

CHALLENGES OF GLOBALIZATION

ESSAY

David Reinier van der Horst

NR8F7DCK3

29 January 2019

Faculty of Business and Economics

Universitat Rovira i Virgili

Professor: Antonio Quesada

Review – Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism

This paper examines Ian Bremmer's book "Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism". Ian Bremmer is the president of the Eurasia Group, the leading global political risk research and consulting firm. The Economist once dubbed Bremmer the "rising guru" in the field of political risk¹. Bremmer has published ten books including several national bestsellers in the United States. The book this paper sheds light on is listed as a New York Times bestseller. Before diving into the content of the book, it is important to emphasize one simple thing: the essential differences between the two concepts of globalization and globalism.

According to Ian Bremmer, the key quote that sums it all up is:

"Globalization is a phenomenon driven by technology and the movement of ideas, people, and goods. Globalism is an ideology that prioritizes the neoliberal global order over national interests. Nobody can deny that we are living in a globalized world. But whether all of our policies should be "globalist" is highly debatable."²

Hence, globalization is the process itself and globalism is believing this process is subsequently beneficial for those involved and should be supported in spite of its contestants. The last sentence of the quote flawlessly describes the current zeitgeist amongst the idea of globalism.

The main topic addressed in the book is the 'credibility' of globalization's success. No one can deny the fact that we are living in a globalized world. But if our policies have to be 'globalized' is highly debatable according to Ian Bremmer. Globalization, according to Ian Bremmer and many with him, has led to more losers than winners. A division between the 'us' and 'them' is global in scale and catastrophic in its extent. Now is the time to reflect on the losses. According to Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, redesigning our mindset, processes and institutions is highly necessary to pursue a worthwhile course of globalization³. Inherent to this track of thought, Ian Bremmer goes his way to set out what he thinks are the inherent contradictions of globalism. The first chapter of this book focuses on the winners and losers of globalization. The plain-spoken and comprehensive analysis that Ian Bremmer makes does not resolve the contradictions between those two groups. Whilst in the first chapter Bremmer states the following:

"Advances in automation and artificial intelligence are remaking the workplace for the benefit of efficiency, making the companies that use them more profitable, but workers who lose their jobs and can't be retrained for new ones won't share in the gains. Technological change then disrupts the ways in which globalization creates opportunity and shifts wealth. As a result, large numbers of U.S. factory jobs have been lost not to Chinese or Mexican factory workers but to robots. A 2015 study conducted by Ball State University found that automation and related factors, not trade, accounted for 88 percent of lost U.S. manufacturing jobs between 2006 and 2013."⁴

However, then he says:

“Globalization creates new economic efficiency by moving production and supply chains to parts of the world where resources — raw materials and workers — are cheapest.... In the developed world, this process bolsters the purchasing power of everyday consumers by putting affordable products on store shelves, but it also disrupts lives by killing livelihoods as corporations gain access to workers in poorer countries who will work for lower wages.”⁸

It could be questioned which one it is. Is the loss of millions of jobs due to automation unrelated to economic trade, or is it because corporations are making a shift to cheaper labor forces?

In the first chapter, Bremmer also discusses the rise of immigration due to globalization. An important keynote is that Bremmer does not seem to be quite fond of Donald Trump. Regarding the immigration in the United States, he quotes a political research stating the following:

“We can see that Trump’s biggest enthusiasts within the party are Republicans who hold the most anti-immigration and anti-Muslim views, demonstrate the most racial resentment, and are most likely to view Social Security and Medicare as important.”⁶

By using the aforementioned quote and other statements in the chapter, Bremmer is sometimes steering towards favoring the stimulation of immigration. But what is the reason that the United States needs abundant immigration if technology is erasing such a high number of existing jobs? Why should the United States bring more people in? To fill in non-existing job positions?

An answer might be found in another belief that is served in the first chapter: new technologies create new jobs — and new kind of jobs. However, it is likely that these jobs require higher levels of education and training. These are skills that even the majority of the United States’ workforce does not possess.

These contrary ways of thinking, the conflict of thoughts; the first two chapters are filled with those. Bremmer is not preaching one side of the story or steering the reader into a certain set direction. It seems to be the case that Bremmer aims to mature the reader’s view in the first chapters by painting a picture of the many outlooks on globalization.

Besides offering a wide variety of insights regarding globalization over the past decades, Ian Bremmer also includes multiple warnings in the first chapters. Multiple times, he emphasizes that there are many fragile countries headed for serious trouble. In the third chapter Bremmer goes further into detail on this matter as he discusses a handful of countries and their experiences and collisions with globalization. The countries include Russia, India, Venezuela and China. As the fate of those countries will determine the future of this entire century’s global economy, this chapter attempts to ‘shape’ the chances of failure and success of globalization.

Bremmer uses the third chapter to lead into setting out the playing fields and their futures for a wide cross section of the globe in an exposing analysis of these countries. In between those analyses, similarities can be drawn although Bremmer seems particularly pessimistic about certain circumstances in several countries. The greatest challenges for these countries include:

- (a) Getting a grip on exploding populations;
- (b) Decreasing the dependence on global demand for commodities those countries export;
- (c) Controlling the high levels of income inequality;
- (d) Adapting to the introduction of automation and machine learning into the workplace.

These points are just a grasp from the entire collection of challenges that Bremmer presents in the chapter. As each country is coping with its own unique struggle, answers from the international community are scarce. However, the unfavorable effects from those struggles that are underway are not isolated to those particular countries. It is likely that they will be universal. As some of the analyzed countries are on a determining point in their history — such as Venezuela in its current situation — it is impossible for the international community to wave it off. Thus, a global answer to those struggles is required. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the problematic countries Ian Bremmer mentions in the third chapter remain overlooked by the international community.

People such as the attendants of the World Economic Forum in Davos — conceived as the partisans of globalization — are calling for more involvement from the international community. Things such as a ‘wider engagement’ and ‘heightened imagination’ are supposed to sustain the benefits of globalization³.

This is where the fourth chapter of the book comes in. As we are at a tipping point of either reducing or fully jumping into globalization, Ian Bremmer starts a provoking chapter focused on the walls that countries are beginning to build to shield themselves off.

The fourth chapter is where the book’s title deserves its decorum. Bremmer explains how countries are conducting actions such as backing away from trade deals, putting up physical barriers and sorting “us” from “them” within countries’ borders. The author expresses his concerns regarding the rapid ‘building of walls’ that is currently happening. Protectionism and nationalism are on the rise in highly developed countries, such as the United States. Patriotism is used to fuel the battle on the pace of globalization.

The chapter also examines the social credit system currently being considered by the Chinese government. This is a valid example on how technology is about to influence the power governments have over their citizens. Without any doubts, this will affect the international community.

The fifth and last chapter before the conclusion discusses the alternative ways of coping with globalization. It provides various ideas for doing so by touching several fields intertwined with globalization. These fields include government trust, education, taxes (and income equality) and economical and technological manners. For each of those, Bremmer provides suggestions on possible alterations in process or shifts in

course. If we are all able to approach the coming challenges with the impartiality and objectivity that Ian Bremmer has in the book, we will definitely be able to accelerate a process of coming to win-win solutions. Yet, I am not too positive that we can. In multiple case studies in the book, the author outlines how the 'globalist old guard' remains committed to private-sector-driven growth and openness to foreign investment, while struggling with an increasingly populist wing in the government.⁸

If you agree on Ian Bremmer's prospective that globalization must be controlled with all its 'failed' aftermath, the book is a delightful read. My personal opinion about globalism remains the same after reading Bremmer's views, but I must admit that the points he makes are worth considering. The least this book will do is mature its readers views or shed light on an increasingly popular reflection on globalization.

Throughout the book, Ian Bremmer seems to struggle with portraying his view upon globalization as either pessimistic or realistic. As the first chapter of the book mainly focuses on the downsides — one might call these the negative results — of globalization, it sketches a one-sided view on the matter. The introduction mentions the election of xenophobic leaders, where the author refers to the election of Donald Trump, and other 'negative' effects of globalization. In my opinion, the author reframes too often from shedding light on the positive results of globalization, whereas globalization for example has brought prosperity and a higher wealth to a broad spectrum of countries.

Throughout the book, Ian Bremmer goes out of his way to note down his personal opinions or thoughts. I do not doubt whether the author has a political agenda with this book. Be that as it may, he seems to be trying to climb above personal vilification, which already pollutes too much of our political debates. As mentioned earlier, the author does not seem to be fond of Donald Trump. In spite of this, Bremmer states the following in his conclusion of the book:

“Donald Trump didn't create us vs. them. Us vs. them created Donald Trump, and those who dismiss his supporters are damaging the United States.” I think that says enough.

An aspect that worries me regarding books that seek to understand globalization, is the binary thinking involved in viewing the phenomenon. You are either a winner or a loser; a supporter or an opponent. Perhaps it is the economic lens through which we examine the circumstances and a lack of further understanding, enabling polarization to follow. Although Ian Bremmer is probably less optimistic than most readers prefer, perhaps naively, he does put in effort to help us understand negative and cautionary aspects of globalism and globalization.

For now, there is no better way of concluding this paper with Ian Bremmer's own quote:

“Things have to become much worse, particularly for the winners, before they can become better for everyone else. This is the ultimate failure of globalism.”⁸

References

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And last but not least:

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