Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism
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Preface

Over the past 400 to 600 years, a culture and society, originating for the most part in Europe and dedicated to the idea of trade and consumption as the ultimate source of well-being, began to expand to all parts of the globe. In many ways it is the most successful culture and society the world has ever seen, and its technology, wealth, and power stand as monuments to its success; however, accompanying its expansion have been problems—growing social and economic inequality, environmental destruction, mass starvation, and social unrest. Most members of this society and culture perceive these problems as distant from themselves or as challenges for them to meet. However, there is the possibility that these problems, which threaten to negate everything this culture has accomplished, are intrinsic to the culture itself. That is the possibility to be explored in this book.

The outline of this book emerged when, a few years ago, colleagues at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, James Armstrong and Mark Cohen, and the senior author began developing a course on global problems. We wanted to create a course that would help students understand the major global issues that they confront in the mass media—problems such as the so-called population explosion, famine and hunger, global environmental destruction, the emergence and spread of new diseases, so-called ethnic conflict and genocides, terrorism, and social protest. We learned quickly that to make the course successful, we had to overcome the often-ethnocentric perspectives of the students, perspectives that were often reinforced by media coverage of global affairs. We needed also to compensate for the students’ lack of backgrounds in anthropology, history, and economics, all crucial for understanding the roots of the problems we were to examine. Finally, we needed to illustrate that the problems we examined were relevant to them, that the problems would affect them either directly or indirectly, and that their actions now or in the future would determine the extent to which the origins of these problems could be acknowledged, let alone ever addressed. The form of this book emerged from our efforts at dealing with these pedagogical issues and the classroom interactions that these efforts stimulated.

The Focus of this Book

We can summarize our approach in this book as follows: There has emerged over the past five to six centuries a distinctive culture or way of life dominated by a belief in trade and commodity consumption as the source of well-being. This culture flowered in Western Europe, reached fruition in the United States, and spread to much of the rest of the world, creating what some anthropologists, sociologists, and historians call the world system. People disagree on the critical factors in the development of this system and even whether it was unique historically, although most agree on certain basic ideas. Among the most important are the assumptions that the driving force behind the spread of the contemporary world system was industrial and corporate capitalism, and that the spread of the world system is related in some way to the resulting division of the world into wealthy nations and poor nations or into wealthy core, developed, or industrialized areas and dependent peripheral, undeveloped, or nonindustrialized areas.

The spread of the capitalist world system has been accompanied by the creation of distinctive patterns of social relations, ways of viewing the world, methods of food production, distinctive diets, patterns of health and disease, relationships to the environment, and so on. However, the spread of this culture has not gone uncontested; there has been resistance in the form of direct and indirect actions—political, religious, and social protest and revolution. How and why capitalist culture developed and the reasons why some groups resisted and continue to resist its development are among the questions posed in this book.

The answers to these questions are based on specific assumptions. First, a central tenet of anthropology is that personal, social, cultural, and historical factors determine the point of view any person might have regarding a certain phenomenon. No less is true of those participating in the culture of capitalism who have created a view of global events that we share. Consequently, these views tend to be, to one extent or another, ethnocentric; that is, they describe, evaluate, and judge events solely from a specific cultural perspective. Among the major purposes of anthropology is to teach ways to avoid ethnocentrism and appreciate the importance of understanding the beliefs and behaviors of others from their perspectives rather than from our own, a view anthropologists refer to as cultural relativism. To some extent ethnocentrism is unavoidable, and the job of the person who interprets global events—whether a journalist, economist, sociologist, or anthropologist—is to make the event comprehensible to those people for whom that person is writing. Our assumption is that to minimize cultural bias we must recognize that our views of events are partially influenced by our culture and, for that reason, we must make our own culture an object of analysis.
Second, we assume that an understanding of global events requires us to recognize that no contemporary culture or society exists independent of what anthropologists refer to as the world system, and that each falls within either the core or the periphery of that system. Using this terminology to refer to different parts of the world permits us to avoid the more value-laden distinctions implicit in the use of terms such as developed or undeveloped, modern or traditional, and First, Second, or Third World. World system theorists often include a third category, semiperiphery, to denote those nation-states or regions that are moving toward the core or that have moved out of the core. These distinctions recognize that countries can move from one category to another. For example, the three nation-states that world system theorists consider to have been dominant in the past four centuries—the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States—all began as semiperipheral to the world system.

Third, we assume that global events and actions cannot be adequately understood without considering the events that preceded them; we must develop a historical perspective. For example, we live in a period of human history largely defined by a sequence of events that began some four to five hundred years ago, loosely termed the Industrial Revolution. Because each of us has lived during only a particular phase of that history, we tend to take it for granted that the world has always been as it is today. Yet the modern industrial world order is, in historical terms, a very recent event. We are deceived by our biology, by our limited life span, into thinking of sixty, seventy, or eighty years as a long time, but in the perspective of human history it is a fleeting moment. Human beings have for most of their existence lived as bands of gatherers and hunters, for a shorter time as agriculturists and farmers, and only recently as industrialists and wage laborers. Yet the Industrial Revolution has transformed the world and human societies as has no other event in history. We cannot understand the events, issues, and problems of today’s world without understanding the how’s and why’s of the Industrial Revolution.

It will be clear that the emergence of capitalism represents a culture that is in many ways the most successful that has ever been developed in terms of accommodating large numbers of individuals in relative and absolute comfort and luxury. It has not been as successful, however, in integrating all in equal measure, and its failure here remains one of its major problems. It has solved the problems of feeding large numbers of people (although certainly not all), and it has provided unprecedented advances in health and medicine (but, again, not for all). It has promoted the development of amazingly complex technological instruments and fostered a level of global communication without precedent. It has united people in common pursuits as no other culture has. Yet it remains to be seen when the balance sheet is tallied whether capitalism represents the epitome of “progress” that some claim.

New to this Edition

When preparing the sixth edition of this book Barak Obama had just been elected to a second term as President of the United States, Great Britain was a functioning member of the European Union, democratic upheavals were reshaping countries in the Middle East while the world was still recovering from the economic crisis of 2007. Global GDP stood at about $78 trillion and at about $17 trillion in the United States. A lot changed in five years. Authoritarian governments emerged in places as diverse as Poland, the Philippines, Egypt, India, and the United States. Citizens of Great Britain voted to leave the European Union as part of a seeming protest of immigration. In spite of international accords, carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere has risen from 397 parts per million (ppm) to almost 407 ppm and the world continues to yearly break old temperature records. New diseases, such as the Zika virus pose threats as do anti-biotic resistant diseases. And Global GDP has declined to about $75 trillion, while in the United States it has climbed to about $18.5 trillion as sovereign debt prompts counties, both poor and rich, to adopt so-called austerity measures including reduction of government services, pension plans, and assistance to the poor.

We have tried to address these concerns, as well as others, in the revisions to the seventh edition. These include the following:

- An expanded discussion of the nature of money and its relationship to debt and economic growth.
- Introduction of content in Chapter 3 on the English financial revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, specifically the establishment of the Bank of England and the beginnings of the modern debt-based financial system.
- An expansion in Chapter 6 of the role of debt in hunger, and specifically a discussion of the debt/food insecurity cycle.
- A discussion in Chapter 10 of how our economic system relates to the occurrence, reaction and remediation of large-scale disasters such as floods, hurricanes and earthquakes.
- A completely revised final chapter (Chapter 13) trying to make sense of the political and economic upheavals of the past five years and the spread of so-called austerity programs. We have discussed several measures specifically involving finance and the creation of our money supply, that could alleviate many of the problems that we discuss in this book.
As always, we welcome comments and communications from readers and can be reached by email at richard.robbins@plattsburgh.edu and RDowtyBeech@newhaven.edu.

This text is available in a variety of formats—digital and print. To learn more about our programs, pricing options, and customization, visit www.pearsonhighered.com.

Course material, including an online Global Problems Reader to accompany the text is available at: https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-plattsburgh-anthro/

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