Globalization II - Good or Bad?: Crash Course World History #42

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=s_iwrt7D5OA
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===== Intro (0:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green and this is the final episode of *Crash Course: World History*, not because we've reached the end of history but because we've reached the particular middle where I happen to be living. Today we'll be considering whether globalization is a good thing, and along the way we'll try to do something that you may not be used to doing in history classes: imagining the future.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! In the future, I'm gonna get to second base with Molly Brown.

Present John: No you won't, Me from the Past, but the fact that when asked to imagine THE future, you imagine YOUR future says a lot about the contemporary world. And listen, Me From the Past, while there's no question that your solipsistic individualism is bad both for you and for our species, the broader implications of individualism in general are a lot more complex.

[Intro Music]

===== Changing Psychology (0:50) =====

Man, I'm gonna miss you, Intro.

So last week (ta-da) we discussed how global economic interdependence has led, on average, to longer, healthier, more prosperous lives for humans--not to mention an astonishing change in the overall human population. In the West, globalization has also led to the rise of a service economy. In the US and Europe, most people now work not in agriculture or manufacturing but in some kind of service sector: healthcare, retail, education, entertainment, information technology, Internet videos about world history, etc. And that switch has really changed our psychology, especially the psychology of upper classes living in the industrialized world.

I mean, to quote Fredric Jameson, "we are...so far removed from the realities of production and work that we inhabit a dream world of artificial stimuli and televised experience." Think of it this way: if you had to kill a chicken every time you visited KFC, you would probably eat fewer chickens. Another change of psychology: many historians-of-the-now note that globalization has also led to a celebration of individualism, particularly in the wake of the failures of the Marxist collectivist utopias.

The generation that lived through the Depression and World War II saw large-scale collectivist responses to both those crises. And they were responses that limited freedom. Like, the military draft, for instance, which limited your freedom, you know, not to be a soldier. Or the collectivization of health insurance seen in most of the post-war West, which limited your freedom to go bankrupt from health care costs. Or also government programs like social security, which limit your freedom not to pay for old people's retirement.

===== Modern Ideas of Individualism (2:18) =====

But since the 1960s, the ascendant idea of personal freedom minimally limited by government intervention has become very powerful. Even the Catholic church was part of this new search for individual freedom, as the Second Vatican Council relaxed church rules in ways that weakened central authority, made concessions to individual styles of worship, even said that people of different religions could go to heaven. What good is heaven if it's gonna be full of Protestants? It's just gonna be like Minnesota.

So here in the last episode of Crash Course World History, in the last thirty seconds, I have offended, uh, 5/6ths of the world's population in the form of non-Catholics and, uh, all Republicans, and probably some political moderates. Who are confused about what Obama's healthcare law will and will not do. Stan, maybe I should just make this episode just an extended rant where I reveal all of my political biases. And also my personal biases.

Look, you're never gonna meet a historian who doesn't have biases. But good historians try to acknowledge their biases and I am biased toward Canada and its awesome healthcare system. I can't lie. I'm very jealous of you guys.

But perhaps the greatest effect of the victory of individualism was on sex and the family. We haven't talked much about sex because my brother's teaching Biology, which is basically just sex, but sex is pretty important historically because it's how we keep happening. But, in the 20th century, greater variety and availability of contraception made it possible for people to experiment with multiple sexual partners and helped to uncouple sex from child bearing, which was awesome, but individualism also had a destabilizing effect on families.

As the great Leo Tolstoy put it, all happy families are alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. But when your individual fulfillment trumps all, you needn't live amid your uniquely unhappy family, you can just leave! So, divorce rates have skyrocketed in the past few decades, and not just in the US. By the turn of the 21st century, divorce rates in China reached nearly 25%, with 70% of those divorces initiated by women.

Technology has also driven families apart, as parents and children spend increasing time alone in front of their individual screens, sharing fewer experiences. That's individualism, too, but not of a kind that we usually celebrate.

But probably the biggest consequence of globalization and the ensuing rise in human population has been humanity's effect on the environment. While populations have increased partly thanks to better yields from existing farmland, much more land has also been brought under cultivation in the past half-century. Often this meant cutting down trees in valuable rainforests– the best known example of this is what's going on in the Amazon, but it happens worldwide. And we're losing land not just for food, but also to grow the global economy. Oh, it's time for the open letter?

===== Open Letter (4:53) =====

An Open Letter to Flowers. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, it's fake flowers. Thank you, Stan. One for behind each ear.

Dear Flowers,

You capture the best and the worst of the globalized economy. You're so pretty. Even the fake ones are pretty. But the real one are constantly dying. They've got to be harvested, and shipped, and cut very efficiently. And it's a global phenomenon. Like there are flowers in my corner market from Africa. These are from China, but because they are plastic, they could just be shipped in a shipping container.

More people can afford to apologize by giving their romantic partners professionally cut and arranged roses than in any time in human history, but in that we have lost something, which is that the whole idea of flowers is that you had to go out into the field and, like, cut them and arrange them yourself to apologize. It's not

supposed to be, “I’m sorry I forgot your birthday. Here’s $8 worth of work that was done in Kenya.” It’s supposed to be, “I’m sorry I forgot your birthday, so I went into the frakking forest and got you some frakking flowers."

Anyway, flowers,
Best wishes,
John Green

Aww... you guys got me flowers for my last episode of World History. Okay, let’s go to the Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble (6:06) =====

As worldwide production and consumption increases, we use more resources, especially water and fossil fuels. Globalization has made the average human richer, and rich people tend to use more of *everything* but especially energy. This has already resulted in climate change, which will likely accelerate.

The global economy isn’t a zero-sum game. Like, I don’t need to become more poor in order for someone else to become more rich. But growth, at least so far, has been dependent upon unsustainable use of the planet's resources. The planet can’t sustain seven billion automobiles, for instance, or seven billion frequent flyers, although most of us who can afford to drive or fly feel entitled to do so.

You'll remember that when we talked about the Industrial Revolution, we discussed the virtuous cycle of more efficiency making things cheaper, which in turn made them easier to buy, which increased demand, which increased efficiency. But from the perspective of the planet, each turn in that cycle takes something: More land under cultivation, more carbon emissions, more resource extraction. That can’t go on forever, but worryingly, our current models of economic growth don’t allow for any other way.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

===== Improved Health (7:15) =====

And then there is our astonishingly robust health. Although much of the world has been ravaged by HIV/AIDS for the past three decades, there’s been a relative lack of global pandemics since the 1918 flu. And that’s particularly surprising given increased population density and more travel between population centers. China has seen 150 million people leave the countryside for cities in the last 20 years. This was Shanghai in 1990; and this is Shanghai in 2010. The population of Lagos was 41,000 in 1900; today, it's almost 8 million. Of course, people have been moving from country to city for a long time; remember Gilgamesh? But the pace of that change has dramatically accelerated.

===== Increasing World Trade (7:59) =====

Similarly, there's nothing new about international trade, but its pace has also increased dramatically: In 1960, trade accounted for 24% of the world's GDP; today, it’s more than double that. Almost no human being alive today lives with stuff only manufactured in their home country, but a thousand years ago, only the richest of the rich could benefit from the Silk Road. Still, trade isn’t new. And while it’s tempting to say that the types of goods being traded-– pharmaceuticals, computers, software, financial services-- represent something wholly new, you could just as easily see this as part of the evolution of trade itself. At some point silk was seen as a new trade good. As tastes change and consumers become more affluent, the things that they want to buy change.

So is anything really different, or is it all just accelerated? Well, some historians argue that an economically interdependent world is much less likely to go to war. And that may be true, but increasing global, cultural, and economic integration hasn’t led to an end to violence. I mean, we've seen large scale ethnic and nationalistic violence from Rwanda to the former Yugoslavia to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Afghanistan. Globalization has not rid the world of violence.

===== Globalization and Democracy (9:06) =====

But there is an ideological shift in the age of globalization that does seem pretty new, and that’s the turn to democracy. Now this isn’t the limited democracy of the ancient Greeks, or the quirky republican system originally developed in the U.S.; there are almost as many kinds of democracies as there are nations experiencing democracy.

The fact is, however, that democracy and political freedom, especially the freedom to participate in and influence the government, have been on the rise all over the world since the 1980s and especially since 1990. For instance, if you looked at the governments of most Latin American countries during most of the 20th centuries, you would usually find them ruled by military strongmen. Now, with a couple of exceptions (Fidel, Hugo)… Stan, are they behind me right now? Because if they’re behind me, I am in favor of collectivizing oil revenue and distributing it to the poor. If they’re not behind me, that’s a terrible idea. Right, but anyway, democracy is now flourishing in most of Latin America.

Probably the most famous democratic success story is South Africa, which jettisoned decades of Apartheid in the 1990s and elected former dissident Nelson Mandela as its first black president in 1994. It also adopted one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. But it’s worth remembering that democracy and economic success don’t always go hand in hand, as much as some Americans wish they would. Many new African democracies continue to struggle, the same is true in some Latin American countries, and China has shown that you don’t need democracy in order to experience economic growth. But for a few countries, especially Brazil and India, the combination of democracy and economic liberalism has unleashed impressive growth that has lifted millions out of poverty.

===== Conclusion (10:40) =====

So can we say that it's good, then? Can we celebrate globalization, in spite of its destabilizing effects on families and the environment? Well, here's where we have to imagine the future, because if some superbug shows up tomorrow and it travels through all these global trade routes and kills every living human, then globalization will have been very bad for human history: specifically, by ending it. If climate change continues to accelerate and displaces billions of people and causes widespread famines and flooding, then we will remember this period of human history as short-sighted, self-indulgent, and tremendously destructive. On the other hand, if we discover an asteroid hurdling toward earth and mobilize global industry and technology in such a way that we lose Bruce Willis but save the world, then globalization will be celebrated for millennia. I mean, assuming we have millennia and can convince Bruce Willis to go.

In short, to understand the present, we have to imagine the future. That's the thing about history, it depends on where you're standing.

From where I'm standing, globalization has been a net positive, but then again, it's been a pretty good run for heterosexual males of European descent. Critics of globalization point out that billions haven't benefited much if at all from all this economic prosperity, and that the polarization of wealth is growing both within and across nations. And those criticisms are valid and they are troubling, but they aren't new. Disparities between those who have more and those who have less have existed pretty much from the moment agriculture enabled us to accumulate a surplus. At some times this inequality has been a big concern, as it was with Jesus and Muhammad, at other times not so much. Inequalities are as old as human history, and almost as old is the debate about them. One thing that is new, however, is our ability to learn about them, to discuss them, and hopefully to find solutions for them together as a global community that is better integrated and more connected than it has ever been before.

Because here's the other thing about history: you are making it. That old idea that history is the deeds of great men? That was wrong. Celebrated individuals do shape history, but so do the rest of us. And while it's true that many historical forces-- malaria, meteors from space-- aren't human, it's also true that every human is a historical force. You are changing the world every day. And it is our hope that by looking at the history that was made before us, we can see our own crucial decisions in a broader context. And I believe that context can help us make better choices, and better changes.

Thanks for watching. But, there's no need to despair, *Crash Course* fans, I'll see you next week for the beginning of our mini series on literature.

===== Credits (13:10) =====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's phrase of the week was "Cookie Monster". This week's phrase of the week was "Bruce Willis," which I am telling you because we are retiring the idea of the phrase of the week.

Thank you so much for watching *Crash Course: World History*. It has been super fun to try to tell the history of the world in 42 twelve-minute videos. I hope you enjoyed it and I hope you'll hang around for literature. Thanks for watching, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.