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# Globalization isn't New; Anti-globalization isn't Either: September 11 and the History of Nations

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ABSTRACT *The September 11 attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center reveals, among other things, a colossal failure of intelligence and radical deficiencies in our understanding of communications in the modern world. The history of nations and the history of communications are continuous, though contradictory, since the eighteenth century, and those continuities and contradictions are revealed by way of analysis of September 11 and its aftermath.*

Keywords: nation, nationalism, globalization, democracy, communications.

## Introduction: A Holiday from History

For the past decade or more, aficionados and enthusiasts of cyberspace have proclaimed the emergence of a new and borderless world thanks to the computer and satellite. Nations, as they correctly observed, were losing control of their frontiers whether understood as geographic or symbolic. Nations were more easily penetrated not only by transnational flows of communications but also by flows of people. Even island nations like Britain and Japan, always the most resistant to these flows, had, relatively speaking, lost control of their borders. The words on everyone's lips and pens were globalization, privatization, deregulation, innovation, the Internet and World Wide Web. A new economy, new politics and a new culture were under construction and Americans were to be the first beneficiaries. We were on a holiday from history.

All that came to at least a temporary end on September 11, but the consequences of that day for the real world of politics and communications, as well as for understanding the underlying processes of social change, will not be known for a very long time. However, we can say with some assurance that the heady atmosphere of the 1990s, the vision of a world united in theory and practice—one market, one culture, one politics, one seamless global communications system—is over, just as assuredly as the Guns of August 1914 brought to an end an earlier

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phase of globalization driven by the telegraph, railroad, underwater cable, the steamship and the gold standard. Whether the consequences will be as devastating—two world wars and a cold war—whether the interregnum will last as long—world trade recovered to 1914 levels only in 1970, capital flows in 1985—no one knows.

At the instant that commercial airliners, brimming with jet fuel, slammed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the people of the United States experienced in a moment of nonplussed apprehension a massive failure of intelligence. The news media, the political class, intellectuals—all the distant and early warning systems of the culture—had failed and Americans were armed only with obsolete historical analogies. 'It's Pearl Harbor all over again.'

In the decade following the end of the Cold War, journalists had been preoccupied with one media event after another: OJ, Tanya, Monica–Linda–Bill, and Gary. The political class was turned inward focused on economic growth, the stock market, interest rates, social security and health insurance, affirmative action, and the so-called 'cultural war'. When the first of the reports from the United States Commission on National Security, containing a devastating indictment of the fragmented and inadequate structures and strategies in place to prevent and respond to attacks on US cities, was issued in September 1999, it was studiously ignored not only by leading news outlets but by Congress as well. The keyword and framework was globalization, which was understood on a model that was primarily economic and, to use an awkward but necessary neologism, US-centric. As a result of the events of September 11, history, politics, and the study of human nature are back on the agenda.

**Communications and the Building of Nations**

One context for understanding the events of September 11 is the intersection of communications and nation building. The major project of the modern era is the making of nations out of fragments of historic cultures: tribes, principalities, kingdoms and religions. We understand that in the aftermath of World War II new nations were made across the globe out of the remains of European Empire. Less obvious is that the nations of Europe and the Americas are not preternatural but themselves historical creations. There are few if any nations—France, perhaps England but not Great Britain, Japan—that pre-date the modern era. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the nations of Europe and the Americas were built just as assuredly as Czechoslovakia was built early and Somalia late in the twentieth century.

The original instrument of nation building was the printing press, which by creating a 'free trade' zone in culture built the imaginary community of the nation. Printing was merely the software, of course; the hardware was the network of roads and post offices, schools and government offices that carried the printed word in the regulatory form of a lingua franca. Simultaneously, the printing press erected barriers between geographic spaces driving a high, if often invisible, wall into a landscape of continuously blending languages.

If the printing press could unify the relatively small nations in Europe and when wedded to new arts of navigation and transoceanic transport permit these nations to leap boundaries into new worlds, it proved hopelessly inefficient at policing and maintaining such newly enlarged spaces. It was the railroad and the telegraph, in

combination, that turned a loose collection of political sovereignties into integrated nations in which a national identity and a national community predominated. The same technology that permitted the integration of large nations allowed much smaller European states to secure an effective empire, one, that unlike the empires of the eighteenth century, could be governed and controlled from a center that continuously monitored its margins in something close to real time.

Actually, the creation of large nations and the integration of empire were exactly the same processes differing only in that one integrated contiguous land masses—Russia, Canada, the United States—and the other leapt oceanic barriers. But the spread of nation states and modern empires produced everywhere a characteristic reaction formation: ethnic nationalisms sprang up at their margins—distant margins, thousands of miles from the center or nearby, internal colonies, close to home.

Television completed and perfected the national system, finished what the printing press, telegraph, telephone, wire services, and national magazine began. The first cable systems, the last mile of the national system of communication and, as it turned out, the first mile of the new global system, linked those places inaccessible to over the air signals and fulfilled the social imaginary of the nineteenth century—the eclipse of time and space: one nation under a common system of communication. The great audience, as Gilbert Seldes called it, was implicitly addressed as members of nation, exposed to one national culture and a consensus narrative exploring the underlying agreements and schisms within the nation.

**The Unraveling of Communication**

This national system of communication which embodied, symbolized and ritualized a common national narrative, indeed a civil religion, held until sometime in the 1970s when a decisive unraveling began with the launching of satellites for direct pay-television, the inauguration of Home Box Office, and the subsequent transformation of small cable systems into independent competitors of the networks.

With the end of the Cold War, the restraints imposed by world politics were shattered, and the new configuration of cable, satellite, and computer technologies, reinforced by changes in public policy, opened up novel conceptions of time and space, individual identity and social action; opened up, in fact, social, political and economic possibilities that transcended the boundaries and restraints of national communication, national identity, and national religion.

In the wake of these technological changes, every modern nation has witnessed a dazzling array of new communication services and, more disturbing, dangerous political phenomena: proliferation of computers and cell phones as consumer goods, the breakdown of the structure of national broadcasting, disarray in political parties and processes, alterations in patterns of settlement, the emergence of new dominating firms, a new cosmopolitan plutocracy unknown two decades ago, and the bursting of borders and boundaries of all kinds, political as well as personal. At the international level there has been a breakdown in governmental authority, the breakup of states, the intensification of tribal, ethnic and religious conflict, the migration, forced and voluntary, of large numbers of people, the proliferation of weapons of aggression, the spread of terrorism, and a new wave of massacres and ethnic cleansing.

We learn again that as communication erases some borders, it erects others, though the latter are much less visible and difficult to detect than the former. Fragmentation and homogenization are not opposites but mutually related trends of a single global reality. Nations, caught in the contradiction between homogenizing and fragmenting forces, unable to reconcile them, are torn as sovereignty simultaneously evolves upward to the transnational and devolves downward into regional, class, ethnic, and racial segments.

We exist, then, in a 'verge' in the sense Daniel Boorstin gave that word: a moment between two different forms of social life in which technology, among other things, has dislodged all human relations and nothing stable has replaced them. The world seems to be imploding and exploding at the same moment, experienced imaginatively as simultaneously coming together and falling apart. In the mid–1970s we entered a new phase in the history of the compression of space and time. As telecommunications burst the constraining boundaries of the nation-state, social structures that had defined the modern world, and established its direction, were thrown into disarray and national cultures forced into cognitive and affective melt-down.

**September 11: A New Symbolism**

On September 11 that verge became strikingly, undeniably apparent. Global communication, including television, had taken the world, not the nation, as its domain. In the commercial sector it was proclaimed that 'The world is our audience' (Time-Warner) and 'We see the world as one civilization' (Archer, Daniels, Midland). But if commerce, commercials, and currency were globalized, so was terrorism for the latter occurs across state boundaries rather than within and the distinction at the root of our thinking between the domestic and the foreign was erased.

We are not then at the end of history, as Francis Fukayama predicted a few years back, but perhaps at the beginning of a new historical phase in which nations thrash about like beached whales, unable to adequately cope, despite a lot of brave talk, with political and cultural processes both within and without their borders. As the capacity of governments to control the traffic in persons, goods, and information that flows across borders decreases, other social formations, usually weaker and less cohesive imagined communities, are better able to transcend the confines of the state. With that, myths of regional, continental and hemispheric unity grow in tandem with an unstable mix of racial, ethnic, religious and gender based myths of particularity. The Internet dream of non-spatial communities turns out to be an illusion for it gives rise to communities lodged in a new dimension of space where they are beyond any form of control, democratic or otherwise.

Samuel Huntington has described this development as a return to a 'pre-Westphalian condition' in which culture breaks loose from its national moorings, and is realigned in transnational and subnational linkages. Huntington's primary example of this change is religion. As he puts it, 'the separation of church and state, an idiosyncratic product of western rationalization, is coming to an end and religion is increasingly likely to intrude in international' and domestic politics as well. The age of ecumenism, cultural as well as religious, may have passed at both the local and international levels. A period in which moral values and cultural outlooks were taken to be private matters and tolerance a shared value may be giving way to antagonism and difference as cultures universalize their particularity

in transnational movements, and particularize their universality in more rigidly bound, local communities and formations.

The nation is no longer the focus, explicit and implicit, of the social imaginary. Peoples and countries with similar cultures are coming together. Peoples and countries with different cultures are coming apart. Alignments defined by ideology and superpower relations are giving way to alignments defined by culture and civilization. Political boundaries increasingly are redrawn to coincide with cultural ones. Cultural communities are replacing Cold War blocs and the fault lines between civilizations are becoming the central lines of conflict in global politics. And because the roots of culture remain religious (as the old saw has it always inquire whether an atheist is a Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or Muslim atheist), a shift to political blocs based on culture and civilization means that religion displaces nation, relatively speaking, as a primary axis of human identity and a force in politics at all levels. That is Huntington's argument, barely paraphrased, and it captures a real tendency and its potentially destructive consequences at the opening of the twenty-first century.

The second wave of globalization through which we have been living has turned out to be wider but thinner and just as intractably dangerous as the globalization of the late nineteenth century. Transaction costs radically fell in commerce but that was perhaps only temporary for the very successes of globalization stimulated policies and social movements to counteract and undo it. On the one hand, the events of September 11 reversed the curve of transaction costs radically raising the costs of transport, insurance, security, including cyberspace security, and triggered globally the redirection of money into military and intelligence budgets. That in itself will slow the pace of globalization. More importantly, globalization has broken down on the cultural plane. Free trade in culture, always the last item to be negotiated in world congresses, runs into the stubborn resistance of historic forms of life, of belief and understanding, of beauty and friendship, and this resistance places strict limits on universalizing communication. Americans, paradoxically a relatively insular people for whom culture is a commodity like any other to be bought and sold in the market place, have a hard time understanding this resistance. That failure became painfully apparent in lower Manhattan and Washington in early September 2001.