

Title: What Does Long Wave Theory Have to Contribute to the Globalization Debate?

Author: Terrence McDonough, National University of Ireland, Galway

Abstract

The paper will begin by reviewing the controversy over whether globalization of the economy represents a qualitatively new phenomenon or whether it is merely the latest extension of a long-standing trend. It will then situate this discussion in the context of Marxian long wave and stage theory as developed by the Social Structure of Accumulation school, the Regulation school, and Mandel. The fundamental contention of these perspectives is that, while there may well be trends which characterize the course of capital accumulation over all or most of its history, these trends manifest themselves in the context of a long run accumulation process which is marked by significant and to a certain extent systematic discontinuities. These break points are identified as periods of significant and comprehensive reorganizations of the institutional conditions of capitalist growth. The first question that arises in this context is whether the process of the international extension of capital similarly experiences discontinuities or innovations in the vicinity of one or more of these historical break points in accumulation. More specifically, it can be asked whether a fundamental change or reorganization of the transnational character of the accumulation process has taken place since the end of the postwar Fordist regime/social structure of accumulation in the mid-1970's.

If such a break cannot be identified, advocates of a new era of globalization must argue that at some time in the recent past quantitative change in the process of the internationalization of capital produced a qualitative transformation or concede that there is nothing particularly novel about globalization. If such a break did take place, however, three further conditions must be met before this break can properly be regarded as the beginning of an era of globalization. First, the existing organization of capitalist society must be demonstrated to operate on a global basis. Demonstrating the global character of market penetration is insufficient to this task as market relations are not synonymous with capitalism and such penetration is in any case arguably many decades if not centuries old by now. What must be demonstrated is the global character of specifically capitalist class relations. Can it be said that a global capitalist class or global working class or both has truly emerged? The second condition that must be met is stability. The new order must be integrated within a sufficient set of institutions to overcome the tendency of the capitalist accumulation process to generate sources of serious instability. The third condition that must be met is that the "global" aspect of the new set of institutions is the dominant one. That is, there is no other aspect of the ensemble of stabilizing institutions that deserves to lend its name to the era of stable accumulation thus inaugurated. *The bulk of the paper will take up the following set of questions. Is there a significant institutional break in international institutions in the post-Fordist period? Have a new set of global class relations emerged? Is a sufficiently stabilizing regime/social structure of accumulation substantially in place? Is such a social structure of accumulation most usefully characterized as a global social structure of accumulation or are other institutional transformations equally or more important?*