charter that:

- Sets *3 non-negotiable rights or rules*
- Offers 1 proposal for taxation or gig work reform
- Names 1 enforcement strategy (Who's the boss?)
- Creates a catchy name or slogan (bonus points if it could trend on Twitter/X or TikTok)

Mini Research Missions

Context Recap:

Big Tech platforms race across borders but regulations lag behind. That leaves gaps in data privacy, gig worker protections, digital taxation, and more.

Now, step into your role, research recent real-world developments, then bring fresh insight back to the group discussion.

Research Tasks by Role

Big Tech Executive

Research Focus: Enforcement of new competition rules and data privacy tensions.

- Task: Find news on how Big Tech is being regulated—look for enforcement actions like fines, data laws, or legal pushback.
- Starter News Clip: The EU has fined Apple (€500 million) and Meta (€200 million) under its Digital Markets Actthe first major enforcement of digital competition rules. Wikipedia
- Research Deliverable: Summarize one recent regulatory move targeting Big Tech. What's at stake for global platforms?

Government of a Small/Emerging Market

Research Focus: Digital taxes and sovereignty.

- Task: Track how countries are taxing digital services from abroad.
- Starter News Clip: The Philippines recently implemented a 12% VAT on foreign digital services, starting June 2025. ForbesWikipedia
- Research Deliverable: Find a news item or data on your country or region—as tax reform for digital services or pushback against them. What are the economic stakes?

EU Digital Regulator

Research Focus: Data privacy enforcement and fragmentation of rules.

- Task: Explore recent cross-border privacy disputes or investigations.
- Starter News Clip: TikTok is facing a fresh EU investigation for transferring user data to China, despite Project Clover efforts. AP NewsBusiness Insider
- Research Deliverable: Present one case of EU data regulation in action and its implications for global platforms.

Gig Worker

Research Focus: Cross-border gig labor conditions and legal recognition.

- Task: Research a news story where gig workers are fighting for rights—especially across borders or jurisdictions.
- Starter News Clip: (Use more general searches—no specific clip provided.)
- Research Deliverable: Share one recent development (e.g., court case, policy, strike) affecting gig workers globally or in your region. How does it reshape your working conditions?

Global Consumer / Digital Creator

Research Focus: Data privacy vs. government access.

- Task: Explore a high-profile privacy dispute where user rights clashed with law enforcement or national regulations.
- Starter News Clip: The FTC warns tech firms not to weaken U.S. privacy while complying with foreign laws like the EU's Digital Services Act. Reuters
- Research Deliverable: Describe a recent privacy tension (apps, encryption, etc.). What are the trade-offs between consumer control and regulation?

Global Tax Justice Advocate / Economist

Research Focus: Implementation of digital taxes and OECD reforms.

- Task: Find a recent story explaining how countries or blocs are managing digital tax challenges.
- Starter News Clip: Canada's Digital Services Tax (3%) entered into force in June 2024. First payments are due in June 2025.

Wikipedia+1
- Research Deliverable: Research either your country or region's current digital tax policy—or status of the OECD's Pillar One/Two. What's at play in global tax justice?

Amped-Up Discussion Questions + Research Integration

After each role completes their mini-research, regroup and integrate findings as you tackle these prompts:

1. What real-world tension did your example reveal and how does it impact the global digital economy?
2. Should countries be allowed to enforce local data, labor, or tax laws even if it clashes with tech platforms' global designs?
3. What compromise or framework would accommodate both global connectivity and local sovereignty?
4. How could your role, based on your research, push for better balance without losing opportunity?

Final Challenge: Build the *Global Digital Compact*

In mixed-role teams, draft a one-page "Global Digital Compact" that includes:

- 3 Must-Have Protections (e.g. data rights, fair taxation, gig worker safeguards)
- 1 Innovation Enabler (e.g. cross-border startup visa, data portability standards)
- 1 Enforcement Idea (global council? national-level body? hybrid approach?)
- A Meme-able Slogan, optional (Think TikTok shareable).

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3.8: Discussion

Something to talk about

Is an Efficient Economy Necessarily a Good Economy?

What criteria besides efficiency should be used to evaluate an economic system?

Consider wages, inequality, prices, sustainability, resilience, worker protections, innovation, security, and democratic accountability.

Use at least two examples from Chapter 3.

Who Actually Has the Most Power in the Global Economy?

Choose one issue, trade, finance, platforms, labor, taxation, AI, or supply chains, and rank governments, corporations, international organizations, workers, consumers, and civil society according to their influence.

Your answer must distinguish among several forms of power.

Has Globalization Failed, or Is It Being Rewritten?

Which interpretation better fits the contemporary period?

A. The world is retreating from globalization.

or

B. Governments are renegotiating the rules of globalization.

Use evidence from at least three sections.

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3.9: Assignments

Assignment 1: The Global Economic Autopsy

Choose one ordinary product or digital service.

Trace:

- production
- labor
- ownership
- finance
- rules
- value
- risk
- power

Conclude by proposing one change that would improve equity without destroying the economic value the system produces.

Assignment 2: The Trade Agreement Redesign Lab

Choose one USMCA issue and redesign one part of the agreement.

Your proposal must identify:

- the problem
- the evidence
- the new rule
- winners and losers
- enforcement
- one unintended consequence

and why your proposal remains preferable despite that trade-off.

Assignment 3: Govern the Algorithm

Design a Global Digital Governance Charter containing:

- five user/worker rights;
- three platform obligations;
- one cross-border data rule;
- one competition rule;
- one AI-accountability requirement;
- one taxation principle;
- one Global South representation mechanism;
- one enforcement institution;
- one appeals process;
- and one protection for innovation or small firms.

Conclude by answering:

Why should anyone trust the institution you just created with this much authority?

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3.10: Key Terms

Words to Know

- **Algorithmic Management:** The use of automated systems to assign tasks, monitor workers, evaluate performance, establish incentives, or make workplace decisions.
- **Balance of Payments:** A record of economic transactions between residents of a country and the rest of the world; serious imbalances can contribute to foreign-exchange or financial crises.
- **Capital:** Assets or resources that can be used to generate additional economic value or income.
- **Capitalism:** An economic system organized substantially around private ownership, market exchange, wage labor, investment, and capital accumulation.
- **Conditionality:** Policy requirements attached to financial assistance, particularly loans from institutions such as the IMF.
- **Data Colonialism:** A critical framework describing the appropriation of human life and social activity as data that can be extracted and monetized.
- **Deregulation:** The reduction or restructuring of government rules governing economic activity.
- **Developmental State:** A state that actively shapes industrial development through coordinated policies involving finance, infrastructure, technology, exports, education, or strategic industries.
- **Digital Sovereignty:** A government's or society's capacity to exercise meaningful control over its digital infrastructure, data, technologies, and regulatory environment.
- **Externality:** A cost or benefit generated by an economic activity that is not fully reflected in its market price.
- **Financialization:** The increasing influence of financial markets, institutions, motives, and practices throughout an economy.
- **Friendshoring:** Relocating or concentrating supply chains among countries viewed as strategically or politically reliable partners.
- **Global Value Chain:** A production system in which different stages of creating a product or service occur across multiple firms, locations, or countries.
- **Hyperglobalization:** A period of particularly deep international integration of trade, investment, finance, and production, especially from the late twentieth century through the early twenty-first century.
- **International Monetary Fund (IMF):** An international financial institution concerned primarily with monetary stability, macroeconomic surveillance, technical assistance, and lending to countries experiencing external financial difficulties.
- **Market Failure:** A situation in which decentralized market activity does not produce an efficient or socially desirable outcome, often because of externalities, monopoly, public goods, or information asymmetries.
- **Nearshoring:** Moving production or services closer to a company's primary market.
- **Neoliberalism:** A family of political-economic ideas and policies emphasizing market competition, private enterprise, liberalization, privatization, and reduced direct state control over many forms of economic activity.
- **Network Effects:** A situation in which a product or platform becomes more valuable as more people use it.
- **Platform Capitalism:** An economic model in which digital platforms mediate interactions among different groups of users while extracting value from data, transactions, or access to those networks.
- **Privatization:** The transfer of publicly owned enterprises, assets, or services toward private ownership or management.
- **Racial Capitalism:** A framework examining how processes of capital accumulation have historically developed alongside systems of racial hierarchy and differentiated labor.
- **Regional Trade Agreement (RTA):** An agreement among countries that reduces trade barriers and establishes rules governing economic exchange among members.
- **Remittances:** Money sent by migrants or workers to households or communities, often across national borders.
- **Structural Adjustment:** Economic reforms, often associated historically with IMF or World Bank lending, involving measures such as fiscal reform, privatization, liberalization, and reductions in state expenditures or subsidies.
- **Surveillance Capitalism:** Zuboff's term for an economic logic based on collecting behavioral data and transforming it into commercially valuable predictions or interventions.
- **Trade Creation:** A shift toward purchasing from a more efficient producer because a trade agreement reduces barriers.
- **Trade Diversion:** A shift away from a more efficient outside producer toward a less efficient producer receiving preferential treatment inside a trade agreement.
- **Washington Consensus:** A term originally coined by John Williamson for a set of market-oriented reforms widely supported by Washington-based economic institutions during the late twentieth century.
- **World Bank:** A group of international development institutions providing financing, technical assistance, research, and other support for economic development and poverty reduction.
- **World Trade Organization (WTO):** The international organization providing a framework for multilateral trade agreements,

negotiations, monitoring, and dispute settlement.

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4: WHY IS THE WORLD SO UNFAIR?

Why Global Inequality Isn't Just About Money, It's Also About Power

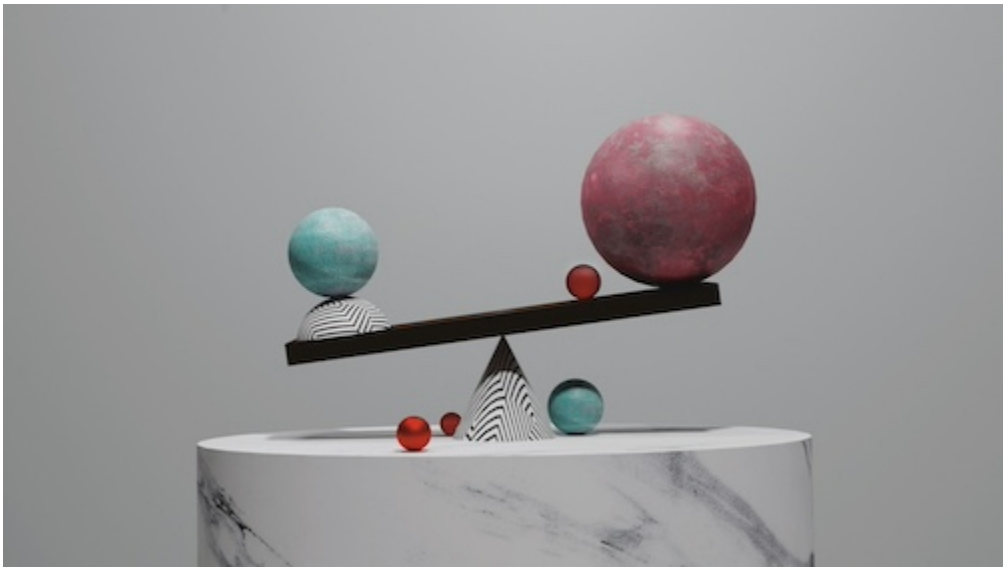


Figure 4.1: Circles on a balancing scale. (Photo by Myles Bloomfield on Myles Bloomfield on Unsplash" href="/Photo_by_%3Ca_href="https://unsplash.com/@loomydoons?utm...creditCopyText">Myles_Bloomfield_on_Unsplash">Unsplash).

Why can someone work full-time and still struggle to afford housing, while someone else can become wealthier simply because they already own assets? Why does the country in which you happen to be born still predict so much about your income, health, education, and opportunities? And if globalization has created extraordinary amounts of wealth, why is that wealth distributed so unevenly?

Welcome to inequality: one of those global problems that looks simple until you actually start pulling on the threads.

It is tempting to reduce inequality to income gaps, who is rich, who is poor, and, yes, who can afford the increasingly suspiciously priced avocado toast. But money is only part of the story. Behind every economic statistic sits a web of history, political decisions, property systems, labor markets, trade agreements, taxation, public investment, discrimination, geography, and accumulated advantage.

Thomas Piketty's extensive work on wealth concentration demonstrates that inequality is not simply produced by individual effort or talent; it is also shaped by institutions governing ownership, inheritance, taxation, and returns on capital (Piketty, 2014, 2020). Branko Milanovic similarly argues that where a person is born remains enormously consequential for lifetime economic prospects, describing citizenship and location as major determinants of access to global income opportunities (Milanovic, 2016).

Global inequality therefore lives at the messy intersection of economics who gets what?, and politics, who decides? It is visible in wages and wealth, but also in access to healthcare, education, technology, clean environments, political influence, and the ability to withstand economic shocks. Amartya Sen (1999) famously argued that development should be understood not simply as rising income but as the expansion of people's substantive freedoms: what they are actually able to do and become.

From that perspective, inequality is not merely a difference in bank balances.

It is a difference in life possibilities.

Keep that distinction in mind as we move through this chapter. Markets distribute resources, but institutions structure markets. History shapes institutions. Power influences whose interests those institutions protect. And globalization can expand opportunity while simultaneously magnifying advantages that were unequal to begin with.

Think About It!

If globalization creates wealth and opportunity, what determines who gets access to them and who does not?

4.1: Introduction to Inequality
4.2: How Do You Measure an Unfair World?
4.3: Theories and Concepts - Contemporary Drivers of Global Inequality
4.4: The World Got Richer. So Why Didn't Everyone?
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4.1: Introduction to Inequality

Inequality: More Than a Gap Between Rich and Poor

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define global inequality and distinguish among income, wealth, poverty, and opportunity.
- Differentiate between absolute and relative approaches to measuring poverty.
- Explain why inequality can increase within countries even while declining between countries.
- Analyze global inequality as a product of both economic outcomes and institutional structures.

Imagine two children born on the same day. One is born into a household with stable housing, reliable electricity, high-speed internet, safe drinking water, access to healthcare, well-funded schools, and parents who possess savings and property. The other is born into a household without several of those things. Neither child chose the starting line. That does not mean their futures are predetermined. It does mean, however, that they begin with dramatically different collections of resources, risks, networks, and opportunities. Sociologists often describe these differences in terms of life chances: the opportunities individuals have to obtain education, income, health, security, and social mobility. Economist Amartya Sen approaches the problem somewhat differently through the capabilities approach, asking what people are genuinely able to be and do with the resources available to them (Sen, 1999). Both perspectives point toward the same basic insight: inequality concerns not only what people possess today, but what their social and economic environments make possible tomorrow. Global inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, risks, and power across and within societies. Economic inequality is one component of this larger phenomenon, but inequality also appears in education, health, political representation, gender relations, exposure to environmental harm, technological access, and mobility. These inequalities frequently reinforce one another. Limited income can constrain access to good schools. Poor schooling can limit employment opportunities. Inadequate employment can reduce access to housing and healthcare. Poor health can make steady employment harder. A single disadvantage can therefore become part of a feedback loop rather than an isolated problem. This is why inequality is best understood as a system, not just a statistic.

Income Is Not Wealth

One of the most important distinctions in inequality research is the difference between income and wealth.

Income is the flow of money received over a period of time, from wages, salaries, business activity, investments, pensions, government transfers, or other sources.

Wealth, by contrast, is accumulated ownership: homes, land, savings, stocks, businesses, retirement accounts, and other assets, minus debt.

The difference matters enormously.

A high-income household can still possess relatively little wealth if it has substantial debt or has only recently begun earning a high salary. Conversely, a household may receive modest annual income while holding property or investments accumulated over generations. Wealth also generates its own advantages. Assets may appreciate in value, produce investment returns, serve as collateral for loans, finance education, or be transferred to the next generation. Piketty (2014) draws attention to precisely this dynamic: when returns on capital accumulate faster than income from labor, societies can experience increasing concentration of wealth unless institutions, including taxation and inheritance policy, counteract that tendency. The *World Inequality Report 2022* likewise finds that global wealth is substantially more concentrated than global income; the richest portions of the global population control a dramatically larger share of wealth than the poorest half (Chancel et al., 2022). In other words, earning more helps.

Owning more can change the game entirely.

This distinction also helps explain why inequality can persist across generations. Families do not pass down salaries, but they can pass down homes, businesses, investments, educational advantages, professional networks, and freedom from debt. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) expanded this idea beyond financial assets, arguing that families also transmit forms of social capital and cultural capital, networks, knowledge, credentials, habits, and familiarity with institutions, that can influence future opportunity.

Inequality therefore accumulates through more channels than a paycheck.

Poverty: Where Do We Draw the Line?

Inequality and poverty are related, but they are not the same thing.] A society could theoretically have very low inequality because nearly everyone is poor. Conversely, a wealthy society might eliminate extreme deprivation while retaining enormous differences between its richest and poorest residents. Poverty generally refers to insufficient resources to achieve a minimally acceptable standard of living. But defining “minimal” is more complicated than it sounds. International organizations use monetary poverty lines to estimate how many people are living in severe deprivation. The World Bank periodically updates international poverty thresholds to reflect revised purchasing-power data, meaning that students should be cautious about treating any specific dollar threshold as permanent (World Bank, 2024). These measures are useful because they make cross-national comparison possible. They cannot capture every dimension of deprivation. This is an important methodological lesson:

A poverty line is a measurement tool, not a magical border separating “poor” from “not poor.”

A household just above an international poverty threshold may still lack adequate nutrition, sanitation, education, healthcare, secure employment, or resilience against financial shocks. For this reason, researchers increasingly supplement income measures with broader indicators of deprivation. The United Nations Development Programme’s Multidimensional Poverty Index examines overlapping disadvantages in health, education, and living standards rather than relying exclusively on income (UNDP, 2023). We can therefore distinguish two broad ways of thinking about poverty.

Absolute poverty asks whether people possess enough resources to meet some minimum standard of basic needs.

Relative poverty asks how people’s resources compare with the prevailing standard of living in the society around them.

The second measure matters because deprivation is socially situated. Having no internet access may once have been inconvenient; in a society where employment applications, education, banking, healthcare appointments, and government services increasingly operate online, it can become a profound disadvantage.

Poverty changes as societies change.

The Birthplace Lottery

Now comes one of the uncomfortable parts. Your economic prospects are influenced not only by what family you are born into but also by where you are born. Milanovic (2016) shows that a substantial share of global income inequality is associated with differences among countries. A worker performing similar labor may earn radically different wages depending on national productivity, institutions, infrastructure, labor protections, currency values, and access to global markets. That means global inequality cannot be understood purely as an aggregation of individual choices.

A nurse born in Manila, a software engineer born in Lagos, an agricultural worker born in Guatemala, and a teacher born in California enter very different labor markets before any of them makes a single career decision. Political borders therefore function economically as well as geographically. They shape who may move, where people may work, what wages they can command, what public services they receive, and what protections they possess. This does not mean geography is destiny. Countries can transform dramatically through industrialization, political reform, public investment, education, health systems, and technological change. South Korea, Singapore, China, and several other economies demonstrate how significantly national income can change within generations. But their experiences also show that development is an institutional process rather than simply the result of individuals “working harder” (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Rodrik, 2011).

Is Global Inequality Getting Better or Worse?

Here is where inequality becomes especially tricky:

The answer can be “both.”

Researchers distinguish among at least three different questions:

1. Is inequality increasing within countries?
2. Is inequality increasing between countries?
3. Is inequality increasing among all individuals in the world, regardless of nationality?

These are not the same measurement.

Over recent decades, rapid economic growth in populous countries (especially China and India) helped reduce average income differences between many countries. Hundreds of millions of people also escaped extreme poverty, representing one of the most significant improvements in global living standards in modern history (World Bank, 2024). At the same time, income and particularly wealth remain highly concentrated, and inequality within many countries has grown substantially since the late twentieth century.

The *World Inequality Report 2022* estimates that the richest 10 percent of the global population receives roughly half of global income, while the poorest 50 percent receives less than one-tenth; wealth is distributed even more unequally (Chancel et al., 2022). So globalization has not produced a simple story in which “the rich got richer and everyone else got poorer.” Nor has it produced a simple story in which economic growth steadily lifted everyone together. Instead, globalization has rearranged inequality.

Some countries have caught up. Some individuals have moved into a growing global middle class. Extreme poverty has fallen dramatically over the longer term, although progress slowed amid the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic shocks (World Bank, 2024). Meanwhile, extraordinary concentrations of income and wealth remain at the top. One of the best-known visualizations of this complexity is the so-called Elephant Curve, developed through research by Christoph Lakner and Branko Milanovic. Their work drew attention to very different patterns of income growth across segments of the global income distribution (Lakner & Milanovic, 2016).

Later research has refined the interpretation, but its central lesson remains useful: the consequences of globalization depend heavily on where you stand in the distribution. The question “Has globalization reduced inequality?” therefore needs several follow-ups: Which inequality? Between whom? Over what period? And measured how? Those four questions will save you from a surprising amount of bad analysis.

Inequality Is Also About Power

Income tells us how much people receive. Wealth tells us what they own. Neither tells us completely who gets to make the rules. That is why inequality is ultimately political as well as economic. Wealth can translate into better education, greater mobility, more resilient households, political donations, lobbying capacity, ownership of media or technology, and greater access to decision-makers. Conversely, communities with fewer resources may have less ability to influence the institutions governing taxation, labor, housing, trade, or environmental protection. This is where Chapter 4 connects directly to Chapter 3. In the previous chapter, we examined how global markets operate through institutions, trade agreements, multinational corporations, and policy choices. Here, we ask the next question: Who enters those systems with bargaining power, and who does not? Inequality is not merely the distance between the top and bottom of a graph. It is the uneven ability to shape what happens next.

The Global Studies Lens: Reading an Inequality Statistic

Whenever you encounter a claim about inequality, ask:

- What is being measured: income, wealth, consumption, health, education, opportunity, or something else?
- Who is being compared: individuals, households, regions, countries, genders, racial or ethnic groups?
- What is the time period?
- Is the measure absolute or relative?
- What does the statistic leave out?
- What historical or institutional mechanisms might have produced the pattern?
- Who benefits from the current distribution, and who has the power to change it?

A number does not explain itself.

Our job in Global Studies is to make it talk.

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4.2: How Do You Measure an Unfair World?

Congratulations, You Have a Number. Now What?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Compare major measures used to analyze economic inequality and human well-being.
- Explain what the Gini Index can and cannot tell us about the distribution of resources.
- Analyze the strengths and limitations of the Human Development Index.
- Distinguish objective indicators of well-being from subjective measures such as life evaluation.
- Evaluate inequality statistics critically rather than treating rankings as self-explanatory facts.

Imagine someone tells you that Country A has a Gini Index of 32, an HDI of .910, and ranks highly in the World Happiness Report. Excellent. Is life good there? Maybe. Is it equal? Maybe. Are most people thriving? Still maybe. So whats the point of all these numbers ?! Welcome to one of the recurring problems of Global Studies: the world gives us lots of numbers, but numbers do not interpret themselves. Researchers use indicators because enormous concepts such as inequality, development, poverty, and well-being are difficult to observe directly. We therefore choose something measurable, income, life expectancy, years of schooling, survey responses, and use it as evidence about a much larger phenomenon.

That is incredibly useful. It is also dangerous if we forget what has been left out. Economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi (2009) argued that conventional economic measures alone are insufficient for evaluating how societies are actually doing. Economic production matters, but so do health, education, security, political voice, social relationships, environmental conditions, and people's own evaluations of their lives. Their broader point is one we will use throughout this section: What you measure influences what you see. And sometimes what you do not measure matters just as much.

Start With the Pie: Who Gets What?

The most straightforward way to examine economic inequality is to ask how income or wealth is distributed across a population. Suppose a country produces $1 trillion in household income in a given year. Knowing that total tells us something about the size of the economy. But it tells us almost nothing about who received the money. Did the bottom half of the population receive a substantial portion? Did most gains go to the top 10 percent? Did middle-income households improve while lower-income households stagnated? Did the economy grow rapidly while virtually all new wealth accumulated among existing asset owners? Same pie. Very different societies. Researchers therefore compare income or wealth shares across groups, often deciles, quintiles, or percentile groups. The *World Inequality Report* uses these kinds of distributional measures precisely because national averages can conceal enormous differences within countries (Chancel et al., 2022).

Another approach is a 90/10 ratio, which compares incomes near the top and bottom of the distribution. These measures have an advantage: they are fairly intuitive. If the top 10 percent earns dramatically more than the bottom 10 percent, you do not need an economics degree to understand that something significant is happening. But researchers often want one number that summarizes the entire distribution. Enter the Gini.

The Gini Index: Inequality in One Convenient Number

The Gini Index (also called the Gini coefficient) is one of the most widely used measures of economic inequality. It asks, essentially: How far is the actual distribution of income or consumption from perfect equality? The World Bank commonly reports the Gini on a scale from 0 to 100. A score of 0 represents perfect equality, while higher values indicate progressively greater measured inequality (World Bank, n.d.). Mathematically, the measure is derived from something called a Lorenz curve, which compares the cumulative share of a population with the cumulative share of income or consumption that population receives. You do not need to memorize the geometry. What you do need to remember is: Higher Gini = greater measured inequality. Simple enough. Except, of course, Global Studies refuses to let anything remain simple for very long.

Interactive World Map of Gini Coefficent

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this Interactive Content online

This is a world map that shows the Gini coefficent for 2025 per country where the darker the shade the higher the number. You can hover over the countries for more details or use the right hand box to choose a country. Click the play button on the left to see how inequality changes over ttime. Unfortunately this box is not accessible. This box will NOT print up in pdfs

The Gini Has a Few Problems

The Gini is useful because it compresses a complex distribution into a single comparable number. Its greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. Two societies can have the same Gini coefficient and completely different distributions of income. In one country, inequality may result primarily from a huge gap between the middle class and the very wealthy. In another, the same Gini could reflect widespread poverty alongside a small middle class. A single coefficient does not tell you where in the distribution inequality occurs. There are other complications.The World Bank notes that Gini estimates may be calculated from income in some countries and consumption expenditure in others, using nationally representative household surveys. Survey years also differ, meaning that two numbers displayed beside one another on a global map may not necessarily have been collected in the exact same year or using identical underlying concepts (World Bank, n.d.).

That matters. Suppose one country's Gini measures household income while another relies primarily on consumption expenditure. Technically, you have two Ginis. Analytically, you may not have a perfectly clean comparison. Household surveys can also struggle to capture people at the very top of the wealth distribution, who may be relatively rare in samples but control enormous resources. Consequently, tax records, national accounts, wealth data, and household surveys sometimes tell somewhat different stories about the extent of inequality (Chancel et al., 2022; Piketty, 2014).

So whenever you see a Gini ranking, don't just ask: Who has the highest number? Ask: What exactly went into the number? That is a much better question.

The Global Studies Measurement Check

Before comparing two inequality statistics, ask:

- Are we measuring income, consumption, or wealth?
- Is the unit the individual or household?
- Is the figure measured before or after taxes and transfers?
- Are the figures from the same year?
- Are the data sources and methods comparable?
- Does a national average conceal important regional, racial, ethnic, gender, or class differences?
- What information disappears when the entire distribution becomes one number?

A ranking is the beginning of analysis, not the end.

Wait, Can a Rich Country Still Have Terrible Outcomes?

Absolutely. Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Income tell us something important about economic resources. They do not tell us everything about what those resources accomplish. Imagine two countries with roughly similar income per person. Country A has long life expectancy, widespread access to education, strong public infrastructure, and relatively low infant mortality. Country B has weaker educational access, greater health disparities, and shorter average life expectancy. If we looked only at income, we might describe the two societies as similarly developed. Clearly, something is missing. That frustration helped inspire

one of the most influential alternative measures of development: the Human Development Index.

HDI: People Are Not GDP

Introduced by the United Nations Development Programme in 1990, the Human Development Index (HDI) represented an attempt to shift attention from the wealth of economies toward the lives of people. The intellectual roots come directly from the human-development and capabilities tradition associated especially with Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen. The central proposition is deceptively simple: Income is a means. Human flourishing is the point.

Human development asks whether people possess genuine opportunities to live lives they value rather than assuming that rising national income automatically produces greater well-being (Jahan, 2015). The HDI combines three broad dimensions:

- Health: represented by life expectancy at birth.
- Education: represented through expected years of schooling and mean years of schooling.
- Standard of living: represented through Gross National Income per capita.

Together, they generate a composite score between 0 and 1, with higher scores indicating higher average levels of human development. Notice what just happened. We moved from asking: How much money does this country have? to asking: What kinds of lives are people able to live there? That is a significant conceptual leap.

Why the HDI Changed the Development Conversation

For much of the twentieth century, development was frequently discussed through economic growth: industrial output, income per capita, investment, productivity. Those things matter. But a society could experience rapid economic growth while failing to translate that wealth into longer lives, better education, or broadly accessible opportunity. HDI forces us to examine that conversion. Consider a resource-rich state earning enormous export revenues. High income might suggest prosperity. But if those revenues remain concentrated among political or economic elites while public education and healthcare remain weak, national income exaggerates the degree to which prosperity has improved everyday life. Conversely, a country with more modest income might achieve surprisingly strong health or educational outcomes through effective public policy. This is exactly why comparative indicators are useful. They expose puzzles. And puzzles force us to ask better questions.

But HDI Is Not the Final Boss of Development Measurement

The HDI is broader than GDP. It is not comprehensive. UNDP itself stresses this point. The HDI is deliberately simple and measures average achievement in only three dimensions, meaning it can conceal substantial inequalities within a country (Jahan, 2015). Imagine a country in which one region has world-class hospitals and universities while another lacks basic healthcare and secondary schools. The national HDI averages those experiences together. Bam! There you have it: one neat number. A mess underneath. Gender inequalities can be obscured. So can racial and ethnic inequality, geographic disparities, disability, political freedom, environmental degradation, personal security, unpaid care work, housing conditions, and many other dimensions of human well-being. UNDP has therefore developed additional measures, including the Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI), which reduces a country's HDI score when health, education, and income achievements are distributed unequally. That distinction is powerful. Two countries can have similar average human-development achievements while distributing those achievements very differently. Which brings us back to the core lesson: Average achievement and equitable achievement are not the same thing.

What If We Just Ask People How Their Lives Are Going?

Now things get even more interesting. Economic and development indicators are generally constructed from observable conditions:

- money earned
- years lived
- years spent in school

But another school of thought asks: Why not ask people themselves?

The World Happiness Report uses survey data from the Gallup World Poll to measure how people evaluate their own lives.

Respondents are asked to imagine a ladder running from 0, representing the worst possible life for them, to 10, representing the best possible life, and then identify where they currently stand. This is known as the Cantril Ladder (Helliwell et al., 2026). There is an important distinction here because the measure is frequently described incorrectly. The World Happiness Report does not create its country ranking by combining GDP, social support, life expectancy, freedom, generosity, and corruption into a single happiness score. The ranking comes from people's own life evaluations. Researchers then use variables such as income, healthy life expectancy, social support, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and perceptions of corruption to help explain why average life evaluations differ among countries (Helliwell et al., 2026). That distinction matters. People are not being told: "You have a good income and strong social support, therefore we have calculated that you are happy." They are being asked: How is your life going? That is a very different kind of evidence.

Can You Really Measure Happiness?

Cue the obvious objection, the philosophical debates, and the naysayers. Isn't happiness subjective? Yes. But that's is the point. Subjective well-being measures are intended to capture something objective indicators cannot: how people themselves experience and evaluate their lives. Two societies with similar income may produce very different levels of reported life satisfaction. Social trust, relationships, safety, health, employment, political conditions, expectations, cultural norms, and personal freedom may all shape those evaluations. But subjective measures introduce their own challenges. People in different cultures may interpret survey questions differently. Expectations vary. Responses can be affected by recent events. National averages can conceal unequal well-being within a country. Sample size produces statistical uncertainty, which is why rankings should not be interpreted as though every neighboring position represents a meaningful difference (Helliwell et al., 2026). Rankings are irresistible. Reality is usually less cooperative.

Three Countries, Three Different Stories

Suppose we examine three hypothetical countries.

- Country A has very high average income but also high inequality.
- Country B earns less per person but has strong health outcomes, widespread education, and relatively equal access to public services.
- Country C has moderate economic and human-development measures but exceptionally high reported life satisfaction and social trust.

Which is doing best? There is no purely statistical answer because the question contains an unstated value judgment: Best according to what? Economic productivity? Equality? Longevity? Educational opportunity? Subjective well-being? Political freedom? Environmental sustainability? Security? This does not mean measures are meaningless. It means measurement is partly about deciding what counts. That choice deserves scrutiny.

The Dashboard Approach: Stop Looking for One Magic Number

A more sophisticated approach is therefore to think in terms of a dashboard rather than a single ranking.

Table 4.2.1: Inequality Ranking Dashboard

Question	Possible Measure
How much economic output exists?	GDP or GNI per capita
How evenly is income distributed?	Gini Index
Who receives economic gains?	Top 10%, bottom 50%, percentile shares
How healthy and educated are people?	HDI
How equally are those achievements distributed?	Inequality-adjusted HDI
Are people experiencing overlapping deprivation?	Multidimensional Poverty Index
How do people evaluate their own lives?	World Happiness Report life evaluations

No one measure wins. They answer different questions. That insight echoes Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi's (2009) broader argument that evaluating societal progress requires moving beyond economic production toward multidimensional measures of people's

actual well-being.A Beautiful Map Can Still Mislead You Global Studies students encounter maps constantly. A world map shaded dark red for “high inequality” and pale yellow for “low inequality” feels authoritative. It may even be accurate. But before accepting its story, inspect the legend. What year? What variable? What data source? Which countries have missing data? Was inequality measured using income or consumption? Were national figures taken from surveys conducted in different years? Is a giant country such as India, China, Brazil, or the United States represented by one national average despite enormous internal variation? Maps create visual certainty. Good analysis restores the complications. This does not mean you should distrust data. It means you should respect data enough to ask how they were made.

So, What Does Global Inequality Actually Look Like?

It depends on which lens you use. Look through income, and you see gaps in earnings. Look through wealth, and the concentration becomes more dramatic. Look through HDI, and health and education enter the picture. Adjust HDI for inequality, and national averages begin to fracture. Look through multidimensional poverty, and deprivation appears as overlapping disadvantages rather than a single income threshold. Ask people to evaluate their own lives, and another dimension emerges altogether. None of these pictures is fake, but none is the whole picture. That may be the most important methodological lesson in this section: Inequality does not have one number because inequality is not one thing. The job of a Global Studies student is therefore not to hunt for the perfect ranking. It is to put indicators into conversation with one another, investigate the historical and political systems behind them, and notice when apparently objective measurements hide important differences in power. Because once we know what inequality looks like, the next question becomes considerably more uncomfortable: How did it get there?

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4.3: Theories and Concepts - Contemporary Drivers of Global Inequality

Contemporary Drivers of Global Inequality

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how colonial histories continue to shape contemporary patterns of global inequality.
- Use political economy to analyze the relationship between markets, states, institutions, and power.
- Explain the origins and goals of Structural Adjustment Programs and the Washington Consensus.
- Evaluate competing arguments about neoliberal economic reform rather than treating its effects as uniformly positive or negative.
- Analyze austerity as a political and distributional choice as well as an economic strategy.
- Distinguish between an economic crisis itself and the policies governments adopt in response to it.

Inequality Did Not Wake Up Yesterday

Look at a map of contemporary global wealth. We've conveniently provided one below.

Interactive Map of Contemporary Wealth

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this Interactive Content online

Hover over the countries or use the right hand box to see details. Unfortunately this box is not accessible. This box will NOT print up in pdfs

Now look at a map of European colonial empires around 1900.

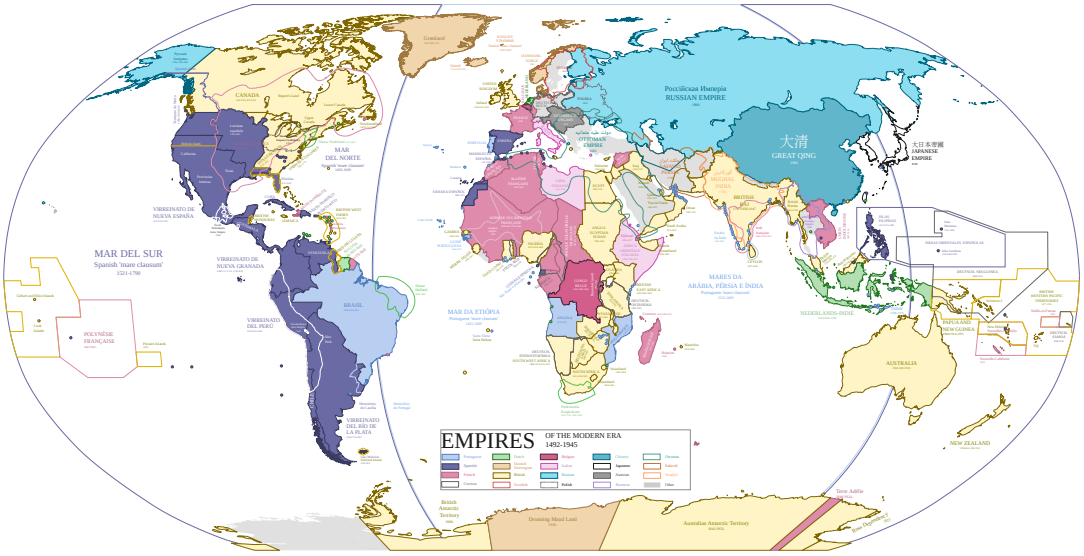


Figure 4.3.1: Map of empires of the Modern Era. (CC0; Nagihuin via Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 4.3.1 World map showing the territorial reach of major empires during the modern era, from 1492 to 1945. Different colors represent empires including the British, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Russian, Ottoman, Dutch, Belgian, German, Italian, Chinese, Mughal, Safavid, and Austro-Hungarian empires. Because the map is diachronic, the colored areas show territories controlled at different points during this period rather than political boundaries at a single moment in time. The map illustrates the enormous geographic extent of imperial expansion across the Americas, Africa, Europe, Asia, and Oceania.

They are not identical, but neither are they unrelated. One of the biggest mistakes we can make when examining global inequality is to treat the world economy as if every country walked onto the field at the same moment, carrying the same resources, governed by the same rules, and starting from the same line. They did not.

Countries entered the contemporary global economy after radically different histories of conquest, colonization, slavery, land dispossession, industrialization, war, institution-building, resource extraction, and state formation. Those histories matter because economies inherit things: infrastructure; property systems; borders; debts; educational systems; trade relationships; political institutions; and patterns of ownership.

History leaves receipts.

Scholars have approached this legacy from very different theoretical traditions. Walter Rodney (1972), writing from a dependency perspective, argued that European economic development and African underdevelopment were historically connected through slavery, colonial extraction, and unequal trade. André Gunder Frank (1966) similarly challenged the assumption that poorer countries were simply passing through an earlier stage of development experienced previously by wealthier states. Instead, dependency theorists argued that the structure of the international economy itself could reproduce unequal relationships. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory pushed this argument further by describing the capitalist world economy as an interconnected system characterized by changing relationships among core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral economies (Wallerstein, 2004). From this perspective, inequality is not simply something occurring inside individual countries. It is also embedded in the relationships connecting them. Later empirical scholarship approached colonial legacies through different methods. Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001), for example, argued that colonial powers established different kinds of institutions under different settlement conditions and that these institutional differences had long-term consequences for development. Nathan Nunn's research likewise finds persistent relationships between historical slave trades and contemporary economic outcomes in Africa, while Nunn and Wantchekon examine one mechanism through which those historical shocks may persist: diminished interpersonal trust (Nunn, 2008; Nunn & Wantchekon, 2011). These scholars disagree about plenty. But they share a crucial insight: The past does not stay politely in the past.

Colonialism Is Not a Complete Explanation

There is, however, an important warning here. Saying colonialism matters is not the same as saying colonialism explains

everything. Countries that experienced colonial rule have followed enormously different trajectories since independence. Botswana and Sierra Leone, Singapore and Myanmar, India and Pakistan, Mauritius and Madagascar cannot be reduced to one identical historical experience. Postcolonial governments have made consequential choices of their own. Geography, political coalitions, conflict, education, industrial policy, resource endowments, global markets, and state capacity all matter. Historical structures create constraints but they do not eliminate agency. This distinction is essential because otherwise Global Studies can fall into two equally weak stories:

Story #1: Poor countries are poor because they simply made bad choices.

Story #2: Poor countries are poor entirely because wealthy countries made them that way.

Reality is considerably messier. History shapes the menu of choices available. Political actors still choose from the menu and sometimes they rewrite it.

Political Economy: Follow the Rules, Not Just the Money

To understand those choices, we need political economy. Political economy examines how economic activity and political power shape one another. Markets do not descend from the sky fully assembled. Governments create property laws, currencies, banking regulations, labor rules, tax systems, corporate regulations, tariffs, social programs, and contracts. International institutions establish additional rules governing trade, lending, finance, and investment. So when someone says: “The market decided.” A political economist's next question should be: “Which market, operating under whose rules?”

1. Consider wages. A worker's wage may reflect supply and demand—but supply and demand operate inside systems of minimum-wage law, union rights, immigration rules, employer concentration, labor protections, educational access, discrimination law, and international competition.
2. Consider housing. Prices reflect demand, but also zoning, lending practices, interest rates, public housing policy, land ownership, infrastructure, taxation, and investment patterns.
3. Consider international trade. Prices matter, but so do tariffs, subsidies, intellectual-property agreements, exchange rates, industrial policy, transportation networks, and trade treaties.

Politics does not sit outside the economy. Politics helps construct the economy. That insight is central to understanding why inequality is not simply an accidental by-product of markets.Distribution reflects both market processes and the political institutions surrounding them (Piketty, 2020; Rodrik, 2011).

Enter the Debt Crisis

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, many countries across Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere faced severe debt and balance-of-payments crises. The causes varied by country, but several international forces mattered. Oil-price shocks. Changing interest rates. Heavy external borrowing. Slowing global growth. Commodity-price volatility. Domestic economic problems. When U.S. interest rates rose sharply at the beginning of the 1980s, servicing dollar-denominated debt became considerably more expensive. For some governments, the basic problem became brutally simple: The bills were due, and the money was not there. Countries experiencing severe balance-of-payments problems frequently turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and other creditors for assistance. But loans rarely arrived without conditions.Those conditions became one of the most consequential and controversial chapters in the history of late twentieth-century development.

Structural Adjustment: Economic Emergency Room or Policy Straightjacket?

Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) were packages of economic reforms commonly associated with IMF and World Bank lending during the 1980s and 1990s.

Although programs differed across countries and institutions, typical reforms could include:

- reducing government expenditures or fiscal deficits;
- privatizing state-owned enterprises;
- liberalizing trade;

- removing price controls or subsidies;
- deregulating sectors of the economy;
- reforming exchange rates;
- encouraging foreign investment; and
- restructuring taxation and public administration.

Why would governments agree to this? Because many were experiencing genuine crises. Supporters of adjustment argued that countries with unsustainable deficits, overvalued currencies, inefficient state enterprises, high inflation, or persistent balance-of-payments problems could not simply continue existing policies indefinitely. Macroeconomic stabilization, advocates argued, was necessary to restore growth, encourage investment, make exports competitive, and regain access to international finance. That argument should not be dismissed. If a government cannot service debt, maintain foreign-exchange reserves, import necessary goods, or control runaway inflation, doing nothing is not a neutral option. But critics asked a different question: Who pays for the adjustment? When governments cut spending, eliminate food or fuel subsidies, reduce public-sector employment, introduce user fees, or privatize public services, the economic consequences are not distributed equally. A budget can balance beautifully on a spreadsheet while a household absorbs the shock.

The Human Face of Adjustment

By the 1980s, researchers and development organizations were documenting serious social consequences associated with some adjustment programs. One particularly influential intervention came from Giovanni Andrea Cornia, Richard Jolly, and Frances Stewart, whose *Adjustment with a Human Face* argued that macroeconomic reform needed to protect vulnerable populations from reductions in nutrition, health, education, and social support (Cornia et al., 1987). The title itself captured the emerging critique. Perhaps adjustment was necessary, but what kind of adjustment, at what speed, and with whose welfare protected? Joseph Stiglitz later argued that international financial institutions too often promoted standardized liberalization and privatization strategies without sufficient attention to institutional capacity, sequencing, local political conditions, or distributional consequences (Stiglitz, 2002). Other scholars have reached more mixed conclusions. Some reforms contributed to lower inflation, stronger macroeconomic stability, expanded trade, or economic growth. Others produced disappointing growth or severe short-term social costs. Outcomes varied enormously according to initial conditions, institutional capacity, policy design, sequencing, global economic circumstances, and whether governments had sufficient fiscal space to protect vulnerable populations. That variation matters because “structural adjustment” was never one identical policy applied everywhere. And neither “success” nor “failure” can be measured with one indicator. A program might improve foreign-exchange reserves while increasing unemployment. It might reduce inflation while lowering public-sector wages. It might increase exports while weakening domestic industries. It might generate growth eventually while imposing substantial costs immediately. So the correct analytical question is not: Did SAPs work? It's: Worked for what objective, over what period, compared with what alternative, and for whom? There is our Global Studies lens again.

The Washington Consensus: Ten Ideas That Became Much Bigger Than Ten Ideas

The reforms associated with structural adjustment became closely connected to the term Washington Consensus. Economist John Williamson coined the phrase to describe a set of policy areas that he believed represented a broad consensus among Washington-based institutions regarding reforms appropriate for Latin American economies. These included fiscal discipline, changes in public expenditure priorities, tax reform, competitive exchange rates, trade liberalization, openness to foreign direct investment, privatization, deregulation, and property rights (Williamson, 1990). Something interesting happened afterward. The term escaped its creator.

“Washington Consensus” increasingly became shorthand for a much broader neoliberal development model emphasizing privatization, deregulation, free trade, limited state intervention, and integration into global markets. Williamson himself later objected that critics were using the phrase to describe policies considerably more ideologically sweeping than the original list he intended. That distinction matters because it shows something fascinating about economic ideas: Policy labels acquire political lives of their own. The original Washington Consensus was not simply a command to “abolish government.” Some recommendations, such as redirecting expenditures toward basic health, education, and infrastructure, are frequently forgotten in popular descriptions. At the same time, the broader reform era undeniably involved significant efforts to reduce direct state ownership and increase reliance on markets. Both things can be true.

Neoliberalism: The State Did Not Disappear

As Chapter 3 introduced, neoliberalism broadly refers to a family of ideas and policies favoring market competition, privatization, deregulation, free trade, and reduced barriers to the movement of capital. But saying neoliberalism favors “less government” can be misleading. Governments remained extremely important.They enforced contracts, protected property, negotiated trade agreements, and privatized enterprises. They also restructured welfare programs, created regulatory systems for newly liberalized markets, and protected financial institutions during crises. In other words, neoliberalism often changed what states did rather than simply making states disappear. David Harvey (2005) describes neoliberalism as a political-economic project that elevated market exchange while reshaping institutions in ways that could strengthen the economic position of capital owners. Dani Rodrik (2011), from a different intellectual tradition, argues that successful globalization requires domestic institutions capable of managing its disruptions and preserving meaningful democratic choice. The argument isn't simply: Markets versus governments. It is: What combination of markets and public institutions produces growth, resilience, opportunity, and an acceptable distribution of risks and rewards? That's much harder. Which is probably why people keep arguing about it.

Growth Is Not the Same Thing as Distribution

Imagine Country X adopts economic reforms and its economy grows by 5 percent. Good news? Potentially. Now imagine almost all of the gains accrue to the richest households. Still good news? Depends who you ask. Economic growth tells us that the size of the pie increased. Distribution tells us who got the slices. These two outcomes need to be analyzed separately. Some reforms associated with globalization, trade expansion, foreign investment, technological diffusion, export-oriented manufacturing, have contributed to enormous reductions in extreme poverty in parts of the world. The rapid development of East and Southeast Asian economies provides strong evidence that integration into global markets can play an important role in economic transformation. But those success stories also complicate simplistic versions of market liberalization. Many high-growth East Asian states did not merely remove government from the economy and wait for markets to work. Governments frequently invested heavily in education and infrastructure, supported strategic industries, managed capital flows, coordinated investment, promoted exports, and developed substantial bureaucratic capacity (Amsden, 1989; Wade, 1990; World Bank, 1993). Markets mattered. States mattered too. The real debate has always been about how they interact.

Austerity: When Governments Tighten the Belt

Now meet another term you will encounter constantly in debates about inequality:austerity. Austerity refers broadly to policies intended to reduce government budget deficits and public debt, usually through some combination of spending cuts, tax increases, or structural reforms. And here we need to correct a common misconception. Austerity did not begin with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Ideas about fiscal retrenchment and balanced budgets are much older. What happened after 2008 was a particularly consequential contemporary revival of austerity politics, especially in Europe following the Global Financial Crisis and subsequent Eurozone sovereign-debt crisis (Blyth, 2013).

Countries including Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Cyprus, and Spain faced varying combinations of banking crises, recession, debt distress, and financial-market pressure. European institutions and the IMF became deeply involved in rescue programs, fiscal adjustment, and economic restructuring. The argument for austerity was straightforward: Governments with unsustainable deficits and debt cannot borrow indefinitely. Reducing expenditures and restoring fiscal credibility, proponents argued, could stabilize public finances, reassure investors, and create conditions for recovery. Critics countered that cutting public spending during deep recessions could reduce demand precisely when economies were already contracting, increasing unemployment and making recovery harder. There was also a distributional question. Once again: Who absorbs the adjustment? A cut in a government budget is not an abstract subtraction. It can become: a closed clinic; a larger classroom; a reduced pension; a lost public-sector job; a transportation fare increase; a tax increase; or a canceled infrastructure project. Fiscal policy becomes social policy remarkably quickly.

Even the IMF Debate Changed

One reason students should avoid simplistic ideological narratives is that major international institutions themselves have changed. The IMF of the twenty-first century is not identical to the IMF of the 1980s. Research published by IMF economists has acknowledged that some aspects of the neoliberal policy agenda, particularly unrestricted capital flows and fiscal consolidation, can produce distributional costs and that rising inequality can undermine the durability of economic growth (Ostry et al., 2014; Ostry et al., 2016). That does not mean the IMF suddenly rejected markets, fiscal discipline, or liberalization. It means policy

debates evolved as evidence accumulated. Institutions learn. Sometimes slowly. Sometimes after everybody has written several hundred angry books about them. But they learn. This evolution matters because it prevents us from treating “the IMF,” “the World Bank,” or “neoliberalism” as frozen objects. Global institutions contain competing ideas, internal debates, changing leadership, shifting research, and changing policy practices. Global governance is a moving target.

Debt Is Back, And the Stakes Are High

Structural adjustment may sound like a story from the 1980s. The underlying problem is not. Developing countries continue to confront difficult trade-offs involving public debt, foreign-currency obligations, social spending, development investment, and vulnerability to global interest-rate changes. When debt-service payments consume a large portion of public revenue, governments have less fiscal space for education, healthcare, climate adaptation, infrastructure, or social protection. That does not automatically mean debt is bad. Governments borrow for the same basic reason households and businesses do: financing today can enable productive investments that generate benefits tomorrow. The question is whether debt finances productive development, whether repayment remains sustainable, what interest rates apply, what currency the debt is denominated in, who holds it, and what happens when the assumptions behind the loan collapse. Debt therefore illustrates a recurring theme of this chapter: Resources create opportunity but obligations distribute risk. And the weakest actor is often least able to survive the shock.

The Inequality Feedback Loop

We can now put the pieces together. Historical inequality can shape institutional capacity. Institutional capacity affects a government's ability to raise revenue. Revenue affects investment in education, health, infrastructure, and social protection. Those investments affect productivity and opportunity. Opportunity influences future income. Income and wealth influence political power. Political power can then influence the rules governing taxation, labor, property, and markets. And around we go. This is what systems thinking adds to inequality analysis.

For example:

historical land concentration → wealth inequality → unequal political influence → policies protecting asset ownership → continued wealth concentration

Or:

weak tax capacity → low public investment → weak infrastructure and education → lower productivity → smaller tax base → continued weak tax capacity

But virtuous cycles are possible too:

public investment → improved health and education → higher productivity → larger tax base → greater capacity for future public investment

The same world economy can therefore generate traps and ladders. Our job is to understand the mechanisms producing each.

So Who Is Responsible?

At this point you may want a villain. Colonial empires? Local elites? The IMF? Multinational corporations? Governments? Banks? Consumers? Capitalism itself? Bad policy? Geography? Corruption? The mildly disappointing answer is: Different combinations in different cases. A serious analysis of inequality requires resisting the temptation to turn complex systems into morality plays. Colonialism created enduring structures of extraction and inequality. Postcolonial elites sometimes reinforced them. International institutions sometimes imposed reforms with severe distributional consequences. Those institutions also sometimes provided financing during crises when private lenders would not. Global markets have generated extraordinary wealth. They have also distributed bargaining power unevenly. Governments have protected vulnerable populations. Governments have also protected entrenched elites. Economic reform can create new opportunity while destroying old livelihoods. None of these propositions cancels the others. Global Studies becomes interesting precisely where multiple explanations collide.

Global Studies Lens: The Inequality Review

When examining an episode of economic reform, debt crisis, or development policy, ask seven questions:

1. What happened before the crisis?
   - Was the problem created by domestic policy, colonial legacies, commodity dependence, external shocks, financial markets, or some combination?
2. Who designed the response? National governments? International institutions? Private creditors? Foreign governments?
3. What problem was the policy actually trying to solve? Inflation? Debt? Currency collapse? Low growth? Investor confidence? Poverty?
4. Who absorbed the short-term costs? Workers? Public employees? Consumers? Pensioners? Asset owners? Corporations?
5. Who captured the benefits?
   - Were benefits broadly distributed or concentrated?
6. What was the counterfactual?
   - What realistically could have been done instead?
7. What happened next?
   - Did the reform produce a temporary shock, durable growth, long-term inequality, institutional reform, political instability, or several at once?

That sixth question is especially important. Criticizing a policy is easy when we compare it with perfection. The better comparison is with the realistic alternatives available at the time.

The Big Idea: Inequality Is Produced, Not Merely Observed

The central lesson of this section is not that one economic ideology explains everything. It is that inequality has mechanisms. It emerges through land ownership, labor systems, education, taxation, debt, trade, institutions, technology, discrimination, public investment, history, and political power. Those mechanisms can be changed. Which means inequality is neither entirely accidental nor completely inevitable. That realization brings us to the uncomfortable question at the center of Section 4.4: If globalization has generated more wealth than any previous period of human history, why are so many people still poor?

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4.4: The World Got Richer. So Why Didn't Everyone?

The World Got Richer

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how globalization can increase total wealth without distributing gains equally.
- Distinguish between participating in a global supply chain and capturing a large share of its value.
- Analyze outsourcing through competing perspectives involving consumers, workers, firms, and governments.
- Explain how bargaining power, technology, ownership, and taxation influence who benefits from globalization.
- Evaluate the "race to the bottom" argument without assuming all foreign investment or low-wage manufacturing has identical effects.
- Apply a global value-chain framework to an everyday consumer product.

Here is the paradox at the heart of this chapter. During the modern era of globalization, the world economy became extraordinarily productive. International trade expanded. Global supply chains stretched across continents and new technologies increased productivity. Countries that had once been overwhelmingly agrarian industrialized. Hundreds of millions of people experienced substantial increases in income, education, health, and consumption. And extreme poverty fell dramatically over the long run. That's not a minor achievement.

Research on global inequality shows that rapid economic growth in countries such as China and India contributed to a major reduction in income gaps between countries during parts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Milanovic, 2016; World Bank, 2024). Global integration helped create export industries, attract investment, move technologies across borders, and connect workers and firms to enormous international markets.

So if you hear someone say: "Globalization has done nothing for poor countries," the evidence does not support that. But neither does the evidence support the opposite claim: "Globalization made the world richer, so everyone benefited." That is where things get spicey. A growing economy tells us how much wealth exists.It does not tell us who captured it.

Growth Is an Average. People Do Not Live Inside Averages.

Suppose a country's income per person rises by 20 percent over a decade. Sounds great. But imagine the richest 10 percent experiences a 50 percent increase, the middle sees modest gains, and the poorest households see almost none. Average income rose. The distribution changed very differently. This is why economists distinguish between economic growth and distribution. Growth asks: Did the pie get larger? Distribution asks: Who got the slices? One of the most persistent mistakes in debates about globalization is assuming that the first question answers the second. It does not. As Piketty (2014) demonstrates, growth and inequality can move in very different directions depending on ownership, returns to capital, taxation, inheritance, institutions, and labor-market conditions. Milanovic (2016) similarly shows that globalization has produced highly uneven gains across different groups of people and countries. A country can become richer while some workers become more economically insecure. A corporation can become more productive while wages stagnate. Consumers can pay less for products while workers elsewhere experience poor labor conditions. All of those things can happen at the same time. Globalization is irritatingly good at producing sentences that begin: "Yes, but..."

Welcome to the Global Value Chain

To understand why, consider the object sitting closest to you. A phone. Sneakers. Laptop. T-shirt. Coffee cup. Chances are, it was not really "made" in one country. It was assembled through a global value chain: a sequence of activities stretching across multiple places, firms, and institutions, from research and design to raw materials, manufacturing, logistics, marketing, retail, and after-sales services. Gary Gereffi and colleagues helped develop the global value-chain framework to explain how production increasingly became fragmented across national borders and coordinated by powerful lead firms (Gereffi et al., 2005).

The key insight is simple: Not every stage of production captures the same amount of value. Imagine a smartphone. Minerals may be extracted in one country. Components fabricated in another. Assembly conducted somewhere else. Software developed elsewhere. The brand headquartered somewhere entirely different. And the phone sold around the world. Everyone participates in making the product. Everyone does not necessarily receive an equal share of the money generated by it. That distinction, between participating in production and capturing value is crucial.

The Smile Curve: The Factory Is Not Always Where the Money Is

In many modern global value chains, some of the highest-value activities occur before and after manufacturing. Think research, product design, patents, software, branding, finance, marketing, retail strategy, these activities can generate large returns. Basic assembly, by contrast, is often highly competitive and easier for firms to relocate. This distribution is sometimes visualized through the smile curve: higher value may accumulate at the beginning of the chain through research and design and at the end through branding and services, while standardized manufacturing in the middle captures relatively less.That does not make manufacturing unimportant. Far from it. Manufacturing has been one of the most important pathways through which countries including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Vietnam, and others industrialized and raised living standards. But there is a major difference between: assembling someone else's product and owning the patent, platform, brand, distribution network, and customer relationship. Ownership changes the math.

The T-Shirt That Has Traveled More Than You Have

Pietra Rivoli's famous T-shirt case remains one of the best ways to make global political economy visible. A supposedly simple T-shirt may begin with cotton grown in the United States, travel overseas for spinning, weaving, dyeing, cutting, and sewing, and then return to wealthy consumer markets as a finished garment (Rivoli, 2015). At first glance, this seems absurd. Why move cotton halfway around the planet only to ship the shirt back again? Because the global economy is not organized around geographic neatness. It is organized around cost, infrastructure, productivity, trade rules, subsidies, logistics, and profit. Rivoli's account shows how U.S. cotton producers benefited not merely from agricultural efficiency but also from institutions, technology, and government policy, while textile manufacturing clustered in places where labor, production capacity, and supply networks made assembly competitive. The final retail price therefore contains a hidden global story. Cotton farmer. Textile mill. Factory worker. Shipping company. Importer. Brand retailer. Consumer. Government. Each participates, but not equally.

A $25 Shirt Does Not Mean the Worker Got $25

This point sounds obvious but its implications are enormous. Consumers usually encounter only the final price of a good. But the price is divided across many actors. The worker who physically stitches a garment may receive only a small fraction of the final retail value. Other portions go toward material inputs, transportation, rent, marketing, design, corporate administration, taxes, finance, retail margins, and profit. That does not automatically mean the wage is exploitative. A wage has to be analyzed relative to local productivity, living costs, working conditions, alternative employment, labor protections, and the value workers help produce. But it does mean that asking: “Where was this product made?” is less analytically useful than asking:“Who controls the valuable parts of the chain?” That is a much better Global Studies question.

Outsourcing: Cheap Stuff, Expensive Politics

Outsourcing occurs when firms contract activities that might otherwise be performed internally to another company, frequently (though not always) in another country. Why do firms outsource? Sometimes labor costs are lower. Sometimes another country has specialized suppliers. Sometimes production clusters make manufacturing more efficient. Sometimes environmental or regulatory costs differ. Sometimes firms are trying to reach new markets and sometimes a supplier abroad is simply better at producing the component. Consumers can benefit enormously. Lower production costs can reduce the price of clothing, electronics, furniture, appliances, and countless other products. For households with limited incomes, cheaper goods are not trivial. Saving $200 on a refrigerator matters. So does affordable clothing. So does access to inexpensive electronics that enable education or employment. Trade economists have long emphasized these consumer gains. David Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon Hanson, however, demonstrate why the story does not end there. Their influential research on the China shock found that regions of the United States more exposed to rapidly increasing Chinese import competition experienced significant and persistent losses in manufacturing employment and labor-force participation (Autor et al., 2013, 2016). This does not mean trade with China made the United States poorer overall. It means the costs were concentrated. And concentrated losses can devastate communities even when national aggregate gains are positive. That distinction matters politically. A person whose television became cheaper

may benefit a little. A person whose factory closed may lose a career. Economic models can add the two together. Human beings generally do not (no shade on humans though).

“Just Get Another Job” Is Not an Economic Theory

When industries decline, workers are often told that labor will simply move into new sectors. Eventually, sometimes it does. The word eventually is doing a lot of work in that sentence. Workers possess specific skills. Homes cannot be moved easily. Families have networks. New industries are often located somewhere else. Retraining costs money and time. Older workers may face barriers to reemployment. Regional economies can become dependent on a few major employers. This is why economic adjustment can be far slower and more painful than simplified models predict (Autor et al., 2016).A factory closure is not just an employment statistic. It can affect restaurants, housing prices, schools, municipal tax revenues, health, migration patterns, family formation, and political attitudes. Globalization enters locally. Sometimes very locally.

But What About the Workers Who Got the Factory?

Now flip the map. The job “lost” in one country may be a job created in another. Export manufacturing has played a major role in economic development across East and Southeast Asia. China is the obvious case, but South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and others illustrate different versions of export-oriented industrialization. For rural workers moving into manufacturing, even relatively low-wage factory jobs may offer higher and more stable income than available alternatives. That fact matters. One danger in wealthy-country debates about “sweatshops” is assuming that eliminating those jobs necessarily improves workers' lives. Paul Krugman made this point controversially in the 1990s: appalling working conditions should be improved, but simply eliminating export-sector employment can make workers worse off if their alternatives are even more precarious (Krugman, 1997). That argument should not become an excuse for poor conditions. It should force us to ask a better question: How do we raise wages and labor standards without removing the employment pathway itself? That is harder than simply declaring the entire system evil and much more useful. To see how this exchange took place in the US, check out the film American Factory winner of the 92 Academy awards for best documentary feature.

The Race to the Bottom: Real Risk, Not Universal Law

The race to the bottom argument suggests that firms and investors may seek locations where wages, taxes, labor protections, or environmental regulations are lower, placing pressure on governments to weaken standards in order to remain competitive. The mechanism is plausible. Imagine two countries competing for a garment factory. Country A requires strong workplace protections, higher wages, environmental safeguards, and corporate taxation. Country B offers lower wages, weaker enforcement, tax holidays, and fewer regulations. Where does the firm go? Maybe B. If governments repeatedly compete by lowering standards, globalization can create downward pressure. But scholars disagree over how universal this effect is. Foreign investors also care about infrastructure, political stability, education, access to suppliers, transportation networks, market size, energy reliability, legal institutions, and workforce productivity. A country cannot attract advanced semiconductor production simply by having the world's lowest wage. Sometimes investors want cheap labor. Sometimes they want highly skilled labor. Often they want both productivity and predictability. So rather than memorizing “globalization causes a race to the bottom,” ask: Under what conditions does competition push standards downward, and under what conditions does investment reward stronger institutions and more skilled workers? Now we have a research question.

Foreign Direct Investment: Exploitation or Development?

Another major pathway connecting globalization to inequality is foreign direct investment (FDI). FDI occurs when a company or investor establishes or acquires a lasting business interest in another country for example, building a factory, purchasing a company, developing a mine, or opening a regional operation. Critics often worry that multinational corporations extract resources, exploit labor, shift profits, or influence governments. Those concerns can be legitimate, but FDI can also bring many positives such as capital; employment; new suppliers; management expertise; export connections; training; technology; and access to international markets. Again, that annoying “yes, but.”The important question is therefore not whether foreign investment is inherently good or bad. It is: what kind of investment enters, under what rules, with what linkages to the domestic economy, and who captures the gains? A mine operating as an isolated enclave with imported equipment, foreign management, weak taxation, and profits leaving the country creates a very different development pathway from a manufacturing investment that trains local engineers, purchases from domestic suppliers, transfers technology, and builds export capacity. Both these examples fall in the same category, FDI, but have very different outcome.

Technology Transfer: The Development Jackpot That Is Harder Than It Sounds

Developing countries often seek technology transfer (the movement of knowledge, skills, production methods, intellectual property, and technical capacity) from one firm or country to another. Why? Because inventing everything from scratch is expensive. Learning from existing technologies can accelerate development. This process was central to the industrialization of many countries now considered high-income economies. Alexander Gerschenkron (1962) emphasized that late industrializers can sometimes accelerate development by adopting technologies already developed elsewhere. But simply placing a factory inside a country does not automatically transfer its technology. Workers may assemble sophisticated products without gaining access to proprietary designs. Foreign firms may import advanced components rather than source them locally. Key intellectual property may remain abroad. Research and development may stay concentrated near corporate headquarters. This creates a strange possibility: a country can manufacture millions of high-tech products while still controlling relatively little of the underlying technology. That is why governments seeking development often try to move firms and workers up the value chain, from basic assembly toward component design, engineering, research, logistics, branding, and ultimately ownership. South Korea's transformation from a relatively poor postwar economy into a major producer of automobiles, electronics, ships, and advanced technologies illustrates how dramatically value capture can change when domestic firms build technological capabilities of their own (Amsden, 1989). The goal is not merely make things. It is learn how to make the valuable things and eventually decide what gets made.

Technology: Productivity Machine, Inequality Machine, or Both?

Technological innovation is one of the main reasons living standards have risen over time. Machines allow workers to produce more, computers process enormous amounts of information, automation can remove dangerous or repetitive tasks, and digital platforms connect producers and consumers across distances that would once have seemed impossible. Artificial intelligence may push these capabilities even further.

All of that sounds promising, and much of it is. The complication is that technology does not distribute its benefits automatically.

Daron Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo distinguish between technologies that augment labor, making workers more productive, and forms of automation that primarily substitute machines or software for tasks previously performed by people (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019). When technology complements workers, rising productivity can generate new occupations, expand output, and support higher wages. When it replaces workers, however, the distributional consequences depend heavily on who owns the technology, who controls the resulting productivity gains, and whether displaced workers have realistic pathways into new forms of employment.

That makes ownership impossible to ignore. If a machine doubles the output of a factory, the economic consequences depend partly on who owns the machine. If artificial intelligence allows a company to produce twice as much with the same workforce, who receives the additional value? If a digital platform connects millions of buyers and sellers around the world, who owns the platform, controls access to it, and sets the fees?

Technology itself does not answer those questions.

Institutions do.

The same innovation can therefore be a productivity machine and an inequality machine at the same time. It can make a society wealthier while concentrating more of the gains among people who own capital, intellectual property, platforms, or firms. The crucial question is not whether technology produces more, but who is positioned to capture what it produce.

Labor Has to Bargain With Capital

Globalization also changes the balance of power between workers and employers.

Imagine a company deciding where to locate its next factory. It may be able to compare wages, taxes, infrastructure, regulations, and incentives across ten or twenty countries. A worker usually does not have comparable freedom. Workers have families, housing, language skills, citizenship restrictions, professional credentials, social networks, and lives rooted in particular places.

Capital can often move faster than labor.

That asymmetry matters because wages are not determined by productivity alone. They are also shaped by bargaining power. Employers with many location options may possess leverage that individual workers do not, particularly where unemployment is high or labor protections are weak. Trade unions, minimum-wage laws, collective bargaining rights, migration rules, social protections, and the availability of alternative employment can all influence how much of the value created by an economy flows toward workers rather than owners.

Research by the International Labour Organization and OECD has examined changing labor shares and bargaining institutions, while broader scholarship on inequality has emphasized the connection between weakened labor power and the growing concentration of income among owners of capital (ILO, 2015; OECD, 2015; Piketty, 2014). This does not mean globalization eliminates worker power. Workers organize across borders, governments can strengthen labor protections, and firms may need highly skilled employees whose expertise gives them substantial bargaining leverage. What globalization changes is the terrain. Workers and capital are bargaining inside a system in which one side is often much more geographically mobile than the other.

When Companies Become More Global Than Taxes

Workers are not the only ones confronting mobility gaps. Governments face them too. For most people, the question of where they pay taxes is fairly straightforward. A multinational corporation operating across dozens of jurisdictions has considerably more options. Global firms can organize subsidiaries, loans, royalties, intellectual property, and corporate ownership across multiple countries, sometimes allowing profits to appear in jurisdictions with relatively low tax rates even when much of the underlying economic activity takes place somewhere else. Research by Gabriel Zucman and collaborators documents the scale of multinational profit shifting and offshore wealth, showing how these practices can reduce the revenues governments collect from highly mobile capital (Tørsløv et al., 2023; Zucman, 2015). Why does that matter for inequality? Because taxes do not simply disappear into a government spreadsheet. They finance schools, healthcare, transportation, infrastructure, social protection, public administration, and the institutional capacity that makes markets function in the first place. If workers and small businesses are relatively fixed in place while multinational capital can move profits among jurisdictions, governments face a difficult problem. Raising taxes on mobile capital may encourage firms to restructure or relocate parts of their financial operations. Lowering taxes to remain competitive may preserve investment while shrinking the revenue available for public services. This is another example of globalization turning mobility into power. The question becomes not simply who earns the income, but who has enough mobility to shape the terms under which that income is taxed.

The Global Economy Rewards Scarcity

The unequal distribution of value is also closely tied to scarcity. When millions of workers can perform similar routine tasks, any single worker may be relatively easy to replace. When only a handful of firms control a crucial patent, semiconductor technology, software platform, logistics network, luxury brand, or dataset, those firms occupy a very different bargaining position. This helps explain why contemporary inequality is increasingly connected not only to manufacturing physical things, but also to controlling intangible assets such as intellectual property, algorithms, software, brands, patents, networks, and data. Haskel and Westlake (2018) describe the growing importance of intangible capital in modern economies. Unlike a factory, which usually has physical limits on how much it can produce, many intangible assets can scale globally at relatively low additional cost. Once software has been created, providing it to the next user may cost very little. A successful platform can potentially serve millions of additional customers without constructing millions of new buildings. That scalability can produce enormous efficiencies. It can also create winner-take-most markets. Think about your phone. Its components may be produced by dozens of suppliers scattered across several countries, but the firms controlling the operating system, ecosystem, design, intellectual property, or brand may capture a much larger share of the final value than the firms doing assembly. So the question “Who made it?” remains important. But an even more revealing question is: Who owns what made it valuable?

China: The Example That Ruins Everyone's Simple Argument

Few countries expose the contradictions of globalization as clearly as China.

Supporters of globalization often point to China as evidence that integration into the world economy can transform living standards. They are not wrong. Market-oriented reforms, manufacturing growth, export expansion, infrastructure investment, and deeper participation in global trade helped produce one of the largest reductions in poverty in recorded history. Productivity rose, industrial capacity expanded enormously, cities grew, and hundreds of millions of people experienced major improvements in material living standards (World Bank & Development Research Center of the State Council, 2013; World Bank, 2024).

Score one for globalization.

Critics, however, can point to a different part of the same story. Income inequality within China rose sharply during much of the reform era, while significant gaps opened among coastal and inland regions, urban and rural populations, and different classes of workers (Piketty et al., 2019).

Score one for the inequality chapter.

The temptation is to decide which version is the "real" story. That is exactly the temptation we should resist. Both are real. China became dramatically richer while also becoming considerably more unequal during much of the same period. And its transformation was never simply a matter of government stepping aside and allowing markets to take over. The Chinese state remained deeply involved in banking, land, infrastructure, education, industrial priorities, state-owned enterprises, trade, and the broader strategy through which the country entered global markets. China therefore complicates the easy version of globalization from both directions. It shows that global integration can generate astonishing development gains. It also shows that those gains can be distributed unevenly. Most importantly, it demonstrates that countries do not simply "join globalization." They **manage their relationship with it**. How they do so matters enormously.

Bangladesh: The Cheap T-Shirt Gets Complicated



Figure 4.4.1: The Worker Inside the Value Chain. Bangladesh's garment industry has created millions of jobs and become central to the country's export economy, while workers continue to face debates over wages, safety, bargaining power, and pressure from global buyers. (Copyright; Photo by Shanjir H | Photo4life AU on Unsplash)

The global garment industry offers another case where simple judgments quickly become inadequate. Bangladesh became one of the world's major garment exporters by integrating deeply into global apparel supply chains. The industry created millions of jobs, many of them held by women, and became a central source of export earnings and industrial growth. For many workers, garment employment offered an income opportunity that had not previously existed, and the expansion of women's paid employment also altered household and social dynamics. Those are genuine development gains. They coexist with serious vulnerabilities. Garment workers have faced low wages, unsafe workplaces, labor-rights violations, and intense pressure from global buyers demanding low prices and rapid production. The risks became impossible to ignore after the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, which killed more than 1,100 people and became one of the defining disasters of the global apparel industry. Rana Plaza exposed something that the price tag on a shirt could never reveal: the same global value chain can create employment and expose workers to profound danger. That is why the useful question is not whether global garment production is simply good or bad. It is whether the economic opportunities created by the industry come with sufficient bargaining power, safety protections, wages, and accountability for the people whose labor makes the system possible. A cheap shirt can embody both development opportunity and structural vulnerability. That contradiction is not a flaw in the analysis, *it is* the analysis.

Cheap for Whom?

Globalization has made enormous numbers of products cheaper. For consumers, this is one of its clearest benefits. Clothing, electronics, household goods, and countless other products can be purchased at prices that would have been difficult to imagine in earlier periods. But “cheap” is a word that deserves inspection. A product can have a low checkout price partly because other costs appear somewhere else. Workers may be poorly paid. A river may absorb pollution from a factory. Governments may subsidize production or infrastructure. Communities may bear environmental damage. Care work supporting low-wage workers may remain unpaid. Resource extraction may impose costs on people who receive little of the final value.

Economists describe costs imposed outside the immediate market transaction as externalities. Imagine a shirt that sells for $10 because the factory producing it can discharge waste into a nearby river without paying the full cost of cleaning that pollution. The shopper pays $10. But the shirt did not really cost society $10. Someone else absorbed part of the bill. That does not mean every inexpensive product is secretly unethical, nor does it mean consumers should feel personally responsible for solving global supply chains with every purchase. It means price and cost are not the same thing. Markets are very good at displaying the first. They are sometimes much worse at revealing the second.

Why Doesn't Wealth Automatically Trickle Everywhere?

We can now return to the question that has been hovering over this entire section. If globalization can create extraordinary amounts of wealth, why does that wealth not simply spread outward until everyone is better off? Because wealth does not move through an empty landscape. It moves through institutions. Those institutions determine who owns productive assets, who receives wages, who earns profits, who controls technology, who has bargaining power, who pays taxes, who can migrate, who finances education, who absorbs environmental costs, and who gets to write the rules governing the system. Markets connect these actors. They do not place them on equal footing. This is why Rodrik (2011) argues that globalization cannot be separated from domestic political institutions. Countries need the capacity to manage the relationship between international markets and employment, social protection, regulation, taxation, and democratic preferences. Sen's capabilities framework pushes the argument even further. The ultimate question is not simply whether globalization increases aggregate income. It is whether those gains expand people's substantive freedom to live lives they value (Sen, 1999). That distinction turns a very abstract economic debate into a much more human one. Growth matters, but growth is a means. What happens to people is the point.

When Inequality Reaches the Dinner Table

One of the clearest ways to see the difference between economic growth and human well-being is to look at food. The world produces enormous quantities of food, yet hundreds of millions of people remain undernourished. The latest internationally comparable FAO data show that nearly one in ten people globally still do not consume enough dietary energy to maintain a normal, active, and healthy life. Progress against hunger was substantial over the longer term, but it slowed and in some regions reversed during the past decade. The next box shows the change in undernourishment over time around the world.

Line Chart of Global Undernourishment

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this Interactive Content online

Hunger Persists in a Wealthier World. The share of people experiencing undernourishment has fallen dramatically over the longer term, but progress has slowed and substantial regional differences remain. Click play to see change over time or hover over specific data points to see exact details or use the right hand box to go directly to a particular country. Unfortunately this box is not accessible. This box will NOT print up in pdfs

That apparent contradiction makes more sense once we stop treating hunger simply as a question of whether enough food exists. A household can live in a country with supermarkets full of food and still experience food insecurity. Food may be physically

available while wages remain too low to buy it. Prices may rise faster than income. Conflict may interrupt transportation. Drought can destroy livelihoods. Families may lack land, reliable employment, social protection, transportation, or political influence. Currency crises can make imported food dramatically more expensive. A government facing debt pressure may reduce food or fuel subsidies. Different mechanisms, same uncomfortable result: food exists, but access does not. This is why food insecurity belongs in a chapter about inequality.

Amartya Sen's work on famine and entitlement helped shift attention away from the assumption that hunger is always caused by an absolute shortage of food. What matters is whether people possess the resources, rights, income, production, exchange opportunities, and institutional protections necessary to command food in the first place (Sen, 1981). A person does not eat a national average. They eat what their household can actually obtain. And when food becomes unaffordable, the effects rarely remain confined to dinner.

Households may reduce portion sizes, switch to cheaper and less nutritious foods, delay healthcare, pull children from school, sell productive assets, take on debt, or send family members elsewhere to work. A temporary income shock can therefore become a health problem, an education problem, a migration decision, and a long-term poverty trap. This is inequality becoming cumulative. The useful Global Studies question is therefore not simply: Does the world produce enough food? It's: Who can reliably access nutritious food, under what conditions, and what happens when the systems providing that access fail? The answer takes us directly back to the central argument of this chapter. Inequality is not merely about how much wealth exists. It is about what that wealth allows people to do.

The Globalization Scorecard

So how should we judge whether a global economic relationship is actually working? Not with one number. A serious evaluation has to look across several dimensions at once. We need to know whether economic output increased, but also who received the gains. We need to ask whether jobs were created or destroyed, whether wages rose alongside productivity, and whether workers gained or lost bargaining power. Ownership matters because the firms, technologies, land, platforms, and patents generating wealth may be highly concentrated. Upgrading matters because countries and firms that remain trapped in low-value activities may participate in globalization without capturing much of its value. Public institutions belong in the scorecard too. Does economic activity generate tax revenue that can support schools, healthcare, transportation, and infrastructure? Can workers organize and work safely? Are environmental or social costs being pushed onto communities that receive little of the economic benefit? And perhaps most importantly, how resilient is the system when a pandemic, war, financial crisis, natural disaster, or technological disruption hits? If all we ask is whether GDP rose, we have learned something. We have not learned enough. The real Global Studies question is whether the system created prosperity that was broad, durable, and capable of surviving the shocks that globalization itself can transmit.

The T-Shirt Autopsy

One way to practice this kind of analysis is to start with something extremely ordinary.

Take a T-shirt from your closet.

The label may tell you where it was sewn, but that is only one chapter in its biography. The cotton may have been grown somewhere else entirely. Fiber may have been spun in one country, fabric woven and dyed in another, the shirt assembled somewhere else, and the final product shipped through ports and distribution centers before reaching the store where you purchased it.

Then follow the value.

Who owns the brand? Where is the company headquartered? Who designed the shirt? Who controls its distribution? What did the factory worker earn? What labor standards governed production? What environmental resources were used in growing cotton or dyeing fabric? Which governments collected taxes? Which firms earned the largest margins?

And then ask the question that usually reveals the system:

If this supply chain disappeared tomorrow, who would lose the most?

This is the Global Autopsy applied to inequality.

A T-shirt stops being just clothing and becomes a story about agriculture, labor, gender, trade, transportation, technology,

corporate governance, environmental costs, public policy, and power.

Which is why Global Studies students are incredibly annoying people to go shopping with. Just kidding, Global Studies students are actually the best people to go shopping with! They'll make sure you know a T-shirt is just not a T-shirt.

So, Is Globalization Working?

The frustrating answer is:

yes.

And no.

Which is why the better question has always been:

For whom?

Globalization has helped generate enormous economic growth, technological diffusion, cheaper consumer goods, industrialization, and major reductions in poverty. Those achievements are real and should not be minimized simply because they complicate an anti-globalization argument. At the same time, globalization has displaced workers and communities, concentrated some of its gains among asset owners, increased the mobility of capital relative to labor, created opportunities for tax competition and profit shifting, and built global production systems in which the people doing essential work may capture only a small portion of the value they help create. Those outcomes are real too. The point is not to choose one story and pretend the other never happened. The more useful question is what kinds of institutions allow societies to preserve the productive benefits of global connection while distributing its rewards, risks, bargaining power, and adjustment costs more fairly. Once globalization is framed that way, inequality stops looking like a mysterious side effect of an otherwise automatic economic process. It becomes something much more interesting: a question of governance.

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4.5: Can We Make the World More Fair?

Redistribution, Predistribution, and the Politics of Who Gets What

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Distinguish between redistribution and predistribution as approaches to reducing inequality.
- Explain how taxation, social protection, labor institutions, public services, and asset ownership influence economic inequality.
- Evaluate universal and targeted approaches to social policy.
- Analyze debates surrounding progressive taxation, wealth taxation, and international corporate taxation.
- Explain why education alone cannot eliminate structural inequality.
- Assess inequality-reduction strategies according to effectiveness, political feasibility, and distributional consequences.

So...What Do We Do About It?

By this point, we have diagnosed the patient fairly thoroughly. Inequality is shaped by history, ownership, institutions, markets, globalization, technology, and political power. Wonderful. Now what? This is where discussions of inequality often become oddly vague. It is relatively easy to agree that extreme poverty is undesirable or that people should have meaningful opportunities to improve their lives. The conversation becomes much harder when someone asks what should actually change, because reducing inequality requires decisions about who receives resources, who pays, which institutions intervene, what trade-offs are acceptable, and what a society even means by “fair.” Those are not purely technical questions. They are political ones. The good news is that governments and societies are not powerless. The less convenient news is that there is no single lever labeled REDUCE INEQUALITY. Different forms of inequality are produced through different mechanisms, which means different problems require different tools.

Equality Is Not the Same Thing as Equity

Before we get into policy, we need to separate two terms that are often used as though they mean the same thing. Equality generally means treating people alike or distributing resources equally. Equity starts from the recognition that people may enter the same system from radically different circumstances, so equal treatment does not always produce equal opportunity.

Imagine three students preparing for the same exam. Giving each of them exactly four hours of study time sounds equal. But suppose one student has reliable internet, a quiet bedroom, private tutoring, and no employment responsibilities, while another works thirty hours a week and studies on a phone during a bus commute. The formal opportunity may be identical. Their actual ability to use that opportunity is not.

This is where Sen's capabilities approach becomes especially useful. Justice cannot be evaluated only by asking whether everyone received the same formal resource. We also have to ask what people were actually able to do with it (Sen, 1999). Equality asks, Did everyone receive the same thing? Equity asks, Did people have a meaningful chance to succeed? Those questions overlap, but they are not identical. A society can be formally equal while remaining deeply unequal in practice.

Redistribution: Fix the Outcome After the Market Acts

One familiar response to inequality is redistribution. Markets generate income through wages, profits, investment returns, property ownership, business activity, and other economic exchanges. Governments then change that original distribution through taxes, transfers, and public spending. Think about a paycheck. The amount a worker earns in the labor market is not necessarily the amount of resources ultimately available to the household. Governments may collect income or payroll taxes, but they may also provide public schools, healthcare, housing assistance, unemployment insurance, pensions, disability support, childcare

subsidies, food assistance, or direct cash benefits. The final distribution of economic resources is therefore partly the result of market activity and partly the result of political choices about taxation and public spending.This can make a significant difference. OECD research shows that taxes and transfers substantially reduce income inequality across many member countries, although the degree of redistribution varies widely depending on the design of national tax and welfare systems (OECD, 2015). And here is where the arguments begin. How progressive should taxation be? Who qualifies for public benefits? Should assistance be universal or targeted? At what point does taxation discourage investment or work? At what point does inequality itself become economically or politically destabilizing? There is no government setting labeled FAIR. Societies have to decide.

Progressive Taxation: The More You Earn, the More You Pay

A progressive tax system generally imposes higher effective tax rates as income rises. The basic reasoning rests partly on ability to pay. Losing $1,000 means something very different to someone earning $20,000 than it does to someone earning $2 million. Progressive taxation can finance public services while also reducing disposable-income inequality, but the debate becomes much sharper when taxation reaches very high incomes, investment income, inheritance, property, or accumulated wealth. Economists disagree about optimal tax levels because taxes do more than raise revenue. They can influence investment, savings, entrepreneurship, relocation, tax avoidance, and even the way people classify or report income. Piketty (2014, 2020) argues that progressive taxation of high incomes, inheritance, and wealth can help prevent concentrations of capital from reproducing themselves indefinitely across generations. Other economists place greater emphasis on preserving incentives for investment, entrepreneurship, and innovation. The policy problem is therefore not as simple as “tax rich people more” or “taxes are bad.” It is how to reduce concentrations of economic advantage without undermining the productive activity that generates resources in the first place. Anyone promising you a completely painless answer is probably running for something.

Wealth Changes the Debate

Income receives most of the attention in everyday political debates, but Chapter 4 has already shown why income is not wealth. Two households can earn the same annual salary and occupy completely different economic worlds. One may own a home, carry no debt, hold investments, and expect an inheritance. The other may rent, carry student loans or medical debt, and have virtually no savings. The difference becomes especially important because wealth does more than sit there. It creates security. It generates returns. It can finance education, allow a family to survive unemployment, provide a down payment for housing, fund a business, or give someone the freedom to take a career risk. And unlike wages, assets can be passed directly from one generation to the next. Piketty's historical work documents how inherited and accumulated wealth can create durable economic advantage, while the World Inequality Report shows that wealth is distributed much more unequally than income at the global level (Chancel et al., 2022; Piketty, 2014). That raises a philosophical question sitting quietly underneath inheritance and wealth-tax debates: How much economic inequality should result from decisions made before a person was even born? There is no global consensus on the answer. But the question matters because a society can claim to reward hard work while allowing enormous advantages to enter the game before anyone starts working.

Predistribution: Why Wait Until Afterward?

Redistribution says, in effect, let the market generate the initial distribution, then adjust it afterward. Predistribution asks a more disruptive question: why not change the institutions that produce that original distribution in the first place? The term predistribution refers to policies that influence wages, bargaining power, access to opportunity, and ownership before taxes and transfers become necessary. Minimum wages, collective bargaining, labor protections, antitrust enforcement, education, childcare access, housing policy, employee ownership, corporate governance, and competition policy can all influence how market income is generated. Jacob Hacker (2011) helped popularize this distinction by emphasizing that governments do not merely redistribute what markets produce. Governments help create the rules under which markets operate. That brings us directly back to political economy. A wage is shaped by labor law. A housing market is shaped by zoning and property rules. A corporation operates within competition law. A worker's negotiating power depends partly on whether unions are protected. Even the supposedly “pre-government” market distribution already carries the fingerprints of government. Predistribution simply makes that fact harder to ignore.

Minimum Wage: Simple Policy, Complicated Debate

The minimum wage seems straightforward enough. Raise the wage floor and low-income workers earn more. Possibly. Traditional economic models warned that if employers are required to pay workers more than their productivity supports, businesses may

respond by hiring fewer workers. The prediction makes intuitive sense: if something becomes more expensive, buyers may demand less of it. But labor markets are not always perfectly competitive. Employers may possess considerable power to set wages, particularly where workers have few alternatives or where a small number of firms dominate local employment. Under those conditions, modest minimum-wage increases may raise earnings without creating the dramatic job losses simple models predict.

Card and Krueger's (1994) influential research on fast-food employment challenged the assumption that moderate minimum-wage increases inevitably generate large employment declines, and decades of research since then have continued debating how effects vary by wage level, region, industry, and labor-market structure. So the useful question is not: Minimum wage: good or bad? It is: At what level, in what labor market, with what consequences for wages, employment, prices, and businesses? That answer is considerably less catchy but it is also considerably more useful.

Labor Unions: Bargaining Changes Distribution

Collective bargaining tackles inequality from another direction: power. A single worker negotiating with a multinational corporation may possess limited leverage. Thousands of workers bargaining together are operating from a different position. Through unions and other forms of worker organization, employees can negotiate collectively over wages, benefits, hours, safety, job security, and working conditions. Historically, organized labor played an important role in creating middle-class wages and social protections in many industrialized societies. Research on the United States has linked declining unionization with rising wage inequality, while comparative OECD research suggests that collective bargaining systems can influence how productivity gains are divided between labor and capital (OECD, 2018; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). That does not mean unions are automatically egalitarian. Labor organizations themselves have sometimes excluded women, migrants, racial minorities, temporary workers, or people outside protected sectors. Strong protections for existing workers can also create divides between secure insiders and precarious outsiders. The lesson is not that unions solve inequality. It is that bargaining institutions affect distribution. Who negotiates, who is represented, and who has the ability to say no matters.

Education: Important, Necessary, and Not Magic

If there were an Olympic event for most frequently proposed solution to inequality, education would be on the podium. And for good reason. Education can improve skills, increase productivity, expand professional options, raise earnings, and strengthen social mobility. Public education remains one of the most important institutions societies have for widening opportunity.

But education cannot carry the entire inequality problem on its back. Imagine everyone earns a university degree tomorrow. Hospitals still need cleaners. Farms still need workers. Warehouses still need staff. Restaurants still need cooks. Older people still need caregivers. Societies require enormous numbers of jobs that may remain poorly compensated regardless of how educated the person performing them happens to be. Education can change who occupies particular positions. It does not automatically change how those positions are valued or rewarded. Atkinson (2015) therefore argues that reducing inequality requires attention not only to education and skills but also to wages, employment, ownership, taxation, technological change, and social policy. Education is indispensable. It is not fairy dust.

Universal or Targeted?

Once governments decide to provide assistance, another debate appears almost immediately: should benefits go only to those who need them most, or should everyone receive them? A targeted program directs resources toward people below a specific income threshold or meeting particular eligibility criteria. That can seem economically efficient because scarce public funds are concentrated on the households facing the greatest need. The difficulty is that targeting requires bureaucracy. Someone has to define need, prove eligibility, verify income, process paperwork, and decide where the cutoff falls. People just above the threshold may receive nothing despite facing similar hardships. Eligible households may fail to participate because the system is complicated, inaccessible, or stigmatizing. A universal program uses a simpler rule. Every child might receive a benefit. Every elderly resident might qualify for healthcare. Every student might receive a school meal. Universal programs can be easier to administer and may create stronger political support because broad portions of society benefit from them. But universality costs more because public resources also go to people who could afford the service themselves. Neither design wins automatically. Many successful social systems combine the two, using universal programs in some areas and targeted assistance in others. Social policy is basically humanity spending several centuries arguing about how to answer the word “depends.”

Social Protection: What Happens When Life Goes Wrong?

Markets reward economic participation, but life has an annoying habit of interrupting economic participation. People get sick. Companies close. Workers become disabled. Parents have children. Recessions destroy jobs. Natural disasters hit. Technologies eliminate occupations. Eventually, everyone gets older. Social-protection systems exist because losing market income can occur for reasons that have little to do with effort or talent. Unemployment insurance, disability benefits, pensions, maternity protections, healthcare, and other forms of social insurance help households survive periods when wages disappear or expenses suddenly rise. These programs do more than protect individuals. They can also stabilize entire economies. During recessions, for example, unemployment benefits and cash transfers allow households to continue buying necessities even as private incomes fall. That spending can prevent an economic downturn from becoming even more severe. Social protection therefore performs two jobs at once: it protects people from shocks and helps prevent shocks from spreading through the wider economy. That is very Global Studies: the household and the system are connected.

Cash Transfers: What If We Just Give People Money?

Here is a policy idea so obvious that it somehow sounds radical: If people do not have enough money, give them money. Cash-transfer programs do exactly that. Some are conditional, requiring families to meet expectations such as children's school attendance or health visits. Others are unconditional and simply provide income support. Latin America became particularly influential in the development of large-scale conditional cash-transfer programs, including Mexico's Progresa/Oportunidades and Brazil's Bolsa Família. Research has found that well-designed programs can reduce poverty while also improving outcomes such as school attendance, nutrition, and use of health services (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009). Critics have long worried that giving people cash could discourage work, create dependency, or lead households to spend irresponsibly. Yet empirical research has frequently found something much less dramatic: people use money for food, school expenses, healthcare, transportation, household needs, and productive investment. Sometimes a complicated policy debate really does contain the sentence: People need money. Not every problem requires a sixteen-layer flowchart.

Universal Basic Income: Everybody Gets a Check

Push the cash-transfer logic further and you reach Universal Basic Income, or UBI. Under a UBI, eligible individuals receive regular cash payments without having to demonstrate poverty or satisfy work requirements. Advocates argue that such a system could reduce poverty, simplify welfare bureaucracy, strengthen workers' bargaining power, support unpaid caregivers, and provide financial security in an economy increasingly shaped by automation. Critics immediately ask the obvious question:
How exactly are we paying for this? A genuinely universal program can be enormously expensive, particularly if payments are large enough to meaningfully support households. Critics also question why scarce public resources should be transferred to wealthy households and worry that financing UBI could require cutting more targeted public services. Experiments with guaranteed-income programs have generated useful evidence, but we still do not have a definitive answer about what would happen under a permanent national UBI operating at large scale. Effects on labor supply, taxation, wages, inflation, and existing welfare systems would depend heavily on program design.
Still, the debate is likely to become more important as artificial intelligence and automation transform work. Section 4.4 asked: If technology raises productivity, who owns the technology? UBI adds another question: Who should share in the gains?

Public Services Are Redistribution Too

Redistribution does not always arrive as money. A publicly funded school gives families an economically valuable service without depositing cash into their bank accounts. The same is true of healthcare, transportation, childcare, libraries, universities, housing, water systems, parks, broadband infrastructure, and legal assistance. Together, these services form part of what is sometimes called the social wage: resources that people receive collectively rather than purchasing individually. This matters because household income alone can give a misleading picture of economic well-being. Imagine two families each earning $50,000 per year. One lives in a society where healthcare, childcare, university tuition, and public transportation are affordable or publicly provided. The other must purchase all of those services privately. Their nominal incomes are identical.
Their actual standards of living may be nowhere close. This is another reason inequality cannot be understood through paychecks alone. What households have to buy privately depends partly on what societies decide to provide collectively.

Geography Makes Redistribution Global

Redistribution becomes much harder when we move from inequality inside countries to inequality between them. National governments can tax residents and spend the money domestically. There is no equivalent global government with the authority to tax humanity and redistribute income worldwide. Yet, as Milanovic (2016) emphasizes, where a person is born remains enormously important to economic opportunity. A worker doing similar work can receive radically different wages depending on the country in which the labor occurs. This means migration can itself become a powerful form of economic redistribution. A person who moves from a low-wage labor market to a high-wage one may increase their income dramatically, often sending part of that income home as remittances to family members. Those transfers have become a major source of household income in many lower- and middle-income countries. But migration also reveals why redistribution is politically difficult. The benefits and costs do not fall on the same people. Migrants may gain higher wages. Origin countries receive remittances but may lose trained workers. Employers in destination countries gain access to labor. Some local workers may worry about wage competition. Communities may experience new cultural, housing, or service pressures. So once again, the analytical question becomes: For whom? The most persistent question in Chapter 4 refuses to leave.

Global Taxes for Global Companies?

The mismatch between a global economy and national political institutions appears especially clearly in corporate taxation. Multinational corporations operate across borders, shift capital among jurisdictions, own intellectual property in one country while selling products in dozens of others, and may record profits somewhere entirely different from where those profits were generated. That creates opportunities for profit shifting, particularly toward low-tax jurisdictions. Research by Tørsløv, Wier, and Zucman (2023) suggests that a substantial share of multinational profits is shifted to tax havens, potentially reducing the revenue available to governments where economic activity actually occurs. In response, governments have pursued international cooperation through the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework, including efforts to establish minimum corporate-tax rules designed to reduce incentives for moving profits largely for tax purposes. The negotiations are difficult because governments want different things. Some want to protect tax revenues. Others use low tax rates as a development strategy. Corporations seek predictable and favorable tax environments. Implementation varies across countries.

But the larger idea matters. Globalization created an economic problem that no single national government could easily solve alone, so states attempted to build a coordinated global response. That is practically the definition of a Global Studies problem.

Debt Relief: Redistribution Between Countries?

For heavily indebted countries, inequality policy can run into another constraint: money that governments might want to spend on education, healthcare, infrastructure, or climate adaptation may already be committed to debt service. Debt is not inherently harmful. Governments borrow because today's investment may produce tomorrow's growth. Roads, energy systems, schools, water infrastructure, and emergency responses often require financing that cannot be covered through current revenue alone.

The problem comes when debt becomes unsustainable. When large portions of public revenue go toward interest and repayment, governments lose what economists call fiscal space. Even a government strongly committed to social investment may have little room to maneuver. Debt relief and restructuring are designed to address this problem by reducing repayment burdens or extending the terms under which debt must be repaid.

The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, launched by the IMF and World Bank in the 1990s, became one of the best-known international efforts to provide relief to countries facing unsustainable debt. Relief can create breathing room. It does not automatically solve the conditions that produced the debt. If governments remain dependent on volatile commodity exports, weak tax systems, expensive borrowing, or repeated emergency lending, yesterday's debt cancellation may simply become tomorrow's new debt. Debt relief can therefore be necessary without being sufficient. Sound familiar?

Development Aid: Help, Dependency, or Both?

Official development assistance represents another way resources move across borders. Aid can finance vaccines, schools, roads, humanitarian relief, climate adaptation, agricultural programs, public-health campaigns, government reform, and emergency response. Some interventions have achieved extraordinary results. Others have failed spectacularly. This is why arguments about aid tend to become arguments about which aid, not merely whether aid is good or bad. Jeffrey Sachs (2005) argues that extremely poor societies can become trapped in conditions where low incomes prevent the very investments needed to escape poverty. From this perspective, sufficiently large and coordinated investments in health, infrastructure, agriculture, and education

can help countries cross important development thresholds. William Easterly (2006) is far more skeptical of large top-down development schemes, arguing that outside planners often lack the local knowledge necessary to design effective interventions and that decentralized experimentation and accountability may produce better results. Dambisa Moyo (2009) goes further, arguing that long-term dependence on foreign aid can sometimes weaken domestic accountability and distort government incentives. Students do not need to join Team Sachs, Team Easterly, or Team Moyo before lunch.
Instead ask what kind of assistance is being provided, who designed it, who controls the funds, what problem it is trying to solve, how success is measured, and what realistic alternative exists. A vaccination campaign and a foreign-designed national economic strategy can both be called "aid." They are not remotely the same intervention.

What About Fair Trade?

Consumers sometimes try to address inequality through what they purchase. Fair Trade certification attempts to change the terms under which goods such as coffee, cocoa, bananas, or other agricultural products enter global markets. Certification systems may include labor standards, environmental requirements, minimum pricing arrangements, or community premiums intended to return more value to producers.

The appeal is obvious. Instead of waiting for governments or corporations to redesign global markets, consumers can reward production systems that claim to operate under fairer conditions. But Fair Trade has limits. Certification itself costs money. Not every producer can participate. Benefits vary by product and organization. And a label on a bag of coffee cannot, by itself, solve deeper problems involving land ownership, trade rules, bargaining power, commodity dependence, or global value chains. Ethical consumption can matter. It cannot substitute for institutions. Your coffee choice does not personally have to solve capitalism before 8:00 a.m.

Representation Matters Too

Economic inequality becomes even more difficult to change when wealth translates into political influence. People and organizations with substantial resources may have greater access to lobbying, campaign finance, policymakers, media ownership, professional advocacy networks, or other mechanisms for shaping political agendas.
Gilens and Page (2014), examining policymaking in the United States, found that economic elites and organized business interests had much stronger independent associations with policy outcomes than average citizens. Their findings come from a particular national context and should not be casually treated as universal. But they illustrate an important feedback loop. If wealth creates political influence, and political influence helps shape tax rules, labor laws, regulations, property protections, or public spending, then economic inequality can reproduce itself politically. Wealth creates influence. Influence shapes institutions. Institutions help determine future wealth. And around we go. At this point, inequality begins to look less like a static distribution of resources and more like a self-reinforcing system. Which, of course, is exactly what we have been arguing throughout the chapter.

There Is No Single Inequality Lever

We have now encountered an absurdly large collection of possible responses to inequality: taxation, unions, minimum wages, education, public services, cash transfers, UBI, migration, debt relief, international tax coordination, development aid, Fair Trade, competition policy, housing reform, and changes in asset ownership. That can feel overwhelming. But the variety is actually telling us something important. There are many solutions because there are many causes.

If low wages result from weak worker bargaining power, a cash transfer may increase household income without changing the bargaining relationship. If inequality is driven by poor schools, raising the minimum wage will not fix educational access. If land ownership is extremely concentrated, job training may improve individual skills without touching the structure generating wealth inequality. If multinational firms are shifting profits across tax jurisdictions, telling workers to get more education is almost comically unrelated to the mechanism.

The most important policy principle in this entire section is therefore: Solutions have to match mechanisms. The goal is not to collect as many good-sounding policies as possible. The goal is to understand why an inequality exists and then choose an intervention capable of changing that process.

The Inequality Policy Lab

When someone proposes a policy to reduce inequality, begin by identifying the inequality itself. Are we talking about income, wealth, education, health, gender, geography, political influence, or opportunity? Then identify the mechanism producing it. Is the problem low wages, unequal ownership, discrimination, tax avoidance, weak public services, historical dispossession, limited bargaining power, or something else?

Only after identifying the mechanism should we ask whether the proposed solution actually targets it. Then comes the part policy debates often try to avoid: who pays? Every intervention has costs somewhere. They may fall on taxpayers, corporations, consumers, workers, asset owners, borrowers, or future generations. Those costs do not automatically make a policy bad, but pretending they do not exist makes the analysis weak. Next ask who benefits and whether those benefits are actually reaching the intended group. Finally, think about what happens after the policy is introduced. Employers may alter hiring. Investors may move capital. Consumers may respond to higher prices. Families may change behavior. Political coalitions may form or collapse. Policy does not happen to mannequins.
People respond. That is why evaluating inequality policy requires thinking several moves ahead.

Fair Does Not Mean Everyone Gets the Same Thing

This chapter began by asking why the world is so unfair. By now, the answer should feel more complicated than it did at the beginning. Some inequality reflects different preferences, skills, effort, risk-taking, and choices. Some reflects luck. Some comes from inheritance. Some is produced by discrimination or exclusion. Some grows out of institutions built long before the people living under them were born. Some results from global differences in productivity, geography, political stability, or state capacity.
The difficult analytical task is distinguishing among them. A perfectly equal society is neither realistic nor necessarily desirable if achieving equality requires eliminating choice, innovation, reward, or diversity. But the opposite claim is equally weak: that any inequality produced through a market must therefore be fair. Markets operate through institutions. Institutions are created through politics. Politics reflects power. And power itself is distributed unequally.

So the better question is not: How do we make everyone equal?

It is: Which inequalities prevent people from exercising meaningful freedom and opportunity, which institutions reproduce those inequalities, and what would changing those institutions cost?

That question does not produce an easy answer but it produces a serious debate.

Final Global Studies Lens: Who Gets What and Why?

When you encounter an inequality, begin with the outcome: who has what? Then trace its history. How did this distribution emerge, and what events or institutions shaped it? Identify the mechanism that keeps reproducing the pattern and the actors who benefit from the current arrangement. Only then should you move to policy: what intervention actually targets the mechanism, who would bear the cost, and what evidence would tell us whether the intervention succeeded? In other words, move from outcome to history, from history to mechanism, from mechanism to power, and from power to policy. And throughout the process, keep asking the question that has followed us through this chapter: For whom? If you can answer that question while also explaining who pays, who benefits, and what might happen next, you are no longer simply describing inequality. You are analyzing it.

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4.6: Who Gets What, Who Decides, and Why?

To sum it up

Inequality is often introduced as a simple question of who has more money and who has less. By the end of this chapter, that definition should feel much too small.
Income matters, but so does wealth. Wealth matters because it provides security, access, inheritance, and the ability to survive shocks. Geography matters because where people are born still shapes wages, opportunities, mobility, and access to public goods. History matters because colonialism, slavery, land ownership, industrialization, debt, and institutional development continue to influence contemporary economic systems. And politics matters because markets never operate in a vacuum. They are built through rules, and those rules shape who gets what. That is the central shift this chapter has asked you to make: from seeing inequality as a static gap to seeing it as a system of relationships.

From Income Gaps to Life Chances

We began by distinguishing among income, wealth, poverty, and opportunity. Those categories overlap, but they are not interchangeable. Two people can earn similar incomes while living very different economic lives if one owns a home, has savings, and expects an inheritance while the other carries debt and has no assets. Sen's capabilities approach helped us move even further beyond income by asking what people are actually able to do with the resources available to them (Sen, 1999). A formal opportunity is not always a meaningful opportunity. People enter schools, labor markets, housing systems, healthcare systems, and political institutions from different starting points. Piketty's work on wealth added another layer by showing how ownership can reproduce advantage across generations (Piketty, 2014, 2020). Families may not pass down salaries, but they can pass down property, businesses, investments, education, networks, and financial security. This is why inequality is not simply about who has more today. It is also about who begins tomorrow with more possibilities.

Measurement Helps, but It Also Hides

The next step was figuring out how inequality can be measured at all. The Gini Index gives us a summary measure of income or consumption inequality. The Human Development Index broadens the discussion by incorporating health, education, and income. The Inequality-adjusted HDI asks how evenly those achievements are distributed. Multidimensional poverty measures overlapping forms of deprivation. The World Happiness Report asks people to evaluate their own lives. Each measure reveals something important. Each also leaves something out.

That is why one of the most useful habits developed in this chapter is measurement humility. A statistic can be accurate without being complete. A country can score well on average while hiding enormous regional, class, gender, racial, or urban-rural inequalities underneath the national number. Two countries can have similar Gini coefficients while arriving at those numbers through very different distributions. The important question is therefore never just, What is the number? It is also, What does the number actually measure, and what disappears when we compress an entire society into it? Data are essential. But data need interpretation.

Inequality Has a History

Once we know how inequality appears, we have to ask how it got there. That question took us backward into colonialism, slavery, trade, land ownership, institutional development, debt, and the global political economy. Dependency theorists such as Rodney and Frank argued that underdevelopment could not be understood simply as a failure to modernize; it had to be analyzed in relation to the historical structure of the international economy. Wallerstein expanded this into a world-systems framework, while later scholars such as Acemoglu, Johnson, Robinson, and Nunn examined long-term institutional and historical mechanisms through different empirical approaches.
These theories do not tell one identical story, and they should not be forced into one. What they do share is a refusal to treat contemporary economic outcomes as if they appeared yesterday. History shapes institutions. Institutions shape incentives. Incentives shape behavior. Behavior can then reinforce the institutions.
That is why inequality can become durable. But history is not destiny. Countries facing similar historical constraints have

often followed very different political and economic paths. Postcolonial governments have made consequential choices. Social movements have changed institutions. States have built industries, expanded education, redistributed land, or failed to do so. The point is not that the past determines everything. It is that the present becomes much harder to understand if we pretend the past no longer matters.

Globalization Creates Gains, but Not Equal Shares

From there, we moved into the contradiction at the heart of globalization. The world economy has become vastly more productive. Trade expanded. Technology diffused. Countries industrialized. Consumer goods became cheaper. Extreme poverty declined over the long run. Those achievements are real. So are the unequal outcomes that accompanied them. Global value chains helped us see why. A product may be assembled across multiple countries, but not every actor in the chain captures the same amount of value. The worker who stitches a garment, the firm that manufactures components, the company that controls the brand, and the platform that controls access to consumers may all participate in the same product while receiving dramatically different returns. The key distinction became the difference between participating in production and capturing value. Technology complicated the picture further. Automation can make workers more productive or replace some tasks altogether. Foreign investment can create employment and transfer knowledge, but it can also remain disconnected from local economies. Outsourcing can lower prices for consumers while concentrating adjustment costs in particular communities. Again, the point was not to decide whether globalization is simply good or bad. The better question was:
Who gains, who loses, who has the ability to adjust, and who gets to shape the rules?

Power Is the Thread Running Through Everything

By this point, one pattern should be difficult to miss.

Ownership affects bargaining power.

Bargaining power affects wages.

Wages affect wealth accumulation.

Wealth can influence politics.

Politics shapes taxation, labor law, trade rules, property rights, education, social protection, and regulation. Those policies then influence future distributions of income and wealth. And around we go. This is why inequality is not only an economic question. It is also a question of power.

The worker and the multinational corporation do not enter negotiations with identical mobility. The household and the financial institution do not enter a debt relationship with identical leverage. A local government and a globally mobile company do not always possess equal power over taxation or investment decisions. The phrase “for whom?” kept returning throughout this chapter because aggregate outcomes can hide these differences. Economic growth may be good overall and still impose large losses on particular communities. Austerity may stabilize a budget while increasing hardship. Foreign investment may create employment while generating weak local linkages. Technology may increase total productivity while directing a larger share of income toward owners of capital. A policy can therefore succeed according to one indicator and fail according to another. That is not contradiction for contradiction's sake. It is what complex systems look like.

Solutions Have to Match Mechanisms

The final section moved from diagnosis into policy. If inequality has multiple causes, there cannot be one universal solution. Redistribution changes outcomes after market income is generated through taxes, transfers, and public services. Predistribution changes some of the institutions that shape the original distribution through wages, bargaining rights, competition policy, education, ownership structures, childcare, housing, and labor-market rules. Neither approach eliminates the other. A society may need both. The important lesson is that policy should be matched to the mechanism generating the problem. If inequality is being driven by weak worker bargaining power, a cash transfer may help household income but leave the underlying labor relationship untouched. If the problem is unequal access to education, a wealth tax alone does not fix school quality. If the problem is multinational profit shifting, telling workers to acquire more skills is almost comically disconnected from the cause.

This is why good inequality policy begins with diagnosis. First ask what kind of inequality exists. Then ask what is producing

it.Only then ask what intervention might change that process. And after that, ask who pays, who benefits, and what unintended consequences might follow. Policy does not happen in a vacuum either. People respond.

So Why Is the World So Unfair?

We can now return to the chapter's opening question.Why is the world so unfair? Partly because people make different choices. Partly because people have different skills, preferences, and luck. Partly because societies reward some forms of work more than others. But also because people inherit different assets, enter different institutions, possess different bargaining power, live under different governments, experience different forms of discrimination, and begin life in radically different positions within the global economy.

Some inequalities emerge from choices.

Some are inherited.

Some are institutional.

Some are historical.

Some are produced through global markets.

Most real cases contain several of these at once. That is why inequality is so resistant to single explanations. And it is why the question of fairness cannot be answered simply by asking whether everyone ended up with the same amount. A better question is whether people had meaningful opportunities, whether the rules were legitimate, whether power was excessively concentrated, and whether some groups were systematically prevented from converting effort into opportunity. Fairness is not sameness.
But neither is every outcome fair simply because it happened through a market. Markets are structured by institutions. Institutions are shaped by politics. Politics reflects power.
And power is rarely distributed equally.

The Global Studies Lens: From Outcome to Accountability

The most useful way to leave this chapter is not with a list of terms but with a way of thinking. When you encounter inequality, begin with the outcome. Who has what? Then trace backward. What historical forces helped create that distribution? What institutions keep reproducing it? Which actors have the most ownership, mobility, or bargaining power? Once you understand the mechanism, move forward again. What policy could realistically change it? Who would pay for that intervention? Who would benefit? What trade-offs would emerge? And what evidence would tell us whether the policy actually worked?

That movement from outcome to history, history to mechanism, mechanism to power, and power to accountability is the analytical habit this chapter is trying to build. And through every step, keep the shortest question in the chapter close at hand:

For whom?

If an economy grows, for whom?

If a policy works, for whom?

If technology increases productivity, for whom?

If globalization creates opportunity, for whom?

If a country becomes richer, for whom?

Those two words force us to move beyond averages and into the distribution of real experiences.

That is where the study of inequality becomes Global Studies.

The world may be unfair.

The interesting question is no longer simply whether it is.

It is how that unfairness is produced, who has the power to change it, and what a fairer system would actually require.

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4.7: Discussion

Lets Talk About it

Discussion 1: When Does Inequality Become Unfair?

Not every difference in income is necessarily unjust.

Imagine two people who begin with similar opportunities. One chooses a highly paid career requiring years of training and long working hours. The other chooses lower-paid work that provides more leisure and flexibility.

Now change the scenario.

One person inherits substantial property, debt-free education, professional networks, and financial security.

The other begins adulthood with debt, unstable housing, and no inherited assets.

At what point does economic difference become unfair inequality?

In your response, distinguish among inequality created by individual choices, inherited advantage, institutional rules, and unequal opportunity.

Use at least two concepts from Chapter 4 and explain what standard you think society should use when evaluating whether a particular inequality is acceptable.

Discussion 2: Your Cheap Product Has a Passport

Choose one inexpensive product that you use regularly:

clothing;

coffee;

a phone accessory;

shoes;

cosmetics;

electronics;

or another consumer good.

Trace what you can about its global production system.

Then answer:

Who appears to capture the most value from the product?

Who performs the most labor-intensive work?

Who owns the brand, technology, or intellectual property?

What benefits does the supply chain create?

What costs may be hidden from the final price?

Finally, answer the central question:

Does buying an inexpensive globally produced product make you part of the inequality problem, part of the development solution, both, or neither?

There is no required position.

Strong responses should acknowledge the contradictions.

Discussion 3: Fix the Mechanism, Not the Symptom

Choose one inequality issue:

- rising housing inequality;
- low wages;
- unequal educational access;
- wealth concentration;
- gender pay inequality;
- multinational tax avoidance;
- global debt;
- unequal access to healthcare; or
- another issue approved by your instructor.

Identify the mechanism that you believe is producing the inequality.

Then propose one policy response.

Your classmates' job is to challenge you by asking:

Does your policy actually address the mechanism you identified?

Revise your argument if necessary.

The goal is not to defend your first idea at all costs.

The goal is to improve the diagnosis.

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4.8: Assignments

Assignment 1: The Inequality Dashboard

Purpose

National rankings often encourage us to believe that one statistic can tell us whether a society is doing well.

This assignment tests that assumption.

Task

Choose two countries that appear similar according to one common measure for example, GDP per capita, geographic region, or development level.

Create an Inequality Dashboard comparing them using at least five indicators from the following categories:

- income inequality;
- wealth inequality, where reliable data are available;
- Human Development Index;
- Inequality-adjusted HDI;
- multidimensional poverty;
- life expectancy;
- education;
- subjective well-being;
- gender inequality;
- access to public services.

Then write a 750–1,000 word analysis answering:

1. What story would someone tell if they looked only at the first indicator?
2. What changes when the other indicators are added?
3. Which measure best captures the inequality you find most important?
4. What does that measure still leave out?
5. What historical or institutional factor may help explain the differences between the two countries?

Required Element

Include a brief Measurement Warning explaining one reason your comparison may be imperfect.

Examples include different data years, missing data, national averages masking regional inequality, or differences in survey methodology.

Goal

Do not simply rank the countries.

Show why measurement choices influence the story we tell about them.

Assignment 2: Follow the Value

Purpose

Most global supply-chain assignments ask where products come from.

This one asks a harder question:

Where does the value go?

Task

Choose one consumer product with a global supply chain.

Examples include:

- sneakers;
- a smartphone;
- coffee;
- chocolate;
- a T-shirt;
- cosmetics;
- a laptop;
- a bicycle; or
- another instructor-approved product.

Create a visual or written Global Value Map identifying as many stages as possible:

raw materials → processing → manufacturing → assembly → shipping → branding → retail

Then investigate who appears to capture significant value at each stage.

Your final analysis should address:

- Who owns the brand?
- Who controls design or intellectual property?
- Where does manufacturing occur?
- What kinds of workers are involved?
- What labor or environmental risks appear?
- What role do governments play?
- Which actors have the greatest bargaining power?
- Does the product demonstrate upgrading, exploitation, development opportunity, or some combination?

Final Component

Write a 500-word Value Capture Memo answering:

If you could change one rule governing this supply chain to make its benefits more equitable without destroying the economic activity it supports, what would you change and why?

Your recommendation must identify a likely trade-off.

Assignment 3: The Inequality Policy Lab

Scenario

You have been hired as part of an advisory team for a country experiencing rapidly rising inequality.

The economy is growing.

Unemployment is moderate.

But wages for lower- and middle-income workers have stagnated, housing costs are increasing, wealth is concentrating, and younger adults believe economic mobility is declining.

The government has enough political support to adopt three major reforms.

Not ten.

Three.

Task

Choose three interventions from areas such as:

- taxation;
- housing;
- education;
- social protection;
- labor law;
- minimum wages;
- collective bargaining;
- competition policy;
- inheritance;
- asset ownership;
- childcare;
- healthcare;
- cash transfers;
- corporate taxation; or
- another policy discussed in Chapter 4.

For each policy, explain:

Mechanism:
What source of inequality does it address?

Expected benefit:
Who is likely to gain?

Cost:
Who pays?

Trade-off:
What unintended consequence might occur?

Evidence:
What evidence would you collect after five years to determine whether the policy worked?

Final Recommendation

Rank your three policies from highest to lowest priority.

Then explain why you did not choose at least two other plausible interventions.

That last part matters.

Policy decisions involve opportunity costs.

Choosing one solution means not choosing another.

Goal

Demonstrate that inequality policy is not about assembling the longest possible wish list.

It is about matching interventions to mechanisms and defending difficult choices.

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4.9: Key Terms

Important Words

- **Absolute poverty** A condition in which people lack sufficient resources to meet a defined minimum standard of basic needs.
- **Austerity** Policies intended to reduce government deficits or public debt, often through spending cuts, tax increases, or structural reforms.
- **Capabilities approach** An approach associated especially with Amartya Sen that evaluates development according to what people are genuinely able to do and become.
- **Collective bargaining** Negotiation between workers, usually represented by a union, and employers over wages, benefits, working conditions, and other employment terms.
- **Conditional cash transfer** A social-protection payment provided to households when specified conditions, such as school attendance or health visits, are met.
- **Dependency theory** A family of theories arguing that underdevelopment can be reproduced through unequal economic relationships between wealthier and poorer parts of the global economy.
- **Economic inequality** Unequal distribution of income, wealth, resources, or economic opportunities within or across societies.
- **Equity** An approach to fairness that recognizes different starting conditions and may require different forms of support to create meaningful opportunity.
- **Externality** A social or environmental cost or benefit created by an economic activity that is not fully reflected in its market price.
- **Foreign direct investment (FDI)** Investment through which a firm or investor establishes a lasting business interest in another country.
- **Gini Index** A measure of income or consumption inequality. Higher values indicate greater measured inequality.
- **Global value chain** A cross-border sequence of activities involved in producing a good or service, including design, sourcing, manufacturing, logistics, marketing, and distribution.
- **Human Development Index (HDI)** A composite measure combining indicators of life expectancy, education, and income to assess average human development.
- **Income** A flow of earnings or resources received over time, including wages, business income, investment income, and transfers.
- **Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI)** A measure that adjusts HDI downward when health, education, and income achievements are distributed unequally.
- **Life chances** The opportunities people have to access valued social outcomes such as education, income, health, security, and mobility.
- **Multidimensional poverty** Poverty understood as overlapping deprivation across dimensions such as health, education, and living standards rather than income alone.
- **Neoliberalism** A broad family of political-economic ideas emphasizing market competition, privatization, deregulation, free trade, and greater reliance on private economic activity.
- **Outsourcing** The contracting of an activity to another firm, often but not necessarily located in another country.
- **Political economy** The study of how political institutions, economic systems, markets, laws, and power shape one another.
- **Predistribution** Policies and institutions that shape the original distribution of market income before taxes and transfers, including wages, bargaining systems, competition policy, and ownership structures.
- **Progressive taxation** A tax structure in which effective tax rates rise as income or wealth increases.
- **Race to the bottom** The argument that governments may compete for investment by lowering wages, taxes, labor protections, or environmental standards.
- **Redistribution** Government policies that alter the distribution of resources after market income is generated, particularly through taxes, transfers, and public services.
- **Relative poverty** Poverty defined in relation to the typical living standards and resources available within a particular society.
- **Social protection** Policies designed to protect people from economic and social risks such as unemployment, illness, disability, maternity, and old age.
- **Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)** Economic reform packages historically associated with IMF and World Bank lending, often including fiscal restraint, privatization, trade liberalization, deregulation, and exchange-rate reform.
- **Technology transfer** The movement of knowledge, technical capacity, skills, production methods, or intellectual property from one firm, country, or institution to another.
- **Universal Basic Income (UBI)** A proposal to provide regular cash payments to eligible individuals without means testing or

work requirements.

- **Washington Consensus** A term originally coined by John Williamson for a set of market-oriented policy reforms associated with Washington-based economic institutions; it later became shorthand for a broader neoliberal development agenda.
- **Wealth** Accumulated assets such as property, land, savings, investments, and businesses, minus debt.
- **World-systems theory** A framework associated with Immanuel Wallerstein that analyzes the global economy through interconnected relationships among core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral regions.

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5: GLOBAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

Global Health, Inequality, and Power



Figure 5.1: Health Is More Than Medicine. When many people think about health, they picture doctors, hospitals, prescriptions, and pills. Those things matter, but health is also shaped by income, housing, food, work, environment, education, policy, history, and access to resources. This chapter asks us to look beyond medicine and examine the systems that shape who gets to be healthy in the first place. (Photo by freestocks on Unsplash).

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Distinguish global health from public health, international health, and health care.
- Analyze how social, political, economic, historical, cultural, and environmental conditions shape health outcomes.
- Apply social-determinants, structural-violence, fundamental-cause, intersectional, political-economy, and ecosocial frameworks to health inequality.
- Evaluate how colonial histories and contemporary global institutions influence health priorities and access to care.
- Compare how different populations experienced COVID-19 and global vaccine distribution.
- Assess the roles of governments, international organizations, corporations, communities, and individuals in producing or reducing health inequities.
- Use systems thinking to connect human health with climate, migration, labor, food systems, technology, and global governance.

Two babies are born at almost exactly the same moment.

One enters the world in a place with clean drinking water, prenatal care, reliable electricity, functioning hospitals, vaccines, safe housing, and doctors who can prescribe medicines that will probably be available when they are needed.

The other does not.

Neither baby chose a country, an income level, a neighborhood, a health system, a passport, a climate, or a government. Yet those circumstances can shape what diseases they encounter, whether treatment exists, how quickly care reaches them, and ultimately how long they are likely to live.

That is where global health begins.

Health is biological, but it is never *only* biological. Viruses do not check passports, but health systems do have borders. Diseases may spread through bodies, yet vulnerability is shaped by housing, labor, income, gender, race, colonial history, environmental exposure, political decisions, access to technology, and the distribution of resources. Who becomes sick and who survives are therefore medical questions—but they are also economic, political, historical, cultural, and ethical ones.

In 2025, the World Health Organization reported that the difference in average life expectancy between the countries with the highest and lowest life expectancies was approximately 33 years. Within individual countries, health outcomes can also vary dramatically according to income, education, race and ethnicity, disability, gender, geography, housing, and working conditions (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025a).

Thirty-three years.

That is not a minor statistical variation.

It is nearly a generation.

Global health therefore asks us to look beyond hospitals and medicines toward what public-health scholars call the social determinants of health: the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, along with the wider political and economic systems that distribute power, money, resources, risk, and opportunity (Solar & Irwin, 2010; WHO, 2025a).

It also forces us into some uncomfortable questions. Why do diseases that are preventable still kill millions of people? Why can a lifesaving medicine exist and still remain inaccessible? Why are some illnesses treated as global emergencies while others remain largely invisible? Who decides which diseases receive research funding? Why does where you are born have so much influence over how long you are likely to live? And when a health crisis crosses borders, who is responsible for protecting whom?

These questions became impossible to ignore during COVID-19. The same virus circulated through an interconnected world, yet people did not encounter the pandemic on equal terms. Some could work from home; others could not. Some countries purchased enormous vaccine supplies before others obtained first doses. Some workers were praised as “essential” while remaining poorly paid and heavily exposed. Technology accelerated vaccine development while misinformation traveled through many of the same global networks.

COVID-19 did not invent global health inequality. It made existing inequality unusually visible. Long before COVID-19, colonialism, trade, war, migration, urbanization, environmental change, labor systems, pharmaceutical markets, sanitation infrastructure, and global institutions had already shaped who was exposed to disease and who had access to protection. Anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer (2004) described this relationship through the idea of structural violence: suffering can be produced not only by direct acts of violence but also by political and economic arrangements that systematically expose some populations to greater risk while limiting their access to resources and care. This chapter therefore treats health as a Global Studies problem.

We will move from bodies to borders, from pathogens to politics, and from hospitals to history. We will examine epidemics, but also the quieter forces that determine health long before anyone enters a clinic. We will explore colonial medicine and global institutions; poverty and inequality; pharmaceutical markets and intellectual property; COVID-19 and vaccine distribution; chronic disease and maternal mortality; climate change, zoonotic disease, and planetary health. Most importantly, we will keep asking the question that sits underneath all of them: If health is shaped by global systems, who has the power and the responsibility to make those systems healthier?

Think About It!

Why do enormous health inequalities persist in a world with more medical knowledge, technology, and wealth than at any previous point in human history?

The Global Studies Lens

Throughout this chapter, keep returning to the same lenses we have used elsewhere in the book. History asks how present health patterns developed. Economics asks who can afford prevention and treatment and who profits from health-related goods and services. Politics asks who sets priorities, allocates resources, and writes the rules. Culture asks how belief, stigma, trust, identity, and knowledge influence health behavior. Society asks which groups experience greater exposure, vulnerability, or barriers to care. The environment asks how climate, pollution, housing, water, food systems, and ecological change shape human bodies. A

disease may begin in a body. Understanding why it spreads, who suffers most, and who survives usually requires looking much farther.

5.1: Introduction - What is Global Health?
5.2: When History Gets Under the Skin
5.3: Why Health Is Unequal
5.4: Who Is the Boss of Global Health?
5.5: Same Virus, Different Worlds
5.6: The Health Crises That Don't Trend
5.7: One Planet, One Health?
5.8: So Who Is Responsible?
5.9: Discussion
5.10: Assignments
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5.1: Introduction - What is Global Health?

Health is never just medical

Imagine that someone asks why a person became sick.

The easiest answers are usually biological. A virus entered the body. A cell changed. Blood pressure rose. A mosquito transmitted a parasite. A gene increased susceptibility to disease.

None of those answers is necessarily wrong.

They are simply incomplete.

Now ask a different set of questions. Did the person have clean water? Safe housing? Nutritious food? Paid sick leave? Reliable transportation? A nearby clinic? Clean air? Was the person exposed to hazardous work? Could they afford medicine? Did discrimination affect the treatment they received? Was the health system adequately funded? Did war, migration, climate change, or economic crisis disrupt care?

Suddenly health becomes much bigger than medicine.

That shift from asking only “What disease does this person have?” to also asking “What conditions made this disease more likely, more dangerous, or harder to treat?” is central to global health.

There is no single universally accepted definition of global health, partly because the field sits at the intersection of public health, medicine, economics, politics, development studies, anthropology, sociology, environmental studies, and international relations. One influential definition describes global health as an area of study, research, and practice that prioritizes improving health and achieving health equity worldwide while emphasizing problems and solutions that cross national boundaries (Koplan et al., 2009).

The word global matters.

Global health is not simply “health problems in poor countries.” Nor is it just wealthy countries helping poorer countries. That older framing can reproduce a misleading picture in which expertise flows in one direction while communities facing health problems become passive recipients of knowledge.

Instead, global health asks how health is produced through interconnected systems. Air pollution crosses borders. Pharmaceutical supply chains cross borders. Health workers migrate. Food moves through global markets. Pathogens travel with humans, animals, and commodities. Medical research takes place across multiple countries. Intellectual-property rules negotiated internationally can influence whether medicines are affordable thousands of miles from the laboratories in which they were developed. Climate change shifts disease environments across regions.

A health system can therefore be intensely local while the forces affecting it are unmistakably global.

It is also useful to distinguish global health from related fields. Public health generally focuses on protecting and improving the health of populations through prevention, surveillance, policy, education, sanitation, and health services. International health historically emphasized health relationships between countries, often focusing on health problems in lower-income countries and assistance delivered across borders. Global health places greater emphasis on transnational connections, shared determinants, international institutions, and health equity. These categories overlap, but global health directs our attention especially toward systems and relationships rather than isolated national problems (Koplan et al., 2009).

An equally important distinction is the difference between health and health care.

Health care includes doctors, nurses, hospitals, clinics, medicines, surgeries, diagnostic technologies, and other services designed to prevent or treat illness.

Health is the much larger outcome.

Excellent hospitals cannot completely compensate for unsafe housing, contaminated drinking water, chronic hunger, dangerous working conditions, severe air pollution, or decades of discrimination. This is why public-health researchers emphasize the social determinants of health: the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, together with the larger systems that distribute power, resources, opportunities, and risk (Marmot, 2005; Solar & Irwin, 2010).

Consider asthma. A physician can prescribe medication to a child experiencing repeated attacks. But what if that child returns every night to an apartment filled with mold? A physician can recommend a healthier diet for a patient with diabetes, but what if healthy food is expensive, the patient works two jobs, and the nearest affordable grocery store is miles away? “A public-health campaign can advise contagious workers to stay home, but what if missing a shift means losing wages needed to make rent?

Individual behavior matters.

But individuals make decisions inside structures of opportunity that are not distributed equally.

From the Dinner Table to the Body

In Chapter 4, food insecurity helped us see inequality as a problem of access rather than simple scarcity. Here the same process becomes biological. When households cannot reliably obtain nutritious food, the consequences can appear in childhood development, immune function, chronic disease, maternal health, and vulnerability to illness.

This is one reason Global Studies keeps crossing chapter boundaries. An economic problem can become a health problem. A health problem can become an education problem. An environmental shock can become all three.

The body is often where global systems eventually leave their receipt.

This leads to another important distinction: equality and equity are not the same thing. Health equality generally means treating people similarly or distributing equivalent resources. Health equity asks whether people have a fair opportunity to achieve good health and whether avoidable and unjust differences have been reduced. Giving two communities identical resources may look equal, but if one community has far greater disease burdens, geographic isolation, language barriers, transportation problems, or decades of systematic underinvestment, identical inputs may not produce equitable outcomes.

Equity therefore requires asking not merely, “Did everybody receive the same thing?” but “What does each population require to have a genuinely fair opportunity to be healthy?”

That question immediately introduces politics.

Someone must decide which differences are unjust, what needs deserve priority, how resources will be distributed, and who participates in making those decisions.

One of the simplest measures we use to see those differences is life expectancy at birth, the average number of years a newborn would be expected to live if current mortality patterns continued. It is an imperfect measure; it cannot capture everything about disability, mental health, quality of life, inequality within a country, or the experiences of particular communities.

But it reveals something difficult to ignore.

WHO's 2025 report on social determinants of health equity found that average life expectancy differs by approximately 33 years between the countries at the highest and lowest ends of the global distribution. WHO also emphasized large differences within countries according to income, education, race and ethnicity, disability, gender, location, and living conditions (WHO, 2025a). Life expectancy around the world is varied and the variance over time is shown in the box below.

A World of Unequal Life Chances.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this Interactive Content online

A World of Unequal Life Chances. Life expectancy varies dramatically across countries, reflecting differences in disease, income, infrastructure, health systems, conflict, environment, and other social conditions Press play or hover over the chart or use the right hand tool bar too isolate countries and see their specifc life expectancy. Unfortunately, this box is not accessible. This box will NOT print up in pdfs

The obvious question is: Why?

Not because populations in one country possess inherently superior genes.

Not because entire populations in another simply make worse choices.

The explanation lies substantially in systems.

Public-health researchers sometimes describe social determinants as the “causes of the causes.” Suppose cardiovascular disease is someone's immediate cause of death. Why did that person have elevated cardiovascular risk? Perhaps chronic stress played a role. Why chronic stress? Perhaps insecure employment, debt, housing instability, discrimination, or limited access to medical care. Why were those conditions concentrated among particular communities?

Now we are asking about labor markets, housing policy, education, taxation, discrimination, social protection, political representation, and history.

The deeper we trace the chain, the less health looks like an isolated medical phenomenon.

That is precisely the point.

Farmer's (2004) concept of structural violence helps us push this analysis farther. His work on HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis in Haiti demonstrated that disease could not be adequately understood without examining colonial history, poverty, racism, political economy, and unequal access to treatment. Structural violence does not mean every illness is caused by injustice. It means that when suffering repeatedly concentrates among people with less wealth, security, political power, or institutional access, researchers should investigate the structure rather than treating millions of similar outcomes as unrelated personal misfortunes.

Instead of seeing poor country → poor health, Global Studies asks what historical relationships produced poverty, how medical resources are distributed, who controls pharmaceutical production, which communities absorb environmental hazards, whose knowledge counts, whose diseases receive research funding, and who possesses enough political power to demand better services.

Now we are studying global health.

When reading health data, however, we must also remember that averages conceal. Two countries with similar life expectancies can contain radically different distributions of health. National data can hide regional differences, Indigenous communities, migrants, racial and ethnic inequalities, gender disparities, or severe socioeconomic gradients.

Whenever you encounter a health statistic, ask who is represented, who may disappear inside the average, how the category was defined, and what causal claims the data actually support.

If people's health is shaped by the conditions into which they are born, then explaining global health inequality requires more than identifying disease.

We have to explain how those unequal conditions came to exist.

And that takes us into history.

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5.2: When History Gets Under the Skin

Disease, Empire, Trade, and the Making of Global Health

Here's an inconvenient truth about globalization: People are not the only things that travel.

Ideas, goods, religions, languages, technologies, plants, animals (and microbes) move through the same human networks.

For thousands of years, expanding connections have created opportunities for trade, migration, conquest, cultural exchange, and disease transmission. A pathogen does not need a passport, diplomatic recognition, or a trade agreement. It needs a host and a route. That makes disease history part of globalization history.

But if we tell that history as a parade of plagues disease appears, lots of people die, next disease we miss the most important part. Disease is biological.

Pandemics are social events.

The same pathogen encounters very different worlds depending on who has clean water, who lives in crowded housing, who is required to work, whose movement is restricted, whose neighborhood receives sanitation infrastructure, whose illness attracts government attention, and whose suffering is considered politically tolerable. So instead of creating a Greatest Hits Album of Human Misery, let us ask a better question:

What did major health crises reveal and what systems did societies build in response?

Long before anyone used the word *globalization*, agriculture brought humans into sustained contact with domesticated animals and created settlements large enough for some infectious diseases to circulate continuously. Cities increased population density. Armies moved people across enormous territories. Pilgrimages connected distant communities. Maritime trade linked ports. Empires built roads. Merchants crossed continents. Each innovation that made humans more connected created new pathways through which disease could move. But connection spread solutions too. Medicines traveled. Medical ideas circulated. Public-health techniques moved between societies. Eventually, vaccines did too. That tension runs throughout the history of global health.

The fourteenth-century plague pandemic commonly known as the Black Death provides an early dramatic example. *Yersinia pestis* moved through a world already connected by commerce, political expansion, maritime shipping, and overland exchange. The epidemic devastated communities across parts of Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Yet the more interesting Global Studies story is not simply its death toll. Trade networks were extensive enough for biological developments in one region to affect societies thousands of miles away. Governments experimented with quarantine. Communities interpreted disease using the religious, cultural, and medical knowledge available to them. Fear sometimes produced scapegoating alongside efforts at collective protection. The plague revealed interdependence.

Centuries before airplanes, the internet, or international organizations, human societies were already connected enough for health crises to become transregional. Only the speed would change. The history of medicine is also much more global than the conventional sequence of famous European scientists sometimes suggests. Consider smallpox prevention. Long before Edward Jenner's 1796 vaccination experiment, forms of variolation had been practiced in parts of Asia, Africa, and the Ottoman Empire. Knowledge of inoculation reached Britain partly through Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's encounters with Ottoman practice. In colonial Massachusetts, an enslaved West African man named Onesimus described a comparable protective procedure to Cotton Mather during an era of recurring smallpox outbreaks (WHO, n.d.-a).

Pause on that history.

Knowledge that became part of Western vaccination history moved through Asian practitioners, Ottoman networks, women, and an enslaved African man.

Knowledge travels.

Credit does not always travel with it.

Jenner's work was enormously consequential, but placing it inside a longer global history changes the story. Humans across different societies observed disease, experimented with protection, exchanged knowledge, altered techniques, and built upon one another's discoveries. Global health has always been global in ways its official histories have not always acknowledged. The nineteenth century then dramatically expanded the scale of those connections. European imperial powers extended control across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Steamships accelerated maritime movement. Railways opened territories to colonial administration and extraction. Plantation economies expanded. Soldiers, administrators, missionaries, merchants, indentured laborers, and coerced populations moved through imperial systems.

Disease traveled alongside them.

So did a political question for colonial governments: How do you keep an empire functioning when soldiers, administrators, workers, and settlers keep becoming sick?

One answer became the developing field of tropical medicine. Research into malaria, yellow fever, sleeping sickness, and other diseases produced scientific discoveries that eventually benefited millions. But the institutional context matters. Tropical medicine developed partly because imperial states wanted to protect military personnel, administrators, trade routes, plantations, and colonial economies. Health interventions could therefore be organized around imperial priorities rather than equal concern for colonized populations (Packard, 2016; Bump & Aniebo, 2022). That does not mean every colonial doctor lacked compassion. It means the system in which medicine operated had political goals. Those goals influenced which illnesses attracted research money, where hospitals were located, which populations were surveyed, and whose health became strategically valuable.

Even the word tropical reveals how medicine and empire became intertwined. Malaria historically existed in places far beyond what we now call the tropics, including parts of Europe and North America. Yet colonial institutions increasingly categorized it as a disease of tropical environments and imperial territories. Bump and Aniebo (2022) show how European efforts to manage malaria became linked to the institutionalization of tropical medicine.

Categories shape institutions. If one region becomes imagined primarily as a source of disease, expertise may be concentrated elsewhere. Researchers in powerful countries become the people who study. Local populations become the people who are studied. Funding moves in one direction, data in another, and academic recognition somewhere else entirely. Contemporary debates about decolonizing global health emerge partly from this legacy. Formal colonialism may have ended across much of the world, but critics continue to ask whether funding, authorship, research leadership, agenda setting, and institutional prestige remain disproportionately concentrated in wealthy countries.

History is not destiny but history leaves infrastructure behind. Another part of modern global health emerged through international cooperation. During the nineteenth century, recurring cholera epidemics traveled along commercial and transportation networks. Governments faced an uncomfortable problem: disease crossed borders, while political authority mostly did not. States also had competing interests. Quarantine might slow disease transmission but interfere with shipping and trade. Beginning in 1851, European states convened a series of International Sanitary Conferences to negotiate shared responses to epidemic disease. The meetings were incomplete, contentious, and shaped heavily by commercial and imperial concerns, yet they represented an important shift.

Health was becoming an issue of international governance. Countries began negotiating practices involving disease reporting, shipping, quarantine, and sanitation because pathogens ignored the political boundaries governments were trying to defend. The modern international health system therefore emerged partly from a contradiction that remains familiar today: states wanted to protect populations from disease without bringing international movement and commerce to a halt. At the same time, rapidly industrializing cities demonstrated that some of the greatest medical technologies were surprisingly unglamorous.

Clean water.

Sewage systems.

Waste removal.

Housing standards.

Food inspection.

Workplace regulation.

Public-health movements increasingly demonstrated that infrastructure could be medicine. A clinician can treat someone with

cholera. A functioning water and sanitation system can prevent thousands of cases. This shift matters because it expands the geography of health. Once housing, sewage, water, and labor conditions affect disease, the street outside the hospital becomes part of health policy. So does the sewer underneath it. The sewer is not especially photogenic. It has nevertheless saved an enormous number of lives.



Figure 5.2.1: Infrastructure Can Be Medicine. Clean water, sewage treatment, waste removal, and housing regulation have prevented enormous amounts of disease without ever entering a hospital. (CC BY SA 4.0; Wikimedia Commons).

By the twentieth century, international health cooperation also demonstrated its extraordinary potential. Smallpox, a disease that had caused human suffering for millennia, became the target of a global eradication campaign. Through surveillance, vaccination, international coordination, national health systems, local health workers, and cooperation that crossed Cold War geopolitical lines, the last naturally occurring case was recorded in Somalia in 1977. WHO declared smallpox eradicated in 1980 (WHO, n.d.-b). Humans eliminated a disease from natural circulation. That is staggering. The achievement also complicates simplistic stories of international organizations arriving to "save" passive populations. Endemic countries contributed enormous amounts of labor, infrastructure, local knowledge, and resources to eradication. It was a genuinely global project. Global systems can distribute inequality. They can also produce collective achievements that no country could accomplish easily alone.

The HIV/AIDS crisis added another layer to this history. Beginning in the late twentieth century, HIV devastated communities around the world, but its social history cannot be separated from sexuality, stigma, race, gender, poverty, activism, pharmaceutical markets, and political neglect. Activists refused to remain passive recipients of medical policy. Organizations such as ACT UP challenged governments, pharmaceutical companies, research institutions, and regulators. They demanded faster research, meaningful participation in clinical-trial design, affordable treatment, and an end to discriminatory policies. As effective antiretroviral drugs emerged, another global divide became obvious.

A medicine can exist without being accessible.

By the late 1990s, effective HIV treatment was transforming survival in wealthier countries while remaining financially inaccessible to millions elsewhere. Pharmaceutical patents, international trade law, generic manufacturing, activist movements, donor financing, and global institutions became central parts of what had once seemed like a purely biomedical story ('t Hoen et al., 2011). Again, health had escaped the hospital.

History therefore leaves us with a more complicated picture than either triumph or tragedy alone. Global health was built through science and politics, collaboration and domination, generosity and self-interest. Humans exchanged medical knowledge across cultures, constructed sanitation systems, created vaccines, organized movements, built international institutions, and eradicated smallpox. They also created systems in which medical knowledge could be extracted without equal recognition, colonial priorities shaped health infrastructure, and lifesaving technologies remained unavailable to people who needed them.

Two things can be true at the same time. And when we look at health inequality today, we are not looking at a blank slate. We are looking at systems that came from somewhere. The next question, then, is not simply what happened historically. It is how we explain the inequalities those systems continue to produce.

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5.3: Why Health Is Unequal

A Toolkit for Explaining the Gap

Suppose two people develop the same illness.

One has paid sick leave, reliable transportation, insurance, nearby specialists, a pharmacy stocked with medication, a stable home, family support, and enough savings to absorb a month without working.

The other has none of those things.

Same diagnosis.

Very different odds.

At this point, blaming the microorganism feels a little inadequate.

Global health inequality is difficult to explain because there is rarely a single cause. Biology matters. Behavior matters. Health systems matter. Poverty matters. Political decisions matter. History matters. Race, gender, class, geography, disability, migration status, and environmental conditions may matter too, and often interact.

So we need a toolkit.

Not one theory that magically explains everything.

Several.

The social determinants of health framework directs us first toward the conditions of everyday life: housing, education, employment, food, transportation, social protection, environmental exposure, and access to health services. But the framework becomes most powerful when we keep going. Solar and Irwin (2010) emphasize that these everyday circumstances are shaped by deeper structural forces including governance, economic policy, labor markets, social policy, political institutions, and systems of stratification.

Otherwise, “social determinants” can become a fancy checklist. Housing , education, and income all matter. Fine, but why are those things distributed unevenly?

Michael Marmot's work on the social gradient in health demonstrates that health outcomes often improve step by step as socioeconomic position rises rather than dividing simply into “poor people” and “everyone else” (Marmot, 2005). That tells us something important: society itself may be organizing exposure, security, autonomy, and resources along a gradient.

A second tool, fundamental cause theory, helps explain why health inequality persists even as medicine improves. Bruce Link and Jo Phelan (1995) argued that socioeconomic position operates as a fundamental cause because it provides access to flexible resources (money, knowledge, power, prestige, and useful social connections) that people can deploy to avoid risks or reduce the consequences of disease.

The disease changes.

The advantage survives.

Research subsequently found evidence for a key implication of the theory: socioeconomic inequalities can be especially pronounced for illnesses where prevention and treatment are more available because resources help people capture those benefits (Phelan et al., 2004; Phelan et al., 2010). Imagine medicine discovers a new exit from a burning building. Excellent news. But some people are standing beside the door. Others are five floors away. Some received a map. Some have transportation. Some know the architect. Some own the building. The existence of an exit does not mean everyone reaches it equally. This helps explain a strange paradox: medical progress can improve population health while initially widening inequality. Screening becomes available, but those with better health coverage obtain it first. New health information appears, but those with more education

and flexible employment are better positioned to act on it. A dangerous environmental exposure becomes known, but wealthier families can relocate more easily. Every new solution can become another inequality until access catches up.

Socioeconomic resources, however, do not explain every pattern. That is where intersectionality becomes useful. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) developed intersectionality to demonstrate how antidiscrimination frameworks could fail Black women when race and gender were treated as entirely separate categories. Public-health scholars subsequently applied intersectional analysis to health, asking how racism, sexism, class inequality, ableism, migration status, and other systems can overlap and produce distinctive health experiences (Bowleg, 2012; Bauer, 2014).

The key insight is not simply that people possess multiple identities. It is that systems of power interact. A migrant woman is not occasionally a migrant and occasionally a woman. A disabled Indigenous person does not encounter disability on Monday and colonialism on Tuesday. Categories do not live one at a time. Suppose national data suggest broadly similar health-service access for women and men. What happens when we disaggregate by race, income, disability, rural residence, or migration status? A reassuring national average may conceal severe inequality within particular populations. Intersectionality helps us see people who disappear inside averages.

Structural violence then pushes the analysis deeper into history and political economy. Farmer (2004) used this concept to explain how social arrangements systematically expose some groups to greater suffering while restricting access to resources that could protect them. His work on HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis in Haiti traced contemporary illness through colonialism, slavery, racism, poverty, political instability, and unequal medical access. The patient is not outside history. History is inside the patient. Structural violence does not require a secret group deliberately deciding who should suffer. A housing policy can concentrate populations in hazardous environments. A labor market can push people with few alternatives into dangerous work. A patent system can increase medicine costs. Debt can constrain health spending. Immigration policy can discourage people from seeking care. No single person needs to intend the final outcome. The system can still produce one. The political economy of health adds another essential question:

Where does the money come from?

Health systems need financing. Pharmaceuticals are developed inside markets. Health workers move toward jobs with better wages and working conditions. Hospitals compete for resources. Donors emphasize certain diseases. International financial institutions influence economic policy. Patents shape who can produce some medicines and what those medicines cost. Markets have generated extraordinary health innovation. They also answer one question especially well: What can be sold profitably? That is not always identical to: What would reduce the most human suffering?

Trouiller and colleagues (2002), for example, documented the severe underdevelopment of medicines for diseases disproportionately affecting populations with little purchasing power. This is one reason the term neglected diseases is so revealing: need and commercial demand are not the same thing. Research on structural adjustment has likewise examined how fiscal austerity, user fees, public-sector contraction, and constrained social spending can affect health systems, although outcomes vary substantially across countries and policies (Kentikelenis et al., 2017). A health budget is therefore not merely an accounting exercise. It represents choices. Who gets taxed? What gets funded? What gets privatized? Who absorbs the risk?

Finally, epidemiologist Nancy Krieger's ecosocial theory helps explain how all of these systems enter bodies. Her concept of embodiment describes how people biologically incorporate the material and social environments in which they live (Krieger, 2001). Air pollution becomes lung tissue. Chronic stress becomes hormonal activity. Dangerous work becomes injury. Food insecurity becomes nutritional deficiency. Extreme heat becomes cardiovascular strain. Political economy becomes biology. The body, in other words, keeps receipts. So which theory wins?

None.

Consider severe asthma in a low-income neighborhood. Social-determinants analysis asks about housing, pollution, access to care, employment, transportation, and income. Fundamental cause theory asks why households with greater resources can more easily avoid exposure or secure specialists. Intersectionality asks whether the burden differs according to race, class, gender, migration status, or disability. Structural violence asks which historical and political processes concentrated particular populations in hazardous environments. Political economy asks who profits from the housing or industry involved and whose interests shape regulation. Ecosocial theory asks how repeated pollution and stress become biologically embodied. Same child. Same asthma. Different analytical floors of the same building.

This is why we should beware the lifestyle trap. Smoking, exercise, diet, medication adherence, sleep, and other individual behaviors matter. But who can afford healthy food? Who has a safe place to exercise? Who works a schedule that permits

adequate sleep? Who can purchase medication every month? Who is exposed to aggressive marketing of unhealthy products? Who lives next to the refinery? Link and Phelan's (1995) formulation remains useful: we have to ask what places people at risk of risks. That does not erase individual responsibility. It puts individual behavior inside the real world. When you encounter a health disparity, therefore, resist the urge to stop at the first plausible explanation. Ask who became sick, who was exposed, who had protection, who possessed resources, who made the rules, what history produced those rules, and who has the power to change them. That is the Global Studies move.

We now have several ways to explain unequal health outcomes. But explanation produces another question. If governments, markets, international organizations, pharmaceutical companies, foundations, NGOs, scientists, and communities all influence health...who is actually in charge?

Spoiler:

There is no Global Ministry of Health.

Which means things are about to get messy.

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5.4: Who Is the Boss of Global Health?

Apparently Everyone. Also, No One.

Imagine a new infectious disease begins spreading rapidly across several countries. Who is in charge? The World Health Organization? National governments? Scientists? Hospitals? Pharmaceutical companies? Private foundations? NGOs? The communities actually living through the outbreak? The answer is: Yes. Also: Not exactly. Welcome to global health governance, where enormous problems cross borders but authority remains scattered among governments, international organizations, corporations, foundations, researchers, donors, civil-society organizations, and communities. There is no global president. There is no global parliament with unlimited authority. And there is definitely no Global Ministry of Health capable of announcing, “Everybody vaccinate by Friday. Also, please stop creating antibiotic-resistant bacteria.” Instead, global health operates through overlapping systems of law, expertise, financing, negotiation, persuasion, markets, institutions, and occasionally a truly heroic quantity of meetings.That can look chaotic. It is. But it is also one of the clearest examples of how governance works in a globalized world.

The distinction between government and governance matters here. Government refers to formal political authority. Governance is broader: it includes the rules, institutions, financing arrangements, negotiations, relationships, and decision-making processes through which collective problems are managed, even when no single government controls the system. Scholars of global health governance therefore look not only at states and international organizations but also at corporations, foundations, civil society, expert networks, and public-private partnerships (Dodgson et al., 2002; Fidler, 2010; Frenk & Moon, 2013).

If you are looking for one person to blame when the system becomes messy, I regret to inform you that the organizational chart has defeated you.



Figure 5.4.1: Global Governance Without a Global Government**.** Geneva hosts many institutions involved in international health, yet no single organization governs global health with unlimited authority. (Photo by Jonathan Ansel Moy de Vitry on Unsplash)

Surely WHO Is in Charge?

If global health had a headquarters, most people would probably point to Geneva. The World Health Organization, established in 1948 as the specialized United Nations agency for international health, collects and analyzes health data, develops technical guidance, coordinates international responses to health emergencies, supports disease surveillance, establishes norms, advises governments, and coordinates major health campaigns. So WHO is the boss? Not quite. WHO exists because sovereign states created it. Its Member States participate in the World Health Assembly, and WHO ordinarily cannot enter a country and simply take over its health ministry. It relies heavily on governments to report outbreaks, cooperate with recommendations,

finance activities, and implement health measures. That creates one of the defining tensions of international health: The risks are increasingly global, while much of the strongest political authority remains national (Fidler, 2003; Frenk & Moon, 2013). WHO therefore possesses substantial technical and normative authority, but expertise is not the same thing as unlimited political power. WHO can say: Here is what the evidence indicates governments should do. A government can still respond: Interesting. Money makes that relationship even more complicated. WHO receives both assessed contributions from Member States and voluntary contributions from governments and other donors. Scholars have long examined how reliance on voluntary and earmarked financing can restrict the organization's freedom to allocate resources according to priorities collectively agreed upon by all Member States (Clinton & Sridhar, 2017). The issue is not that voluntary funding is bad. Much of WHO's work depends on it. The issue is that funding structures can become governance structures. If a large share of an institution's money arrives attached to particular diseases, programs, or donor priorities, then questions about institutional independence and agenda setting become unavoidable. Money does not automatically control policy, but pretending money and power have never met would be adorable.

Sovereignty Has Entered the Chat

National governments remain extraordinarily important because they possess capacities international organizations generally do not. Governments can tax, regulate health professionals, purchase medicines, build hospitals, establish insurance systems, control borders, create vaccination policy, regulate food and drugs, and decide whether health care is understood primarily as a public service, a market commodity, an individual responsibility, or some combination of all three. During health emergencies, those powers can collide directly with international cooperation. Imagine a disease emerging inside one country. International institutions want rapid reporting. But the national government may worry that disclosure will trigger travel bans, damage tourism, disrupt trade, frighten investors, or create political consequences at home. Now public health and national interest are pulling in different directions. The International Health Regulations were designed in part to manage precisely this problem by creating shared rules for detecting and responding to health threats that may cross borders (Gostin & Katz, 2016). Yet international law still depends heavily on national implementation. Global risk. National authority. There is our problem.

Science Meets the Extremely Expensive Pill

Then pharmaceutical companies enter the story. Vaccines, antiviral drugs, antibiotics, cancer treatments, diagnostics, and medical devices require scientific expertise, investment, research capacity, manufacturing infrastructure, and often substantial financial risk. Intellectual-property protections such as patents are designed partly to encourage innovation by providing temporary exclusive rights. That arrangement makes some sense. Until the product is lifesaving. If a new sneaker is too expensive, most people can survive without it. If a lifesaving medicine is too expensive, the ethical stakes change considerably.

This creates an enduring tension between innovation and access. Pharmaceutical markets have produced extraordinary advances in human health, but scholars have also shown how intellectual-property rules, manufacturing capacity, market incentives, and purchasing power shape which medicines are developed and who can obtain them (Trouiller et al., 2002; 't Hoen et al., 2011).

The dilemma is not as simple as “patents good” or “patents evil.” Research incentives matter. So does affordability. Manufacturing matters. So does technology transfer. Market competition matters. So does public investment in research. Global health has a remarkable ability to turn every apparently simple answer into four more questions. The tension becomes especially visible when the people who most need a medicine are also the people least able to create a profitable market for it. This is one reason neglected tropical diseases became such a powerful case in global health: severe disease burdens could coexist with limited commercial incentives for pharmaceutical development (Trouiller et al., 2002). Markets can produce remarkable innovation. Markets can also produce a brutally simple outcome:

If there is no profitable customer, there may be very little market.

Billionaires, But Make It Public Health

Large philanthropic foundations complicate the governance landscape even further. Private philanthropy has financed vaccine programs, infectious-disease research, sanitation initiatives, agricultural interventions, health technologies, and many other public-health efforts. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in particular, has become one of the most influential private actors in contemporary global health. This funding has supported major health gains. But philanthropy introduces a peculiar democratic question. Imagine someone controls billions of dollars and wants to improve global health. Wonderful. Now ask:

Who elected them?

That does not mean philanthropic foundations should disappear. It means large-scale financial power can translate into agenda-setting power even without formal political authority. Scholars examining philanthrocapitalism have asked how private foundations influence priorities, metrics, research agendas, and institutional behavior through funding choices (McGoey, 2015).

A foundation does not have to pass a law to shape global health. It can fund a disease, a technology, a research network, a university center, a pilot program, or an NGO.The ability to decide what receives money can itself become a form of governance.

And Then We Invented the Hybrid

As if the system were not already complicated enough, global health increasingly operates through public-private partnerships. Take Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. It brings together governments, WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank, vaccine manufacturers, philanthropic organizations, civil society, and other partners to expand access to immunization. This model reflects a major shift in global governance. Instead of assuming that states and UN agencies must do everything themselves, global health increasingly functions through networks in which different actors contribute different forms of power. Governments may contribute legitimacy and public systems. International organizations bring technical expertise and coordination. Foundations bring financing. Companies bring manufacturing capacity and technology. Civil-society organizations bring community knowledge and advocacy. In theory, everyone contributes what they do best. In practice, they also bring competing priorities, unequal bargaining power, conflicting incentives, and meetings with seventeen logos on the title slide.

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria offers another version of this hybrid governance model. Its board includes donor governments, implementing countries, civil society, private-sector representatives, foundations, and communities affected by the diseases it funds. That structure is more significant than it may sound. People affected by disease are not supposed to exist only as recipients of programs designed elsewhere. They are supposed to have a role in governing them. That is an important shift in global health thinking. Of course, a seat at the table does not automatically erase inequalities in money, technical expertise, diplomatic influence, language, or institutional status. Representation is not the same thing as equal power. But it changes the architecture.

Sometimes Power Comes From Being Loud

Civil society occupies yet another position in this complicated system. Governments possess law. Corporations possess capital. International organizations possess technical authority. Civil society often possesses pressure. The HIV/AIDS movement demonstrated this vividly. ACT UP activists did not control pharmaceutical companies, government agencies, or international health organizations. Yet they influenced clinical-trial design, regulatory practices, public discussion, medicine access, and the relationship between patients and researchers. That is governance too.

Civil-society organizations can create routes into decision-making for groups excluded from formal institutions. They can organize communities, gather evidence, monitor governments, challenge corporations, deliver services, litigate, advocate, and make politically invisible suffering harder to ignore. But NGOs generate their own questions.

Who funds them?

Who do they actually represent?

Is an international NGO accountable primarily to the community where it works, or to the donor paying for the program?

Why might a large foreign organization have greater influence than a smaller local organization with deeper contextual knowledge?

Good intentions do not make power disappear.

Experts Get a Seat. They Do Not Own the Table.

Modern global health also depends enormously on expertise. Epidemiologists estimate transmission. Economists calculate cost-effectiveness. Clinicians evaluate treatments. Statisticians interpret mortality data. Anthropologists study communities. Data scientists build predictive models.This expertise is essential. But technical knowledge can become politically powerful when

decisions are framed as if they contain no values. Suppose a model tells policymakers which intervention saves the most lives per dollar. Useful. But who decided cost per life saved was the only value that mattered? What about historical responsibility? Rights? Geographic fairness? Disability? Community preference? Whether a particular population has been systematically neglected? Evidence can help tell us what a policy is likely to do. Evidence cannot independently decide what society ought to prioritize. Experts deserve a seat at the table. They should not automatically own the table.

Plot Twist: Communities Were Here the Whole Time

Perhaps the most obvious actor in global health is also the one formal institutions have sometimes been surprisingly good at overlooking: the people actually living with the problem. Communities frequently know things external experts do not. They know whether the clinic is really reachable. Whether women feel safe entering it. Whether people trust the government. Whether translated health materials make sense. Whether medicine is being resold informally. Whether public transportation disappears after dark. Whether a beautiful intervention designed somewhere else has any realistic chance of working locally. That knowledge is not anecdotal decoration. It is expertise. This is why contemporary global health increasingly emphasizes local ownership, co-design, community participation, and meaningful engagement. But participation exists on a spectrum. There is a difference between asking: What do you need? and saying: Here is the program we already designed. Would you mind attending the listening session? Participation without decision-making power can become decorative. A genuinely equitable global health system therefore has to ask not only whether communities were consulted, but whether they had meaningful influence over goals, resources, and implementation.

The Accountability Hot-Potato Problem

Once this many actors are involved, another problem appears. What happens when something fails? Imagine an international health program collapses.

The donor says:

We supplied the money.

The international organization says:

We supplied technical guidance.

The pharmaceutical company says:

We manufactured the medicine.

The national government says:

Implementation was decentralized.

The local government says:

We were underfunded.

The NGO says:

We followed the grant requirements.

Everyone played a role.

Somehow nobody owns the failure.

This is one of the central problems of networked governance. Partnerships can mobilize resources and expertise across borders, but complicated institutional arrangements can also blur lines of accountability (Frenk & Moon, 2013). This is especially important when donors favor vertical health programs that focus intensely on one disease or intervention. These programs can be enormously effective. They often have clear goals, measurable outcomes, dedicated expertise, and concentrated financing. But imagine a clinic with no reliable electricity, insufficient staff, poor supply chains, and no transportation system. You can create a

brilliant malaria program BUT the clinic is still broken.

That is why scholars have emphasized the importance of balancing disease-specific programs with broader health-system strengthening, including investments in primary care, health workers, laboratories, procurement, financing, infrastructure, and administration (Atun et al., 2008). The political problem is that these long-term investments are often less glamorous.

“We distributed four million bed nets” fits beautifully on a donor report.

“We spent fifteen years improving rural nursing retention, procurement systems, district management, and electrical reliability” is harder to turn into a compelling headline.

Not sexy but extremely important.

Follow the Money. Again.

One of the easiest ways to understand any global health institution is to temporarily ignore its inspirational mission statement and examine its budget.

Who contributes?

Who receives?

Is the money flexible or earmarked?

What outcomes are rewarded?

Which diseases are easier to fund?

Which interventions produce clean metrics?

Which problems require long-term investments that are politically harder to celebrate?

Funding does not merely respond to health problems.

It helps define what the problem is.

A vaccination campaign, a sanitation project, a mental-health system, a hospital, a community-health-worker network, and a housing intervention all represent different theories about what produces health. Budgets reveal those theories surprisingly well. This matters because health problems do not automatically receive global attention in proportion to their severity. Political visibility, advocacy networks, donor priorities, media attention, institutional incentives, and the existence of an appealing solution all shape which issues become global priorities (Shiffman & Smith, 2007). Some problems become urgent. Others become normal. And that brings us to perhaps the most important question in the section: Who gets to set the agenda?

Who Actually Has Power?

A useful way to answer that question is to stop thinking only about formal titles and look at different kinds of power.

One actor may control money. Another controls law. Another controls technology. Another possesses scientific authority. Another controls data. Another has community legitimacy. Another bears the consequences. Those forms of power are not interchangeable. And one of the most revealing questions is: Who can walk away? A government desperate for a vaccine may have less bargaining power than the company that owns the technology. An NGO dependent on one donor may have less room to challenge that donor's priorities. A community dependent on one clinic may have little ability to reject a poorly designed program. Power often belongs partly to the actor who can credibly say: No. That is why global health governance cannot be understood simply by listing organizations. We have to examine the relationships among them.

So Who Is the Boss?

We can finally answer the question that opened this section.

Nobody.

And everybody.

Global health is governed through a complex architecture of states, international organizations, corporations, foundations, partnerships, researchers, NGOs, and communities rather than through a single centralized authority (Fidler, 2010; Frenk & Moon, 2013). That fragmentation can be a strength. Different actors can mobilize science, technology, money, political pressure, legal authority, community knowledge, and logistical capacity. It can produce vaccines, surveillance systems, treatment programs, research collaborations, and genuinely extraordinary global achievements. But fragmentation also creates vulnerabilities. Priorities can follow money. Private actors can influence public goals without the same democratic obligations as governments. Expertise can overshadow local knowledge. Countries with fewer resources can enter negotiations from weaker positions. Communities can be consulted without actually being empowered. And accountability can become extremely difficult to locate. Which leaves us with the question underneath the entire system:

When everybody has a seat at the table, who chose the table and who is still standing outside the room?

That question is about to matter enormously. Because COVID-19 did not test one part of the global health system. It stress-tested nearly all of it at once.

Also: Not exactly.

Welcome to global health governance, where enormous problems cross borders but authority remains scattered among governments, international organizations, corporations, foundations, researchers, donors, civil-society organizations, and communities. There is no global president and no global parliament with unlimited authority. There is definitely no Global Ministry of Health capable of announcing, “Everybody vaccinate by Friday. Also, please stop creating antibiotic-resistant bacteria.” Instead, global health operates through overlapping systems of authority, expertise, money, law, negotiation, persuasion, markets, and occasionally a truly heroic quantity of meetings. That can look chaotic. It is. But it is also an excellent example of governance in a globalized world.

Governance is broader than government. It includes the rules, institutions, financing arrangements, negotiations, relationships, and decision-making processes through which collective problems are managed, even where no single government controls the system. Scholars of global health governance therefore examine states alongside international organizations, corporations, philanthropic foundations, civil society, expert networks, and public-private partnerships (Dodgson et al., 2002; Fidler, 2010; Frenk & Moon, 2013).

The most obvious global institution is the World Health Organization, established in 1948 as the specialized United Nations agency for international health. WHO collects and analyzes health data, develops technical guidance, coordinates international responses to health emergencies, supports disease surveillance, establishes norms, advises governments, and coordinates major health campaigns.

So WHO is the boss?

Not quite.

WHO exists because sovereign states created it. Its Member States participate in the World Health Assembly, and the organization ordinarily cannot enter a country and simply take over its health ministry. It depends heavily on governments to report outbreaks, cooperate with recommendations, finance activities, and implement health measures. This produces one of the defining tensions of international health: health risks are increasingly transnational, while much of the strongest political authority remains national (Fidler, 2003; Frenk & Moon, 2013). WHO therefore possesses substantial technical and normative authority. But expertise is not the same thing as unlimited power. WHO can say: Here is what the evidence indicates governments should do. A government can still respond: Interesting.

Money complicates matters further. WHO receives both assessed contributions from Member States and voluntary contributions from governments and other donors. Scholars have long examined how reliance on voluntary and earmarked financing can constrain the organization's freedom to allocate resources according to collectively determined priorities (Clinton & Sridhar,

2017). This does not mean donors simply dictate policy. It does mean that funding structures matter. If much of an institution's financing arrives attached to particular programs or priorities, questions about agenda setting, independence, and accountability become unavoidable. Money and power have, historically, met.

National governments remain extraordinarily important precisely because they possess capacities international institutions often do not. Governments can tax, regulate health professionals, purchase medicines, build hospitals, establish insurance systems, control borders, enact vaccination policies, regulate drugs and food, and decide whether health care is understood primarily as a public service, a market commodity, an individual responsibility, or some combination of all three. During international health emergencies, this creates recurring conflict between cooperation and state sovereignty. A government may be expected to report an outbreak rapidly but fear that disclosure will trigger travel bans, tourism losses, trade disruption, investment decline, or domestic political consequences. The International Health Regulations were designed in part to manage this tension by creating shared rules for detecting and responding to international health threats (Gostin & Katz, 2016). But agreements still depend heavily on national implementation. Global risk. National authority. There is our problem.

Then pharmaceutical companies enter the room. Vaccines, antivirals, antibiotics, cancer treatments, diagnostics, and other medical technologies require expertise, investment, research, and manufacturing capacity. Intellectual-property protections such as patents are designed partly to encourage innovation by providing temporary exclusive rights. But health technologies are not ordinary consumer goods. If a sneaker is too expensive, most people can survive without it. If a lifesaving drug is too expensive, the stakes change. This produces an enduring tension between innovation and access. Scholars studying access to medicines have shown how intellectual-property rules, pharmaceutical markets, manufacturing capacity, and purchasing power influence both which drugs are developed and who can obtain them (Trouiller et al., 2002; 't Hoen et al., 2011). The debate is more complicated than "patents good" versus "patents evil." Research incentives matter. So does affordability. Manufacturing capacity matters. So does technology transfer. Global health has a remarkable ability to turn every apparently simple answer into four more questions.

Large philanthropic foundations add another layer. Private philanthropy has supported vaccines, health research, sanitation, infectious-disease programs, health technologies, and numerous other interventions. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in particular, became a highly influential global health funder. This investment has supported major health gains. It also raises an unusual democratic question. If a private foundation controls billions of dollars capable of altering global priorities: Who elected it?

Scholars examining philanthrocapitalism ask how financial power translates into agenda-setting capacity and whether the preferences of wealthy donors can disproportionately influence public priorities (McGoey, 2015). The question is not whether philanthropy is good or bad. It is whether substantial power should be examined wherever it appears.

Global health has also increasingly moved toward public-private partnerships. Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, for example, brings together governments, WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank, vaccine manufacturers, philanthropies, civil-society organizations, and others in an effort to expand vaccination access. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria similarly brings together donor governments, implementing countries, civil society, affected communities, foundations, and private actors. These arrangements reflect an important shift. Instead of assuming governments or UN agencies must solve global health problems alone, governance increasingly operates through networks. Different actors bring different resources. They also bring different incentives. And meetings with seventeen logos on the title slide. Civil-society organizations complicate the picture further because power does not always come from money or law. Sometimes it comes from being loud.

HIV/AIDS activists demonstrated this dramatically. ACT UP did not control a health ministry, pharmaceutical laboratory, or international organization. Yet activists changed clinical-trial practices, public discussion, regulatory processes, and debates over medicine access. That is governance too.

Expertise is another form of power. Epidemiologists model transmission. Economists calculate cost-effectiveness. Clinicians evaluate treatment. Statisticians interpret mortality. Anthropologists investigate local experience. Data scientists model risk. All of this expertise is essential.

But technical knowledge cannot independently determine what societies ought to value. A model can estimate which intervention saves the most lives per dollar. It cannot decide whether historical injustice, disability rights, geographic equity, or community preferences should alter the decision unless someone builds those values into the analysis.

Experts deserve a seat at the table.

They do not automatically own the table.

And then there are communities themselves, the people who actually know whether the clinic is reachable, whether women feel safe entering it, whether the campaign is trusted, whether the translation makes sense, whether transportation disappears after dark, whether medicine is being resold informally, and whether a beautifully designed intervention created in Geneva has any realistic chance of working locally.

Contemporary health practice increasingly emphasizes community participation, local ownership, and co-design.

But there is an enormous difference between:

What do you need?

and

Here is the program we already designed. Would you attend the listening session?

Participation without meaningful authority can become decorative. When global health involves so many actors, another problem emerges: accountability. Imagine a health program fails. The donor says it supplied the money. The international organization says it supplied technical guidance. The company says it manufactured the medicine. The national government says implementation was decentralized. The local authority says it was underfunded. The NGO says it followed the grant requirements. Everyone played a role. Somehow nobody owns the failure. Networks can mobilize enormous resources and expertise, but complicated governance can also blur responsibility (Frenk & Moon, 2013).

This becomes especially important when global donors support narrow disease-specific, or vertical, programs. These can be highly effective: vaccination, malaria prevention, HIV treatment, and other interventions benefit from concentrated expertise, clear goals, and measurable outcomes.

But imagine a rural clinic with no electricity, inadequate staffing, broken procurement systems, and unreliable transportation.

You can create an excellent malaria program.

The clinic is still broken.

This is why scholars have emphasized the need to balance disease-specific interventions with health-system strengthening involving primary care, health workers, supply chains, laboratories, financing, infrastructure, and administration (Atun et al., 2008).

The dilemma is partly political.

“Four million bed nets distributed” fits beautifully on a results dashboard.

“We spent fifteen years improving district procurement, rural nursing retention, electrical reliability, and public administration” is considerably less glamorous.

Not sexy.

Extremely important.

Perhaps the most important question in global health governance is therefore:

Who gets to set the agenda?

Health problems do not automatically receive attention in proportion to suffering. Political visibility, donor interests, advocacy networks, institutional incentives, media coverage, and the availability of attractive solutions can all influence which issues become global priorities (Shiffman & Smith, 2007). Problems have to become politically legible. Someone must frame the issue, produce data, mobilize advocates, secure resources, and convince decision-makers that action is urgent. Sometimes tragedy attracts action. Sometimes tragedy becomes normalized. One useful way to analyze any global health initiative is to follow power. Ask who controls money, law, expertise, technology, data, public legitimacy, and decision-making. Then ask who experiences the consequences and who can walk away. That final question matters enormously. An institution dependent on funding cannot negotiate with a donor on equal terms. A government desperate for medicine may not negotiate with a pharmaceutical company from an equal position. A community dependent on a single NGO for health services may have very little leverage over program design.

Power often belongs partly to the actor who can credibly say:

No.

So who is the boss of global health?

Nobody.

And everybody.

The fragmented system can be a strength. It allows diverse actors to mobilize scientific expertise, money, technology, political pressure, community knowledge, and institutional capacity.

It can also create serious vulnerabilities. Priorities may follow financing. Technical expertise can overshadow local knowledge. Private actors can influence public priorities without the same democratic obligations as governments. Countries with fewer resources may enter negotiations from weaker positions. Communities may be consulted without actually being empowered.

Which leaves us with the question underneath global health governance:

When everybody has a seat at the table, who chose the table and who is still standing outside the room?

COVID-19 would put virtually every part of this system under pressure at once.

And the results were revealing.

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5.5: Same Virus, Different Worlds

In It Together

In early 2020, one sentence appeared almost everywhere: “We are all in this together.” It was comforting. It was also only partly true.

Humanity was confronting the same virus, but people were not confronting it from anything resembling the same circumstances. Some isolated in houses with spare bedrooms, reliable internet, and jobs that migrated relatively smoothly onto laptops. Others lived six people to a room or worked in jobs that could not be converted into a Zoom meeting. Grocery shelves still had to be stocked. Food still had to be delivered. Hospitals still needed cleaning. Buses still ran, crops still needed harvesting, warehouses still moved goods, older adults still required care, and sick patients still needed people standing beside them.

Governments entered the crisis from equally unequal starting positions. Some could borrow enormous sums of money to support households, hospitals, and businesses. Others were already constrained by debt, fragile public institutions, and health systems with little reserve capacity. When vaccines arrived, some countries eventually secured enough doses to vaccinate their populations several times over while others waited months for meaningful supplies.

Same pathogen. Different worlds.

COVID-19 therefore became one of the clearest stress tests imaginable for global health inequality. The pandemic certainly created new problems, but perhaps more revealingly, it found the old ones and amplified them.

The biological story begins with SARS-CoV-2. Almost immediately, however, the social story becomes impossible to separate from it. Who encountered the virus repeatedly because of their work? Who could avoid exposure? Who could work remotely? Who could afford to miss a paycheck? Who lived in a crowded household? Who had access to testing, reliable information, nearby intensive-care facilities, health insurance, paid leave, or eventually a vaccine?

Researchers documented pronounced socioeconomic and racial inequalities in infection, hospitalization, and mortality across multiple settings (Bambra et al., 2020; Mackey et al., 2021). Bambra and colleagues described COVID-19 as a syndemic, emphasizing that the disease interacted with chronic illness and existing social inequality rather than entering an empty social landscape.

In normal-person language, COVID entered an unequal world. It should not surprise us that the outcomes were unequal too.

Stay Home, If Home Works

One of the defining public-health instructions of the early pandemic seemed beautifully simple: Stay home.

Excellent advice. If home works.

Remote work requires a job that can actually be performed remotely. Safe quarantine requires physical space. Ordering groceries requires money, internet access, digital literacy, and functioning delivery systems. Missing work requires savings, paid sick leave, public support, or an unusually forgiving employer. Remote schooling requires electricity, devices, broadband, adult supervision, and somewhere quiet enough to learn.

Suddenly, following a public-health recommendation was partly a reflection of socioeconomic position.

Dingel and Neiman (2020) demonstrated substantial differences among occupations in whether work could realistically be performed from home, with lower-wage workers often disproportionately concentrated in jobs requiring physical presence. Many of those workers acquired a new label during the pandemic: essential.

The term was deserved, but it also exposed an uncomfortable contradiction. Society could declare that it could not function without someone's labor while still failing to organize that labor so it was safe, secure, or well compensated. In that sense, the pandemic did not create the contradiction. It simply placed a giant Essential Worker banner over it.

Migrant workers experienced this tension especially sharply. Economies throughout the world depended heavily on migrants working in agriculture, construction, transportation, logistics, health care, domestic work, elder care, and other service industries, while many of those same workers confronted crowded housing, precarious employment, legal insecurity, language barriers, limited insurance, or exclusion from emergency relief.

Borders could define people as outsiders while economies defined their labor as indispensable. COVID made both realities visible at the same time.

The pandemic also offered an unusually clear demonstration of fundamental cause theory. As knowledge and technologies capable of reducing risk appeared, access to them remained unequal. Some people could quickly purchase better masks, work remotely, navigate online appointment systems, reach pharmacies, consult specialists, or obtain treatment. Others could not. Every new solution therefore carried the possibility of becoming another source of inequality until access caught up.

Science Moved Fast. Distribution Did Not.

Then came one of the most remarkable scientific achievements of the pandemic. Researchers published the genetic sequence of SARS-CoV-2 in January 2020, and by the end of that year effective vaccines were already being administered. That speed did not emerge from nowhere. COVID vaccines benefited from decades of prior research on coronaviruses and vaccine platforms, enormous public investment, rapid international scientific exchange, accelerated regulatory review, and governments willing to purchase candidates before knowing which would succeed.

Science moved astonishingly quickly.

Politics caught up almost immediately.

Before vaccines were widely available, wealthy governments entered advance-purchase agreements with manufacturers. From the perspective of individual states, the logic was obvious. National leaders are primarily accountable to their own populations and faced enormous pressure to secure doses as quickly as possible.

Zoom out, however, and the problem changes.

If wealthy countries purchase a substantial portion of the earliest global supply, what remains for everyone else?

Scholars warned early that vaccine nationalism could undermine global equity and prolong the pandemic itself (Katz et al., 2021; Wouters et al., 2021). Humanity had developed a potential route out of the crisis, but some countries had effectively reserved places near the front of the line.

Global institutions recognized this danger and created COVAX, an international mechanism intended to pool purchasing power and improve vaccine access across countries. The basic principle was multilateral: a transnational threat demanded some mechanism for distributing protection beyond national purchasing power alone.

Then that mechanism met the political economy of the world in which it had to operate.

Wealthy governments continued negotiating bilateral agreements with manufacturers. Production remained geographically concentrated. Supply chains became strained. Export restrictions interrupted deliveries. Financing gaps constrained purchasing. Donations often arrived later than recipient countries needed them or with limited predictability. de Bengy Puyvallée and Storeng (2022) documented the gap between COVAX's ambitions and its performance during 2021, when vaccination coverage remained dramatically lower in low-income countries than in wealthier ones. This can be seen over time in the next box.

One Vaccine, Radically Different Access

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

View this Interactive Content online

By the end of 2021, COVID-19 vaccination coverage differed sharply across countries. Scientific innovation had produced effective vaccines, but purchasing power, manufacturing capacity, supply chains, health infrastructure, and global governance shaped how quickly populations could receive them. Unfortunatley this box is not accessible. This box will NOT print up in pdfs

This does not mean COVAX accomplished nothing. Hundreds of millions of doses moving through a newly constructed international mechanism mattered enormously. The more revealing lesson is structural: an institution designed to promote equitable distribution was operating inside a political and market system that remained deeply unequal.

Governance architecture met political economy, and political economy won several rounds.

Vaccine donations illustrated a related distinction between charity and equity. Donations unquestionably saved lives and expanded access, but equity asks a deeper question than whether wealthier countries eventually shared surplus doses. It asks why particular states and firms possessed such disproportionate control over the scarce resource in the first place.

The controversy surrounding pharmaceutical intellectual property pushed that question even further. India and South Africa proposed temporarily relaxing certain intellectual-property protections under the World Trade Organization's TRIPS Agreement in an effort to expand access to COVID-related technologies. Supporters argued that extraordinary global circumstances justified stronger measures for expanding production. Critics countered that patents were only one constraint among many: vaccine manufacturing also required specialized facilities, trained personnel, raw materials, regulatory systems, complex supply chains, technical expertise, and meaningful technology transfer.

Both arguments contained truth. A patent does not manufacture a vaccine, but intellectual property is hardly irrelevant to who controls technology, knowledge, and productive capacity. Wouters and colleagues (2021) therefore emphasized the need to think about production, affordability, allocation, and deployment together.

The system, annoyingly, refuses to have one cause.

Nor does a vaccine magically teleport into someone's arm. It must be manufactured, packaged, stored, shipped, tracked, transported, delivered through functioning health systems, and accepted by communities. The final distance between vaccine exists and person vaccinated runs through infrastructure.

Remember the vertical-versus-horizontal debate?

COVID brought receipts.

The Infodemic Was Also About Trust

The pandemic unfolded inside another global system: digital information networks. Accurate health information traveled extraordinarily quickly, but so did rumors, fabricated cures, conspiracy theories, misleading statistics, political propaganda, and deliberate disinformation. The World Health Organization described this accompanying flood of information as an infodemic.

It is tempting to reduce the problem to foolish people believing false things. That explanation is far too easy.

Information environments are shaped by trust in government, trust in medicine, education, language, political polarization, platform design, community networks, social identities, and previous encounters with institutions. Misinformation and mistrust are related, but they are not the same thing. Communities that have experienced discrimination, medical abuse, coercive health interventions, or long histories of institutional neglect may interpret new medical recommendations through those histories.

Their conclusions may still be factually incorrect. Understanding where mistrust comes from does not require pretending that every claim is equally valid.

It does mean that effective public health requires more than shouting facts louder.

It requires institutions people have reason to trust.

A Virus Has No Gender. A Labor Market Does.

COVID also exposed the gendered organization of labor and care. Women make up a substantial portion of the health and care workforce globally and continue to perform a disproportionate share of unpaid caregiving. When schools closed, health systems strained, jobs disappeared, and families absorbed new care responsibilities, those pressures therefore did not fall evenly.

A virus has no gender. A labor market does. A household division of labor does. A health workforce does.

Borders created similar unevenness. Governments imposed testing requirements, entry bans, quarantines, travel restrictions, and other mobility controls. Some measures reduced transmission or bought valuable time, but their effects were distributed unevenly among migrant workers, refugees, separated families, tourism-dependent communities, international students, and people whose legal status or livelihoods depended upon cross-border movement.

Again, a policy may be universal on paper while its consequences are anything but.

The economic response followed the same pattern. Wealthier governments deployed enormous fiscal packages to support households and businesses, while many lower-income governments had dramatically less borrowing capacity and fiscal space. The pandemic could therefore deepen the very inequalities that had made certain populations more vulnerable to the disease in the first place.

Health affected economics. Economics affected health.

This is why COVID cannot adequately be understood as a medical emergency alone. It was simultaneously a labor crisis, a care crisis, a governance crisis, an information crisis, an education crisis, an inequality crisis, and an economic crisis. Very inconsiderate of it.

The Pandemic Was Also a Story of Capacity

Yet reducing COVID-19 to a story of institutional failure would be equally misleading. Scientific cooperation expanded at extraordinary speed. Researchers shared genetic data and clinical findings across borders. Health workers operated under intense pressure. Community organizations delivered food, medicine, transportation, and information. Mutual-aid networks appeared in neighborhoods around the world. Governments created forms of income support, housing protection, paid leave, and public intervention that had previously been dismissed in some countries as politically impossible.

Multiple vaccines were developed at unprecedented speed.

Global systems failed in some places and adapted impressively in others.

Both stories matter.

Perhaps the most useful way to understand the pandemic is therefore as a **mirror**. COVID reflected the systems already operating before the virus appeared. Countries with stronger public-health capacity possessed advantages. Communities already living with overcrowded housing, precarious work, discrimination, pollution, and weak access to medicine confronted additional risk. Wealthier governments could deploy purchasing power to acquire scarce technologies. Political mistrust complicated public-health communication. International institutions created new cooperative mechanisms but struggled against national interests and unequal markets.

None of those inequalities originated with SARS-CoV-2.

The virus simply made them much harder to ignore.

That is what major crises often do. Systems that quietly distribute security, opportunity, and vulnerability during ordinary times are suddenly placed under enormous pressure.

The cracks become visible.

COVID consequently leaves us with a difficult twenty-first-century paradox: humanity may be becoming better at solving certain medical problems than it is at solving the political problem of who receives the solution.

But COVID was loud. Many of the world's greatest health crises are not.

They unfold slowly, predictably, and sometimes so routinely that societies begin treating preventable suffering as normal.

That is where we go next.

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5.6: The Health Crises That Don't Trend

What Happens When Preventable Suffering Becomes Normal?

Some health crises arrive with sirens. Breaking-news banners. Emergency declarations. Daily dashboards. Others arrive every morning. Quietly. A woman dies in childbirth. A worker spends years breathing toxic dust. A patient cannot afford insulin. A teenager waits months for mental-health care. A bacterial infection stops responding to antibiotics. No dramatic countdown. No “Day 47 of the crisis." Just repetition. That raises a difficult question: When does a health problem become an emergency and when does it simply become normal?

We often assume that the health issues receiving the most attention must be the most serious. Not necessarily. Global-health priorities are influenced by more than disease burden alone. Political attention, donor interest, advocacy networks, technological possibility, institutional incentives, and media visibility can influence what becomes urgent (Shiffman & Smith, 2007). New, dramatic, fast-moving, economically disruptive health threats are relatively easy to identify as crises. Chronic suffering is different. It accumulates. A slow crisis can become difficult to see precisely because it happens all the time. Routine suffering rarely looks like breaking news.

Few statistics expose this more clearly than maternal mortality. In 2023, approximately 260,000 women died from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, and more than 90 percent of those deaths occurred in low- and lower-middle-income countries. Most were preventable (WHO et al., 2025). Many of the interventions required are not mysterious. Skilled birth attendance, emergency obstetric care, antibiotics, blood transfusions, prenatal monitoring, postpartum care, and timely surgical intervention are well understood.



Figure 5.6.1: Maternal Mortality Is Often Preventable. Skilled care before, during, and after childbirth can prevent many maternal deaths, yet access to that care remains deeply unequal. (Photo by Iwaria Inc. on Unsplash)

So why do women continue to die from causes that are, in many cases, medically treatable?

The answer is rarely one dramatic failure. More often, maternal mortality reflects a chain of delays and constraints that accumulate until a manageable complication becomes a fatal one. A woman may live hours from the nearest hospital, lack money for transportation, have little authority to decide when to seek care, reach an understaffed clinic, or arrive at a facility where blood, medications, trained personnel, or surgical capacity are unavailable. Thaddeus and Maine's (1994) influential **Three Delays Model** captures this process through three stages: delays in deciding to seek care, delays in reaching an appropriate facility, and delays in receiving adequate treatment after arrival.

The framework is simple. The causes are not.

Maternal mortality therefore illustrates a recurring global-health problem: what looks like a medical event at the end of the chain is often the product of economic, political, geographic, and social conditions operating long before the emergency begins.

The same pattern appears in another enormous but comparatively quiet health crisis: noncommunicable disease. Cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory disease account for tens of millions of deaths each year, with especially heavy burdens of premature mortality in lower- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2023). Unlike an infectious outbreak, however, these conditions rarely generate dramatic maps or emergency press conferences. They accumulate slowly. Blood pressure rises over years. Diabetes becomes harder to manage. Cancer develops. A stroke occurs. There is no airport screening and no quarantine, yet the collective burden is immense.

It is tempting to frame these illnesses primarily as consequences of individual behavior, and personal choices certainly matter. But behavior does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped by food systems, advertising environments, working conditions, urban design, income, chronic stress, pollution, access to preventive care, and the price and availability of healthier alternatives. This is where the commercial determinants of health framework becomes especially useful. Corporations do not merely place products on shelves; they help shape the environments in which choices are made through marketing, lobbying, pricing, product design, political influence, and research sponsorship (Kickbusch et al., 2016; Gilmore et al., 2023).

If millions of people are exposed to the same unhealthy environment, it becomes increasingly difficult to explain the resulting disease as millions of unrelated personal failures.

Your health, it turns out, has a marketing department.

Apparently it has a lobbying budget too.

Mental health presents another version of the same problem. Depression, anxiety, trauma, suicide, and substance-use disorders are deeply personal experiences, but they are also embedded in social conditions. War, displacement, unemployment, violence, discrimination, housing insecurity, loneliness, and unequal access to care all shape mental-health risk. WHO's global reporting has documented large gaps in access to mental-health services, particularly in lower-resource settings (WHO, 2022), yet mental health frequently receives less funding and political attention than physical health.

Why? Stigma matters. Provider shortages matter. Measurement matters. Political priorities matter. Systems also tend to become very good at funding what they already know how to count.

Then there are diseases that the global-health system itself officially describes as neglected. The term is almost too honest.

Neglected tropical diseases disproportionately affect people living with poverty, unsafe water, poor sanitation, inadequate housing, limited health access, and high exposure to disease vectors. Historically, many of these conditions attracted comparatively little pharmaceutical investment because the populations carrying the greatest disease burden offered relatively weak commercial markets (Trouiller et al., 2002). A disease can therefore be medically devastating and commercially uninteresting at the same time.

That is not merely a scientific problem. It is a political-economic one.

Some health crises are hidden even more deeply inside ordinary work. Miners breathe dust. Agricultural workers encounter pesticides and extreme heat. Construction workers face injury and toxic exposure. Factory workers may confront chemicals, repetitive strain, and dangerous equipment. Health workers themselves experience burnout, stress, infection risk, and workplace violence. Occupational disease often unfolds slowly enough that the original exposure becomes difficult to see, especially when illness appears years later.

The workers carrying the greatest risks are also frequently migrants, temporary workers, informal workers, or people with relatively little political power. That makes the political-economy question unusually direct:

Who receives the profit, and who receives the exposure?

Then there is antimicrobial resistance, or AMR, one of the clearest examples of a crisis that grows precisely because it does not arrive all at once. Antibiotics transformed modern medicine by making once-deadly bacterial infections treatable and by making surgery, chemotherapy, transplantation, and countless other procedures far safer. But microorganisms evolve. The overuse and misuse of antibiotics can accelerate resistance, as can poor sanitation, weak infection control, unregulated pharmaceutical access, agricultural use, and inadequate surveillance.

A major global analysis estimated that bacterial antimicrobial resistance directly caused approximately 1.27 million deaths in 2019 and was associated with nearly 5 million deaths (Murray et al., 2022). Yet AMR rarely dominates public attention because it does not look like one dramatic emergency. Instead, a urinary infection stops responding to treatment. A surgical infection becomes dangerous. Tuberculosis becomes harder to cure. Thousands of scattered treatment failures accumulate into a global pattern.

AMR is a slow-motion pandemic, the global-health equivalent of a bridge rusting one bolt at a time.

Its economics are strange as well. A pharmaceutical company may spend enormous sums developing a new antibiotic only for public-health officials to say, quite correctly, please use it as little as possible so that resistance does not emerge too quickly.

Excellent medicine. Awkward business model.

Again, the same question returns: What happens when human need and normal market incentives do not align?

Climate change increasingly intensifies all of these pressures. Extreme heat, wildfire smoke, food insecurity, flooding, water stress, displacement, shifting infectious-disease patterns, and health-system disruption connect ecological instability directly to human health (IPCC, 2022; Romanello et al., 2023). But here too, exposure is unequal. A person working outdoors during extreme heat does not face the same risk as someone in an air-conditioned office. A community with reliable electricity, strong hospitals, insurance, and disaster-response capacity experiences the same storm or heat wave very differently from one with weak infrastructure and fewer resources.

The injustice can become even sharper across countries. States that contributed relatively little to historical greenhouse-gas emissions may face severe health effects while possessing fewer resources to adapt. Climate change therefore acts not simply as a new health threat, but as a multiplier of existing inequality.

And this brings us to a larger political problem: long-running crises are remarkably easy to normalize.

Humans adjust. A shocking number becomes familiar. A familiar number becomes background. A background number becomes normal.

A health threat that kills dramatically can trigger emergency mobilization. One that kills predictably for decades can become another line in an annual report.

Acute crisis gets urgency. Chronic crisis gets a committee.

This is the normalization problem. The health problems most deeply embedded in social structures are often the hardest to make politically urgent because there is no single villain, no single vaccine, no singular moment of emergency, and no obvious finish line. Their persistence can make them seem inevitable even when they are not.

So when studying the health of any society, it is not enough to ask:

What is the biggest health emergency?

A better question is:

What suffering has become ordinary?

Look for the community everyone knows lacks doctors. The workplace everyone knows is unsafe. The pollution everyone has learned to live with. The maternal-health journey everyone accepts as dangerously long.

A crisis does not stop being a crisis because people become accustomed to it.

Sometimes that is exactly when it becomes structural.

By this point, one factor has appeared repeatedly across nearly every example: the environment. Air quality shapes respiratory disease. Water systems determine exposure to pathogens. Extreme heat transforms occupational risk. Food systems connect nutrition, agriculture, labor, and land. Animals and humans share ecological spaces where pathogens can move between species. Pollution accumulates in bodies and communities.

The boundary between human health and the rest of the planet is beginning to look suspiciously artificial.

So now we zoom out again.

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5.7: One Planet, One Health?

What If Human Health Was Never Just Human?

We like categories. Universities create departments for them. Governments create ministries around them. Health belongs over here, agriculture over there, environment somewhere else, and climate perhaps in an entirely different building.

Reality, unfortunately, did not read the organizational chart.

Humans live inside ecosystems. We raise animals, grow food, clear land, build cities, alter rivers, consume energy, move species around the planet, use antibiotics in both humans and animals, and generate enormous quantities of waste. The microbes, pollutants, animals, plants, and ecological systems sharing that world have never shown much interest in our bureaucratic boundaries.

This is the central insight behind One Health, an approach that treats the health of people, animals, and ecosystems as interconnected rather than separate policy problems. Major international organizations including WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the World Organisation for Animal Health now formally collaborate through a One Health framework (FAO et al., 2022).

In other words, the body does not stop at the skin.

At least not analytically.



Figure 5.7.1: One Health Begins at the Boundaries We Invented. Human health, animal health, food production, labor, land use, and ecosystems interact in the same physical environments. (Photo by Tadeu Jnr on Unsplash).

Consider zoonotic disease, infections capable of moving between animals and humans. Influenza, rabies, Ebola, and several coronaviruses all involve relationships across species, but asking only which animal carried a pathogen rarely tells us enough. The more revealing Global Studies question is how human activity created the conditions in which that encounter became possible.

Land-use change can fragment wildlife habitat, while agricultural expansion can bring livestock into closer contact with wild species. New roads open previously less-disturbed ecosystems to greater human movement. Urban development changes animal populations and their proximity to people. Climate conditions can shift the geographic range of vectors, while global commerce can move biological material across vast distances with extraordinary speed. For that reason, researchers studying zoonotic spillover increasingly focus not only on pathogens themselves but also on the ecological and social conditions that create opportunities for pathogens to cross species boundaries (Allen et al., 2017; Plowright et al., 2017; Plowright et al., 2021).

This does not mean that deforestation automatically causes a pandemic or that every interaction with wildlife produces disease. Environmental change alters probabilities rather than writing destiny. Pandemics do not simply “come from nature.” Human societies repeatedly rearrange the conditions under which humans, wildlife, livestock, and pathogens encounter one another.

We help rearrange the seating chart.

Biodiversity complicates the story further. It is tempting to reduce the relationship to a slogan such as “more biodiversity means less disease,” but ecosystems rarely cooperate with slogans. The relationship between species diversity and infectious disease varies according to the pathogen, host community, vector, ecological setting, and type of environmental disturbance. Researchers have nevertheless shown that changes in biodiversity can alter patterns of disease transmission and that ecological disruption deserves serious attention when explaining emerging infectious disease (Keesing et al., 2010; Rohr et al., 2019).

The point is not that nature is good and human activity is bad. It is that changing ecological relationships changes health risk.

Food Systems Are Health Systems

Food systems make these relationships especially visible because they connect human health, animal health, labor, land use, trade, culture, and environmental change inside a single network. Livestock production supports livelihoods, employment, nutrition, and cultural practices across much of the world. At the same time, intensive animal-production systems can facilitate disease transmission, increase demand for antimicrobials, affect water quality, reshape land use, and concentrate biological risk.

Food, in other words, is never only nutrition. It is also labor, infrastructure, trade, environment, culture, and governance.

Antimicrobial resistance makes the interconnectedness particularly difficult to ignore. Antibiotics are used in human medicine, veterinary care, and some agricultural systems, while resistant organisms and resistance genes can circulate through people, animals, food, wastewater, soil, hospitals, and farms. Advising physicians to prescribe antibiotics carefully is essential, but physician behavior alone cannot solve a problem whose pathways also run through pharmaceutical manufacturing, sanitation, veterinary practice, agricultural policy, food regulation, infection control, and environmental contamination.

The bacteria, once again, are refusing to respect our administrative boundaries.

Very inconsiderate.

The same systems logic applies when we tell people simply to “eat better.” That advice sounds straightforward until we ask what determines which foods are affordable, available, culturally familiar, subsidized, aggressively marketed, transported efficiently, or sold nearby. Agricultural policy shapes production. Trade agreements influence prices and availability. Employers determine wages and working hours. School systems structure children's meals. Corporations shape advertising environments. Urban planning determines what kinds of stores and transportation exist. Climate shocks affect harvests and prices.

The EAT–Lancet Commission drew attention to precisely this relationship by examining human diets and planetary sustainability together rather than treating nutrition and environmental policy as separate domains (Willett et al., 2019).

You cannot fix a food system only at the fork.

Climate Change as a Health Multiplier

Climate change expands the systems problem because it does not produce one neat category of disease. Instead, it changes the conditions under which many health problems occur. Extreme heat increases cardiovascular and occupational risk. Flooding can damage health facilities and contaminate water systems. Drought can undermine food security. Wildfire smoke harms respiratory health. Changing temperatures can alter the geographic distribution of disease vectors. Disasters can displace communities and interrupt treatment for people living with chronic conditions (IPCC, 2022; Romanello et al., 2023).

Climate change therefore functions less like a single health problem than a risk amplifier.

The risk it amplifies is not distributed evenly. A weather station may record the same temperature for an entire city, but an outdoor construction worker experiences that heat differently from someone working in an air-conditioned office. An older adult living alone without dependable electricity faces a different danger from a household with backup power and reliable cooling. A neighborhood covered in asphalt with little vegetation may retain significantly more heat than a greener neighborhood only a few

miles away.

The temperature may be shared. The risk is not.

Once housing, occupation, infrastructure, income, and political power enter the picture, environmental exposure is no longer purely environmental.

Air pollution tells a similar story. Fine particulate matter can penetrate deep into the lungs and is associated with cardiovascular and respiratory disease, yet exposure depends heavily on geography. Traffic corridors, industrial zones, ports, power plants, waste facilities, and poorly ventilated indoor environments are not distributed randomly.

The health question quickly becomes: Who lives where?

Global Studies then asks the less comfortable follow-up: Why?

Housing markets, zoning decisions, income, race, colonial histories, industrial policy, and political representation begin entering what initially looked like a story about lungs.

Cities make these contradictions especially visible. Urbanization can dramatically improve health by concentrating hospitals, schools, employment, sanitation systems, public transportation, and other services. Yet the same city can concentrate pollution, heat, traffic injuries, overcrowding, stress, and severe inequalities in infrastructure. A city is not healthy simply because it contains excellent hospitals. A healthier city is one whose housing, water, transportation, labor protections, public space, and environmental infrastructure prevent people from needing those hospitals in the first place.

The sewer is back.

It always comes back.

From One Health to Planetary Health

Following these connections eventually pushes One Health toward an even larger framework: planetary health. If One Health emphasizes relationships among humans, animals, and ecosystems, planetary health asks how human civilization itself depends on the stability of Earth's natural systems. Climate, biodiversity, oceans, soils, fresh water, land use, and resource consumption become health issues because human health ultimately depends upon ecological systems capable of providing food, water, shelter, and stable living conditions.

The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health identified an uncomfortable paradox: humanity has achieved extraordinary gains in health and development while simultaneously degrading many of the ecological systems on which future health depends (Whitmee et al., 2015).

That makes the word progress much harder to define.

Economic growth can improve nutrition, housing, education, sanitation, transportation, and medicine. The same growth can intensify resource extraction, pollution, greenhouse-gas emissions, habitat destruction, and ecological degradation. Planetary health therefore forces conventional health policy to confront a question it can otherwise postpone:

What counts as progress if improving well-being today damages the systems required for well-being tomorrow?

This is also a question of justice because neither environmental harm nor adaptive capacity is evenly distributed. Communities with less economic and political power are often less able to relocate away from hazards, purchase protective technologies, insure themselves against disasters, rebuild after catastrophe, or influence environmental decisions. At the international level, countries responsible for relatively small shares of historical greenhouse-gas emissions may face severe climate-related health consequences while possessing fewer financial resources for adaptation.

The question therefore moves beyond identifying vulnerability. We also have to ask who benefited from the activities producing risk, who bears the costs, who possesses the capacity to adapt, and who carries responsibility for changing the system.

At that point, One Health becomes unmistakably Global Studies.

Everyone Sees a Different Piece of the Same Problem

Imagine a region where forest is cleared for large-scale livestock production. The project creates jobs, expands exports, and lowers food costs. Several years later, however, wildlife habitat has become fragmented, local water quality has deteriorated, antibiotic use in livestock has increased, workers face greater heat exposure, and researchers identify a new pathogen circulating among wildlife, livestock, and people.

What, exactly, is the health problem?

The pathogen matters, but so does land use. Agricultural practices matter, but so do labor conditions, environmental regulation, antibiotic policy, trade incentives, climate, and water infrastructure. There is no single answer because the problem was never produced by a single system.

Now imagine that same problem arriving inside government. The health ministry sees infectious disease. The agriculture ministry sees livestock policy. The environmental ministry sees deforestation and water quality. The labor ministry sees worker protection. The trade ministry sees exports and competitiveness.

Everyone is correct.

And now the governance problem becomes visible.

Systems thinking is relatively easy on a whiteboard. It becomes far more difficult when five ministries have separate budgets, different institutional cultures, competing political incentives, distinct constituencies, and no obvious reason to surrender authority to one another.

Prevention creates another political difficulty because successful prevention is often nearly invisible. Governments can count vaccines administered, patients treated, and hospital beds built. It is much harder to celebrate the zoonotic spillover event that never occurred because land-use practices improved, the heat deaths prevented by urban tree cover, the resistant infection that never developed because antibiotics were used appropriately, or the worker who never developed lung disease because an exposure standard changed.

The better prevention works, the less dramatic the outcome appears.

A strange reward system.

This is why One Health ultimately asks us to stop following only the disease and start following the system. Follow the land, food, animals, workers, supply chains, regulations, water, energy, infrastructure, financing, and ecological change. Then ask where risk is created, who benefits from the activity creating it, who absorbs the cost, who possesses the authority to intervene, and whose interests are missing from the decision.

The chapter began with a deceptively simple question: Who gets to be healthy?

By now, the answer has become inconveniently large.

Health depends not only on medicine but also on income, housing, history, governance, technology, labor, community, rights, infrastructure, and ecological stability. Human health is not a self-contained achievement. It is an ecosystem outcome.

And once health becomes this interconnected, we arrive at an ethical problem we can no longer avoid. If governments, corporations, communities, international organizations, workers, consumers, and entire economic systems all shape health outcomes, does responsibility become so widely distributed that nobody is responsible at all?

Or does greater power create greater obligation?

That is the final question of this chapter.

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5.8: So Who Is Responsible?

The Question We Can No Longer Avoid

We have spent this chapter making health more complicated.

We began with the body, but the walls around it kept moving. Health turned out to be connected to housing, work, income, history, race, gender, migration, pharmaceutical markets, political institutions, infrastructure, climate, food systems, and power. By now, explaining illness entirely through individual behavior should feel a little like blaming someone for getting wet while standing inside a house with no roof. Perhaps they could have moved the chair, but sooner or later we have to discuss the roof.

That leaves us with the hardest question in the chapter: If health is produced by systems, who is responsible for changing those systems?

The easiest answer is “everyone.” Individuals matter. Families and communities matter. Governments, corporations, international organizations, scientists, employers, donors, researchers, and health professionals all matter. That answer is true, but it is not especially useful. When responsibility belongs vaguely to everyone, it can very quickly belong concretely to no one.

A better approach is to connect responsibility to power, capacity, causation, benefit, obligation, and accountability. Instead of asking only who is involved in a health problem, we can ask who actually has the ability to change the conditions producing it, who benefits from the existing arrangement, who bears its costs, and what obligations follow from unequal power.

Individuals clearly make decisions that affect their own health. Food, exercise, medication, smoking, vaccination, sleep, sexual behavior, and medical care all matter. Personal agency is real. But agency is never exercised in empty space. Someone deciding what to eat chooses inside a food system. Someone deciding whether to visit a doctor acts within a health-financing system. A worker deciding whether to stay home sick is making that choice inside a labor market that may or may not provide paid leave. A parent deciding whether to vaccinate a child acts within an information environment shaped by trust, media, education, institutions, and history.

Public-health scholarship has therefore consistently challenged explanations that reduce health inequality entirely to individual choice (Link & Phelan, 1995; Marmot, 2005). Choice matters, but some people choose from a menu while others choose from whatever is left.

That suggests a useful principle: responsibility should increase with the power to shape health conditions.

A teenager cannot regulate pharmaceutical prices. A migrant laborer cannot redesign national labor law. A patient cannot independently build a rural hospital. A village cannot rewrite an international patent regime. Governments, corporations, and international institutions possess forms of power that individuals do not, and their obligations cannot therefore be identical.

Thomas Pogge (2002) pushes this argument further by asking us to consider not only whether powerful actors do enough to relieve suffering, but also whether the institutional arrangements from which they benefit help reproduce that suffering in the first place. That changes the ethical standard. Instead of asking whether wealthy states, corporations, or institutions are generous enough, we begin asking whether the rules themselves are just.

Health has long been connected to this language of rights. The Constitution of the World Health Organization describes enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health as a fundamental human right, while the Universal Declaration of Human Rights links health and well-being to food, housing, medical care, and social protection. A right to health does not mean that governments can guarantee that nobody will ever become sick. No government can promise immortality, which would be a terrible campaign platform anyway. Rather, the right to health concerns fair and nondiscriminatory access to the institutions, services, resources, and social conditions that make the highest attainable standard of health possible.

Legal scholar Lawrence Gostin (2014) argues that global health justice therefore involves responsibilities that extend beyond voluntary charity, including obligations related to basic health capabilities, public goods, governance, and human rights. The conversation changes from It would be nice if everyone had access to a much harder question: What do governments and institutions actually owe people?

Scarcity makes that question difficult. No health system can provide every possible intervention to every person at unlimited cost. Governments make choices among maternal health, vaccination, mental-health care, sanitation, primary care, chronic-disease prevention, rare-disease treatments, workforce development, and countless competing needs.

A budget is therefore more than a financial document. It is also a moral one. It reveals which needs were considered urgent, which populations were prioritized, and which forms of suffering were allowed to wait.

Norman Daniels (2008) argues that health has special moral importance because it protects people's range of opportunities. Ill health can profoundly restrict what individuals are able to do and become, making fair access to health-producing conditions central to justice. Amartya Sen's capability approach widens the argument further by asking us not simply what resources people formally possess, but what they are actually able to do with them (Sen, 1999).

Two people can receive the same health resource and still possess radically different capabilities. Imagine that everyone is technically entitled to use the same clinic. One patient lives next door, while another travels six hours. One receives paid leave, while another loses a day's wages. One speaks the clinic's language; another does not. One trusts the institution, while another has experienced discrimination there.

The formal resource may be equal. The meaningful opportunity is not.

Martha Nussbaum (2011) similarly identifies bodily health as central to human flourishing. Taken together, these approaches demand more of equity than simply providing everyone with the same service. The real question is whether people possess a meaningful opportunity to live healthy lives.

This is also why charity and justice are not the same thing.

Suppose a wealthy country donates vaccines to a lower-income country. The donation is useful and may save lives. Justice nevertheless asks an additional question: Why was donation necessary in the first place? If the global system governing vaccine production, purchasing, financing, and intellectual property made it extraordinarily difficult for some countries to obtain vaccines independently, generosity can be genuinely valuable while the underlying arrangement remains unequal.

Charity asks, How can I help?

Justice asks, Why are you in this position, why am I in mine, and what system connects those facts?

Global health needs generosity. It also needs the second question.

Paul Farmer's (2004) work on structural violence makes that distinction especially clear. Poverty and illness cannot always be treated as unfortunate circumstances floating free from history when contemporary patterns of suffering have been shaped by political and economic relationships built over generations. Sometimes helping means delivering medicine. Sometimes it means asking why the medicine was inaccessible. Often it means doing both.

Governments remain especially important because states possess powers that almost no other actor has. They can tax, regulate, finance hospitals, train health workers, negotiate medicine prices, enforce labor standards, build water systems, control pollution, provide insurance, and establish social protections. That capacity creates responsibility.

Yet states themselves are profoundly unequal. Some governments possess enormous tax bases, scientific capacity, effective bureaucracies, and substantial bargaining power. Others govern amid debt, war, colonial legacies, limited revenues, weak infrastructure, or vulnerability to economic forces originating beyond their borders. A country's health outcomes can therefore be shaped by international trade, commodity prices, debt, migration, climate change, pharmaceutical supply chains, and global financial institutions.

If causes cross borders, obligations may have to cross them too.

This is where global solidarity becomes more useful than a simple charity model. Solidarity does not erase differences in wealth or power; it begins by acknowledging them. During a pandemic, solidarity can mean sharing scientific information, expanding manufacturing capacity, financing vaccines, strengthening health systems, and supporting health workers. In climate policy, it can mean countries with greater historical responsibility and greater financial capacity contributing more toward adaptation and resilience.

Solidarity changes the grammar of responsibility. The problem is no longer simply *yours*. It becomes a question of our relationship

to the conditions producing it.

Corporations belong in this ethical conversation as well. Pharmaceutical companies develop medicines and vaccines. Food companies shape diets and consumer environments. Technology platforms influence health information. Energy firms affect environmental exposure. Employers determine working conditions. Insurance companies influence access to care. Corporations can improve health enormously, but they can also create, intensify, or redistribute health risks.

Scholarship on the commercial determinants of health therefore treats corporations as active participants in health governance rather than neutral economic scenery (Kickbusch et al., 2016; Gilmore et al., 2023). The interesting question is not whether profit is inherently immoral. It is what society permits profit to override.

That leads to an important distinction between legal responsibility and ethical responsibility. A company may legally sell a harmful product. A government may legally design a policy with deeply unequal consequences. A wealthy country may legally purchase much of the early supply of a scarce medicine. “We followed the rules” may be factually correct, but it does not necessarily answer whether the rules themselves were just.

Sometimes the most important political question is not Who broke the rules?

It is Who wrote them?

Responsibility also requires more than technically competent decision-making. Powerful institutions have often assumed that responsibility means knowing what is best for other people. That can reproduce hierarchy rather than dismantle it. Communities possess knowledge institutions need: knowledge about trust, language, culture, transportation, family structures, local history, political dynamics, and whether an intervention is actually likely to work.

Meaningful participation therefore cannot mean inviting people to a meeting after the major decisions have already been made. Otherwise, “community engagement” becomes a polished way of saying, We already decided.

Real participation redistributes some authority.

This brings us to accountability, perhaps the most practical concept in the chapter. When an actor possesses power over a health outcome, we should ask what that actor can control, what obligations follow from that control, and what happens when those obligations are ignored.

That final question matters because a right without accountability can become an aspiration. A corporate promise without accountability can become marketing. An international commitment without accountability can become conference language. A government target without accountability can become a PDF.

Lovely PDF.

Still no nurses.

Accountability is where values become institutions.

At this point, the scale of global health can understandably feel overwhelming. History matters. Economics matters. Corporations matter. Governments matter. Climate matters. Apparently the forest has entered the syllabus too. A student might reasonably conclude that they are personally expected to restructure global pharmaceutical markets before Thursday.

Good news: no.

The purpose of structural analysis is not to make individuals responsible for everything. It is almost the opposite. Structural analysis helps us identify which level of action actually matches the problem.

Individuals can organize, vote where political systems permit it, challenge misinformation, work in health professions, conduct research, advocate, support community organizations, and help build better institutions. But individual action becomes most powerful when it targets systems capable of producing structural change.

The point is not: You are responsible for everything.

The point is: Stop asking individuals to solve problems that institutions were built to solve.

And this is where the chapter becomes more hopeful.

Global Studies can occasionally make humanity look like a group project where half the members did not read the instructions. Fair enough. But this chapter has also shown what happens when people successfully change systems. Smallpox was eradicated. Sanitation transformed urban health. Vaccination changed childhood survival. HIV activists reshaped research priorities and drug-access politics. Governments created universal health systems. Communities forced institutions to listen. International collaboration has repeatedly mobilized scientists, health workers, governments, and ordinary people across national borders.

None of those changes occurred because humanity suddenly became perfect. They happened because laws changed, budgets changed, infrastructure changed, knowledge changed, institutions changed, and expectations changed.

That matters because it tells us something fundamental about inequality. If health outcomes change when institutions change, then inequality is not simply something societies have to describe or endure.

It is something they can contest.

Return, then, to where this chapter began. WHO's 2025 report described a global difference in average life expectancy of roughly **33 years** between countries at opposite ends of the distribution (WHO, 2025a).

We could memorize the statistic, put it on an exam, circle the correct answer, and move on.

But statistics become intellectually useful only when they make us curious about what produced them.

Behind a life-expectancy number are water systems, vaccines, wars, wages, roads, hospitals, food, pollution, medicine prices, education systems, discrimination, care, public budgets, and political decisions.

A health statistic is often a compressed history of a society.

So who gets to be healthy?

People whose environments protect them. People whose governments invest in functioning systems. People whose workplaces do not routinely expose them to danger. People whose medicines exist and are accessible. People whose communities possess political voice. And, uncomfortably, people who happen to be born into systems that make survival easier.

That last one should bother us, because birth is not an achievement.

A child did not earn clean water, and another child did not fail to earn it. A newborn did not choose a health system. A pregnant woman did not design the road to the hospital. A worker did not write the occupational-safety law. A patient did not negotiate the pharmaceutical patent.

This is why health inequality becomes a question of justice. Not every health difference is necessarily unfair, but many are avoidable, patterned, and connected to distributions of power that people did not choose.

And that brings us to the final Global Studies move.

When confronted with suffering, begin by asking what happened. Then ask why it happened more often to some people than others. Push farther: What system produced the pattern? Who benefits from it? Who bears its costs? Who has the power to change it? What would justice require?

That last question is the one worth keeping.

Because studying global problems without asking what should change risks turning other people's suffering into interesting course material. The goal is not simply to know more.

It is to see more clearly.

A virus is microscopic. A hospital is local. A government has borders. A corporation has shareholders. A climate has none of those things.

And somehow a human body sits at the intersection of all of them.

That is global health.

The body is where enormous systems eventually become personal.

Trade becomes diet. Policy becomes medicine. Pollution becomes breath. Labor becomes injury. Housing becomes exposure. History becomes risk. Inequality becomes life expectancy.

And sometimes justice becomes survival.

So the next time you encounter a statistic about maternal mortality, vaccination, cancer, hunger, extreme heat, tuberculosis, or life expectancy, do not stop at **How many?**

Ask why them. Ask why there. Ask who decided. Ask who could have prevented it.

And then ask the question that turns information into responsibility: Now that we know, what are we going to do with that knowledge? Because health is never only a story about who becomes sick. It is a story about the kind of world we have built, and the kind we are willing to build next.

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5.9: Discussion

Discussion 1: Is Health a Choice?

A common argument holds that individuals should take responsibility for their own health because people make choices about food, exercise, smoking, medication, vaccination, and medical care. Using at least two frameworks from Chapter 5, evaluate that argument.

Where does individual responsibility genuinely matter? At what point does focusing on individual behavior become misleading? Identify a concrete health issue and explain how personal choices interact with larger institutions or structures.

Your response should do more than say “both matter.” Explain how and where responsibility changes as you move from the individual to the system.

Discussion 2: Who Should Get the Vaccine?

Imagine a future respiratory pandemic. Scientists develop an effective vaccine, but manufacturers initially produce enough doses for only 20 percent of the world's population.

Design a distribution principle.

Should doses be allocated according to national population, mortality risk, current outbreaks, health-worker status, age, ability to pay, contribution to vaccine research, or another criterion?

Your answer must consider at least three ideas from this chapter, such as health equity, sovereignty, global solidarity, political economy, fundamental cause theory, vaccine nationalism, or global health governance.

There is no perfect solution.

The challenge is to explain what you are prioritizing—and what your choice leaves unresolved.

Discussion 3: What Suffering Has Become Normal?

Identify one important health problem that you believe receives less political or public attention than its impact warrants. Examples might include maternal mortality, antimicrobial resistance, occupational disease, mental health, air pollution, neglected tropical diseases, heat-related illness, or another issue.

Why has this problem become easier to ignore?

Consider who experiences it, how quickly or slowly it unfolds, whose economic or political interests are involved, and what would have to change for the problem to become politically urgent.

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5.10: Assignments

Assignment 1: Global Health Autopsy

From Body to System

Choose one health outcome occurring in a specific country, region, or community. Possibilities include maternal mortality, asthma, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, mental-health access, heat-related illness, cancer, antimicrobial resistance, occupational injury, or another approved topic.

Your task is to conduct a Global Health Autopsy.

Begin with the immediate health outcome, then trace outward. Explain the biological or clinical problem, but do not stop there. Investigate living conditions, social position, institutions, political economy, environmental conditions, and relevant history. Apply at least three theoretical frameworks from Chapter 5 and identify what each helps you see that another framework might miss.

Conclude by identifying which actor or institution possesses the greatest realistic power to reduce the health disparity and defend your choice.

Suggested length: 1,200–1,500 words.

Evidence requirement: At least four credible sources, including at least two scholarly sources.

Assignment 2: Follow the Money

Mapping Power in Global Health

Choose one major global health initiative, organization, or controversy. Examples include WHO financing, Gavi, the Global Fund, COVID-19 vaccine access, HIV medicine pricing, malaria eradication, antimicrobial resistance financing, maternal-health funding, or a major philanthropic global-health initiative.

Create a power map answering the following central question:

Who has the greatest influence over what happens, and why?

Your analysis should identify the major actors, where the money comes from, who possesses legal authority, who controls technical expertise or technology, whose interests shape priorities, which communities experience the consequences, and how accountability works when something goes wrong.

Your final product may be a written policy analysis, infographic plus commentary, narrated presentation, or another format approved by your instructor.

Whatever format you choose, the argument must be analytical rather than descriptive. Do not merely tell us who participates.

Show us who has power.

Assignment 3: The Quiet Crisis Pitch

Make the Invisible Impossible to Ignore

Choose a global health problem that has become politically normalized despite causing substantial preventable suffering.

Imagine you have five minutes before an international funding committee that can commit significant resources to your issue.

Make the case.

Your pitch must establish the scale of the problem, explain why it remains under-recognized, identify which groups bear the greatest burden, use at least one Chapter 5 theory to explain why the problem persists, and propose an intervention that addresses more than individual behavior.

The strongest projects will also address a difficult question:

Why should this problem receive funding instead of another equally deserving health priority?

You may submit the assignment as a written brief, recorded advocacy pitch, multimedia presentation, or another instructor-approved format.

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5.11: Key Terms

Words to Know

- **Antimicrobial resistance (AMR):** The process through which microorganisms change in ways that make antimicrobial medicines less effective.
- **Capability approach:** An approach associated with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum that evaluates well-being partly in terms of what people are genuinely able to be and do rather than simply which resources they formally possess.
- **Commercial determinants of health:** The ways corporate products, practices, marketing, lobbying, investment, and political influence shape population health.
- **COVAX:** The global COVID-19 vaccine-access mechanism designed to support more equitable vaccine procurement and distribution.
- **Ecosocial theory:** Nancy Krieger's framework for understanding how social, political, ecological, and historical conditions become biologically embodied.
- **Embodiment:** The process through which people biologically incorporate the material and social conditions in which they live.
- **Fundamental cause theory:** The theory that socioeconomic resources such as money, knowledge, power, prestige, and social connections continually allow advantaged groups to reduce disease risk across changing health threats.
- **Global health:** A field of research and practice concerned with improving health and health equity across populations, especially where health determinants, problems, or solutions cross national boundaries.
- **Global health governance:** The institutions, actors, rules, networks, financing arrangements, and decision-making processes through which health problems crossing borders are managed.
- **Health equity:** A condition in which people have a fair opportunity to achieve good health and avoidable, unjust differences in health are reduced.
- **Health equality:** The provision of equivalent treatment or resources, regardless of whether different populations begin with different levels of need.
- **Health-system strengthening:** Long-term investment in the institutions needed for effective health care, including workforce, primary care, financing, laboratories, procurement, information systems, infrastructure, and governance.
- **Infodemic:** An overabundance of information—including false and misleading information—that makes trustworthy health guidance more difficult to identify and use.
- **Intersectionality:** A framework for analyzing how multiple systems of power and social position interact to shape experiences and outcomes.
- **International Health Regulations (IHR):** The legally binding international framework through which WHO Member States coordinate capacities and responses to health threats that may cross borders.
- **Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs):** A group of diseases concentrated disproportionately among populations experiencing poverty and historically receiving limited political or commercial attention.
- **Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs):** Diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory disease that are not primarily transmitted between people.
- **One Health:** An approach recognizing the interconnected health of humans, animals, and ecosystems.
- **Planetary health:** A framework examining how human health depends on the stability and functioning of Earth's natural systems.
- **Political economy of health:** Analysis of how markets, states, institutions, wealth, and power influence health outcomes and access to health resources.
- **Public health:** The study and practice of protecting and improving population health through prevention, policy, services, surveillance, education, and environmental interventions.
- **Social determinants of health:** The conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, along with the broader political and economic forces that distribute those conditions.
- **Structural violence:** Social and institutional arrangements that systematically expose particular groups to greater harm while restricting access to resources and opportunities.
- **Syndemic:** The interaction of multiple health problems with social conditions in ways that intensify their combined effects.
- **Vaccine nationalism:** The prioritization of a state's own population in obtaining vaccines, especially where advance purchasing or other actions reduce access elsewhere.
- **Vertical health program:** A health intervention organized primarily around a particular disease, population, or technical objective.
- **Zoonotic disease:** An infection capable of moving between animals and humans.

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5.12: References

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6: POLITICS SHOULDN'T BE AT THE DINNER TABLE

Who gets to make the rules?



Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): Flags of different countries outside a United Nations Building. (CC BY 4.0; Photo by Gavin Li on Unsplash)

Chapter 5 ended with a deceptively simple realization: health is never only about health. Who receives a vaccine, who can afford treatment, whose neighborhood absorbs environmental risk, whose knowledge counts during a crisis, and whose suffering becomes statistically acceptable are all shaped by institutions, resources, histories, and choices. Eventually, every one of those questions runs into politics. And this is where things get interesting.

Politics is sometimes taught as a world of elections, presidents, constitutions, political parties, and people arguing on television. Those things matter. We often say politics shouldn't be brought to the dinner table, but global politics is considerably bigger and much messier, and in fact we should talk about what is happening in the world at dinner. We don't live in a vacuum and it's import to have a strong understanding about what is happening politically in the world around us. Politics is about power: who has it, how they got it, what they can do with it, what limits it, and what happens when other people refuse to accept it. In a globalized world, those questions no longer stop neatly at national borders. Governments regulate what happens inside their territories, but financial markets can move billions of dollars across those territories in seconds. Digital platforms headquartered somewhere else can shape what citizens see before an election. Corporations can possess revenues larger than the economies of some countries. International organizations establish rules governments voluntarily accept and later sometimes resent. Wars can disrupt grocery prices on another continent. Refugee movements can become central issues in elections thousands of miles away. A political decision made in one capital can ripple through supply chains, energy markets, security alliances, migration routes, and your bank account before you have finished wondering why any of it matters.

Welcome to global politics.

The central tension of this chapter is not simply globalization versus the nation-state. States have not disappeared, and globalization has not produced one seamless political community. Political authority has instead become layered, contested, and uneven. Governments operate alongside international organizations, corporations, regional blocs, cities, social movements, Indigenous nations, armed groups, digital platforms, and transnational networks. Susan Strange (1996) famously argued that globalization was changing the relationship between states and markets. The more interesting question today is not whether power disappeared from the state, but where power moved, how it changed form, and which actors gained the ability to shape the rules.

For a brief moment after the Cold War, some observers believed they knew where all of this was heading. Francis Fukuyama (1989, 1992) famously suggested that liberal democracy might represent the endpoint of humanity's major ideological evolution. Markets were expanding, democratic transitions were occurring across several regions, and international institutions appeared

increasingly influential. The future looked surprisingly settled. The world of 2026 does not look particularly settled.

Democratic backsliding, authoritarian resilience, resurgent nationalism, Russia's war against Ukraine, conflict across several regions, intensifying U.S.-China competition, debates about migration and sovereignty, technological rivalry, and growing distrust of political institutions all complicate any story of inevitable convergence. At the same time, international cooperation has hardly disappeared. Governments still negotiate treaties, regulate trade, coordinate health responses, share intelligence, cooperate on disasters, participate in international organizations, and attempt (sometimes successfully and sometimes spectacularly unsuccessfully) to manage problems no country can solve alone.

That contradiction is the chapter. Globalization connects political systems without making them agree. It produces interdependence without eliminating rivalry, spreads norms without guaranteeing compliance, and can weaken some forms of state authority while strengthening others. Rather than asking whether globalization has made states obsolete, we will ask something more useful: Who makes the rules in an interconnected world, who can ignore them, why do people accept some forms of political authority and reject others, and what happens when competing visions of the world collide?

Because politics is not something happening somewhere else. The global arrives locally in the availability of medicine, the jobs in your community, the information on your screen, the passport you carry, the products you can buy, and the rights you can exercise. Chapter 6 follows those connections all the way to power.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain how globalization reshapes political power and sovereignty by examining the roles of states, international organizations, corporations, civil society, and transnational networks.
- Distinguish among major approaches to global politics, including realism, liberalism, constructivism, critical political economy, Global International Relations, and feminist perspectives, and use them to interpret contemporary political issues.
- Analyze nationalism, populism, cosmopolitanism, borders, and self-determination as competing responses to globalization and changing ideas of political belonging.
- Evaluate changing understandings of security, including state security, human security, collective security, deterrence, securitization, cyber threats, artificial intelligence, and climate-related insecurity.
- Assess shifts in contemporary world order, including changing U.S. power, China's rise, India and other emerging powers, BRICS+, middle-power diplomacy, and debates over multipolarity and institutional representation.
- Apply a Global Studies lens to political power at multiple levels of analysis, tracing how international systems affect states, communities, households, and individuals.
- Use Kyrgyzstan as a case study to examine how smaller states exercise agency within unequal relationships involving great powers, migration, development institutions, trade, tourism, and environmental change.

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6.1: Introduction - Politics of Globalization

Who Gets to Make the Rules?

Here is a useful rule for studying politics: whenever someone tells you, “That is just how the system works,” it's worth asking who built the system in the first place. That question has been hiding inside nearly everything we have studied. Economic globalization introduced rules governing trade, debt, taxation, labor, and investment. Inequality revealed that markets operate through laws, institutions, histories, and political choices. Global health showed governments deciding what to fund, pharmaceutical companies controlling intellectual property, international organizations coordinating responses, and communities demanding access to care. Eventually, all of these become questions about power.

Robert Dahl (1957) offered one classic definition of power when he described one actor as having power over another when the first can get the second to do something they otherwise would not have done. It captures a visible kind of political power: somebody wants something, somebody else resists, and one side gets its way. Globalization complicates that picture because influence can also operate through markets, laws, institutions, financial systems, media networks, technologies, and assumptions about which political choices are possible in the first place. Susan Strange (1996) pushed this further through the idea of structural power, or the ability to shape the system within which other actors make decisions. Winning an argument is one kind of power; designing the arena in which the argument occurs is another. A government may formally be free to regulate a multinational corporation, but the decision looks different if that corporation can relocate jobs, investment, production, or taxable profits elsewhere. Nobody necessarily has to issue a direct command. The structure itself can narrow the choices.

This is one of the central problems of political globalization: power does not always announce itself.

The State Is Not the Nation

Before going further, we need to untangle several words everyday conversation often treats as interchangeable. A state is a political entity exercising authority over a defined territory and population and recognized as part of the international system. A government is the collection of institutions and officials currently exercising political authority within that state. Governments change while states often persist. A nation is different. Nations are communities whose members understand themselves as connected through some shared identity, often involving language, history, culture, religion, ancestry, territory, political experience, or combinations of these. Benedict Anderson (1983) famously described nations as imagined communities. He did not mean that they are fake. He meant that most members of a nation will never personally meet most of the others, yet can still imagine themselves as belonging to the same community. This is why the phrase nation-state sounds tidier than reality. Some states contain multiple nations. Some nations lack sovereign states. People may simultaneously belong to local, ethnic, linguistic, religious, national, regional, diasporic, and global communities. In some settings these identities coexist comfortably. In others, the failure of political borders to align with collective identities becomes a basis for demands for autonomy, independence, recognition, or conflict.

Sovereignty: Beautiful in Theory, Complicated in Practice

The concept making the modern interstate system possible is sovereignty. In its classical form, sovereignty means that a state possesses supreme political authority within its territory and that outside powers should not simply interfere in its domestic affairs. Sovereignty became especially important during decolonization, when political independence had to mean more than replacing one flag with another. On paper, the idea appears straightforward. The world is divided into states, each state governs itself, and others respect the boundaries. Then reality enters the room.

A country may be legally sovereign while depending on foreign creditors. It may control its borders while depending on imported food, medicine, technology, energy, or military equipment. It may regulate domestic speech while foreign-owned platforms influence what citizens see. It may possess the legal authority to set economic policy while worrying that investors will move money elsewhere. It may voluntarily join international institutions whose rules then constrain government choices. None of this makes sovereignty fake. It means sovereignty operates within relationships of interdependence and unequal power.

Stephen Krasner (1999) famously described sovereignty as organized hypocrisy, emphasizing the gap between principles governments publicly defend and the ways those principles are repeatedly negotiated, bent, or violated. Governments invoke

sovereignty to protect legitimate self-determination, but sovereignty can also be invoked to resist outside scrutiny. The same principle can protect political independence and shield political abuses.

Globalization intensifies the dilemma because many consequences no longer fit territorial boundaries. Carbon emissions, pandemics, financial crises, cyberattacks, refugee movements, pollution, supply chains, and information networks all cross borders. Political authority remains territorially organized while many of the problems governments must manage are not.

That mismatch is one of the defining political problems of globalization.

The State Did Not Disappear. It Got New Roommates.

Late twentieth-century observers frequently wondered whether globalization would make states less important. Trade expanded, multinational corporations became more powerful, capital moved quickly, regional institutions deepened, and digital technologies seemed to reduce the importance of geography. Strange's *The Retreat of the State* (1996) captured part of this transformation.

But the state did not disappear. States still determine citizenship, issue passports, collect taxes, regulate borders, operate schools, maintain militaries, negotiate treaties, recognize property rights, imprison people, and provide public services. During wars, pandemics, financial crises, disasters, and infrastructure failures, people generally do not turn first to multinational corporations and ask them to restore public order.

What changed was the ecosystem surrounding the state. Governments operate beside international organizations such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank. Regional organizations such as the European Union, African Union, and ASEAN add additional layers of authority. Multinational corporations influence investment, technology, infrastructure, employment, communications, and supply chains. NGOs and transnational advocacy networks mobilize around human rights, environmental protection, corruption, humanitarian crises, and labor rights. Diasporas influence elections and send remittances. Indigenous nations assert forms of authority that may predate contemporary borders.

Digital platforms complicate this landscape further. A social-media company can establish rules governing speech and visibility for a population larger than most states. Search engines influence which knowledge becomes easiest to find. Technology firms develop AI systems used by governments, schools, militaries, and businesses worldwide. Political authority has not vanished. It has become crowded.

Governing Without a World Government

Political scientists use global governance to describe the collection of institutions, agreements, norms, networks, and practices through which actors attempt to manage problems crossing borders even though no world government exists (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992). There is no global president or planetary legislature capable of simply passing universally binding law. Global governance operates through treaties, negotiations, organizations, courts, regional institutions, private standards, NGOs, corporate rules, development assistance, professional networks, and political pressure.

Artificial intelligence makes the fragmentation obvious. Governments regulate AI, companies develop models, international organizations propose standards, courts interpret laws, universities conduct research, civil society documents harms, investors influence development, workers challenge automation, and semiconductor supply chains connect several countries. No single actor governs AI completely, yet governance is happening. That is global governance: necessary, messy, overlapping, and rarely controlled by one institution.

Power Does Not Always Look Like Power

Joseph Nye (1990, 2004) distinguishes between hard power, involving military or economic coercion and material incentives, and soft power, the ability to shape outcomes partly through attraction. Culture, political values, diplomacy, education, reputation, media, technology, and popular culture can generate international influence without direct coercion. Steven Lukes (1974/2005) pushes the analysis deeper by asking who determines which issues become legitimate subjects of debate in the first place. Sometimes power consists not in winning an argument but in deciding what everyone is arguing about. That distinction matters globally. If policymakers debate which corporate tax rate is optimal without questioning the structures giving corporations enormous mobility, part of the political landscape has already been established. If a financial institution defines one economic problem as the central crisis, competing interpretations may receive less attention. If an algorithm determines which

political stories millions encounter, influence occurs before anybody votes. Sometimes the most powerful actor is giving orders. Sometimes it is writing the rules. Sometimes it is convincing everyone that the rules are simply common sense.

Globalization Creates Winners. It Also Creates Politics.

Economic globalization is often described through efficiency: trade can reduce prices, foreign investment can create jobs, and integrated markets can generate growth. Those benefits can be real. The political problem is that gains and losses are not distributed evenly. A trade agreement might increase national income while devastating a particular community. Immigration can expand economic activity while generating conflicts over labor, identity, citizenship, and public services. Foreign investment can produce jobs while increasing dependence on external firms. Environmental regulation may create broad benefits while imposing concentrated costs on particular industries. Economics can estimate some of these effects. It cannot decide how a society should distribute them.

That is politics.

Dani Rodrik (2011) captures this tension through the globalization trilemma, arguing that deep economic globalization, national sovereignty, and democratic politics cannot all be maximized simultaneously. Governments repeatedly face trade-offs between global economic integration, responsiveness to domestic voters, and preservation of national policy autonomy. Trade-offs create winners and losers. Winners and losers organize. Globalization becomes political. Resistance also comes from different directions. Some critics demand more equitable globalization: stronger labor rights, environmental protections, debt reform, human rights, or greater Global South representation. Others seek less integration through stronger borders, trade protection, restrictions on migration, or greater national control over policymaking. Both may announce that globalization is broken while proposing radically different repairs.

The chapter's central paradox is now visible. Humanity has organized political authority primarily through sovereign states at the same historical moment when many important problems have become transnational. Governments cooperate, then worry about losing autonomy. They build international institutions, then complain about the institutions they built. They embrace international markets, then discover that interdependence produces vulnerability. Global politics is not a story about globalization defeating the state. It is about governments attempting to retain political control in a world they cannot fully control. At the end of the Cold War, some scholars thought this problem might gradually become easier because political systems themselves seemed to be converging around liberal democracy. For a moment, it looked plausible, then history kept happening.

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6.2: Background - Reaching the "End of History"

“The End of History”? That Aged Well.

For a few extraordinary years at the end of the twentieth century, it really did look as if the political world might be settling down. Francis Fukuyama was not arguing that wars, protests, elections, or terrible political decisions would suddenly disappear. His claim was larger. In 1989, as communist governments across Eastern Europe began collapsing, Fukuyama published “The End of History?” and later expanded the argument in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). He proposed that the great ideological competition over the best form of modern political organization might be approaching an endpoint. Fascism had been catastrophically defeated earlier in the century. Soviet-style communism was visibly struggling. Liberal democracy appeared to lack an equally powerful universal ideological rival.

That is what he meant by the “end of history”: not the end of events, but potentially the end of humanity’s search for a fundamentally different model of legitimate modern government. In 1989, you can see why someone might have thought so. The Berlin Wall fell. Communist governments across Central and Eastern Europe collapsed. Germany reunified. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. Countries that had spent decades under one-party socialist rule began holding competitive elections. Samuel Huntington (1991) situated this moment within a broader third wave of democratization that had begun earlier in Southern Europe and spread through Latin America and parts of Asia and Africa. Meanwhile, economic globalization accelerated. Trade expanded, market reforms spread, international investment grew, and institutions such as the European Union deepened integration. The Cold War ideological divide appeared to have collapsed at exactly the moment global markets were connecting economies more tightly. Perhaps countries really were converging. History, unfortunately for theories of straight-line progress, is exceptionally rude.

What Exactly Is Liberal Democracy?

Part of the problem is that democracy gets used so casually that almost any system containing an election may claim the label. Fukuyama was specifically discussing liberal democracy. Here, *liberal* does not refer to one side of contemporary American partisan politics. It refers to a much older political tradition involving individual liberty, legal equality, constitutionalism, and restraints on arbitrary political power.

Liberal democracy therefore requires more than voting. Elections matter enormously, but elections alone do not guarantee political freedom. Governments can hold elections while intimidating opponents, controlling media, weakening courts, manipulating electoral rules, or making it exceedingly difficult for incumbents to lose. Liberal democracy joins popular political participation to institutional restraints on power. Citizens require meaningful opportunities to choose leaders, but governments must also operate under laws they cannot rewrite whenever those laws become inconvenient. Political opposition must be able to organize, journalists must be able to investigate, courts require independence, and civil liberties need protection.

This makes democracy a continuum rather than an on/off switch. Elections can remain competitive while press freedom declines. Courts can remain formally independent while political leaders gradually capture them. Democratic institutions can exist on paper while losing practical force. That complication became increasingly important after the optimism of the 1990s.

Capitalism Did Not Automatically Produce Liberal Democracy

China provided one of the clearest challenges to simple convergence theories. During the same decades in which globalization accelerated, China became deeply integrated into the world economy. Market reforms transformed production, foreign investment expanded, incomes rose dramatically, Chinese firms became major global competitors, and the country became one of the world’s largest economies. Yet China did not become a liberal democracy. The Chinese Communist Party retained one-party political rule, restricted organized opposition, controlled major political institutions, and developed increasingly sophisticated forms of information management and surveillance.

Russia offered another challenge. Following the Soviet collapse, Russia experienced rapid and frequently chaotic economic and political liberalization. Over time, however, authority became increasingly centralized under Vladimir Putin, independent media and opposition politics faced intensifying pressure, and Russian foreign policy returned to coercive great-power competition. The lesson became difficult to ignore: economic globalization does not automatically produce political convergence. Modernization does not come with democracy automatically activated.

Authoritarianism Got an Upgrade

Twentieth-century images of authoritarianism often involve obvious ruptures: coups, tanks, canceled elections, secret police, and rulers whose portraits appear everywhere. Those forms still exist, but contemporary democracies do not always collapse dramatically. Nancy Bermeo (2016) describes executive aggrandizement, through which political leaders gradually expand executive authority, weaken checks, alter electoral rules, pressure courts, and constrain independent institutions without necessarily abolishing democracy overnight. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) similarly emphasize that democratic erosion can occur through institutions that remain formally legal. Political leaders may claim they are fighting corruption, protecting security, or carrying out the authentic will of the people while steadily weakening constraints on their authority. The building still says democracy on the front but somebody may be quietly removing the support beams.

By the 2010s and 2020s, scholars increasingly described these patterns as democratic backsliding or autocratization. The V-Dem Institute's *Democracy Report 2026* concludes that democracy experienced by the average global citizen has fallen to roughly 1978 levels. At the end of 2025, V-Dem classified 92 countries as autocracies and 87 as democracies and estimated that approximately 74 percent of the world's population lived under autocratic rule (V-Dem Institute, 2026). Freedom House reaches a similarly troubling conclusion through a different methodology. Its *Freedom in the World 2026* report records the twentieth consecutive year of global decline in political rights and civil liberties, with 54 countries deteriorating during 2025 and 35 improving (Freedom House, 2026).

Those findings do not mean democracy disappeared. Competitive elections continue across much of the world, civil society remains powerful, citizens under authoritarian systems continue demanding political rights, and some countries have improved. The more accurate picture is messier: democracy spread remarkably far, the expansion stalled, some systems consolidated, others deteriorated, authoritarian governments proved durable, and ordinary people repeatedly continued demanding participation. History did not choose one lane.

Was Fukuyama Simply Wrong?

It is easy from the vantage point of 2026 to turn the "end of history" into a punchline. Wars continued, authoritarian states survived, nationalism surged, and democratic backsliding spread. That is not the most useful reading. Fukuyama's deeper argument concerned ideological legitimacy. Was another political model capable of making a comparably universal claim about what legitimate government should look like? Authoritarian governments have clearly demonstrated the ability to survive, modernize, innovate, generate growth, and exercise international power. Yet authoritarian governments still generally seek legitimacy. They justify themselves through stability, economic development, national renewal, security, religion, revolutionary history, cultural protection, or claims of superior competence. Very few governments simply tell their populations, "We rule because we are stronger and you have no legitimate political interests." Political legitimacy still matters. Fukuyama therefore remains useful not because history obeyed his prediction but because he posed a question that remains unresolved: What makes a political system legitimate to the people living under it? Liberal democracy provides one answer. Authoritarian systems provide others. The contest did not end. It changed.

Maybe Globalization Never Had a Destination

The larger lesson is that globalization does not necessarily create sameness. Countries can trade extensively while disagreeing over rights. Governments can belong to the same international organizations while maintaining very different political institutions. Digital platforms can support democratic activism, nationalist mobilization, religious movements, conspiracy networks, and authoritarian propaganda simultaneously. Globalization moves ideas. It does not control what people do with them. Political systems encounter global forces through histories of colonialism, nationalism, religion, class, inequality, war, institutions, and memories of foreign intervention. Liberal democracy itself should not be treated as a pristine political product invented in one region and exported to everyone else. Councils, assemblies, confederacies, deliberative institutions, and struggles for accountable government have existed across many societies. At the same time, modern liberal democratic institutions developed alongside empire, slavery, racial exclusion, patriarchy, and restrictions on citizenship. The democratic story has always contained aspiration and contradiction. Globalization did not resolve that contradiction, it globalized the debate. The more interesting question in 2026 is therefore not whether liberal democracy represents history's final destination. It is what kind of political order globalization is producing now. To answer that, we need theory. Unfortunately for the theorists, we are going to make them explain themselves in plain English.

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6.3: Theories

Everybody Has a Theory

Theory sounds like the moment a perfectly interesting subject becomes homework. In reality, theories are organized ways of deciding what matters. They tell us what to notice, which causes to investigate, and which questions we should ask first. Imagine two countries increasing their military presence along a disputed border. One analyst asks which country is militarily stronger and whether either side can trust the other. Another asks whether institutions or diplomacy might reduce the tension. A third investigates how historical narratives transformed a strip of territory into something people might die for. A fourth asks whether colonial borders, trade routes, resources, or economic inequalities sit underneath the conflict. They are observing the same border, but they are not seeing the same world. Theory is not the only choice analysts make. They also choose where to point the camera. Political scientists often describe this as the level of analysis. At the individual level, we might examine the beliefs, personalities, or decisions of particular leaders. At the state level, we might focus on political institutions, regime type, public opinion, economic interests, or national identity. At the international or systemic level, we look outward at alliances, distributions of power, international institutions, and the broader structure within which states operate. The same crisis can therefore look very different depending on whether we begin with a president, a government, or the international system surrounding them. Global Studies often moves among these levels because global problems rarely stay politely inside only one of them. Three of the most influential traditions in International Relations, realism, liberalism, and constructivism, begin with very different assumptions about political behavior. Critical political economy, postcolonial and Global IR, and feminist approaches widen the conversation further by questioning whether conventional theories have focused too narrowly on states, great powers, European history, and formal institutions. None provides the whole answer and that is why we need more than one.

Realism: Assume Nobody Is Coming to Save You

Realism begins with a grim but important observation: there is no government above governments. Within a state, institutions exist to enforce laws. States lack an equivalent supreme authority. The United Nations, international law, alliances, and treaties matter, but no global government possesses unquestioned authority over every state. International Relations scholars call this condition anarchy. It does not mean chaos. It means the absence of supreme political authority above sovereign states. Hans Morgenthau (1948) placed power and national interest at the center of international politics. Kenneth Waltz (1979) later argued that competition arises partly from the structure of an anarchic international system, while John Mearsheimer (2001) contends that great powers have incentives to maximize relative power because no state can ever be completely certain about another state's future intentions. Even within realism, however, scholars disagree about how much power states actually need. Defensive realists, associated especially with Waltz, generally argue that states seek enough power to preserve their security and survival; accumulating too much power can provoke balancing coalitions and make a state less secure rather than more. Offensive realists, most prominently associated with Mearsheimer, are more pessimistic. Because states can never know one another's future intentions with certainty, great powers have incentives to maximize their relative power when opportunities arise and, if possible, prevent rivals from becoming dominant. The disagreement is subtle but important: one version of realism asks how states can become secure, while the other asks why genuine security may remain impossible as long as other great powers exist. Governments can observe capabilities. They cannot observe the future. A military described as defensive today may be controlled by another government tomorrow. Political leaders therefore worry not only about what other states intend to do but what they could do. Robert Jervis (1978) shows how this produces the security dilemma. One government increases defensive capabilities because it feels insecure. Its neighbor sees the buildup and becomes frightened, so it arms itself. The first government interprets the response as proof that its fears were justified. Neither side has to begin by wanting war. Fear can do much of the work. Realism remains relevant in the 2020s because territorial conflict, nuclear deterrence, strategic competition, alliances, military spending, and disputes over places such as Taiwan remain significant. Yet contemporary power also includes semiconductors, cyber capabilities, sanctions networks, energy systems, data, and supply-chain chokepoints. A state can be militarily powerful and still discover that somebody else controls a technology it needs. Realism explains a great deal. Its difficulty is that governments also cooperate constantly.

Liberalism: Maybe We Can Build Some Rules Around Here

Governments trade, share scientific information, coordinate aviation, regulate telecommunications, negotiate environmental agreements, and participate in thousands of international arrangements that rarely become headlines because they generally

work. Liberal theories ask why cooperation occurs despite anarchy. Robert Keohane (1984) argues that institutions can reduce uncertainty, provide information, monitor commitments, establish expectations, and lower the cost of repeated cooperation. Institutions do not make governments nice. They can make keeping an agreement more useful than breaking it. Keohane and Nye's concept of complex interdependence further emphasizes that governments are connected through finance, trade, migration, communication, energy, technology, environmental systems, and institutions (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Military force remains important but is not useful for every problem. A fighter jet is impressive but it remains remarkably bad at negotiating a climate agreement.

Contemporary globalization has also revealed a darker side of interdependence. Economic connections can become sources of coercive leverage when states control important financial, technological, informational, or supply-chain networks (Farrell & Newman, 2019). The same networks that facilitate cooperation can create pressure points. Liberalism also opens the state itself. Governments are not single brains. Legislatures, businesses, voters, bureaucracies, courts, interest groups, civil society, and political institutions all influence international behavior. Still, institutions and incentives do not always explain why states want such different things in the first place. For that, we need ideas.

Constructivism: The World Means Things Because We Make It Mean Things

Alexander Wendt titled one of the most influential articles in modern IR "Anarchy Is What States Make of It" (1992). His point was not that anarchy is imaginary. It was that the absence of world government does not automatically determine how states interpret one another. Why can one country possess a large nuclear arsenal and cause relatively little fear in an ally while another country's smaller arsenal generates intense alarm? The missiles alone cannot explain the difference. Relationships, history, identity, and expectations matter. Constructivists argue that international politics is shaped not only by material resources but by identities, norms, ideas, language, and shared meanings (Wendt, 1992, 1999). States do not necessarily enter the international system with interests permanently fixed. Interaction helps construct those interests. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) likewise show how international norms can emerge, spread, and become internalized. Practices once accepted by powerful political actors including formal empire and slavery, became increasingly illegitimate as social movements, institutions, political leaders, and publics challenged them.

Contemporary conflicts over climate responsibility, Indigenous sovereignty, digital privacy, migration, gender, and artificial intelligence are partly conflicts over what forms of behavior the international community should regard as legitimate. This is competition over meaning. What counts as terrorism rather than resistance? Humanitarian intervention rather than imperial interference? Self-determination rather than separatism? Who is called a refugee, migrant, dissident, settler, or freedom fighter? Labels influence political possibilities. Constructivism helps us see why.

Critical Political Economy: The Rules Were Not Written on a Blank Page

Robert Cox (1981) famously distinguished theories attempting to solve problems inside an existing system from critical theory, which asks how the system itself was produced. A world map can make sovereign states look remarkably equal. Every country receives a border and a label. Most receive a seat in the UN General Assembly. Zoom out and equality becomes difficult to find. States vary enormously in wealth, military capability, access to finance, technological infrastructure, institutional influence, and bargaining power. Colonialism, slavery, imperialism, industrialization, resource extraction, debt, and uneven development helped create those inequalities. Political independence and economic independence are therefore not the same thing. A newly independent country can gain a flag and legal sovereignty while inheriting an economy structured around commodity exports, foreign capital, external debt, or trade relationships built under empire. Formal equality can coexist with structural dependence.

Contemporary scholarship pushes this analysis into the emerging multipolar system. Wijaya and Jayasuriya (2024), for example, argue that changes in global order should not be understood only by counting powerful states. Domestic business classes, state-market relationships, industrial strategies, and competing forms of capitalism also shape the new geopolitical economy. A multipolar world is not simply a world with more powerful countries. It may also contain multiple models of capitalism, development, state intervention, technology, and political authority competing at the same time.

Postcolonial and Global IR: Europe Is Not the Beginning of the World

Conventional International Relations often tells its history through Westphalia, European balance-of-power politics, the world wars, the Cold War, NATO, and European integration. Those histories matter enormously but they are not the history of the entire planet. Postcolonial scholars have long challenged the tendency to treat European experience as universal and everyone else as a case study. Amitav Acharya's work on Global International Relations calls for a discipline that takes multiple regions, civilizations,

histories, and forms of political organization seriously rather than simply inserting non-Western examples into theories developed elsewhere (Acharya, 2014, 2023). His 2023 work explicitly examines forms of world order predating European global dominance and argues that the history of international relations should recognize Near Eastern, Indian, Chinese, Islamic, Indian Ocean, and other political orders rather than beginning automatically with the European sovereign-state system. This changes the question. Instead of asking only how the European state system spread around the world, we can ask what other political orders existed before, alongside, and beyond it. Empires, tributary systems, trading networks, religious communities, Indigenous confederacies, maritime networks, city-states, and diasporas have all organized political life across territories. The sovereign state is enormously important, yet is not humanity's only political invention.

Feminist Perspectives: Security for Whom?

Feminist scholars ask another question conventional International Relations historically neglected: when governments say they are protecting national security, whose security are they protecting? Cynthia Enloe and other feminist scholars show how international politics depends upon forms of gendered labor and power that can disappear when analysis focuses only on presidents, diplomats, and armies (Enloe, 2014). Wars are fought by soldiers, but they are sustained and experienced by caregivers, refugees, factory workers, military spouses, nurses, domestic workers, displaced families, and communities whose work rarely appears on strategic maps. Sanctions target states but affect households. Military bases transform local economies. Conflict can intensify sexual violence. Cuts to services can transfer burdens onto unpaid care work. A state can be secure while many people living inside it are not. That insight will matter when we turn to human security.

Theory Is a Flashlight, Not the Sun

Theories are not museum exhibits. Scholars continue revising them as politics changes. Contemporary work places realism, liberalism, constructivism, poststructuralism, and critical theory into conversation with the actual choices of political actors rather than treating them as sealed philosophical camps (Gaskarth, 2024). Take Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. A realist may focus on military power, alliances, deterrence, territory, and strategic rivalry. A liberal may emphasize international law, institutions, sanctions, economic interdependence, and alliance coordination. A constructivist may examine Russian and Ukrainian national identities, historical narratives, and competing interpretations of sovereignty. A critical political-economy approach might examine energy networks, finance, sanctions, defense industries, and unequal capacities to absorb economic costs. A postcolonial perspective might investigate global hierarchies and historical interpretations of great-power politics. A feminist perspective might move the analytical camera toward displacement, caregiving, sexual violence, household insecurity, and the gendered consequences of war.

Even in the same conflict, different evidence becomes visible. Theories illuminate different parts of reality and hide others. Realism is useful when security and strategic competition dominate. Liberalism clarifies institutions and cooperation. Constructivism reveals identity and legitimacy. Critical political economy exposes structural inequalities. Global IR challenges whose histories become theory. Feminist scholarship reveals forms of insecurity that disappear when the state becomes the only actor that counts. If one theoretical lens explains absolutely everything you encounter, there is a decent chance you have stopped testing the theory and started using it as a personality. Global Studies asks us to move among lenses. Doing so makes the concept waiting in the next section increasingly complicated. States want control. Global problems demand cooperation. People want belonging. Markets cross borders. Institutions require compromise. Sovereignty, as it turns out, is having a complicated century.

Table 6.3.1: Theoretical lenses

Lens	The Question It Asks
Realism	Who has power, and who can threaten whom?
Liberalism	When and why can states cooperate?
Constructivism	How do ideas, identities, and norms shape politics?
Critical Political Economy	Who benefits from the structure of the global system?
Global IR / Postcolonial	Whose history and political experience gets treated as "theory"?
Feminist Perspectives	Whose security and labor disappear when we only look at states?

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6.4: Sovereignty Is Having a Complicated Century

Its Complicated

We have never been more connected. We have also become remarkably obsessed with borders. Goods cross them. Money crosses them. Data, pollution, music, technologies, diseases, investment, political ideas, and conspiracy theories cross them. People cross them too. Yet borders remain politically powerful because they determine something many other global flows do not: who belongs, who decides, and who has the right to say no. Globalization creates incentives to open borders selectively while governments attempt to control them politically. States want investment but may fear foreign influence. They want tourists but worry about unauthorized migration. They need international cooperation while resenting outside interference. They want global markets while promising voters that national governments remain in control. It sounds contradictory because it is contradictory. That is politics.

Nationalism Is Not Just Really Liking Your Flag

A nation is an imagined political community. Nationalism goes further by connecting collective identity to political claims involving belonging, self-determination, authority, territory, or sovereignty. Nationalism has supported anti-colonial independence and provided stateless communities with a language for recognition and self-government. It can create solidarity among people divided by class, region, religion, or other identities and encourage citizens to imagine obligations toward millions of strangers. It can also become profoundly exclusionary. The political power of nationalism comes partly from its ability to create an enormous imagined we. Every “we” raises another question: who counts? National identities may emphasize citizenship and political institutions or place greater weight on language, religion, ancestry, ethnicity, or historical territory. Scholars sometimes distinguish civic nationalism from ethnic nationalism, but real national identities rarely fit perfectly into either category. Nationalism is better understood as an ongoing argument over the boundaries of political community. Who are “the people”? Who is included? Who must prove they belong? Who decides? Globalization can intensify these questions because migration, cultural exchange, economic restructuring, technological change, and political ideas arriving from elsewhere can make communities feel that the world is changing faster than their ability to influence it. Nationalism offers an emotionally powerful response: this is our place, these are our people, and we should decide what happens here. It is not difficult to understand why that argument travels.

Globalization Was Never Going to Erase Belonging

Globalization also creates identities extending beyond borders. People live outside the countries where they were born, study internationally, participate in diasporas, work in multinational organizations, consume global culture, and build digital relationships that ignore geography. This gives political relevance to cosmopolitanism, the idea that human beings possess moral worth beyond the borders of the states into which they happen to be born. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) describes a cosmopolitan ethic that combines concern for humanity with respect for meaningful cultural difference. Cosmopolitanism does not necessarily require people to abandon national attachments. Humans can carry several identities simultaneously, but there is a catch.

The ability to experience the world as borderless is distributed very unevenly. A wealthy professional carrying a powerful passport may experience globalization through airport lounges, international conferences, universities, remote work, and frictionless payment systems. A refugee arriving at the same border may experience detention, bureaucracy, surveillance, and rejection. Both live in a globalized world but they definitly don't live in the same version of it. Cosmopolitanism therefore becomes politically vulnerable when it celebrates mobility without asking who actually gets to move.

The Border Never Left

For all the talk of borderless globalization, states remained intensely concerned about borders. Globalization often makes borders selective rather than irrelevant. A container of electronics may pass through systems designed to move goods efficiently across several countries. The person who assembled those electronics may confront a completely different border regime. Capital can sometimes move in milliseconds. Workers generally need documents. Borders are therefore political sorting systems. They distinguish citizen from noncitizen, authorized from unauthorized, domestic from foreign, tourist from worker, asylum seeker from ordinary traveler, and permitted goods from prohibited ones. A passport can determine whether somebody crosses a border with an electronic scan or spends years trying to receive permission. Citizenship influences voting rights, employment, education,

welfare, diplomatic protection, and the legal right to remain. The border may be where sovereignty appears strongest and at the same time it is also where its limits become visible. International refugee law places obligations on governments. Regional agreements may permit freedom of movement. Trade agreements constrain tariffs. Human-rights law establishes obligations toward people within state jurisdiction. Borders remain sovereign spaces embedded in international rules.

Enter Populism

The politics of sovereignty becomes more combustible when nationalism overlaps with populism. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) describe populism as a worldview dividing society between a supposedly authentic people and a corrupt elite, with politics expected to express the general will of those people. Jan-Werner Müller (2016) emphasizes the potentially anti-pluralist aspect of populism. Populist leaders may claim not merely to represent some voters better than competitors but to uniquely represent the real people. If I alone represent the real people, what does that make everyone who disagrees with me? Rogers Brubaker (2020) argues that nationalism and populism overlap without being identical. Populism tends to construct a vertical divide between people and elites, while nationalism constructs boundaries around political community. When combined, they can produce a powerful story in which authentic citizens are being betrayed by elites supposedly more loyal to outsiders, migrants, global institutions, corporations, or foreign interests than to "us." The villains change from country to country. The political structure travels remarkably well.

Why Globalization Became Such an Easy Target

Return to the economic chapters. Imagine a community once dependent on manufacturing. A factory closes, employment declines, younger people leave, and public services weaken. Political leaders explain that globalization creates efficiency and national economic gains. The statistics may even be correct. They may feel irrelevant if your community absorbed the loss. Now imagine somebody arrives and says: they promised globalization would help everyone, but it helped them. We are taking control back. That is powerful language because it converts complex economic transformations into a story of identity and responsibility. Christian Joppke (2021) examines forms of neoliberal nationalism in which nationalist politics can coexist with market-oriented economics while demanding greater control over immigration, citizenship, borders, and cultural belonging. This complicates any simple left-right story about globalization. Earlier anti-globalization movements often attacked multinational corporations, free trade, debt, and neoliberal institutions from the political left. Contemporary nationalist movements may criticize international integration from the right while remaining supportive of markets and private enterprise. The political dispute is not merely globalization versus no globalization. It is increasingly about which forms of globalization should remain open, who should benefit, and who gets to control the terms.

"Take Back Control" Is More Complicated Than It Sounds

Promises to restore sovereignty carry obvious emotional force. Our borders, our laws, our decisions. Yet 6.1 gave us a problem: where exactly is "home" for a global supply chain? A government seeking greater economic independence may want domestic manufacturing, secure energy, nationally controlled data, reliable medicines, and reduced dependence on foreign technology. Those goals can be reasonable. They can also be expensive. Domestic production may cost more, trading partners may retaliate, strategic minerals may not exist domestically, and technology may depend on intellectual property located elsewhere. Formal authority does not eliminate material dependence.

Regional integration presents the same dilemma. European Union members voluntarily pool authority because cooperation creates benefits that individual governments may struggle to achieve alone. But shared sovereignty necessarily limits some unilateral national decisions. The United Kingdom's Brexit debate made this tension visible through the language of "taking back control." Leaving the European Union was unquestionably an exercise of sovereign political choice. It did not move Britain farther away from Europe geographically. Trade still needed rules, borders required management, firms operated across markets, and new agreements had to be negotiated. Independence and interdependence can exist simultaneously.

Sovereignty for Whom?

Not every nation possesses a state. Kurdish populations, for example, live principally across parts of Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, and Kurdish political movements have pursued different forms of autonomy, self-government, recognition, and independence. The case reveals the difficulty of self-determination. The principle sounds straightforward: peoples should be able to determine their own political future. Then comes the hard question: which people? If every nation deserves its own state, what happens when national communities overlap geographically? Where should borders go? What happens to minorities who end up on the

other side? Decolonization made these dilemmas especially visible. Independence movements legitimately challenged imperial rule, but many new states inherited borders shaped partly by colonial institutions rather than clean correspondence with ethnic, linguistic, or religious communities. Changing borders could create conflict. Keeping them could preserve earlier divisions. There was no universally painless solution.

Nationalism Is Not Automatically the Villain

It would be historically sloppy to treat nationalism simply as the bad guy. Nationalism has supported xenophobia, ethnic cleansing, authoritarianism, and territorial expansion. It has also powered resistance to occupation, anti-colonial liberation, national self-determination, and movements for minority recognition. The useful question is not merely whether nationalism exists but what kind of nation is being imagined, who belongs to it, and what political consequences follow. Context, power, and history matters.

Cosmopolitanism Has Problems Too

Cosmopolitanism sounds ethically attractive: human rights should not stop at borders and moral concern should extend beyond fellow citizens. But democratic politics raises an uncomfortable practical question: how much do governments owe people outside their own political community? Should states prioritize citizens when distributing scarce resources? How much responsibility do wealthy countries bear for climate harms affecting poorer societies? What obligations exist toward refugees? If workers lose jobs when production moves to a poorer country, whose interests should governments prioritize? Cosmopolitan ethics asks us to recognize humanity beyond borders. Democratic accountability still largely operates inside them. That gap is difficult.

The emerging political reality is probably not a choice between nation and world society. National identities remain powerful while transnational identities and relationships continue growing. People can celebrate national holidays while working for multinational companies, maintain family ties across borders while supporting stronger immigration controls, and criticize international organizations while expecting international cooperation during pandemics or wars. Human identity tolerates contradiction more comfortably than political theory sometimes does. The danger appears when leaders insist that only one identity can be legitimate. That is when belonging becomes a border of its own.

Sovereignty Is Becoming Selective

Perhaps the defining transformation is therefore not the disappearance or triumphant return of sovereignty but increasingly selective sovereignty. Governments favor cooperation when it expands influence or solves collective problems and resist it when rules constrain domestic priorities. They welcome some flows of capital, tourists, skilled workers, technology, and information while restricting others. This makes sovereignty a continuing negotiation between authority and dependence, openness and closure, belonging and exclusion, cooperation and control. Globalization did not abolish sovereignty, it made sovereignty more difficult to perform. Eventually, disagreements over authority, territory, resources, borders, and survival move beyond political rhetoric. That is when cooperation breaks.

A simple summary

If you need a visual for everything that was just discussed, here is nifty summary!

FORMAL SOVEREIGNTY
State → territory → law → citizenship → borders

↓ operates within

INTERDEPENDENCE
Markets • international institutions • corporations • migration • digital platforms • climate • security relationships

↓

SOVEREIGNTY IN PRACTICE
Authority + constraint + bargaining + unequal dependence

Rules Without a World Government

Here is one of the stranger features of global politics: there is no world government, yet the international system is full of rules.

Aircraft cross national airspace according to international agreements. Ships move through oceans governed partly by the law of the sea. Governments sign treaties governing trade, weapons, refugees, diplomatic relations, human rights, telecommunications, environmental protection, and countless other areas. International law has gradually expanded alongside globalization because increasing interdependence creates more situations in which what happens inside one country affects people somewhere else.

Unlike domestic law, however, international law operates in a political system without a single global legislature, police force, or supreme enforcement authority. Much of it is created through treaties, agreements states voluntarily accept, and customary international law, rules that emerge from sufficiently widespread and accepted state practice. International organizations also help develop, interpret, monitor, and sometimes enforce international rules.

Consider two courts that are frequently confused. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) settles legal disputes between states and provides advisory opinions on questions of international law. The International Criminal Court (ICC), by contrast, was created to prosecute individuals accused of particularly serious international crimes, including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. Their existence reflects an extraordinary development in world politics: under some circumstances, conduct once treated primarily as an internal matter of sovereign states can become a subject of international legal concern.

Yet international law immediately runs into the problem we have been examining throughout this chapter.

Power.

States remain central to creating and enforcing international rules, and powerful governments do not always accept the jurisdiction of international courts or comply equally with international institutions. Some countries have joined the ICC while others, including several major powers, have not. International legal rules may therefore be widely recognized while their enforcement remains inconsistent.

That does not necessarily make international law meaningless. Most international rules are not enforced by dramatic courtroom confrontations. They work because governments benefit from predictable expectations, because violations can carry diplomatic or economic costs, because institutions create repeated opportunities for cooperation, and because governments often want other states to follow the same rules they themselves rely upon.

International law therefore sits directly inside globalization's sovereignty puzzle. States created many of these rules because governing an interconnected world requires cooperation, yet those same rules can constrain what states are free to do.

The central question is no longer whether sovereignty or international law wins.

It is how much authority states are willing to share, under what conditions, and whether international rules can remain legitimate when the power to make and enforce them is distributed so unequally.

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6.5: When Cooperation Breaks

Can't we just work it out?

Not every international disagreement becomes violent. Most do not. Governments negotiate, threaten, sanction, compromise, hold summits, recall ambassadors, impose tariffs, and occasionally argue for hours over the exact wording of documents nobody outside the meeting will ever read. That's good news. The international system survives partly because governments have developed many ways to disagree without shooting at each other. Sometimes cooperation fails anyway. A government decides negotiations have failed. Territory becomes contested. An alliance commitment is triggered. A cyberattack disrupts infrastructure. A civil war pulls neighboring countries into the crisis. A conflict that begins locally changes food prices, energy supplies, migration, shipping, financial markets, or diplomacy far away. Suddenly the word security becomes much harder to define. Security from what? Security for whom?

Security Used to Have a Fairly Obvious Main Character

Traditional security studies centered the state. Security meant protecting territory, political independence, and governmental survival from external military threats. This makes historical sense. Imperial competition, great-power warfare, two world wars, nuclear weapons, and the Cold War made national survival difficult to treat casually. Realism therefore places security at the center of international politics. Governments maintain militaries, form alliances, monitor rivals, and attempt deterrence because no higher authority can guarantee their safety. Yet the security dilemma means that defensive preparations can make other governments feel less secure (Jervis, 1978). Military exercises may appear aggressive. Alliances intended to reassure members may frighten outsiders. One state arms because the other is arming, while the other is arming because the first is arming. Try telling either side to stop first. This is why deterrence became central to security politics. Rather than removing an adversary's ability to attack, deterrence attempts to convince the adversary that attacking would produce unacceptable costs. The message is simple: you could attack, but you would regret it.

Nuclear Weapons: The Most Terrifying Peace Strategy Ever Invented

Nuclear deterrence is built around an extraordinary contradiction: the weapons are supposed to prevent catastrophic war because using them would be catastrophic. During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union built arsenals capable of devastating each other repeatedly. Mutually assured destruction described a situation in which neither could launch a nuclear first strike without facing devastating retaliation. If both governments understood nuclear war could produce no meaningful victory, neither should rationally begin one. That logic helped structure Cold War deterrence. It also required enormous confidence in human judgment, accurate information, reliable technology, disciplined command systems, and nobody making a catastrophic mistake. Nuclear weapons did not disappear after the Cold War. SIPRI's 2026 reporting describes continued modernization of military capabilities amid a broader climate of geopolitical insecurity, while world military spending reached approximately $2.887 trillion in 2025 after an eleventh consecutive annual increase (Liang et al., 2026).

The strategic environment has also become technologically more complicated. Cyber operations can affect command systems. Artificial intelligence increasingly supports surveillance and decision-making. Faster weapons can shorten reaction times. Deterrence is one of international politics' strangest successes. When it works, nothing happens. When it fails badly enough, everybody notices.

The Threat Stopped Wearing a Uniform

Cold War security thinking was dominated by states, armies, alliances, nuclear deterrence, and the possibility of major-power confrontation. That framework never explained every conflict, but it strongly shaped how governments imagined international threats. The attacks of September 11, 2001 dramatically exposed the limits of that model. Al-Qaeda was not a sovereign state, did not control a conventional national military, and did not need to invade U.S. territory in the traditional sense to produce enormous political and security consequences. The subsequent "war on terror," conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the rise of ISIS, and the spread of transnational militant networks forced governments to confront threats that moved through financial systems, communication networks, fragile states, ideological communities, and cross-border recruitment rather than conventional armies alone.

This did not make state security obsolete. It expanded the security landscape. Governments increasingly had to think simultaneously about territorial defense, terrorism, intelligence, border control, financial networks, cybersecurity, public health, and threats generated by nonstate actors. The shift also intensified debates about surveillance, detention, emergency powers, civilian casualties, and the danger of treating entire populations or political movements as security threats. Security was becoming broader at exactly the moment the political consequences of calling something a "security issue" were becoming more powerful.

Then Security Got Personal

Traditional state-centered security increasingly faced criticism because a country can remain territorially intact while people inside it experience profound insecurity. A person dying from famine may not feel secure. Neither may somebody fleeing domestic violence, political persecution, environmental disaster, gang violence, or a collapsing health system. The United Nations Development Programme's *Human Development Report 1994* helped popularize human security, which expands the concept beyond military threats to include chronic dangers such as hunger, disease, repression, economic insecurity, and sudden disruptions to everyday life (UNDP, 1994). Instead of asking only whether the state is safe, human security asks whether people are safe. The categories overlap but are not identical. A drought can reduce agricultural production, raising food prices and deepening household insecurity. Economic hardship can accelerate migration and intensify political grievances. Conflict can disrupt food systems further. Where did the security problem begin? Climate? Food? Economics? Politics? The more useful answer may be that systems make such boundaries artificial.

A Country Can Be Secure While Its People Are Not

Human security also reveals that institutions claiming to provide security can themselves generate insecurity. Governments maintain police, militaries, intelligence services, surveillance systems, and border institutions partly to protect populations. Those institutions can also be used repressively. The challenge is not solved by pretending threats are imaginary. Governments genuinely face terrorism, organized crime, cyberattacks, espionage, foreign interference, and political violence. The harder question is how much coercive power governments should possess, under which legal restrictions, for how long, and with what oversight. This brings us to securitization. Scholars associated with the Copenhagen School describe securitization as the process through which political actors frame an issue as an existential security threat that may justify extraordinary action (Buzan et al., 1998). Migration can be securitized. Disease can be securitized. Climate, technology, and information can be securitized. By now, almost every major policy area seems capable of being described in the language of security. That expansion reflects genuine interdependence, but it also creates a danger: when too many issues are treated as existential threats, emergency politics can begin replacing ordinary democratic debate. Emergency politics often privileges secrecy, executive authority, urgency, surveillance, and coercion. Those tools can sometimes be necessary, but they can also make accountability inconvenient. Calling something a security problem is therefore never merely descriptive, it can change what governments believe they are permitted to do.

Collective Security: What If Everybody Agrees Not to Do This?

Collective security begins from a different logic. Rather than every state relying entirely on itself, governments agree that aggression against one creates concerns for a wider community. The League of Nations represented an early attempt following World War I. Its inability to prevent another world war was spectacular. The United Nations was created after World War II with stronger institutions, including a Security Council responsible for international peace and security. The UN system has since supported peacekeeping, mediation, humanitarian coordination, sanctions, arms control, and diplomatic efforts across many conflicts. Yet a political contradiction remains. The UN is an organization of sovereign states, and five permanent members of the Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) possess veto power. That structure reflected the balance of power in 1945 and the belief that a global security institution unable to retain major powers would probably fail like the League of Nations. The logic is understandable. The representation problem eighty years later is also obvious. The institution designed to manage great-power conflict depends heavily on cooperation among great powers. You may notice the difficulty.

Interdependence Has a Dark Side

Globalization was often expected to reduce conflict by making war economically expensive. Interdependence does create costs. It can also create weapons. Farrell and Newman (2019) use weaponized interdependence to describe how states occupying central positions in global financial and informational networks can use those networks coercively. Governments can restrict access to currencies, markets, technologies, payment systems, energy, data, or strategic goods without firing a missile. A supply chain is efficient until somebody controls the chokepoint. A payment system is convenient until access disappears. An imported

energy source is useful until somebody closes the valve. Economic policy therefore increasingly overlaps with security policy. Governments now speak of strategic autonomy, de-risking, economic security, industrial resilience, and trusted supply chains. Economics and geopolitics are sitting at the same table.They probably always were, but maybe we didn't call them out explicitly.

Your Border Has Wi-Fi

Cyber conflict complicates security because malicious actors can target hospitals, electrical grids, government databases, financial systems, communications, or elections without crossing a physical border. Attribution can be difficult. Attackers may be governments, criminal organizations, political networks, proxies, or actors whose relationship with states remains deliberately ambiguous. If tanks cross a border, identifying the attacker is usually straightforward. If malicious code appears inside a server, the answer may be less obvious. Cyber operations therefore complicate deterrence. What counts as an armed attack? How certain should a government be before retaliating? Should a cyberattack receive a cyber, economic, diplomatic, or military response? Information warfare adds another layer. Governments and political organizations can manipulate online conversations, spread disinformation, hack and leak documents, deploy automated accounts, or amplify political divisions. The objective may not be convincing everyone to believe one story. Sometimes creating uncertainty about whether anything can be trusted is strategically useful.

AI Has Entered the Chat

Artificial intelligence adds further uncertainty. AI increasingly affects military intelligence, surveillance, logistics, target recognition, cyber operations, autonomous systems, and decision support. The International Committee of the Red Cross (2024) has emphasized that military AI raises concerns well beyond the narrow category of fully autonomous weapons because algorithmic systems increasingly influence decisions surrounding the use of force. Suppose an AI-supported system recommends a target after processing enormous amounts of data. A human officer approves it. The recommendation is wrong. Who made the decision? This is not simply a technical puzzle. It is an accountability problem. AI may allow faster processing and more precise operations. It may also accelerate decisions in situations where slowing down is exactly what prevents escalation. Speed is useful until everybody is making potentially catastrophic decisions faster.

Climate Change Is Not Invading Anyone, but It Is a Security Problem

Climate change presents another kind of threat because there is no hostile army to defeat. Yet changing climate conditions can undermine food systems, water access, infrastructure, public health, livelihoods, and mobility. Where poverty, exclusion, weak institutions, or armed conflict already exist, environmental stress can intensify vulnerability. This relationship requires care. Climate change does not mechanically “cause wars.” Drought does not automatically produce terrorism. Institutions, inequality, land rights, state capacity, economic opportunities, grievances, and existing conflicts shape whether environmental stress becomes politically destabilizing. A human-security approach changes the camera angle. Instead of asking only whether climate change destabilizes states, it asks what happens to people already experiencing instability. The most drastic recent example would be be the August 2026 glacial collapse which wiped out the border towns in both Nepal and Tibet. The flood didn't stop at a border and it certainly didn't choose which countries to 'invade' causing the people of Nepal who generate .01 percent of carbon emissions to bear the brunt of a tragedy caused by industrialized nations.

So What Makes Us Safer?

There is no single answer. Military capability can deter aggression and provoke arms races. Alliances can protect states and deepen security dilemmas. Interdependence can discourage conflict and create coercive vulnerabilities. Digital technology can improve crisis response and enable surveillance. AI can improve analysis and obscure accountability. Borders can protect political communities and trap vulnerable people outside them. International institutions can enable cooperation and reproduce inequalities of power. Security is not a final condition governments eventually achieve. It is an ongoing negotiation over risk. The important questions are therefore political: who defines the threat, who selects the response, who pays for it, who becomes safer, and who may become less safe as a consequence? The world has built more institutions for cooperation than at almost any previous moment. States are simultaneously spending extraordinary amounts preparing for the possibility that cooperation will fail. That brings us to the next problem. What kind of world order are we actually building?

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6.6: The World Order is Under Construction

Politics

The previous section left us with a strange political system. Governments cooperate because they need to, prepare for cooperation to fail, build institutions to manage conflict, and then discover that many of those institutions reflect political bargains made decades ago. Underneath all of this is a larger question: Who actually gets to shape world order? For much of the post-Cold War era, the easiest answer appeared to be the United States, its allies, and institutions constructed largely under Western leadership after World War II. That answer is no longer sufficient. The international system of 2026 is neither neatly unipolar nor cleanly bipolar. Military power, financial power, demographic scale, technological capacity, energy, supply chains, regulatory influence, and diplomatic authority are distributed unevenly, and not always among the same actors. The world looks less like one chessboard than several games occurring on the same table. Some players disagree about the rules.

The Order We Inherited Was Built After Catastrophe

The contemporary international system did not emerge from a neutral planning exercise. It emerged from war. After World War II, enormous portions of Europe and Asia were devastated. Fascist regimes had collapsed, European colonial empires still ruled much of the world, the United States emerged with extraordinary economic and military power, and the Soviet Union became the second central pole of the coming Cold War. Institutions created around this moment reflected those conditions. The United Nations was established in 1945. The IMF and World Bank grew from the Bretton Woods system. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade eventually developed into the World Trade Organization. NATO emerged in 1949 as a collective defense alliance. These institutions became key parts of what scholars often call the liberal international order.

The phrase can be misleading. The postwar system was never perfectly liberal, universal, or equal. Western governments supported democracy in some settings and authoritarian regimes in others. Colonialism continued after 1945. The Cold War generated proxy wars, interventions, coups, and tremendous violence across the Global South. Yet the order also embedded important norms and institutions involving sovereignty, multilateral diplomacy, constraints on territorial conquest, expanding trade, human rights, and international cooperation. G. John Ikenberry (2011) argues that one reason this system became durable was that American power was partly embedded within institutions. Rather than relying exclusively on coercion, the United States helped construct an order providing other states with access to markets, institutions, alliances, and predictable rules. The system did not eliminate hierarchy. It institutionalized a particular version of it. Then global power began shifting.

The Unipolar Moment Did Not Last Forever

The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 left the United States in an extraordinarily dominant position. Charles Krauthammer (1990/1991) famously called this the unipolar moment. For a time, identifying a peer competitor was difficult. The United States combined extraordinary military capacity with the world's largest economy, powerful alliances, international institutional influence, technological leadership, and cultural reach. This was the world in which arguments about liberal convergence appeared plausible. But a moment is not a permanent condition. China's economic transformation changed global balances. India's scale and economic growth increased its influence. Russia reasserted military power. Regional powers gained confidence. The European Union developed substantial regulatory and economic authority despite not becoming a traditional sovereign superstate. The United States did not stop being powerful. Power became more distributed. Those claims are not the same.

China Changed the Conversation

No country has altered twenty-first-century debates about world order more dramatically than China. Beginning with market reforms in the late 1970s, China experienced extraordinary economic growth, became central to global manufacturing and trade, expanded technological capacity, invested internationally, and increased its diplomatic and military reach. China's rise challenges simple accounts of political change because it benefited enormously from the existing international system. China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, attracted foreign investment, expanded exports, and participated in global institutions. China did not rise outside globalizatio, it rose through it. Chinese leaders have nevertheless criticized aspects of an order they regard as disproportionately shaped by Western preferences. Beijing has supported institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, promoted the Belt and Road Initiative, expanded diplomatic relations across the Global South, and emphasized sovereignty

and noninterference. This does not mean China simply wants to destroy every existing institution. It often seeks greater influence within existing structures while constructing alternatives or parallel arrangements in other areas. The useful question is therefore not whether China is “for” or “against” the existing order. It is which parts China wants to preserve, revise, bypass, or reshape.

The United States Is Still Extremely Powerful and More Constrained

Predictions of American decline appear often enough to constitute their own intellectual genre. Many have been premature. The United States retains enormous structural advantages. It possesses a global alliance network, major military capabilities, centrality in international finance, influential technology companies and universities, considerable soft power, and institutional influence. The U.S. dollar remains deeply important in global finance, which helps translate financial centrality into political leverage. Farrell and Newman’s (2019) concept of weaponized interdependence helps explain why states controlling central nodes in economic networks can wield coercive power without controlling every sector directly. But structural advantage is not total control. The United States cannot simply dictate Chinese policy, determine every country’s position on Russia or the Middle East, or force all allies to prioritize Washington’s interests equally. Governments today often possess more potential partners for trade, investment, infrastructure, and diplomacy than they did during the early post-Cold War era. American influence remains enormous but the ability to assume compliance has declined.

Power Is Multidimensional

Russia demonstrates why GDP alone cannot measure power. Its economy is smaller than those of several other major actors, yet Russia possesses a massive nuclear arsenal, substantial military capabilities, enormous natural resources, a permanent UN Security Council veto, strategic geography, and the willingness to use coercive force. The European Union demonstrates something different. It is not a sovereign state, yet its enormous market allows it to exercise significant regulatory influence. Anu Bradford (2020) calls this the **Brussels Effect**: global corporations may adopt EU standards beyond Europe because maintaining one high-standard system can be easier than creating entirely separate systems for different markets. Nobody invaded anyone. The rules traveled because access to the market mattered. India adds another model. With enormous demographic scale, a major economy, nuclear weapons, growing technological capacity, and increasing diplomatic reach, India has become central to world-order debates while resisting a simple bloc alignment. It participates in the Quad with the United States, Japan, and Australia, belongs to BRICS, maintains longstanding ties with Russia, competes with China, and presents itself as a major voice of the Global South. From a binary geopolitical perspective, this can look inconsistent. From India’s perspective, it can look like foreign policy.

The Global South Is Not One Actor

The phrase Global South can identify shared historical experiences involving colonialism, unequal development, limited representation, debt, and frustration with international institutions. It can also become analytically lazy if used as though dozens of very different societies share one foreign policy. India and Pakistan do not have identical interests. Saudi Arabia and Iran do not. Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, Türkiye, Mexico, Nigeria, Vietnam, and the United Arab Emirates occupy different geopolitical and economic positions. Contemporary world politics increasingly demonstrates agency among states that do not want to become extensions of one great-power camp. Strategic flexibility, hedging, and multi-alignment may allow governments to cooperate with different partners on different issues. Choosing neither side exclusively does not necessarily mean sitting on the fence. Sometimes the state is building the fence where it wants it.

BRICS+ Is Important. It Is Not the Avengers.

BRICS originally brought together Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa and has since expanded. The grouping matters because its members represent significant populations, resources, economic activity, and political influence and because its growth reflects dissatisfaction with the distribution of authority in existing global institutions. But BRICS+ is not one coherent anti-Western alliance. Its members have different political systems, security relationships, economic structures, and geopolitical priorities. China and India have an unresolved border dispute. Some members maintain deep economic or security ties with the United States and Europe. Its importance lies partly in what its existence tells us: influential governments increasingly believe the current distribution of authority is insufficient and see value in alternative forums. It may not be the new center of the world. It may be evidence that there is no longer one center.



Figure 6.6.1: Meeting of the BRICS+ Outreach group . (CC BY; via Wikimedia Commons)

Multipolarity Sounds Cleaner Than It Is

A multipolar system distributes significant power among several major actors instead of concentrating it in one hegemon or two rival blocs. The label sounds appropriate. The United States remains extremely powerful, China has become a major competitor, India's influence is rising, Russia retains strategic power, and the EU possesses enormous economic and regulatory reach. Other states exercise significant regional or issue-specific influence. The problem is that power is not distributed uniformly. An actor may be influential in finance but not security, regulation but not military power, energy but not technology, manufacturing but not currency. This is why contemporary scholars increasingly use terms such as multiplex, polycentric, fragmented, contested, or post-hegemonic. Acharya (2018, 2023) uses the idea of a multiplex world to emphasize multiple actors, institutions, and political scripts existing simultaneously rather than one hegemon simply replacing another. Wijaya and Jayasuriya (2024) complicate the picture further by arguing that the emerging order also reflects changes within states, including new business classes, industrial strategies, and relationships between markets and political authority. The audience is not watching one film. Neither is the world.

Middle Powers Have Discovered the Middle Can Be Useful

A more fragmented order creates opportunities for middle powers that may lack the ability to dominate globally but exercise significant influence through diplomacy, regional leadership, specialized resources, investment, or coalition-building. States such as Brazil, Indonesia, Türkiye, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates can cooperate with different major powers on different issues rather than permanently joining one bloc. This is sometimes called hedging, strategic autonomy, or multi-alignment. The behavior may look indecisive from a great-power perspective. It may actually preserve bargaining power. If two powerful states both want your cooperation, giving neither a permanent monopoly on it can be rational.

The Institutions Have a Representation Problem

As global power changes, international institutions increasingly reveal political arrangements inherited from earlier eras. The UN Security Council's permanent veto-holding members remain China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. There is no permanent African or Latin American member. India is not permanent. Japan and Germany are not permanent. The system reflects 1945 more clearly than 2026.

Reform is difficult because institutional legitimacy and institutional effectiveness do not automatically point in the same direction. Equal votes may frustrate governments contributing large resources. Weighting authority by wealth privileges wealthy countries. Weighting by population produces another hierarchy. Regional representation raises the question of who speaks for a region. Global governance repeatedly encounters the same problem: How do institutions become both effective and legitimate when power is unequal? Nobody has solved this. If they had, Chapter 6 would be shorter.

Globalization Is Becoming Suspicious

Growing U.S.-China competition has produced comparisons with the Cold War. Strategic rivalry is intensifying, technology is increasingly politicized, military alliances are strengthening, and governments restrict access to semiconductors, investment, telecommunications, and other strategically sensitive sectors. But the analogy has limits. The United States and China remain much more economically interdependent than the United States and Soviet Union ever were. Supply chains connect rivals. Many governments resist choosing one camp. Climate change requires cooperation among competitors whether they enjoy each other's company or not. Governments increasingly seek to reduce **strategic dependence** without eliminating international connection entirely. They want safer supply chains, not necessarily no supply chains. Trusted technology, not no international technology. Strategic autonomy, not complete isolation. Globalization is not necessarily ending it is becoming suspicious.

Maybe "World Order" Is the Wrong Mental Image

The phrase world order suggests structure, predictability, and perhaps somebody who labeled the folders. Contemporary global politics may look more like overlapping orders: a security order shaped by alliances, a financial order centered heavily on the dollar, a trade order combining WTO rules and regional agreements, a digital order governed by both states and corporations, a climate order organized through multilateral negotiations, and multiple regional systems. The better Global Studies question may therefore be not "Who runs the world?" but who possesses power over which system? Who controls finance? Military alliances? Technology standards? Infrastructure? Culture? Energy? Strategic minerals? Data? Shipping routes? Rules? Who has enough power to ignore those rules? The answer changes depending on the issue. That may be the defining feature of the emerging order: not leaderless, not equal, not perfectly multipolar, but increasingly distributed and contested. The best way to see that system may be to stop staring exclusively at Washington, Beijing, Moscow, or Brussels. Sometimes the so-called periphery provides the better view.

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6.7: Kyrgystan Background and Case

The “Periphery” Is a Terrible Place to Ignore: Kyrgyzstan

If you wanted to understand global politics by looking only at countries that dominate international headlines, you could spend an entire semester bouncing among the United States, China, Russia, and the major states of Western Europe. You would learn a great deal. You would also develop a distorted picture of how the international system actually works.

Most countries are not superpowers. They do not control global reserve currencies, possess enormous militaries, dominate international institutions, or get to redesign the rules whenever those rules become inconvenient. They live inside a political system shaped partly by actors more powerful than themselves, which means they often become very good at something great powers sometimes forget how to do: maneuver.

Kyrgyzstan offers an unusually revealing example. A mountainous country of roughly seven million people in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan sits between China and Kazakhstan, within a region shaped historically by Russia and positioned along routes connecting Europe, Russia, China, South Asia, and the Middle East. It has no ocean coastline, no permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and no plausible route to becoming a military superpower. That is exactly why it is useful. From Kyrgyzstan, almost every major idea in this chapter suddenly becomes visible at once: sovereignty, Russian influence, China’s economic rise, migration, remittances, nationalism, international institutions, infrastructure, political legitimacy, tourism, environmental stress, and the difficult art of maintaining national autonomy when more powerful actors are interested in your neighborhood.

The so-called periphery is an excellent place to watch the system.

Start With the Map, but Do Not Stop There

Central Asia is often introduced geographically as the landlocked region consisting of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The description is accurate and almost completely inadequate. For centuries, this region connected political, commercial, intellectual, and cultural worlds. Trade routes commonly grouped under the label Silk Roads moved goods, religions, technologies, languages, and people across Central Asian territory long before anyone invented the word globalization. Russian imperial expansion and Soviet rule later transformed the political landscape. Soviet institutions reshaped economic systems, education, infrastructure, language, agriculture, and settlement while embedding Kyrgyzstan within a political economy centered heavily on Moscow. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Kyrgyzstan gained formal independence and international recognition. The relationships built through history did not dissolve with it. A state can possess formal sovereignty while continuing to operate within structures of dependence created by history, geography, markets, infrastructure, security, and human mobility. Kyrgyzstan became independent. It did not become detached.



Figure 6.7.1: Map of Kyrgystan. (CC BY 3.0; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA] via Wikimedia Commons).

Figure 6.7.1 This is a map of Kyrgystan showing major cities of Bishkek, Talas, Jalal-Abad, Osh, Naryn, and Karakol; as well as the surronding countries of Kazakstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China.



Figure 6.7.2: From left to right, 1) Kyrgystan landscape with Yurt, Oziel Gomez for Unsplash 2) Kyrgystani Woman in market. Irene Strong for Unsplash

Russia Left the Soviet Union. Russia Did Not Leave the Region.

Russia remains important to Kyrgyzstan through security, trade, culture, language, institutions, and migration. Kyrgyzstan belongs to the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union, relationships that can facilitate security cooperation, trade, and labor mobility. Migration reveals how international politics reaches households. Many Kyrgyz citizens work abroad, particularly in Russia, and remittances have long played an important role in the economy. A change in Russian immigration rules, economic conditions, currency values, or political relationships can therefore affect families in Kyrgyzstan directly. This is interdependence in practical form. It is also unequal. Kyrgyzstan matters to Russia, but Russia possesses far greater capacity to absorb disruption in the relationship. Interdependence does not imply equal dependence.

Then China Built a Road

China represents another major force reshaping Central Asia. It shares a border with Kyrgyzstan and has become a significant economic actor through trade, investment, lending, infrastructure, transportation, and the Belt and Road Initiative. For a landlocked country, infrastructure is geopolitical. Roads determine accessible markets. Railways redirect commerce. Border crossings transform regions into corridors. Energy and digital networks create new dependencies. A liberal analysis may emphasize investment and market access. A realist sees strategic influence. A critical political-economy approach asks who finances projects, owns assets, receives contracts, carries debt, and absorbs environmental costs. A constructivist asks how Chinese influence is understood locally. Same road. Different theory.

Small States Are Not Blank Spaces Between Great Powers

Describing Kyrgyzstan as merely "caught between Russia and China" turns the country into scenery. Central Asian governments pursue interests, diversify partnerships, participate in overlapping institutions, and negotiate among larger powers. Scholars sometimes describe this through multi-vector diplomacy, hedging, or strategic diversification. The political logic is straightforward: when dominating the system is impossible, preserving options can itself become a form of power. Kyrgyzstan can maintain security and migration relationships with Russia while trading with China and working with the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, United Nations agencies, Türkiye, European institutions, and neighboring Central Asian governments. Strategic flexibility is not necessarily great-power ambition, sometimes it is how sovereignty survives.

Democracy Is Not a Switch

Kyrgyzstan was long described as Central Asia's most politically open system. Compared with several neighboring states, it developed more competitive politics, civil society, opposition activity, and independent journalism. Popular uprisings removed presidents in 2005 and 2010, and another major political crisis followed the disputed 2020 parliamentary elections. The picture is less optimistic today. Constitutional reforms adopted in 2021 increased presidential power and weakened parliament. Freedom House (2026) currently rates Kyrgyzstan Not Free, identifying pressure on political opponents, media, journalists, and civil society. This reinforces one of Chapter 6's central lessons. Democracy does not simply switch on and remain there. Political systems can liberalize, consolidate imperfectly, erode, and change direction. Apparently history did not end in Bishkek either.

Now Add Tourism

Tourism appears economic until we ask who benefits. Kyrgyzstan's mountains, lakes, horse culture, trekking routes, craft traditions, and yurt stays attract international travelers and create potential income for rural communities. Tourism may generate foreign exchange, employment, infrastructure, and economic diversification. It can also reproduce inequality. A visitor sees Song-Kul Lake and thinks adventure. A local household may see seasonal income. A government planner may see foreign currency. An investor sees market potential. An environmental group sees a fragile ecosystem. A cultural historian may worry about what happens when traditions become products marketed as authentic. These perspectives collide in the same landscape. If external companies control booking platforms, transportation, or high-value accommodation, local communities may retain only part of visitor spending. Rising land values can impose costs on residents. Infrastructure designed for visitors may reshape community priorities. Economic growth can therefore expand opportunity while distributing benefits and costs unevenly.

Authenticity Is Political Too

Tourists often seek "authentic" experiences involving yurts, food, crafts, clothing, horses, music, or imagined versions of nomadic tradition. But who decides what counts as authentic? Cultural practices can gain economic support through tourism while also being reshaped around visitor expectations. Identity is not simply something Kyrgyzstan possesses. It is represented, negotiated, marketed, preserved, and sometimes monetized. Constructivism has arrived at the yurt camp.

Climate Change Has Entered the Yurt Too

Mountain ecosystems are increasingly affected by climate change, including glacier retreat and changing water patterns. Tourism adds further pressure through waste, transportation, land use, infrastructure, and trail erosion. The systems relationship becomes obvious. Climate affects water. Water affects agriculture. Agriculture shapes livelihoods. Livelihoods influence migration. Tourism offers alternative income. Tourism creates environmental pressure. Environmental degradation can damage the very landscapes

attracting visitors. Sustainable tourism therefore cannot mean merely attracting environmentally conscious travelers. It requires decisions about who controls development, how environmental limits are enforced, who receives the revenue, whose land is used, and whether communities possess meaningful authority. Those are political decisions.

Global Governance Does Not Only Happen at Headquarters

International organizations and development partners also shape Kyrgyzstan's choices. Development financing can provide infrastructure, expertise, education, environmental programs, and institutional support. It also arrives with standards, safeguards, reporting expectations, evaluation systems, and particular definitions of development. Many requirements serve important purposes. They nevertheless return us to the opening question: who defines the problem? Whose evidence counts? How much authority does a community have over a project transforming its environment? What happens when international priorities and domestic politics conflict? Global governance happens when a development project reaches a village just as surely as it happens in a diplomatic chamber.

Sovereignty Looks Different From Bishkek

Kyrgyzstan is sovereign. It possesses a recognized state, government, territory, citizenship, and diplomatic relations. It cannot independently control every condition shaping its future. Neither can a superpower. The constraints are not equal. Russian migration policy can affect household income. Chinese infrastructure finance can reshape transportation. International lenders influence development options. Climate change created mostly outside Kyrgyzstan threatens glaciers and water. Global tourism changes rural economies. This suggests a more realistic definition of sovereignty: sovereignty is not the absence of dependence; it is the political capacity to negotiate dependence. For a smaller state, this means diversifying relationships, strengthening domestic institutions, negotiating with investors, preserving policy space, building public legitimacy, and ensuring globalization does not become a series of decisions made elsewhere.

The Periphery Was Never Peripheral

Imagine standing near Song-Kul Lake. A family operates a yurt camp. Tourists arrive from several continents through a platform headquartered abroad. Infrastructure may have involved international financing. Relatives may earn money in Russia. The government wants tourism revenue. Environmental groups worry about ecosystem pressure. Investors see potential. Climate change affects pasture conditions. Local communities want livelihoods and political voice. Who is in charge? Many actors possess power. They do not possess the same power. That is the chapter in miniature. Global politics is not divided into actors and spectators. Smaller states make choices, communities negotiate globalization, migrants build livelihoods, governments diversify relationships, civil society resists, and countries turn geography or strategic position into leverage where possible. Everyone is acting. They simply do not begin with equal power. That is not peripheral politics. That is global politics.

Case Study: *Welcome to Kyrgyzstan - Can Tourism Lift a Nation or Will It Break It?*

TL;DR:

Tourism in Kyrgyzstan is booming. That's good news, right? Maybe. But it also comes with a cocktail of global politics, environmental stress, economic dreams, and culture clashes. In this multiplayer simulation, you're stepping into the shoes of different power players in Kyrgyzstan's evolving tourism industry—each with their own agendas, pressures, and priorities. Your goal: figure out what "sustainable tourism" really means in one of the most stunning (but fragile) regions on Earth.

Note: All quotes below are hypothetical examples of what people in each of these roles might say.

Where Are We?

Kyrgyzstan, a mountainous, landlocked country in Central Asia, has gone from Soviet satellite to one of the most Instagrammable nomadic travel destinations in the world. Think: towering peaks, turquoise lakes, yurts under the stars, and eagle hunters riding horses across the highlands.

Tourism in Kyrgyzstan is small but growing fast, especially among eco-tourists, backpackers, and adventure seekers. But this

growth brings big questions. Who profits? Who gets left behind? Can the environment handle the pressure? And what happens when global tourism meets local tradition?

Meet the Players

Choose your character. You'll explore the case from their point of view, defend their interests, and weigh the trade-offs.

1. Local Population (especially rural nomadic communities)

You live in or around tourist hotspots like Song-Kul Lake or the Tian Shan mountains. You may earn money from hosting tourists, guiding treks, or selling handmade crafts. But your traditions, resources, and way of life are being transformed, sometimes in uncomfortable ways.

> "Some tourists come here expecting a museum version of our lives. Others bring pollution and noise. We want opportunities, but not at the cost of who we are."

2. Kyrgyz Government

You want tourism to boost GDP, cut unemployment, and make Kyrgyzstan a recognized player in the global economy. But you also need to protect the country's environment and manage international partnerships. Oh—and you're under pressure to keep the political system stable while attracting foreign investment.

> "We want Kyrgyzstan to be the 'Switzerland of Central Asia.' But we can't get there without balancing growth and sustainability."

3. Multilateral Organizations (UNESCO, World Bank, etc.)

You fund projects, label World Heritage Sites, and support "sustainable development." You love promoting eco-tourism, but your programs often require local governments to meet complicated environmental, human rights, and governance standards.

> "We're here to support, but we expect accountability and real sustainability, not greenwashing."

4. International Tourists

You're here for the adventure. Trekking, horseback riding, yurt stays, and authentic nomadic experiences are on your list. You might be concerned about your environmental footprint or you might just be here for the 'Gram.

> "I love that this place feels untouched. I hope it stays that way. Also, do you have Wi-Fi?"

5. Aid Organizations & NGOs

You're working in areas like women's empowerment, environmental protection, indigenous rights, and sustainable development. You want tourism to benefit marginalized groups not just rich investors or corrupt officials.

> "Tourism can help rural communities, but not if it just recreates old power imbalances with a prettier view."

6. Foreign Investors / Tour Operators

You see Kyrgyzstan as an untapped gold mine for eco-lodges, adventure packages, and luxury experiences. You're pushing for infrastructure upgrades (roads, airports, permits) and love government tax breaks.

> "The demand is there. Let us build the supply. Think jobs, think growth."

The Big Global Forces at Play

Tourism isn't just a local industry. It's shaped by global trends, politics, and environmental realities.

Economic Globalization

Tourism brings in foreign currency and jobs, especially in places with few other export industries. Kyrgyzstan wants to diversify beyond mining and agriculture—but tourism is seasonal, vulnerable to global shocks (like pandemics), and often benefits outsiders more than locals.

- Kyrgyzstan's tourism industry makes up about 5% of GDP (and growing).
- Many local guides, cooks, and horse owners rely on the short summer season to earn most of their yearly income.

Environmental Pressure

Eco-tourism sounds nice until fragile alpine meadows get trashed by off-road jeeps or campsites generate waste with no disposal plan. Climate change is already melting glaciers and shrinking water sources, can tourism really be green?

- Popular trails are experiencing erosion, wildlife is being displaced, and unregulated camping leads to pollution.
- Locals are noticing less snowpack, faster glacier melt, and changes in pasture timing for their animals.

Political Challenges

Kyrgyzstan is a democracy, but it's had three revolutions since 2005, and there's political instability bubbling beneath the surface. Corruption is a concern, and foreign investors want guarantees. Meanwhile, tensions sometimes flare over land rights, cultural preservation, and how tourism income gets distributed.

- Indigenous and rural communities have been excluded from national planning processes.
- Some tourist areas were historically sacred or community-owned, now they're up for lease.

Cultural Globalization

Tourists want the "authentic nomad experience"—but that sometimes means dressing up local culture for consumption. Festivals and traditions risk becoming performances instead of lived realities. Younger generations are caught between modern jobs and traditional values.

- Yurt stays and eagle shows are sometimes staged for tourists, with little connection to traditional timing or meaning.
- Some young Kyrgyz see tourism as a ticket out of poverty; others feel it dilutes their identity.

Discussion Questions for the Players

After reading and role-playing, gather your squad and discuss the following:

1. Whose voice should matter most when planning tourism policy in Kyrgyzstan—and why?

- Should it be locals who live there? Government planners? Investors? International experts?

2. What does "sustainable tourism" look like *for your player*?

- Is it about money, culture, environment, justice—or all of the above?

- Where are you willing to compromise?

3. How can Kyrgyzstan balance attracting tourists with protecting natural and cultural resources?

- Should there be visitor caps on fragile regions?
- Who monitors environmental impact? Who pays for it?

4. Should tourism be promoted as a national development strategy—or is it too risky?

- What happens if tourism crashes (e.g., due to war, pandemic, natural disaster)?
- Are there better alternatives for economic development?

5. How does climate change complicate the tourism boom?

- How should tourism policy respond to shrinking glaciers, droughts, or ecosystem stress?
- Can tourism actually help fund climate adaptation?

Final Challenge: Create a Tourism Strategy

As a team of mixed players, draft a one-page tourism strategy for Kyrgyzstan that:

- Names 2 top priorities
- Identifies 1 major conflict between players
- Proposes at least 2 creative solutions (e.g., a tourist tax, community-led lodges, permit systems)
- Includes a catchy name or slogan (optional: make it meme-worthy)

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6.8: Conclusion

Follow the Power

We began this chapter with a deceptively simple question: Who gets to make the rules? After everything we have seen, the least satisfying answer is also the most accurate one: it depends. States remain extraordinarily powerful. They issue passports, police borders, collect taxes, maintain militaries, negotiate treaties, regulate markets, define citizenship, and determine which laws apply within their territories. Globalization did not make the state disappear. States now operate, however, within dense networks of institutions, markets, corporations, technologies, norms, alliances, diasporas, social movements, and dependencies. Sovereignty therefore looks less like complete control and more like negotiation. Governments want interdependence without vulnerability, international cooperation without unwanted constraint, global markets without losing domestic authority, and open networks without surrendering control over what travels through them. Sometimes those goals coexist. Often they collide.

Theories help us see different parts of those collisions. Realism reminds us that governments operate in a world where nobody can guarantee their survival. Liberalism shows why those governments nevertheless build institutions and cooperate. Constructivism demonstrates that identities, narratives, and norms shape what political actors consider legitimate or threatening. Critical political economy reveals inequalities built into global systems. Global IR challenges the assumption that European political history provides the universal starting point. Feminist analysis asks whose security and labor disappear when we stare only at governments and armies. None of those theories wins the chapter. That's not a failure, thats the point.

Global Studies asks us to know when to change lenses. A military buildup may require realism. A climate treaty may benefit from institutional analysis. A nationalist movement may become clearer through constructivism. A debt negotiation may demand political economy. A security policy looks different when we examine who absorbs its costs.The international order itself requires the same flexibility. The United States remains enormously powerful but does not run the planet. China has changed the distribution of global power without simply replacing the United States. The European Union exports regulatory standards without becoming a conventional superstate. India and other rising powers often refuse simple bloc politics. BRICS+ expresses dissatisfaction with parts of the existing system without becoming one coherent geopolitical actor. Smaller states such as Kyrgyzstan maneuver through the system rather than merely waiting for instructions. The emerging order is therefore layered, contested, issue-specific, and crowded. One actor may dominate finance, another manufacturing, another military security, another regulatory standards, another energy, and another digital infrastructure. Nobody is completely in charge. That does't mean power disappeared. It means we have to work harder to find it.

The most useful habit to carry forward is therefore simple: follow the power. When somebody says a policy is necessary, ask who defined the problem. When a government invokes sovereignty, ask what forms of dependence surround that claim. When an international institution establishes rules, ask who helped write them and who can afford to ignore them. When a political movement claims to speak for “the people,” ask who belongs to that category and who disappears outside it. When something becomes a security threat, ask what new forms of authority suddenly become possible. And when someone claims globalization erased borders, look at who is trying to cross one. That question takes us directly into Chapter 7.

So far, we have mostly examined mobility through capital, goods, information, institutions, technologies, and political influence. People move too, but their movement is governed much more unevenly. Some people cross borders with passports, university admissions, professional contracts, and frequent-flyer accounts. Others move because wages collapsed, conflict made staying impossible, families are divided, or somebody else is profiting from their vulnerability. Governments classify those people differently, as tourists, international students, migrant workers, refugees, undocumented migrants, or victims of trafficking—and those categories can determine who is welcomed, who is exploited, who is protected, and who can stay. Chapter 7 follows the people moving through the systems we have just studied. The borders are still there. Now we are going to meet the people crossing them.

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6.9: Discussion

Lets Talk About it

1. Has globalization weakened the state, or merely changed how state power operates? Make a clear claim using at least two examples from the chapter. Address one plausible counterargument and explain what evidence would make you reconsider your position.
2. Which theoretical lens best explains the contemporary international system: realism, liberalism, constructivism, critical political economy, Global IR, or feminist analysis? Select one as your primary framework, apply it to a contemporary issue, and then identify something another framework explains better.
3. Does sovereignty still provide a useful way of organizing global politics? Consider borders, migration, international institutions, economic dependence, security, and the Kyrgyzstan case. Your response should distinguish between legal sovereignty and practical political autonomy.

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6.10: Assignments

Assignment 1: One Crisis, Four Theories

Select a current international political issue involving at least two countries. Analyze the same issue using four theoretical lenses from Section 6.3. For each lens, identify the actors it emphasizes, the causal mechanism it prioritizes, the evidence it makes visible, and one important element it may overlook. Conclude by arguing whether the theories are competing explanations or complementary tools. Use at least four credible sources, including two scholarly sources. Suggested length: 1,200–1,500 words.

Assignment 2: The Sovereignty Audit

Choose one country other than the United States and conduct a "sovereignty audit." Begin by identifying areas in which the government possesses strong formal authority. Then trace at least four external relationships that constrain, enable, or reshape practical autonomy, for example trade, debt, migration, military alliances, climate vulnerability, technology, energy, international organizations, or multinational corporations. Your conclusion should answer the question: Is sovereignty best understood as control, independence, bargaining capacity, or something else? Use a minimum of one scholarly source, one institutional or government source, and one current data source. Suggested length: 1,200 words plus one original systems map.

Assignment 3: Who Actually Has Power Here?

Choose a global governance problem such as artificial intelligence, climate change, migration, global health, critical minerals, cyber conflict, food security, or international finance. Identify the major actors involved and trace how at least four different forms of power operate: legal authority, economic power, military or coercive power, structural power, soft power, informational power, or agenda-setting power. Do not simply rank the actors. Explain how their forms of power interact and where accountability becomes difficult to locate. End with one realistic governance reform and identify the trade-off it would create. Suggested length: 1,500 words.

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6.11: Key Terms

Words to Know

- **Anarchy:** In International Relations, the absence of a supreme political authority above sovereign states; it does not necessarily mean chaos.
- **Autocratization:** A process through which democratic institutions, rights, or political competition decline and authoritarian characteristics increase.
- **Balance of power:** A distribution of capabilities among states intended, deliberately or indirectly, to prevent one actor from becoming overwhelmingly dominant.
- **Collective security:** An arrangement in which states treat aggression against one member as a concern for the wider international community.
- **Complex interdependence:** The idea that states and societies are linked through multiple economic, political, social, environmental, and institutional relationships that cannot be reduced to military affairs.
- **Constructivism:** A theoretical approach emphasizing how identities, norms, ideas, social relationships, and shared meanings help construct political interests and behavior.
- **Cosmopolitanism:** The ethical or political idea that obligations toward human beings extend beyond national borders and citizenship.
- **Critical political economy:** An approach examining how political authority interacts with capitalism, class, markets, colonial histories, production, finance, and unequal economic structures.
- **Democratic backsliding:** The gradual weakening of democratic institutions, rights, electoral competition, accountability, or constraints on political power.
- **Deterrence:** An attempt to prevent another actor from taking an action by convincing it that the costs will outweigh the benefits.
- **Global governance:** The overlapping institutions, rules, norms, networks, and practices through which governments and nonstate actors attempt to manage transnational problems without a single world government.
- **Global International Relations (Global IR):** An approach seeking to broaden International Relations beyond predominantly Western histories and concepts by recognizing diverse regions, civilizations, actors, and intellectual traditions.
- **Hard power:** Influence exercised through coercive military or economic capabilities or material incentives.
- **Human security:** An approach emphasizing the security of individuals and communities, including protection from threats involving violence, poverty, hunger, disease, repression, and environmental disruption.
- **Interdependence:** A relationship in which actors depend upon one another, although the degree of dependence may be highly unequal.
- **Liberal democracy:** A political system combining meaningful political participation and competitive elections with rule of law, civil liberties, legal equality, and institutional constraints on government power.
- **Liberalism:** In International Relations, a broad theoretical tradition emphasizing cooperation, institutions, interdependence, domestic politics, and the possibility that international rules can shape state behavior.
- **Middle power:** A state possessing significant diplomatic, economic, strategic, or regional influence without dominating the international system as a great power.
- **Multipolarity:** An international distribution of power in which several major actors possess significant capabilities rather than power being concentrated in one or two states.
- **Nation:** A community whose members understand themselves as connected through shared identity, history, culture, political experience, territory, or other forms of collective belonging.
- **Nationalism:** A political idea or movement connecting national identity to claims involving political authority, self-determination, sovereignty, territory, or belonging.
- **Populism:** A political worldview commonly framing politics as a struggle between a morally authentic “people” and a corrupt or self-serving elite.
- **Realism:** An International Relations tradition emphasizing anarchy, state survival, military and strategic power, uncertainty, and competition among states.
- **Securitization:** The political process through which an issue is framed as an existential security threat that may justify extraordinary measures.
- **Security dilemma:** A situation in which one state’s attempt to increase its security makes another state feel less secure, potentially producing escalating competition.
- **Soft power:** The ability to influence others through attraction, legitimacy, culture, values, diplomacy, or reputation rather than direct coercion.

- **Sovereignty:** The principle that a state possesses supreme political authority within its territory and legal independence within the international system; practical autonomy may nevertheless be constrained by interdependence.
- **Structural power:** The ability to shape the systems, institutions, markets, or rules within which other actors must make choices.
- **Weaponized interdependence:** The use of advantageous positions within global economic or informational networks to exert coercive political pressure.

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7: ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSIONS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Environment, Energy, and the Unequal Costs of a Connected World



Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): Map of the world made of plants. (Photo by A Chosen Soul on Unsplash).

You throw something into the trash. It disappears. At least, that is what it looks like. You plug in your phone and electricity appears. You order something online and a box arrives. You fill your car, turn on the air conditioner, replace an old laptop, buy a new pair of shoes, stream a movie, eat dinner, or toss a plastic container into a blue recycling bin. Modern life is remarkably good at making complicated systems feel simple. That simplicity is an illusion. Your trash went somewhere. Your electricity came from somewhere. The minerals inside your phone were extracted somewhere. The package at your door required fuel, infrastructure, labor, land, warehouses, roads, ships, planes, data centers, and energy. Even the cloud is not floating in the sky. It lives in buildings full of servers that require electricity, cooling systems, water, minerals, and physical infrastructure.

Globalization has become extraordinarily good at moving things. It has also become extraordinarily good at moving consequences. Pollution can be transferred downstream. Carbon emissions enter a shared atmosphere. Electronic waste can cross borders. Energy dependence can reshape foreign policy. Mining for the technologies needed to reduce fossil-fuel use can create new conflicts over land and water. Climate disasters can devastate communities that contributed relatively little to the emissions driving global warming. Suddenly, an environmental issue is not only an environmental issue. It is economic because resources have prices. It is political because someone writes the rules. It is social because risks are not distributed equally. It is historical because today's patterns of production and consumption did not appear out of nowhere. It is cultural because communities understand land, nature, ownership, and responsibility in different ways. And it is global because the benefits and consequences routinely cross borders. That is exactly why environmental questions belong in Global Studies.

The Question Behind the Chapter

This chapter begins with a deceptively simple idea: There is no “away.” What looks like disposal is usually relocation. What looks like cheap energy may contain costs that somebody else is paying. What looks like an environmental solution in one place may create a new environmental problem somewhere else. Our job is therefore not simply to identify environmental problems. We are going to follow them. Where did this come from? Where does it go? Who benefits? Who carries the risk? Who has the power to make decisions? Who is missing from the story? And perhaps the hardest question of all: what would a genuinely sustainable global system require us to change?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Analyze environmental challenges as interconnected ecological, economic, political, and social systems.
- Explain how industrialization, fossil fuels, colonial extraction, and mass consumption contributed to contemporary environmental change.
- Compare major approaches to governing shared environmental resources, including the tragedy of the commons and institutional approaches to collective action.
- Analyze global waste and energy systems through the lenses of environmental justice and unequal exchange.
- Evaluate the geopolitical and social consequences of the global transition toward renewable energy and critical minerals.
- Distinguish between climate change as a global physical process and climate vulnerability as an unequal social and political condition.
- Assess the possibilities and limitations of individual consumption, markets, technology, and public policy as responses to environmental problems.
- Apply systems thinking to questions of sustainability, justice, responsibility, and environmental governance.

Before we decide how to solve an environmental problem, we need to understand what kind of problem we are looking at. That turns out to be harder than it sounds, because nature does not organize itself into textbook chapters.

7.1: Introduction - Core Environmental Concerns

7.2: How did we get here?

7.3: Who owns the atmosphere?

7.4: Throw it Away

7.5: Flip the Switch

7.6: The Green Transition has a Mining Problem

7.7: Climate Change is Global. Vulnerability is not.

7.8: Can We Consume our Way Out of This?

7.9: The Future is not "Environment vs Economy"

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7.1: Introduction - Core Environmental Concerns

The Planet is a System, Not a Background

Imagine trying to pull one thread out of a sweater without affecting anything around it. That is roughly what happens when we try to separate environmental problems from one another. Climate change affects rainfall. Rainfall affects agriculture. Agriculture affects land use. Land use affects biodiversity. Biodiversity influences ecosystem resilience. Agriculture and cities compete for water. Energy production uses land and water. Mining transforms landscapes. Consumption produces waste. Waste can contaminate soil and groundwater. Climate change can intensify heat, fires, floods, drought, and ecosystem stress, which can then affect food prices, migration, health, infrastructure, politics, and inequality. Everything keeps touching everything else. This is why environmental analysis requires systems thinking.

Nature Is Not a Separate Sector

For much of modern economic history, the environment was often treated as something surrounding the economy rather than something making the economy possible. Forests became timber. Rivers became water supplies or transportation routes. Land became property. Minerals became commodities. Fossil fuels became energy. The ecological systems beneath those categories could disappear from economic calculations. Yet every economy ultimately operates within physical systems. There is no agriculture without soil, water, nutrients, climate, and biological processes. There is no manufacturing without matter and energy. There is no digital economy without minerals, electricity, cooling, buildings, cables, devices, and enormous physical infrastructure. The “environment” is therefore not simply one policy area alongside health, politics, and economics. It is the material setting in which all of them exist.

Climate Change Is Important, but It Is Not the Whole Story

Climate change receives enormous attention for good reason. Human activities, particularly the combustion of fossil fuels and changes in land use, have increased atmospheric greenhouse-gas concentrations and altered the climate system. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concludes unequivocally that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean, and land (IPCC, 2023). But environmental change is larger than climate change alone. Species and habitats are being lost. Freshwater systems are under pressure. Land is being transformed. Synthetic chemicals circulate through ecosystems. Nitrogen and phosphorus cycles have been altered by agriculture. Forests are cleared. Oceans absorb carbon dioxide and heat. Plastics and other waste travel enormous distances. Scientists working with the planetary boundaries framework have attempted to identify major Earth-system processes that help maintain relatively stable conditions for human societies. The framework does not claim that crossing a boundary means the world suddenly ends. Rather, it asks whether human activity is pushing critical systems beyond conditions associated with the relatively stable Holocene environment in which complex human civilizations developed. A 2023 update concluded that six of nine boundaries assessed had been transgressed, emphasizing that climate, biodiversity, land, freshwater, nutrient cycles, and novel substances cannot be treated as entirely separate problems (Richardson et al., 2023).

This is a useful model, but remember what models do. They simplify reality so we can see patterns. A planetary boundary does not tell us which community should reduce its consumption first. It does not tell us who has historically benefited from resource use. It does not determine whether a particular mine should open. It cannot tell us how costs should be shared. For that, we need politics, economics, ethics, geography, history, and culture. In other words, we need Global Studies.

Feedback Loops: When Effects Start Creating More Effects

Systems can produce feedback loops, situations in which an initial change creates additional changes that reinforce or counteract the original one. Consider Arctic ice. Bright ice reflects significant solar radiation. When warming causes ice to melt, darker ocean surfaces are exposed. Those surfaces absorb more heat, contributing to additional warming and further ice loss. Or think about forests. Forest loss can reduce carbon storage, alter rainfall patterns, fragment habitats, and increase vulnerability to fire. Those changes can make further forest loss more likely.

Social systems have feedback loops too. A drought may reduce crop yields. Falling yields can raise food prices. Higher food prices can increase household insecurity. Governments may respond with subsidies, export restrictions, emergency imports, or political

repression. Farmers may change crops, borrow money, migrate, or leave agriculture. Those responses can reshape future food production.

A “climate event” can quickly become an economic event, a migration event, a political event, and a health event.

Externalities: The Costs That Disappear From the Price Tag

One of the most useful economic concepts for understanding environmental problems is the externality. An externality occurs when an economic activity creates costs or benefits that are not fully reflected in the market transaction itself. Suppose a company produces a cheap product while releasing pollution into a river. If the company does not pay the full cost of cleaning the river, treating illnesses, restoring ecosystems, or replacing damaged livelihoods, the product's market price does not represent its total social cost. The cost did not disappear. It moved. Someone downstream may pay it. A government may pay it. Future generations may pay it. An ecosystem may absorb it until it can no longer do so. This is one reason inexpensive goods can be misleading. A low price may reflect efficiency. It can also reflect labor exploitation, pollution, subsidies, resource depletion, or environmental costs shifted outside the transaction.

The Global Studies Lens: Follow the Cost

Whenever a global product, industry, or environmental policy appears unusually cheap, clean, convenient, or efficient, ask one more question: Where did the costs go? Maybe technology genuinely reduced them. Maybe somebody else is paying them. Often, both things are true.

From Systems to History

Environmental systems are interconnected, but that still leaves another question. How did humans become capable of altering them on such an enormous scale? For that, we have to go backward before we can move forward.

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7.2: How did we get here?

Industrialization, Extraction, and the Great Acceleration

Humans have changed environments for thousands of years. We have cleared forests, diverted rivers, irrigated deserts, domesticated species, built cities, hunted animals to extinction, transformed landscapes, and moved plants and animals across continents. So what exactly changed? Scale. And much of that change begins underground.

We Learned to Burn Ancient Sunlight

Coal, petroleum, and natural gas contain energy produced from ancient organic matter transformed over geological time. Industrial societies learned to access those concentrated stores of energy and use them at extraordinary scale. That changed almost everything. Coal powered factories, steamships, and railroads. Petroleum transformed transportation, warfare, agriculture, manufacturing, and global trade. Natural gas became central to electricity generation, heating, fertilizer production, and industry. Fossil fuels allowed societies to mobilize energy far beyond what contemporary forests, animals, wind, and flowing water could provide. Everything became accelerated, production, transportation, urbanization, extraction, and eventually, emissions accelerated too.

Industrialization Did Not Happen on an Empty Map

It is tempting to tell the Industrial Revolution as a story of ingenious machines appearing in Britain and then spreading around the world. The machines mattered. So did empire. European industrialization developed within global systems containing colonial land, enslaved and coerced labor, plantation production, extracted minerals, overseas markets, and global commodity chains. Cotton grown through enslaved labor in the Americas fed British textile production. Colonial territories supplied raw materials and provided markets for manufactured goods. Industrialization, capitalism, empire, and extraction became deeply intertwined. That history matters because environmental inequality did not begin with contemporary climate negotiations. For centuries, powerful states and companies have been able to obtain resources from distant places while locating many of the environmental and social costs of extraction elsewhere. Globalization expanded the distance between consumption and consequence.

1750 to 1945: Fossil Power

The early industrial era dramatically increased the use of coal, mechanized production, transportation networks, mining, and urban industry. Later, oil transformed mobility. Automobiles, aviation, mechanized warfare, industrial agriculture, petrochemicals, plastics, and global logistics became increasingly dependent on petroleum. Environmental problems expanded with them. Cities struggled with air pollution and sewage. Industrial waterways became contaminated. Mining transformed landscapes. Forest extraction accelerated. Colonial administrations reorganized land and agricultural systems around export production. Yet the scale of what came next was even larger.

After 1945: Fast Forward

Researchers use the term Great Acceleration to describe the dramatic increase in many forms of human activity and Earth-system change after the mid-twentieth century. Population grew. Global GDP expanded. Fertilizer consumption surged. Dam construction increased. International tourism expanded. Motor vehicles multiplied. Urban populations rose. Paper production, telecommunications, transportation, and consumption all accelerated. At the same time, atmospheric greenhouse gases increased, tropical forests declined, marine fisheries came under mounting pressure, and human influence over ecological systems became increasingly visible (Steffen et al., 2015). This does not mean every person suddenly became equally responsible for planetary change. Far from it. The Great Acceleration was profoundly unequal. Industrialized societies consumed much more energy and material per person than poorer societies. Wealthy households consumed more than poor ones. Corporations controlled enormous production networks. Colonial and postcolonial economic relationships shaped where resources were extracted and where commodities were consumed. That distinction becomes critical when we decide what to call our era.

Welcome to the Anthropocene?

The term Anthropocene has been used to describe a proposed geological epoch in which human activity has become a major force altering Earth systems. Atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen helped popularize the term in the early twenty-first century (Crutzen, 2002). The concept is powerful because it makes an enormous claim: Humans are no longer simply living on Earth. Collectively, human activities are changing Earth systems. But the word also produces an immediate problem. Which humans? A subsistence farmer and a billionaire with multiple homes do not have equivalent environmental footprints. A Pacific island community and an industrial petrostate did not contribute equally to historic greenhouse-gas emissions. A worker assembling electronics and a corporation deciding how millions of those devices are designed do not hold equal power over production. So some scholars argue that Anthropocene can make humanity sound more uniform than it actually is.

Or the Capitalocene?

Environmental historian Jason W. Moore and others have used the term Capitalocene to shift attention from humanity in general toward capitalist systems of production, extraction, labor, and accumulation (Moore, 2016). The point is not that one word is unquestionably correct and the other is wrong. They ask different questions.

Anthropocene: What have humans collectively done to the Earth system?

Capitalocene: Which historical economic systems organized that transformation, and who benefited most from them?

Other scholars emphasize colonialism, racial capitalism, plantation economies, patriarchy, or particular modes of industrial development. The vocabulary matters because explanations quietly contain theories of responsibility. If “humanity” caused the crisis, perhaps humanity needs to consume less. If fossil-fuel systems caused the crisis, perhaps energy systems need to be transformed. If corporate political power obstructs change, then corporate regulation becomes central. If colonial extraction helped create today's inequalities, questions of repair and redistribution enter the conversation. Same planet. Different diagnosis. Different prescription.

History Does Not Give Us an Excuse. It Gives Us a Map.

Understanding how industrialization created environmental problems does not mean deciding that everything terrible today is simply the fault of something that happened two centuries ago. History is useful because systems have path dependence. Once roads, cities, industries, electricity grids, laws, subsidies, housing patterns, and transportation networks are built around a particular energy system, changing them becomes difficult. That is why simply announcing “stop using fossil fuels” does not instantly reorganize the world. There are power plants to replace. Workers whose livelihoods depend on industries. Governments whose revenue depends on oil and gas. Communities organized around mining. Transportation networks designed around cars. Companies with enormous investments. Consumers accustomed to particular lifestyles. Energy transitions are therefore technological transitions, but they are also political, social, geographic, and economic transitions. And transitions generate conflict.

Population: More Complicated Than “Too Many People”

Environmental conversations have a habit of eventually arriving at population. If more people need food, housing, transportation, water, electricity, and consumer goods, it seems logical to assume that population growth must be one of the central causes of environmental pressure.

There is truth in that argument, but it becomes misleading remarkably quickly.

The global population grew dramatically during the twentieth century as mortality declined and life expectancy increased, yet the demographic story of the twenty-first century is becoming far more uneven. Fertility rates have fallen across much of the world, population growth is slowing globally, many societies are aging, some countries are beginning to shrink, and much of the remaining population growth is concentrated in particular regions, especially parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The United Nations projects that the world population will likely peak later this century rather than continue growing indefinitely (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2024).

Demographers describe much of this change through the demographic transition, the long-term movement from societies characterized by relatively high birth and death rates toward societies with lower birth and death rates. Countries do not move

through this transition at identical speeds, however, which means globalization is connecting societies experiencing very different demographic realities. Japan, South Korea, Italy, and other aging societies confront shrinking workforces and expanding elder-care needs, while younger societies face the very different challenge of creating sufficient education, housing, infrastructure, and employment for rapidly growing working-age populations.

Population also interacts with urbanization. More than half of humanity now lives in urban areas, concentrating enormous demands for housing, transportation, water, energy, food, and waste management while also creating opportunities for more efficient infrastructure and public services. A rapidly growing city built around automobiles and fossil fuels will create a different environmental footprint from an equally large city organized around dense housing and mass transit.

This is why population cannot be separated from consumption, technology, inequality, and power. A person born into a high-income, carbon-intensive economy may consume far more energy and materials over a lifetime than someone born in a much poorer country. Treating environmental degradation as simply a problem of “too many people” can therefore obscure enormous differences in resource use and historical responsibility.

The better Global Studies question is not simply How many people are there?

It is: How are population, consumption, technology, wealth, infrastructure, and access to resources interacting, and who has the power to shape those patterns?

Population matters. But numbers alone never tell the whole story.

From History to Governance

We now know how the problem became global. The next question is whether humans can cooperate well enough to manage resources and risks that cross borders.That brings us to one of the most famous arguments in environmental thought, and one of its most important rebuttals.

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7.3: Who owns the atmosphere?

Commons, Collective Action, and Environmental Governance

Imagine a pasture shared by several herders. Each has an incentive to add another animal. The additional animal benefits its owner, while the cost of additional grazing is spread across everyone using the pasture. If everyone reasons the same way, the pasture may eventually be destroyed. Welcome to the tragedy of the commons.

Hardin's Warning

Ecologist Garrett Hardin popularized this argument in a famous 1968 essay. His basic insight was that individually rational choices can produce collectively disastrous outcomes when people share a limited resource (Hardin, 1968). The idea became enormously influential. Fisheries could collapse because everyone had an incentive to catch fish before somebody else did. Forests could be overharvested. Groundwater could be depleted. The atmosphere could be filled with greenhouse gases because individual actors benefited from fossil-fuel use while climatic costs were distributed globally. Hardin's argument is powerful because environmental governance really does involve collective-action problems. But there is a problem with the “tragedy.” It is not inevitable.

Ostrom's Reply: Humans Actually Govern Things Together All the Time

Political economist Elinor Ostrom spent decades studying communities that governed shared resources. Her research demonstrated that common-pool resources did not automatically collapse simply because they were shared. Communities developed rules and monitored use. They also sanctioned violators, negottiated access, created boundaries and adapted institutions to local conditions. They solved problems collectively. Ostrom's work challenged the assumption that only privatization or centralized government control could prevent environmental destruction (Ostrom, 1990). That changes the question. Instead of asking: Why do commons inevitably fail? We ask: Under what conditions can people govern shared resources successfully? That is a much more thought provoking question.

Here Comes the Hard Part: Scale

Managing an irrigation system with a community is difficult. Managing the atmosphere is harder. Climate change involves nearly every government on Earth, billions of individuals, countless companies, multiple generations, competing development needs, and a resource that has no fence around it. Carbon dioxide emitted in California does not stay over California. Emissions released in China do not remain over China. The atmosphere mixes them. This creates one of the largest collective-action problems humans have ever faced.

But Countries Do Not Arrive at the Table Equally

Suppose two people share a kitchen. One has been leaving dirty dishes in the sink for thirty years. The other arrived yesterday. Now the sink is overflowing. “We all share this kitchen,” the first person announces. “Everyone needs to clean equally.” You can probably see the problem. Climate negotiations repeatedly encounter versions of this argument. Industrialized states produced much of the cumulative carbon dioxide that has accumulated in the atmosphere since industrialization. Emerging economies now account for significant shares of annual emissions. Poorer countries argue that they still need development, infrastructure, energy, housing, transportation, and industrial capacity. Who should reduce emissions? How quickly? Who should pay? How should historical responsibility matter? These questions help explain the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, embedded in international climate governance. Countries share responsibility for addressing climate change, but their responsibilities cannot simply be assumed to be identical.

Global Environmental Governance: A Messy Architecture

There is no world environmental government. Instead, environmental governance happens through overlapping institutions. States create domestic regulations. Cities establish climate plans. Indigenous nations exercise governance over territories and resources. Companies adopt standards and make investment decisions. Civil-society organizations organize campaigns.

Scientists produce assessments. International organizations coordinate negotiations and technical work. Treaties create rules around particular problems. The 1987 Montreal Protocol, for example, coordinated international action to phase out substances damaging the ozone layer and is widely regarded as a major success in environmental cooperation. Climate change has proven harder. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, adopted in 1992, established the central international framework for climate negotiations. The Paris Agreement of 2015 asks states to submit nationally determined contributions toward limiting global temperature rise. Unlike a simple global law that orders every country to reduce emissions by the same amount, the Paris system depends heavily on national commitments, monitoring, negotiation, political pressure, technological change, and repeated increases in ambition. That may sound frustrating. It is. Global governance often is. But Ostrom gives us an important reminder. Cooperation does not require one perfect authority controlling everything from the top. Environmental governance can be polycentric, occurring through many overlapping centers of authority and action.

The Commons Question Has Changed

Hardin asked what happens when individuals have incentives to overuse something shared. Ostrom asked how communities build institutions to prevent that outcome. Climate change asks whether similar cooperation is possible at planetary scale. There is one more complication. Even when everyone agrees that a resource must be protected, people may still disagree about whose land should host the landfill, mine, pipeline, wind farm, dam, transmission line, or recycling facility. The environmental question therefore becomes a justice question. And nowhere is that more visible than in the things we throw away.

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7.4: Throw it Away

Waste, E-Waste, and Environmental Justice

You get a new phone, and the old one begins a strange second life. At first, it may simply sit in a drawer, still functional but increasingly obsolete as the battery weakens, software updates disappear, or repair becomes more trouble than replacement seems worth. Eventually, perhaps in an effort to do the responsible thing, you recycle it.

That feels like an ending.

It is not.

A smartphone is a remarkable compression of geography. Its glass, plastics, copper, aluminum, gold, lithium, cobalt, rare metals, semiconductors, and other components connect it to mines, factories, assembly plants, shipping networks, warehouses, data systems, and electricity grids across the world. None of that geography disappears when the device becomes unwanted. The phone merely changes categories, from product to waste, and that change can determine who handles it next, what laws apply to it, and where its remaining value and risk are distributed.

The global economy is very good at making the beginning of a product visible. Companies advertise sleek launches, new features, faster processors, better cameras, and cleaner designs. The end of the product's life is usually less photogenic.

According to the *Global E-waste Monitor 2024*, the world generated roughly 62 million metric tons of electronic waste in 2022, while documented formal collection and recycling represented only a fraction of that total (Baldé et al., 2024). The gap matters because electronics contain both valuable and potentially hazardous materials. Recovering copper, gold, aluminum, and other resources can create economic opportunities and extend material life, yet dismantling and processing devices without adequate protections can expose workers and nearby communities to toxic substances.

This is where a seemingly simple question such as “Did I recycle my phone?” becomes a Global Studies problem.

This flow chart helps demonstrate the path:

YOU THROW IT AWAY
↓
Collection
↓
Sorting / recycling / landfill / incineration
↓
Domestic processing or export
↓
Secondary materials / informal recycling / disposal
↓
Environmental + labor + health consequences

The waste did not disappear. It changed location.

*There Is No “Away.” Waste moves through collection, sorting, trade, recycling, incineration, and disposal systems that can shift environmental and social costs across communities and borders. Source: Author-created, CC BY 4.0

Waste Crosses Borders Because Costs Do

Why would one country send unwanted electronics somewhere else?

Often for the same reason that companies relocate manufacturing, sourcing, processing, and logistics: costs differ across places. Labor is cheaper in some locations. Land is less expensive. Regulatory standards vary. Enforcement capacity differs. Some countries possess specialized recycling industries; others have extensive informal repair and materials-recovery economies.

Global trade allows waste, reusable goods, spare parts, and scrap materials to circulate through these differences.

International agreements such as the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal attempt to regulate hazardous-waste shipments across borders, but the distinction between “waste” and “usable secondhand goods” is not always straightforward.

A ten-year-old computer shipped abroad may be unwanted garbage.

It may also become an affordable computer for a student, school, business, or household.

A used phone can enter a repair economy in which technicians replace parts, resell components, extend the device's life, and create livelihoods. Those activities complicate the popular image of the Global South as simply the final dumping ground for the world's unwanted electronics. Repair, resale, refurbishment, and recycling are also forms of economic activity and technical expertise.

The problem emerges when products that are no longer realistically usable are exported under the appearance of reuse, or when the risks associated with recovering their remaining value fall disproportionately on people who had little influence over how the products were designed in the first place.

The phone's value may therefore move upward through one set of actors while its risks move downward through another.

A technology company captures revenue from design and branding. A consumer receives years of use. A secondhand seller extends the object's life. A recycler recovers copper. A dismantling worker encounters chemical exposure. A nearby community may live with contaminated soil or air.

The same object participates in all of these realities.

Pollution Has an Address

This unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens is central to environmental justice.

Environmental justice movements emerged in part from the recognition that pollution is not randomly distributed across populations. Communities with less political influence, lower incomes, racial or ethnic marginalization, or histories of dispossession have often faced disproportionate exposure to landfills, industrial facilities, toxic sites, polluted air, and contaminated water. Robert Bullard's research helped establish environmental racism as a major field of study in the United States by demonstrating that environmental hazards frequently followed existing patterns of social inequality rather than appearing in socially neutral landscapes (Bullard, 2000).

Globalization expands the scale of this analysis.

David Pellow's work on global environmental inequality demonstrates how hazardous commodities, industrial processes, and waste streams can connect high-consumption societies with environmental risks experienced elsewhere (Pellow, 2007). The important point is not simply that one country throws garbage into another country. Global waste systems are more complicated than that. Rather, environmental justice asks how economic value, political authority, environmental harm, and decision-making power move through transnational systems.

Three questions become especially useful:

Who receives the benefits?

Who absorbs the environmental costs?

Who had meaningful power over the decision?

The last question changes the analysis considerably. A community may benefit economically from recycling, mining, manufacturing, or waste processing while simultaneously having limited influence over wages, workplace protections, pollution controls, or land use. Environmental justice therefore concerns not only the distribution of harm but also procedural justice, meaning who participates in decisions and whose knowledge counts when environmental policies are made.

Environmental Costs Are Not Randomly Distributed

Waste rarely travels according to environmental logic alone. It also follows the geography of power. Landfills, incinerators, hazardous industrial facilities, mines, highways, ports, and other environmentally burdensome infrastructure are often more likely to be located near communities with less political influence, lower incomes, or histories of racial and ethnic marginalization. What looks on a map like a technical decision about where to place a facility can therefore reveal a much deeper political question: who has the power to say no?

This is the concern at the heart of environmental justice, a movement and analytical framework that asks whether environmental benefits and environmental harms are distributed fairly and whether affected communities have meaningful power in the decisions that shape their environments. In the United States, scholars and activists helped popularize the related concept of environmental racism to describe patterns in which communities of color are disproportionately exposed to pollution, hazardous waste, toxic industries, and other environmental risks (Bullard, 1990). The idea does not require every individual siting decision to be motivated by explicit racial hostility. Unequal outcomes can emerge from housing segregation, land prices, discriminatory planning, weak political representation, historic disinvestment, and the tendency to locate unwanted facilities where resistance is expected to be weakest.

Globalization extends this question across borders. Wealthier societies can consume enormous quantities of electronics, clothing, plastics, and other goods while some of the environmental costs associated with disposal and recycling are displaced elsewhere. A discarded computer in one country may become someone else's occupational hazard thousands of miles away. Environmental justice therefore asks us to look beyond how much pollution exists and ask a second question that is every bit as important: who is expected to live with it?

The Problem Starts Before the Recycling Bin

One reason recycling receives so much attention is that it gives consumers an obvious action to perform. The product has already been manufactured, purchased, used, and discarded, so the question appears to be what we should do with it now.

A systems perspective asks whether the more important choices occurred earlier.

Could the device have been designed so the battery was easily replaceable?

Could manufacturers have supported software for longer?

Could components have been standardized?

Could repair have been cheaper than replacement?

Could the producer have been required to take responsibility for collection and disposal?

These questions shift attention from consumer behavior to product design and corporate responsibility.

Policies known as extended producer responsibility attempt to do exactly that by assigning manufacturers greater responsibility for products after consumers are finished with them. The related idea of a circular economy seeks to move away from the dominant linear pattern of extraction, production, consumption, and disposal toward systems that emphasize durability, repair, reuse, remanufacturing, material recovery, and recycling.

Circularity does not mean waste can disappear completely. Materials degrade. Recycling requires energy. Some substances are difficult or uneconomical to recover. Yet the concept forces us to ask a more sophisticated question than “Can this go in the blue bin?”

It asks whether an economic system can be designed so that products become waste less quickly in the first place.

That question will matter enormously as the world attempts to transform another system that has been built around extraction and consumption for more than two centuries: energy.

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7.5: Flip the Switch

Energy, Power, and the Geography of Dependence

Electricity is easiest to understand when it disappears.

When the lights go out, traffic signals fail, refrigerators begin warming, phones stop charging, elevators stop moving, classrooms lose connectivity, hospitals switch to backup generators, and air-conditioning systems shut down. A service that had seemed nearly invisible suddenly reveals itself as a basic infrastructure of modern life.

Under ordinary conditions, however, energy hides its geography extremely well. A wall socket does not tell you whether the electricity came from coal, natural gas, nuclear power, hydropower, wind, solar energy, or some combination of several sources. Nor does it reveal the mines, pipelines, transmission lines, shipping routes, power plants, regulations, subsidies, workers, and international relationships that made that electricity available.

Yet energy systems are deeply political because control over energy can become control over economic stability, national security, household wellbeing, and international leverage.

Modern societies require enormous amounts of energy to operate. Hospitals need reliable electricity and backup capacity. Agriculture depends on fuel, fertilizer, irrigation, refrigeration, storage, and transport. Digital systems rely on grids, servers, cooling systems, and data centers. Cities need energy for buildings, water treatment, public transportation, communications, and industry. In many regions, heating and cooling are literally matters of survival.

Energy therefore represents much more than a commodity market. It is a foundation of social capacity.

The irony is that access to that foundation remains profoundly unequal. A government may debate energy security in terms of oil imports while a household within the same country experiences energy insecurity because it cannot reliably afford electricity. A country may possess enormous fossil-fuel reserves while parts of its population remain poorly served by the national grid. A region may produce substantial electricity while communities living near the infrastructure receive little of its economic benefit.

This makes energy security a deceptively broad concept. At the national level, it usually refers to reliable access to sufficient energy at manageable prices and with limited vulnerability to disruption. At the household level, however, the same phrase can mean something as basic as whether a family can keep the refrigerator running or safely heat a home.

Energy systems operate at both scales simultaneously.

Geography Becomes Strategy

Fossil fuels transformed global politics partly because they are distributed unevenly. Oil and gas exist in particular geological formations, which means states controlling large reserves can gain strategic importance far beyond what population size or territory alone might suggest.

Over the twentieth century, access to petroleum shaped wars, alliances, trade relationships, industrial planning, military strategy, and foreign policy. Oil-producing states could obtain substantial export revenue and geopolitical influence, while importing states became concerned with maintaining access to suppliers and transportation routes.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, founded in 1960, illustrates how producers attempted to coordinate within this system. The oil crises of the 1970s demonstrated dramatically that changes in supply and price could reverberate throughout the global economy, contributing to inflation, recession, and changes in energy policy far from the countries where oil was extracted.

Yet resource wealth is not automatically political or economic good fortune. Scholars have long debated the resource curse, a pattern in which resource-rich states sometimes experience corruption, rent-seeking, conflict, institutional weakness, or excessive dependence on commodity revenues.

Calling this a curse can make the outcome sound mysterious or inevitable. It is neither. Norway's management of petroleum revenues looks very different from the experiences of states in which oil wealth has been captured by narrow elites or intensified conflict.

Resources do not determine political outcomes.

Institutions, historical conditions, ownership arrangements, state capacity, and distributions of power shape what resource wealth becomes.

Interdependence Can Turn Into Vulnerability

Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas before 2022 offers a particularly clear demonstration of how energy interdependence can change political meaning.

For years, imported Russian gas supplied significant portions of European energy demand. Economic interdependence generated benefits for both exporters and importers, and some policymakers believed that commercial ties might contribute to greater political stability.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine transformed that calculation.

Infrastructure previously viewed as economically efficient became a source of strategic vulnerability. European governments accelerated efforts to diversify suppliers, increase liquefied-natural-gas imports, reduce demand, expand renewable energy, and lessen dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

Nothing about the physical pipeline changed overnight.

Its geopolitical meaning did.

This is a recurring theme in globalization. Interdependence creates opportunity because actors gain access to resources, markets, technologies, and networks they could not easily provide alone. The same connections can also create leverage when one actor controls something another cannot quickly replace.

That is why globalization is neither simply cooperation nor simply dependence.

It is often both.

Renewables Change the Map Rather Than Erasing It

Renewable energy is sometimes described as a way to escape the geopolitics of fossil fuels.

There is truth in that claim.

Solar radiation and wind are distributed much more broadly than oil and gas reserves. Countries do not need to continuously import sunlight. A wind turbine does not require a tanker to arrive every week carrying wind.

Once renewable infrastructure is built, dependence on imported fuel can decline substantially.

But the energy transition does not make geography irrelevant.

It changes which geographies matter.

Solar panels, electric vehicles, battery storage, wind turbines, transmission networks, and other low-carbon technologies require enormous industrial supply chains. Those systems depend on minerals, manufacturing capacity, refining facilities, electricity grids, shipping networks, and technical expertise.

As fossil-fuel dependence declines, strategic attention increasingly shifts toward materials such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, graphite, copper, and rare earth elements.

The map changes from:

Where is the oil?

to questions such as:

Where are the minerals?

Who controls refining?

Who manufactures batteries?

Who produces solar modules?

Who owns the technology?

Who can build grids quickly enough?

A low-carbon world will still have geopolitical dependencies. They will simply be organized differently.

A Just Transition Is More Than Changing the Fuel

The phrase just transition emerged from labor and environmental movements concerned that workers and communities should not be treated as disposable casualties of environmental change. The International Labour Organization emphasizes that transitions toward environmentally sustainable economies should also incorporate decent work, social protection, participation, and social dialogue (ILO, 2016).

That matters because decarbonization can generate enormous social disruption even when the environmental objective is necessary.

Closing a coal mine may reduce emissions while devastating a town economically.

Reducing oil demand may benefit the climate while destabilizing a government dependent on petroleum revenue.

Raising electricity prices to finance cleaner infrastructure may burden low-income households.

Building renewable facilities may create new jobs while producing land conflicts.

Energy policy therefore cannot be evaluated only according to how many tons of carbon it eliminates.

A serious analysis also asks who receives new opportunities, who loses old ones, how quickly people can adapt, and whether the transition expands or reduces inequality.

This is where the energy transition becomes more complicated than a simple shift from fossil fuels to renewable technology.

Because renewable technology itself begins with extraction.

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7.6: The Green Transition has a Mining Problem

Critical Minerals, Green Extractivism, and the Next Resource Rush

The clean-energy transition is frequently visualized through objects that appear strikingly clean: a row of solar panels, an electric vehicle plugged into a charger, a wind turbine standing against the sky. The mine usually remains outside the frame. That omission matters because low-carbon technologies are physical technologies. They require steel, copper, lithium, nickel, cobalt, graphite, rare earth elements, cement, glass, plastics, manufacturing facilities, transportation systems, and electricity. An electric vehicle eliminates the gasoline tank. It does not eliminate material extraction.

The International Energy Agency has documented the growing importance of minerals for clean-energy technologies and projects that demand for several of these materials could rise significantly under pathways involving rapid decarbonization (IEA, 2024). This means that the global energy transition may reduce dependence on fossil-fuel extraction while simultaneously expanding demand for other forms of mining. That is not an argument against clean energy. It is an argument for looking at the entire system.

Diagram to think through this:

GREEN TECHNOLOGY

Solar panels
Wind turbines
EVs
Batteries
Electric grids

↓

REQUIRES MATERIALS

Lithium • Cobalt • Nickel • Copper • Rare Earths

↓

REQUIRES EXTRACTION

Land • Water • Energy • Labor

↓

CREATES A JUSTICE QUESTION

Who receives the benefits of decarbonization, and who absorbs the costs of extraction?

One Battery, Many Geographies

Consider an electric-vehicle battery.

It may contain lithium extracted in Australia or South America, nickel associated with Indonesia, cobalt linked to the Democratic Republic of Congo, graphite processed in China, copper drawn from multiple mining regions, and components manufactured through a highly internationalized supply chain.

By the time the battery reaches the vehicle, its geography has been compressed into an object.

As with the smartphone, the final product hides the relationships that produced it.

Lithium provides a useful example. Significant reserves and production are associated with Australia, Chile, Argentina, China, and other locations. In the high-altitude salt-flat regions of South America, lithium extraction has generated debates over water use, Indigenous rights, ecosystem impacts, local consultation, and the distribution of economic benefits.

A battery purchased in a wealthy country can therefore become connected to disputes over groundwater and territorial rights thousands of miles away.

Cobalt reveals a different dimension of the same system.

The Democratic Republic of Congo occupies an enormously important position in global cobalt production, and international attention has focused on the role of both industrial and artisanal mining. Reports concerning dangerous working conditions, child labor, informal extraction, governance challenges, and supply-chain accountability have linked consumer electronics and battery manufacturing to longstanding questions about labor and resource exploitation.

Yet narratives about Congolese cobalt can become misleading when the country is portrayed merely as a distant zone of suffering that supplies technology for everyone else.

Mining is also employment.

Minerals are national assets.

Artisanal mining can support livelihoods.

Congolese workers, communities, policymakers, civil-society organizations, and entrepreneurs have their own interests in how these resources are governed.

The central issue is therefore not whether mining should automatically disappear. It is how much value producing regions are able to retain, how environmental and labor protections are enforced, and who exercises meaningful authority over the terms of extraction.

Those questions are familiar because they resemble older debates about oil, agriculture, manufacturing, and colonial commodity systems.

The resource changes.

The political economy often looks surprisingly recognizable.

Indonesia and the Politics of Moving Up the Value Chain

Indonesia provides an especially useful example of how mineral-producing states may try to change their position within global supply chains.

Rather than simply exporting raw nickel ore, Indonesia has pursued policies encouraging domestic processing and investment in downstream industries. The logic is clear. Countries that export unprocessed resources often capture less economic value than those performing refining, manufacturing, and technology-intensive stages later in the chain.

From a development perspective, moving up the value chain can increase investment, employment, industrial capacity, and state revenue.

From an environmental perspective, rapid industrial expansion can produce significant costs.

Nickel processing requires large amounts of energy and infrastructure, and some processing has depended heavily on coal. Mining and industrial development can contribute to deforestation, water pollution, land conflicts, and social disruption.

The same policy can therefore represent economic self-assertion and environmental risk.

Global Studies becomes useful precisely when the temptation is to choose one description and discard the other.

Indonesia is not simply exploiting nature.

Nor is it simply benefiting from the green transition.

It is attempting to capture a larger share of value from a global industrial shift while confronting the environmental consequences of doing so.

That contradiction is real.

Green Extractivism and the Problem of Sacrifice Zones

The term green extractivism describes the concern that transitions marketed as environmentally progressive may still reproduce older patterns in which some regions provide land, minerals, water, and labor so that consumption elsewhere can become cleaner.

Imagine a wealthy urban consumer replacing a gasoline vehicle with an electric one.

The local air becomes cleaner.

Oil demand falls.

Carbon emissions may decrease.

At the same time, mineral extraction expands in a distant landscape.

Those outcomes are not equivalent, nor do they cancel one another out. The climate benefits of electric vehicles remain important. The point is that environmental improvement in one part of the system should not make environmental costs in another part invisible.

This is especially important when new projects overlap with Indigenous territories.

Many Indigenous peoples have experienced centuries of land appropriation and extractive development justified through external claims about economic necessity, national interest, modernization, or progress. Kyle Whyte argues that Indigenous climate justice must therefore be understood through histories of colonial disruption and the transformation of Indigenous relationships with land, governance, and ecological systems (Whyte, 2018).

A mining project may be declared essential for the global energy transition.

An Indigenous community may view the same land through sovereignty, treaty rights, cultural continuity, sacred obligations, or relationships that cannot be reduced to the market value of a mineral deposit.

Calling the mineral “critical” does not settle the question.

It simply tells us that somebody powerful has defined it as strategically important.

The Transition Is a Design Problem

None of this means the world is trapped between fossil fuels and an equally destructive mineral economy.

Technologies can change.

Battery chemistries can reduce reliance on particular materials.

Recycling can recover valuable minerals.

Products can last longer.

Public transportation can reduce the number of private vehicles required.

Urban planning can reduce total transportation demand.

Mining regulation can improve.

Communities can receive stronger legal rights and greater decision-making authority.

Supply chains can become more transparent.

The crucial point is that different versions of the energy transition require dramatically different quantities of material.

A society that replaces every gasoline-powered SUV with an electric SUV requires one kind of mineral future.

A society that combines electrification with compact cities, mass transit, walking, cycling, smaller vehicles, repair, and reduced material consumption requires another.

The question is therefore not merely:

Which technology is green?

It is:

What kind of society are we building around that technology?

That distinction becomes even more important when we consider climate change, because the benefits and burdens of environmental transformation are not distributed across a level playing field.

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7.7: Climate Change is Global. Vulnerability is not.

Responsibility, Adaptation, and Climate Justice

Carbon dioxide does not respect borders. Once greenhouse gases enter the atmosphere, they become part of a shared planetary system, which is one reason climate change is often described as the ultimate global problem. No government can protect its atmosphere by building a wall around it, and every society depends, in one way or another, on a relatively stable climate. Yet this universal physical exposure can obscure a more complicated political reality: countries have not contributed equally to the problem, and they are not equally equipped to survive its consequences.

Some states industrialized early and accumulated enormous historical emissions over generations; others contributed very little to the atmospheric stock now warming the planet. Levels of wealth and consumption differ sharply, as do infrastructure, geography, institutional capacity, and access to public resources. A coastal city protected by engineered flood barriers, functioning hospitals, reliable transport, insurance, and a government capable of mobilizing emergency funds does not experience climate risk in the same way as a community where homes are fragile, drainage is poor, savings are scarce, and public services are already stretched thin. Climate change may be global, but the capacity to withstand it is profoundly unequal.

Responsibility Depends on What You Measure

Even the apparently straightforward question of who is most responsible for climate change quickly becomes complicated because responsibility changes depending on what is being measured. Annual emissions tell us which countries are releasing the largest quantities of greenhouse gases now, while historical emissions reveal which societies contributed most to the cumulative stock built up over time. Per-capita measurements shift attention again by dividing emissions by population, exposing large differences between societies whose national totals may look similar but whose individual consumption patterns are very different. Consumption-based emissions complicate the picture further by assigning some of the carbon associated with imported goods back to the countries where those goods are ultimately consumed rather than leaving all responsibility with the places where they were manufactured.

None of these measures is inherently wrong. They simply answer different questions, and that is precisely why political arguments over climate responsibility can become so slippery. One government may point out that an emerging economy is now among the world's largest annual emitters, while another responds that older industrial powers produced far more cumulative emissions over the last two centuries. A third may note that emissions per person remain dramatically higher in wealthy societies, while a fourth insists that consumption patterns in affluent importing countries should be taken into account. All of these claims may be accurate at the same time.

The disagreement, then, is not only statistical. It is moral and political. If present-day emissions matter most, rapidly growing economies face enormous pressure to decarbonize. If historical emissions matter, long-industrialized states carry greater responsibility for the atmospheric problem that now exists. If per-capita emissions matter, high-consuming populations appear especially significant. And if consumption-based accounting matters, some of the pollution apparently produced abroad can be traced back to consumer demand elsewhere. Measurement does more than describe the climate problem. It helps determine how responsibility for solving it is distributed.

A Disaster Is More Than a Hazard

The same principle applies when we turn from responsibility to vulnerability. Imagine two coastal cities struck by storms of similar intensity. One has modern drainage systems, strict building codes, functioning hospitals, resilient electrical networks, emergency-response capacity, public transportation, insurance markets, and a government capable of financing recovery. The other contains large informal settlements, fragile housing, unreliable health services, weak drainage, limited emergency transport, and households whose savings can disappear after only a few days without work. Meteorologically, the two cities may have experienced a similar hazard. Socially, they have not experienced the same disaster.

This distinction is why climate scholars separate physical hazards from vulnerability. A drought, flood, wildfire, storm, or heat wave becomes catastrophic through the social and political conditions it encounters. Poverty can determine whether a household can

evacuate. Housing quality can determine whether a storm damages a roof or destroys an entire home. Weak governance may turn a predictable hazard into a prolonged emergency, while marginalization can leave some communities with less access to recovery funds, health care, insurance, transportation, or political attention. The IPCC emphasizes that vulnerability varies substantially both among and within societies and is shaped by socioeconomic development, governance, marginalization, and access to resources (IPCC, 2023).

Climate change therefore does not invent every inequality it encounters. More often, it moves through inequalities that already exist and intensifies them.



Figure 7.7.1: Flooded agricultural land in Chittagong, Bangladesh. Climate hazards affect physical landscapes, but their human consequences depend on livelihoods, infrastructure, resources, and the capacity to adapt. (Photo by Sharafat Siddiqui on Unsplash)

Adaptation Is Easier When You Can Afford It

Climate policy generally distinguishes between mitigation, which seeks to reduce the causes of climate change, and adaptation, which attempts to limit the damage from climatic changes that are already happening or expected to occur. Mitigation might involve reducing fossil-fuel use, changing transportation systems, expanding renewable energy, improving efficiency, or increasing carbon removal. Adaptation is more defensive: seawalls, heat-warning systems, drought-resistant crops, stronger building codes, improved drainage, urban tree cover, water storage, emergency planning, redesigned infrastructure, and, in some places, relocation away from areas that may become increasingly dangerous.

Yet adaptation is not simply a matter of knowing what to do. It is also a matter of being able to pay for it. A wealthy city may spend billions of dollars redesigning its waterfront or strengthening flood defenses, while a poorer municipality may struggle to keep storm drains functioning. A high-income household may respond to extreme heat by installing air conditioning, moving temporarily, purchasing insurance, or rebuilding after a disaster. A low-income household may confront the same hazard with none of those options available.

The ability to adapt is therefore deeply connected to existing distributions of wealth, political influence, infrastructure, public capacity, and international finance. This is where climate policy becomes inseparable from environmental justice. Exposure may begin with geography, but vulnerability is often amplified by histories of segregation, poverty, colonialism, political exclusion, and unequal access to infrastructure and public protection. Climate change does not simply ask where storms, droughts, or heat waves will occur. It asks which communities have the resources to protect themselves when they do.

When Adaptation Is Not Enough

There are also moments when adaptation reaches its limits. Some climate harms cannot be prevented by constructing higher seawalls, changing crops, improving drainage, or relocating infrastructure. Coastal land may disappear permanently. Freshwater sources may become saline. Glaciers can retreat beyond recovery. Ecosystems may cross ecological thresholds, and communities

can lose landscapes that carry cultural, spiritual, or historical meaning. People can die, and no later investment can reverse that loss.

This is the territory of loss and damage, a concept that refers broadly to climate-related harms that cannot be fully prevented through mitigation or adaptation. For climate-vulnerable developing countries, the issue became one of the most politically charged questions in international climate diplomacy because many of these states argued that they were already bearing severe costs from a crisis to which they had contributed relatively little. The eventual creation of new funding arrangements, including a fund responding to loss and damage, marked an important institutional development, with major operational decisions made at COP28 in 2023 (UNFCCC, 2023).

The diplomatic language surrounding loss and damage can become technical very quickly, but the ethical issue underneath it is much simpler: what obligations do wealthy, high-emitting societies have toward communities experiencing irreversible harms they did relatively little to create? Governments answer that question differently because the answer carries enormous financial and potentially legal consequences. But avoiding the question does not make the politics disappear. Refusing to decide who should bear the costs is itself a decision about who will.

Small Islands and the Limits of Adaptation

Small Island Developing States have made these questions especially difficult to treat as abstractions. Many contribute only tiny shares of global greenhouse-gas emissions, yet they face sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion, coastal erosion, infrastructure damage, stronger climate hazards, and growing threats to long-term habitability. The usual language of adaptation can sound very different when applied to a small island. For a large continental country, retreat from a vulnerable coastline may mean moving communities farther inland. For an island only a few kilometers wide, "inland" may barely exist.

At that point, climate change begins raising questions that environmental policy alone cannot answer. If territory becomes uninhabitable, what happens to citizenship? If people relocate across borders, what becomes of political sovereignty or maritime rights? Can a population retain a national identity if its physical homeland is disappearing? Can relocation protect lives while still destroying language, memory, cultural continuity, or relationships to ancestral land?

Sea-level measurements can tell us how high the ocean is rising. They cannot tell us what it means to lose a homeland.

Climate Mobility Is Real, but It Is Rarely Simple

Environmental change can also reshape human mobility, although the relationship is rarely as simple as the phrase climate migrant sometimes implies. A prolonged drought may reduce agricultural income, repeated floods may destroy housing, extreme heat may make outdoor work dangerous, or sea-level rise may gradually make a settlement untenable. Yet people rarely make migration decisions in response to environmental conditions alone.

A farming household, for example, may leave after several seasons of declining yields, but that decision might also reflect debt, unemployment, rising food prices, limited government assistance, insecurity, or the presence of relatives already living elsewhere who can provide housing or employment. Climate change may be part of the explanation without being the only explanation. Economic conditions matter. Political institutions matter. Social networks matter. Family obligations matter. Sometimes conflict matters as well.

This complexity is important because Global Studies asks us to resist explanations that isolate people from the systems in which they live. Climate change interacts with political, economic, and social pressures rather than replacing them. Mobility is often produced by several forces converging at once.

Who Pays Is the Central Political Question

Climate policy is sometimes discussed as though governments are deciding between paying for climate action and avoiding economic costs. In reality, no cost-free option exists. Mitigation requires investment in infrastructure, energy systems, technology, transportation, industry, and transition. Adaptation requires spending on resilience, emergency planning, public health, water systems, agriculture, and protection. Loss and damage raises questions of compensation and reconstruction. And choosing to do very little simply shifts the bill elsewhere, into disaster recovery, damaged infrastructure, health impacts, lost productivity, displacement, ecosystem decline, and human suffering.

The real political question is therefore not whether societies will pay. It is how, when, and by whom those costs will be paid.

That brings us back to the larger pattern running through this chapter. Environmental consequences often become politically invisible when they are pushed somewhere else: onto another community, another country, another generation, or another part of the global economy. Climate change follows the same logic. The atmosphere may be shared, but neither responsibility nor vulnerability is distributed evenly within it.

And if governments and corporations begin telling individuals that solving the crisis depends primarily on their own consumption choices, we encounter another version of the same question.

So how much can personal consumption really accomplish?

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7.8: Can We Consume our Way Out of This?

Ethical Consumption, Fair Trade, and the Limits of Individual Choice

Environmental responsibility is frequently presented to us through shopping.

Buy the efficient appliance.

Bring the reusable bottle.

Choose the sustainable brand.

Recycle correctly.

Eat differently.

Drive electric.

Purchase carbon offsets.

Look for a certification label.

These actions are not meaningless. Consumption choices can reduce environmental impacts, support different business models, establish social norms, and send signals through markets. The problem begins when environmental responsibility is reduced almost entirely to those choices, because consumers operate inside systems that shape what products exist, how expensive they are, what infrastructure is available, and what information people possess when they make decisions.

A household can choose between two cars.

It cannot personally build a rail network.

A consumer can purchase a repairable phone if one exists.

She cannot independently require every manufacturer to design one.

A renter can try to conserve energy.

He may have no authority to replace inefficient heating equipment, install insulation, or add solar panels.

An individual can recycle packaging.

She did not decide that the product needed three layers of packaging in the first place.

Environmental action therefore becomes distorted when systems create harmful choices and then assign responsibility primarily to individuals for navigating them perfectly.

Ethical Consumption Can Help Without Becoming Magic

Fair Trade provides a useful example.

Many global commodity markets place small producers in structurally weak bargaining positions. Coffee farmers, cocoa producers, artisans, and agricultural workers may participate in supply chains in which much of the final retail value is captured later by processors, brands, retailers, distributors, and financial actors.

Fair Trade initiatives attempt to address some of these inequalities by creating standards concerning pricing, producer organization, labor conditions, environmental practices, or trading relationships.

These efforts can produce meaningful benefits.

Cooperatives can strengthen collective bargaining.

Certification can make labor and environmental conditions more visible.

Consumers may support producers meeting stronger standards.

Trading relationships can become more direct.

But certification does not dissolve the political economy surrounding a commodity.

Not all producers can afford certification.

Standards differ.

Market demand is uncertain.

Retailers may continue capturing substantial shares of value.

Consumers may misunderstand what a label guarantees.

This does not mean Fair Trade “doesn't work.”

It means we should stop demanding that one consumer label solve a global system.

The question is not whether Fair Trade is perfect.

It is what problem it can realistically address, what problems remain, and what other forms of regulation, producer organization, labor rights, or public policy are still necessary.

The Electric Car Problem

Electric vehicles generate a similar debate.

Replacing gasoline vehicles with electric ones can significantly reduce direct fossil-fuel consumption and lower lifecycle greenhouse-gas emissions in many contexts, particularly as electricity grids become cleaner.

That is a substantial environmental benefit.

Yet focusing exclusively on replacing the engine can hide the transportation system around it.

A large electric SUV still uses minerals, steel, glass, rubber, road space, parking, electricity, and manufacturing capacity. It still contributes to congestion. Tire and road wear still generate particulate pollution. A transportation system built around private automobiles still requires vast amounts of urban land for roads and parking.

This does not make an electric car environmentally equivalent to a gasoline car.

It means the comparison “electric versus gasoline” is not the only comparison available.

We could also compare:

car dependence versus public transportation,

long commutes versus compact cities,

private ownership versus shared mobility,

large vehicles versus smaller ones.

Environmental analysis improves when we stop asking only which product is greener and begin asking which system requires fewer resources while providing people with the same or better quality of life.

Greenwashing and the Information Problem

The rise of environmental concern has created another market opportunity: appearing sustainable.

Companies now sell products described as green, natural, responsible, climate-friendly, eco-conscious, low-carbon, ethical, or sustainable.

Some of these claims represent genuine improvements.

Others are difficult to verify.

Still others may be examples of greenwashing, in which environmental language creates an impression of responsibility that exceeds the actual environmental performance of the product or company.

This creates an information problem for consumers.

A person standing in a grocery store cannot independently trace every commodity chain, inspect every factory, calculate every lifecycle emission, verify labor conditions, examine wastewater systems, and audit corporate reports.

That is why sustainable consumption cannot depend entirely on individual research.

Certification standards, regulation, disclosure rules, investigative journalism, supply-chain transparency, independent auditing, and public information systems all shape whether consumers have meaningful choices.

The ability to make an ethical choice depends partly on institutions that make the consequences of products visible.

A Circular Economy Changes the Question Upstream

The concept of a circular economy tries to move environmental action earlier in the product lifecycle.

Instead of asking consumers to become better waste managers, it asks manufacturers and policymakers to reconsider how products are designed.

Can products last longer?

Can they be repaired easily?

Can components be reused?

Can materials be recovered?

Can packaging be eliminated?

Can producers retain responsibility after sale?

This is important because downstream environmental campaigns can accidentally normalize wasteful production.

If the product is badly designed, telling millions of consumers to dispose of it perfectly may be much less effective than redesigning the product itself.

That is a fundamental shift in responsibility.

Degrowth Asks a More Uncomfortable Question

Circular production and cleaner technology assume that economic activity can become substantially less environmentally

damaging.

Degrowth scholarship raises a harder question: what if efficiency improvements are not sufficient in already wealthy, high-consumption societies?

Degrowth does not simply mean deliberately creating a recession or forcing everyone into poverty. Rather, many degrowth scholars ask whether continued increases in material consumption can remain compatible with ecological limits and whether societies could instead prioritize wellbeing through public services, redistribution, durable goods, shorter work time, lower material throughput, and less dependence on consumption as the principal measure of prosperity.

Critics respond that economic growth has historically been crucial to poverty reduction, public revenue, infrastructure, technological development, and improvements in living standards. They also argue that poorer countries still require substantial material development.

That critique is important because the global economy contains radically unequal starting points.

A family lacking reliable electricity does not have the same consumption problem as a wealthy household replacing a perfectly functional vehicle with a much larger one.

A country attempting to build hospitals, sanitation systems, housing, and transportation cannot be treated as environmentally equivalent to a high-income country debating the environmental consequences of luxury consumption.

The question “Should humanity consume less?” is therefore too blunt.

A more useful question is:

Who consumes far beyond what is necessary for wellbeing, who still lacks the material basis for a dignified life, and how could global systems address both realities at once?

That question moves us away from environmental guilt and toward political economy.

Personal Responsibility Still Matters

None of this gives individuals permission to ignore their own choices.

Consumer behavior matters.

Voting matters.

Community organizing matters.

Reducing unnecessary consumption matters.

Choosing lower-impact transportation when feasible matters.

Supporting stronger standards matters.

Repair matters.

Recycling matters.

The mistake is not personal responsibility itself.

The mistake is pretending that personal responsibility is the whole system.

The environmental challenge requires action at multiple levels precisely because environmental harm is produced at multiple levels. Individuals influence systems, but governments, companies, infrastructure, technology, finance, and institutions shape the options within which individuals act.

Once we understand that, a larger question comes into view.

Maybe the future is not about choosing between protecting the environment and preserving prosperity.

Maybe it is about redefining what prosperity means.

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7.9: The Future is not "Environment vs Economy"

Sustainability, Justice, and Living Inside Limits

Environmental debates are often framed as if society must choose between competing priorities: protect the environment or protect jobs, regulate industry or preserve economic growth, build clean-energy infrastructure or defend local landscapes, restrict extraction or pursue development. Those conflicts can be real, but the larger framing is misleading because it assumes that the economy and the environment are separate systems negotiating with one another.

They are not.

Every economy depends on material conditions that make production possible. Agriculture requires soil, water, climate, nutrients, and biological systems; manufacturing requires energy and extracted resources; transportation depends on land, infrastructure, fuel, metals, and machinery; even the supposedly weightless digital economy rests on data centers, electricity grids, cables, cooling systems, minerals, devices, and industrial supply chains. The economy therefore does not sit beside the environment as an independent sphere. It operates within ecological systems that impose limits, create dependencies, and absorb consequences.

That simple observation changes how we think about sustainability.

Sustainability Is Really a Question About Time, Distribution, and Power

The most widely cited definition of sustainable development comes from the 1987 Brundtland Report, which described development that meets the needs of the present without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The definition remains useful because it forces us to connect present prosperity to future consequences, but it becomes much more complicated once we begin asking what counts as a need, whose needs are prioritized, how much material consumption is necessary for wellbeing, and who has the authority to decide when environmental damage becomes unacceptable.

That ambiguity helps explain why almost everyone can claim to support sustainability while advocating very different futures.

A mining company may describe the extraction of critical minerals as essential to a sustainable energy transition, while an Indigenous nation may oppose the same project in the name of protecting land, water, sovereignty, and future generations. A government may promote renewable infrastructure as a climate solution, while a community may resist a particular project because it was imposed without meaningful consultation. A consumer may purchase an electric vehicle to reduce emissions, while an urban planner may argue that genuine sustainability requires redesigning cities so fewer people need private cars at all.

The word sustainability does not settle these conflicts. It exposes them.

Once sustainability is understood this way, it becomes less a technical calculation and more a political argument about whose vision of the future will count.

Resilience Is Useful, but It Is Not the Same Thing as Justice

A related concept, resilience, has become central to climate policy and disaster planning. In general, resilience refers to the ability of a system or community to withstand disruption, adapt to changing conditions, and recover after shocks.

That capacity matters enormously in an era of intensifying heat, storms, floods, drought, fires, and infrastructure strain. Cities need electrical grids that continue functioning during extreme weather; agricultural systems need to cope with changing rainfall; communities need emergency systems capable of responding quickly when disasters occur.

Yet resilience becomes a problem when survival itself is treated as evidence that a system is acceptable.

A poor community may become extraordinarily skilled at rebuilding after repeated floods without ever receiving the infrastructure that would reduce the flooding. Workers may demonstrate remarkable resilience in dangerous industries because they have few

alternatives. Households may adapt repeatedly to unreliable electricity, water shortages, or extreme heat while the structural conditions creating those vulnerabilities remain unchanged.

In such cases, the question is not simply whether people can endure.

It is whether they should have to.

This distinction separates resilience from transformation. Sometimes societies need to strengthen existing systems so they survive disruption. At other times, the more just response is to change the system that repeatedly produces the vulnerability.

Whose Knowledge Counts?

Environmental policy also raises a quieter but equally important question: who gets to define the problem?

Modern governments often approach land, water, forests, minerals, and ecosystems through administrative categories. Resources are mapped, surveyed, regulated, priced, leased, conserved, or extracted. Scientific expertise and technical planning are indispensable to many of these decisions, but they are not the only forms of knowledge through which people understand their relationship to land.

Many Indigenous knowledge systems begin from very different relationships among people, territory, nonhuman life, ancestry, obligation, and future generations. There is enormous diversity among Indigenous peoples, so it would be misleading to speak of one universal Indigenous environmental philosophy. Still, scholars including Kyle Whyte emphasize that Indigenous climate knowledge is frequently inseparable from histories of colonialism, dispossession, governance, kinship, and sovereignty (Whyte, 2018).

This matters because governments often describe Indigenous peoples as environmental “stakeholders,” a term that can quietly flatten major political differences. A stakeholder has an interest in a decision. An Indigenous nation may possess treaty rights, territorial claims, jurisdiction, sovereignty, or relationships to land that predate the state conducting the consultation.

Those are not the same thing.

Meaningful environmental justice therefore requires more than inviting communities to comment after the major decisions have already been made. It requires asking whose knowledge defines the problem, whose authority is recognized, and who has the power to say no.

Technology Changes What Is Possible, Not What Is Just

There are legitimate reasons for technological optimism.

Solar and wind power have become dramatically more competitive. Batteries continue to improve. Industrial processes can become more efficient. Buildings can require less energy. Agricultural systems can change. New materials can reduce waste. Transportation can be electrified. Recycling technologies can improve. Carbon-removal technologies may eventually play a significant role in limiting warming.

Technological innovation matters because environmental problems are partly problems of material systems, and those systems can be redesigned.

But technology never arrives outside politics.

A more efficient vehicle may encourage longer commutes. Cheaper electricity may increase total energy use. A new battery chemistry may reduce demand for one mineral while increasing pressure on another. A powerful technology may remain inaccessible to poorer countries because of patents, infrastructure costs, or unequal financing. Carbon-removal technologies may complement rapid emissions reductions, or they may become political excuses for delaying them.

Technology expands the range of choices available to society.

It does not determine which choices society makes.

That is why asking whether technology will “save us” misses the point. Technology is part of the social system we are trying to

understand. Its effects depend on ownership, regulation, access, investment, infrastructure, and political decisions.

No Single Actor Gets to Be the Hero

The same problem appears whenever environmental debates search for one actor that will solve everything.

Governments are essential because they can regulate pollution, establish standards, protect ecosystems, build infrastructure, finance public transportation, tax emissions, subsidize new technologies, and negotiate international agreements. Markets matter because they can mobilize investment and scale innovations quickly. Companies matter because they design products, organize supply chains, employ workers, and control enormous amounts of capital. Consumers matter because their choices influence demand and because consumers are also voters, workers, organizers, and community members.

International institutions coordinate problems that cross borders, while local communities often possess knowledge that distant agencies lack. Indigenous nations may exercise rights and governance authority that cannot be reduced to consultation. Scientists help societies understand environmental change, while activists frequently reshape what governments and companies consider politically possible.

None of these actors is sufficient on its own.

Environmental governance therefore looks less like finding the right hero and more like redesigning relationships among institutions, markets, communities, technologies, and political authority. Ostrom's concept of polycentric governance becomes useful again here because complex environmental systems may require overlapping centers of decision-making rather than one institution attempting to command everything from above.

The difficulty, of course, is that these actors do not possess equal power.

A multinational corporation can shape investment decisions across continents. A local community may struggle simply to gain access to the meeting where those decisions are discussed. An international agreement may establish ambitious goals while national governments still control implementation. A consumer may technically possess “choice” while price and infrastructure make some options unrealistic.

Sustainability therefore cannot be separated from power.

One Planet Does Not Mean One Starting Point

Perhaps the most difficult part of the sustainability debate is that humanity shares ecological limits without sharing equal material conditions.

Hundreds of millions of people still lack reliable access to electricity, sanitation, adequate housing, transportation, health care, nutrition, and other basic foundations of wellbeing. A sustainable future cannot simply freeze current patterns of consumption in place because current patterns already include enormous deprivation.

At the same time, wealthy societies cannot assume that every form of consumption can continue expanding indefinitely simply because technologies become more efficient.

These two realities have to be addressed together.

For households lacking basic infrastructure, development may require more material consumption, more energy, more housing, more transportation, and more public investment. For affluent households whose consumption greatly exceeds what is necessary for a high quality of life, sustainability may require less material throughput, longer-lasting products, different transportation systems, and a shift away from consumption as the primary measure of prosperity.

That is why the question “Should humanity consume less?” is too crude.

Humanity is not one household with one budget.

A more useful question asks how societies can reduce ecologically damaging forms of excess while expanding access to the material conditions necessary for a dignified life.

Once again, sustainability becomes inseparable from inequality.

Seeing the System Again

At this point, return to something ordinary you used today.

Maybe it was your phone, your shoes, your lunch, your laptop, your electricity, your car, or the bottle sitting beside you.

Instead of seeing a finished object, imagine the system behind it.

Its materials came from somewhere. Someone extracted them. Energy transformed them. Workers assembled them. Laws shaped the process. Companies captured value. Infrastructure moved the product. Environmental costs were created along the way, and those costs did not necessarily remain where the benefits were enjoyed.

Eventually the object will stop being useful.

Then another system will decide whether it is repaired, reused, resold, dismantled, recycled, buried, burned, exported, or simply forgotten.

This is the environmental version of the Global Autopsy introduced earlier in the book. The purpose is not to make every object seem morally suspect or to convince students that ordinary life is impossible without guilt. The purpose is to make systems visible.

Once those systems become visible, different questions become possible. We can ask not only whether a product is “green,” but whether the institutions surrounding it distribute costs fairly, whether communities have meaningful power over extraction and disposal, whether the product was designed to last, whether alternatives exist, and whether the system could meet human needs with less environmental harm.

The object is rarely the whole story.

The relationships around it are.

There Is No “Away”

The environmental question of the twenty-first century is no longer whether human societies are capable of changing the planet.

We already have.

We have transformed landscapes, altered rivers, changed atmospheric chemistry, moved species across continents, expanded cities, reorganized coastlines, built industrial systems that stretch across the world, and created flows of energy and materials large enough to influence planetary processes.

The harder question is whether we can deliberately redesign the systems through which we now live.

That redesign will involve technology, but it cannot rely on technology alone. It will require governments capable of regulating and investing, but governments cannot succeed without social legitimacy and international cooperation. Markets can help scale new technologies, but markets alone do not guarantee justice. Consumer behavior matters, but consumers do not control the entire structure of production. Communities need greater power, especially when environmental decisions reshape the places where they live, yet local action alone cannot govern the atmosphere.

There is no single lever to pull.

There is no perfect actor waiting to rescue everyone else.

And there is no environmental solution that becomes just merely because it reduces carbon.

A sustainable future will depend on whether societies can reduce environmental harm while also confronting the inequalities that determine who benefits from extraction, who controls resources, who can adapt to disruption, and whose losses are treated as acceptable.

That is why this chapter began with something as ordinary as throwing an object away.

The action seems simple because the system behind it is hidden.

Global Studies teaches us to make that system visible.

Follow the material far enough and you eventually encounter labor, markets, borders, corporations, governments, ecosystems, communities, technology, inequality, and power.

Follow the consequences far enough and the same lesson keeps returning.

There is no “away.”

There is only somewhere else.

Where We Go Next

The environmental systems explored in this chapter have repeatedly shown that global risks are filtered through existing distributions of social and political power. Pollution does not affect every community equally, climate hazards do not create identical consequences everywhere, and access to energy, land, resources, decision-making authority, and the ability to adapt are all structured by inequality.

The next chapter turns to another major system through which power is organized: gender.

Rather than treating gender as a separate social topic, Chapter 8 examines how global labor, political representation, security, health, law, identity, and everyday life change when gender becomes part of the analysis. As with the environment, what initially looks like one issue quickly reveals a much larger system.

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7.10: Discussion

Lets Talk About It

1. Is Climate Change Really a “Tragedy of the Commons”?

Hardin's tragedy-of-the-commons model suggests that individuals pursuing their own interests can collectively destroy a shared resource. Ostrom demonstrated that communities can create institutions capable of governing commons successfully.

Which framework better helps explain climate change?

Make a clear claim. Use at least two pieces of evidence or examples from the chapter, explain one limitation of the framework you chose, and respond to a plausible counterargument.

2. Can a Green Transition Still Be Unjust?

Consider one clean-energy technology discussed in this chapter, such as electric vehicles, solar energy, wind power, batteries, or electricity-storage systems.

Can expanding that technology reduce global environmental harm while simultaneously creating environmental injustice in particular communities?

Explain how both outcomes could occur at the same time. Your response should identify at least one benefit, one burden, and one question about political power or decision-making.

3. How Much Environmental Responsibility Belongs to You?

Some environmental campaigns emphasize individual choices such as recycling, consuming less, buying certified products, or choosing lower-carbon transportation. Others emphasize governments, companies, infrastructure, and economic systems.

Where should responsibility primarily lie?

Avoid answering “everyone” without explaining how responsibility should differ. Compare at least three actors, such as consumers, corporations, governments, wealthy states, lower-income states, or international institutions. Defend how responsibility should be distributed and why.

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7.11: Assignments

Assignment 1: Follow the Thing, Environmental Edition

Choose one physical object that you use regularly. Possible examples include a smartphone, laptop, pair of sneakers, coffee cup, electric-vehicle battery, T-shirt, water bottle, piece of furniture, or packaged food product.

Trace its environmental life cycle as far as available evidence allows.

Your analysis should address where major raw materials originate, how the product is manufactured, what energy systems support production and transportation, which environmental impacts appear along the supply chain, who receives economic value, which communities experience environmental risk, what happens at the end of the product's useful life, and what policy or design change could reduce its total impact.

Your final project should include at least five credible sources and one original visual showing the product's environmental journey.

Do not simply calculate a carbon footprint. The purpose is to identify the system around the product.

Conclude by answering:

Where did the product's environmental costs go, and who had the least power over that outcome?

Assignment 2: The Just Transition Policy Challenge

Choose one country or region undergoing a significant energy transition.

Examples might include a coal-dependent region, a petroleum-exporting state, a country rapidly expanding renewable energy, or a mineral-producing country experiencing increased demand because of clean-energy technologies.

Prepare a policy brief evaluating the transition through four lenses:

environmental effectiveness, economic consequences, social justice, and political feasibility.

Identify major stakeholders and explain what each stands to gain or lose. Your recommendations must address workers, affected communities, consumers, and environmental goals.

The challenge is not to design a transition with no tradeoffs.

It is to make the tradeoffs visible and defend which ones are ethically and politically acceptable.

Suggested length: 1,200 to 1,500 words.

Assignment 3: Who Pays for Climate Change?

Select a climate-impact case involving two or more countries or communities with substantially different levels of responsibility and vulnerability.

Possible cases include sea-level rise in Pacific Island states, flood risk in South Asia, extreme heat in unequal cities, drought in the Horn of Africa, wildfire risk, glacier loss, or another instructor-approved case.

Analyze the case using at least three different measures of climate responsibility:

current emissions, historical emissions, per-capita emissions, or consumption-based emissions.

Then assess vulnerability by considering infrastructure, income, political capacity, geography, inequality, and access to adaptation

resources.

Your final recommendation must answer:

Who should finance adaptation or loss and damage in this case, and on what principle should that responsibility be based?

Support your argument with evidence and acknowledge at least one serious counterargument.

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7.12: Key Terms

Words to Know

- **Adaptation:** Adjustments in human or ecological systems that reduce vulnerability to actual or expected climate impacts.
- **Anthropocene:** A widely used term for a proposed era in which human activity has become a major force affecting Earth systems.
- **Capitalocene:** A critical alternative to the Anthropocene concept that emphasizes capitalism, extraction, accumulation, and unequal economic systems as major drivers of planetary environmental change.
- **Circular Economy:** An economic approach emphasizing durability, reuse, repair, remanufacturing, and recycling in order to reduce waste and reliance on virgin material extraction.
- **Climate Justice:** An approach to climate change emphasizing unequal responsibility, vulnerability, power, impacts, and capacity to respond.
- **Common but Differentiated Responsibilities:** A principle of global environmental governance recognizing that states share environmental responsibilities but differ in historical contribution and capacity.
- **Common-Pool Resource:** A resource from which it can be difficult to exclude users and where one user's consumption can reduce availability for others.
- **Critical Minerals:** Minerals considered important for economic, technological, or strategic purposes and potentially vulnerable to supply disruption.
- **Degrowth:** A body of scholarship questioning whether continued material economic expansion in wealthy societies is compatible with ecological limits and exploring alternative models of prosperity and wellbeing.
- **Energy Justice:** An approach examining how energy-system benefits, burdens, decision-making power, and historical harms are distributed.
- **Energy Poverty:** Inadequate or unaffordable access to energy services necessary for basic wellbeing.
- **Energy Security:** Reliable and affordable access to energy while limiting vulnerability to disruption or supply risk.
- **Environmental Justice:** A framework examining the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and hazards and the degree to which affected communities participate in decisions.
- **Externality:** A cost or benefit generated by an activity that is not fully incorporated into the market transaction producing it.
- **Feedback Loop:** A process through which an initial change creates effects that either reinforce or counteract that change.
- **Global Environmental Governance:** The network of states, international institutions, communities, companies, civil-society organizations, treaties, and norms through which transboundary environmental issues are governed.
- **Great Acceleration:** The rapid expansion of human economic activity, consumption, population, resource use, and associated Earth-system changes, particularly after the mid-twentieth century.
- **Green Extractivism:** The concern that transitions toward low-carbon technologies can reproduce intensive and unequal patterns of resource extraction.
- **Greenwashing:** Misleading or exaggerated environmental claims used to make a product, organization, or activity appear more sustainable than it is.
- **Just Transition:** An approach to environmental transition that combines decarbonization with decent work, social protection, participation, fairness, and attention to communities affected by economic change.
- **Loss and Damage:** Climate-related harms that cannot be fully prevented through mitigation or adaptation.
- **Mitigation:** Actions intended to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions or enhance processes that remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere.
- **Planetary Boundaries:** A scientific framework identifying major Earth-system processes and proposed limits associated with maintaining relatively stable conditions for human societies.
- **Polycentric Governance:** Governance occurring through multiple overlapping and interacting centers of authority rather than a single central institution.
- **Resilience:** The capacity of a community or system to withstand, adapt to, or recover from disruption.
- **Resource Curse:** The theory that abundant natural-resource wealth can under some political and institutional conditions contribute to poor governance, conflict, corruption, or economic overdependence rather than broad development.
- **Sustainability:** The pursuit of human wellbeing in ways that maintain ecological and social systems over time and do not undermine future generations' ability to meet their needs.
- **Tragedy of the Commons:** A model in which individually rational use of a shared, limited resource can generate collective depletion when effective governance institutions are absent.
- **Vulnerability:** The degree to which individuals, communities, or systems are susceptible to harm and lack the capacity to anticipate, cope with, or recover from it.

- **Adaptation Note for Staff:** Key-term list compiled and written for this revised edition.

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7.13: References

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8: THE WORLD IS NOT GENDER-NEUTRAL

Power, Work, Bodies, and the Fight Over Who Gets to Shape the Future



Figure 8.1: A group fo women representative of some of the diversity found in the world. (Photo by Joeyy Lee on Unsplash)

There is something a little strange about putting women in Chapter 8.

Women were in Chapters 1 through 7.

They grew food, crossed borders, staffed hospitals, worked in factories, raised children, organized protests, survived wars, ran businesses, governed countries, cared for aging relatives, managed households, migrated for work, built social movements, consumed media, produced culture, and lived through climate change.

They just were not always named.

That is the problem this chapter takes seriously.

Global systems often present themselves as if they operate on everyone in roughly the same way. A labor market is a labor market. A healthcare system is a healthcare system. A drought is a drought. A war is a war. A new technology is a new technology.

Except they are not experienced evenly.

Whether someone can own property, move freely, control their earnings, attend school, participate in politics, decide whether and when to have children, inherit wealth, use technology safely, or leave an abusive household can depend partly on gender. Those patterns are then reshaped by class, race, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, citizenship, age, geography, and other dimensions of social power.

That means gender is not simply another global issue to place next to trade, climate change, migration, or health.

Gender changes how those issues work.

Other previous scholarship on women treated women's health, violence against women, women in armed conflict, women in the economy, political decision-making, environmental issues, poverty, girls' rights, media, and education as separate subjects. There is value in all of them. But Global Studies asks us to connect the pieces.

So that's what we are going to do.

Instead of asking, “What problems do women face?” we will ask a more useful question:

What do global systems look like when we stop assuming that they are gender-neutral?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- Explain how gender operates as a system of power that shapes economic, political, cultural, technological, and environmental experiences across societies.
- Analyze how gender intersects with class, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, disability, migration status, and other identities to produce different experiences of globalization.
- Evaluate the relationship between gender and global labor systems, including unpaid care work, occupational segregation, migration, informal labor, and economic inequality.
- Distinguish between formal rights and substantive equality in areas such as health, reproductive autonomy, political participation, education, and protection from violence.
- Assess the roles women play in conflict, peacebuilding, political leadership, environmental action, and social movements without reducing women to either victims or symbols of empowerment.
- Examine how digital technologies and artificial intelligence can both reproduce and challenge gender inequality, particularly through online harassment, deepfakes, political participation, and transnational organizing.
- Critically evaluate the concept of empowerment by distinguishing between interventions that help individuals navigate unequal systems and reforms that change the structures producing inequality.
- Apply a gender lens to futures thinking by identifying how present-day inequalities shape who benefits from, influences, or bears the risks of emerging global changes.

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8.1: Gender Is Not a Side Quest

Looking Again at the World We Have Already Studied

Imagine replaying the previous chapters with one additional question switched on.

Consider a garment factory. We might analyze supply chains, wages, multinational corporations, trade agreements, and consumer demand. Now ask why particular industries employ overwhelmingly female workforces, why some employers prefer younger women workers, who performs unpaid household labor after the factory shift ends, and who has the power to organize for better conditions.

Consider migration. We might examine borders, labor demand, remittances, displacement, and citizenship. Add gender and new patterns appear. Some migrants enter construction or agricultural labor while others enter domestic work, eldercare, nursing, hospitality, or the sex trade. Immigration status can affect people's ability to leave abusive employers or relationships. Family expectations may influence who migrates, who stays, who sends money home, and who cares for children left behind.

Consider climate change. A drought affects everyone in a region, but it does not necessarily affect everyone in the same way. If women perform most household water collection, have less secure access to land, own fewer financial assets, or have less influence over agricultural decisions, the environmental shock travels through a gendered social system.

This is why scholars distinguish between biological sex and gender. Gender refers to socially constructed expectations, roles, identities, relationships, and institutions associated with masculinity, femininity, and other gender identities. These norms differ across societies and historical periods, which is precisely why gender is such an interesting subject for Global Studies: what appears “natural” in one context may be organized very differently somewhere else.

Gender also concerns men.

Expectations surrounding masculinity can shape military recruitment, violence, health behavior, migration, employment, political leadership, emotional expression, and risk-taking. Research on gender and health, for example, has long shown that norms encouraging men to appear invulnerable can discourage healthcare seeking and contribute to poorer health outcomes. The old Chapter 8 included precisely this useful reminder in its health resources, pointing students toward scholarship on constructions of masculinity and men's well-being.

So a gender analysis is not shorthand for “study women.”

It asks how societies organize expectations and power around gender, and what consequences follow.

Intersectionality: The Difference That Makes a Difference

There is another complication.

There is no universal “woman's experience.”

A billionaire executive and an undocumented domestic worker may both encounter sexism, but they do not encounter the same labor market, immigration system, healthcare system, or degree of political influence. A rural girl facing barriers to secondary education, an Indigenous environmental activist defending ancestral land, a transgender woman navigating public space, and a prime minister governing a wealthy democracy all occupy very different social positions.

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized the term intersectionality to describe how systems of inequality intersect rather than simply stack neatly on top of one another (Crenshaw, 1989). Gender interacts with race, class, ethnicity, caste, nationality, disability, sexuality, religion, and other structures of power.

Intersectionality therefore changes the question.

Instead of asking:

How are women affected?

we ask:

Which women? Where? Under what institutions? With what resources? Compared with whom?

That small change makes the analysis considerably better.

Be Careful With the Rescue Story

Gender analysis also requires intellectual humility.

Global discussions of women's rights have sometimes divided the world into supposedly “liberated” women in one part of the globe and “oppressed” women somewhere else. Muslim women, in particular, have repeatedly been represented in Western political and media discourse through narrow images of veiling, victimhood, and rescue. The inherited chapter itself contained material asking students to interrogate representations of “Third World women” by Western NGOs.

This does not mean ignoring discrimination.

It means distinguishing between criticizing an institution or practice and imagining that entire societies can be reduced to it.

Women everywhere debate the meaning of freedom, family, work, religion, sexuality, modesty, tradition, equality, and autonomy. Those debates happen within societies, not merely between “the West” and everyone else.

Global Studies becomes much more interesting once we stop sorting the world into heroes who save and victims who wait.

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8.2: The Economy Has a Gender

The Work the World Needs and the Work the World Counts



Figure 8.2.1: The economy has a gender. The visible paid economy depends on a less visible foundation of care work, including childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, emotional labor, and household management. Much of this work is unpaid or underpaid and is disproportionately performed by women. Global care chains can shift care responsibilities across borders as migrant workers provide care abroad, send remittances home, and rely on relatives or other caregivers to assume responsibilities in their communities of origin. (CC BY 4.0; author via promt generation using ChatGpt)

Figure 8.2.1 is an infographic titled “The Economy Has a Gender.” It illustrates the relationship between the visible paid economy and the less visible care work that supports it. At the top of the image is a large platform labeled “Paid Economy.” The platform contains illustrations representing offices, hospitals, schools, factories, shops, and service work. These activities represent employment and economic activity that are typically counted in formal economic statistics. The paid economy is shown resting on a larger foundation labeled “Care Work.” This supporting layer includes six forms of work: childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, emotional labor, and household management. Illustrations show people caring for children and older adults, preparing food, cleaning a home, providing emotional support, and managing household responsibilities. Text beneath the foundation states: “The paid economy depends on care work.” A note beside the illustration explains that much of this care work is unpaid or underpaid and is disproportionately performed by women. The arrangement of the image emphasizes that formal economic activity depends on care labor even when that labor is not fully recognized or compensated by markets. The lower portion of the infographic is titled “Global Care Chains.” It shows a woman leaving her home country to work as a caregiver abroad. At home, responsibility for children or other family members is transferred to another woman or family member. The migrant worker travels internationally and provides care for another household, represented by an illustration of her assisting an older person. An arrow labeled “Remittances Home” shows money flowing from the migrant worker back to her household or community of origin. The visual therefore illustrates how paid care in one household can depend on the reorganization of unpaid or underpaid care in another household, sometimes across national borders. At the bottom, the infographic concludes with the statement: “The work the world needs is not always the work the world counts.”

Here is one of the stranger features of the global economy.

Every day, billions of hours of economically essential work are performed without appearing on a paycheck.

Children are fed. Elderly relatives are bathed. Homes are cleaned. Food is prepared. Water is collected. Family members are transported to medical appointments. Emotional crises are managed. School schedules are coordinated. Sick relatives are cared for.

Now remove that labor for a week.

Good luck running the economy.

Yet much of this activity sits outside conventional measures of economic production, and women perform a disproportionate share of it. UN Women reports that women and girls globally devote about 2.5 times as many hours per day to unpaid domestic and care work as men.

That statistic looks like a household statistic.

It is actually a globalization statistic.

The Shift After the Shift

Suppose two people finish an eight-hour paid workday at the same time. One goes home and begins several additional hours of cooking, cleaning, childcare, or eldercare. The other does considerably less.

Their official workday may look identical.

Their actual workday is not.

Feminist economists have long criticized economic models that treat households as private spaces outside the “real” economy. Scholars including Lourdes Benería, Günseli Berik, and Maria Floro argue that globalization cannot be understood without examining how paid production depends on unpaid reproductive and care labor (Benería, Berik, & Floro, 2015).

This relationship becomes especially visible in what scholars call global care chains.

A woman from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Mexico, Moldova, or another migrant-sending society may leave her own family to provide childcare or eldercare for a wealthier household abroad. Her wages may support children and relatives at home, while another family member, often another woman, takes on the care work she previously performed.

One household solves a care shortage by importing someone else's labor.

The labor crosses borders.

The need for care does not disappear. It moves.

Why Are Some Jobs “Women's Work”?

Global labor markets also divide occupations by gender.

Garment manufacturing has historically relied heavily on women workers. Nursing and care sectors are feminized in many countries. Domestic work remains disproportionately performed by women. Men dominate numerous construction, transportation, extraction, and military occupations.

These patterns do not arise because women mysteriously possess garment-factory DNA while men inherit forklift chromosomes.

They are produced through social expectations, education, employer preferences, discrimination, immigration policy, wage structures, and histories of industrial development.

Employers have sometimes actively recruited women into export-processing industries because they were stereotyped as patient, obedient, dexterous, or less likely to organize. Those assumptions may appear cultural, but they can have very profitable economic consequences.

Gender norms can therefore become business models.

The Double Burden

When women enter paid employment without a corresponding redistribution of household labor, economists and sociologists often describe the result as a **double burden**: paid work layered on top of unpaid domestic responsibilities.

The phrase is useful, but the phenomenon has larger consequences than simple exhaustion.

Time itself becomes a resource.

A person spending several additional hours each day on unpaid care has fewer hours available for paid employment, education, political participation, networking, rest, entrepreneurship, or leisure. Over decades, those lost hours can translate into differences in earnings, promotions, pensions, wealth accumulation, and political influence.

Inequality can accumulate quietly.

Not through one spectacular discriminatory act, but through thousands of ordinary days.

When “Empowerment” Meets the Market

Development organizations have spent decades promoting women's entrepreneurship, cooperatives, microfinance, vocational training, financial inclusion, and access to credit. Some of these efforts have produced meaningful gains, particularly where women previously lacked independent access to financial resources.

The original Chapter 8 featured examples of women's cooperatives and entrepreneurial initiatives as routes toward greater economic autonomy.

But we should ask a harder question.

What exactly is being transformed?

Imagine a woman receives a microloan, starts a small business, earns additional income, and gains greater financial influence within her household. That can matter enormously.

Now imagine that she remains responsible for nearly all childcare, has no affordable healthcare, lacks legal title to property, faces harassment in the marketplace, cannot access formal credit, and works within an economy offering few secure jobs.

She may have become more economically active without the underlying structure becoming particularly equal.

That does not make entrepreneurship meaningless.

It means individual resilience and structural transformation are not the same thing.

The world's women do not simply need better instructions for navigating inequality.

Sometimes the road needs rebuilding.

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8.3: Your Body, Whose Rules?

Health, Reproduction, Violence, and Bodily Autonomy

Bodies are extraordinarily personal.

Politics has nevertheless spent a great deal of time managing them.

Governments regulate abortion. Families influence marriage. Healthcare institutions determine access to reproductive services. Religious authorities shape moral norms. Employers structure maternity benefits. Legal systems decide which forms of violence count as crimes. Immigration systems can make victims dependent on partners or employers. Schools determine what students learn about sexuality and reproduction.

The phrase bodily autonomy captures the underlying issue: to what extent can a person make meaningful decisions about their own body, health, sexuality, and reproduction?

The word meaningful matters.

A right that exists only on paper may not be fully usable.

A Right, Technically

Imagine a country guarantees reproductive healthcare by law.

Now imagine the nearest clinic is six hours away.

Or the service costs more than a month's wages.

Or a woman needs permission from her husband.

Or an undocumented worker fears that entering a public institution could expose her immigration status.

Or healthcare workers refuse treatment.

Or the law technically protects abortion but no providers operate within hundreds of kilometers.

The formal right exists.

The substantive ability to exercise it does not.

This difference between formal equality and substantive equality appears throughout gender politics.

The old Chapter 8 included material on maternal health, HIV, obstetric violence, reproductive healthcare, and the political challenges involved in influencing health policy. Those topics remain valuable, but they make more sense when understood as pieces of one larger argument about autonomy and access.

Violence Is Not Simply “Private”

Gender-based violence provides an especially powerful example of the relationship between private experience and public systems.

Intimate-partner violence occurs inside homes, but its prevalence is influenced by laws, policing, economic dependency, housing access, social norms, stigma, healthcare services, weapons access, immigration rules, and the availability of shelters or legal assistance.

Sexual violence can occur during war, at work, in schools, during migration, in detention, online, or within families.

Child marriage may be influenced by tradition, but also by poverty, insecurity, education systems, conflict, family strategy, and state capacity.

That is why political scientist Jacqui True argues that violence against women has a political economy. Violence is not disconnected from markets, states, and global inequality; it is shaped by them (True, 2012).

This matters because descriptions such as “cultural violence” can become analytically lazy.

Culture matters.

But so do money, law, institutions, war, labor markets, property rights, and political power.

Economic Exit Matters

Consider one uncomfortable question:

What does it take to leave?

Leaving an abusive relationship may require money, transportation, childcare, housing, legal documentation, employment, access to a bank account, family support, police protection, and confidence that the legal system will respond effectively.

A person can therefore possess freedom in principle but lack the infrastructure necessary to use it.

This brings us directly back to economics.

A wage can become a form of autonomy.

So can affordable childcare.

So can public transportation.

So can legal aid.

Gender equality is sometimes debated as a matter of attitudes. Attitudes matter enormously, but material infrastructure often determines whether choices are actually possible.

Health Is Also About Power

Health systems themselves are not neutral institutions.

Who is studied in medical research? Whose pain is believed? Which conditions receive funding? Who provides care? Who controls reproductive decisions? Which populations can access doctors? How do colonial histories and global inequalities shape health infrastructure?

The inherited chapter's health material was one of its stronger areas precisely because it moved beyond biology, connecting women's health to HIV, reproductive policy, medical systems, economic inequality, and political decision-making.

The broader lesson is simple:

A body may belong to an individual, but the conditions under which that body lives are profoundly social.

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8.4: A Seat at the Table Is Not the Same as Power

Representation, Leadership, and Who Actually Makes the Rules

A photograph can tell you who is standing in a room. It cannot necessarily tell you who controls it. That distinction matters when we discuss women's political representation. As of January 1, 2025, women held approximately 27.2 percent of seats in national parliaments worldwide. At the same time, more than one hundred countries had never had a woman serve as head of state or government. Political representation has changed dramatically over the last several decades, but progress has been uneven, and numbers alone do not answer the most important questions.

Representation Changes the Room

There are good reasons to care who sits in legislatures, cabinets, courts, local governments, peace negotiations, corporate boards, university leadership teams, and international organizations. Political institutions make decisions about reproductive policy, war, education, transportation, labor, taxation, childcare, healthcare, environmental regulation, family law, and public spending. If half the population is largely absent from those decisions, the democratic problem should be fairly obvious. Many governments have therefore adopted gender quotas or parity rules designed to increase women's representation. Rwanda became internationally known for having one of the world's highest proportions of women in parliament. Mexico developed increasingly strong parity requirements and elected Claudia Sheinbaum as its first woman president in 2024. Such changes matter. But they produce another question.

Which Women, Representing Whom?

A woman entering political office does not automatically represent every woman. Women disagree politically. They belong to competing parties, classes, religious traditions, ethnic groups, ideological movements, and economic interests. A wealthy female legislator may have little in common economically with a low-income female agricultural worker. A woman politician may champion reproductive rights or oppose them. She may expand social welfare or cut it. She may challenge patriarchal institutions or govern comfortably within them. Gender diversity can change political institutions without eliminating politics. Good. That is what democracy looks like. The analytical mistake is assuming that demographic representation automatically produces substantive representation. Political scientists often distinguish between descriptive representation, who occupies office, and substantive representation, whose interests and priorities shape policy. A parliament may become more gender-balanced while major economic, legal, or cultural inequalities persist. The chair at the table matters. So does the agenda. So does the budget. So does who can say no.

Table 8.4.1: Comparison of Descriptive and Substantive Representation

Descriptive Representation	Substantive Representation
Who is in the room?	Who shapes the agenda?
Who holds office?	Whose interests influence policy?
How many women are represented?	Who controls budgets, rules, and decisions?

The Architecture Behind the Politician

International women's-rights frameworks have attempted to move the discussion beyond individual leaders. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, created an international legal framework for addressing discrimination. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted in 1995, identified major areas requiring government action, including education, health, violence, armed conflict, the economy, political power, media, and the environment. Much of the inherited Chapter 8 was organized around precisely those Beijing issue areas. One strategy emerging from this history is gender mainstreaming, the idea that policymakers should consider gendered consequences across all areas of policy rather than confining gender equality to one isolated ministry. The concept is sensible. Its implementation is harder. A government can create a women's ministry with a tiny budget. A corporation can announce a gender initiative while maintaining unequal promotion structures. An institution can publish an equality strategy without changing who controls resources. Which

gives us a useful Global Studies rule: Never confuse the existence of an institution with the distribution of power inside it.

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8.5: War Is Gendered. Peace Is Too.

Conflict, Displacement, Security, and Political Agency

When war appears in textbooks, the cast of characters is often predictable.

Presidents.

Generals.

Militias.

Diplomats.

Soldiers.

Maps.

Women and children tend to appear later under the heading “civilian casualties.” That tells us something about how security has traditionally been studied. It tells us less about how war actually works. Women can be civilians, soldiers, guerrillas, political leaders, organizers, journalists, doctors, humanitarian workers, spies, protesters, displaced people, negotiators, survivors, perpetrators, and peacebuilders. Sometimes several at once.

War Rearranges Everyday Life

Armed conflict destroys infrastructure, but it also rearranges social roles. When people are killed, conscripted, imprisoned, displaced, or forced to migrate, household responsibilities change. Women may become primary earners, heads of households, community organizers, caregivers, traders, or political actors under conditions they did not choose. Conflict can also intensify existing inequalities. Sexual violence has been used strategically in numerous wars. Displacement can increase exposure to trafficking, exploitation, early marriage, and unsafe work. Health systems collapse. Schools close. Property records disappear. Food systems become unstable. In 2025, UN Women estimated that more than 612 million women and girls were living in conflict-affected areas. Yet focusing only on vulnerability leaves half the story untold.

Resolution 1325: A Different Definition of Security

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The resolution was significant because it did not merely ask governments to protect women during conflict. It recognized that women should participate meaningfully in preventing war, negotiating peace, conducting peacekeeping, rebuilding institutions, and designing post-conflict societies. That sounds obvious now. Historically, it was not. For generations, peace agreements were frequently negotiated almost entirely by men despite the fact that the resulting political arrangements governed everyone. Twenty-five years after Resolution 1325, however, implementation remains deeply incomplete. UN Women reported that in 2024, only about one in ten peace negotiators was a woman, even as global conflict intensified. That produces a rather astonishing contradiction: The international community has spent decades officially declaring women's participation essential to peace. Then it repeatedly negotiates peace without them.

Afghanistan: Education as Political Space

Afghanistan makes the relationship between gender, security, state power, and public life especially visible. Since returning to power in 2021, the Taliban has imposed extensive restrictions on women's education, work, mobility, and participation in public life. UNESCO reported in August 2025 that Afghanistan remained the only country in the world where secondary and higher education were prohibited for girls and women, leaving approximately 2.2 million girls and young women excluded from education beyond primary school. Education here is not merely about schooling. It determines who can become a doctor, journalist, civil servant, professor, engineer, political organizer, or business owner.Restricting education today reorganizes society tomorrow. And yet Afghan women have continued teaching through informal networks, documenting restrictions, advocating internationally,

operating businesses where possible, producing journalism, and organizing inside and outside the country. They are not footnotes to Afghanistan's political story. They are among its political actors.

Liberia and the Politics of Peace



Figure 8.5.1: Leymah Gbowee and women's peacebuilding. Liberian peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Leymah Gbowee, whose work with the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace helped demonstrate the political power of women's grassroots peace activism. (International Development Law Organization, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

Consider a very different case.

During Liberia's civil war, women's peace activism became internationally visible through the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement, associated with activist Leymah Gbowee and a broad coalition of Christian and Muslim women. Women organized demonstrations, pressured political leaders, and demanded negotiations. Their actions did not single-handedly end Liberia's war, and romanticizing peace movements would oversimplify a complex conflict. But their participation challenges one of the oldest assumptions in international politics: that security is produced mainly by people with weapons. Sometimes political power looks like a military convoy. Sometimes it looks like thousands of women refusing to leave.

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8.6: There Is No Gender-Neutral Climate Crisis

Land, Water, Extraction, and the Unequal Capacity to Adapt

A flood does not check someone's gender before entering a house.

A drought does not discriminate.

A cyclone does not have a political ideology.

And yet environmental crises regularly produce unequal effects.

How?

Because environmental hazards collide with societies that were unequal before the hazard arrived.

Suppose a community experiences severe drought. If women are responsible for collecting household water, the distance they travel may increase. If land titles are primarily held by men, women farmers may have less access to credit or compensation. If women have fewer financial assets, relocation may be harder. If girls' household labor increases when water becomes scarce, school attendance may suffer.

The drought is environmental.

The vulnerability is socially organized.

Women Are Not “Naturally” Environmental

There is an important trap here.

Development literature has sometimes portrayed women as inherently closer to nature: natural caregivers, natural conservationists, natural stewards of the earth.

That sounds flattering.

It can also reproduce stereotypes.

Women often possess extensive ecological knowledge because their socially assigned work involves agriculture, forests, water, seeds, food preparation, or household resource management. Those forms of knowledge are valuable precisely because they are learned, practiced, inherited, and embedded in communities.

Not because of chromosomes.

Ownership Changes Vulnerability

Property rights are especially important.

In agricultural societies, access to land can determine income, food security, status, collateral, inheritance, and political influence. Where women's ownership or inheritance rights are restricted in law or practice, climate shocks can magnify economic vulnerability.

Imagine two farmers experience the same crop failure.

One owns land, holds insurance, controls a bank account, has access to agricultural credit, and can sell an asset.

The other cultivates land informally, lacks title, has no independent account, and needs permission to make major financial

decisions.

Same drought.

Very different crisis.

From Vulnerability to Leadership

Women are also deeply involved in climate adaptation and environmental movements.

Indigenous women have organized against mining, pipelines, deforestation, and land dispossession. Women's agricultural cooperatives have developed local adaptation strategies. Community organizations have managed water, forests, seeds, and disaster response.

The inherited Chapter 8 already contained this more complicated story, recognizing women's disproportionate environmental vulnerability while also emphasizing women's environmental leadership.

That is exactly the framing we want.

Not:

Women are victims of climate change.

But:

Gender affects exposure, resources, authority, knowledge, and the ability to respond.

Chapter 7 taught us that environmental problems are never only environmental.

Chapter 8 adds one more layer.

Neither are their solutions.

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8.7: The Internet Did Not Delete Patriarchy

Media, AI, Deepfakes, and the Globalization of Misogyny

For a brief and glorious moment, the internet was going to democratize everything.

Anyone could publish.

Anyone could organize.

Anyone could speak.

Gatekeepers would disappear.

Information would be free.

Humanity would connect.

You have probably noticed some complications.

Digital technologies have unquestionably expanded political participation. Feminist movements have used social media to share testimony, expose abuse, organize protests, raise money, educate audiences, build communities, and coordinate transnational campaigns.

The #MeToo movement spread across national boundaries while taking locally specific forms. Ni Una Menos, originating in Argentina in response to femicide and gender-based violence, expanded across Latin America and beyond. Iranian women and their allies used digital platforms to circulate images and messages during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests. Afghan activists have used online networks to document restrictions that might otherwise disappear from international attention.

Digital globalization can make solidarity extraordinarily fast.

Unfortunately, hatred travels quickly too.

Old Misogyny, New Machinery

Online harassment, cyberstalking, doxing, nonconsensual image sharing, threats, coordinated disinformation, and sexualized abuse have become major barriers to participation in digital public life.

Then generative AI arrived.

AI can now create realistic fake images, imitate voices, automate harassment, generate personalized threats, assist stalking, scale impersonation, and produce enormous quantities of synthetic sexual material.

UN Women has warned that generative AI is intensifying technology-facilitated violence by increasing its speed, scale, accessibility, and potential for anonymity. Research summarized by the organization indicates that women are overwhelmingly the targets of nonconsensual sexual deepfakes.

Notice what happened.

The technology did not invent misogyny.

It industrialized some of its possibilities.

The Cost of Speaking

This has political consequences.

Women journalists, politicians, activists, academics, gamers, public officials, creators, and ordinary social media users can be targeted with abuse designed not merely to insult them but to push them out of public space.

UN Women reported in late 2025 that roughly one in four women journalists and one in three women parliamentarians worldwide reported online threats of physical violence.

If participating in public debate carries a predictable threat of sexualized humiliation or violence, “free expression” starts looking less equal than it appears.

The issue is not simply offensive content.

It is voice.

Who can speak publicly without paying an extraordinary personal price?

Technology Can Also Rearrange Power

The answer is not that technology is inherently bad.

Digital platforms can help people bypass traditional media institutions, document abuses, access reproductive-health information, find support networks, operate businesses, organize across borders, and build political movements.

The internet contains patriarchy.

It also contains millions of people arguing with patriarchy.

That contradiction is exactly what makes digital politics worth studying.

Technology rarely arrives in a blank society.

It enters a world already structured by power.

Then it amplifies, disrupts, commercializes, or rearranges what it finds.

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8.8: Progress Is Not a Straight Line

Rights, Resistance, and the Politics of Backlash

Textbooks love arrows.

1848 → 1920 → 1945 → 1979 → 1995 → equality.

History is less cooperative.

Women's political rights expanded dramatically across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Educational attainment increased. Maternal mortality declined in many regions. Women entered professions from which they had once been excluded. Legal frameworks addressing discrimination and gender-based violence expanded. Reproductive technologies transformed possibilities surrounding fertility. Women's movements changed laws, workplaces, households, schools, political parties, and cultural expectations.

All true.

And none of it means progress is irreversible.

Rights Can Move Backward

Political scientists use terms such as democratic backsliding when political rights and institutions weaken after periods of expansion.

Gender equality can experience backsliding too.

Governments may restrict reproductive rights, limit women's education or employment, weaken domestic-violence protections, attack LGBTQ+ communities, target feminist organizations, or use nationalism and religion to promote narrower definitions of acceptable gender roles.

Digital spaces can accelerate backlash by connecting misogynistic movements across borders.

Political actors also use gender symbolically.

Debates over women's clothing, reproduction, education, sexuality, and family life can become debates about national identity itself.

Who represents tradition?

Who represents modernity?

Who is supposedly corrupting the nation?

Who is responsible for reproducing it?

Suddenly a debate about what one person wears becomes a debate about civilization.

Why Nationalism Keeps Finding Women's Bodies

Nationalist politics often assigns women symbolic roles as mothers, guardians of culture, markers of communal honor, or embodiments of tradition.

That symbolism can create enormous pressure.

Women's clothing may become politically regulated because clothing communicates identity. Reproductive policy may become entangled with fears about declining birth rates or demographic competition. Interfaith or interethnic relationships can become controversial because women are imagined as carrying group identity across generations.

This is one reason gender politics cannot be reduced to personal attitudes.

It can become part of state-building.

The Resistance Is Global Too

Backlash travels.

So does resistance.

Women's movements have exchanged ideas, legal strategies, slogans, organizing tactics, funding networks, and digital tools across borders for decades. Activists learn from one another while adapting strategies to local circumstances.

Latin American movements against femicide helped popularize new language for understanding violence.

Iran's Woman, Life, Freedom movement linked bodily autonomy to broader political freedom.

Afghan women's organizations continue advocating for education and public participation under extraordinary restrictions.

Women's rights activists across Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas contest domestic violence, unequal inheritance, workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, reproductive restrictions, and exclusion from political power.

There is no single global feminism.

There are feminisms.

Sometimes they cooperate.

Sometimes they disagree sharply.

That is not evidence of failure.

It is evidence that women are political actors rather than one giant interest group.

Progress Has to Be Maintained

Perhaps the most important lesson is that rights are not historical prizes that societies permanently win.

They are institutions.

Institutions require enforcement, funding, legitimacy, political coalitions, public support, and people willing to defend them.

A right written into law can become difficult to exercise.

A policy can lose funding.

A court can reinterpret legislation.

A government can change.

A movement can fragment.

A new technology can produce a problem older laws never anticipated.

Progress therefore behaves less like climbing a staircase and more like maintaining infrastructure.

If nobody maintains the bridge, eventually you notice.

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8.9: Stop Asking Women to Be Empowered

What Would It Mean to Change the System?

Development organizations have spent decades using one word with almost magical frequency: empowerment.

The empowered girl stays in school. The empowered woman starts a business. The empowered mother improves family health. The empowered entrepreneur gains financial independence. The empowered community becomes more resilient. In many contexts, these programs matter enormously because education, access to credit, property ownership, digital tools, and political participation can expand real choices. The problem begins when empowerment quietly shifts responsibility for solving structural inequality onto the people living inside it.

A woman may receive financial-literacy training and still live in a society where she has limited access to formal credit, little control over household assets, no affordable childcare, and weak legal protections against workplace discrimination. A girl may receive a scholarship but still spend hours each day performing unpaid domestic labor that her brother is not expected to do. A woman may be encouraged to become an entrepreneur in a labor market where secure employment is scarce, maternity protections are weak, and healthcare costs remain prohibitive. None of those individual interventions is necessarily useless. But none should be mistaken for a transformed system.

This distinction matters because development policy has a tendency to celebrate resilience without asking why so much resilience is required in the first place.

There is something admirable about a person who finds a way around an unfair obstacle. There is something less admirable about building public policy around the assumption that people should simply become better at climbing over unfair obstacles.

Structural inequality often survives precisely because it is dispersed across many institutions at once. A woman may technically have equal employment rights while lacking reliable transportation to reach work, childcare that makes full-time employment possible, access to a bank account independent of relatives, protection from workplace harassment, or the confidence that courts and police will enforce existing law. No single barrier explains the inequality. Together, however, they shape the range of choices actually available to her.

This is why formal equality and substantive equality are not the same thing. Formal equality asks whether the law treats people the same. Substantive equality asks whether people have the resources, institutional support, and practical freedom necessary to benefit from those rights.

The distinction becomes clearer when we compare individual solutions with institutional ones. A leadership workshop might help a woman run for office, but electoral reforms can change who political parties nominate in the first place. A self-defense class may help someone respond to danger, but effective public transportation, workplace protections, housing access, legal aid, and enforcement against gender-based violence can reduce the conditions that produce that danger. A coding program might help women enter the technology sector, but equitable promotion practices, parental leave, anti-harassment enforcement, and childcare policy determine whether women remain and advance once they get there.

In other words, individual agency and structural change should not be treated as competitors. People need tools to navigate the institutions that exist, but societies also have to decide whether those institutions are acceptable.

That is where the chapter's earlier themes reconnect.

Unpaid care work affects employment because time is a resource. Property rights affect climate resilience because assets shape who can recover from shocks. Education affects political power because credentials influence who can enter professions and public institutions. Reproductive autonomy affects economic security because decisions about pregnancy and family structure shape employment, health, and income. Digital safety affects participation because people who are routinely harassed out of public spaces do not enjoy equal access to political voice.

Seen this way, “women's issues” dissolve into questions about the distribution of money, time, security, mobility, authority, and voice.

And perhaps that gives us a better definition of empowerment.

Empowerment should not mean teaching people to become exceptionally skilled at surviving unequal systems. It should mean increasing their capacity to make meaningful choices while also changing the institutions that unnecessarily constrain those choices.

That requires more than inspirational language. It requires budgets, enforcement, public infrastructure, healthcare, labor protections, social movements, political representation, institutional accountability, and cultural change. It also requires men to participate in changing gender relations rather than treating gender equality as a project women are supposed to complete on behalf of everyone else.

The work is less tidy than the slogan.

It is also more consequential.

Women have been surviving unequal systems for a very long time. Survival is impressive. It should not be the policy goal.

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8.10: The Future Is Gendered, Too

What This Chapter Changes

We began this chapter with a slightly uncomfortable observation: women had already been present throughout the book, but gender had not always been treated as something worth analyzing.

Once we made gender visible, many of the systems from earlier chapters began to look different.

The global economy, for example, did not simply consist of firms, workers, trade flows, and markets. It also depended on enormous quantities of unpaid care work that conventional economic measures often overlook. Healthcare was not simply about disease and medical technology; it was also about who controls decisions over bodies, whose pain is believed, who can access services, and who bears the costs of care. Political institutions could no longer be evaluated only by whether elections occurred or offices existed, because we also had to ask who entered those institutions, whose interests shaped their agendas, and who controlled resources once inside.

Conflict changed too. War was no longer a story only about armies and governments because gender shaped displacement, caregiving, sexual violence, political organizing, peace negotiations, and reconstruction. Climate change stopped looking like a purely environmental crisis once we saw how access to land, water, credit, mobility, and decision-making could alter people's ability to adapt. Digital technology stopped looking merely innovative once we recognized that the internet can amplify old forms of inequality while simultaneously providing new tools for organizing against them.

That is what a useful analytical lens does.

It does not simply add one more topic to a crowded textbook.

It changes what the rest of the textbook means.

Looking Back Differently

Throughout this book, we have repeatedly asked students to trace connections. Where did a product come from? Who produced it? Who profits from it? Who sets the rules? Whose environment absorbs the costs? Who has the ability to move, speak, organize, consume, or resist?

Gender adds another layer to those questions because it asks us to pay attention to work that is hidden, power that is unevenly distributed, and choices that may appear individual even when they are shaped by institutions.

A household decision about who stays home with a child can reflect wage gaps, childcare costs, cultural expectations, and workplace policies. A decision about whether to migrate can depend on family obligations and immigration rules. A decision about whether to participate in politics can be shaped by online harassment, household responsibilities, party structures, and physical safety. A decision about whether to remain in an abusive relationship may depend as much on housing, income, immigration status, and childcare as on personal preference.

When we start tracing those connections, gender stops looking like a narrow social category and begins to look like part of the architecture of globalization itself.

The Dangerous Idea of “Progress”

There is another lesson worth carrying forward.

Progress is not guaranteed.

The history of women's rights contains remarkable expansion in education, political participation, reproductive autonomy, labor-force participation, legal equality, and protection from violence. It also contains reversals, backlash, uneven implementation, and enormous differences between what laws promise and what institutions deliver.

That matters because students can easily fall into one of two stories.

The first says everything is getting steadily better.

The second says nothing ever changes.

Neither is useful.

Institutions do change. Social movements matter. Laws matter. Political representation matters. Education matters. Economic independence matters.

But gains have to be defended, implemented, funded, and adapted to new circumstances. A legal right that cannot be exercised in practice is fragile. A policy without enforcement is fragile. A movement without political support is fragile. A protection written for one technological era may become inadequate when a new technology creates new forms of surveillance or abuse.

Rights are not trophies societies place on a shelf after achieving them.

They are infrastructure.

Infrastructure has to be maintained.

So Who Gets the Future?

The next chapter turns from the world we have inherited to the worlds we might create.

That shift raises a deceptively simple question: Whose future are we imagining?

It is tempting to talk about "the future of work," "the future of AI," "the future of migration," or "the future of climate adaptation" as though humanity were moving toward one shared destination. But the future of automated work will look very different to a technology executive, a garment worker, a migrant caregiver, and a public-sector employee. A green-energy transition will create opportunities for some communities while threatening livelihoods in others. Artificial intelligence may expand access to education and healthcare while also enabling new forms of discrimination, surveillance, and harassment.

There is no single global future because there has never been a single global present.

The distribution of power that exists today will influence whose problems are treated as urgent tomorrow, which technologies receive investment, whose labor is automated, whose communities are asked to relocate, whose risks are considered acceptable, and whose vision of progress becomes policy.

That is why futures thinking is not simply prediction.

It is politics.

Futures are shaped by governments, corporations, researchers, activists, communities, investors, international organizations, and ordinary people making decisions within systems they did not fully choose. They are negotiated through budgets, laws, technologies, institutions, social movements, and competing ideas about what a good society should look like.

So Chapter 9 begins not by asking students to guess what will happen.

It asks them to think more carefully about who has the power to make certain futures more likely than others.

And after this chapter, one additional question should remain impossible to ignore:

Who gets to help build the future, and who is expected merely to live with it?

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8.11: Discussion

Lets Talk About It

1. This chapter argues that gender is not a separate global issue but a lens that changes how we understand globalization itself. Choose one issue from an earlier chapter, such as migration, trade, health, politics, climate change, or technology, and explain how applying a gender lens changes the analysis.
2. What is the difference between formal equality and substantive equality? Identify one example from the chapter where a legal right may exist but remains difficult to exercise in practice. What additional institutions or resources would be needed to make that right meaningful?
3. The chapter criticizes development approaches that place too much responsibility on individual women to become "empowered." When can empowerment programs genuinely expand choice, and when might they allow governments or institutions to avoid addressing structural inequality?
4. Why is political representation important even though electing more women does not automatically produce gender-equal policies? How should we distinguish between descriptive representation, substantive representation, and actual political power?
5. The chapter argues that women should not be represented only as victims of war, climate change, or economic inequality. Why does this distinction matter? How can researchers discuss vulnerability without erasing agency?
6. How has digital technology changed gender inequality? Consider both sides of the argument: the ways digital platforms can amplify harassment and exclusion, and the ways they can facilitate organizing, entrepreneurship, political participation, and transnational solidarity.

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8.12: Assignments

Assignment 1: Gender Lens Re-Analysis

Go Back and Look Again

Choose one case, issue, event, institution, or global process from Chapters 1 through 7 and analyze it again using the gender lens developed in this chapter.

Your goal is not simply to “add women” to the original discussion. Instead, investigate whether gender changes how the issue works.

In a response of approximately 750–1,000 words, identify the original issue and explain what becomes visible once gender is treated as part of the system. You might consider labor roles, access to resources, political influence, household responsibilities, migration status, bodily autonomy, exposure to violence, representation, or other relevant dimensions. Your analysis should also consider intersectionality rather than assuming that all women or all men experience the issue in the same way.

Conclude by explaining whether the gender analysis changes how you would define the problem or propose a solution.

Purpose: This assignment asks you to practice using gender as an analytical lens rather than treating it as a stand-alone topic.

Assignment 2: Empowerment or Structural Change?

Evaluate a Real Program

Find a current program, policy, NGO initiative, government strategy, or international development project that claims to advance women's or girls' empowerment.

Examples might involve entrepreneurship, education, microfinance, political leadership, digital skills, reproductive health, agricultural development, or workforce training.

In approximately 1,000 words, evaluate the initiative using the framework from Section 8.9. Begin by identifying the problem the program is trying to address and the intervention it proposes. Then ask whether the project primarily helps individuals navigate an unequal system, changes the system itself, or attempts to do both.

Your analysis should consider what forms of power the intervention actually changes. Does it affect income, legal rights, property ownership, time, mobility, political influence, access to institutions, safety, or decision-making? What barriers remain untouched?

Conclude by proposing one realistic institutional or policy change that could strengthen the initiative.

Purpose: This assignment develops students' ability to distinguish between individual-level interventions and structural reform.

Assignment 3: Who Gets the Future?

Gender and an Emerging Global Change

Choose one emerging global transformation, such as artificial intelligence, automation, climate adaptation, demographic aging, renewable energy, migration, digital finance, biotechnology, or changing labor markets.

Create a short analytical brief of approximately 1,000–1,250 words examining how this future might produce different opportunities and risks depending on gender.

Avoid predicting that “technology will help women” or “technology will hurt women.” Instead, identify the institutions that will shape the outcome. Who owns the technology? Who performs the labor? Who has access? Who is represented in decision-making? Who bears risk? Who benefits financially? Which existing inequalities might be reproduced?

End with two policy recommendations designed to make the emerging system more equitable.

Purpose: This assignment prepares students for Chapter 9 by connecting gender analysis to futures thinking.

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8.13: Key Terms

Words to Know

- **Bodily autonomy**: The ability of individuals to make meaningful decisions about their own bodies, health, sexuality, and reproduction without coercion or unreasonable institutional barriers.
- **Care economy**: The paid and unpaid labor involved in caring for children, older adults, people who are ill or disabled, households, and communities.
- **CEDAW**: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 as an international framework addressing discrimination against women.
- **Descriptive representation**: Political representation in which elected officials or leaders share demographic characteristics with the population they represent.
- **Double burden**: The combination of paid employment and disproportionate responsibility for unpaid household and caregiving labor.
- **Formal equality**: Equality established through laws, rules, or official policies that apply the same legal standards to different groups.
- **Gender**: Socially constructed roles, expectations, identities, relationships, and institutions associated with masculinity, femininity, and other gender identities.
- **Gender-based violence**: Violence directed at a person because of gender or violence that disproportionately affects people of a particular gender.
- **Gender mainstreaming**: The practice of incorporating gender analysis into policy design, implementation, budgeting, and evaluation across government or institutional activities rather than isolating gender concerns within a single program.
- **Gender norms**: Social expectations regarding how people of different genders are expected to behave, work, dress, communicate, form relationships, or participate in society.
- **Gender parity**: A condition in which women and men participate or are represented in roughly equal proportions within a particular institution or activity.
- **Gender quota**: A policy requiring or encouraging a specified minimum level of representation for a gender within political, educational, corporate, or other institutions.
- **Global care chain**: A transnational arrangement in which caregiving labor is transferred across households and countries, often through the migration of women who provide paid care abroad while others care for their own families at home.
- **Intersectionality**: A framework for understanding how systems such as gender, race, class, caste, sexuality, disability, nationality, and other forms of inequality interact rather than operating independently.
- **Patriarchy**: A social system in which political, economic, cultural, or familial institutions historically privilege men and masculinity relative to women and other gender identities.
- **Substantive equality**: Equality measured not simply by whether people possess the same formal rights but by whether they have the practical resources and opportunities needed to exercise those rights.
- **Substantive representation**: Political representation in which leaders actively advance the interests, priorities, or concerns of particular populations, regardless of whether they share those populations' demographic characteristics.
- **Technology-facilitated gender-based violence**: Gender-based abuse conducted or amplified through digital technologies, including stalking, threats, harassment, impersonation, nonconsensual image sharing, and sexual deepfakes.
- **Unpaid care work**: Domestic and caregiving labor performed without direct monetary compensation, including cooking, cleaning, childcare, eldercare, and care for family members who are ill or disabled.
- **Women, Peace and Security Agenda**: The international policy framework associated with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions emphasizing women's protection and meaningful participation in conflict prevention, peace processes, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction.

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9: FAST FORWARD - FUTURES THINKING AND GLOBALIZATION

Who Gets to Build the Global Future?



Figure 9.1: Hallway into the future. (Photo by Tom Parkes on Unsplash)

Globalization is dead.

Again.

Apparently.

For decades, globalization has been declared inevitable, unstoppable, finished, revived, broken, transformed, and occasionally blamed for almost everything happening on Earth. Depending on whom you ask, we are entering a borderless future, retreating into nationalism, splitting into rival geopolitical blocs, surrendering our jobs to artificial intelligence, building a multipolar world, or somehow doing all of these things at once.

And strangely enough, that last possibility may be closest to the truth.

Globalization was never a single machine moving steadily in one direction. It has always been a collection of overlapping processes through which goods, money, people, ideas, technologies, diseases, environmental pressures, political movements, and cultural practices move across space. Those processes do not necessarily accelerate together. Trade can fragment while digital communication expands. Governments can tighten borders while businesses recruit workers internationally. States can subsidize domestic semiconductor production while remaining dependent on minerals extracted thousands of miles away. Nationalist politicians can denounce globalization from smartphones assembled through global supply chains.

In other words, the global future is unlikely to be simply more globalization or less globalization.

It is likely to be stranger.

Recent evidence already points in that direction. The World Trade Organization has documented growing fragmentation between geopolitical blocs, including renewed divergence in trade patterns associated with U.S.-China tensions, while simultaneously emphasizing that international trade remains deeply embedded in the global economy (WTO, 2026). The International Monetary Fund likewise describes geopolitical fragmentation, trade tensions, technological transformation, conflict, and economic interdependence as forces operating simultaneously rather than sequentially (IMF, 2026).

That makes our final chapter less a prediction exercise than a question of possibility, power, and choice.

Who gets to shape what comes next?

Governments?

Corporations?

Workers?

Social movements?

Artificial intelligence companies?

Communities already dealing with the environmental consequences of decisions made somewhere else?

People who have historically been excluded from the institutions writing global rules?

And where exactly do *you* fit into this?

Throughout this book, we have followed globalization through history, culture, economics, political power, health, environmental change, mobility, food, gender, technology, and everyday life. At almost every stop, the same lesson kept resurfacing: global systems create connections, but connections do not automatically create equality. Who moves and who cannot, who profits and who pays, whose knowledge becomes authoritative, whose labor disappears into a supply chain, whose culture travels easily, and whose passport opens doors have never been random details. They are part of how globalization works.

The future will be no different.

Except now you know what to look for.

9.1: Breaking Up is Hard to Do

9.2: Another Globalization Is Possible

9.3: Welcome to the Geopolitical Remix

9.4: The Future Arrived Early

9.5: Your Global Studies Degree is Not a Job Title

9.6: Stop Trying to Predict the Future

9.7: Plot Twist- You Are Part of the System

9.8: So What did you Learn to See?

9.9: Discussion

9.10: Assignments

9.11: Key Terms

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9.1: Breaking Up is Hard to Do

It's Getting Weird

There is a recurring problem with conversations about globalization: we keep trying to decide whether it is on or off.

A factory relocates and globalization is winning. A tariff appears and globalization is dying. International trade increases and borders supposedly matter less. A government restricts migration and suddenly nationalism is back. A company announces that it will manufacture closer to home and commentators announce “deglobalization,” only to discover that the company's suppliers still stretch across six countries.

Reality is considerably messier.

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

The Aug. 26 version of this chapter was onto something when it called its opening section “Breaking Up Is Hard to Do.” The title works because the global economy has spent decades building relationships that are remarkably difficult to unwind.

Consider something as seemingly national as a car assembled in the United States, Germany, Mexico, South Korea, or Japan. Its components may include semiconductors designed in one country, fabricated in another, machinery made elsewhere, minerals extracted on another continent, software developed by internationally dispersed teams, financing moving through global capital markets, and intellectual property governed by treaties negotiated years earlier.

“Made in” has become a surprisingly complicated phrase.

Richard Baldwin (2016) describes contemporary globalization as increasingly organized around international production networks rather than simple exchanges of finished products between national economies. Production itself has been sliced apart geographically. That makes separation expensive, because governments and companies are not merely deciding whether to trade with one another; they are trying to untangle systems that evolved through decades of investment, specialization, infrastructure, regulation, and habit.

This does not mean those systems cannot change.

They already are.

From Efficiency to Security

For much of the late twentieth century, firms were encouraged to organize production around a relatively simple logic: find the combination of locations, workers, suppliers, regulations, and transportation systems that would produce goods efficiently and cheaply.

Then reality started interrupting the spreadsheet.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of highly concentrated supply chains. Semiconductor shortages halted production far beyond the electronics industry. Russia's invasion of Ukraine disrupted energy and food markets. U.S.-China competition transformed chips, batteries, telecommunications equipment, and critical minerals into questions of national security. Governments that once celebrated the efficiency of geographically dispersed production began worrying about whether they could obtain essential goods during a crisis.

The language changed accordingly.

Policymakers increasingly spoke of reshoring, moving production back home; nearshoring, relocating production closer to major markets; and friend-shoring, shifting supply chains toward countries considered politically reliable partners.

None of these developments means that international production disappears.

They mean that governments and firms are reconsidering which international relationships they are willing to depend on.

That distinction matters.

The WTO's 2026 assessment finds evidence that trade between geopolitical blocs has grown more slowly than trade within them, with renewed fragmentation particularly visible amid intensified U.S.-China tensions (WTO, 2026). Yet the same evidence does not describe a world retreating neatly into self-contained national economies. Instead, trade routes are being redirected, alliances reconsidered, suppliers diversified, and production networks rearranged.

Globalization is not necessarily shrinking.

It may be changing its map.

Slowbalization, Fragmentation, and the Trouble with Labels

Economist Adjiedj Bakas popularized the term slowbalization, later developed in broader debates about the slowdown of some forms of economic integration following the hyperglobalization of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The idea is useful because globalization does not need to reverse completely in order to change significantly.

Other scholars use geoeconomic fragmentation to describe a world in which economic relationships are increasingly shaped by strategic rivalry, sanctions, security concerns, and political alliances.

Those concepts capture something that the simple word deglobalization often misses.

Imagine two countries that continue trading billions of dollars in goods while simultaneously restricting each other's technology companies, subsidizing competing domestic industries, imposing export controls, screening foreign investment, and building alternative supply networks.

Are they globalizing?

Deglobalizing?

Both?

Welcome to Global Studies.

Borders Matter. Just Not Equally.

One of the oldest clichés about globalization is that borders are disappearing.

They aren't.

The more interesting question is what crosses them easily.

Money can sometimes travel around the planet in seconds. Digital content can circulate almost instantaneously. A multinational corporation may shift investment from one country to another with relative ease. A person fleeing conflict, however, may encounter walls, visa systems, biometric databases, asylum restrictions, detention centers, or a passport that dramatically limits where they are legally permitted to go.

The border did not vanish.

It became selective.

That pattern should sound familiar because we have encountered it repeatedly throughout this book. Globalization increases mobility, but it distributes mobility unevenly. It produces connection, but not symmetrical power. It creates global markets while allowing profoundly different labor protections, environmental regulations, wages, and citizenship rights to exist inside them.

The result is not a flat world.

It is a deeply connected one whose pathways have very different gates.

Nationalism Never Actually Left

Globalization theory sometimes created the impression that national identity would gradually fade as markets, travel, media, and communication connected societies more closely.

Instead, globalization has frequently generated powerful nationalist reactions.

That is not necessarily contradictory.

The more societies experience economic restructuring, migration, cultural change, technological disruption, and declining confidence in institutions, the more political actors may mobilize narratives promising control, sovereignty, security, or national restoration. Political scientist Dani Rodrik (2011) famously argued that deep economic globalization can generate tensions among national sovereignty, democratic politics, and international economic integration because societies cannot always maximize all three simultaneously.

That tension remains remarkably relevant.

People may enjoy imported products while opposing trade agreements. Businesses may depend on migrant workers while political movements demand tighter immigration controls. Governments may encourage foreign investment while portraying foreign economic influence as threatening. Voters can want the benefits of interdependence without accepting all of its consequences.

Humans, as it turns out, are extremely capable of holding several contradictory ideas before breakfast.

Globalization Has Always Been Political

Another reason claims about the “death of globalization” can be misleading is that they sometimes treat globalization as though it were a natural force, like gravity, rather than something constructed through rules.

But supply chains do not spontaneously appear.

Governments negotiate trade agreements. International institutions establish standards. Corporations decide where to invest. States construct visa systems. Courts enforce contracts. Central banks influence financial flows. Infrastructure determines which regions connect to markets. Labor laws shape working conditions. Intellectual-property rules determine who controls technologies and knowledge.

Globalization has therefore never been simply about movement.

It has been about the governance of movement.

Once we recognize that, an important possibility appears.

If globalization was constructed through political choices, institutional arrangements, struggles over power, and historical circumstances, then its future is not predetermined either.

It can be redesigned.

Which brings us to a movement whose argument was never simply “stop globalization.”

Its argument was much more inconvenient:

What if we globalized differently?

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9.2: Another Globalization Is Possible

Alter-Globalization and the Fight Over the Rules

At the turn of the twenty-first century, protestors gathered outside meetings of the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and major economic summits. Images of these protests were frequently described as evidence of an anti-globalization movement.

The label was catchy.

It was also incomplete.

Many participants were not opposed to international cooperation, cross-border solidarity, cultural exchange, or global political action. In fact, they were often extraordinarily global themselves. Labor organizations collaborated internationally. Environmental activists built transnational networks. Indigenous movements connected struggles occurring on different continents. Human-rights organizations shared strategies across borders. Campaigners opposed sweatshop labor in supply chains linking consumers in wealthy economies with workers thousands of miles away.

They were not necessarily arguing for a less connected world.

They were arguing about the terms of connection.

Scholars and activists increasingly used the term alter-globalization to describe this position: not the rejection of globalization itself, but an effort to imagine forms of global integration organized around social justice, democratic participation, labor rights, ecological sustainability, and human dignity rather than primarily around the expansion of markets (Pleyers, 2010; de Sousa Santos, 2006).

This distinction matters because it changes the question.

Instead of asking:

Globalization: yes or no?

Alter-globalization asks:

Globalization for whom, governed by whom, and toward what ends?

That question has quietly followed us through almost every chapter of this book.

When workers demand better conditions inside global supply chains, they are not necessarily demanding that international trade disappear.

When farmers advocate food sovereignty, they are not arguing that food should never cross borders.

When climate-justice advocates demand that historically high-emitting countries contribute more toward adaptation and loss and damage, they are not rejecting international cooperation.

When feminist economists insist that unpaid care work be recognized as economically significant, they are not asking economic activity to stop.

When Indigenous communities seek control over land, knowledge, and cultural resources, they are not rejecting every form of exchange with outsiders.

They are challenging who gets to set the rules.

The World Social Forum and an Awkwardly Powerful Idea

Beginning in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, the World Social Forum brought together activists, labor groups, scholars, Indigenous organizations, environmental movements, feminist groups, and civil-society organizations from around the world.

Its most famous slogan was simple:

Another world is possible.

Which sounds wonderful until Global Studies arrives and starts asking follow-up questions.

Another world according to whom?

Should international trade be reformed or radically reduced? Should corporations face stronger regulation, or should some economic activities be removed from private control altogether? Should international institutions become more democratic, or are they too deeply shaped by unequal power to be repaired? How should environmental protection be balanced against development demands in countries that contributed relatively little to historical emissions? Who speaks for "civil society" when civil-society organizations themselves have unequal access to funding, travel, technology, and global institutions?

Alter-globalization is therefore not one ideology.

It is better understood as a contested political space containing movements that often share criticisms of concentrated global power while proposing quite different alternatives.

That is precisely why it belongs in a Global Studies course.

It refuses the easy binary.

Resistance Can Globalize Too

There is another fascinating contradiction here.

Many movements resisting the consequences of globalization have themselves become globalized.

Anti-sweatshop campaigns connect consumers with labor activists across borders. Climate strikes move through social media and international networks. Indigenous rights movements use global institutions to challenge states. Feminist campaigns circulate vocabulary, strategies, research, and protest tactics internationally. Human-rights organizations document abuses in one location and mobilize pressure from another.

Keck and Sikkink (1998) famously described transnational advocacy networks in which activists, organizations, and movements exchange information and coordinate across national borders, sometimes using international allies to pressure governments that are unresponsive domestically.

The technologies and networks created by globalization can therefore become tools for challenging globalization's inequalities.

That is not a bug in the story.

It is the story.

Power travels across borders.

So does resistance.

But Good Intentions Do Not Erase Power

There is a temptation here to turn global activism into the heroic part of the chapter.

We should resist it.

Transnational movements can reproduce many of the inequalities they challenge. Organizations based in wealthy countries frequently have more funding, easier travel access, greater command of dominant global languages, stronger connections to

international institutions, and more influence over which issues attract media attention.

Even solidarity has politics.

Whose campaign becomes globally visible? Whose language defines the problem? Who receives grants? Who gets invited to international conferences? Who becomes the “voice” of a community? Who remains at home doing the work?

The same Global Studies lens that asks us to scrutinize corporations and governments should follow us into civil society.

Nobody gets analytical immunity because we like their mission.

From Fair Trade to Fair Rules

Earlier in this book, we encountered debates about Fair Trade, food systems, labor conditions, climate responsibility, migration, health inequality, and gendered work. Each issue could be treated separately, but alter-globalization reveals a deeper connection among them.

The central dispute is often not whether global interaction should exist.

It is whether the institutions organizing global interaction distribute power, risk, opportunity, and responsibility fairly.

That gives us a useful way to think about the future.

Perhaps the most consequential struggle will not be between globalization and deglobalization.

It may be between competing versions of globalization.

And there are already several versions taking shape.

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9.3: Welcome to the Geopolitical Remix

Deglobalization, Regionalization, and a Multipolar World

For much of the post-Cold War period, the dominant story about globalization was surprisingly linear. Markets would integrate, institutions would deepen, democracies would spread, technology would compress distance, and the world, while still unequal and conflict-ridden, would gradually become more interconnected under a broadly shared set of rules.

That story now looks much less tidy.

The international system is becoming more fragmented at the same time that many forms of interdependence remain stubbornly intact. The United States and China are strategic competitors whose economies are still deeply entangled. European governments talk about “de-risking” rather than full economic separation because complete disengagement would be enormously costly. India participates in the Quad while maintaining ties with Russia and asserting its own strategic autonomy. Gulf states deepen economic relationships with China while sustaining security ties with the United States. Middle powers increasingly resist the idea that they must fit neatly into someone else’s camp.

This is not the return of a simple Cold War.

It is messier than that.

From One Center to Several

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars frequently described the international system as unipolar, with the United States occupying an unusually dominant position in military, economic, technological, and institutional power (Wohlforth, 1999). That dominance never meant that the United States controlled everything, but it did help structure many of the institutions, norms, and economic arrangements that shaped the early decades of contemporary globalization.

Today, however, global power is more dispersed.

China has become indispensable to global manufacturing, trade, finance, infrastructure investment, and technology. India’s demographic and economic weight has expanded rapidly, while Brazil, Türkiye, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, South Africa, and other states increasingly seek influence beyond the traditional centers of global governance. Russia remains a major military and energy power despite significant economic constraints. The European Union continues to exercise enormous regulatory and market power even when its member states disagree politically.

The result is not a world in which one power simply replaces another.

It is a world in which multiple states and coalitions increasingly possess enough economic, political, military, demographic, technological, or regional influence to complicate any single hierarchy.

That is what scholars mean when they talk about multipolarity.

The term is useful, but it can also obscure as much as it reveals. Power does not come in one neat package. A state may possess extraordinary military capabilities while remaining dependent on foreign technology. Another may wield enormous influence through finance or manufacturing without dominating global security institutions. A smaller country may lack traditional geopolitical weight yet control minerals, shipping routes, energy supplies, data infrastructure, or diplomatic access that becomes disproportionately important during moments of crisis.

Global power is therefore becoming not merely more dispersed, but more issue-specific.

BRICS and the Politics of Not Asking Permission

One visible expression of this shifting landscape is the expansion of BRICS, the grouping originally composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The coalition has grown beyond its original membership and increasingly presents itself as a

platform for states seeking greater influence within, or alternatives to, institutions long dominated by Europe and the United States.

It would be easy to interpret BRICS as simply an anti-Western bloc.

That would be a mistake.

Its members differ sharply in political systems, strategic priorities, economic structures, regional ambitions, and relationships with the United States and Europe. India and China, for example, cooperate within BRICS while simultaneously managing a serious geopolitical rivalry. Gulf states may pursue BRICS relationships without abandoning longstanding Western partnerships. Brazil has often emphasized reform of global governance rather than wholesale rejection of the existing international order.

What holds such coalitions together is therefore not necessarily ideological unity.

It is often dissatisfaction with the distribution of voice and authority in global institutions.

That grievance has a long history. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank were created in a very different distribution of global power, and debates over voting shares, leadership traditions, lending conditions, and representation have persisted for decades. Demands for reform are therefore not simply symbolic. They reflect a broader question that has followed this entire book:

Who gets to write the rules when the world that created those rules has changed?

Regionalization: Globalization With Neighborhoods

Another plausible future is not deglobalization at all, but regionalization.

Instead of one increasingly integrated global economy, we may see denser economic and political networks forming within regions. North American production has become deeply integrated through the United States, Mexico, and Canada. The European Union remains one of the most sophisticated regional integration projects in history. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the African Continental Free Trade Area, Mercosur, and other regional institutions reflect efforts to expand trade, coordination, mobility, or political leverage among neighboring states.

Regionalization can make practical sense. Geographic proximity reduces transportation costs. Neighboring states often share infrastructure, migration systems, environmental problems, energy grids, security concerns, and commercial ties. Governments seeking to reduce vulnerability may prefer supply chains that remain international but are geographically closer or politically easier to manage.

Yet regional integration does not automatically produce equality.

Economic activity may concentrate in already prosperous urban corridors. Smaller economies may become dependent on larger neighbors. Environmental costs may be shifted toward less powerful communities. Migrants may cross borders to fill labor shortages while remaining politically marginalized. Corporations may move production within a region precisely because wage and regulatory differences persist.

A region can be integrated and unequal at the same time.

You have probably noticed by now that this book refuses to let anything stay simple for very long.

The Global South Is Not One Thing

Discussions of multipolarity often rely heavily on the phrase Global South, but the term requires care.

It is useful because it highlights historical inequalities embedded in colonialism, development, finance, trade, and global governance. It also captures real efforts among countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere to coordinate around issues such as climate finance, development rights, debt, intellectual property, and institutional reform.

But “the Global South” is not a unified political actor.

Its states have profoundly different interests.

Oil exporters and climate-vulnerable island states may both belong to the Global South while approaching energy politics very differently. Middle-income industrial powers do not occupy the same economic position as low-income states burdened by debt. Countries competing for regional influence may cooperate in one forum while opposing each other elsewhere. Some governments possess considerable bargaining power in global markets; others have very little.

The phrase therefore works best as an analytical category, not as shorthand for political unity.

Once again, scale matters.

Middle Powers and the Art of Strategic Ambiguity

One of the most interesting developments in the emerging global order is the growing importance of states that do not dominate the international system but possess enough economic, diplomatic, technological, military, or geographic importance to shape outcomes.

These middle powers often pursue multiple relationships simultaneously.

They may buy weapons from one country, accept infrastructure financing from another, sign trade agreements with a third, participate in regional organizations, and cooperate with rivals on climate negotiations or maritime security. What can look inconsistent from the outside may actually be a strategy designed to preserve autonomy.

Political scientists sometimes describe this behavior as hedging: states avoid committing completely to one side while maintaining relationships that reduce dependence and maximize room for maneuver.

This matters because much popular commentary still describes world politics as though every country is lining up behind Washington or Beijing.

Many are not.

They are negotiating.

And that negotiation itself is power.

Supply Chains Have Become Foreign Policy

The geopolitical remix is perhaps most visible in places that once seemed almost aggressively boring: semiconductor factories, shipping routes, battery minerals, pharmaceutical ingredients, fiber-optic cables, and ports.

Governments now regularly discuss supply chains using the language of national security.

Advanced semiconductors sit at the center of artificial intelligence, telecommunications, consumer electronics, automobiles, and military technology. Lithium, cobalt, nickel, graphite, and rare-earth elements are critical to batteries, renewable-energy systems, and advanced manufacturing. Undersea cables carry the overwhelming majority of international digital traffic. Major ports and shipping corridors can become strategic vulnerabilities when conflict, accident, climate disruption, or political pressure interrupts them.

The map of globalization is therefore increasingly also a map of strategic dependence.

A country that controls a crucial input does not need to dominate the entire international system to possess leverage.

This is one reason the future is likely to involve not merely competition for territory, but competition over infrastructure, standards, data, minerals, finance, logistics, and technological ecosystems.

The geopolitics of the twenty-first century may sometimes look less like armies facing one another across a border and more like a fight over who gets to manufacture the chips.

Less cinematic.

Potentially just as consequential.

Three Futures Can Be Happening at Once



Figure 9.3.1: The Geopolitical Remix. Contemporary globalization can fragment along some dimensions, regionalize along others, and remain deeply interconnected at the same time. Source: Author-created through prompt generation using ChatGpTt, CC BY 4.0.

Figure 9.3.1: The image above provides a visualization of the three dimensions of globalization surrounding a globe, fragmentation shown on the left of the globe witth sanctions, export controls, and strategic rivalry, regionalization shown on the right of the globe with regional trade, nearshoring, and new alliances, and continued interdependence at the bottom of the globe covering supply chains, finance, energy, and technology.

This brings us back to the central problem of the chapter.

Is globalization ending?

The evidence gives us a frustrating answer.

Not exactly.

Some relationships are fragmenting. Others are deepening. Some production is moving closer to final markets. New trade routes are emerging. States are protecting strategic industries while simultaneously pursuing international investment. Regional institutions are strengthening. Rival powers are competing while continuing to depend on each other economically.

Several futures are arriving at once.

That is precisely why the next question cannot simply be whether globalization survives.

The more important question is what kinds of global systems emerge from the rearrangement, and who has enough power to shape them.

Because while governments are busy redrawing economic and geopolitical relationships, another transformation is moving even faster.

It does not require a passport.

It does not wait for a trade agreement.

And it is already changing how millions of people work, learn, communicate, create, and compete.

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9.4: The Future Arrived Early

Artificial Intelligence, Work, and the Next Global Divide

For years, conversations about automation relied on a familiar image.

The robot comes for your job.

Sometimes it was an assembly-line machine replacing factory workers. Sometimes it was a self-driving truck. Sometimes it was a vaguely menacing humanoid doing something that, judging from most demonstrations, would have taken an actual human about twelve seconds.

Then generative artificial intelligence arrived, and the conversation changed.

Suddenly the occupations assumed to be safest from automation were not necessarily those requiring advanced education or creativity. AI systems could generate text, summarize documents, produce images, write code, analyze data, translate languages, draft contracts, tutor students, imitate voices, design presentations, and perform pieces of knowledge work that had long been treated as distinctly human.

The future did not arrive exactly as predicted.

It rarely does.

Exposure Is Not the Same as Replacement

Public discussion about AI often collapses several different questions into one.

Can AI perform part of a job?

Can it perform most of a job?

Will employers redesign the job around it?

Will the technology increase worker productivity, reduce staffing, create entirely new occupations, or simply add one more tool workers are expected to master without receiving more time or pay?

Those outcomes are not interchangeable.

Recent labor research increasingly emphasizes task transformation rather than immediate wholesale job elimination. The International Labour Organization's global analysis of generative AI estimates that roughly one quarter of workers worldwide are employed in occupations with some degree of exposure to generative AI, but the report stresses that exposure does not mean that an occupation will disappear. In many cases, AI is more likely to alter the composition of work than replace the worker entirely (ILO, 2025).

That distinction matters enormously.

Jobs are bundles of tasks.

A teacher does not simply “deliver information.” A nurse does not simply record symptoms. A lawyer does not simply draft language. A journalist does not merely rearrange facts into sentences. Occupations involve judgment, relationships, accountability, tacit knowledge, physical presence, institutional rules, emotional labor, and ethical decisions that may be difficult to automate even when some component tasks are technically replicable.

AI may therefore remove pieces of work while increasing the importance of other pieces.

The real transformation occurs when institutions decide what humans should still be paid to do.

Productivity for Whom?

Technological change is often justified through the language of productivity.

If workers can produce more in less time, economic theory suggests that organizations can become more efficient and societies potentially wealthier.

But there is an awkward question hiding inside that sentence.

Who gets the productivity gain?

If an AI system allows one employee to complete work that previously required three, several outcomes are possible. Workers might receive higher wages because their productivity increased. Firms might shorten working hours while maintaining output. Organizations might expand services without expanding staffing. Or employers might eliminate positions and capture most of the savings as profit.

Technology does not decide among these possibilities.

Institutions do.

Labor markets do.

Political systems do.

Ownership structures do.

That should sound familiar.

Throughout this book, we have repeatedly encountered technologies or economic systems presented as neutral tools whose consequences turned out to depend heavily on who controlled them. AI is no exception.

The Next Digital Divide

For decades, scholars and policymakers have discussed the digital divide, initially focusing on unequal access to computers and internet connectivity.

Artificial intelligence complicates that divide.

Access still matters, of course. Reliable electricity, broadband infrastructure, computing capacity, affordable devices, and digital literacy remain unevenly distributed across countries and within them. But the emerging AI divide may involve several additional layers: who possesses the computing infrastructure required to build large models, which languages receive high-quality representation, whose data becomes training material, which countries host data centers, who owns intellectual property, and which education systems can prepare people to use AI productively rather than merely consume it.

The distinction between access and capacity is crucial.

A country may have millions of citizens using AI tools while possessing little influence over the technologies themselves.

That is participation without control.

Language Is Infrastructure Too

One of the least visible dimensions of AI inequality is language.

Large AI systems perform best in languages with abundant digitized text, strong commercial markets, large user bases, and substantial technical investment. English enjoys enormous advantages in this environment, while many Indigenous, regional, and lower-resource languages are represented by far smaller datasets.

That matters for more than convenience.

Language carries cultural knowledge, historical memory, social categories, humor, metaphor, political meaning, and ways of understanding the world. If AI systems increasingly mediate education, government services, translation, search, communication, and knowledge production, then uneven language representation can become another mechanism through which some communities participate in the digital future on someone else's terms.

Technological inequality can therefore become cultural inequality.

And cultural inequality, as we saw much earlier in this book, rarely stays cultural for long.

The Cloud Lives Somewhere

AI is often described using remarkably weightless vocabulary.

The cloud.

Virtual assistants.

Digital intelligence.

Machine learning.

The language can make the technology sound almost immaterial, as though AI floats somewhere above the physical world.

It does not.

AI requires semiconductor manufacturing, server farms, electrical grids, cooling systems, water, fiber-optic infrastructure, mineral extraction, transportation networks, and enormous capital investment. Data centers occupy land. Chips depend on highly specialized manufacturing ecosystems. Batteries and electronics require minerals whose extraction carries environmental and labor consequences.

The digital economy has a physical geography.

That geography links AI directly back to environmental politics, labor, development, and inequality.

A student asking whether AI will transform education in California is therefore connected, however indirectly, to semiconductor manufacturing in East Asia, mineral extraction in Africa and Latin America, energy systems in multiple regions, globally distributed data-labeling labor, and regulatory decisions made in capitals around the world.

There is our old friend again.

The supply chain.

It never really leaves.

Invisible Workers Behind Intelligent Machines

Artificial intelligence is frequently described as though machines simply learned everything by themselves.

They did not.

Human beings label images, review harmful content, rank responses, transcribe audio, annotate datasets, test outputs, moderate platforms, translate language, and perform countless forms of digital labor that make automated systems appear more autonomous than they actually are.

Much of this work has been outsourced internationally.

Workers in lower-income labor markets may perform repetitive or psychologically difficult tasks for companies and platforms

headquartered elsewhere, often through subcontracting structures that make responsibility difficult to trace.

The pattern is remarkably familiar.

New technology.

Old question.

Who does the hidden work?



Figure 9.4.1: The hidden global infrastructure of AI. AI systems may appear as simple digital tools such as chatbots, apps, or automated platforms, but they rely on a much larger material and social infrastructure, including data, human labeling and moderation, engineering, chips and data centers, electricity and water, critical minerals, and global labor and supply chains. The figure also highlights key political questions surrounding AI: who owns it, who works on it, who bears the environmental costs, and who captures the gains. *Source: Author-created via promt generation using ChatGPT, CC BY 4.0.*

Figure 9.4.1 This infographic is titled “The Hidden Global Infrastructure of AI.” It shows AI as a layered system rather than a standalone digital tool. At the top of the image is the part labeled “What you see,” which includes a chatbot displayed on a laptop screen, an AI app, and an AI system. This top layer represents the visible, user-facing side of artificial intelligence. Below that, the visual moves downward through a series of stacked layers showing what makes AI possible. The first layer is Data, represented by database imagery and digital information systems. The second layer is Human Labeling and Moderation, represented by people working at computers. This layer emphasizes that AI depends on human workers who sort, label, review, and moderate content. The third layer is Models and Engineering, represented by coders and technical workers building and maintaining AI systems. The fourth layer is Chips and Data Centers, represented by servers, computer chips, and large-scale computing infrastructure. The fifth layer is Electricity and Water, represented by power lines, utility infrastructure, and water use, showing that AI requires major physical resources to operate. The sixth layer is Critical Minerals, represented by mining equipment and extracted earth materials, emphasizing the role of mineral extraction in producing the hardware behind AI. The bottom layer is Global Labor and Supply Chains, represented by ships, shipping containers, trucks, and industrial facilities, showing that AI depends on worldwide manufacturing, transport, and labor systems. On the right side of the graphic, four questions appear vertically: Who owns it? Who works on it? Who pays the environmental cost? Who captures the gains? At the bottom, the figure concludes with the statement: “AI has a global material footprint.”

AI Governance Is Global Governance

Because AI systems cross borders so easily, regulating them presents a difficult problem.

A company may be headquartered in one country, train models using data gathered globally, run infrastructure in several jurisdictions, sell services in dozens more, and produce consequences that national regulators struggle to contain.

Different governments are already developing sharply different regulatory approaches. The European Union has pursued a

relatively comprehensive risk-based framework through the AI Act. The United States has historically relied more heavily on sectoral governance and executive action, although policy remains politically contested. China has developed its own regulatory structure around algorithms, generative AI, data, and platform governance. UNESCO, the OECD, and other international bodies have attempted to establish broader principles for responsible AI.

These frameworks differ, but the underlying issue is the same.

Technological power has become transnational faster than political accountability.

That should make us nervous.

Not because the robots are about to take over.

Because humans are very good at building enormously influential systems before deciding who should be responsible when something goes wrong.

The More Important AI Question

So will AI destroy jobs?

Some.

Create jobs?

Almost certainly.

Transform many more?

Very likely.

But Global Studies pushes us toward a harder question.

Will the gains and disruptions be distributed evenly?

There is little reason to assume they will be.

Countries with strong digital infrastructure, research institutions, highly skilled workforces, large technology firms, abundant capital, and reliable energy systems may be positioned to capture substantial productivity gains. Countries lacking those advantages may adopt AI as consumers while remaining dependent on technologies developed elsewhere. Within countries, highly educated workers may gain new tools while other workers experience intensified monitoring, reduced bargaining power, or displacement.

Gender may shape these effects because clerical and administrative occupations with relatively high AI exposure employ large numbers of women in many economies. Language matters. Geography matters. Education matters. Disability can shape both opportunities and exclusions. Labor institutions matter.

In other words, AI does not replace the global inequalities we have spent this book studying.

It plugs into them.

And occasionally amplifies them.

The Future of Work Is Really the Future of Bargaining

This is why the future of work cannot be understood solely as a technological question.

It is a political and institutional question.

Who owns the systems?

Who controls the data?

Who decides how workers are evaluated?

Who receives the productivity gains?

Who bears the cost of retraining?

Who is protected during transitions?

Who can challenge an automated decision?

Who gets to say no?

Those questions are not fundamentally about artificial intelligence.

They are about power.

Technology changes the terrain on which power operates, but it does not eliminate the struggle over how benefits and risks are distributed.

That struggle will shape the global economy students enter after leaving this classroom.

Which raises a fairly practical question.

After an entire book about systems, inequalities, institutions, cultures, conflicts, borders, food, health, gender, climate, and now artificial intelligence, what exactly are you supposed to do with all of this?

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9.5: Your Global Studies Degree is Not a Job Title

Which Is Actually the Point

Nobody opens a job-search website and types:

Global Studier.

This can be mildly alarming.

Students majoring in accounting can imagine becoming accountants. Nursing students can picture becoming nurses. Engineering students encounter job titles containing the word engineer with reassuring regularity.

Global Studies is less cooperative.

There is no single profession waiting at the end of the major because Global Studies is not designed around one occupational function. It is designed around a problem: how do we understand issues that cross borders, institutions, disciplines, cultures, and scales?

That turns out to be useful in far more places than the degree title initially suggests.

You Have Been Practicing a Method

Think about what this book has actually asked you to do.

You have examined ordinary objects as products of global systems. You have traced historical processes into contemporary institutions. You have looked at markets without assuming that markets explain everything, politics without pretending states act alone, culture without treating identity as static, and individual choices without forgetting the structures that shape them.

You have repeatedly moved between levels of analysis.

A migrant's decision can be personal and economic and political and historical at the same time. A public-health crisis can begin locally and become global through transportation networks, institutional failures, inequality, and communication. A food price can reflect weather, war, finance, transportation, labor, energy, and policy. A piece of clothing can carry the history of colonialism, contemporary labor systems, cultural meaning, intellectual-property disputes, and environmental costs inside a single object.

That way of thinking has a name.

Systems analysis.

And employers rarely complain that someone understands too many connections.

The Jobs Are Hiding Inside Other Fields

Global Studies graduates often work in fields that do not advertise themselves as “global studies.”

They enter public policy, international education, humanitarian assistance, sustainability, communications, diplomacy, nonprofit management, migration services, global health, corporate responsibility, research, journalism, international business, development, technology policy, higher education, advocacy, and government.

What connects these fields is not a common job title.

It is the need to understand complexity.

Consider sustainability work. A specialist may need to understand environmental regulation, supply chains, corporate reporting,

community relations, international standards, labor conditions, and climate policy simultaneously.

Consider international education. The work may involve immigration systems, intercultural communication, institutional policy, global mobility, geopolitics, student advising, and educational access.

Consider technology governance. Suddenly the person who understands ethics, law, inequality, culture, policy, international competition, and social consequences becomes extremely useful in a room full of people who understand the software.

Interdisciplinary people occasionally spend college worrying that they are insufficiently specialized.

Then the world creates interdisciplinary problems.

Cultural Competence Is Not Knowing Everyone's Food

Global careers also reward something more difficult than simply knowing that different cultures exist.

Intercultural competence means being able to recognize that people interpret institutions, authority, time, communication, conflict, identity, obligation, and professional relationships differently.

It does not mean memorizing national stereotypes.

“Japanese people value harmony.”

“Americans are individualistic.”

“Latin cultures are collectivist.”

Statements like these may point toward broad patterns, but they become dangerous when treated as instructions for predicting actual individuals.

Cultural competence requires something more flexible: curiosity without romanticization, awareness without stereotyping, and the willingness to notice when your own assumptions are behaving as though they are universal.

That skill matters in diplomacy.

It also matters in a Zoom meeting.

Global Knowledge Without Practical Skills Is Not Enough

There is, however, an important limitation.

Knowing about globalization does not automatically make someone employable.

Global Studies becomes much more powerful when students pair broad analytical ability with concrete skills: research methods, data analysis, another language, writing, project management, budgeting, geographic information systems, policy analysis, digital tools, communications, or a substantive specialization such as migration, sustainability, public health, education, business, or technology.

The combination matters because employers generally hire people to solve particular problems.

Your Global Studies background helps you understand why the problem is complicated.

Your practical skills help you do something about it.

This is not a weakness of the field.

It is an invitation to build your own configuration.

Careers Are Global Systems Too

The labor market itself has globalized.

Professional teams increasingly work across time zones. Remote work allows some forms of employment to detach from geography while creating new forms of competition. International credentials may travel unevenly. Immigration law shapes who can accept opportunities across borders. Language skills can increase mobility. Professional networks can open doors that formal qualifications alone may not.

Even careers therefore reflect the same systems we have studied elsewhere.

Opportunity is structured.

Networks matter.

Institutions matter.

Citizenship matters.

Geography matters.

But agency matters too.

That balance is worth holding onto because it prevents two equally unhelpful conclusions: that success is purely individual, or that individuals possess no meaningful ability to shape their lives.

Neither is true.

You Do Not Need to Save the World

Global Studies sometimes attracts people who care deeply about international problems.

That is good.

It can also produce an unfortunate pressure to imagine that one's career must become a heroic mission.

Please do not do this to yourself.

You do not need to end every humanitarian crisis, redesign global capitalism, solve climate change, reform every international institution, and achieve world peace before your thirty-fifth birthday.

In fact, one of the lessons of this book is that complex problems are rarely solved by heroic individuals acting alone.

They change through institutions, coalitions, policy, organizing, research, professional practice, technological design, funding decisions, lawsuits, elections, education, cultural change, and thousands of people doing less glamorous work than the documentary version will eventually imply.

The question is not whether you personally can fix the world.

The better question is:

Where can your skills, values, and position allow you to contribute to changing one part of it?

That is a much less cinematic proposition.

It is also how most change actually happens.

And before we decide what kind of change might be possible, we need one more skill.

We need to stop pretending that the future is something waiting patiently for us to discover.

It is not.

It is something being produced right now.

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9.6: Stop Trying to Predict the Future

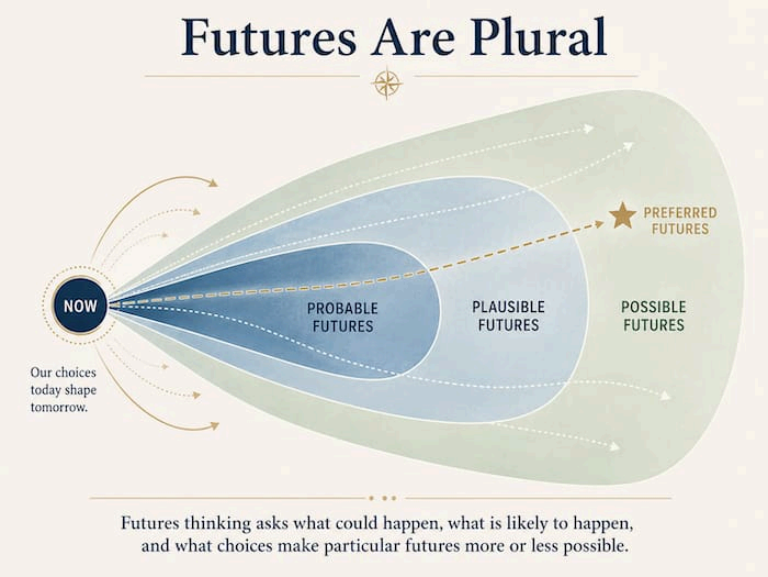


Figure 9.6.1: Futures Are Plural. Futures thinking distinguishes among possible, plausible, probable, and preferred futures rather than assuming that one predetermined future is waiting to arrive. Source: Author-created using prompt generation from ChatGpT , adapted from common futures-cone models, CC BY 4.0.

Figure 9.6.1 The infographic is titled “Futures Are Plural.” It presents a futures cone beginning at a single point on the left labeled “Now” and widening toward the right to represent an expanding range of possible futures. Closest to the center is a narrow band labeled “Probable Futures,” representing outcomes that currently appear most likely. Surrounding that is a wider band labeled “Plausible Futures,” representing outcomes that could reasonably occur under different conditions. The widest outer band is labeled “Possible Futures,” representing the broadest range of futures that could occur. A highlighted pathway extends from “Now” through the cone toward a star labeled “Preferred Futures.” This shows that a preferred future is not necessarily the most probable future; it is a future that people, institutions, or societies may actively choose to work toward. Several additional dotted and curved pathways spread outward from the present, emphasizing that there is no single predetermined future. The visual also includes the statement “Our choices today shape tomorrow.” At the bottom, the figure concludes: “Futures thinking asks what could happen, what is likely to happen, and what choices make particular futures more or less possible.”

Futures Thinking in an Uncertain World

Prediction is irresistible. Humans have been trying to anticipate the future for as long as we have been trying to make sense of uncertainty, looking to stars, markets, algorithms, expert forecasts, polling models, economic indicators, historical analogies, and, on occasion, octopuses selecting winners of football matches. Our record is mixed.

That does not make prediction useless. Forecasts can be enormously valuable when they identify probabilities, model risks, or help institutions prepare for likely scenarios. Weather forecasts save lives. Epidemiological models can guide health policy. Economic projections can help governments plan budgets and prepare for possible downturns. The problem begins when a forecast quietly turns into destiny.

Complex global systems rarely behave that neatly. They contain feedback loops, political shocks, technological surprises, environmental disruptions, human choices, and interactions that are difficult to model perfectly. A relatively small event can trigger enormous downstream changes, while events that appear world-changing in the moment sometimes produce far less transformation than expected. The future, in other words, is not a single destination waiting patiently for us to arrive.

It is plural.

Futures, Not Future

Futures thinking begins with an intentionally awkward grammatical idea: there is not one future waiting to happen. There are multiple plausible futures, and their likelihood shifts as decisions, institutions, technologies, conflicts, environmental conditions, and human behavior change.

The point is not to guess correctly. It is to think systematically about possibility.

A world divided into increasingly rigid geopolitical blocs, for example, might filter trade, technology, migration, and information flows through security competition. A different future could strengthen regional organizations as governments seek cooperation closer to home. Another might give multinational corporations and digital platforms even greater influence over communication, commerce, knowledge, and labor, sometimes rivaling the authority of states. Still another could emerge from repeated climate, health, and security crises that push governments toward stronger forms of international coordination.

None of these possibilities belongs entirely to science fiction. Pieces of all of them already exist. Futures thinking asks us to examine those fragments and then ask what conditions would make one trajectory more likely than another.

Scenarios Are Not Predictions Wearing Costumes

A good scenario sits in an interesting space between imagination and evidence. It must be plausible enough to illuminate real choices, but different enough from the present to expose assumptions we might otherwise overlook.

Suppose, for instance, that global warming continues to intensify while climate finance remains inadequate and migration restrictions tighten. The value of the scenario does not come from claiming that this exact future will occur. It comes from asking what such a combination might do to cities receiving displaced populations, insurance markets facing repeated losses, governments managing political pressure, and labor markets experiencing both shortages and social tensions. Food prices, border policy, housing, nationalism, public finance, and employment would begin interacting in ways that are difficult to see when each issue is studied separately.

That is why futures thinking fits Global Studies so naturally.

It is systems thinking pointed forward.

The Future Is Unevenly Distributed

Science-fiction author William Gibson is frequently credited with the observation that the future is already here; it is simply unevenly distributed. Whether used literally or metaphorically, the line captures something important about global change.

A technology that feels futuristic in one society may already be ordinary somewhere else. Climate conditions described in wealthy countries as future risks are already daily realities for many vulnerable communities. Demographic aging is reshaping some societies while others remain overwhelmingly young. Cashless payments dominate everyday commerce in some economies, while large populations elsewhere continue to operate outside formal banking systems.

This unevenness should make us suspicious of any theory that imagines the world moving along one universal timeline. Countries do not pass through identical stages toward a common destination, and societies do not experience modernity in the same sequence or at the same pace. Development thinking has repeatedly been distorted by the assumption that they do.

The world is better understood as a collection of overlapping presents, each containing different combinations of what appears old, new, transitional, or futuristic.

Futures Thinking Is Also About Power

Imagining the future is not merely an intellectual exercise. It is also a form of power.

Governments publish national development strategies. Corporations announce visions of technological transformation. International organizations build scenarios around population, energy, climate, trade, and security. Investors place enormous bets on which futures they believe will become profitable. These expectations do not simply describe tomorrow. They begin shaping

the present.

If governments believe electric vehicles will dominate transportation, they may invest in charging networks, battery supply chains, mineral access, and industrial policy. If cities anticipate large-scale climate migration, they may plan housing, transportation, and public services differently. If corporations expect artificial intelligence to reduce demand for certain forms of labor, they may alter hiring or training decisions before the technology is remotely capable of replacing workers at the scale being predicted.

Expectations can become partially self-fulfilling because institutions begin building toward the futures they imagine.

The future, then, starts influencing the present before it arrives.

Whose Future Gets Imagined?

Once we recognize that imagined futures shape present decisions, another question becomes unavoidable: whose imagined future receives the resources required to become real?

A technology company's vision of automation may attract billions of dollars in investment. A community's vision of safer public transportation may struggle to secure a municipal budget allocation. Military scenarios can reshape national spending for decades, while an Indigenous community's long-term understanding of ecological stewardship may remain excluded from formal planning even when it reflects centuries of accumulated environmental knowledge.

The difference is not simply creativity. It is institutional power. Some actors possess far greater ability than others to transform imagination into infrastructure, regulation, capital, and policy.

That means the politics of the future is partly a politics of whose vision becomes actionable.

This is one reason participation matters in planning, governance, and technological design. A future designed almost entirely by people who already possess power tends, rather conveniently, to contain a great deal of existing power.

Scenario Thinking Without Doom

Futures thinking often arrives in classrooms dressed as catastrophe. Climate collapse. War. Pandemics. AI apocalypse. Democratic breakdown. These risks deserve serious attention, but a steady diet of catastrophe produces its own intellectual failure: fatalism. If every global problem is presented as an approaching disaster and every institution as hopelessly inadequate, students may reasonably conclude that analysis is simply the sophisticated study of why nothing can be done. That is not where this book is going. Systems can change, and history makes that abundantly clear. Empires disappear. Social norms shift. Diseases once considered untreatable become manageable. Technologies reorder communication, transportation, and work. Rights that once appeared politically impossible become written into law. Institutions built after catastrophe sometimes prevent future catastrophe, never perfectly, but often meaningfully. None of this guarantees progress. It proves something more modest and, in some ways, more useful: the present is not permanent. That is enough to matter.

From Possible Futures to Present Choices

The value of futures thinking lies precisely in its ability to return us to the present. A scenario becomes useful when it forces us to ask what decisions would move us toward or away from a particular outcome. If a highly fragmented world would make future pandemics harder to manage, which institutions should be strengthened now? If AI could deepen inequality, what educational, labor, and regulatory systems might distribute its benefits differently? If climate migration is likely to increase, what would humane planning require before displacement becomes crisis? If global governance institutions suffer from weak legitimacy, what reforms could expand meaningful representation before distrust hardens into withdrawal? The future becomes analytically useful when it changes what we notice today. And once we begin asking what choices shape future systems, we arrive at perhaps the most uncomfortable question in the entire book. If these systems are made by people, institutions, and decisions rather than simply appearing from nowhere, then what responsibilities do the people inside them actually have? Including us.

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9.7: Plot Twist- You Are Part of the System

Agency Without the Save-the-World Speech

One of the strange effects of studying global problems is that the more you understand them, the larger they seem to become.

Climate change is not only about emissions; it involves energy systems, industrial policy, agriculture, urban design, finance, technology, consumption, inequality, and historical responsibility. Migration is not only about people moving from one place to another; it is shaped by labor markets, borders, families, conflict, demographic change, environmental pressures, citizenship law, and the uneven distribution of opportunity. Artificial intelligence is not merely a technological development; it sits inside systems of ownership, education, infrastructure, language, labor, energy, regulation, and geopolitical competition.

Once you begin thinking this way, the world becomes harder to reduce to simple causes and even harder to solve with simple answers.

That is intellectually useful.

It can also be exhausting.

At some point, a reasonable student may wonder what any individual person is supposed to do with problems operating at planetary scale.

The answer is not everything.

The Limits of the Perfect Global Citizen

Global citizenship is often presented through the language of personal responsibility. Recycle. Buy ethically. Travel responsibly. Learn about other cultures. Vote. Donate. Consume less. Support sustainable companies. Call your representative. Avoid exploitative products. Pay attention to where your food and clothing come from.

None of these actions is meaningless, and many of them can matter a great deal, particularly when they become part of wider institutional or collective changes. The problem appears when individual action is treated as though it operates at the same scale as corporate, governmental, financial, or legal power.

A consumer can choose one product over another, but a multinational corporation can alter purchasing standards across an entire supplier network. A household can reduce energy use, while governments determine electricity systems, transportation infrastructure, building codes, and industrial policy. One person can boycott a company, yet regulation can change the conditions under which an entire sector operates.

The difference is not simply one of moral seriousness.

It is a difference in leverage.

Understanding leverage helps us avoid two equally unhelpful conclusions: first, that every global problem can be solved through better personal choices; second, that individual action is pointless because structures are too powerful to change.

Both misunderstand how systems work.

Responsibility Without Pretending Everyone Has Equal Power

Political theorist Iris Marion Young offers a useful framework for thinking through this problem. In her **social connection model of responsibility**, Young argues that structural injustice often emerges through processes involving many actors rather than one clearly identifiable wrongdoer, which means responsibility cannot always be reduced to finding a single guilty party (Young, 2011).

Consider a global garment supply chain.

The consumer did not write the labor laws in the producing country. The worker did not determine international purchasing prices. A clothing brand may not directly employ factory workers if production has been subcontracted through several layers of suppliers. Governments set legal standards, investors influence corporate priorities, retailers pressure suppliers on cost and delivery, and workers themselves may possess very different levels of bargaining power depending on whether unions are permitted and effective.

The outcome is produced through a system of relationships.

Yet participation in the same system does not mean equal responsibility.

A corporation controlling millions of dollars in purchasing contracts has more leverage than an individual shopper. A government has powers that workers do not. Investors, regulators, managers, journalists, unions, and consumers occupy different positions and therefore possess different capacities to influence outcomes.

Young's model is useful precisely because it allows us to hold two ideas at once: structural problems are shared, but power within those structures is not.

Agency Inside Constraint

The concept of agency becomes important here, although it is often misunderstood.

Agency does not mean that people can simply choose their way out of structural constraints. A worker operating in an insecure labor market may technically be free to leave a job while having very few realistic alternatives. A migrant may make meaningful decisions while navigating immigration laws, family obligations, labor demand, and financial limits that sharply narrow available options. A community may resist environmental harm even when corporations or governments possess substantially greater legal and economic resources.

Agency exists within conditions people did not entirely choose.

That is what makes it interesting.

Structures shape the range of possible action, but they are also reproduced through human behavior and, over time, can be challenged, renegotiated, or transformed. Laws change because people change them. Institutions persist because actors continue to operate within them. Norms shift because groups challenge what once appeared normal.

The relationship between agency and structure therefore runs in both directions.

Neither explains the world without the other.

Collective Action Changes the Mathematics

Individual power often appears small until it becomes organized.

One employee can be replaced relatively easily; a coordinated workforce creates a different bargaining problem. One consumer complaint may disappear into a customer-service system; thousands of coordinated complaints can become a reputational and financial risk. A community protesting an infrastructure project may initially be ignored, but coalitions involving residents, lawyers, researchers, journalists, public officials, and civil-society organizations can alter the political and economic calculation.

Collective action does not guarantee success, and movements themselves can contain internal inequalities, competing priorities, and strategic disagreements.

What collective action does is change scale.

That matters because many structural problems are sustained through institutions, and durable change often requires institutional responses. A protest can alter attention. A lawsuit can reinterpret rights. A union can redistribute bargaining power. Regulation can alter incentives. A professional standard can reshape organizational behavior. Education can change which assumptions future decision-makers carry into their work.

The results are rarely dramatic enough to fit a heroic narrative.

They are often far more important.

The Savior Problem

Global engagement also requires caution because the desire to help can reproduce hierarchy.

International development, humanitarian work, advocacy, education, and volunteer programs have repeatedly demonstrated that good intentions do not automatically produce good outcomes. Projects designed without meaningful community participation can misunderstand local priorities. Outside experts may arrive with technical knowledge while overlooking social, historical, or political realities. Donors can steer organizations toward whatever issue currently attracts funding, even when local communities identify different needs.

The central problem is not that outsiders should never participate.

It is that participation without humility can turn assistance into another form of control.

Solidarity therefore requires a different posture: listen before prescribing, understand who already possesses expertise, examine who controls resources, identify whose priorities are being centered, and recognize when leadership should come from people closest to the problem.

This approach is less flattering to the ego.

It is usually more useful.

Most Global Power Looks Ordinary

Agency also operates through professional life in ways that do not always look political.

A supply-chain manager selecting suppliers may influence labor and environmental standards across several countries. A software engineer deciding how an automated system evaluates users can affect access to opportunities. A teacher choosing which histories and perspectives appear in a curriculum shapes what students understand as legitimate knowledge. A public-health official deciding where resources are allocated helps determine which communities receive protection. A journalist choosing which crisis receives sustained attention can influence public awareness, donor behavior, and government pressure.

Most people do not exercise power by standing at a podium.

They exercise it through meetings, budgets, procurement decisions, hiring choices, algorithms, policies, lesson plans, grant criteria, contracts, and ordinary professional routines.

That is one reason it is a mistake to imagine global responsibility as something separate from everyday life.

The systems we have studied are maintained through ordinary decisions too.

Responsibility Without Guilt

There is an important emotional distinction between responsibility and guilt.

Guilt asks what you should feel about the existence of an unjust system.

Responsibility asks what your position within that system allows you to do.

You did not create colonialism, contemporary border regimes, global inequality, carbon-intensive development, or the digital economy, and there is little analytical value in pretending otherwise. At the same time, recognizing that we inherit structures does not mean we are merely passive occupants of them.

We vote inside institutions.

We work inside organizations.

We consume within markets.

We participate in professions.

We build technologies.

We teach, manage, research, organize, invest, regulate, hire, design, advocate, and decide.

Some people possess far more power than others, and any serious account of responsibility must acknowledge that difference.

But once you can see the structure, you are no longer required to pretend it is simply natural.

That changes the question.

The question is no longer whether you can personally fix the world.

It is where your position gives you leverage, whom you might work with, what consequences you can influence, and which institutions are capable of turning individual intention into durable change.

That is a far less glamorous idea than saving the world.

It is also much closer to how the world actually changes.

And that brings us, finally, back to where we started.

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9.8: So What did you Learn to See?

The Global Studies Lens, One Last Time

At the beginning of this book, we took something ordinary and made it strange.

Maybe it was a phone, a shirt, a cup of coffee, something so familiar that it barely seemed worth examining. Then we slowed down long enough to ask where it came from, who made it, what moved it, who profited from it, what laws and borders shaped its journey, and what invisible histories had already accumulated inside it before it ever reached your hand.

The object did not change.

You did.

That was always the point.

The Global Autopsy was never really about the object itself. It was a training exercise in refusing the surface of things. Once you learn to look that way, the method begins to travel. A border stops being only a line and becomes a history of conquest, law, belonging, exclusion, security, race, and labor. A drought stops being only weather and becomes a story about infrastructure, agriculture, governance, wealth, vulnerability, and the uneven consequences of climate change. A pandemic becomes more than a virus because it moves through transportation systems, housing conditions, public trust, pharmaceutical markets, health infrastructure, and political decisions. An AI system becomes more than software once you can see the energy, minerals, data, labor, language, capital, and institutional choices packed inside it.

The deeper you look, the less self-contained anything becomes.

That is one of the strange pleasures of Global Studies. The world gets more complicated, but also more legible.

You begin to notice history sitting quietly behind the present. Borders, markets, institutions, identities, and inequalities rarely begin where contemporary headlines begin. They carry older decisions inside them: colonial administrations, treaties, wars, migration, industrialization, development policy, social movements, legal categories, and economic systems that outlived the political moments that created them. The past does not dictate everything that comes after it, but it leaves grooves in the road.

Once you see those grooves, contemporary events stop looking quite so sudden.

You also begin to understand that scale changes the story. A decision that appears personal at one level can look structural at another. Migration may begin as a family choice and end up entangled with labor markets, demographic change, immigration law, regional agreements, and global inequality. A local environmental dispute may turn out to be connected to international finance, commodity markets, or corporate supply chains. A national policy may fail because the problem it is trying to solve is actually transnational.

Global Studies teaches you to move your eyes back and forth between these scales until the explanation starts to hold.

And somewhere along the way, you become suspicious of sentences that begin with “that is just how the system works.”

Systems do not simply happen.

They are built, inherited, protected, challenged, and revised. Someone writes the standards. Someone controls the infrastructure. Someone decides which credentials count, which borders open easily, which risks are insured, which languages become official, which evidence gets taken seriously, and which losses are treated as unavoidable.

Power is not always theatrical. Sometimes it appears as law, force, or money, but just as often it hides inside procedures, defaults, categories, technical standards, and assumptions that have been repeated for so long they start to feel natural.

That is why evidence matters so much.

Good evidence has an annoying habit of ruining elegant stories.

Globalization is not simply liberation or exploitation. Markets do not produce only opportunity or only inequality. Migration is not reducible to crisis, aspiration, economics, or politics because it is often several of those things at once. Technology can expand access and concentrate power in the same breath. International institutions can solve collective problems while reproducing old hierarchies. Economic growth can improve living standards without distributing its gains evenly. Environmental crises can be shared globally while responsibility for causing them, and the ability to survive them, remain profoundly unequal.

None of this is an excuse for indecision.

It is an argument for intellectual patience.

The world is complicated whether we acknowledge it or not. The task is not to simplify it until it becomes comfortable. The task is to understand enough of the complexity to make better judgments.

That matters because complexity can become its own trap. Once you see how many systems overlap, it is easy to conclude that every solution is too partial to matter. Change labor standards and firms may relocate. Expand renewable energy and new mineral pressures emerge. Regulate technology and innovation may shift elsewhere. Promote tourism and local economies may grow while housing pressures rise.

Nothing stays neatly inside the box where we first found it.

But that does not mean change is impossible.

It means change requires humility about consequences, attention to scale, and a willingness to adjust when reality pushes back.

You will get things wrong.

That may be one of the most useful things this field can teach you.

You will misunderstand a culture you thought you understood. You will encounter evidence that complicates a theory you liked. You will discover that a policy celebrated as successful created costs you had not seen, or that a group you had treated as unified contains disagreements, hierarchies, and histories of its own. If you keep studying the world seriously, some of your certainties will not survive.

Good.

That is not failure.

It is what learning looks like when the subject is alive.

So return, one last time, to that ordinary object from Chapter 1.

Suppose it is still the phone.

Maybe, at the beginning, you saw a screen, a battery, a brand, a camera, a piece of technology designed to make the world feel close.

Now the object carries more weight.

You can see the mines and factories buried inside it. You can see semiconductor rivalries, shipping routes, patents, labor systems, energy demand, corporate power, digital culture, data extraction, environmental costs, and the global infrastructure required to make the device feel effortless.

The phone is exactly where it was before.

The world around it is what came into focus.

That is the payoff.

Global Studies does not make the world simpler.

It makes simple explanations harder to accept.

You start noticing when borders welcome money but stop people. You notice when technological change is described as inevitable even though people designed the rules around it. You notice when a supposedly universal policy assumes one culture's experience as the default. You notice when the people doing the labor disappear from the finished product, when historical responsibility vanishes from a climate debate, or when the most powerful actor in a system somehow manages to present itself as merely another participant.

And once you begin seeing those things, there is no easy way to go back.

The world you are entering will keep changing. Alliances will shift. Technologies will arrive faster than institutions can regulate them. New forms of inequality will appear beside old ones. Communities will organize, governments will redraw rules, corporations will reinvent supply chains, movements will rise, institutions will fail, and some arrangements that currently seem permanent will eventually look strangely temporary.

You do not need to know exactly what happens next.

You need to know how to look when it does.

You need enough curiosity to ask where something came from, enough skepticism to wonder who benefits from the arrangement, enough historical sense to recognize that the present did not begin yesterday, and enough humility to change your mind when the evidence demands it.

That is the habit this book has been trying to build all along.

Not memorizing the world.

Reading it.

And when the explanation looks finished, when the story seems too clean, when someone tells you that this is simply the way things are, there is one final thing to do.

Look again.

That is Global Studies.

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9.9: Discussion

Lets Talk About It

1. This chapter argues that globalization is not simply ending, but changing shape. Which current trend best supports that argument: geopolitical fragmentation, regionalization, AI, supply-chain restructuring, migration, or something else? Explain how the trend reflects both continued interdependence and renewed efforts at control.
2. Alter-globalization asks not whether globalization should exist, but what kind of globalization should exist and who should govern it. Which issue from this book best illustrates that question, and what would a more just version of that global system look like?
3. The chapter argues that technological change is not neutral because its effects depend on ownership, regulation, labor institutions, infrastructure, and power. How does this perspective change the way we should think about artificial intelligence?
4. What is the difference between individual responsibility and structural responsibility? Using one issue from the book, explain what an individual can realistically influence and what would require institutional or collective action.
5. Which Global Studies concept from this book most changed how you understand an ordinary object, event, or news story? What do you notice now that you might not have noticed before taking the course?
6. Futures thinking emphasizes multiple plausible futures rather than one inevitable trajectory. Which global future discussed in this chapter seems most plausible to you, and what political, economic, social, or technological developments would make it more likely?

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9.10: Assignments

Work on it

Assignment 1: The Global Autopsy, Revisited

Return to the Global Autopsy exercise from Chapter 1 and choose a different ordinary object, service, platform, or everyday activity. Analyze it using the Global Studies lens you have developed across the book.

Your analysis should move beyond simply identifying where something was produced. Trace its history, economic relationships, political institutions, cultural meanings, labor systems, environmental effects, and unequal distributions of power or risk. Where possible, connect your analysis to at least three chapters from the book.

Conclude by answering one question:

What can you see now that you probably would not have seen at the beginning of the course?

Assignment 2: Build a Global Futures Scenario

Choose one major global issue explored in this book, such as migration, climate change, global health, gender inequality, food systems, AI, trade, or geopolitical competition.

Construct a plausible scenario for the year 2040. Your goal is not to predict what will happen, but to explain how a particular future could emerge.

Identify the major forces shaping that scenario and explain how institutions, states, corporations, communities, social movements, technologies, and historical inequalities interact. Then identify at least three decisions that governments, organizations, or communities could make today that would increase or decrease the likelihood of that future.

Your scenario should make clear that the future is produced through choices rather than simply waiting to arrive.

Assignment 3: Where Is Your Leverage?

Choose one global issue you care about and map the different forms of power operating within it.

Identify the major actors involved, including governments, corporations, international institutions, workers, communities, civil-society organizations, consumers, researchers, or others who are relevant. Explain which actors possess the greatest leverage, which actors bear the greatest risks, and where collective action could change the balance of power.

Conclude by identifying one realistic point of intervention connected to your own academic, professional, civic, or community life.

The purpose is not to design a plan to “save the world.” It is to identify where meaningful influence is actually possible.

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9.11: Key Terms

Words to Know

- **Agency**: The capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and act within social, political, economic, and institutional constraints.
- **Alter-globalization**: A movement or perspective that seeks to reform or redesign globalization around greater social justice, democracy, environmental sustainability, labor rights, and human dignity rather than rejecting global interconnection altogether.
- **BRICS**: A grouping originally composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa that has expanded and increasingly serves as a platform for cooperation among states seeking greater influence in global governance.
- **Deglobalization**: A reduction or restructuring of cross-border economic, political, or social integration.
- **Digital Divide**: Unequal access to digital infrastructure, technology, skills, and the capacity to benefit from digital systems.
- **Friend-shoring**: The strategy of relocating supply chains toward countries considered politically or strategically reliable partners.
- **Futures Thinking**: A method of examining multiple plausible futures and the conditions, decisions, and uncertainties that could produce them.
- **Geoeconomic Fragmentation**: The reorganization of global economic relationships around geopolitical rivalry, national security, sanctions, strategic alliances, and political competition.
- **Global Governance**: The collection of formal and informal institutions, rules, agreements, organizations, and networks used to manage problems that cross national borders.
- **Global South**: A broad and imperfect term used to describe countries shaped by historical patterns of colonialism, unequal development, and marginalization within global governance, particularly across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.
- **Hedging**: A foreign-policy strategy in which states maintain relationships with competing powers rather than aligning completely with one side.
- **Middle Power**: A state that does not dominate the international system but possesses enough diplomatic, economic, geographic, technological, or military influence to shape important outcomes.
- **Multipolarity**: An international system in which power is distributed among several influential states or centers rather than concentrated primarily in one or two.
- **Nearshoring**: Relocating production or supply chains closer to a firm's major markets or home country.
- **Regionalization**: The increasing organization of trade, institutions, production, migration, or political cooperation within geographic regions.
- **Reshoring**: Moving production or supply-chain activities back to a firm's or country's home market.
- **Scenario Analysis**: A method of exploring how different combinations of political, economic, social, technological, or environmental forces could produce alternative futures.
- **Slowbalization**: A term used to describe the slowing or restructuring of some forms of global economic integration after periods of rapid globalization.
- **Social Connection Model of Responsibility**: Iris Marion Young's framework for understanding responsibility for structural injustice as shared across actors who participate in systems, while recognizing that those actors possess unequal levels of power and influence.
- **Systems Thinking**: An approach that examines how multiple actors, institutions, processes, and levels of analysis interact to produce outcomes.
- **Transnational Advocacy Network**: A network of activists, organizations, and institutions that coordinate across national borders to influence policy, norms, or public opinion.

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10: BONUS KPOP CASE STUDY

What Happens When the Whole Book Walks Onto a Stage?

Imagine that it is just before midnight in Seoul.

A countdown reaches zero, a music video appears online, and within seconds someone in Manila has shared it while fans in Los Angeles are already watching with subtitles. A reaction video is being recorded in Mexico City. Someone in São Paulo is arguing about the choreography. A teenager in Jakarta recognizes a fashion reference. Fans in Paris begin translating an interview. A dance challenge appears on TikTok. Streams begin accumulating across platforms headquartered thousands of miles from South Korea, merchandise orders start moving through international payment systems and supply chains, entertainment reporters begin tracking chart positions, and tourism boards, brands, governments, and investors all start paying attention.

Somewhere, somebody's parent walks past a bedroom door, hears screaming, and wonders what on earth has happened.

Welcome to globalization.

Not the diagram version. Not globalization as a neat definition involving trade, migration, institutions, and arrows crossing a map. This is globalization as people actually experience it: noisy, emotional, commercial, political, digital, creative, unequal, and almost impossible to separate into clean categories.

K-pop is useful to global studies precisely because it refuses to stay in one intellectual box. Explain it as music and economics immediately interrupts. Explain it as an industry and questions of culture push their way back in. Treat it as culture and politics appears. Talk about politics and technology changes the rules. Focus on technology and suddenly labor, identity, race, gender, inequality, language, ownership, and power are already waiting.

K-pop is not simply the story of South Korean music becoming internationally popular. It is a story about how culture is produced inside global systems, how those systems are shaped by unequal histories, how corporations and governments attempt to organize cultural flows, how audiences transform what they receive, and how something can become deeply global while remaining strongly associated with a particular place.

That makes it an unusually useful case with which to end our journey through globalization.

By now, the central argument of this book should sound familiar. Globalization is not one thing moving in one direction. It is an unstable collection of relationships connecting people, states, markets, institutions, technologies, environments, and ideas. K-pop allows us to watch many of those relationships operate at the same time.

So rather than adding another set of concepts, we are going to do something different.

We are going to follow the music.

10.1: Acts

10.2: Coda

10.3: Case Study Reflection

10.4: Discussion

10.5: Assignments

10.6: References

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10.1: Acts

ACT I: THIS WAS NOT AN ACCIDENT



Figure 10.1.1:Black Pink a KPOP Girl Band. (*CC BY 3.0*; via Wikimedia Commons)

There is an appealing version of the K-pop story in which talented performers made irresistible music, the internet discovered them, and the world fell in love.

None of that is entirely wrong.

It is simply nowhere close to enough.

Modern South Korean popular culture emerged from a country whose twentieth-century history included colonization, war, authoritarian rule, rapid industrialization, democratization, and increasingly ambitious integration into the global economy. South Korea's transformation from a war-devastated society into a major industrial economy is already one of globalization's most remarkable development stories, but by the late twentieth century policymakers were confronting a new question. If cars, ships, steel, semiconductors, and electronics could become globally competitive exports, why not culture?

Beginning in the 1990s, South Korean policy increasingly treated cultural industries not merely as artistic activity but as a potentially significant part of national economic development. Kwon and Kim (2014) trace an important policy shift during this period from a state concerned primarily with regulating cultural production toward one that increasingly saw culture as an export industry. The 1997 Asian financial crisis intensified South Korea's broader efforts to rethink economic strategy, innovation, and international competitiveness, and in that environment movies, television, gaming, music, fashion, beauty, and digital media gradually became parts of a much larger cultural ecosystem.

The result would eventually be described as Hallyu, or the Korean Wave.

At first, much of that wave moved regionally. Korean television dramas became popular across parts of East and Southeast Asia, music followed, and then digital technology dramatically changed the scale of what was possible. Jin (2016) argues that social media and mobile technologies were central to the emergence of a new phase of the Korean Wave because they allowed Korean cultural products to circulate through networks that did not depend entirely on traditional Western media gatekeepers.

That change matters because older theories of cultural globalization often assumed a much more one-directional world. For much of the twentieth century, scholarship on cultural imperialism focused on enormous asymmetries in global media power. Hollywood films, American television, Western advertising, and major European and American media corporations possessed extraordinary capacity to distribute images of the world across it. The concern was not merely that people might enjoy American movies or music. It was that control over cultural production could shape assumptions about beauty, modernity, success, consumption, gender, politics, and the good life itself.

Then the neatness of that picture began to collapse.

Japanese anime developed enormous global audiences. Indian cinema moved through vast domestic and diasporic markets.

Latin music crossed linguistic borders. African music industries found increasingly global audiences. Turkish television dramas traveled across regions once considered culturally disconnected from one another. Korean dramas became streaming phenomena, and K-pop became impossible to dismiss as a regional curiosity.

None of this means cultural power suddenly became equal. English still enjoys structural advantages, American corporations remain central to music distribution and digital platforms, and a relatively small number of technology firms continue to control much of the infrastructure through which global cultural life moves. Yet the older image of cultural globalization as one giant arrow labeled WEST pointing outward became harder to defend.

K-pop tells a messier story. It shows us that globalization can produce new cultural centers without erasing older ones, and that power can become more geographically dispersed without becoming evenly distributed.

Soft Power With a Light Stick

Governments have always understood that power can wear more than one costume. Military power can threaten, economic power can reward or punish, and political institutions can negotiate, but countries can also become influential because other people find aspects of them compelling.

Joseph Nye (2004) described soft power as the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion, and culture can be one source of that attraction. This makes K-pop politically interesting because someone who becomes interested in BTS, BLACKPINK, Stray Kids, TWICE, SEVENTEEN, aespa, or another Korean act may not stop at music. Curiosity can expand toward Korean television, language learning, food, fashion, skincare, tourism, history, or society. The song becomes an entry point into a much larger relationship with a country.

South Korean governments have recognized that possibility and supported the broader international expansion of Korean cultural industries. Yet this story becomes misleading if we make it too tidy. Governments do not sit in ministries deciding which song a teenager in California will love. Soft power is not mind control.

A state can fund cultural infrastructure, support international promotion, finance language programs, encourage tourism, negotiate access, and celebrate successful artists, but it cannot manufacture genuine attraction on command. Fans interpret culture for themselves. They criticize companies, remix material, organize politically, translate content, make memes, and sometimes become far more important in spreading culture than the institutions officially responsible for promoting it.

That is the strange thing about soft power. The more successfully culture travels, the less completely anyone controls what it means.

ACT II: THE SONG IS KOREAN, EXCEPT WHEN IT ISN'T, EXCEPT WHEN IT IS

Listen closely to a K-pop song and the category begins to wobble.

You may hear Korean lyrics next to English phrases, while the song itself may have been developed by writers or producers from several countries. Its sound may draw from hip-hop, R&B, electronic dance music, pop, rock, Latin music, or other traditions whose histories stretch across oceans. Styling may borrow from fashion circulating through Seoul, Tokyo, Paris, New York, and Los Angeles. Choreography may emerge from another international network entirely.

Then the finished product arrives under the label K-pop.

So what exactly makes it Korean?

This is where globalization becomes more interesting than simple cultural exchange. Appadurai (1996) described globalization through overlapping landscapes of people, technology, finance, media, and ideas. These flows do not move together neatly. People encounter images from places they may never visit, money crosses borders differently from migrants, technologies travel differently from political beliefs, and cultural forms become detached from one setting before being reconstructed inside another.

K-pop fits almost perfectly into that world.

Its Korean identity does not require every ingredient to have originated on the Korean peninsula, because culture has almost never worked that way. Human beings have always borrowed, migrated, translated, copied, traded, conquered, improvised, resisted, collaborated, stolen, adapted, remembered, forgotten, and rebuilt. Globalization does not create cultural exchange. It changes its speed, scale, infrastructure, and intensity.

K-pop therefore complicates the fear that globalization inevitably produces cultural homogenization. It certainly participates in a global commercial system. Performers compete for attention in global markets, entertainment corporations study international audiences, and music is increasingly packaged for digital platforms. Global beauty and fashion industries shape aesthetics, and English often appears because it can facilitate international circulation.

Yet Korean did not have to disappear for K-pop to travel.

In some cases, the audience adapted itself to the product.

Fans learned phrases, translated lyrics, researched cultural references, studied Korean, followed variety shows with subtitles, and became interested in a society because they first encountered a song. That is a useful reminder that localization is not simply something corporations do to products. Audiences localize culture too.

A fan in Peru, India, Germany, Kenya, or the United States does not encounter K-pop from the same social position. The music enters different histories, racial politics, class structures, gender expectations, linguistic environments, and cultural debates. Meaning changes as it moves.

Globalization therefore produces neither perfect sameness nor untouched cultural difference.

It produces hybridity.

And hybridity is rarely tidy.

When Does Borrowing Become Taking?

Consider a K-pop video that draws visually or musically from Black American hip-hop.

Is that globalization? Certainly.

Is it cultural hybridity? Potentially.

Could it also involve cultural appropriation? Yes.

Those answers can coexist because the ethical question is not whether cultures influence each other. They always have. The more difficult questions concern history, power, credit, context, profit, and harm.

K-pop owes significant artistic debts to Black musical traditions, including hip-hop and R&B, genres that emerged from specific histories of racial inequality, creativity, resistance, community, and commercialization in the United States. Once these styles enter global popular culture, they can be admired and transformed, but they can also be detached from their histories, stereotyped, repackaged, or used as aesthetic shorthand.

Other controversies have involved Indigenous imagery, religious symbols, hairstyles, clothing, and practices drawn from communities whose histories may not be understood by the people using them. Research with K-pop fans of color shows that these debates are not simply academic exercises. Fans can find themselves simultaneously loving a cultural form while feeling alienated by the way their own communities appear within it (Kim, 2024).

That tension is worth staying with.

It is tempting to solve cultural exchange with a simple rule in which borrowing is either permissible or forbidden, but global culture is too complicated for that. A better approach is to ask whether the origins and histories of a cultural form are recognized, whether benefits and opportunities move in more than one direction, and whether those involved accept responsibility when harm becomes visible.

These are the Three Rs: Recognition, Reciprocity, and Responsibility.

Recognition asks whether the people, history, and meaning connected to a cultural practice remain visible when the practice travels. It changes the question from "Can I use this?" to "Do I know what I am using?" A rhythm, hairstyle, garment, symbol, or dance did not appear without a history, and recognition asks whether that history travels with the form or disappears precisely when the form becomes commercially useful.

Reciprocity asks who benefits. Cultural exchange becomes ethically more complicated when powerful institutions profit from marginalized communities while those communities remain excluded, stereotyped, or economically disadvantaged. Reciprocity does not demand mathematical equality, but it does require us to notice collaboration, compensation, credit, access, and whose cultural creativity is producing opportunity for whom.

Responsibility asks what happens after criticism appears. In a highly connected world, artists, corporations, platforms, and consumers can hear responses almost immediately. International audiences organize quickly, communities speak back, and companies are forced to decide whether they will ignore, defend, explain, repair, or change.

The Three Rs do not turn every cultural dispute into a simple verdict. That is their strength. They turn cultural exchange into an investigation of relationships.

That is what global studies is supposed to do.

ACT III: THE FACTORY, THE DREAM, AND THE PEOPLE INSIDE BOTH

There is another reason K-pop makes such an effective globalization case.

It looks glamorous.

Globalization frequently does.

The finished object hides the process that created it. We see a smartphone rather than the minerals, factories, logistics systems, patents, designers, programmers, marketers, data centers, and workers behind it. We see a cheap shirt rather than cotton production, textile manufacturing, shipping, retail strategy, and garment labor.

K-pop offers a similar illusion. The final performance can look effortless precisely because enormous amounts of effort have disappeared into it.

Entertainment companies developed highly organized systems for identifying and training prospective performers. Trainees may spend years studying dance, singing, languages, stage performance, media presentation, and other skills without any guarantee of debuting successfully. The system can produce extraordinary technical ability and tightly coordinated performances, but it can also produce extraordinary pressure.

Here globalization reconnects with labor.

Questions that appeared earlier in this book return in a new costume. Who assumes risk? Who controls schedules? Who owns the music? Who has bargaining power? Who becomes replaceable? Who captures the largest share of revenue when a cultural product becomes internationally successful?

The entertainment industry is unusual mainly because its workers are highly visible. The underlying structure is familiar. Global capitalism frequently organizes production by distributing risk and reward unevenly.

K-pop complicates the traditional image of the exploited global worker because successful idols may eventually become extraordinarily wealthy and influential. Some acquire creative control, establish companies, negotiate better contracts, or accumulate substantial ownership and bargaining power. Yet the existence of successful workers does not make the underlying system irrelevant. For every internationally recognized performer, many aspiring artists never become famous, while the industry continues to monetize competition, emotional attachment, physical discipline, youth, beauty, availability, and attention.

The product being sold is therefore not only music.

It is also access, personality, narrative, intimacy, and the sense that you know someone you have never met.

That is where K-pop becomes not only a labor story but also a story about contemporary capitalism.

The Idol Is Working Even When the Song Ends

Industrial capitalism famously separated the factory from the home.

Digital capitalism has been remarkably creative about putting work almost everywhere else.

An idol performs onstage, but value is also created through livestreams, interviews, social posts, fan platforms, behind-the-scenes videos, endorsements, airport appearances, variety programs, short clips, photographs, and carefully maintained relationships with audiences. The boundary between working and simply existing becomes difficult to locate.

Fans participate in this system too.

A fan may translate an interview from Korean into English before another person wakes up, after which someone else translates that version into Spanish. Another fan maintains a streaming guide. Someone creates graphics. Someone explains a cultural reference. Someone organizes a birthday fundraiser or edits a compilation. Others teach new fans how to vote in online competitions or coordinate streaming campaigns.

None of this looks like conventional employment, yet all of it can create economic value.

Cho and Cho's (2021) research on BTS fan translation describes fan translators as part of a transnational affective community whose work facilitates cultural production and knowledge sharing across borders. Fans make cultural material accessible to audiences that entertainment companies themselves might never reach as quickly or as intimately.

This is participatory culture at its most powerful, but it is also a form of labor.

Research on platform-organized fansubbing complicates the cheerful language of participation even further. Kang and Yu (2021) show how fan translation promoted as voluntary community activity can also operate inside institutional systems that structure, monitor, and benefit from that work.

At that point, the boundary between producer and consumer begins to collapse. The fan consumes the product, promotes it, translates it, generates new content around it, supplies engagement data, recruits other consumers, and sometimes even pressures other fans to behave as better consumers.

Economists used to enjoy a fairly comfortable distinction between producers and consumers.

The internet made that distinction much harder to defend.

ACT IV: THE BAND HAS AN INVISIBLE MEMBER, AND ITS NAME IS THE ALGORITHM

Imagine the global music industry without the internet.

K-pop might still have traveled.

It simply would have traveled differently.

Traditional cultural distribution relied heavily on gatekeepers such as radio stations, television networks, record labels, retailers, critics, concert promoters, and national media systems. Those institutions still matter, but digital platforms created additional routes around them.

YouTube was especially important to the international growth of the Korean Wave because a video produced in Seoul no longer required a television executive in every destination country to decide that local audiences should see it. Jin (2016) identifies social media and digital technology as critical infrastructure for Hallyu's expansion.

That can sound wonderfully democratic. A Korean musician, Nigerian filmmaker, Indonesian fashion designer, Kazakhstani singer, or Brazilian creator can potentially reach international audiences without first persuading the old cultural establishment that they deserve access.

But eliminating one gatekeeper does not eliminate gates.

It creates new ones.

Today, enormous amounts of cultural visibility are mediated by platforms whose recommendation algorithms, ranking systems, advertising models, moderation practices, and business decisions remain mostly invisible to the people using them. A song can technically be available everywhere and still remain effectively unseen.

Attention has become infrastructure.

And infrastructure is power.

When TikTok recommends a dance, Spotify places a song on a playlist, YouTube suggests a music video, or an algorithm decides that a piece of content should appear on millions of screens, technology is not simply carrying culture. It is helping determine which culture gets carried.

Digital globalization therefore cannot be understood through access alone. We also have to ask who owns the systems through which access occurs.

K-pop may challenge older patterns of Western cultural dominance while remaining deeply dependent on technology corporations that control global distribution infrastructure. That is not a contradiction. It is globalization.

Power moves.

It rarely disappears.

Zuboff's (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism pushes the analysis further because platforms do not merely show us culture. They learn from what we watch, replay, skip, like, share, search for, purchase, and ignore.

The fan experiences enthusiasm.

The platform receives behavioral data.

The same action is cultural experience and economic information at once.

At this point, trying to identify one actor responsible for K-pop's globalization becomes almost impossible. The South Korean government mattered. Entertainment companies mattered. Artists mattered. Producers, choreographers, stylists, translators, directors, managers, engineers, and countless other workers mattered. Platforms mattered. Traditional media mattered. Brands mattered. Fans mattered enormously.

That is what a global system looks like.

The outcome belongs to no single actor because it emerges from interaction among many of them.

Those actors, however, do not possess equal power. A trainee and an entertainment conglomerate occupy different positions. A volunteer translator and a technology platform occupy different positions. A small country's cultural ministry and a multinational digital corporation occupy different positions. A Black artist whose musical tradition is borrowed and a global entertainment company packaging that tradition for new markets occupy different positions.

Studying globalization means refusing to confuse connection with equality.

ACT V: FANDOM BUILDS A COUNTRY THAT DOES NOT EXIST ON A MAP

There is a peculiar geography to fandom.

A person can belong intensely to a community whose members are scattered across continents, languages, nationalities, religions, classes, and political systems. They may never meet one another and yet recognize a shared vocabulary, humor, history, and set of rituals almost instantly.

BTS's ARMY is perhaps the most famous K-pop example, though similar dynamics exist across many fandoms. These communities translate content, circulate news, organize charitable projects, coordinate digital campaigns, explain cultural references, defend artists, fight among themselves, develop norms, preserve archives, and generate remarkable amounts of shared knowledge.

This is not merely an audience.

It is social infrastructure.

Someone can wake up in California and immediately enter a conversation already underway among people in Seoul, Manila, Delhi, Nairobi, London, Mexico City, and São Paulo. The nation-state has not disappeared. Everyone involved still lives somewhere, under laws, passports, economies, and political institutions that matter enormously. Yet another layer of belonging now sits on top of geography.

This is one reason cultural globalization matters so much. It creates communities based not only on where people live but also on what they imagine themselves to share.

Appadurai (1996) emphasized the importance of imagination in globalization. Global media allow people to imagine possible lives, identities, communities, and futures through material originating far beyond their immediate surroundings. A teenager does not need to migrate to South Korea for South Korea to become part of the imaginative geography of their life.

Sometimes this produces meaningful curiosity. A student starts with K-pop and begins learning Korean. Another becomes interested in Korean history. Someone else discovers Korean food. Another begins learning about East Asian politics. A fan develops friendships with people from places they previously knew almost nothing about.

None of this means fandom automatically produces sophisticated intercultural understanding. Fascination can become fetishization. Cultural interest can harden into stereotype. Online communities can become nationalistic, hostile, exclusionary, or obsessive.

But even those failures teach us something important.

Global contact does not automatically produce global understanding.

Connection creates an opportunity.

What people do with it remains human.

ACT VI: THE WAVE HITS ANOTHER SHORE

Perhaps the most revealing part of the K-pop story appears when we stop looking at Korea.

Travel northwest and eventually we reach Kazakhstan.

In the mid-2010s, a popular music form known as Q-pop, short for Qazaq pop, began attracting attention, particularly through the group Ninety One. The influence of K-pop is visible, but calling Q-pop a copy misses almost everything interesting about it.

Q-pop took elements of a globally circulating Korean popular music system and reconstructed them inside Kazakhstan's own linguistic, cultural, political, and generational landscape. Performers used the Kazakh language. Visual aesthetics engaged local ideas about modernity and identity. Young audiences encountered a form that could look globally contemporary without requiring cultural modernity to be expressed primarily through Russian or English.

Recent research describes Q-pop through precisely this process of glocalization, in which globally circulating forms are localized and transformed rather than simply reproduced (Zholamanova & Oh, 2025).

Consider how complicated the path has become.

Black American musical traditions helped shape forms later incorporated into Korean popular music. Korean performers and companies transformed those traditions inside a particular cultural industry. K-pop then circulated internationally through digital platforms. Kazakhstani musicians encountered that Korean form and adapted parts of the model into Q-pop. Q-pop, in turn,

became connected to questions of language, youth, identity, generational change, and Kazakhstan's place within both a post-Soviet and a global cultural environment.

There is no straight arrow that adequately represents that process.

That is why theories imagining globalization as cultural Americanization eventually become insufficient. American influence remains enormous, including within K-pop's own genealogy, but culture does not simply leave the United States, arrive somewhere else, and stop. It gets altered, after which the altered form travels again.

At every stage, people add, remove, translate, contest, reinterpret, and reinvent.

Globalization behaves less like ink dropped into water than like an international remix whose participants disagree constantly about where the original track began.

The same pattern appears across contemporary global culture. Afrobeats travels through African and diasporic networks and influences mainstream global music. Latin artists reshape international pop without abandoning Spanish. Japanese anime influences artists creating entirely different forms elsewhere. Indian cinema circulates through domestic, diasporic, and digital networks that do not conform neatly to Western media geography. Korean television dramas reshape assumptions about what international streaming content can attract global audiences, while Turkish series travel far beyond their regional origins.

Cultural globalization is becoming increasingly multipolar.

That does not mean every cultural center has equal resources or distribution power. Multipolarity is not equality. It simply means that cultural innovation capable of global circulation increasingly emerges from many places and travels through many routes.

For students of globalization, this changes the question.

Instead of asking only what globalization is doing to local cultures, we also have to ask what local cultures are doing to globalization.

ACT VII: YOU ARE NOT OUTSIDE THE MACHINE

Here is the uncomfortable ending.

It would be convenient if globalization were something governments and corporations did while everyone else watched.

It isn't.

A single stream is tiny, but millions of streams become an industry. One click appears insignificant, but billions of clicks train recommendation systems. A single fan buying an album changes almost nothing, while millions of fans buying multiple versions can alter charts, corporate strategies, manufacturing decisions, and artist priorities. A translation posted online may feel like a gift to a community, yet thousands of voluntary translations can become infrastructure that allows corporations to expand into markets without paying for equivalent professional labor. One criticism of cultural appropriation may be easy to ignore, while a transnational fan backlash can force a company to respond.

Consumers are not omnipotent, and pretending otherwise would be another distortion. Fans do not control entertainment corporations, algorithms, trade rules, intellectual property systems, labor contracts, or global markets simply because they participate in them.

But participation is not powerlessness either.

That is why responsibility matters at the end of the Three Rs. Globalization distributes responsibility unevenly because participation occurs at different scales. Governments establish rules, corporations make production decisions, platforms govern visibility, artists create and perform, workers sustain industries, fans produce value, consumers reward some practices and reject others, and communities whose culture is borrowed speak back.

No single participant is responsible for everything.

Very few are responsible for nothing.

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10.2: Coda

WHEN THE LIGHTS COME UP

The concert ends.

The performers leave the stage.

The lights come on, and what looked like magic becomes infrastructure again.

The arena was designed by someone. Tickets moved through a commercial system. Visas were negotiated. Songs were written, produced, translated, recorded, choreographed, distributed, streamed, ranked, and monetized. Someone manufactured the light stick. Someone assembled the phone recording the concert. Someone mined materials used inside that phone. Someone operates the server storing the video. Someone owns the intellectual property. Someone collects behavioral data from the person watching it.

Then somewhere else, a teenager hears the song and decides to create something new.

That may be the most important part of the story.

Globalization is often presented as a force acting upon human beings, as though it arrived one morning like weather. Yet globalization is also something people continuously produce through policy, technology, ambition, migration, inequality, curiosity, exploitation, creativity, and choices so ordinary that we rarely recognize them as global at all.

K-pop does not prove that globalization is good.

It does not prove that globalization is bad.

It proves something much more useful.

The categories we separated throughout this book were never really separate.

Culture becomes economic when songs turn into industries. Economics becomes political when governments recognize cultural exports as national assets. Politics becomes technological when platforms govern visibility. Technology becomes cultural when algorithms help decide what millions of people encounter. Labor becomes intimate when personality itself becomes part of the product. Identity becomes both local and global when people use foreign cultural forms to rethink who they are at home.

Power can travel through an aircraft carrier, a trade agreement, a beauty standard, a recommendation system, a television drama, or a three-minute song.

Culture does not simply travel.

It changes the people who encounter it.

Then they change it.

Then it travels again.

Someone in Kazakhstan hears Seoul. Seoul once heard Detroit, Atlanta, New York, Tokyo, London, Kingston, Los Angeles, and countless places in between. Somewhere else, someone is listening now.

The next version does not exist yet.

That is globalization.

The music is still playing.

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10.3: Case Study Reflection

CASE STUDY REFLECTION

Return to the opening scene. A K-pop video has just been released in Seoul and within minutes is being watched, translated, discussed, promoted, criticized, and remixed around the world.

Now explain what happened without using globalization itself as an answer.

A strong explanation would have to account for governments, entertainment companies, artists, platforms, workers, translators, fans, supply chains, algorithms, cultural histories, and unequal forms of power. It would need to explain how national identity survives inside a hybrid cultural form, why voluntary fan participation can also become economically valuable labor, how soft power operates without total state control, and why a cultural product traveling from Korea to Kazakhstan may arrive there not as a copy but as raw material for something new.

By the end of the book, that complexity should no longer feel like a problem.

It should feel like the point.

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10.4: Discussion

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what extent can K-pop be understood as an instrument of South Korean soft power if much of its global influence is actually produced by private companies, artists, platforms, and fans?
2. Does K-pop challenge the cultural imperialism thesis, or does its dependence on global platforms and musical traditions associated with the United States suggest that older power structures remain embedded inside newer cultural flows?
3. Apply Recognition, Reciprocity, and Responsibility to one example of cultural borrowing in global popular culture. Does the framework produce a different conclusion than simply asking whether the case is cultural appropriation?
4. Are fan translators, streaming organizers, content creators, and other active fans consumers, workers, producers, or some combination of all three? What changes when unpaid participation creates commercial value?
5. What does the emergence of Q-pop reveal about glocalization and the changing direction of cultural globalization?

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10.5: Assignments

Follow One Song Around the World

Select one K-pop song or music video and reconstruct the globalization network behind it. Investigate the performers, entertainment company, songwriters, producers, choreographers, musical influences, digital platforms, languages, international audience, fan activity, marketing, and any cultural controversies associated with it.

Your goal is not to review whether the song is good. Your goal is to demonstrate how many global systems have to interact before a three-minute piece of music becomes an international cultural event.

Conclude by identifying the three forms of power you believe mattered most in the song's global circulation.

The Three Rs Cultural Exchange Audit

Choose a case of cultural borrowing from music, fashion, food, film, beauty, gaming, or another area of global popular culture and analyze it through Recognition, Reciprocity, and Responsibility.

Examine whose culture is being borrowed from, whether that history is acknowledged, who benefits economically or culturally, whether members of the originating community are collaborators or merely sources of inspiration, and how the people or institutions involved responded if criticism emerged.

Conclude by explaining whether you consider the exchange primarily appreciation, appropriation, hybridity, exploitation, or something too complicated for a single label.

Build the Next Wave

Identify a cultural form currently developing outside the traditional centers of Western global media. It might be a music industry, television genre, fashion movement, gaming culture, film industry, or digital creator ecosystem.

Explain the local conditions that produced it, then analyze what would have to happen for it to become globally influential. Consider language, technology, migration, capital, state support, platforms, diasporas, fan communities, and cultural translation.

End with one final question: if this cultural form becomes global, what might another society eventually create from it?

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GLOSSARY

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