Globalization, National Culture, and the Future of the World Polity

John W. MEYER
Stanford University

Actual and perceived economic and political globalization, in the absence of strong supranational institutions, have generated expanded expectation about what national states and societies ought to be like. This generates a global culture, maintained by a wide variety of professions and associations, that creates unexpected homogeneity in a world that is very diverse in local culture and resources. The pressures involved have worked in three broad ways, which are reviewed in the lecture. First, world society has built up models of the proper national state and society which have great impact on policy and action in areas like human equality or economic policy or education. Second, with raw national sovereignty seen as threatening on many dimensions, world forces have globalized models of the proper national state and society, so that nation-states are more suitable members of world society. This generates great social movements for social rationalization, the scientization of the environment, and universalized human rights. Third, visions of a global society are produced, and appear in the world’s curricula for both mass and higher education. These stress the commonality of human individuals and societies, the rational and participatory character of social organization.

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and the centrality of science and scientific laws in governing proper human conduct.

Introduction

In this lecture I will discuss the rise, nature, and impact of world society as a cultural and associational system. I will review research on the impact of world models on national society, and then discuss the ways these models of a proper national society are themselves being globalized.

This view of the world society and its effects is unusual. Nation-states are usually seen, and tend to present themselves, as culturally autonomous actors. Globalization is viewed as involving expanded economic, and sometimes political, interdependencies which may impact national societies. Liberals view it, in the main, in an optimistic light, as integrating the world and bringing more rapid progress by weakening traditional constraints. Radicals are in the main negative, seeing globalization as bringing new amounts and sources of inequality. Conservatives are often critical, too, fearful of the destruction of diversity and tradition involved. But whether globalization is seen as generating a risk society or an opportunity society, the core dimension perceived is usually economic.

The realities, and perhaps even more the perceptions, of economic and political globalization make up a powerful force in the contemporary world. Seen either as risk or as opportunity, they clearly call for expanded action and responsibility on behalf of a wide range of participants, and claims of this sort occur on a wide range of fronts. It is treated as obvious that we must do something about the environment, about human rights, about the chaotic or ineffective or irrational local political and economic structures. Thus, a thick global culture of issues and problems and solutions is generated in the current period.

Who is to do all this dramatic problem-solving action in a globalizing world (Meyer and Jepperson 2000)? It is obvious that there is no great collective actor — no world state — with the authority and competence to act. There is no world state at all, and the weak international organs that do exist have neither the capacity nor the right to take authoritative action. And the world stratification system, now devoid of empires, generates only weak collective leadership. The United States may be rather dominant, but it is formally only the first among equals.

The problem-solving actors in the world are clearly to be individual persons and their associations — and international associations spring up in the world at an exponential rate (Boli and Thomas 1997, 1999). Even more, in this stateless world society, the main actors who are to have the authority and responsibility to fix things are the national states. They are to organize and protect efficient and innovative domestic economies, to maintain political systems supporting progress and equality, and to deal with all the environmental crises that are perceived with increasing frequency across increasing numbers of domains (Meyer et al. 1997a).

Naturally, these responsible actors, faced with a plethora of urgent problems and worldwide expectations that they are to solve the problems, seek stabilizing advice and instruction — cultural rules about how to assume their responsibilities (Strang and Meyer 1993; Meyer and Jepperson 2000). And their internal constituencies, citizens and groups concerned about the widest range of issues, are eager to create or obtain from the environment exactly the same sorts of cultural rules. Similarly, the external social environment, filled with other states and all sorts of professional and associational actors eager for improved social control of nation-states, generates massive waves of cultural rules of the same sort (Meyer 1994).

Every party involved, it turns out, has an interest in expanding the cultural framework within which national societies and states function. It is thus unsurprising that globalized culture has expanded dramatically in the current period. In this lecture, I discuss three phases of this expanded culture: first, the standardizing impact of world models on the structures and activities of national states and societies; second, the rapid globalization of these world models, so that the proper nation-state is increasingly an extraordinarily good citizen of the evolving world society; third, the cultural formulation — especially in educational curricula — of a global society of equal individuals and cultures organized in rational and progressive ways relating to the natural environment with scientifically certified care and precision.

The Impact of World Models on National States and Societies

The world is filled with very diverse societies, seen in terms of conventional cultural classifications. And inasmuch as societies can be seen in any common frame, they are in fact extraordinarily unequal. Economic inequality in the world, for instance, greatly surpasses typical inequalities
within national societies, so that most of the income inequality in the world is between, rather than within, nations (Firebaugh 1999).

For the most part, social theories have routinely accepted the facts of cultural diversity and social inequality, and taken as a consequence that the structures and pathways of modernization would greatly differ according to the diverse functional requirements involved. Rich and poor societies would need different institutions, as would culturally diverse ones. The functional requirements involved were sometimes seen in rather benign ways as reflecting the needs of whole societies, but in more critical models were taken to be the requirements of dominating and exploiting elites. In either case, the obvious consequence to be expected was great diversity in forms and paths of modernity.

It thus came as a surprise to theory and research when much empirical evidence suggested considerable, and on many dimensions increasing, isomorphism among the world’s diverse national states and societies (see Finnemore 1996b; Meyer et al. 1997a; or Jepperson 2001 for reviews). We can summarize some of the available research around four themes:

Goals and Identities. It turns out that national states adopt remarkably similar constitutional frames, around stylized goals of collective progress and individual rights and equality (Boli 1987). They describe themselves in very similar ways, as focusing on “the people,” and as seeing these people in remarkably standardized ways (McNeely 1995; Ventresca 1995). Emphases on unique religious, racial, ethnic, or dynastic and historical claims tend to recede, as these entities increasingly depict themselves as good and cooperative citizens of their neighborhoods and the world.

Models of Progress. Further, collective progress — a main stylized goal of the proper modern national state — is itself defined in standardized ways (commonly having to do with the GNP/capita), and is to be achieved in very standardized ways. Technical improvement is such a way, and investments in science are a standard and world-certified means to this end (Finnemore 1996a; Drori et al. 2002). Population control has spread as an approved technique to achieve more growth, and perhaps half the world’s countries have the appropriate policies (none did in 1950 according to Barrett and Frank 1999). A wave of Keynesian strategies in an earlier period (Hall 1989) has been succeeded by another wave of neoliberal fashions.

Equality and Justice. In exactly the same way, equality and justice are defined in standardized ways as rights of individual human persons, in the current period, and common models flow rapidly around the world. A wave of female suffrage rights triumphed by the middle of the twentieth century (Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan 1997). Broader principles of democracy are seeing their third wave (Diamond 1999). And women’s rights, defined in an equality frame triumping over alternative more familial visions, have had widespread success as general principles (Berkovitch 1999). Gender rights and equality principles extend to cover worldwide gay and lesbian rights, too (Frank and McEneaney 1999). Earlier worldwide movements created standard world models asserting the equality and rights of ethnic and religious and racial minorities, and formal certifications on these dimensions are now routine in national legislation (McNeely 1995).

Mass and Higher Education. The two main goals of the proper modern national state — individual equality and collective progress — come together in an extraordinary worldwide wave of astonishingly homogeneous educational expansion. Education is the modern good most tightly linked to both progress and equality, in common models, and its isomorphic expansion thus makes much sense (Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992; Meyer et al. 1992; Ramirez and Ventresca 1992; Frank et al. 2000). Enrollment expansion, at both mass and elite levels, follows common patterns. And so do curricula, so that very similar cultural materials are presented in elementary schools (and universities) around the world.

None of this makes much sense if we expect very divergent national cultures and resource systems to produce different functional forms of modernity. But suppose we see that the forms of modernity adopted reflect not the realities of diversity in the world, but the homogeneity in ultimate aspirations or models of the good society. Then isomorphism makes more sense: modern national states have divergent present and past arrangements and resources, but more homogeneous visions of a future in which national socioeconomic progress and equality and justice for the citizenry are firmly established. If education, for instance, reflects such common visions around the world, it is not surprising that common modernized forms take root almost everywhere.
Mechanisms and Processes

It is useful to consider, not only that much unexpected isomorphism is to be found among modern national societies, but how this occurs. We briefly consider mechanisms, or structures, that facilitate it. Then we turn to some of the processes, or steps, involved.

On the mechanisms side, it is clear that a globalizing world generates many structural elements that facilitate isomorphism. Prominent among these are inter-governmental, and even more non-governmental, associations. These have expanded exponentially in number and strength in the contemporary period (Boli and Thomas 1999). They provide models for proper national action in every domain of rationalized social life, from the state regulation of sexuality (Frank and McEneaney 1999) to the attainment of economic growth.

The models these associations promulgate are commonly the product of scientific and professional communities. These have expanded in number, penetration, and scope throughout the current period (Drori et al. 2002), so that a good modern university can provide all the knowledge required for the “correct” management of every social problem and goal anywhere in the world.

The modern knowledge system and associational structure come together in a wide variety of forms. Some of these look like classic social movements, and global structures of this kind are found in all the arenas of modernity. Others look very traditional, taking the form of more peripheral actors modeling themselves on more central ones — and leading nation-states in the world make great efforts to present and portray themselves as models. If the Americans are models of expansive freedom, the Swedes are models of welfare, and the Japanese of social order: other competitors attempt to enter this fashion system too.

None of these mechanisms would work without the effective operation of a range of important social processes. There is the desire of participants in national states to achieve legitimacy by conforming to worldwide standards. It is reinforced by competition among élites, and by pressure from participants in society who may be well connected to worldwide bodies and thus well informed on the proprieties supported in world society. It is also reinforced by linkages to external professionals and associations, as representatives of these structures appear on local scenes around the world carrying the models of virtuous modernity. Modern nation-states are deeply embedded in world society. They do not really live by their fictional autonomous sovereignty.

Decoupling

All the diffusion and isomorphism is facilitated by the possibilities of enormous “decoupling” — a term taken from institutional analyses of modern organizations (Weick 1976; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Peripheral national societies may adopt modern forms without closely linking these forms to practice. A measure of legitimacy is thus obtained without much real social change. And it is certainly the case that modern structures are very poorly correlated, across the set of national societies, with parallel practices. For instance, the actual expansion of education in a country is very poorly related to the existence of rules of compulsory education (Ramirez and Ventresca 1992). This leads to some cynicism about whether the flood of modern structures, around the world, really means anything in terms of real social change.

The cynicism is generally misplaced. Worldwide changes in the model of the proper society generate waves of policy change in countries. They also generate waves of change in practice around the world. But across the set of national societies being influenced, the two types of change tend to be unrelated. So when Francisco Ramirez studies, in a series of papers, the expansion of female participation in higher education (e.g., Bradley and Ramirez 1996), he and his colleagues find a huge wave of expanded participation, a similar wave of changes in policy and talk, but very little association between the two. The point stressed in institutional theory, following Durkheim, is that actors embedded in a strong institutional context are likely to be highly decoupled internally (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Plans and action, or policies and action, or structures and action are likely to be as much alternatives to each other under strong exogenous pressures as they are to be synchronized.

Globalizing the Models: Taming National States in a Stateless World

Models of the ideal or proper national state and society, as we discuss above, are not simply products of some dominant powers (economic or political), though they are undoubtedly affected by the dramatic variations in power that obtain in the modern world. These models are carried along by an elaborate network of associations, professions, social movements, and modeling processes. Great world movements in our time have been generally opposed, or very weakly supported, by the putatively dominant forces of world society. This is obviously true of the environment
movement and the human rights movement, for instance (Meyer et al. 1997b; Lauren 1998).

The professions and associations involved have operated in response to the dramatic failures and threats of World War II, the Cold War, decolonization, the long nuclear crisis, and other dramas of globalization. They have tended — with the aid of many nation-states themselves — to see the need for a changed model of the proper national state and society. And they have increasingly created such models, reorganizing the picture of the virtuous nation-state so that it is a better citizen of the global economy, political system, and military order. It has seemed obvious that even successful warlike behavior is no longer an indicator of evolutionary success, that economic confrontations destabilize the whole world, and that the politics of realism are very unrealistic.

Heroic nationalism, once a standard of culture for the nation-state, no longer seems heroic. The rooting of national sovereignty in roots of racial distinctiveness and superiority looks very unattractive. The rooting of it in special religious claims also no longer fits perceptions of propriety. And special historical claims to special national missions against the neighborhood and world leave a very bad taste.

In these ways, the nation-state, while retaining much of its organizational strength and most of a set of expanding responsibilities, is increasingly tamed in the modern world culture. It is to be a service organization, carrying many responsibilities for the production of progress and justice for its citizenry, but given no more demonic authority of its own, independent of the needs and will of “the people.”

But if the national state and society are to become components or subunits of a bigger world society, what is the nature of this society? The absence of a clear world state — or any real possibility for such a state — or of a controlling positive legal system leaves a kind of vacuum. It is filled by a variety of social movements rooted in principles of various forms of natural law — law rooted in the nature of things physical and spiritual, rather than in explicit agreements that might form a world polity that looked like a larger nation-state. We can call attention to three great arenas for such social movements — together they make up a theorized natural world society.

A Base in the Human Individual. The nation-state system involved a good deal of individualism, in its celebration of citizenship (Marshall 1964). In the current period, there have been many movements, and much reconstruction, building up a set of “natural law” human rights transcending citizenship rights (Soysal 1994). These are claims on the whole world, not simply particular states, and they are extraordinarily extensive. They cover a claimed human right to education, welfare, and medicine, as well as traditional freedoms from oppression (see Chabott 1999 for the educational example). They try to limit national pressures to enforce standard national cultures and languages. They undercut traditional familial controls, elaborating the equal rights of women, children, the old, and those who violate earlier gender and sexual rules. They strengthen individual rights to ethnic culture and to status in indigenous groups, and empower a great deal of ethnic mobilization and protest in the current world (Tsutsui 1998).

A Scientized Natural World. The modern individual is empowered in many domains, at least theoretically, and is free to have a wide array of tastes. But a variety of powerful social movements elaborate many controls at the same time as they generate nominal freedom. Much of the control takes the form of the exponential expansion in scientific movements organizing proper rational action for the “free” individuals and groups. Every area of social life, from the micro details of familial and sexual life to large scale economic and environmental concerns, comes under the discipline of scientific authority. There are more sciences, they are found in more places, they address a wider range of issues, and they penetrate down further into society (Schofer 1999; Drori et al. 2002).

And as more globalization is perceived, and more threats of interdependence analyzed, the power of the sciences is inevitably increased. It is not really legitimate in the modern world for powerful bodies to simply impose themselves on weaker ones. The legitimate forms of argumentation involve scientized analyses. And with expanded interdependence in a stateless global system, thus, the authority of the sciences increases. The modern environmental movement is the most dramatic example, but there are many others.

The Rationalized Society and State. Modern individuals, empowered with and entitled by rapidly expanding human rights, are to act sensibly and intelligently in a scientized and standardized nature. They are to do this in society, of course, and naturally conceptions of proper society are standardized and rationalized too. If people are everywhere ultimately similar, and if they are all acting in a nature organized around universal and
rational laws, society too should be a standard and rational system. The older elements of distinctiveness, built around myths of unique national histories, racial structures, or religious rules, no longer hold. And older communal elements — complex family systems, community structures, estate systems, and the like — are likely to be in violation of both individual rights (as, for instance, with female genital mutilation) and principles of science (e.g., medical and psychological laws).

Thus a host of social movements arises, organizing public and private life around principles of transparency and rationality. An international standards movement blossoms almost everywhere (Walgenbach 2000; Mendel 2001), and firms in every country try to obtain the blessings of ISO9000 certification. Transparency in accounting rules and practices is demanded everywhere (Jang 2001). Countries everywhere in the world are arrayed on the standardized dimension of “corruption,” and the measures are portrayed with little complaint on the Internet.

Standardized notions of active managerialism flow around the world in dramatic movements. Consulting firms — highly internationalized rather than marketing local expertise — spread everywhere (see the papers in Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002). Standardized models of in-service training for personal development emphasize the actorness of both firm and individual. And business schools, including MBA programs, spread rapidly, and carry managerialist models around the world (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002).

All these models of expanded and active rationalized actorness impact private organizations everywhere. But they also, in current social movements, attack the old bureaucratic state, demanding decentralization, accountability at the agency level, and so on. The New Public Management movement is worldwide (Olson, Guthrie, and Humphrey 1998).

The Production of Social Problems

All of these social movements aggressively reorganize models of the proper nation-state, so that it is to become a good citizen of world society. It is to be rationally organized, to reflect the human rights of all its people, and to be in tune with the most scientized models of the natural environment. No nation-state can live up to these expectations, and thus the modern period experiences an enormous expansion in the number and range of perceived social problems. Customary social organization is reconceptualized as corruption. Traditional stratification arrangements are seen as involving the wholesale violation of human rights. And most past social practices are seen as inconsistent with a scientized view of nature: here they destroy the environment, there they use energy inefficiently, and over there they violate medical principles (Schofer 1999).

Whatever progress the modern globalized system has made in managing world problems is entirely overcome by a constantly expanding view of these problems. For every problem solved, two new ones are generated by a worldwide system of associations and professions for which problem-creation is a main (and highly rewarded) business.

Global Society in the Curriculum

The processes discussed above organize world models of the proper nation-state and society, and then globalize these models. A main result is the emergence of clearer and clearer visions of a global society, in which national societies and states are simply administrative and social subunits. Rootedness and sovereignty at more local levels are weakened — the really charismatic unit becomes world society, made up of human (not citizen) individuals in a unified physical world. One can find many reflections of this global society in modern educational curricula, and I review research on the subject. Looking at curricula in both mass and higher education makes sense since, as discussed above, modern education is more a vision of the future than a summary of the present or past. We moderns teach our children to deal with the world as it will or should be, not with the corrupt world that actually exists.

Since there is nothing like a positive world state or polity, the curricular shift toward locating the student in a global world involves much dependence on natural rather than positive law, as discussed above. Society is natural and potentially rational. The individuals are all the same, with cultural modifications and variations seen as variations on a theme rather than as constitutive. And the scientized world is everywhere in physical and social space, making possible and sensible standardized rational action. We can review evidence from studies tracing curricular foci through the twentieth century for many countries (Meyer et al. 1992; McEneaney and Meyer 2000).

Pictures of “Society”

One dramatic change in both mass and higher educational curricula has to
do with the decline in importance of history in the curriculum. Society is to be seen as a rational system more than a historical one. Thus, in mass education, history tends to be replaced by a "social studies" subject (Wong 1991) — a scientized picture of a variety of human societies, emphasizing their commonalities rather than their differences. Social studies is, in a sense, deliberately decontextualized, to give the student an understanding of common general principles rather than variable practices. In higher education, the same shift produces a decline in history instruction and a dramatic rise in the social sciences with their rationalistic analyses (Frank et al. 2000).

Society is seen as made up of individual persons, very much including children, and is analyzed in terms of their participation rather than collective political activity. Thus there is a strong emphasis on democracy, even in countries that do not have democratic regimes (Rauner 1998). This is a general matter, and does not involve increasing attention to the idiosyncracies of local civic participation: the person participates in public life as a human person more than as a citizen of a particular community.

When history is taught, it is increasingly social scientized, emphasizing social and cultural (and current) history and sharply deemphasizing political and military history (in the new globalized world, war is seen as a mistake, not a potentially heroic activity). The nation-state is deemphasized, and both local and international history gain priority. In the same way, Eurocentrism sharply declines, and other regions of the world are increasingly incorporated (Frank et al. 2000). There is also greatly increased emphasis on supranational institutions like the United Nations, or regional political communities.

Thus, increasingly, the social world is seen as standardized and rationalized around general principles of a scientific sort. The child and person are central elements, entitled and empowered. And equal: older notions of hierarchical stratification among societies (from primitive to advanced) are deemphasized, and older notions that some societies are better than others in fundamental ways are even more eliminated. Societies, made up of equal persons in a standardized nature, are ultimately equal.

**Culture: From Collective Rule to Individual Taste**

As many observers have noted, national high cultural canons — formerly part of the underpinning of national sovereignty — have lost standing in the curriculum. Students are less often required to learn the sacred thread of national literature and art. The modern watchwords are diversity and choice. Diversity means that the student should learn from the broad range of cultural materials available anywhere in the world. It is more important for the student and person to know that they have much in common with persons everywhere else than for them to share an intense common local/national culture. Again, the effort is to create a person-centered decontextualized orientation to cultural materials. Choice means that individual students may legitimately decide, on the basis of their own interests and tastes, what cultural materials to pursue.

These principles hold, to some extent, even of basic language instruction and use. High linguistic forms are not emphasized — language is a medium of interpersonal communication, not a carrier of high culture. The important thing for the person is not to use language correctly, but to be an active and interactive user.

All this implies that any emphasis on the superiority of one language and culture over another is in good part eliminated. Older notions that some core European languages and cultures carry special status, or the capacity to transmit special meanings, are replaced by an emphasis on the equality (and even similarity) of languages and cultures: variations are variations in taste and style, not status or virtue. In this sense, all cultures are seen as more equal, and all are seen as good.

The democratization of culture puts the person/student at the center of cultural production and consumption. Thus there is an emphasis on participation — on writing books as much as reading them, on producing art as well as appreciating it.

**Scientization**

In the modern mythology of globalization, what holds the social world together? Certainly the world’s set of equal and similar individuals, with strong human rights. And certainly the principles of rational social organization (currently including the market economy). But a prominently standardizing and integrating force is the doctrine that the physical (and psychological and social) world we all inhabit is highly lawful, universal, and common. Social control in a stateless world rests on such assumptions, and science has indeed flowered in recent decades (Schofer 1999; Drori et al. 2002). It plays a very prominent role in the curriculum (McEneaney 2002).
The science involved is very broad, covering social and psychological aspects of life as well as a broader range of physical ones than in the past. It is broader than a specific set of narrow disciplines, and is a mode of thought, exploration, and action more than a set of bodies of laws and knowledge. It is a way of thinking, and a very natural one at that. So the student learns science, not as a laboratory specialization, but as a practice in which children can participate, perhaps on the kitchen stove: all persons, including children, can and should be scientific and even scientists.

The student is seen as an active participant in the scientific process, as a matter of normal life. Science is not a demanding specialty for the elite — it is a pleasurable activity for ordinary persons, and part of the glue that holds society together. Thus science enters into every aspect of life (and of course, every aspect of life can influence science, to the distaste of the purists).

Conclusion

The global system contains many models of what national societies and states should be like and of what they should do. These have great impact on national societies, producing a good deal of unanticipated homogeneity among them in matters of modern structure. The models are carried along by a global associational and professional system of considerable authority — especially as the expanded responsibilities of the nation-state are far beyond the capabilities they actually have (especially in the world’s peripheries).

In the current period, many social movements undercut the legitimacy of nationalisms, which are seen to be extremely threatening in a post-World War II nuclear era. They rewrite the script of the proper nation-state to emphasize global solidarity. Humans have in common that they are individuals with many rights — diversity is deemphasized. They should function in rationalized and standardized societies — distinctive cultures violate human rights, scientific principles, or the logic of rational social organization. And the whole system rests on assumptions of a very standardized and lawful nature, from which many common rules can be taken.

All of this generates something of a standardized culture that is truly global, emphasizing the commonality of individuals, the standard principles of rational society, all in a lawful nature. To a surprising extent, this culture actually emerges in current world educational curricula.

It is a picture of empowered and equal individuals in equal and similar societies and cultures, all embedded in a highly scientized conception of nature.

John W. Meyer is Professor of Sociology (emeritus) at Stanford University, where he has worked since 1966. He received his doctorate at Columbia University in 1965. He has contributed, with many publications, to the fields of formal organizations, and the sociology of education. His recent research has concentrated on the rise of a coherent world polity, and its impact on structures and practices in national societies, in such areas as the environment, education, science, and human rights.

References


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John W. Meyer

Stanford University

摘 要

在凌駕於國家之上的強有力機構還未出現的情況下，經濟和政治的全球化，包括實際存在和只是意識之中的，對於各國的政治和社會應該是甚麼面貌，產生了極大的期許。一個全球文化正在形成，由各種各樣的行業和團體涵養着。地方文化和資源本來都非常多元的世界，產生了未曾預計的一致性。警察所包含的壓力，在三大範圍發生作用：其一，國際社會對於甚麼是一國應有的政治和社會體制，建立了各種模式，因而對涉及人類平等、經濟、教育等政策和措施產生了重大的影響；其二，在國家主權從若干方面被視作具有威脅性的情況下，國際力量對於甚麼是一國應有的政治和社會體制，已經建立了全球一致的各種模式，以令各民族國家更恰當地成為國際社會的成員，因而在社會的合理化、環境的科學化管理、人權的普及化等方面，形成了重大的社會運動；其三，對全球社會的種種願景已被提出來，並且進入了大學和高等教育的課程，這些願景強調個體和社會之間的共通性、社會組織的理性和參與性特質，以及科學知識和規律在指導人類行為方面所發揮的中心作用。