

The Global and the Local

The World and Libraries after 11 September

Yekaterina Guenieva

The 21st Century and the third millennium began for the world at 8:45 a.m. New York time, on September 11, 2001, just as the 20th Century (as it is etched in human memory, rather than marked in the calendar) was launched by the loss of the Titanic and the horrors of the First World War.

The 21st Century and the third millennium began for the world at 8:45 a.m. New York time, on 11 September 2001, just as the 20th Century (as it is etched in human memory, rather than marked in the calendar) was launched by the loss of the Titanic and the horrors of the First World War.

Nine-eleven dashed the illusion of a happy end to the phase of world civilisation that was launched by the bloodless collapse of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet empire, when an age “beyond” Capitalism and Communism seemed about to dawn.

At that moment on 11 September 2001, now a historical benchmark, the world looked straight into the face of a new threat: the world’s dateline was telescoped to the flight time between Boston and New York. Within that short spell of time, the Western social order, its values, its market economy, and its world-wide political system, were suddenly no longer seen as a prevailing pattern of world civilisation to be adopted, sooner or later, by other countries and systems.

Everyone will agree that the 20th Century, a hundred years that included two world wars, Hiroshima, the Soviet Gulag and Chernobyl, Kosovo, and Chechnya, was the most tragic period of human history. So why, you may ask, did the local tragedy in New York on September 11 give such a severe shock to a world long accustomed to horrors of all kinds? It was the first time that the threat of destruction loomed over the emerging, indeed barely nascent, idea of a global order.

The global dimension implies that, without necessarily realising it, we have lived for a long time in a community in which closed borders exist only as a fiction. No one country or group of countries can fence itself off from the rest of the world. Different economic, cultural, and political forces are interacting with one another. A world community implies shared social relations. The question now is how real is it? Could it be simply virtual reality claiming to be the real thing?

The world community has another side to it, namely how and where different nations and cultures see themselves in the tangle of their diverse features. The “world” in the phrase “world community” actually implies “differences in diversity” and “community” stands for “diversity in disunity”. Globalisation involves

processes whereby nation-states are enmeshed in a web of transnational scenarios and operate in accordance with their rules.

Globalisation is a reality of the modern world, in which all forces gravitate towards unity and tend to merge. What are the factors contributing to this?

- First, contacts are expanding geographically and multiplying in all areas – the economy, the arts, sciences, and culture;
- Second, a revolution in information technologies and communications is becoming a permanent feature that is gathering momentum and altering many of society's basic institutions, such as education and politics;
- Third, society is demanding respect for human rights across the world;
- Fourth, poverty remains a global problem, with the Third World falling far behind the developed nations;
- Fifth, environmental degradation is a global problem;
- Sixth, conflicts between cultures threaten an impending global crisis.

Globalisation means that whatever happens anywhere on our planet today is, since nine-eleven, no longer a localized event. All inventions, triumphs, failures, peace-keeping missions and wars are projected across the world, and our behaviour, our organisations and our institutions have to be aligned along the local-global axis.

Globalisation sceptics could sneer, "What's new here?" Such scepticism is misplaced. Surely it is a new development that our everyday activities have stepped out of the nation-state framework and evolved in a thick skein of interdependencies and reciprocities, or that people are no longer tied to any particular place on earth?

Opponents of globalisation might insist, "This represents a threat". By this logic, globalisation would eventually compel all countries and systems to line up to jump on the Western bandwagon. Cultures and civilisations that stood by the wayside would decline and vanish like extinct historical species.

According to this logic, the future of humanity is degenerating from an intensive search for self-identity into a mechanical process which forces nations, tribes and cultures through a blender to emerge eventually as a uniform mass.

If it is all systems go in the world after nine-eleven, globalisation is bound to engender violent anti-Western extremism, a powerful driver of political tensions that threatens to leave no hope of nations ever living in tolerance with one another. Put simply, there will be no room left for mutual understanding and compassion.

This logic, too, has its own rationale. Indeed, long before nine-eleven, the Russo-US sociologist Pitirim Sorokin pronounced a similar verdict on Western civilisation, describing it as a “cancerous tumour”.

The face-off between globalists and anti-globalists is, at core, a clash between two world views and types of social organization, between established values and something covert and as yet unclear, like a vague shadow of the real world, a virtual Internet reality manipulated by a virtual government unburdened by commitments to national governments. This new world frightens anti-globalists as they visualise a virtual world that breeds authoritarian and totalitarian attitudes and spreads them across the new world of IT like a plague or wind. This applies, above all, to IT mafias, international terrorism, and neo-fascist nationalist groups whose emergence is evident in many countries across the world.

We will not find any historical parallels that resemble, even remotely, what happened on nine-eleven. This is not a war between civilisations; for different civilisations, such as Christianity and Islam, have lived side by side without fighting wars to the death. Nor is it a war waged by the poor against the rich: the poor concentrate on survival, how to earn their daily bread and protect their rights. They do not seek to destroy buildings, like the twin towers in New York that crumbled into dust burying thousands of innocent people.

What lessons has the world taken from nine-eleven? They are numerous and varied. The US saw it as evidence of inadequate resolve. It gave them yet another reason to claim in practice, as well as in theory, the dominant role vis-a-vis the world community which it could corral into the “fight against global evil”. Europe saw a different interpretation: the world today lives in roughly the same environment but the future looms over the horizon in vague, hazy and disquieting outline.

What view has Russia adopted? The fact that Russia is reassembling itself from disarray into a modern state in a new, global environment has certain philosophical implications. It is entering a globalised world almost unencumbered by the past, which it has broken away from or discarded on the way. In the last century it suffered two breakdowns: the lifestyles of whole classes, folk skills, traditions and culture were twice mercilessly uprooted or crushed. In 1917 it was convulsed by the Revolution, and in the closing years of the 20th Century everything seemed to have been destroyed and scattered around the world. No country would want to go through what Russia endured; and no other country really has. The experience we have gained the hard way gives us an open-ended perspective in designing a new domestic framework in line with the new global trends.

In Russia’s present context there is no sense in putting globalisation on hold or turning our backs on it. We cannot say like a magic incantation: “this is not for us, we have a different destiny to follow”. History is impatiently knocking at the door. Unless we unbolt the door and let it in, it will break in through the window at the risk of fracturing its limbs Russian-style. Back in the early 19th Century, a man deemed a holy fool, the poet and philosopher Chaadaev penned theses about global solidarity amongst human beings. He wrote about a citizen of the world and a

system of new ethical principles that he was trying to make a reality – a world without geographical borders.

Having considered different viewpoints, we have to admit that, seen within a world co-ordinate system, nine-eleven is an “axis” point in history. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers looked back to a time in the remote past when assorted tribal beliefs were fused to become single world religions – like the ideas of Christianity and Buddhism or the teachings of Confucius. In the same way, the revolution that occurred in people’s minds was a response to the challenges of their time. It made humans what they are today – and inspired a new morality. Whether we like it or not, globalisation brings a new ethics in its wake. It could well be called absolute morality, one that would be accepted by all. Feodor Dostoyevsky had a different name for much the same ethics – “worldwide responsiveness”. Unless we learn to practise “worldwide responsiveness” in our everyday life, including in politics, we will not escape yet another worldwide slaughter.

Where do libraries fit into these developments? Do public, university or local libraries have a mission to fulfill in this process or will globalisation proceed without them?

Unlike many other social institutions that were not confronted by the choice of self-identification until 11 September, libraries everywhere, including in this part of the world, have some experience of dealing with new realities, being intrinsically symbols of “worldwide responsiveness”.

Do libraries, the undying phoenixes, have a puzzle for us to unravel?

The banal answer is that, if libraries are to find a niche in the global IT environment, they have to hitch their future to high technologies including the Internet in order to provide access to information. An unorthodox answer is that libraries are wedded to the Word and have a complete understanding of its weaknesses and its strengths. The Word is weak because it does not have the same meaning for each and everyone and because it is fragile it must be handled with great care. “Nine-eleven” refers to a Word that threatens to become terroristic, aggressive, dogmatic and totalitarian. A diseased language can infect society, so that concepts are empty and words cease to inspire; they obscure rather than elucidate. When words become stale, as they did under the Soviet regime, the world sinks into apathy, a forerunner of stagnation.

The Word can also be strong. It is universal and has a rallying, emotional, and intellectual power to bring people together and give them a common language.

With the Word as their stock in trade for centuries, libraries have watched the vagaries the Word has undergone. First it was cherished, and then locked up in classified book depositories. Finally it has been allowed liberties beyond all reason

being supported and disseminated in every format – hand-written, printed or electronic.

In the final quarter of the last century the Word worked harder than ever, all in relation to democratic ideas and globalisation, which libraries picked up and embraced quite some time before other social institutions. The idea of freedom of information and free access, which is basic to the operation of libraries, has a direct bearing on globalisation. In many countries it is principally through libraries that the Internet, and the expanding world-wide web are promoted and made available to the general public.

Globalisation has an impact on other areas of library services and operations as well, such as providing interactive services, e-mailing documents, and setting up information web sites, portals, and electronic libraries, which are a must-have asset for any library professing to be a modern information institution.

Libraries cannot develop unless they communicate with their peers within the framework of international global societies and associations, such as the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), various vertical and horizontal corporations, collective library and bibliographic services, and catalogue record centres exchanging information resources transnationally.

Library standards, too, have a significant role to play in the globalisation context. Of all professional communities, libraries are probably the most advanced in standardizing information gathering and collecting tools. Realizing the need for standards in communicating across national boundaries is self-evident to an intelligent librarian. In short, libraries as social institutions are closely involved in globalisation processes and are actually at the cutting edge of globalisation.

Standards may differ greatly, though. Not every standard will be an accepted norm, if it is imposed against the users' will and goes against existing patterns of mental habits. People will continue to speak different national languages, as they have done throughout history. It will not work if we are left with just one language to the exclusion of every other tongue. A language will not comply with the logic of the Mint; it is not like a euro or a dollar that can be struck or printed in bulk to be passed around to all. It cannot be made to order. It has been sent to humans by divine will as a measure of their tolerance. We do not have to understand other people speaking (thank Heaven we have translators and interpreters for that), but we certainly must hear the sacred message of every language and acknowledge its right to be heard around the world.

The collapsing Tower of Babel was, in modern parlance, a systemic symbol of the nine-eleven tragedy. An exaggeration, perhaps, but it clearly gives a meaning to the symbolism of collapsing towers.

Why did the Tower of Babel collapse? In the first place, because instead of turning it into a symbol of world unity, people made a fetish of their own arrogance and vanity. Not dissimilarly, the New York high-rises too, were seen by many as symbols of a superpower's arrogance. Even if not a precise parallel, this simile carries

a grain of tragic truth. Americans will build more high-rises, we may be certain of that. My point is, though, how many more towers will have to come down around the world before nations learn to build, not to destroy? This is the chief lesson of nine-eleven to be assimilated by, among others, us as librarians, who seem so far removed from politics.