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Dreams Of World Peace And A Global Culture Are Just That - Dreams

Owen Harries Owen Harries Is A Senior Fellow At The Centre For Independent Studies.

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Globalisation has not meant a decline in the power of the states - quite the opposite, writes Owen Harries.

SOME people believe there is emerging a global culture that, reflecting the reality of growing interdependence, will be conducive to harmony and peace and will provide the basis for a global civil society. Others are much more sceptical, believing that the novelty and importance of recent changes are greatly exaggerated.

And still others worry that, while the fact of globalisation is real enough, its consequences will be bad rather than good, resulting in the destruction of traditional communities and their replacement by a homogenised, vulgar and alien culture.

The sceptics and let me make it clear that I'm one of them make the following arguments:

First, the claim of the uniqueness of the present level of economic interdependence is false, or, at the very least, grossly exaggerated. In terms of trade and capital flows, measured as percentages of gross domestic product, the level of interdependence at the end of the 20th century was approximately what it had been at the beginning of that century. And financial markets were about as integrated 100 years ago as they are now.

Moreover, precisely the same claims that interdependence was making political conflict and war counterproductive if not obsolescent were being made then, by people like the English pacifist Norman Angell in his influential book *The Great Illusion*.

But the terrible carnage of World War I and World War II was soon to prove this belief in the primacy of economic forces over nationalist loyalties to be utterly false.

Second, the proposition that the main cause of conflict is ignorance and misunderstanding between peoples doesn't bear serious examination.

Some of the most savage conflicts in history have been civil wars, in which the people involved knew each other very well indeed. And in today's world, no two groups know each other better than the Palestinians and the Israelis - unless they be the Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland.

One can take the argument further and point out that the chance of being murdered by someone one knows well is much higher than by a stranger and that people who use the term "global village" as a metaphor for peace and harmony have very little acquaintance with real villages, and the degree of envy, rivalry and malice that their intimacy can not only accommodate but foster.

As to the alleged weakening of states and their increasing displacement as the major international actors, it may be worth beginning with a reminder that more than 150 years have passed since Marx and Engels, in their *Communist Manifesto*, declared the coming withering away of states.

In the interim, states have shown themselves to be extremely tough, durable and adaptable institutions, still the only entities that most people are prepared to fight and die for.

Indeed, the history of the past 100 years is one of the increasing growth of state power, not its diminution consider, for example, how much of the gross domestic product states now appropriate, as compared with

what they did a century ago.

Those who predict a severe decline in the power of states do so largely on the basis of the anticipated effects of a revolution in information technology, but the argument tends to ignore the fact that states themselves are among the most effective users of the new technologies.

Indeed, the organisation that has so far made the most spectacularly successful use of them is the US military, to transform its war-fighting capacity.

None of these criticisms should be interpreted as a denial that globalisation has important cultural consequences, including the introduction of important new actors and norms of behaviour. The aspect that is most obvious and that has received most attention is the global spread of US popular culture, but in terms of international relations other, elite, dimensions of the phenomenon may turn out to be much more important.

The sociologist Peter Berger has identified two culture phenomena which he characterises as "Davos Culture" (after the annual World Economic Summit that meets in that Swiss resort) and "Faculty Club International".

The former is exemplified and carried by international business; the latter by foundations, academic networks, a proliferating number of non-governmental organisations and think tanks.

To some extent they overlap. Both are elite cultures, their lifestyles and tastes have much in common, and members of Faculty Club International frequently act as economic advisers for members of the Davos Culture - as, for example, the Harvard Institute for International Development did in Russia throughout the 1990s.

But just as often the two are at odds, with some non-governmental organisations and academics being the most dedicated and effective critics of the economic globalisation promoted by the Davos Culture.

The anthropologist **Janine Wedel** maintains that these cultures are producing a new set of international actors and organisations she calls them "transactors" whose outstanding characteristic is their flexible, adaptable, chameleon-like character. They adopt multiple roles and identities, and are largely unaccountable. They often work outside formal channels. Their nationality is becoming increasingly irrelevant; their loyalties and interests are changeable.

Wedel says of the Harvard Institute people: "To suit the transactors' purpose, the same individual could represent the United States in one meeting and Russia in the next - and perhaps himself at a third regardless of national origin." They are, she sums up, "members of an exclusive and highly mobile multinational club, whose rules and regulations have yet to be written".

Who will write those rules, and to whom these new elites will be accountable, are among the really important questions of this era.

Owen Harries is a senior fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies. This is an edited extract of the fourth of the ABC's 2003 Boyer lectures. The full lecture will be broadcast on ABC Radio National 576AM on Sunday at 5pm and repeated on Tuesday at 1pm.

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