

DAVID BROOKS

# Globalization Is Over. The Global Culture Wars Have Begun.

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I'm from a fortunate generation. I can remember a time — about a quarter-century ago — when the world seemed to be coming together. The great Cold War contest between communism and capitalism appeared to be over. Democracy was still spreading. Nations were becoming more economically interdependent. The internet seemed ready to foster worldwide communications. It seemed as if there would be a global convergence around a set of universal values — freedom, equality, personal dignity, pluralism, human rights.

We called this process of convergence globalization. It was, first of all, an economic and a technological process — about growing trade and investment between nations and the spread of technologies that put, say, Wikipedia instantly at our fingertips. But globalization was also a political, social and moral process.

In the 1990s, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens argued that globalization is “a shift in our very life circumstances. It is the way we now live.” It involved “the intensification of worldwide social relations.” Globalization was about the integration of worldviews, products, ideas and culture.

This fit in with an academic theory that had been floating around called Modernization Theory. The idea was that as nations developed, they would become more like us in the West — the ones who had already modernized.

In the wider public conversation, it was sometimes assumed that nations all around the world would admire the success of the Western democracies and seek to imitate us. It was sometimes assumed that as people “modernized,” they would become more bourgeois, consumerist, peaceful — just like us. It was sometimes assumed that as societies modernized, they'd become more secular, just as in Europe and parts of the United States. They'd be more driven by the desire to make money than to conquer others. They'd be more driven by the desire to settle down into suburban homes than by the fanatical ideologies or the sort of hunger for prestige and conquest that had doomed humanity to centuries of war.

This was an optimistic vision of how history would evolve, a vision of progress and convergence. Unfortunately, this vision does not describe the world we live in today. The world is not converging anymore; it's diverging. The process of globalization has slowed and, in some cases, even kicked into reverse. Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlights these trends. While Ukraine's brave fight against authoritarian aggression is an inspiration in the West, much of the world remains unmoved, even sympathetic to Vladimir Putin.

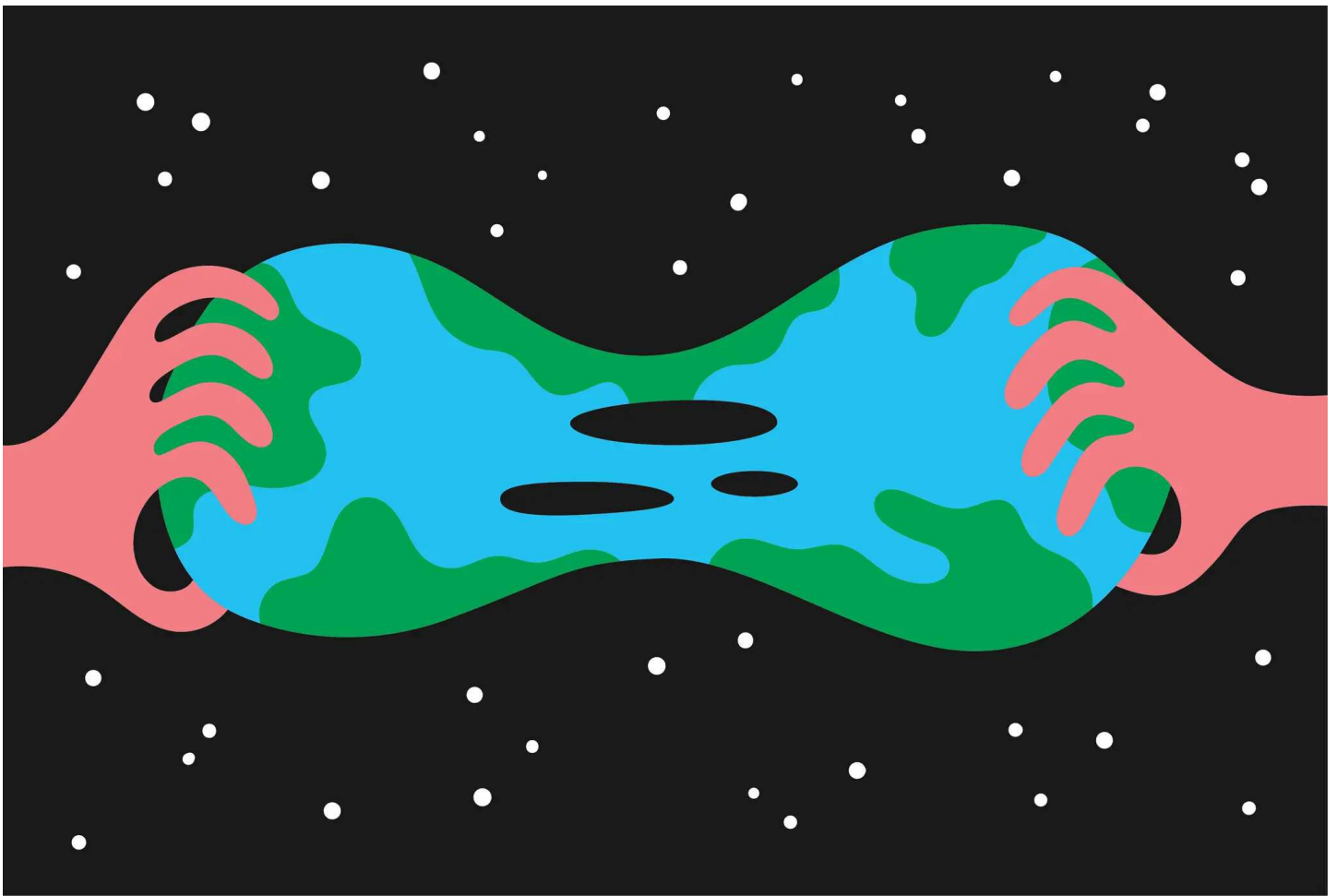
The Economist reports that between 2008 and 2019, world trade, relative to global G.D.P., fell by about five percentage points. There has been a slew of new tariffs and other barriers to trade. Immigration flows have slowed. Global flows of long-term investment fell by half between 2016 and 2019. The causes of this deglobalization are broad and deep. The 2008 financial crisis delegitimized global capitalism for many people. China has apparently demonstrated that mercantilism can be an effective economic strategy. All manner of antiglobalization movements have arisen: those of the Brexiteers, xenophobic nationalists, Trumpian populists, the antiglobalist left.

There's just a lot more global conflict than there was in that brief holiday from history in the '90s. Trade, travel and even communication across political blocs have become more morally, politically and economically fraught. Hundreds of companies have withdrawn from Russia as the West partly decouples from Putin's war machine. Many Western consumers don't want trade with China because of accusations of forced labor and genocide. Many Western C.E.O.s are rethinking their operations in China as the regime gets more hostile to the West and as supply chains are threatened by political uncertainty. In 2014 the United States barred the Chinese tech company Huawei from bidding on government contracts. Joe Biden has strengthened “Buy American” rules so that the U.S. government buys more stuff domestically.

The world economy seems to be gradually decoupling into, for starters, a Western zone and a Chinese zone. Foreign direct investment flows between China and America were nearly \$30 billion per year five years ago. Now they are down to \$5 billion.

As John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge wrote in a superb essay for Bloomberg, “geopolitics is definitively moving against globalization — toward a world dominated by two or three great trading blocs.” This broader context, and especially the invasion of Ukraine, “is burying most of the basic assumptions that have underlain business thinking about the world for the past 40 years.”

Sure, globalization as flows of trade will continue. But globalization as the driving logic of world affairs — that seems to be over. Economic rivalries have now merged with political, moral and other rivalries into one global contest for dominance. Globalization has been replaced by something that looks a lot like global culture war.



Tim Lahan

Looking back, we probably put too much emphasis on the power of material forces like economics and technology to drive human events and bring us all together. This is not the first time this has happened. In the early 20th century, Norman Angell wrote a now notorious book called “The Great Illusion” that argued that the industrialized nations of his time were too economically interdependent to go to war with one another. Instead, two world wars followed.

The fact is that human behavior is often driven by forces much deeper than economic and political self-interest, at least as Western rationalists typically understand these things. It’s these deeper motivations that are driving events right now — and they are sending history off into wildly unpredictable directions.

First, human beings are powerfully driven by what are known as the thymotic desires. These are the needs to be seen, respected, appreciated. If you give people the impression that they are unseen, disrespected and unappreciated, they will become enraged, resentful and vengeful. They will perceive diminishment as injustice and respond with aggressive indignation.

Global politics over the past few decades functioned as a massive social inequality machine. In country after country, groups of highly educated urban elites have arisen to dominate media, universities, culture and often political power. Great swaths of people feel looked down upon and ignored. In country after country, populist leaders have arisen to exploit these resentments: Donald Trump in the United States, Narendra Modi in India, Marine Le Pen in France.

Meanwhile, authoritarians like Putin and Xi Jinping practice this politics of resentment on a global scale. They treat the collective West as the global elites and declare their open revolt against it. Putin tells humiliation stories — what the West supposedly did to Russia in the 1990s. He promises a return to Russian exceptionalism and Russian glory. Russia will reclaim its starring role in world history.

China’s leaders talk about the “century of humiliation.” They complain about the way the arrogant Westerners try to impose their values on everybody else. Though China may eventually become the world’s largest economy, Xi still talks about China as a developing nation.

Second, most people have a strong loyalty to their place and to their nation. But over the past few decades many people have felt that their places have been left behind and that their national honor has been threatened. In the heyday of globalization, multilateral organizations and global corporations seemed to be eclipsing nation-states.

In country after country, highly nationalistic movements have arisen to insist on national sovereignty and to restore national pride: Modi in India, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Trump in the United States, Boris Johnson in Britain. To hell with cosmopolitanism and global convergence, they say. We’re going to make our own country great again in our own way. Many globalists completely underestimated the power of nationalism to drive history.

Third, people are driven by moral longings — by their attachment to their own cultural values, by their desire to fiercely defend their values when they seem to be under assault. For the past few decades, globalization has seemed to many people to be exactly this kind of assault.

After the Cold War, Western values came to dominate the world — through our movies, music, political conversation, social media. One theory of globalization was that the world culture would converge, basically around these liberal values.

The problem is that Western values are not the world's values. In fact, we in the West are complete cultural outliers. In his book “The WEIRD People in the World,” Joseph Henrich amasses hundreds of pages of data to show just how unusual Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic values are.

He writes: “We WEIRD people are highly individualistic, self-obsessed, control-oriented, nonconformist and analytical. We focus on ourselves — our attributes, accomplishments and aspirations — over our relationships and social roles.”

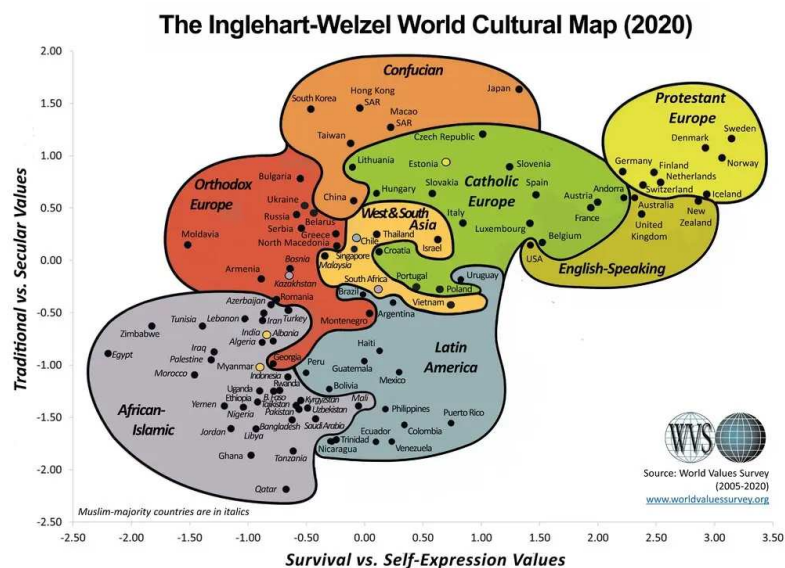
It's completely possible to enjoy listening to Billie Eilish or Megan Thee Stallion and still find Western values foreign and maybe repellent. Many people around the world look at our ideas about gender roles and find them foreign or repellent. They look at (at our best) our fervent defense of L.G.B.T.Q. rights and find them off-putting. The idea that it's up to each person to choose one's own identity and values — that seems ridiculous to many. The idea that the purpose of education is to inculcate critical thinking skills so students can liberate themselves from the ideas they received from their parents and communities — that seems foolish to many.

With 44 percent of American high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, our culture isn't exactly the best advertisement for Western values right now.

Despite the assumptions of globalization, world culture does not seem to be converging and in some cases seems to be diverging. The economists Fernando Ferreira and Joel Waldfogel studied popular music charts in 22 countries between 1960 and 2007. They found that people are biased toward the music of their own country and that this bias has increased since the late 1990s. People don't want to blend into a homogeneous global culture; they want to preserve their own kind.

Every few years the World Values Survey questions people from around the globe about their moral and cultural beliefs. Every few years, some of these survey results are synthesized into a map that shows how the different cultural zones stand in relation to one another. In 1996 the Protestant Europe cultural zone and the English-Speaking zone were clumped in with the other global zones. Western values were different from the values found in say, Latin America or the Confucian zone, but they were contiguous.

But the 2020 map looks different. The Protestant Europe and English-Speaking zones have drifted away from the rest of the world cultures and now jut out like some extraneous cultural peninsula.



World Values Survey Association

In a summary of the surveys' findings and insights, the World Values Survey Association noted that on issues like marriage, family, gender and sexual orientation, “there has been a growing divergence between the prevailing values in low-income countries and high-income countries.” We in the West have long been outliers; now our distance from the rest of the world is growing vast.

Finally, people are powerfully driven by a desire for order. Nothing is worse than chaos and anarchy. These cultural changes, and the often simultaneous breakdown of effective governance, can feel like social chaos, like anarchy, leading people to seek order at all costs.

We in the democratic nations of the world are lucky enough to live in societies that have rules-based orders, in which individual rights are protected and in which we get to choose our own leaders. In more and more parts of the world, though, people do not have access to this kind of order.

Just as there are signs that the world is economically and culturally diverging, there are signs it is politically diverging. In its “Freedom in the World 2022” report, Freedom House notes that the world has experienced 16 consecutive years of democratic decline. It reported last year: “The countries experiencing deterioration outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin recorded since the negative trend began in 2006. The long democratic recession is deepening.” This is not what we thought would happen in the golden age of globalization.

In that heyday, democracies appeared stable, and authoritarian regimes appeared to be headed to the ash heap of history. Today, many democracies appear less stable than they did and many authoritarian regimes appear more stable. American democracy, for example, has slid toward polarization and dysfunction. Meanwhile, China has shown that highly centralized nations can be just as technologically advanced as the West. Modern authoritarian nations now have technologies that allow them to exercise pervasive control of their citizens in ways that were unimaginable decades ago.

Autocratic regimes are now serious economic rivals to the West. They account for 60 percent of patent applications. In 2020, the governments and businesses in these countries invested \$9 trillion in things like machinery, equipment and infrastructure, while democratic nations invested \$12 trillion. If things are going well, authoritarian governments can enjoy surprising popular support.

What I'm describing is a divergence on an array of fronts. As scholars Heather Berry, Mauro F. Guillén and Arun S. Hendi reported in a study of international convergence, "Over the last half century, nation-states in the global system have not evolved significantly closer (or more similar) to one another along a number of dimensions." We in the West subscribe to a series of universal values about freedom, democracy and personal dignity. The problem is that these universal values are not universally accepted and seem to be getting less so.

Next, I'm describing a world in which divergence turns into conflict, especially as great powers compete for resources and dominance. China and Russia clearly want to establish regional zones that they dominate. Some of this is the kind of conflict that historically exists between opposing political systems, similar to what we saw during the Cold War. This is the global struggle between the forces of authoritarianism and the forces of democratization. Illiberal regimes are building closer alliances with one another. They are investing more in one another's economies. At the other end, democratic governments are building closer alliances with one another. The walls are going up. Korea was the first major battleground of the Cold War. Ukraine could be the first battleground in what turns out to be a long struggle between diametrically opposed political systems.

But something bigger is happening today that is different from the great power struggles of the past, that is different from the Cold War. This is not just a political or an economic conflict. It's a conflict about politics, economics, culture, status, psychology, morality and religion all at once. More specifically, it's a rejection of Western ways of doing things by hundreds of millions of people along a wide array of fronts.

To define this conflict most generously, I'd say it's the difference between the West's emphasis on personal dignity and much of the rest of the world's emphasis on communal cohesion. But that's not all that's going on here. What's important is the way these longstanding and normal cultural differences are being whipped up by autocrats who want to expand their power and sow chaos in the democratic world. Authoritarian rulers now routinely weaponize cultural differences, religious tensions and status resentments to mobilize supporters, attract allies and expand their own power. This is cultural difference transmogrified by status resentment into culture war.

Some people have revived Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations theory to capture what's going on. Huntington was right that ideas, psychology and values drive history as much as material interests. But these divides don't break down on the neat civilizational lines that Huntington described.

In fact, what haunts me most is that this rejection of Western liberalism, individualism, pluralism, gender equality and all the rest is not only happening between nations but also within nations. The status resentment against Western cultural, economic and political elites that flows from the mouths of illiberal leaders like Putin and Modi and Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil sounds quite a lot like the status resentment that flows from the mouths of the Trumpian right, from the French right, from the Italian and Hungarian right.

There's a lot of complexity here — the Trumpians obviously have no love for China — but sometimes when I look at world affairs I see a giant, global maximalist version of America's familiar contest between Reds and Blues. In America we've divided along regional, educational, religious, cultural, generational and urban/rural lines, and now the world is fragmenting in ways that often seem to mimic our own. The paths various populists prefer may differ, and their nationalistic passions often conflict, but what they're revolting against is often the same thing.

How do you win a global culture war in which differing views on secularism and gay rights parades are intertwined with nuclear weapons, global trade flows, status resentments, toxic masculinity and authoritarian power grabs? That's the bind we find ourselves in today.

I look back over the past few decades of social thinking with *understanding*. I was too young to really experience the tension of the Cold War, but it must have been brutal. I understand why so many people, when the Soviet Union fell, grabbed onto a vision of the future that promised an end to existential conflict.

I look at the current situation with *humility*. The critiques that so many people are making about the West, and about American culture — for being too individualistic, too materialistic, too condescending — these critiques are not wrong. We have a lot of work to do if we are going to be socially strong enough to stand up to the challenges that are coming over the next several years, if we are going to persuade people in all those swing countries across Africa, Latin America and the rest of the world that they should throw their lot in with the democracies and not with the authoritarians — that our way of life is the better way of life.

And I look at the current situation with *confidence*. Ultimately, people want to stand out and fit in. They want to feel that their lives have dignity, that they are respected for who they are. They also want to feel membership in moral communities. Right now, many people feel disrespected by the West. They are casting their lot with authoritarian leaders who speak to their resentments and their national pride. But those leaders don't actually recognize them. For those authoritarians — from Trump to Putin — their followers are just instruments in their own search for self-aggrandizement.

At the end of the day, only democracy and liberalism are based on respect for the dignity of each person. At the end of the day, only these systems and our worldviews offer the highest fulfillment for the drives and desires I've tried to describe here.

I've lost confidence in our ability to predict where history is headed and in the idea that as nations "modernize" they develop along some predictable line. I guess it's time to open our minds up to the possibility that the future may be very different from anything we expected.

The Chinese seem very confident that our coalition against Putin will fall apart. Western consumers won't be able to tolerate the economic sacrifice. Our alliances will fragment. The Chinese also seem convinced that they will bury our decadent systems before too long. These are not possibilities that can be dismissed out of hand.

But I have faith in the ideas and the moral systems that we have inherited. What we call "the West" is not an ethnic designation or an elitist country club. The heroes of Ukraine are showing that at its best, it is a moral accomplishment, and unlike its rivals, it aspires to extend dignity, human rights and self-determination to all. That's worth reforming and working on and defending and sharing in the decades ahead.

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