

GLOBALIZATION

Ask anyone's opinion about globalization and you are bound to receive globally different answers. As is the case with many of man's inventions, globalization can be used for good or bad - for the benefit of society or the personal benefit of just a few, while many others suffer, sometimes unwittingly, the ill effects of the system.

The idea of developing a single economy and culture as a result of improved technology and communications and the influence of powerful international companies has undeniably brought about an impressive amount of progress and improvement to some countries and some of their citizens, but the price the whole world has had to pay for that success has been too high.

It is true that "free trade" among nations (can it truly be called "free", I wonder?) has taken countries like China, India, Russia and Brasil (the so-called BRICs) out of their potentially dangerous nationalism and isolationism. Through an aggressive policy of exporting everything they possibly can, from primary commodities to industrialized products, those countries have been growing at amazing rates.

Those who praise globalization could also argue that thanks to that system consumers all across the world can now avail themselves of the marvels of modern technology. A Mexican citizen, in Guadalajara for example, can drive his Japanese car to the German company where he works, work on a Korean computer that was assembled in Brazil, enjoy a good meal at a Thai restaurant, order a bottle of Portuguese wine, buy his Canadian girlfriend a bottle of French perfume for her birthday. He will be doing this while wearing an Armani suit and a pair of Nike (a Greek goddess) sneakers made in India or a pair of Brazilian flip-flops, which happen to be called Havaianas (from Hawaii). All this is possibly true, and another reason for lauding globalization is the fact that it enables anyone in the world to consume the best quality product, as long as they can afford it.

The critics of globalization, however, also have a lot to say. The main reason for the development of a single economy and culture was not the promotion of a peaceful worldwide society, free from social inequalities and poverty. Business is what makes the capitalist world go round and money is the name of the game. Along with economic progress for some countries, globalization has brought forward a surge in illegal immigration, a disease with hazardous side effects such as human trafficking, child prostitution, the exploitation of slave work in sweat shops, racial or ethnic prejudice and even war. Many of the wars that break out every now and then in one part or the other of the planet, especially in Africa, are to a certain extent started by unscrupulous warmongers and arms merchants, secretly trading in weapons made in "civilized" countries such as the United States, Russia, Israel, Switzerland, Germany, and yes ... the United Kingdom and even Brazil. Money makes the world go round, even when it is covered in blood.

Critics of globalization also blame it for at least a partial loss of cultural identity in the countries "invaded" by international ideas, customs and products, a kind of cultural colonialism against which the locals have no immunity. They consider the system to be the culprit of something that might be labelled "culture

homogenization", the loss of the characteristics that used to be peculiar to a certain culture and have gradually given way to ideas, customs and products brought over by multinational companies that operate worldwide. One can be in Nepal and see the familiar Coca-Cola sign, one can be in Lisbon at lunchtime and have the choice of eating either at Pizza Hut (Italian food served at an American chain restaurant) or at McDonald's (Scottish name, American junk food restaurant). But that person will have to try harder if he just wants to have lunch at an old-fashioned homemade Portuguese food restaurant.

Sometimes I recall the time when, as a boy in Portugal, I gorged myself on fruits of the season - peaches, plums, cherries, grapes, melons ... They were so abundant, sold dirt cheap at any corner grocery store. Those fruits were locally grown, on small individual farms across the country. They tasted delicious, I can still feel the sweet taste of those juicy peaches from Alcobaça. Now you go to Portugal and you cannot find them. There are no grocery stores anymore, for that matter. They have been "made redundant" by the supermarkets. You can buy all those fruits at the supermarket, of course. Fruits from all parts of the world. They have the same name, they look the same, but they just don't have the same taste. And they all taste the same, they have been "pasteurized", they have lost their individual excellence, they have been produced according to common regulations that have deprived them of their uniqueness.

Bottom line: globalization is here to stay. Like it or not, we will have to accept it, with its pros and cons.