

Donald Trump hates globalization, but globalization is what made Donald Trump's life possible

[Atossa Araxia Abrahamian](#)

Quartz, November 7, 2016



Reuters/Osman Orsal

Donald Trump speaks during a news conference during the opening of the Trump Towers Mall in Istanbul.

Today, “globalization” can mean anything you want it to mean: open borders, lower wages, the European Union, that godawful Pitbull record. Whatever it is, Donald Trump is against it. Over the course of his candidacy, the Republican presidential nominee and international businessman has rebranded virtually all outward-looking engagement with the rest of the world as “globalism”, which his supporters now use as a slur.

Never mind that this very “globalism” was instrumental in spreading Donald Trump casinos, Donald Trump golf courses, Donald Trump towers, Donald Trump memes. Trump runs a global business empire, manufacturing clothing in China, Honduras, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Turkey, India, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Slovenia, Germany, South Korea, and Mexico. Two of Trump’s three wives were even born abroad. He should be the first to grasp that globalization is a multi-faceted thing. And yet the man has succeeded in projecting every anxiety about the phenomenon of globalization onto the figure of a swarthy brown guy with an accent, whom I’ll henceforth refer to as The Glob.

The Glob, the story goes, is illegally crossing your open border, then sending the factory where you work to Mexico, because NAFTA. He’s fixing your neighbor’s roof—illegally, and without paying his taxes, of course—and foreclosing on her home, even though he can’t speak English. The Glob is raping your wife,

indoctrinating your kids with ISIL propaganda, and donating to Hilary Clinton. The Glob works on Wall Street, but he's definitely, like a communist, or something. Also: Benghazi.

The Glob, the story goes, is illegally crossing your open border, then sending the factory where you work to Mexico, because NAFTA.

If this sounds like a contradictory picture, that's intentional: the Glob is an ingenious chimera of conspiracy, fact, and fiction that melds founded suspicions about the hyper-mobile global elite with tribal fears of hordes of unwashed foreign "others" taking advantage, and eventually, taking over. It speaks to anxieties about what it means to be American when there's a broad perception that you can buy or smuggle your way across the border. The Glob is calibrated to appeal to emotion, not intellect, and its looming presence exploits the moral, political, and economic ambiguities of globalization.

You don't have to be part of the "poorly educated" demographic Trump claims to love to be confused about what to think about globalization: it's really, really hard to grasp that the freer movement of money, (some) people, and things is not "good" or "bad", but rather, part of the scaffolding of the world in which we now live. Since we're wired to react most strongly to what's immediately around us, it's cognitively difficult, maybe even impossible, to reconcile its pros and cons when it affords life-altering wage hikes to the Chinese middle class but pushes a factory in Detroit to move south.

To someone who's already (and understandably) confused about their place in the world, it's a muddled picture. And because of its all-encompassing nature, globalization can't just be vanquished, like a common enemy; for better or for worse, it is the context—like oxygen, or gravity. In Trump's world, it becomes The Glob. That, at least, is easier to understand.

Though many Trump voters are wealthier than average, the voter to whom Trump directs his anti-globalist screeds—the working-class white person in one of the world's wealthiest counties—is more likely to be on the losing end of a series of changes and events that are both caused by, and coincide with, a period of rapid globalization. The CUNY economist Branko Milanovic has compiled reams of household data into what is now known as the "elephant graph", which charts how people all over the world at different income distributions have fared since 1988. The picture looks great for the middle class in Asia, and for the super-wealthy. It's pretty good for almost everyone else except the poorest five percent. But the people whose income is between the 75th and 90th percentile—the slice of the population in the bottom half of the income distribution of rich countries—barely saw their incomes grow at all.

There's an opportunity, here, to appeal to a group who is resentful of how they've fared, and Trump has taken it. His America First approach offers at the very least a

symbolic form of survival, and an assurance that yes, America is still special, even if you feel like you're getting screwed. If you're on a losing streak, a guy whose foreign policy is based on getting a "good deal" seems like just that.

Trump's anti-globalism also exploits an apparent incoherence in the border policies of American politicians both on the center-right and the center-left. Those on the left (forgive the broad generalization) say want to welcome refugees and immigrants—thus opening the border—but complain that trade treaties are unfair and help only the wealthy, essentially advocating for a sort of closing off. Hillary Clinton's hawkishness does nothing to clarify the picture of how America ought to engage with other countries; nor does her diplomatic record, which is sometimes conciliatory and sometimes aggressive. For Democrats, then, borders—for people, money, and things—are essentially porous.

Those on the right tend to support free trade as a matter of free-market capitalist principle, but balk at the idea of admitting more foreigners: another mixed bag. Trump's proposed walling-off, symbolically, is much more straightforward. It challenges the perception that borders seem to exist for ordinary people, but not the cosmopolitan rich or the asylum-seeking poor (never mind that there are [more](#) border walls, barriers, and checkpoints today than there ever have been in human history, and that net migration from Mexico in the United States is at a net negative.)

He's against free trade treaties and the free movement of people, whether they're rich or poor. He's against intervention. He's against the Glob. He's against it all! In the absence of clarity, Trump's blanket nihilism, if not quite coherent, is at least easy to keep track of.

Globalization, globalism, the Glob: they have all served Donald Trump very, very well. In fact, he is a net beneficiary of the system he denounces, and by denouncing it, he just seems to benefit more. When you run for office on a platform of utter nihilism, then that, too, is part of the appeal.

This article is part of [Quartz Ideas](#), our home for bold arguments and big thinkers.