

Globalization: Theoretical Perspectives
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Lecture 21
Giddens and the 'runaway world'

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Giddens and the 'runaway world'



Welcome back to the class, we are concluding our discussion on Anthony Giddens and his theorizations on globalization and in this class, which is a concluding session on Giddens, we are discussing his book published in 1999, titled 'Globalization and the Runaway World' and as he has used this argument in several books and in several articles.

And in a way, it sums up the kinds of arguments that Giddens has been making for the last for the previous, say 10 years and it is an extension to quite a lot of points and arguments that we have seen in his first book that we discussed extensively that is the consequences of modernity.

And in this class as again, I am not going to discuss the book in detail, since it is a long book and most of the arguments are already familiar to you and again going to depend on this book 'Globalization: Key thinkers', which provides a gist or a summary of the key arguments of Giddens as well as this particular book and at the end of this book, we will also have a very brief look into some of the criticisms against Giddens theorizations on globalization.

Because Giddens theorisation, his own globalizations have been criticized extensively, especially by people like Rosenberg and others, which very significantly question some of his very foundational premises. So, we will have a very brief look into that, I will not go deeper into that, but we will touch upon some of these important things.

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First, and probably most significant, Giddens argues that we are living 'through a major period of historical transformation' (Giddens 1999: 1). He suggests that we feel 'out of control' in a 'runaway world' where many of the influences that were meant to make life feel more predictable such as science and technology have had the opposite effect. Globalization, he argues, is thus 'restructuring the ways in which we live' in 'a very profound manner' (ibid.: 4). As his theoretical conception suggests, since globalization is affecting everyday life as well as economies and states, this runaway world has implications for virtually everyone on the planet. The major implication of contemporary globalization is thus that it is an unavoidable reality.



So, we know that we already spent some time trying to understand Giddens overall argument and Giddens argues very strongly that what we are seeing in a globalized world is a radicalized form of modernity and its modernity cannot be thrown away, it cannot be discarded, because the very essential features of modernity, including global capitalist system, the nature of industrial production, the nature of nation states, the military system.

These things are still very much prevalent and the only thing is that we get an image or we get an impression that the world has moved beyond modernity, because we have not really adequately understood or comprehended the very basic nature of modernity. So, it is a very important argument by Giddens that modernity is essentially inherently globalizing.

Only the point is that we are seeing its most radical form only very lately maybe since 1980s or 1990s, but from the very inception of modernity, may be from say 18th century onwards or 19th, 20th century onwards, what we are seeing was different facets of globalization, that is why Giddens very emphatically argues that, modernity is essentially inherently globalizing.

So, let us recap. So, in this section, he is taking this argument, one step ahead and present this whole idea of a runaway world. A world that is not in our hand, A world that is not in the control of human beings.

So, modernity promised you that you will be able to control the nature, we will be able to control the society, we will have a far peaceful life, we will have a far better life for everybody and the language of modernity was the language of optimism, it was the language of hope, it was the language of having a very specific understanding of what progress means, what it means to be development.

Science was seen as the panacea, as the solution for almost all social ills as well as miseries of human beings. But now looking back, we know that we are, we are no longer in the driver's seat on this world. We are no longer able to control the way things are turning out to be, things are running on its own.

We are as if the world is on its own course, the world is running in its own as per it has its own will and we look kind of helplessly, we try to control and contain them, but nothing is in our hands. So that is the point in which, by which Giddens uses the runaway world. So, all the

arguments that he makes in this book are something familiar and he is making certain kind of extensions.

So first and foremost, and probably most significant, Giddens argues that we are living through a major period of historical transformation. He suggests that we feel out of control in a runaway world, where many of the influences that were meant to make life feel more predictable, such as science and technology have had the opposite effect.

This is exactly what I was mentioning, because science came up with the assurance or with the promise that by using scientific technology, by using a scientific rationality, we will be able to comprehend the world better, because we have said goodbye to all superstitious understanding, all blind beliefs or all unfounded ideas of religion or all unfounded ideas have been discarded.

So, what is left is a scientific objective truth derived from scientific exploration and such an understanding, such a knowledge system, along with the scientific technologies and other things must be sufficient or must be able to provide a far secure life for human beings. But now, that the general, consensus or the general feeling is that, that hope seems to be misplaced or that hope seems to be kind of completely unsubstantiated, it does not have any validity.

Because he suggests that we feel out of control in a runaway world, where many of the influences that were meant to make life feel more predictable, such as science and technology have had the opposite effect. So, this is a point which comes up again and again in the writings of Giddens as well as that Ulrich Beck and Ulrich Beck has theorized risk and Giddens has theorized risk, we will spend more time looking at Ulrich Beck's theorization of risk he calls it as a 'risk society'.

He calls the contemporary society as a risk society and the risk again, not the idea of a natural calamity or natural catastrophe, risk he defines precisely as unwanted consequences or unintended consequences, unforeseen consequences of our own actions or risk is seen as emanating from the consequences of modernity, the first modernity.

Globalization, he argues, is this restructuring the ways in which we live, in a very profound manner and we are not in the controlling seat of this restructure, it is taking its own course. As his theoretical conceptions suggest, since globalization is affecting everyday life, as well as economies and states, this runaway world has implications for virtually everyone on the planet.

I do not think I need to elaborate this point, because in the previous class, we discussed how this globalization can have very significant impact on our individual subjectivity. In order to establish a personal relationship, an erotic relationship or a romantic relationship with somebody, that process has to be very, very laborious, that process has to be really a reflective.

Because every person standing in front of you is a very complicated human being, and that person can have a completely different set of ideas about a host of things that were taken for granted so far. In terms of identity, in terms of preferences, in terms of ethics, politics, you name it, each person is so different from each other.

So, human subjectivity is not free from these arguments. Your economy is not free from your, nation state is not free from your culture, your consumption, your fashion; everything is deeply implicated by globalization. The major implications of contemporary globalization is this, that it is an unavoidable reality, a point that does not really require too much of an elaboration.

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Second, and following on, Giddens identifies the view that globalization represents both an opportunity and a threat. Traditional societies have already broken down, and traditional values are following. He argues that the implication of globalization is that other traditions, such as religion, are also experiencing major transformation. Religious fundamentalism, he suggests, originates as a reaction to those 'crumbling traditions' and thus needs to be understood on that basis. He sees globalization as promoting 'cosmopolitanism' insofar as in a globalizing world where 'we are regularly in contact with others who think differently, and live differently' (ibid.: 4). This has produced and will continue to produce conflict in the twenty-first century as fundamentalists in the spheres of religion, nationalism and ethnic identity take refuge in 'renewed and purified tradition' as well as violence. Giddens suggests we can 'legitimately hope that the outcome of cosmopolitanism produced by globalisation will be tolerance and democracy', but that globalization also exposes the limits and weaknesses of the institutions that currently promote and maintain democracy.



Second and following on, Giddens identifies the view that globalization represents both an opportunity and a threat. Traditional societies have already broken down and traditional values are following. He argues that the implication of globalization is that other people traditions such as religion are also experiencing major transformations.

Religious fundamentalism, he suggests originates as a reaction to those crumbling traditions and this need to be understood on that basis. He sees globalization as promoting cosmopolitanism insofar as in a globalizing world where we are regularly in contact with others who think differently and live differently.

This has produced and will continue to produce conflict in the 21st century as fundamentalists in the sphere of religion, nationalism and ethnic identities, take refuge in renewed and purified traditions as well as violence. Giddens suggest we can legitimately hope that the outcome of cosmopolitanism produced by globalization will be tolerance and democracy.

But that globalization also exposes the limits and weakness of the institutions that currently promote and maintain democracy. He has written this book in 1999 and so, 20 years down the line, we know that most of his predictions or most of his apprehensions are coming true, because we know that first of all modernity as secondly, this late modernity has very systematically, restructured what we call it as tradition and we had mentioned about it in the previous class, when we discussed earlier, we argued that tradition is no longer sufficient to give you an orientation for the present and for the future.

Tradition can be understood in its own right as a set of values, orientations and guidelines and how people lived in the past. But it is increasingly becoming irrelevant for preparing us for a different kind of a tomorrow because what is to expect is completely different from our experience, but we will come back to Koselleck.

Koselleck has very interesting arguments about this experience and expectations and this becomes very clear when you contrast our own experience with that of a completely pre-modern society, a group of say a tribals who live in a particular region. So, for them, their experience is sufficient to plan for the tomorrow.

Their experience of hunting, their experience of food gathering, their experience of surviving in a forest is good enough to a large extent in order to survive for the next maybe 30 or 40 or 50 years, because there is nothing much of a change, but for us what we learn from the past, our experiences are proving to be completely insufficient and insignificant in shaping us to face the world in the tomorrow.

So, he is talking about the kind of crumbling down of traditions and especially religion and what are the kind of a by-products of such a scenario and he says definitely, that it is promoting cosmopolitanism in a large section and you know that there are studies about how some countries in, especially the Scandinavian countries in the Europe, their substantial section of people are becoming irreligious.

They seem to be least concerned about religion, they are not bothered about religion and these are the countries which have least amount of violence, they have the highest social development indicators, the lowest crime rates, lowest forms of violence. So, there is one kind of movement towards that, people are ready to accept each other, people have really broadened their overview people are really, really open to accept each other, there is increasing in the racial, in there, you know, regional, inter religious marriage is taking place.

But at the same time, on the other side, we are seeing that this the various forms of fundamentalisms, various forms of creating new kinds of traditions, new religious traditions are being created with extreme form of intolerance and extreme form of violence, the kind of xenophobia that we experience, the cultural intolerance that we see in many parts of the globe, the kind of attack against the migrants attack, against the foreigners, they claim that our place belongs to us and then, people need to live in a particular manner.

Such kind of very assertive claims are reflections of the kind of backlash that is happening towards this kind of a crumbling down of tradition and religion. So, Giddens says that it is both an opportunity as well as a threat and how do we deal with these countervailing forces, how do we deal with this kind of opposite kind of pulls from different sides, this is something extremely important and significant.

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Third, globalization therefore also means that people need to respond. It is not possible in the contemporary world to stand still, but rather these processes of transformation require a response. Firms need to remain competitive, workers need to re-skill and governments need to address new risks and challenges to security. Giddens's argument is that contemporary globalization produces a heightened need to be proactive and to manage transformations rather than being resigned to the 'runaway world'. In that sense, 'we can never become masters of our own history, but we can and must find ways of bringing the runaway world to heel' (ibid.: 5).



Third, Giddens argues, globalization, therefore also means that people need to respond, it is not possible in the contemporary world to stand still, but rather these processes of transformation are required a response. Firms need to remain competitive; workers need to reskill and government need to address new risks and challenges to security. Giddens argument is that, contemporary globalization produces a heightened need to be proactive and to manage transformations rather than being resigned to the runaway world.

In that sense, we can never become masters of our own history, but we can and must face, find ways of bringing the runaway world to heel. So, this is his overall argument again, that it does not mean that globalization has gone completely out of hand and we are completely helpless, it is even that position is indefensible, that position is suicidal, that position is irrelevant, because human endeavour right from the human civilization has been to take control of matters around them.

So, once we see that the kind of life, the world that in which we are living in as becoming so complicated, human beings also must try to bring in better energy better vision better, technological solutions to bringing some kind of order and some kind of some kind of control over this world. So, that the runaway world is brought to its heel and this is the kind of optimism that he presents and this requires individual actions, this requires a very strong collective action from the states.

The nation-states need to cooperate with each other, a kind of a highly selfish kind of political agenda and outlook could be very, very problematic for the larger scenario because as many people have pointed out, many of the problems that nation-states are facing today are global problems.

A nation-state cannot do anything or a nation-state become so powerless in front of this larger global problems whose scales are global, whether you talk about terrorism, whether you talk about threat from nuclear issues or whether you talk about pollution or global warming or a pandemic like COVID-19.

All these require concerted global efforts and that is the kind of scenario that Giddens talks about, that every person's, every country, every nation-state needs to reinvent, reinvent themselves and then come to a kind of a more concerted and concrete actions.

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Fourth, and finally, the implication is also the ongoing need to reconstruct institutions to tackle the new challenges posed by globalization. This includes national and international institutions of government but also the family, work, tradition and even nature. His view is that these institutions remain the 'shell' of what they used to represent, but globalization has undermined and transformed the circumstances in which they exist and they are now therefore 'inadequate for the tasks they are called upon to perform' (ibid.: 19). For example, in Giddens's view 'nations today face risks and dangers rather than enemies' which amount to 'massive shifts in their very nature' (ibid.: 18). The powerlessness people feel in the face of globalization is therefore not 'a sign of personal failing' but rather 'reflects the incapacities of our institutions'. It is the degree to which institutions adapt to globalization that will determine how globalization processes play out in the coming decades.



Fourth and finally, the implication is also the ongoing need to reconstruct institutions to tackle the new challenges posed by globalization. This includes national and international institutions of government, but also family, work, tradition, and even nature. It is a very all-encompassing kind of an argument, because no institutions in that sense, whether starting from our own family can be completely free from this kind of large-scale changes.

In fact, our family, its ethos, its economy, its cultural values, its tradition, all these are increasingly being unsettled by processes of globalization. So, how do you deal with it? How do you relate with it? How do you ensure that your children have their own freedom to make important choices in their life?

At the same time, how do you feel that those choices and decisions are not threatening your sense of tradition, your sense of honour, your sense of identity. So, it is all a major challenge that we see in our everyday life, his view is that these institutions remain the shell of which they used to represent.

But globalization has undermined and transformed the circumstances in which they exist and they are now therefore, inadequate for the tasks they are called upon to perform, a very important argument. There is a kind of an implosion. There is a kind of hollowing out. These institutions that are still there, whether it is family or work or tradition, these institutions, these modern institutions or even these traditional institutions, they are still there.

But the content is changed, the context in which they used to work change, their relevance change, their form of functions change, the underlying values of these things change and we think they are inadequate for the task that they are called upon to perform. For example, Giddens view nations today face the risks and dangers rather than enemies, which amount to massive shifts in their very nature.

Absolutely, it is not that the countries do not face the threat of a war, a vast majority of the countries do not face it. But more than that, almost every country has to face a host of other issues, including climate change, including rising sea level, including increasing pollution, including increasing sections of people under the poverty or increasing level of inequality between different sections of poor people.

So, these are the new challenges, which were never seen as challenges 100 years back, global warming was not a challenge some time back, terrorism was not a challenge some 100 years back, pollution was not a challenge 100 years back, greenhouse effect was never even acknowledged or depletion of natural resources was never a serious issue some 100 years back. So, we are seeing more and more different kind of challenges.

The powerlessness people feel in the face of globalization is therefore not a sign of personal failure, but rather reflects the incapacities of our institutions. It is the degree to which institutions adaptive globalization that we will determine how globalization processes play out in the coming decades, it is a very important and prophetic argument in that sense that, how do we reinvent these institutions?



How do we make these institutions more relevant to each other and this human agency in that sense will really define the nature of our response to globalization and to see how far we were able to adapt to these kind of changing scenario and then to face these kinds of challenges.

Because if you think that the existing arrangement, existing values, existing dynamics are sufficient, then we are completely mistaken. So, in that book, 'Runaway world', I do not think that, Giddens brings up any new arguments, but he is kind of recasting the similar arguments as came up from this book, consequence of modernity, but he used a lot more new examples and makes it a more kind of a philosophically rooted one.

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Criticisms

Yet what is also clear is that Giddens's foundations for both the concept of globalization and his theoretical framework for understanding it as a feature of the contemporary world are far from uncontested. On the contrary, the critical arguments of many within sociology, politics and international relations theory which Rosenberg draws together in his critique indicate that globalization may be built on precarious epistemological and theoretical foundations. The most enduring aspects of the critiques can perhaps be reduced to three central claims. The first is that globalization is a 'description' masquerading as an 'explanation', and as such can offer no insight into the causes of change in today's interconnected world society. The second is that there is nothing intrinsically different about contemporary social life that the conceptual language and theoretical frameworks of existing classical social theories cannot explain as well as globalization theory, and therefore there is no real need to develop a new kind of theorization based around this new concept. Third is that even if the first two criticisms are misguided, globalization – defined as a spatio-temporal process – cannot be satisfactorily defined as a 'pure' phenomenon that is prevalent and relevant to all the different aspects of contemporary societal transformation that Giddens claims it is. The ultimate challenge is that not every aspect of modernity is globalizing and, even when it appears to be, there is no singular process at work 'causing' this spatial and temporal reconfiguration in a consistent manner. If various aspects of contemporary spatio-temporal reconfiguration are contradictory (as Rosenberg argues), then the concept of globalization cannot adequately capture what in reality corresponds to multiple and sometimes opposing forms of transformation.



Now, I have a couple of slides on the criticisms, there are quite a bit of criticism. As I mentioned earlier, Giddens work has been extremely influential Giddens as a sociologist is extremely influential, he was directly involved in the policy decisions of the UK Government, he was an advisor. So, in that sense, he was a very influential public intellectual.

So, his theorization on globalization also has been extremely influential, his books like this runaway world or consequence of modernity have been, very influential and so similarly, and because of this very reason, there a lot of criticisms against Giddens and his arguments about globalization, whether he is able to provide any theory as such or is he only describing globalization.

So, I have just chosen to two paragraphs from this book, globalization key thinkers just to give a glimpse of the kind of criticisms that are raised against Giddens. So, yet what is also clear is that Giddens foundations for both the concept of globalization and his theoretical framework for understanding it as a feature of the contemporary world are far from uncontested.

On the contrary, the critical arguments of many within sociology, politics and international relations theory, which Rosenberg, this Rosenberg is a very important critic of Giddens, Rosenberg, draws together in his critic indicate that globalization may be built on the precarious epistemological and theoretical foundations, the most enduring aspect of the critic can perhaps be reduced to three central claims.

The first is that globalization is a description masquerading as an explanation. Whether what Giddens provides at best is only a description of a phenomenon not a theory, because the theory is expected to explain certain things. Here whereas, Giddens goes on to describe it and description and explanation are very different.

Explanation, usually you have a theory, you need to talk about the kind of causality of a particular scenario, whereas description does not require it, it only need you to describe the kind of phenomena at hand and such a can offer no insight into the causes of changes in today. Because he is not really talking about the kind of causes of this radicalization of modernity, rather, he only says that the globalized world is a radicalized form of modernity.

No offer insight into the course of changes of today is interconnected world society. The second is that there is nothing intrinsically different about contemporary social life, that the conceptual language and theoretical frameworks of existing classical social theories cannot explain as well as globalization theory and therefore, there is no real need to develop a new kind of theorization based around new concept.

So, if he argues that globalization can be explained on the basis of modernity. Then, it also means that classical social, sociological theories, theories of Weber, Marx, and Durkheim and others are sufficient enough to explain that because they were the theorists of modernity, they were the theorists of modernity and the same framework must be used.

Third is that even if the first two criticisms are misguided, globalization defined as a spatial temporal process cannot be satisfactorily defined as a pure phenomenon, that is prevalent and relevant to all the different aspects of contemporary societal transformation that Giddens claims of it. The ultimate challenge is that not every aspect of modernity is globalizing and even when it appears to be, there is no singular process at work causing the spatial and temporal reconfiguration in a consistent manner.

The various aspects of contemporary spatial-temporal reconfigurations are contradictory as Rosenberg argues, then the concept of globalization cannot adequately capture what in reality corresponds to multiple and sometimes opposing forms of transformation, because that is a core argument, because globalization is such a complicated and contradictory process. It is such a complicated process that it does not really lend itself for easy theorizations.

Because the moment you talk about a particular feature as the defining feature of globalization, there could be n number of examples against that, there could be n number of illustrations against that. So, if there is, there are so much of counter examples and contradictions, then how do we think about the theory of globalization? So, many of these criticisms against Giddens comes from this argument that even to attempt a theorization of globalization is unwanted or secondly, it is kind of impossible.

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This last strand is probably the most potentially damaging to Giddens's arguments about globalization. It questions the very existence of such a thing as 'globalization', rather opening up the possibility that Giddens presents a theoretical framework concerning the transformation of time and space in the contemporary era that runs the risk of being monocausal and is overly simplistic. Such a scepticism also resonates with a wider school of thought within postmodern social science that doubts the capacity of meta-theory to be able to tell convincing stories of the social world. Just as with Wallerstein's world systems approach, postmodern thinkers point to the complexity and multiplicity of social relations and the organizations and institutions which they produce. Postmodern thought thus remains at odds with Giddens's epistemology – an epistemology that shares a modernist and 'structuralist' lineage with Wallerstein and classical social theories.



And finally, the last strand is possibly the most potential damaging to Giddens arguments about globalization. It questions the very existence of such thing as a globalization rather than opening up possibilities that Giddens presents a theoretical framework concerning the transformation of the time and space in the contemporary era, that runs the risk of being mono causal and is overly simplistic.

Such as scepticism also resonate with a wide pool of thought within postmodern social science that doubt the capacity of a meta theory to be able to tell convincing stories of the social world. So, this whole idea of globalization, whether it is a phenomenon, because it questions the very existence of such a thing as globalization, rather opening up the possibility that Giddens presents a theoretical framework concerning the transformation of time and space.

You know, that this time-space distancing is the central argument of Giddens, as something that is behind causative factor behind that of globalization. But a host of scholars, especially the scholars who have affinity towards postmodern positions, they would affirm that you cannot have a single theory, you cannot have an overarching theory that is capable of explaining a complicated process as globalization.

Globalization will not lend itself to be made, to be available, to be theorized by a singular theory like time-space distancing. Just as with Wallerstein's world system approach, postmodern thinkers point the complexity and multiplicity of social relations and organizations and institutions which they produce.

Postmodern thought thus remains at odds with Giddens epistemology, an epistemology that shares a modernist and structuralist lineage with Wallerstein's and classical social theorist and which is quite expected, we know that Giddens is a modernist, Giddens is not ready to accept the postmodernist positions.

So, these criticisms that mainly come from postmodern circles are really accused or really criticized Giddens of not acknowledging or not adequately comprehending this complexity and rather providing a rather easier explanation, a kind of a mono causal explanation. So, I hope you have found this discussion on Giddens useful, because from a sociological theory point of view he is extremely an important person, extremely an important scholar.

So, that is why I decided to rather devote so much of time on Giddens. We looked at his work, we looked at his book called 'Consequences of Modernity', we discussed one chapter in detail and then we also had a broad overview of his other works and then we are ending with a brief critical reflection. So, let us wind up the class today and we will have four more classes on this whole question of modernity, post modernity and globalization debate. See you then. Thanks.