Globalization is very often quoted as a process that is today unifying the world, a phenomenon that has never occurred in world history. You, as well as several anthropologists or historians such as Fernand Braudel, go against this opinion. Could you explain us why?

J.F. Our view is that globalization is not an evolutionary phenomenon but is a historical phenomenon which has occurred many times in history. It is characteristic of periods of declining hegemony in which old centers finance the rise of new centers via a phenomenon of capital export which is the equivalent of globalization. Such periods may be observed repeatedly, whether in the ancient Mediterranean, the end of the Bronze Age, the Athenian and Hellenistic eras, the decline of the Roman Empire leading progressively to a shift of hegemony toward the Middle East, or also in modern European history, with the shift of hegemony from Italy to the Iberian peninsula, then to Holland, then to England, then to the United States (with Germany as a principal competitor), then in part back to Europe and to Japan, and then from the West as a whole and Japan to centers in East Asia, and to a lesser extent Southeast Asia, South Asia, and parts of Latin America. Global systems demonstrate the same systemic properties, with the following pattern: hegemonic competition, shifting hegemony, and a series of cycles of expansion and contraction that end with a final collapse. Thus, in the trajectories of global systems there is commonly a process leading from declining hegemony to attempted empire and then to collapse or rapid decline accompanied by a longer-term shift in hegemony. This process is related to the cycle of centralization and decentralization of wealth accumulation. There are usually a number of competing centers whose development at the same time implies the emergence of peripheries, trade states, and

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I am an anthropologist. My interest in the long term processes goes back to the beginning of my research activities. I first got involved in the development of Marxist anthropology, which, from our point of view, meant simply that we looked at structures in terms of models of social reproduction rather than as static, unchangeable forms or cultural essences. Another starting point, which was also part of a critique of functionalist anthropology, was that no social systems are functional in the long run. At the end of the sixties, I started in South East Asia, studying the development cycles of growth and decline of tribal societies, into states, and then into collapse. Back then we started working with archaeologists and historians. We tried to place evolution and evolutionary models in the perspective of this more historical approach which says that what we have to look at is also: what really happens. The link to the “global” came as a critique of the Marxist approach, which we thought was too simplistic and reductionist, but also as the result of trying to apply our models to empirical material, i.e. to what we get from historical and ethnographic material. This, as a good deal of my itinerary, has a lot to do with my wife, who is also an anthropologist who has developed a global approach. When doing
Speaking with

Jonathan Friedman, anthropologist, whose social sciences: Anthropology of World-Systems.
and very thought provoking exchange.

ethnographical fieldwork in Northern Madagascar, she came upon what we call, in ethnography, a “breakdown”: her models and/or theoretical baggage did not work. Then, rather than trying to fit reality into the model, she tried to work on a new framework of understanding and finally wrote an article, the first of our production, called “Why societies don’t work” which showed how this apparently remote society was also dependent on a larger, global context that it did not control. So we started working together and it has been a joint project since 1975. Since then, we have had increasing interest in what we call global systems and that were later referred to by others as “world systems”. We then looked at European history, starting some 5 000 years ago, trying to track down long term historical processes and their dynamics, but also their cultural, political, and even psychological parameters. This led to an engagement with quite a few archaeologists and ancient historians and our approach also inspired a whole kind of rethinking of archaeology, known as “world systems’ archaeology”. Then, around 1985, we returned to field work -because we had lost touch with it and also because we truly like it- to questions of culture, of culture and identity, how they change over time in these cycles of growth and decline, how do people behave in periods of decline. So we worked in Africa (my wife more particularly, who did extensive research in the Congo Brazzaville area), and also in Hawaii and elsewhere, on indigenous or nationalist movements, which we surmised were phenomena typical of hegemonic decline. It is only recently that we came back to a long term macro historical approach, this time with political scientists, several economists and archaeologists, and on a much more comparative basis.

2. Among the various historical examples, which one would you compare with today’s situation?

J.F. All periods have their peculiarities but very often express some particular phenomenal reality that might easily be compared with today’s world. The Hellenistic period however, which has been documented in great detail, displays many characteristics that are familiar to students of contemporary globalization and also to historians, sociologists and anthropologists of European colonialization of the past centuries. The Hellenistic era fits into the long cycle of expansion and contraction of Mediterranean based hegemony from 600 BC –starting with the Aegean and Athenian expansion– to 500 AD –ending with the collapse of the Roman Empire–.

There is capitalism very early in world history. Ancient commercial civilisations are capitalistic. In some ways they are more capitalistic than we are, since commodification is more extensive, including even people. Classical slavery is a case in point, a kind of manpowersystem in which slave owners hire out their slaves to various activities where the latter often work for a wage and then pay a “rent” to their owners.
In the fourth century BC, the rise of the Hellenistic era, i.e. the rise of Macedon, consisted of the transformation of a periphery, exporter of wood for Athenian shipbuilding and a producer of silver, into a dominant position within Greece. There are a number of indicators of the Athenian decline and shift of hegemony to Macedon whose expansion was very much the result of the movement of capital in the form of wealth and craftsmen to the North, resulting in a process of productive development, urbanisation and growth of the Macedonian state. The Northern areas, Thrace, Macedon and the Kingdom of Bosporus, and those farther North and East, from Bulgaria to the Black sea, are areas of increasing import substitution and declining Athenian imports. At the same time, Athens increases its production of silver in order to obtain grain and other products that are no longer exchanged for locally produced commodities such as vases and wine. During this period, there is an increasing social polarisation in the center, the formation of a “new” political class and increasing pauperization. The level of conflict increases from this period throughout the Hellenistic era. Production is increasingly capitalized for the market via an increase of credit. There is increasing class struggle and the appearance of “anti-capitalist” ideologies. The disintegration of civil society is expressed in the “cosmopolitanization” of the Athenian elites, adapting to the new global arena established by Macedon.

The conquest achieved by Alexander was short lived as an empire. What emerged as the result of the fragmentation of the empire was a regional system of states sharing similar political cultures and a strong elite identity, from the cities of the Western Mediterranean to India. This elite is not merely a product of expansion itself, but a self conscious project in which Greek culture is consciously used to maintain and promote an elite Greek identity. This elite builds its own enclaves or even entire cities separate from native populations who might be understood as colonized agricultural and labour supplying populations. A hierarchy emerges between colonists and colonized even where local elites are maintained, leading to the creation of a single transnational dominant class.

Civilisation is an imperialist project that for its maintenance is dependent upon trade and ultimately upon war.

In “The final collapse of Bronze Age civilizations” by Kajsa Ekholm Friedman

One must also note the ferocious competition of this period, the rapid intensification of exploitation, and the key role played by warfare in the process of accumulation. Then Hellenistic states are veritable war machines. The military can be considered the main industrial system of the period, based on accumulated monetary wealth –either by access to mines, by tribute, or by means of previous warfare- and on a labour force of mercenaries and slaves produced by the massive marginalization and impoverishment that characterized the period. Warfare results less in the actual formation of an imperial state that in the massive transfer of wealth in the form of state and temple treasuries and enslaved populations. Accumulation in the Hellenistic period leads to the intensification of competition, warfare, expenses and the ultimate weakening of the state sectors that are necessary to the maintenance of the regional trade system (global market).

The weakening of the Hellenistic takes the form of decentralization of territorial power. There is evidence of increasing conflict between natives and Greeks throughout the empire. This results in the gradual usurpation of Greek-monopolized state power by the second ranked Hellenized elites, very much as in modern anti-colonial nationalist revolutions. Rome exploits this systematically by making alliances with the cities against Macedon, in the name of liberation. Roman liberation quickly turns into exploitation via high levels of tribute leading to increasing impoverishment. A significant part of the tribute is itself converted into loans to maintain the consumption of local elites. The tendency towards fragmentation is thus turned into expansive integration into the Roman imperial project.

3. How does this apply to the contemporary world?

J.F. Many parallels may be drawn, obviously, and there are many striking similarities. History, as it seems, demonstrates a compulsive tendency to repeat itself. More specifically, I believe that we have been witnessing, for the past 30 years, a period of hegemonic decline in the West, pervaded by the following tendencies:

There is since 1975 a massive increase in all kinds of movements, mostly based on cultural identity. It starts in the seventies with indigenous movements – such as North American Indians, African Americans and Hawaiians – and continues in the eighties with the ethnification of regional minority groups, as in France, Spain and in the United Kingdom. There is in that period a tendency for national identity to become more cultural, and for immigration as well: instead of being a process of economic integration, immigration becomes a process of separation, of segregation. Society thus becomes more and more fragmented into religious, ethnic groups. It is also the end of labour migration in Europe. Migration has to take other forms. General salary levels decrease and there is a greater polarisation of society. This is a generation which is finding a kind of salvation in culture when they have lost a view of the future, a view of success, a view of consumption. This characterizes most of the West from 1975 gradually until today and it is still there. And this happens in the West, not in China. It happens in the US, where it started first, in Europe and in all of the areas connected to that center which are weaklings, dependents. It happens in parts of South America –not in Brazil, perhaps not in Chile any more– and in Africa, in which some areas are in a situation of constant collapse, permanent chaos and extreme poverty. All this progressive transformation into fragmentation, as I said, is typical decline.
This phenomenon is now also on a world scale because of the rise of Muslim identity. One could say that it is a clash of civilisations. It is not exactly what this is about but I see it as the expression of this wider context, but on a higher level. There is also a global ideology of the fall of the Ottoman Empire which Middle East intellectuals use all the time to explain why they are anti-Western: this is about the reestablishment of the Ottoman rule. I call it the "Ottoman blues". It is a cultural identity movement of course and it is the latest development, very much a part of this decline in real control. Hegemony is not there anymore and this is another aspect of that.

There is also this neo-liberal concept, which nowadays cuts across political parties of all tendencies. It starts in the eighties with deregulation, and its subsequent wave of privatizations and withdrawals of the states from sectors where they used to be present. Neo-liberalism, which is simply liberalism because it has always been there, is part of the crisis: it is a necessity for the West which deems it cannot afford to do otherwise. This I believe is also related to and participates in the decline process.

4. What about China and India?

J.F. There is definitely a tendency toward a shift which seems to fit our hypothetical model pretty well: China and India could very well become the new centers of the world. They are apparently quite specialized with respect to one another: China is heavy industry and mass consumption goods, while India is high technology. They have the desire to collaborate with one another. This link now includes 3 other countries -Brazil, Russia and South Africa- and it has emerged as the recent BRICS strategic alliance. So there are new market circuits of supply and demand developing in the world. In these countries there are also emergent and quite huge middle classes. The middle class of India is going to be larger than Europe numerically and in China this would also seem to be the case. It is also interesting to note that while the West is engaging in an uncomfortable conflict with Middle East, to some extent because of oil but also because of cultural issues, China is quickly moving into Africa and Latin America financing all sorts of heavy infrastructure projects. They are replicating the same kind of large scale development aid that the United States engaged in after World War II: they are taking the old imperial orders' peripheries, especially where there are resources. So yes, all of this fits pretty well. Whether it actually becomes realized to the full is another issue.

Now there is, on the other hand, some evidence of increasing regionalization. In Asia for instance, more and more capital comes from the region itself. This means that globalisation is decreasing in relative geographic terms, and there is currently some noteworthy research on this. It also means that what is left after globalization, that is, regionalization, must lead to increasing competition. And indeed, this incredible increase in competition, which necessitates "rampant" flexibilization among other things, is a very tangible fact. Coupled with fanaticism, which is also part of declining eras, this world could become very messy. Not withstanding the fact that the planet has limited resources. What would happen with them if China reached the same living standards as the US? This is quite frightening, and some authors, such as George Orwell for instance, clearly had premonitions of this. Let us merely note that in his novel, "1984", the world is divided in 3 groups, not so far from NAFTA, EU and APEC.

5. Is the role of technology predominant in today's pattern?

J.F. It is certainly important in quantitative terms, but it is not clear that the nature of the global has changed because of the introduction of computer and internet technology. Yes, the world has become smaller and network-like communication has vastly increased. The same kind of phenomenon occurred in the last century when undersea telegraph cables accelerated the movement of capital between continents in an equivalent way. If this is an age of movement of capital, people, and goods, an age of diffusion, then the turn of the last century, from 1870 to 1920 is an example of the same kind of globalization. The export or international movement of capital rose to levels completely equivalent to those of today. Rates of international migration were also equivalent. The discourse on technology, just as today, was of infatuation or hate. The British, in their industrial decline, were the undisputed single world military power; they were (and still are) the world's financial center and an exporter of English culture on a significant scale. During this period the center moved from Britain to the United States. Everything was not, of course, the same as today, but at a certain level of analysis there are striking similarities.

6. What about culture? Is this particular globalization period, supported by powerful communication technologies and industries, bound to create a kind of unified, hybrid, and uniform culture?

J.F. The current discourse on globalization as a new, a "modern" phenomenon is often accompanied by the assumption that modern culture, while still remaining differential, consists of differences that are becoming mere surface phenomena, differences like "Pepsi versus Coke". A global systemic approach does not concur with this description of the contemporary world. There are very great differences in people's social realities that cannot be understood in terms of such superficialities. The fact that such different modes of "being in the world" do exist and are linked in larger global processes is simply the normal
state of affairs in global systems: only certain regions or zones and especially classes are assimilated to the center’s mode of experience, usually via massive transformation of family and other institutions of socialization, while others are not, and remain intrinsically different. In fact, much of the current ideology of multiculturalism and of cultural "creolization" is in our view the product of an emergent cosmopolitan identity within the world system. It is a particular elevated position within the changing world system that conflates its own experience with that of the rest of the world. The development of such representations is particularly salient in periods of hegemonic decline when globalized elites emerge as major actors in the global arena. At the same time, cosmopolitan hybridity is countered by nationalistic or localist identity that opposes itself to everything cosmopolitan.

7. There is now a discourse in many international forums which demonstrates a growing awareness that the effects of globalization should be better controlled. What is your view on this?

J.F. It is true that such concerns are becoming a major item of discussion. But doing something about the process is very difficult because of the nature of competition, which is intense, and also because of the multiplicity of the very antagonist interests involved. In places like the World Economic Forum, there are certainly very interesting discussions about such topics. You have people like George Soros, who goes there every year, and who says that we need a world wide Keynesianism. But I do not know how he is received. Is there in such places some consciousness of how the world really works? I am not sure. I do not think that people there have the opportunity to be reflexive, partially because they think it is all now. Everything is very much present oriented. It is very difficult for them to consider things from a longer term, historical perspective, even if the literature is already there. This has also to do with the fact that people very often base their models of the changing world on the experience of their own life cycles: there is very little accumulation of knowledge about the social and this is a very serious problem.

8. What should be done then?

J.F. We do have to find out what is really wrong. I believe that, first of all, we need to fully understand how the global system works. Current research on the latter is not really adequate. What we have tried to do is to find parallels, to build models... Now, if this approach makes sense, and I believe that it does, then we have to rethink all the core processes involved.

What does it mean that things get more expensive? Why should things get more expensive when productivity increases for example? It is a simple economic problem. How is it that added value increases more rapidly than productivity: does that mean that the system is inefficient? If you measure value in energy terms, or ecological terms, development or economic growth should imply decreasing costs, but this is not what happens in price terms, although there is a tendency in this direction in certain highly competitive domains, like computer technology. It was also a long term general tendency in the 19th Century, although such is not the case today. One might as a contrast, consider certain markets like real estate, which is by and large unrelated to productivity, and ask oneself: how much of the total production (as value) is rent, i.e. what is cost of rent as a percentage of total value of everything that is sold? And how does this percentage vary over time? I imagine how competitive the West might be compared to China if real estate were kept out of the market and if that component of total production costs decreased significantly.

What are the things that should be on the market and what kind of things should be kept off the market? Do we have the right economic rationality to answer this kind of question? Consider privatizations for instance. Privatization may be a good idea in some sectors and is probably not in others. There should be more cost accounting of these things. Take the health sector for instance: all studies comparing medical costs in the US, where this sector is privatized, to other countries, show that it is significantly more expensive in the US.

Develop an economic analysis of large scale systems. We have done some work with economists on the long term macro historical approach, but this kind of analysis is still lacking. The problem with most economic models is that the basic starting point is much too limited. We need more encompassing approaches, like system theoretical models or dynamic models to deal with such phenomena. There is also in economics a curious functionalist assumption of equilibrium: everything must end in equilibrium, which leads to some confusion with regard to rapid and catastrophic changes like those that occur in periods of declining hegemony. And there is no such thing as a crisis for many economists, since everything can be reduced or translated into equilibrium terms or what is often called an "adjustment". This is a problem that we discussed years ago in criticizing the assumptions of functionalism. If I throw a glass against the wall so that it shatters, I can see this as the end of the glass, a crisis for its integrity so to speak. But I can also describe this as the way in which the glass adapts or adjusts to the impact. This, I think, is part of the problem. Some economists, of course, are interested in related issues such as geographical shifts, and others -business economists more often- are open to subjects like globalization, but I believe that there is still a lot to achieve in the area of economics of global systems.

For those who want to know more:

- Hegemonic Declines, Present and past. Edited by Jonathan Friedman and Christopher Chase - Dunn
- Political Economy of the World-system annuals. Paradigm publishers
- The Uruk World systems: the dynamics of expansion of Early Mesopotamian civilization. Guillermo Algaze - University of Chicago Press
- The Golden Age of Islam. Maurice Lombard - Markus Wiener Publishers
Risk News is available on the GRM portal within Echonet:
Echonet Home Page
> BNP Paribas Group
> Functions
> Group Risk Management

Quotation of the month

“It is a pity to see a strong-minded man like Napoleon, devoted to petty things such as empires, events, the thunders of the cannon and of the voice, such as believing in victory, in posterity, in Caesar, - as dealing with the moving masses and with the surface of the peoples...
Did he not feel that what it is all about is really something else?”

Paul Valéry (Bad thoughts and others)

“C’est pitié de voir une forte tête, comme celle de Napoléon, vouée aux choses insignifiantes, comme sont les empires, les événements, les tonnerres du canon et de la voix, croire à la gloire, à la postérité, à César, - s’occuper des masses mouvantes et de la surface des peuples... Il ne sentait donc pas qu’il s’agit de bien autre chose ?”

Paul Valéry (Mauvaises pensées et autres)