Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism
Sixth Edition

Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism

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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, my colleagues at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, James Armstrong and Mark Cohen, and I 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 anthro-
pology 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, semi-
periphery, 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 with-
out 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 think-
ing 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 pro-
moted 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 repre-
sents the epitome of “progress” that some claim.

NEW TO THE SIXTH EDITION

Since the publication of the fifth edition of Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism,
we have experienced significant global upheaval as well as heightened concerns over global
immigration, urbanization, climate change, and regional conflict, as well as levels of protest,
all of which are addressed in this, the sixth, edition of the book. Specific changes include the following:

- Additional discussion of money as debt, the movement of money, and the consequences and the importance of perpetual growth.
- Material on advertising targeted to children and the scope of the practice.
- Coverage of immigration, its history, and its social, political, and economic impact.
- Coverage of urbanization and its impacts
- Discussion of climate change and its impact on the economy and society as a whole.
- Timely information on Occupy Wall Street and the philosophy and techniques of Direct Action.
- A new, comprehensive Chapter 13 discussing how to address many of the issues raised in the book.

Throughout this edition, I have tried to make the nature and origin of complex problems accessible to general readers and undergraduates without oversimplifying the gravity of the problems.

As always, I welcome comments and communications from readers and can be reached by email at richard.robbins@plattsburgh.edu. In addition, readers are encouraged to use the Web resources, including readings, online videos, and references created especially for the book, at http://www.plattsburgh.edu/legacy.

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Reviewers of the first edition were John L. Aguilar, Charles O. Ellenbaum, Cynthia Mahmood, Richard Moore, Jon Olson, and Dave Winther. Reviewers of the second edition were Elliot Fratkin, Smith College; James Loucky, Western Washington University; Luis A. Vivanco, University of Vermont; and Vaughn Bryant, Texas A&M University. Reviewers of the third edition were Eric Mielants, Fairfield University; William Leggett, Middle Tennessee; Nancy McDowell, Beloit College; and Benjamin Brewer, James Madison University. Reviewers of the fifth edition were George Esber, Miami University, Middletown; Suzanne Scheld, California State University, Northridge; James Sewastynowicz, Jacksonville State University; and Miguel Vasquez, Northern Arizona University.

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