

# The Arc of Globalizing Knowledge

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Amidst the animated debates on globalization over the course of the last decade, running the gamut from the iconization of Madonna, Michael Jackson, and Michael Jordan and the institution of various ‘free trade’ agreements so eagerly embraced by the United States, to the street battles fought in Seattle and elsewhere over the regimes of globalization sought to be installed by the WTO and the controversies spawned by outsourcing of jobs to India, something quite fundamental has been obscured. Nothing, but nothing, has been so fundamentally globalized as what is today construed as ‘knowledge’. Whatever the triumphs of Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, or Nike and Gap, or the inroads into global markets by the giant retailer Walmart, nothing is likely to be as enduring as those categories of knowledge which, often bearing no explicit marks of their provenance and posing as neutral carriers of messages, have insinuated themselves into the worldviews of people. The West is to be distinguished not only by its copyright over the idea of copyright, but by its willingness to forgo the mark of the copyright when its interests are better advanced in its absence.

The world at this juncture of history is understood overwhelmingly through categories that are largely the product of the academic disciplines that constitute the bedrock of

modern knowledge systems. These disciplines have been charged with codifying, disciplining, organizing, institutionalizing and transmitting knowledge about the physical and material world, as well as about the various social, political, cultural, religious, and legal institutions and practices found among the diverse human communities that have inhabited the world over the last few thousand years. The consequences of the imposition of the West upon the rest of the world have commonly been understood through the phenomenon of colonialism, and some theorists are even inclined to view European colonial conquests as early waves of globalization. Four centuries separate the extraordinary swagger and unremitting cruelty of the conquistadors who wove their way through central and South America from the Boers who imagined that some divine covenant commanded them to subject Africans to their stern rule, but nevertheless something also permits us to place these diverse histories under one single, if polychromatic, lens. Neither one language (say French) nor one system of government (for example, electoral democracy) was disseminated to every part of the world by the colonizers, but every part of the colonized world was opened up to one European language or the other. Europe's colonization of the world, when it did not lead to the decimation or extermination of native people, still resulted in the extinction of lifestyles, cultural life forms, and the biological, cultural, and social inheritance of various societies.

The post-colonial era has brought us to the belated recognition that every conquest is preeminently a conquest of knowledge. What seems commonplace to the present generation of scholars was scarcely such even three decades ago. The military accomplishments of colonizers, the policies of proconsuls, the negotiations over the fate

of colonies, and the swashbuckling adventures of intrepid explorers were the woof and warp of colonial histories. The more serious and committed historians added accounts of colonial methods of revenue extraction or allowed themselves to meander into investigations of colonial pretensions about civilising the natives. The epistemological imperatives of the colonial state only began to receive the critical scrutiny of scholars and commentators some three to four decades ago. The widespread student rebellions of the late 1960s, the disenchantment with the United States over its ruthless incineration of Vietnam and Cambodia, and the immense loss of faith in communism once the Stalinist horrors became public knowledge had also the cumulative effect of putting into question the role of the academy, the ideologies of Marxism and capitalism, and the enterprise of 'research' itself as sites of knowledge production. What forms of knowledge do different political systems produce and equally subjugate? What had been the forms of knowledge of the colonial state, and did the malaise encountered in many newly independent nation-states reflect the fact that colonial knowledge systems were taken over, lock, stock and barrel?

The British in India, to take one well-known example, devoted themselves to an exhaustive study of India's social and intellectual traditions: grammars of Indian languages were created, translations of scriptural texts were authorized, the legal texts of Hindus and Muslims were codified, the land was mapped and its inhabitants counted, measured, and classified; 'communities' were enumerated, marked, and named.<sup>1</sup> A grand register of the 'People of India' was created. The Botanical Survey, the Archaeological Survey, the Trigonometrical Survey, and the voluminous enterprise of creating imperial

and district gazetteers, among other like projects, were as much a part of the institutional framework of colonial rule as the various pieces of legislation and administrative decisions which gave rise to colonial police and armed forces, the courts and a judicial apparatus, mechanisms of governance, and other well-known institutions of colonial policy-making.<sup>2</sup> The Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, as modern patrons of scholarship and the higher learning, were anticipated by the East India Company, as global an enterprise as one can imagine. Though the Company's fortunes rested on its trade in goods such as tea, spices, textiles, and opium, and subsequently on the revenue accumulated in its worldwide overseas possessions, it was understood that the intellectual endeavors of the company's servants were likely to be more enduring. As Governor General of India, Warren Hastings patronized British gentlemen who were keen to render Indian texts less opaque to British sensibilities; and in offering Charles Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* to Nathaniel Smith, Chairman of the East India Company, Hastings expressed the hope, indeed the confidence, that this labor of love would 'survive when the British dominion in India shall have long ceased to exist'.<sup>3</sup> What is true of India is also, to a greater or lesser degree, characteristic of British, French, and Dutch colonies in other parts of the world.<sup>4</sup> To many lay observers, the most transparent aspect of the colonial 'conquest of knowledge' is elucidated through other facts, such as the inheritance (and obviously not in India alone) of the English language, the continuing legacy of British parliamentary traditions, or even, as in the case of India, the peculiar circumstance that though the country's constitution framers consulted a large number of constitutions, the essential features of the Indian constitution were ultimately

derived from that very colonial piece of policy-making known as the Government of India Act of 1935.

The 'conquest of knowledge' entailed, however, a great deal more than what was wrought under colonial rule itself, and under conditions of globalization Western knowledge systems have sought, largely with success, to gain complete dominance across the globe in nearly all spheres of life. The economists' conceptions of growth, poverty, scarcity, and development, marketed by all the social sciences, have come to predominate everywhere. The sum total of Western social science, it can well be argued, has not only been to mire the so-called developing world in ever more acute levels of poverty, but to forestall the possibility of worldviews and lifestyles that do not synchronize with the conception of the 'good life' that prevails in the 'developed' West. The entire theory of development, to pursue this one idea at somewhat greater length, is predicated on a time-lag: countries that are under-developed or part of the developing world seek to emulate the developed countries, but by the time they have seemingly caught up, the developed countries have moved to another plane of development. The native, to speak in a different tongue, always arrive late at the destination; indeed, the theory of development condemns the underdeveloped to live not their own lives, but rather to fulfill someone else's conception of life. The supposed beneficiary of development is told that he or she will finally arrive at the doors of history -- except that it is someone else's history. Development doesn't merely assure us that the past of the native must be entirely jettisoned, it also hijacks the native's future. If the native's present is the European's past, the native's future is the European's present. Once there is, moreover, a developing

or developed middle class, one can be quite certain that a consuming class renders all previous understandings of poverty obsolete. The only meaning of poverty that is permitted to survive is one drawn from the annals of modern life in the industrialized societies. Those who refuse to partake of the consumerist lifestyle are henceforth marked as poor, the objects of pity and incomprehension. Only then can we understand why the poor in a country such as the United States cannot be drawn into a class struggle or be turned into proponents of distributive justice. The poor look up to the rich with envy and admiration and are firmly convinced that the rich are deserving of further tax breaks.

The advocates of development have construed it as the only legitimate and efficacious form of social intervention. Whatever domain of life one turns to, the story is a similar one of the narrowing of categories of knowledge under the sway of modernity and globalization and the demise of pluralism even as multiculturalism in the American idiom prospers. Modern knowledge militates against the notion of the 'commons', an outcome only surprising to those who have not grasped that globalization and specialization of knowledge are not contrary but complementary processes. I mean by this not only what is palpably evident to all those who are heavily invested in environmental histories, namely that water, pastures, and forests were seen by traditional communities as being the common inheritance of all or certainly most members of those communities. Many have argued that the knowledge of the culinary, medicinal, and symbolic uses of various plants, such as neem and tamarind, was traditionally not confined to specialists but was part of the collective memory of communities. Much less evident examples come to mind. Gujaratis plied the oceans for centuries and were eminently successful

businessmen. Their credit was good thousands of miles away, and there was not a port anywhere in the Indian Ocean trading network where a Gujarati was not to be found.<sup>5</sup> The present-day ubiquitousness of the Patel Brothers grocery store has its antecedents in the business houses established by the likes of the Jain merchant and banker of the seventeenth century, Virji Vohra, and the eighteenth century Sunni Bohra shipper, Abdul Ghafar, men described by one scholar as ‘probably among the world’s wealthiest persons.’<sup>6</sup> But the time when an American-style MBA is the only proper credential for a businessmen of repute is nearly upon us, and the practices of traditional businessmen will become something like folk dances which survive only in Bollywood films or as indispensable ingredients of that exercise in official culture that goes by the name of ‘Festival of India’. Indian businesses must have known something of precision and efficiency as the numerous accounts of Bombay’s legendary tiffin lunch-box system, which Forbes magazine has characterized as an operation with the least margin of error among businesses with tens of thousands of employees, suggest.<sup>7</sup> Now that this lunch-box delivery system has become part of the modern historical sensibility, having had the good fortune to be designated a ‘case study’ at the likes of Harvard and Stanford business schools, one can be certain that in a generation its origin in different knowledge systems will be forgotten. There will be attempts to patent it on the pretext that natives lack the foresight to extend applications of their innovations. The attempts to patent neem and basmati are thus not merely exercises in appropriation, but part of the larger narrative of how the commons of knowledge continues to be eroded under the aegis of globalization.

Secondly, under globalization the tendency to restrict the semiotic and symbolic range of concepts has been greatly aggravated. So long as people have the vote, they are thought to be engaging in politics. The idea of electoral democracy should doubtless be defended, considering that the alternatives give us no occasion to be cheerful, but the reduction of the idea of politics to electoral democracy is as pathetic as the opposition of the right and left is sterile. The 'greatest' democracy in the world, the United States, stands forth as palpably evident testimony of the veracity of these propositions. If John Kerry was unable to respond to the allegation that he was America's most 'liberal' senator, and if the communists of West Bengal have now become enthusiastic proponents of liberalization, the salience of the distinction between right and left is not very clear. How is it that the notion of swadeshi was divested of its vast range of associations -- political self-reliance, putting the world ahead of oneself, economic autarchy, one's spiritual emancipation as the condition of political freedom, among others -- and allowed to be hijacked by a party which, in its aspiration to turn India into a strong nation-state, has never shown an iota of intellectual creativity? But politics is scarcely the only compromised notion, as the convoluted history surrounding the world 'tolerance' well illustrates. Suffice to say that a well-known Indian commentator has vigorously argued that the idea of tolerance is utterly foreign to India. The most intelligent defense he was capable of mounting was that since India never produced a John Locke, the author of 'A Letter Concerning Toleration', or indeed any other theorist of tolerance, it stands to reason that tolerance cannot be used to describe the relations that existed between various communities in India over the course of two millennia and more.<sup>8</sup>



The curricula, not something often discussed by sociologists and theorists of knowledge, adopted in universities across the world tell the tale of the globalization of Western knowledge in stark terms. The sum total of what is known within each discipline multiplied astronomically during the twentieth century, and everything points to the fact that this trend will persist in the twenty-first century. Yet the curricula around the world display more similarity today than at any previous moment in modern times. Paul Samuelson's *Principles of Economics* is now in its 15<sup>th</sup> edition, and is used in over 70 countries. No medieval textbook on witchcraft did as well. Farid Alatas, a professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore, found that introductory sociology courses in India, Pakistan, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and other countries all teach Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Giddens, with scarcely any thought to what kind of societies these writers themselves came from and the conditions to which they were responding.<sup>9</sup> In all this, it is important to recognize that the West did nothing to the non-West that it did not do its own dissenters and representatives of marginalized traditions and communities. Consequently, subjugated knowledges include not only the most evident oral traditions of Africa and the Americas, as well as the vernacular, little, and folk traditions of people around the world, but also the squandered inheritances drawn from some of the supreme figures of Western intellectual history. In this context, Goethe's writings on color, light, metallurgy, weather, and botany; Blake's invocations of prophecy; and Newton's and Boyle's serious engagements with alchemy come readily to mind. If freedom is indivisible, it is important to recognize not only that the South has to free itself from that albatross around its neck that goes by the name of the 'West', but that the so-called

developed countries have to be liberated from their own knowledge systems and their reliance on knowledge experts.

The blitzkrieg of knowledge in the era of globalization is caught in a pincer-like movement -- caught, shall we say, between constipation and diarrhea. On the one hand, the notion of what is knowledge has hardened very considerably, or -- to be more precise -- the categories with which intellectuals and scholars work are responsive to increasingly smaller registers of meaning. The professional economist who would entertain even an ounce of feeling for something that we might call Gandhian economics, Buddhist economics, or (in Marshall Sahlins' phrase) 'stone age economics' would be viewed as a dinosaur within his or her profession.<sup>10</sup> Even the likes of the recently deceased Robert Heilbroner, who thought that economics could be explained through elegantly constructed lives of the principal economists,<sup>11</sup> have become a complete anomaly. The categories of the social scientists are often so totalizing as to exclude all possibility of conversation, not to mention interculturality. To be sure, the impression sought to be conveyed by the disciplines is often very different, such that many subjects that would once have been viewed outside the purview of the scholar are now construed as legitimate, even worthy, subjects of inquiry. It has, to take one instance, now become entirely respectable to study various manifestations of low-brow or youth culture, including numerous varieties of pulp fiction, rap, heavy metal, techno-music, and drag racing. The oral traditions of Aboriginals, Polynesian tribes, the Bushmen, Santals and numerous other communities must even receive deference as authentic expressions of cultural difference, though it should also be noted that they are all subsumed under

‘ethnohistories’, just as the musical traditions of Africa, India, Indonesia, and South America are relegated to departments of ‘ethnomusicology’. The greater part of various academic constituencies would still rubbish the idea that Australian aboriginals or native Americans might have been in possession of what we would today call scientific knowledge, but some scholars are constrained to admit that the wisdom of those elders can suitably be termed ‘ethnoscience’.<sup>12</sup> The academic disciplines are, as is often heard, in a state of ‘fluidity’, which calls to mind both the predisposition to view everything as ‘process’ and the apparent ambition of disciplines to be more loosely accommodating to the idea of cultural diversity. We have seen that, with globalization, the study of world history is now on the ascendancy. Leaving aside the all too obvious (and not terribly interesting) inference that the emergence of the academic study of world history, particularly in the United States, bears some relationship to empire and what ideologues termed the Project for the New American Century, what is most disturbing about the academic pursuit of world history is that it once again claims Euro-America as the site of pluralism and ecumenism.<sup>13</sup> World history brings into the world’s orbit all those places that colonialism mercifully could not penetrate.

It is not inappropriate that the coda on the globalization of knowledge should be furnished by a reflection on the life of Mohandas Gandhi, one of the supremely global figures of late modernity. He is most widely remembered as the principal architect of Indian independence and as the chief theorist and practitioner of nonviolent resistance in modern times, but a modicum of acquaintance with this nettlesome old man reveals a number of what many bemused observers have termed eccentricities. Gandhi was also an

earnest critic of modern industrial civilization and of its categories of knowledge. He went far beyond any conception of ‘politics’ with which the British were familiar, and similarly his adversaries, Indian and British alike, remained clueless about his insistence that economics, religion, ethics, and politics were all planks of a single structure. But Gandhi was just as much interested in his body as he was in the quest for India’s independence or in democratizing the Indian polity. Much has been written about his food habits and the rigorous diets to which he subscribed -- though, let us be clear, he never engaged in what is now called ‘dieting’. (Had Gandhi been alive today, he would have been the first to recognize that a history of globalization can be written around the gradual encroachment of the idea of dieting.<sup>14</sup> and the notion of what constitutes beauty is rendered increasingly homogeneous around the world, obesity and anorexia will be the twin signs under which the representation of the body will be the object of discourse.) Gandhi was also an ardent advocate of enemas and he steeled himself to monitor and study his stools. It is not too much to say that he viewed knowledge of one’s body to be not less critical than knowledge of the body politic, and the attention he bestowed on the vexing problem of securing appropriate toilets in private and public should not be dismissed as an idiosyncrasy. The historian of Gandhi’s twin obsessions with bowel movements and the critique of modern knowledge systems is still awaited, but I daresay that to Gandhi knowledge had to be freed from the extremes of constipation and diarrhea.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1987); idem, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> The ‘intellectual’ work of the British in India thus seems especially impressive to many contemporary observers who, keeping in mind the American occupation of Iraq, are prone to contrast the allegedly brilliant proconsuls of the British empire with the nearly illiterate and

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abrasive Americans who have been charged with the governance of that unfortunate country. The historian Niall Ferguson, whose ascendancy to stardom owes much to the perennial American admiration for posturing Oxford dons who appear to furnish some reassurance that the Anglo world is not devoid of people of style and intelligence, has commended the views of the hawkish Max Boot to everyone's attention. In a widely circulated piece, Boot enjoined upon the American invaders of Afghanistan (and subsequently the occupiers of Iraq) to aim at providing 'the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets.' See Paul D'Amato, 'Bringing back the old days of empire', *Socialist Worker Online* (16 May 2003) at [http://www.socialistworker.org/2003-1/453/453\\_09\\_Empire.shtml](http://www.socialistworker.org/2003-1/453/453_09_Empire.shtml). For more of the same, see Sagarika Ghose, 'Dumb Americana: Tommy Franks should learn some Arabic', *New Indian Express* (1 April 2003); and Stanley Kurtz, 'Democratic Imperialism: A Blueprint', *Policy Review* (April 2003), online at: <http://www.policyreview.org/apr03/kurtz.html>

<sup>3</sup> Warren Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith' [1784], in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970), 184-91.

<sup>4</sup> A case in point is the great Swedish botanist, Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), who found employment as superintendent of the gardens and herbarium at the estate of George Clifford, an Anglo-Dutch banker who served as Director of the Dutch East India Company.

<sup>5</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 302.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas E. Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: The Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 37.

<sup>7</sup> See 'Mumbai dabbawallas wow industry captains', online at: <http://www.ciionline.org/southern/images/23july.htm>; Lajwanti D'Souza, 'Mumbai dabbawallas lecture at IIMs', *Mid-day* (15 October 2003), online at: <http://web.mid-day.com/news/city/2003/october/66240.htm>; 'Indian Dabbawallas make waves in international market' (3 August 2004), online at: <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2004/8/prweb145850.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Achin Vanaik, *The Furies of Indian Communalism: Religion, Modernity and Secularization* (London: Verso, 1997), chapter 4.

<sup>9</sup> Presentation at the Multiversity conference on 'Reforming the Social Science Curricula', Penang (Malaysia), 21-23 November 2004.

<sup>10</sup> E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, new ed. (New York: Perennial Library, 1989); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1972); Romesh Diwan and Mark Lutz, eds., *Essays in Gandhian Economics* (London: Intermediate Technology, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times, and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers*, 7<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1999 [1953]).

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in Peter Worsley, *Knowledges: Culture, Counterculture, Subculture* (New York: New Press, 1997), especially 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> For a more extended treatment of this argument, see Vinay Lal, 'Much Ado About Something: The New Malaise of World History', *Radical History Review*, no. 91 (Winter 2005), 124-30.

<sup>14</sup> See Vinay Lal and Ziauddin Sardar, 'McDonald's', in Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy, eds., *The Future of Knowledge and Culture: A Dictionary for the Twenty-first Century* (New Delhi: Viking, 2005), 180-85.