Towards a Systematic Dialectic of Globalization

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A great number of theorists have discussed from a great variety of perspectives a great number of issues associated with ‘globalization’. Some contributions to these debates share sufficient ‘family resemblances’ to justify speaking of a shared position, defined by a specific model of globalization purporting to describe the main features of the contemporary global order and a set of claims regarding this model, especially normative claims.

Here, as elsewhere, it is always possible to criticize a position from an external standpoint. Suppose, however, that a particular model of globalization implicitly includes elements contradicting the main claims made by its leading proponents. Establishing this would constitute a criticism of the framework internal to the framework itself, an *immanent critique*. Suppose further that some other position explicitly addressed these immanent contradictions. There would then be a systematic relationship between the two, justifying a theoretical progression from one to the other. If this second position in its turn were implicitly beset by immanent contradictions explicitly addressed in a third theoretical framework, the systematic progression could be continued. Such an ordering may be termed ‘dialectical’ since it is constructed by means of ‘determinate negation’, the central principle of dialectical methodology. In so far as this sort of ordering does not reconstruct a historical progression, it is an example of ‘systematic’ rather than historical dialectics. In the present chapter, I shall attempt to sketch a systematic dialectic of positions in the globalization debate.

In any systematic dialectic, the first position to be considered must be the simplest and least complex. In the present context the *social state*
model of globalization meets these criteria, and so forms an appropriate beginning. Its essential features include the following:

- national economies, more specifically, capitalist national economies;
- social states;
- foreign trade and investment between and among national economies; and
- an interstate system, formed by relations among states and codified in treaties establishing a ‘law of peoples’.

Defenders of this model accept the normative claim that capitalist markets in principle can attain a level of efficiency and liberty unsurpassed by any feasible alternative. But they can do so only if the proper background conditions are in place. Markets left to themselves, for example, necessarily tend to generate significant involuntary unemployment, high levels of poverty, and severe inequality, all of which block access to the material and cultural resources required for effective exercises of freedom. It is the responsibility of the social state to establish strong regulatory and redistributive programs to maintain full employment, alleviate poverty, and keep inequalities within bounds consistent with the fair value of political liberties and substantive equality of opportunity.5

This framework provides an appropriate starting point for a systematic dialectic of globalization in that the global order is conceptualized in the simplest possible manner, as a mere aggregate of distinct national economies and states bound together through external relations (trade; treaties). It is thus a minimalist account of the global order.6

There are two main immanent contradictions in this model. Foreign trade necessarily tends to lead to specialization in national economies. But the more specialization occurs, the less plausible it is to conceive the global economy as a mere aggregate of distinct national economies, and the more it must be conceptualized as a distinct totality (‘the world market’) with higher-order emergent properties. This conclusion is reinforced when we consider the technological dynamism of capitalism, which tends to lower the costs associated with cross-border flows of trade and investment. Declining costs encourage these flows to increase past the point at which ‘quantity becomes quality’, and national economies must be categorized as moments within a larger whole, the world market. Structural tendencies implicit within the social state model of globalization thus do not cohere with the manner in which the global economy is conceptualized in this model.

A second difficulty arises from the limits on state capacities imposed by the world market. In a world of extensive cross-border flows of