

Globalization and Interpretation: Learning to Question and to Think

Robert O. Keohane: Talk for CW, April 13, 2014

In international relations, we used to talk about “interdependence” among countries, which involves the mutual effects that activity in one country has on others. Interdependence is not a new phenomenon – foreign trade as a percentage of aggregate gross domestic product in 1913 was greater than in any year between 1914 and 1972, and foreign investment as a percentage of aggregate gross domestic product was higher in 1913 than it has ever been since – including now. Despite what some people thought in 1910 – but not in 1915 -- interdependence does not imply peace.

But contemporary globalization is different due to instantaneous communication and its multidimensionality. A friend of mine who is a well-known scholar of international relations and who has played a major role in the United Nations over the last 20 years says that *Globalization is to interdependence as Federal Express is to the exchange of letters between national post offices*. It’s a good image although it may even under-state the impact of the internet. Perhaps a better image would be that globalization is to interdependence as Google Glass is to an old dial telephone. We are not just affected by what happens in other countries; we

perceive events multi-dimensionally in real time and we can communicate instantaneously to people around the world about them.

We don't even have to look around the world, since globalization comes here.

When I was growing up in the 1950s, America was a country to which immigration had largely been barred for thirty years. And Heaven Forbid that we should accept immigrants from Asia, Africa, or most of Latin America! Immigration quotas were set in the McCarran-Walter Act of 1951 on the basis of the population composition of the United States in 1920, when the first restrictive immigration measures were passed. It is as if our legislators were telling us to "Stop History." My last experience in Sunday School took place in 1956 when our teacher, a parochial Illinois farmer, ranted in Sunday School against the admission of Hungarian freedom fighters to the United States on the grounds that "you wouldn't want your sister to marry one of them." (One of my best friends is the daughter of one of those freedom fighters.)

However, since the Immigration Act of 1965, with its family unification policy, America has once again become a country of immigration – and furthermore, one that celebrates diverse traditions rather than demanding homogeneous conformity in a "melting pot." Globalization has come even to those of us who do not venture

outside of the United States and pay little or no attention to events outside their local communities.

But I am not going to recite facts and figures about globalization because you have all heard them and they are not meaningful in themselves. Our population is indeed globalized. Furthermore, our wealth depends on globalization. As Adam Smith famously said, the roots of wealth are in the division of labor and “the division of labor depends on the extent of the market.” Smith basically said it all – in 1776 -- about the aggregate economic effects of globalization on “the wealth of nations.” But globalization also exacerbates inequality, which is rising within countries world-wide, and markedly within the United States. The globalization of war, with nuclear weapons, jeopardized everyone who is my age for forty years and its shadow still hangs around. I for one have not forgotten the Cuban Missile Crisis. If globalization did not imply automatic peace in 1914, neither did it in 1962 – nor does it now. Interdependence always contains the seeds of conflict as well as of cooperation. It is policies and institutions that make the difference between conflict and cooperation – not some automatic process that can be captured by a phrase such as “globalization.”

For how we in Higher Education should respond to globalization, facts and figures won't help much. It is more important to note that the Harvard Business School has just launched its one-line courses -- HBX. The *Financial Times* – the closest publication we have to a global newspaper – had an interview two weeks ago with the leader of HBX, who was born in India. For \$1500 – scholarships available – pre-MBA students will be able to take on-line courses for credit. They will be “cold-called” as in Cambridge, and other students will grade their responses. Students from around the world will be able to ask questions of one another and form virtual study groups. They will be examined rigorously; Harvard wants serious learners. *HBX is globalization.*

One of the interesting things about the HBX model is that it is not designed to push undergraduates into a pre-professional track – quite the contrary. It is designed for liberal arts graduates who are working after receiving their BA degrees. As the team leader, Bharat Anand says, “We are saying, follow your passions. Major in classics or art history. And then at some point do these core courses on HBX, to give you a business vocabulary and to help you feel confident going into the workforce.” (FT March 24, 2014, p. 9).

HBX illustrates two of my themes. Globalization requires – from Americans and non-Americans who want to succeed – two types of knowledge that are often seen as antithetical: technical knowledge and socio-cultural sophistication. I will talk first about technical knowledge, then about socio-cultural sophistication: that is, skills of *interpretation*.

It really is most obvious that young people – and middle-aged or older people – need now continually to increase their skill levels in their chosen fields to compete with other people, since competition can come from anywhere. This one of the things that we are continually told by the gurus of productivity that is true. When I was finishing college, real competition came only from Americans; now it comes from talented people around the world. Technical skills are needed; it is not enough just to be an American with a degree from the College of William and Mary or Princeton.

I saw this global technical competition dramatically the only time I was invited – not because of my position but because of my wife's – to the White House. It was a reception for the Prime Minister of India in October 2000, and the White House seemed filled with high-tech Indian-American entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley, who were as comfortable in Palo Alto as in Bangalore.

But in the same room was the commentator Fareed Zakaria – whose dissertation I signed at Harvard. Zakaria does not have the kind of technical skills that people who only want American students to study math, engineering, and science value. But he has another, more interpretive and skill set that is equally valuable: the ability to see America through the eyes both of an American and a foreigner. He was born in India and graduated from Yale College with a degree in history before receiving his PhD in international relations. He is deeply multicultural without accepting questionable claims, often associated with “multiculturalism,” that all cultural traditions are on an equal ethical plane.

Mentioning Fareed Zakaria fits well with my quote from Professor Anand, who mentioned classics and art history, not engineering or math, or even economics. Professor Anand could equally well have focused on comparative history, archeology, sociology, linguistics, comparative politics, or international relations. And he might have not only said, “follow your passions,” but “learn about the variety of global experiences in some field, so that you are sophisticated about both the similarities and differences in human experience. Get some *range of experiences* and some *interpretive skills*.” Zakaria has interpretive skills that are relevant both in abundance.

In his wonderful book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz tells the tale of Cohen, a Jewish shepherd in French-held Algeria around 1900, who understood local tribal cultures although he was not part of them. A raiding tribe stole Cohen's sheep, so he appealed to the tribe that was supposed to control his area for redress – for his *Ar*. This tribe responded by requiring the offending group to make available their flocks to Cohen, to choose sheep to replace those that had been stolen. Geertz portrays Cohen, his black gown flapping in the wind, going through the flock, talking his good time, selecting the best sheep for his *Ar*.

Cohen lived in a globalized little part of the world – run at the top by the French with its Foreign Legion, locally by North African tribes, with his little Jewish world within. And he had the talents that modern education needs to provide its students: a combination of technical knowledge – he knew which sheep to select – and cultural understanding, reflected in his understanding of the customs that required redress. (Unfortunately, or so Geertz recounts, the French lacked these cultural sensitivities, and confiscated his sheep when he came into their fort, on the grounds that he must have acquired them illegally.)

Geertz's tale – I have no idea how accurate it is but it does not matter for my purposes – should make us all curious. What were the traditions that made the tribe that required compensation act as it did – and what beliefs about propriety, or perhaps about religions, lay behind these traditions? How did Cohen, from a very different culture, learn about these traditions? Why did he have the status to require his *Ar*? After all, in tribal Pakistan or Taliban Afghanistan or contemporary Saudi Arabia, an Orthodox Jewish trader would not be well-advised to travel now, much less to make demands. Why were the French suspicious – what were their fears about letting Cohen go home with his sheep? Did their cultural misunderstandings have anything to do with their loss of North Africa half a century later?

Children are naturally curious but bad schools drum it out of them. The children may be reprimanded by their teachers or – perhaps more serious – criticized by their schoolmates for asking impertinent questions and delaying progress toward learning the lessons that must be mastered to pass the state exams. Or if they are “good students” they may learn that they should know the “right answer,” when often there is no right answer. Perhaps our most important job in higher education is to make students curious again – to ask questions that are impertinent or to which there may be no right answers. Indeed, in a globalized world some of these

questions will be answered antithetically by people from different cultures, generating more questions to ponder. *Globalization increases the value of curiosity – and its market value.* People who lack curiosity, the awareness that they do not understand a situation, and the interpretive skills to figure it out will not do well in a globalized world.

My wife, Nannerl O. Keohane, who was later president of Wellesley College and of Duke University, went to a public school in Hot Springs, Arkansas. In that school she had a brilliant history teacher who posed the question, “Who should have won the American Revolution?” She wrote a well-composed and conventional essay saying that the colonists should have won, for which she received an A-. *Minus?* She was not used to receiving a “minus” so she asked what was wrong. Her teacher, William Meers, responded in a way that would be worth a whole year of high school: “You should have used your imagination and given the non-obvious, harder answer.” And from a contemporary perspective sensitive to slavery, one could make a good case for the proposition that the British should have won. Certainly from the perspective of more than three generations of African-Americans, it would have been a better outcome.

What do we learn from this about globalization? *Don't always side with the winners. Don't assume that there is some inevitable rightness about history – after all, one downside of globalization is increased inequality. Don't naively believe in progress – look what happened to the many people in 1913 who held that belief.*

And what do we learn about education? *Look for the counter-argument.*

Encourage curiosity and unconventional thinking.

Questions are more important than answers, since questions open doors that answers often close. I have a vivid memory that makes this point from when I was teaching at Stanford 40 years ago. I was a political scientist trying to learn some economics, in which I had never had a proper course. So I went to economics seminars a few hundred yards from my office. At one such seminar a paper was being given by a well-known economist whose work I knew. He was proceeding fluently when, after not five minutes, he was interrupted by a question from a bearded young man. He answered – very well, I thought – and went on, only to be interrupted again and again (economists do this). After the third interruption, I was getting annoyed, wanting the questioner to shut up and let the speaker continue. But after the fifth or sixth question I finally realized that *only the questioner understood the subject*. His questions had thoroughly dismantled the premises of the talk. I have forgotten all other details but not the lesson: *there is never a dumb*

question. When a question seems dumb it may in fact be ignorant, or based on a false premise – but only questions that seem dumb to most listeners are likely to be so profound that they undermine the premises of an argument. So we need always to encourage questions.

Much of what we think we know about globalization may well be false. For example, does globalization promote the spread of democracy? It has seemed so to American presidents of both parties since 1990 but in view of the return to authoritarianism in Russia and its economic and regime-maintaining success in China and Singapore, perhaps we should not be so sure. Even within the European Union, which requires democracy for membership, we see some disturbing regression, as in Hungary. The European Union, when its members act collectively, is often said to have a “democratic deficit.” The Greeks thought that democracy was impossible except in the *polis*, and this association of democracy with small size was maintained by brilliant political thinkers for over 2000 years. Historically, it has been difficult to make democracy work in huge countries with many people – just as it is difficult to make it work in the United States today in the wake of *Citizens United* and the recent Supreme Court decision lifting even further individual limits on campaign spending.

But beware! If we too readily conclude that globalization is antithetical to democracy, we may miss its democracy-enhancing features. Democracy is appealing, even to people who may not have the experience and values to make good use of it. Globalization means that it is impossible effectively to cut off a country with aspirations to prosperity from social media – although the Prime Minister of Turkey tried to do so last month when he faced fierce criticism for his policies and his repression.

The point is that we don't have simple answers to the big questions – since reality keeps changing. We therefore can't teach valid answers about the impact of globalization to our students. And even if we could, there is no guarantee – or perhaps even likelihood – that these answers would remain valid twenty or forty years into the future. Think of much of what was conventional wisdom forty years ago in international relations, when I was teaching a course on “How Nations Deal with One Another” to undergraduates at Stanford. The Cold War would last indefinitely, and when it eventually ended, this would come as the result either of war or a grand bargain between the West and the Soviet Union, perhaps resulting from policies of *détente*. Communism and capitalism were antithetical and could not coexist in the same country. Poor countries were caught in a web of

“dependency” that they could not escape, so rich countries would keep getting richer relative to the poor ones.

These propositions were indeed the conventional wisdom on important issues: I am not making this up. And they were all wrong. The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union after Gorbachev’s failed attempts at reform and reconciliation. China and Vietnam – still divided forty years ago with South Vietnam supported, increasingly weakly, by the United States – display a vibrant combination of communism and capitalism, which seem to reinforce one another in remarkably novel and interesting ways. And for the last quarter-century, poor countries, including countries considered “basket cases” such as India and many other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin American, have been growing much more rapidly than rich countries.

Fortunately, although I may have perpetuated these misconceptions to my Stanford students, I did not emphasize them, or the teaching of facts. I emphasized that we can still emphasize: skills of logical reasoning, empirical investigation, and cultural interpretation. Our crystal ball is unlikely to be any better in 2014 than it was in 1984 – or than it was to George Orwell when he wrote the novel *1984* right after World War II. But skills of reasoning, empirical investigation, exploration of

values, and cultural interpretation will be valuable to our students even in a very different and unexpected world – as long as they have the curiosity to use them and the energy and courage to follow their questions onto unfamiliar or even forbidden terrain. And we can certainly encourage curiosity – not least by refusing to pretend that we have all the answers.

There *are* certain skills that we need to teach for education in a globalized world. We need to teach knowledge of foreign history, language, and cultures. We need to let students learn how to understand other societies, polities, and economic systems. They need to be exposed to global issues such as the severity of climate change and the impressive, if incomplete, science behind our understanding of the dangers that it poses for the human race and for other species. They need to understand the great moral and political thinkers of the past, from Aristotle to John Rawls. They should gain a critical understanding of state, corporate, and multinational organizational practices. But most of all, they need to discover these answers for themselves – through research and critical analysis. They need to discover, not to be told.

Globalization does not eliminate pomposity, which remains perhaps the most important enemy of true education. If renewing Federal support for international

education enhanced our pomposity about what we know, I would be reluctant to endorse it. When we support Federal aid, let's do so by celebrating curiosity and critical questioning, not our knowledge or the false belief that funding will solve our educational knowledge by enabling us to instruct students about what is true.

I will therefore close my prepared remarks with the following story, from my father's notebooks, about Robert Maynard Hutchins, an iconoclast who was dean of Yale Law School at age 28 in about 1925. Chief Justice William Howard Taft – a former President and a leading conservative – visited Yale, and said to Hutchins, “Mr. Hutchins, I understand that at Yale you teach your students that judges are fools.” Robert Maynard responded quickly, “No, Mr. Chief Justice, at Yale we teach our students to find that out for themselves.”

Now it is your turn – to ask me questions and find out for yourselves whether this professor is a fool and if so, whether you can find that out for yourselves.