

Deglobalisation

Walden Bello

Deglobalisation: a conceptual, political, and personal history

On the 20th anniversary of the historic ‘Battle of Genoa’ of 20–21 July 2001, the Italian sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo recalled that among the people trapped with him at the media centre that was raided by the *carabinieri*, was,

... Walden Bello, a Filipino economist and environmentalist whose theory of de-globalization was becoming influential at the time. Since the 1990s — a decade which had seen the NAFTA agreement, European economic integration, and trade liberalization under the aegis of the World Trade Organization — there had been much debate on the Left on how to approach the global era. For some, economic globalization and its superseding of nation-states was an irreversible tendency. Yes, its nefarious effects had to be attacked — but its progressive aspects should be reclaimed, pursuing global justice and global democracy as a higher form of universalism.

Bello’s approach was more blunt. True to its popular name, the anti-globalization movement had to fight for outright “de-globalization,” an overall reduction in planetary economic interconnectedness and a re-localization of economic processes. For Bello... de-globalization would mean taking away power from transnational corporations and re-empowering local communities and citizens. It would prioritize equity and environmental sustainability over growth.

Looking back, he wrote, ‘At the time of the Genoa protests, any talk of a break from globalization appeared to many as an unrealistic if not outright dystopian prospect. However, twenty years later, this is precisely the course that history is taking.’ (Gerbaudo 2021)

Deglobalisation: the evolution of an idea

In 2009, *The Economist*, one of the loudest cheerleaders of globalisation, cited me – in a disapproving context – as having coined the term ‘deglobalization’ (The Economist 2009). I pleaded guilty. Deglobalisation was never meant as a neutral term. It was conceived in political struggle. If globalisation was what we were opposing, then we had to counter it with the strongest idea possible: deglobalisation. When we advanced it, deglobalisation was a vision, a strategy, not a description of an empirical reality or process, as it is used now to describe current trends away from globalised production and global supply chains or ‘reshoring’, though we foresaw these.

This did not mean it was simply a slogan. It was a programme, the main points of which were refocusing the economy back on production for the domestic market rather than for export markets, resubordinating the market to society, reassert-

ing cooperation over competition, replacing the pursuit of narrow efficiency with that of social effectiveness, and allowing for a diversity of ways of organising and economy rather than fitting all economies into one mould, the neoliberal template. It was also an idea that sprang from a rich intellectual tradition, associated with the Hungarian thinker Karl Polanyi.

In his classic book *The Great Transformation* that came out in 1944 (Polanyi 2001), Polanyi wrote that the unregulated market championed by neoliberals emerged from a process of ‘disembedding’ the market from the broader social system, so market relations came to drive the whole system. But he also argued that this disembedding was the first phase of a ‘double movement’. When the disembedded market began to run out of control, creating tremendous social crises, society reasserted its supremacy over the market. The second phase occurred after the Great Depression of the 20th century, in the shape of strong state intervention to ‘re-embed’ the market in society.

Inspired by Polanyi’s double movement, the deglobalisation paradigm called for a second re-embedding of the market in society after the crisis unleashed by the unfettered market under neoliberalism. ‘Something fundamentally similar is necessary today, with the current crisis of neoliberalism,’ I wrote. ‘Unlike classical socialism, deglobalization does not call for the abolition of the market and its replacement by central planning. What it does call for is the “re-embedding” of market relations in society, meaning that social relations must reflect the subordination of market efficiency to the higher values of community, solidarity, and equality. The market’s role in exchange and the allocation of resources is important, but this must not only be balanced but subordinated to the maintenance and enhancement of social solidarity. Acting to balance and guide the market must not only be the state but also civil society, and in place of the invisible hand as the agent of the common good must come the visible hand of democratic choice. In place of the economics of narrow efficiency, we propose what we might call “effective economics”.’ (Haski 2011).

Stockholm, December 2003

Deglobalisation was the theme of my acceptance speech when in 2003, I was named the recipient of the Right Livelihood Award, also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize. The reason for the award, according to the official citation, was ‘[f]or his outstanding efforts in educating civil society about the effects of corporate globalization, and how alternatives to it can be implemented.’ Addressing the audience at the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm on 8 December 2003, I said,

... [A]bove all, we must change the rules of the global economy, for it is the logic of global capitalism that is the source of the disruption of society and of the environment. The challenge is that even as we deconstruct the old, we dare to imagine and win over people to our visions and programmes for the new.

Contrary to the claims of the ideologues of the establishment, the principles that would serve as the pillars of a new global order are present. The primordial principle is that instead of the economy, the market, driving society, the market must be – to use the image of the great Hungarian Social Democrat Karl Polanyi – “reembedded” in society and governed by the overarching values of community, solidarity, justice, and equity. At the international level, the global economy must be deglobalized or rid of the distorting, disfiguring logic of corporate profitability and truly internationalized, meaning that participation in the international economy must serve to strengthen and develop rather than disintegrate and destroy local and national economies.

The perspective and principles are there; the challenge is how each society can articulate these principles and programmes in unique ways that respond to their values, their rhythms, their personality as societies. Call it post-modern, but central to our movement is the conviction that, in contrast to the belief common to both neoliberalism and bureaucratic socialism, there is no one shoe that will fit all. It is no longer a question of an alternative but of alternatives.

But there is an urgency to the task of articulating credible and viable alternatives to the global community, for the dying spasms of old orders have always presented not just great opportunity but great risk.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the revolutionary thinker Rosa Luxemburg made her famous comment about the possibility that the future might belong to “barbarism.”

Barbarism in the form of fascism nearly triumphed in the 1930’s and 1940’s.

Today, corporate-driven globalization is creating so much of the same instability, resentment, and crisis that are the breeding grounds of fascist, fanatical, and authoritarian populist movements.

Globalization not only has lost its promise but it is embittering many. The forces representing human solidarity and community have no choice but to step in quickly to convince the disenchanted masses that, indeed, as the banner of World Social Forum in Porto Alegre proclaims, “Another world is possible.” For the alternative is, as in the 1930’s, to see the vacuum filled by terrorists, demagogues of the religious and secular Right, and the purveyors of irrationality and nihilism.

The future, dear friends, is in the balance. (Bello 2003)

The many lives of deglobalisation

In its later iterations after my Stockholm speech, deglobalisation was translated from principles into a concrete programme that came to include, among others, activist trade and industrial policies, land and income redistribution, de-emphasis on economic growth in favour of improvement in equity and environment-enhancing policies, and the creation of a ‘mixed economy’ that included community cooperatives, private enterprises, and state enterprises.

Some called what we were proposing a non-capitalist economy. We did not object. More critical commentators said we were anti-capitalist. We did not deny it.

After 2010, things became more complicated in terms of the public's reception of the deglobalisation paradigm. The situation in France, for instance, was interesting. Arnaud Montebourg, a member of the Socialist Party ran for president under the banner of *demandialisation*, with one account noting that 'the utopia of demandialisation is all the more appealing as Montebourg points out that it's not a rich-man's dream of keeping the poor at bay, crediting Walden Bello, the Princeton-educated Filipino writer, politician, and a man of the South for the concept' (Haski 2011). Montebourg was later appointed minister of reindustrialisation in the government of President Francois Hollande, though, as far as I know, he never got to seriously implement a programme of deglobalisation.

On the other hand, the French far right led by Marine Le Pen of the National Front embraced deglobalisation, but it cleverly mixed valid working-class anxieties about globalisation with anti-European Union and anti-immigrant sentiments. As one account noted, Le Pen 'carries the idea [of] globalization further, as she advocates an exit by France from the euro and erection of barriers at France's borders. Her plan, a one-country-versus-all approach, makes no economic sense, but carries strong nationalistic and emotional appeal' (Haski 2011).

What was happening was that themes we had articulated, among them the subordination of trade to the social good, the expansion of social protection, and the re-embedding of the market in society were being articulated within an ideological framework that privileged the dominant social group and marginalised large numbers of people on the basis of their race, ethnicity, nationality, or culture. Deglobalisation was being hijacked to provide legitimacy to anti-migrant politics. The right was appealing to community, but its concept of community was very different from that of the progressive tradition. As I later pointed out,

For the right, community is determined by race, ethnicity, and blood. It is narrow in terms of who is included in it rather than expansive. For us, community is principally a matter of shared values that transcend differences in blood, gender, race, class, and culture. Community tends towards continual expansion and incorporation of people that share the same values. . . Central to this interpretation of community is the assumption that all people are entitled to the full range of political, civil, economic, social, and human rights, including the right to join a desired community. This does not mean that there are no procedural rules governing the acquisition of citizenship or migration. It does mean that though that these rules and regulations are guided by a fundamental openness towards accepting those who wish to join a community. (Bello 2019, 9)

One cannot overemphasize the role that neoliberalism and globalisation have played in spawning movements of the radical right. The worsening living standards and great inequalities created by neoliberal policies created disillusionment among

people who felt the liberal democracy had been captured by the rich and triggered distrust in centre-right and centre-left parties that promoted those policies. After being supporters of the neoliberal policies that had promoted globalisation, the far right opportunistically latched onto deglobalisation to capture citizens that had lost their trust in the moderate parties identified with them.

Perhaps, there is no better account of the way anti-globalisation and deglobalisation migrated from the left to the right than that of former President Barack Obama, who represented the dominant, neoliberal, ‘Third Way’ wing of the Democratic Party, along with the Clintons. In a speech in Johannesburg in July 2017, Obama remarked that the ‘politics of fear and resentment’ stemmed from a process of globalisation that ‘upended the agricultural and manufacturing sectors in many countries. . . greatly reduced the demand for certain workers. . . helped weaken unions and labor’s bargaining power. . . [and] made it easier for capital to avoid tax laws and the regulations of nation states.’ He further noted that ‘challenges to globalization first came from the left but then came more forcefully from the right, as you started seeing populist movements . . . [that] tapped the unease that was felt by many people that lived outside the urban cores; fears that economic security was slipping away, that their social status and privileges were eroding; that their cultural identities were being threatened by outsiders, somebody that didn’t look like them or sound like them or pray as they did.’ These resentful, discontented masses are the base of fascist parties. Obama was practically admitting that neoliberal policies that he was one of the major advocates of in the United States had backfired.

Aborted deglobalisation plans for Myanmar

Deglobalisation was a theoretical paradigm, and the sceptics would always ask us, where can we see deglobalisation being put into practice? I had been looking for an opportunity to translate deglobalisation from theory into reality, and it seems like my prayers were answered when Pietje Vervest of the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute and Paung Ku and other progressive NGOs in Myanmar invited me to come up with an alternative development plan for Myanmar in 2017. The opportunity had opened up with the National League for Democracy’s (NLD) decisive win in the national elections of 2015.

The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and other members of the development establishment had already come in like gangbusters once the Thein Sein transition government said it was open for business in 2011. Not surprisingly, they had proceeded to set Myanmar on an export-oriented path meant to integrate it into the regional and international supply chains of global capitalism. But many in Myanmar’s civil society and the NLD were not convinced this was the way to go, having seen the crisis of agriculture, environmental problems, and growing inequalities

this paradigm had spawned in other Southeast Asian countries. They were eager for an alternative path, and that is what I was asked to provide.

After several visits to Myanmar in 2017 and 2018, where I encountered a bustling and hopeful civil society in Yangon, Mandalay, and Dawei, a detailed development strategy was ready that challenged frontally the outward orientation pushed by the development establishment and promoted instead an inward-focused, domestic market-focused, agriculture-led strategy where industry, trade, and energy provision developed principally through synergy with the needs of the agricultural sector. The goal was to bring about equitably shared prosperity, with mutually enhancing and balanced development between the city and the countryside, among states, among social groups, and among the ethnic communities of Myanmar. And in contrast to the development from above approach of the World Bank, the alternative strategy would be implemented via a participatory democratic process of development from below, with people's organisations, communities, and civil society taking the lead (Bello 2018).

Noteworthy among our proposals were two: the adoption of agroecology and making Myanmar's poppy producers in the ethnic minority states part of a legal pharmaceutical industry. Smallholder agriculture, we pointed out, is particularly suited to agroecology – an approach that makes use of natural ecosystems and relies on local knowledge to plant diverse crops that raise the sustainability of the farming system as a whole by reducing the ecological stresses induced by chemical-intensive monoculture. As for poppy producers, they could be weaned away from being participants in the illegal narcotics trade and become legitimate sources of supply for poppy-based medicinal drugs such as morphine and codeine.

Unfortunately, the national debate on alternative strategies of development was aborted by the military coup of February 2021. But the freezing of debate is likely to be temporary, for the people of Myanmar, I am confident, will eventually get rid of an oppressive military regime that has overreached and, as of the middle of 2023, had already lost control of half of the country. Deglobalisation may yet come to Myanmar.

Revisiting deglobalisation

While the foundational concepts of deglobalisation met with approval in progressive circles, concrete policies stemming from the paradigm were seen by some as needing more substantive articulation. Key issues that needed to be addressed more fully were whether deglobalisation favoured 'delinking' from the international economy, whether it was a 'development alternative' or an 'alternative to development', whether it favoured 'decoupling' or 'degrowth' as the way forward in addressing climate change, what its relationship was to the food sovereignty paradigm, what its stand was on feminist economics, how it related to structural

changes in the economy like advances in artificial intelligence, and what its relationship was to *Buen Vivir* and other paradigms influenced by indigenous perspectives (→ **Epistemologies, alternative**).

In a very productive dialogue with other alternative paradigms that have been advanced over the last two decades, it was clarified that deglobalisation did not mean delinking from the international economy; was more of an alternative to development than a development alternative; favoured degrowth over decoupling; was enriched by the perspectives of food sovereignty and agroecology; and sought to integrate the insights of feminist economics, in particular, the value of reproductive work and the centrality of work related to care in the post-growth economy. Also, like emancipatory Marxism, deglobalisation recognized both the massive threat posed to workers by advances in artificial intelligence and the liberating potential of the latter in terms of releasing people from the burden of work in order to concentrate on fulfilling their potential as creative beings (For an extended discussion of the relationship of deglobalisation to these perspectives, see Bello 2019 and Bello 2022).

Deglobalisation also has much in common with the perspectives and values undergirding *Buen Vivir*. Indeed, the shared perspectives among all the alternatives to development are striking. However, rather than subsuming all the discourses under one overarching discourse, it is probably more productive for each of them to be articulated and developed separately, with their complementarities being pointed out along with their differences. A paradigm serves as a conceptual and ethical filter that surfaces realities that might not appear or receive a similar emphasis in other paradigms. The insights each paradigm now delivers might be lost under a homogenising conceptual framework.

It must also be pointed out that the sails of deglobalisation received fresh wind from new analytical concepts such as, for instance, the idea of dis:connectivity that this volume deals with. The 2008 global financial crisis stalled globalisation, but it did not prevent China from proclaiming the advent of a new phase of globalisation called 'connectivity', with China leading it. 'Connectivity' was mainly an infrastructural process, with road and rail connections linking Asia and Europe, and connecting countries at the continental level in Africa and Latin America. It was a breath-taking vision, but it was laid low by three developments. One was the coronavirus, which travelled swiftly by air and other transportation, leading countries to restrict entry into their territories. Second was geopolitics; as the 'New Cold War' heated up, the US and the EU pushed their corporations to 'reshore' their global supply chains from China. The third factor was civil society scepticism about connectivity being a positive force. The idea of dis:connectivity seeks to bring these developments together analytically.

Conclusion

Deglobalisation is over 20 years old. This period has seen both its vindication and the rise of challenges to it. Globalisation is now in crisis, for many of the reasons that the deglobalisation paradigm articulated. At the same time, politically deglobalisation has been appropriated by the far right, which has been much better at using it to mobilise people than the left. A big question then is how progressive forces can reclaim it as a vision and programme.

Another key concern was how deglobalisation could be put into practice. Myanmar under the government of Aung Sang Suu Kyi offered an opportunity to do this, but after an initial plan was drafted in cooperation with civil society organisations there, the military coup of 2021 led to its being shelved. Pushing it as an alternative, however, remains a possibility once the junta is overthrown.

Over the last two decades, we have seen other alternative approaches emerge, among them ecofeminism, food sovereignty, degrowth, emancipatory Marxism, Buen Vivir, and the analytical concept of dis:connectivity. The dialogue between deglobalisation and these perspectives has been rich, but it has barely begun.

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