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**World Society, the Welfare State and the Life Course
An Institutional Perspective**

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An Institutional Perspective¹

By John W. Meyer

Globalization is obviously a main theme in contemporary life, and in current social scientific thinking. Attention to it occurs everywhere, but may be especially distinct in Europe, where the impact of supranational forces is intensified by the similar and parallel rise of the European Union and other regional institutions.

The various phenomena involved in globalization are widely understood to have strong impacts on individual lives and on the traditional -- often national -- social institutions thought to structure lives. In this paper, we develop the more specific idea that globalization is closely related to the 'life course' as a modern institution and that education and social welfare systems are major factors in this process. By 'life course' we mean much more than the distributions of patterns and sequences that describe individual roles and experiences in a society. We mean the institutionalized sociocultural organization of legitimate roles and expectations and perspectives. Thus in contemporary developed societies an individual can expect and is expected to receive an education that develops both a self and a broad set of social rights for future roles. These roles are organized by institutions that support a whole set of individual perspectives (e.g., job satisfaction, security, and the like) and rights, and that lead naturally through a set of phases toward a socially protected retirement. What is especially distinctive about the modern life course, which we argue here comes under global scrutiny and (at least symbolic) protection, is its pronounced legitimation and organization of the subjective perspective of the individual. Life is supposed to make sense from the point of view of individual people, even more than such social groups as nations.

We approach the matter from the perspective of sociological institutionalism (Thomas et al. 1987). This means that we emphasize two themes that may be different from emphases in many discussions of the issues. First, we see globalization as an institutional matter, not simply the rise of supranational economic and political forces. We see a whole array of world institutions -- organizations and discourses -- arising to articulately develop and expand models bearing on individual lives and perspectives. Second, we see the individual life course as itself a changing institutional or cultural construction, not simply a series of demographic events reflecting wider socioeconomic forces (as, for example, in Mills and Blossfeld 2003). The proper life course is, in other words, the direct focus of much regulatory and ideological attention, not a derivative consequence.

We begin by reviewing meanings and dimensions of globalization, and then consider ways in which these dimensions effect the social structuring of the life course. We review ways in which some classic life course institutions are weakened, and ways in which others are changed and strengthened. Expanding global society increasingly legitimates the structuring of the life course as built around the project of the individual's life and perspective, and decreasingly derives life course rules from the needs, projects, and perspectives of corporate groups and national societies. In a sense, with modern globalization we are seeing the increased world-level development of institutionalized individualism (Meyer 1986).

1. MEANINGS AND DIMENSIONS OF GLOBALIZATION

The Globalization of National Societies

Most meanings of the term globalization reflect the idea that the national societies of the modern world come under sustained world influences. This may take the simple forms of expanded trade, but broader influences involving the direct diffusion of institutional arrangements, such as life course patterns, are increasingly emphasized. The larger point is that, beyond simple economic interaction, the global models of what ought to be a proper nation-state tend to diffuse. Conceptions of society and state, in other words, do not simply reflect local economic and cultural arrangements and resources, but incorporate world-wide forms.

Economic Exchange. Most discussions of globalization emphasize relatively raw economic forces. And those that do so tend to see globalization as having some negative impacts on the institutions -- particularly welfare state institutions -- supporting the individual life course. There is the expansion of trade, particularly obvious in Europe. There are greatly increased flows of investment and technologies. In one way or another, labor is made subject to international markets. As a consequence, at least on some dimensions, there may be a competitive "race to the bottom," with the undercutting of employment, incomes, and welfare protections -- concern about such issues arises in all sorts of countries (Alber and Standing 2000).

Another consequence is particularly to be found in Europe, with its modern history of welfare state institutions. 'Globalization' here is also a discourse (sometimes referred to as 'neoliberal') which stipulates the need for nation states to deregulate their welfare states and the life course of their citizens in response to economic globalization. This involved the sense that Europeanization and globalization generate anomie, uncertainty, and deregulation. Whether or not there is deprivation, there are all sorts of normative inconsistencies of the kind that greatly activate legal and social scientific policy intellectuals. An American social scientist visiting Europe now can only with great difficulty avoid long excited

normative/policy discussions on questions that seem arcane: What exactly are the rights of a Portuguese worker injured in France on the way to work for a Dutch construction firm in Berlin? Such legitimation crises are, with globalization, everywhere.

Economic Institutions. Interpretations of globalization broaden if the term is understood to include, not simply raw economic variables, but the world economy as an institutional system involving extensive legal and cultural legitimation. The justifications of expanded trade and investment ultimately must resort to globalized conceptions of the rights of individuals (and globalized conceptions of societies) around the world. Global markets of a capitalist sort are substantially legitimated only if the participants can be seen as having equal status in principle. Thus in the world context as in earlier national and regional ones, the institutions (not necessarily the instrumental realities) of modernity and in particular its capitalist forms legitimate a great deal of individualism. This amounts to the 'institutionalized individualism' of Parsons and Platt (1973) -- with much social protection and regulation of the individual life course. This is done with much theoretical emphasis on the individual as competent and empowered choice- and decision-maker, since the capacity for choice is crucial to the legitimation of markets. In other words, whatever damage worldwide trading patterns may do to individual choice capacities, world economic institutional principles are designed to expand these capacities, and to legitimate this expansion. Sometimes, as with the institutions of human capital, like education, effects seem fairly dramatic.

The Social Institutions of Modernity. But modern meanings of globalization go far beyond economic arrangements, whether these are seen as practical matters of trade or as institutional matters of legitimation. It has become clear that every social institution of modernity comes under global influences, and spreads globally, particularly in the expansive post-1945

world. The sociological institutionalists have made this a main theme, with accounts of a world polity or society (see the reviews and citations in Thomas et al. 1987, Meyer et al. 1997, Finnemore 1996, Jepperson 2002, Hasse and Kruecken 1999). From a different background, the systems theory of society converges with institutionalism in this respect (see Luhmann 1997, Stichweh 2000, and Stichweh, this volume). Centrally, all sorts of models of social progress and of individual development have spread pervasively around the world. The spread is not principally in response to the spread of socioeconomic development, as the narrower economic theories suppose -- it is a matter of direct constitutive influence. So it has long been known that the protective institutions of the welfare state spread (as political programs, often with the weakest implementation, given resource constraints) widely around the world (Strang and Chang 1993). And so, dramatically, do the more liberal institutions of expansive education, individual political and social participation, and the like (Meyer et al. 1992).

Liberal Dominance. The models of society that spread most dramatically, in the last half-century, have obviously been those celebrating the logics of expansive modernity. Such logics, carried by a variety of contending forces, all have at their core quite aggressive notions of the membership of the individual person in the larger society. Liberals, corporatists and statistes, from far right to far left, all see society (as well as, sometimes, other structures) as rooted in individual persons, and individual persons as deriving benefits from society. All construct citizenship, claiming to represent and attempting to control individuals. In this sense, all carry out versions of modern development and modernity that expand the recognition of, and control over, the individual life course (Jepperson 2002). Institutions managing every state of the life course expand, from birth and infancy to old age and death. Stages and transitions come under inspection and control or regulation -- more tangibly in advanced welfare states but also in more market-oriented

societies. The perspective of the individual, in one form or another, is increasingly celebrated.

But among the contesting forms of modernity, and hence of the institutionally constructed life course, one form has obviously had a good deal of precedence in the last half-century. One rightist alternative, fascism, was destroyed and stigmatized in World War II, and a left version, communism, in the Cold War. In non-communist countries after 1945, statist structures were weakened, in some measure quite deliberately (Djelic 1998). And the doctrinally liberal (but by no means what is now called "neo-liberal" with its rawly economic meanings) and individualist United States was quite hegemonic. The United States had much precedence with regard to military power, and the ideals of freedom and democracy. So as the European welfare states developed, in good part on older European models, they tended to evolve in liberal formats, emphasizing human rights and individual development perspectives rather than older corporatist models.

Conclusion. The spread of the life course institutions is by no means an accidental process produced by high rates of contact, communication or exchange (Strang and Meyer 1993). It is highly intentional, purposive, even driven, both from the sending side and the receiving side. As for the recipients of modernity, societies around the world, as they enter the nation-state system, aggressively pursue the institutions of modern rationalization and differentiation. And the institutions of the life course are central to their conceptions of the proper national society, both as they indicate and produce national development, and as they indicate and produce the welfare of the people conceived as individuals and citizens.

The sending side of the diffusion of modernity is also strikingly aggressive. The world is now filled with all sorts of international

organizations and professional associations who have, as main functions, the diffusion of the appropriate modern institutions (Boli and Thomas, 1999; Berkovitch 1999: with regard to social policy Deacon et al. 1997; Deacon, this volume, Kaufmann, this volume).

The Rise of a Global Society

The overwhelming modern awareness that interdependencies of all sorts transcend the boundaries of national societies generates forms of globalization that go far beyond the enhanced diffusion of standard models of national society and state. They go beyond even the diffusion of models edited to fit more smoothly into a global interstate society (e.g., less warlike, less ethnocentric, more friendly participants in regional neighborhoods and world organizations, and so on). Increasingly, "society" and "polity" themselves come to be conceived and discussed and organized at a global level.² This has great impact on both the global focus on the individual life course and on the way this life course is conceived and defined.

Statelessness. A commonly noted central feature of the rising world political system is its dramatic statelessness. Even its European regional counterpart, the EU, though filled with organizational structures, lacks the properties of unity, sovereignty, and citizenship that are central to the modern national state. The direct impact on life-course institutions is clear. The world has no capability, and Europe has a very weak capacity, to build up the traditional styles of welfare protections associated with highly corporate nation-states. It is difficult to imagine state-like protections against unemployment organized at a global level, or a traditionally structured world pension system. A certain amount of world welfare support exists, but until very recently advocated almost entirely on the ancient base of charity -- notably 'humanitarian

aid' - not the modern one of welfare entitlement. Lacking a state, a world welfare state of a sort highly structured around statist or corporatist traditions is not plausible. As we observe below, many traditional notions of welfare survive and indeed expand globally, but they do so justified by foci on expanded individualist models, and are appreciably altered in the process.

Welfare and the nation state. Further, the capacity of existing welfare states to operate is, as is often noted, undercut. Above, we note that it may be undercut by raw economic forces of competition. Here, we need to add the point that the communal integration and sovereignty, on which the corporatist welfare state's legitimacy is based, is undercut. This is true in several senses. First, it is more and more difficult, and lacks legitimacy, to exclude foreigners from the rights of membership in the national family (Soysal 1994). Second, it is difficult to sustain the unique definitions of national culture and virtue required to support the closed national system. People have more and more human rights, defined exogenously. They can resist the restrictive classificatory efforts of the welfare state, and can demand new rights and resources. The national bureaucracies and professional establishments (e.g., medicine) can no longer so successfully impose their definitions and procedures. Closed and exclusionary definitions of proper education, health, welfare, age-related rights, and so on, lose power and legitimacy.

Universalism. Stateless global society, as it expands, rests on and reinforces universalistic definitions. Science gains authority (Drori et al. 2003). So do social scientific principles of rationalization (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002), which recently come to the fore in the institutional design of social security systems as propagated by international policy consultants and international organizations. And at the center lies, not the national state or corporate society, but rather the expanded human individual (Ramirez and Meyer 2002). This theorized

person has an enormously expanded set of rights. The rights are held as a natural human being, not the citizen of any specific enterprise. The rights are claims, not simply against some state authorities, but in principle against the whole world. And in fact claims based on human rights are now routinely addressed to the world in general, international courts and organizations, non-governmental organizations, and the global media.

Thus, given global statelessness and the weakening of the sovereignty of national states, globalization intensifies models rooted in an expansive individualism. The individual involved is less an entitled beneficiary of a national (or other) community, and more depicted as a proactive project and perspective of his own. This has powerful effects on the expansion of social regulation of the life course and on the character of that life course. Life course institutions of liberalism are intensified, and those reflecting more corporate welfare arrangements are weakened or rearranged in more individualistic formats.

2. IMPLICATIONS OF GLOBALIZATION FOR THE INSTITUTIONALIZED LIFE COURSE

We review, above, a variety of dimensions of modern globalization, with an eye to assessing their impact on life course institutions and arrangements around the world. This review, essentially, supports a set of core ideas about how these institutions are changing.

General effects

First, almost all the changes associated with globalization move the individual person toward the center of the social stage, and weaken the corporate or communal groups (e.g., familial) in which the individual might previously have been seen as embedded. Much associational life, including

a reconstructed and individualized family life, remains and intensifies, but obviously the dependencies associated with corporate family and community are undercut at every turn. We live in societies of vastly expanded organizational structures, but these organizations are rationalized, and are structured in terms of individual persons rather than corporate groups.

Second, while social controls increasingly reach down to reflect and affect and incorporate individual persons, the forces of globalization tend to reinforce the legitimacy of the individual's perspective as a project. The global individual is a choosing entity -- an actor -- with purposes and interests of his own. Many social situations are properly evaluated as they reflect interests and purposes of the individual: for example, the interests of the family have less legitimate opportunity to block a divorce, and the interests of the autonomous divorcing individual have much more standing, worldwide, than in the past.

Third, while all sorts of institutions around the individual make gains, those associated with the liberal model of the active, autonomous, choosing individual gain special strength, while those associated with the individual as protected welfare beneficiary of strong corporate or collective processes lose relative strength. This involves two shifts: First, some structures, like education, gain much prominence. Second, many life course structures, such as health institutions, change character to reflect changed models of the individual and the life course. Changes of this sort are endemic in the modern system: welfare arrangements focus on individuals in new ways, but so do educational systems, career mobility patterns, retirement arrangements, and so on.

Thus the forces of globalization create a period with an enormous explosion of human ideas and standards -- structured at the world level -- organized broadly around human rights ideas (Ramirez and Meyer 2002). Goals that

might once have been phrased in terms of the collective goods of societies are now organized around the life courses of individuals, and individuals seen as projects of their own. Thus traditional welfare arrangements are reconstructed around conceptions of an active choosing individual, and the "state" of the welfare state loses much of its dramatic corporate character. The modern welfare state becomes a service organization trying to carry out global norms.

In the following we look at implications and concomitants of globalization in specific institutional areas.

Schooling

Educational Expansion. Heidenheimer (1981; Flora and Heidenheimer 1981) developed a classic distinction between countries modernizing with an emphasis on educational expansion -- with the individual seen as the central actor in progress -- and those emphasizing welfare arrangements in which the collective society is the central actor and the individual a beneficiary. While globalization, as is well known, has put barriers in the way of traditional welfare systems, it has helped produce an explosion in educational enrollments. This explosion characterizes every educational level from kindergarten through post-doctoral study. It characterizes the whole world, every type of specific country that can be identified, and the whole past half-century. A number of studies, using world-wide data from UNESCO show the dramatic increases in primary and secondary schooling, such that over ninety per cent of the world's children spend appreciable time in schools (for analyses, see Meyer et al. 1977, 1992). A current project analyzes the explosion of enrollments, over the last half-century, in higher education (Schofer and Meyer 2004). It turns out that these enrollments, in every type of country expand by factors of ten and twenty over the period. So a typical Third-World country has higher educational enrollments higher than those of Germany, England, or France thirty years ago. Something like twenty percent of an age-cohort, worldwide,

experiences higher education -- a figure unthinkable a few decades ago. Thus, in a global society built around individuals, education becomes -- for individuals and countries alike -- an expansive format for improvement.

Non-Formal Education. Aside from the formal educational system, there is a world-wide explosion in foci on training. Life-long learning is a main theme, and training is to be found in all sorts of settings, from firms to government offices to the personal-development marketplace (Luo 2002).

Educational Foci. Over and above the general expansion of education, we may note features of the educational system that reflect global liberalism, or the expansion of life-course institutions focused on the perspective and development of individuals. A major loser, world-wide, is narrowly vocational training (Benavot 1983). Education, even in firms, is now increasingly organized around logics of personal choice and personal development (Monahan, Scott and Meyer 1994; Luo 2002).

This is strikingly true of the development of the formal educational system, worldwide. The great fear that this system would develop simply as an instrument of the political or economic Leviathan has turned out to be quite misplaced. Educational systems expand general, not technical, training. They increasingly organize curricula around individual choice and participation, and extend such forms to earlier and earlier phases of the mass educational cycle. They emphasize active participatory learning of a student-centered sort, and decreasingly focus on developing knowledge of canonical sorts. In science, for example, instructional changes worldwide deemphasize highly disciplinary forms, deductive forms, and the elaboration of formal or technical knowledge: they now emphasize student involvement, participation, interest and choice (McEneaney 2003). The whole effort is to appeal to the student's interest and understanding, not to the subordination of the student to the canonical requirements of science as a priesthood.

Similarly, as is well-known, modern instruction in the humanities (arts, literature, music, and language) decreasingly emphasizes any sort of canonical cultural knowledge and increasingly emphasizes individual choice, participation, and the equality of cultures. As Frank and Gabler (2004) might suggest, lower proportions of educated people know who Rembrandt is, and more have painted a painting.

Along the same lines, Frank and Gabler note that the great expansions in modern university systems have been in social science, not technical, areas. And of course, those social sciences grounded in liberal individualism have been the biggest gainers.

Education as a Global Human Right. For many years, education has been seen as a right of citizens and a responsibility for the virtuous state to provide. External forces, such as international nongovernmental organizations, might push states to assume their responsibilities. And they could criticize negligent states as defective, especially if these states had made (as has been common) abstract commitments to universal education.

In recent decades, globalization has produced the "Education for All" movement, defining universal education as the right of all, and the responsibility of all to support. All states are to provide it, and all other states and people to drive them to do so. Massive social efforts around the world are made to fulfill the dream involved.

In very recent years, an even newer movement has arisen to set out the goal of Universal Basic and Secondary Education (Bloom and Cohen 2003). So even secondary education, until the last few years a program for a minority of the world's children, is now to be universalized. And again the right and responsibility to carry out this mission is explicitly global in character

-- all of us, apparently, are to have the responsibility to require all others, no matter what state they are located in, to have access to education through the secondary cycle.

The Organized Career

Entry. Associated with the enormous global expansion of education, larger and larger fractions of the occupational system are linked to educational attainment. The relative decline in strictly vocational education does not imply that education is less relevant to occupational attainment. The regularization of the education-occupation link, always under the purview of organizational rules, and often under the rules of the state, directly implies an increase in the social management or structuration of the life course. The individual, formally, chooses educational roles to an increased degree, and subsequently may have something like enhanced choice of occupational positions, but it all occurs under regulation. Certain jobs are inappropriate for persons with certain educational levels, and lie outside the choice process. So more and more choice may be created, but more and more social regulation arises over the choices.

Organization of the occupational career. Globalization involves and produces a great expansion in the organizational structuring of society. Every sector, from education to health to production systems to government services, is more organized than in the past. And the organizations involved look less and less like traditional bureaucratic structures, built around the authoritative control of collective goods. Bureaucracy declines, and evolves into modern formal organizational systems (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000). These modern organizations are rationalized structures built around the participatory roles of individuals, more than simple hierarchical forms carrying down what Weber called imperative authority. The modern form assumes an active participatory individual, not a passive member of an occupational community.

With these changes, more and more elaborate career choices and sequences can be identified and articulated. Individuals can formulate plans and prospects, and calculations become possible that once would not have been considered. They are, thus, individuals-as-projects, with active rights and obligations of participation. Similarly, organizations can produce articulate plans and programs (e.g., training, counseling) around individual career sequence prospects. And states can create rules defining appropriate processing rules (e.g., grievance procedures, rules for meritocratic decision-making): in some respects, these rules come under international human rights scrutiny too. Note that in all these matters, the individual's own choices and perspectives are to be taken into substantial account: the shift from bureaucracy to organization is a shift from decision-making about collective needs to decision-making about matters that involve personal development and choice considerations. The shift involved can be found, more or less globally, in every type of organization -- schools, business firms, governmental agencies, health and welfare organizations, and so on. And criticisms of organizations of these sorts are more likely to involve complaints about the slowness with which the now-required changes have taken place, not the extreme character of the actual changes. Theoretically, here, we are discussing the shift from "manpower planning" perspectives toward occupational structuring and allocation to "human capital" perspectives. And within the human capital tradition, the further shift from objectified and technical notions of this capital (as social resource) to increasingly social and cultural and now psychological notions, centered on the perspective of the individual person.

The effects on the individual person are to legitimate expanded self-oriented articulated planning-like activities (Giddens 1991). Schneider and Stevenson (1999) provide useful statistical data, showing the extraordinary expansion in the articulateness and complexity of American

teen-agers' reflections of their futures from the middle of the twentieth century to its close. These authors emphasize the extraordinary optimism involved, and the likely anomie involved resulting from the inevitable failures (they are reporting on a world in which the typical young person articulates planful hopes far beyond any realistic possibility). In our discussion here, we emphasize a different aspect of the matter: the fact of the legitimated articulateness itself (not its realism). The lives of the young people are discussable in universalistic terms. They can be discussed by the young people themselves. And they can properly be discussed by these young people in terms of their own desires, plans, intentions, and choices.

Retirement. In the same way, obviously, modern occupational sequences more often end in formal retirement, and the organizational rationalization generated by globalization expands its scope. More traditional pension arrangements are often expanded, but are modified to take into account the expanded and choice-laden empowerment of the modern individual. This is a public phenomenon, explicitly and articulately structured around the individual's life course, and commonly incorporating the perspective of the individual, and some of this individual's choices and needs. Riley and Riley (1994) discuss it all as involving a shift from constraints on the life course to the integration of that life course (around, naturally, the perspective of the individual person).

Identity

A striking feature of the liberal system is the organization of the identity as a property of the individual person (rather than collectives like families, ethnic groups, or nations). The abstract principles of human rights involved are well developed at the global level (Ramirez and Meyer 2002), and spread rapidly to national levels (McNeely 1995; Frank and

McEneaney 1999). Modern identities are, to a much greater extent than in the past (a) properties of the individual, (b) chosen by the individual, and (c) freely alterable by the individual through the life course (Frank and Meyer 2002). So the modern individual chooses (and may at any time rethink) a religion. But also, surprisingly, an ethnicity (Lieberson and Waters 1988; Snipp 1992). And in good part a gender identity (chosen, in principle from a list that is longer than two). And of course, familial membership is also, increasingly, an individual choice -- divorce is commonly legitimated, and the separation of child from improper parents increasingly protected.

At the high point of the national state, of course, the identity of citizenship and national culture was managed quite intensely (Weber 1976). With globalization, this has come loose, too. It is easier to change national citizenships, and common to maintain at least two (Jacobson 1996). National cultural identities are more difficult to enforce, now, and cultural and linguistic identities are increasingly a matter of individual choice. And they can be changed by choice through the life course. Thus, a French state that devoted enormous time and energy to standardizing language and culture, and eliminating peripheral languages and cultures, now provides schooled instruction in a good number of them. It is a global principle that states should do this.

In the same way, nationalism and national foci decline worldwide in school instruction, which now celebrates both global solidarity and local diversity and choice (Frank et al. 2000).

Note that the identity choices celebrated in the global system are commonly defined as global human rights -- that is as rights to be protected, no matter what local state is involved, by everyone in the world. These choices, thus, are universalized and standardized in the global system.

One cannot now properly choose to live in a country which restricts one's religious choices, or those of one's neighbors.

Health

Welfare states, traditionally, make arrangements to protect health (as defined by the welfare state). But also in leading liberal states, notably the USA, citizens often utilize health services at high rates (e.g., through market-like arrangements), and appear to have even greater faith than traditional welfare state citizens in the powers of medicine (and science generally).

Globalization has seen a considerable expansion in individual's legitimate claims to, and apparent faith in, modern health institutions. And indeed, health is commonly recognized as a general global human right (Inoue, this volume): the recognition was symbolic with the foundation of the modern WHO, but in recent decades the claims have become more and more real and urgent. The AIDS crisis has intensified all this.

Concomitantly, the nature of the health claims legitimated in the modern world has shifted considerably. Inoue (this volume) discusses the shifts in detail. Essentially, they are shifts from the traditional welfare state model, in which the corporate community (or medical authorities) define what health is, toward a more liberal model in which the individual person (the emphasis is often on individual women) defines health needs. And associated with this change is a dramatically increased emphasis on individual health education, and public communication associated with individual health decisions. Health is thus seen from the point of view of the individual life course rather than the corporate community. Health concerns, in the traditional welfare state, focused on individual health, too. What seems to have changed is the active conception of the participation of the individual, and the expansion of the conception of

that individual as a central choosing actor in the pursuit of and definition of health.

Thus the health sector changes character as it moves from a more national, and welfare state, focus, toward a global system. Health comes to be seen from an individual perspective, as linked to the individual's own choices and life-course trajectory.

3. THE LIFE COURSE IN THE WORLD SOCIETY

Standardization and Universalization

In all the areas discussed above, globalization -- by weakening the charisma of the national state, and strengthening that of the individual person -- generates universalizing and standardizing forces. For instance, education becomes a general human right everywhere, and is seen in roughly the same terms everywhere. So also with health, or human rights, or political participation, or subjective self-expression. Statistics can now be kept, and reported worldwide, on every aspect of the individual development and life course. Lives and life-courses can be compared, and are to be seen in, ultimately, the same terms.

So the same social system that elaborates the perspective of the individual, and the life course choices to be made by that individual, also standardizes and universalizes both the individual and the choices involved. We can now know in detail, from almost every point in the world, the educational, health, political, or attitudinal states of the individuals involved.

Globalization permits the formulation of sweeping human social goals, and indeed, the United Nations has generated a variety of such goals. Interestingly, most of them are formulated in terms of the individual human

life course. This is certainly the case with the classic human rights declarations, of course -- dramatic statements about the political and civil rights of persons and the economic and social rights, too. More recently, we have the Millenium Development Goals, most of which also celebrate progress formulated in terms of the life course of individual persons (see <http://www.developmentgoals.org>):

Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
 Improve maternal health
 Achieve universal primary education
 Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
 Promote gender equality and empower women
 Ensure environmental sustainability
 Reduce child mortality
 Develop a global partnership for development

Global liberalism

A core theme of this essay concerns the cultural and political meaning of the expanded liberal individualism that is spread by the global order of the last half-century. In many analyses (particularly those focused on the extremes of a revanchist neo-liberalism), the liberal system is about markets, markets are about exploitation, and the subjective freedom of market participants is reactive false consciousness. In the view put forward here, global liberalism has spread as a political, cultural, legal and quasi-religious model of collective action and organization. The explosion of subjectivity in the modern world is legitimated (and on a global scale) and constitutive (also on that scale), and by no means a sort of neurotic mass reaction of individuals themselves. It is important to spell out the point.

We have focused throughout this essay on the global expansion of all sorts of individual-centered institutions historically associated with many forms of the welfare state. All these expanded rules of individual life course choice and free variability seem, in some analyses, to be prescriptions for massive anomie and social disintegration. And this is a common theoretical picture of the freedoms of individualism in the modern world, following old critiques of "mass society" (e.g., Putnam 2000). This imagery is fundamentally mistaken, as it omits the core social controls of this kind of society. Such controls, classically celebrated by Tocqueville (2000 [1835]) and the Scottish philosophers (Silver 1990), and elaborated by the American social control theorists (e.g., Mead 1956; Cooley 1964), discipline the life course by disciplining the individuals who nominally steer it and whose perspectives are celebrated. Thus the nominally free American individual is under continuous pressure from an extended set of also-free peers and associations.

The idea is that the extraordinarily expanded agency of the modern individual is acquired from collective cultural sources and legitimated by them (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). So long years of socialization and discipline go into their construction -- the expanded educational systems of modern societies both indicate and result from this.

Thus the choices individuals make must, under modern conditions, be presented with elaborate justification. Individuals are to pretend to be responsibly choosing individual persons, and to respect the individuality of others: naturally, this greatly constrains choices. Life course choices (and all sorts of opinions) are to be made and justified responsibly, with reasonable arguments respecting the individual's own personhood as well as that of others. The individual is to be a coherent person over time, with calculated relations to a past and a future: the life course, and attention to it as a project are increasing requirements.

As a consequence, in the modern system opinions and choices are a good deal more disciplined than might be expected -- organized around the standardized and legitimated self infused with culturally-conferred agency as a project (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). Any individual, at any stage of the life course, may have a broader range of possibilities than in the past. And these possibilities may be somewhat more disconnected from particular social roles. But the overall variance is substantially constrained -- the range of plausible motives, perspectives, and considerations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Modern globalization, overall, has produced an enhanced focus on the individual and the individual's life course. This individual is decreasingly linked to the nation-state as a corporate structure, and is increasingly seen as a legitimate member of the global community -- a member with standard rights and responsibilities.

Further, the individual life course is defined from the point of view of the individual person, rather than the local or national society as a whole. The life course is not to be externally planned so as to fit into an orderly local or national community, but is to reflect the evolving choices and participation of the individual person him or herself.

Thus, life course institutions associated with participation, choice, and individual empowerment expand -- education, identity choice, occupational choice, political participation, health choice, and so on. And some institutions, once organized around corporate social authority (like traditional vocational education, or classic health arrangements and institutions of the welfare state) reorganize around the participatory and choosing individual life course. The individual as a project, reflecting the dominant liberal tradition, is central.

Obviously, it is difficult to make assessment of how all this works out, and for whose benefit (if any) it redounds. The ancient arguments over the virtues of modernization in general, and the celebration of the individual in particular, are now repeated on a global scale. Do people (and which people) gain by the rapid spread of norms valuing the individual life course and the individual's perspective on the life course, or lose by the economic and political exploitations legitimated by their nominal empowerment? The point of our discussion is not to celebrate the benefits of the brave new liberal world. It is to call attention to two related phenomena: the public social emphasis on life course issues in structuring social organization; and the public social legitimation of the perspective (and choices) of the individual as centrally involved in the life course.

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² Sociological systems theory assumes that today there is only one society, the world society (Luhmann 1973).