Globalization

From Dictionary of Information Science and Technology

the growing interdependence of countries worldwide through increasing volume and variety of cross-border interactions and transactions in goods and services, free international capital flows, and more rapid and widespread diffusion of technology (Liao & Luo, 2008a)

Summary Article: globalization
From The Dictionary of Human Geography

A big buzzword in political speech and a ubiquitous analytical category in academic debate, globalization operates today rather like modernization did in the mid-twentieth century as the key term of a master discourse about the general state of the world. The most common political version of the discourse depicts globalization as an unstoppable process of global integration, a supposedly inevitable process that while being driven by free market capitalism also necessitates all the free market reforms of neoliberalism. Here, for example, is Thomas Friedman (1999, pp. 7–8), a columnist of the New York Times who has made a name for himself by interpreting practically any event anywhere in the world through this same simple discourse. Globalization, he says,

Involves the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before – in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before. The driving idea behind globalization is free-market capitalism – the more you let market forces rule and the more you open your economy to free trade and competition, the more efficient and flourishing your economy will be.

There is both a historical irony and a logical paradox in this sort of argument. The irony is that while Friedman and others hype the new-ness of globalization to promote free market capitalism, they forget that in the middle of the nineteenth century global economic integration was depicted in very similar ways as a prelude to advancing a defiantly anti-capitalist Communist manifesto. In their famously lyrical account of the globalizing activities of the capitalist business class (the ‘bourgeoisie’), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued thus that:

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations.

(Marx and Engels, 1998 [1848], p. 38)
Marx and Engels saw these interdependencies forged by capitalist globalization as leading ultimately to a global revolution by the workers of the world. By transcending local loyalties, increasing competition and intensifying exploitation, globalized capitalism would, they thought, create a globally united working class that would eventually revolt. This global revolution has still not happened, but the logical steps in the argument made by Marx and Engels were clear. By contrast, the contemporary argument that globalization is inexorable and yet necessitates reform is paradoxical. Global integration cannot be inexorable exactly if politicians and pundits have to keep promoting neo-liberal policies as the only way for it to function effectively. Nevertheless, this is precisely what they have been doing from the late 1970s onwards (see Harvey, 2005). ‘There is No Alternative’ to free market policies, argued the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, and, following her lead, TINA-touts the world over have endlessly repeated the mantra that globalization is inevitable and that it necessitates neo-liberal policy-making (e.g. Bhagwati, 2004; Wolf, 2004; Friedman, 2005). In the context of this instrumental use of globalization in creating a taken-for-granted world for policy-makers, there have been four main academic responses.

The first and most sceptical scholarly approach to globalization has been to argue that it is nothing but hype. Hirst and Thompson (1996) have suggested in this way that globalization is a myth, and that the picture of integration proceeding farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before is empirically unsound. Against the claim that globalization is new, they highlight how significant forms of globe-spanning economic integration existed in the first decades of the twentieth century as a result of imperialism and the other nineteenth-century economic developments noted by Marx and Engels. Against the claim that corporations have become stateless engines of border-crossing enterprise, they show how even large transnational corporations remain shaped by national supports and norms. And against the TINA-tout promotion of free market fundamentalism, they argue that policies that are not neo-liberal can still provide successful models of national development. However, in attempting to counter the hype, Hirst and Thompson miss many of the ways in which new networks have expanded and deepened global interdependency from the 1970s onwards.

Charting the development of global networks over time has in turn been the basis of the second main academic approach to globalization. Perhaps the most exhaustive examination available defines globalization thus in terms of the extension, acceleration and intensification of consequential worldwide interconnections (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton, 1999). The four authors argue that if globalization is conceptualized as ‘the widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnectedness’ (p. 14), it is also possible to pick it apart as ‘a process which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions – assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact – generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction and the exercise of power’ (p. 16). The precision of this approach is useful insofar as it provides clear parameters for assessing just how far global integration dynamics have created globally shared forms of common fate. They themselves also provide tremendous amounts of empirical data showing the changing extensity, intensity, velocity and impact of different sorts of space-spanning networks over time. However, their approach has two limitations. First, it obscures the ways in which global interconnections can also create deeply divergent global fates, or what critics of cosmopolitanism and other idealistic accounts of transnationalism describe as discrepant cosmopolitanisms (Robbins, 1998). These discrepant communities are all also underpinned by global interconnections, but in ways that create vastly varied fates ranging from the soft cosmopolitanism of wealthy migrants and transnational capitalists (Skair, 2001; Calhoun, 2003; Mitchell,
to the carceral cosmopolitanism of those imprisoned in global spaces of exception (see exception, spaces of) (Gregory, 2004b; Sparke, 2006), to the critical cosmopolitanism of grassroots globalization activists and associated anti-neoliberal NGO networks (Routledge, 2003; Sparke, Brown, Corva et al., 2005). Part of the reason why Held and co-authors tend to downplay such discrepancies between global networks may in turn be traced to a second limitation with many network-centric accounts; namely, their relative inattention to the uneven development of spatial organization itself. This weakness is often amplified in assessments of globalization that stress what the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) once called time–space distanciation; that is, the establishment of space-spanning relations of regulation, trust and interaction between people at a distance. Commentators from across the political spectrum, Giddens himself amongst them, have thus unfortunately tended to describe globalization as some sort of end to geography in which time–space distanciation has reached its final fulfilment in the creation of a smooth, borderless, post-national, supraterritorial global landscape or, what Thomas Friedman has recently described as a ‘flat’ world (see, e.g., Giddens, 1995; Ohmae, 1995; Appadurai, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Scholte, 2000; Friedman, 2005).

In response to all the pre-emptive epitaphs to geography, a third more geographically sensitive approach to globalization highlights how capitalism has created new forms of uneven development involving both deterritorialization and reterritorialization. David Harvey (1989b, 2006b) has argued thus that while capitalists shrink distance and create time–space compression because of their deterritorializing efforts to reduce the frictions of distance, they also episodically require a reterritorializing spatial fix in which fixed capital investments are made and through which crises of over-accumulation can be temporarily resolved (see also Harvey, 1999 [1982]). This argument has also led him to interpret the recent resurgence of American empire in terms of the tensions between place-transcending and place-remaking dynamics on a global scale (Harvey, 2004b). Drawing further attention to the changing shape of American global place-making in particular, many other academics have highlighted how flat-world visions of globalization obscure the asymmetries and attendant geopolitics of today’s US-centric global order, including the exceptional privileges reserved by the USA within global governance institutions such as the international monetary fund and the World Bank (Anderson, 2002b; Gowan, 2003; Peet, 2003; Agnew, 2004; Pieterse, 2004; Smith, 2004; Sparke, 2005). In a different way, research on the governance of international borders has shown how the border-softening emphasis in flat-world business discourse also obscures diverse forms of contemporary border hardening (Nevins, 2002; Newstead, Reid and Sparke, 2003; Sparke, Sidaway, Bunnell and Grundy-Warr, 2004; Coleman, 2005; Sparke, 2006). Meanwhile, the ongoing need to track how business practices are themselves constantly reorganizing the geography of commodity chains has led yet other scholars to chart the unevenness of the global economic map of production, trade, distribution and consumption (e.g. Dicken, 2003: see also Mittelman, 2000). And it is this uneven and constantly shifting map that has in turn inspired interest in glocalization as way of exploring reciprocal local-global relations that avoids end-state end-of-geography ideas about global flattening (Swyngedouw, 2004).

With a related repudiation of what she calls an ‘impact model’ of globalization, the geographer Gill Hart’s recent work also illustrates a fourth form of academic response to globalization focused on how its hegemony as a neo-liberal discourse both works and breaks down in practice (Hart, 2004). Hart argues that this hegemony serves amongst other things to make the forced privatization of public goods and spaces seem natural, and in response she suggests that ethnographies of the ties between different places and people can help denaturalize such dispossession (Hart, 2006: see also Tsing, 2004). Such
counter-hegemonic critiques of neo-liberal globalization discourse have now developed a diverse set of complementary strategies for debunking TINA-tout inevitability ideology. Such strategies range from efforts to chart the emergence and marketing of globalization discourse as a form of ‘Globaloney’ or globalist common-sense (Steger, 2005; Veseth, 2005), to examinations of how it has been re-engineered and spread internationally by ‘World Bank Literature’ (Kumar, 2003), global business schooling (Roberts, 2004; Olds and Thrift, 2005) and business-funded think-tanks (Peck, 2001b, 2004), to studies of its uneven implementation in the actual organization of business practices themselves (Dicken, 2003; Ho, 2005), to research into its impact as a form of geo-economics that shapes both national and transnational statecraft (Smith, 2002; Roberts et al., 2003; Sparke and Lawson, 2003; Hay, 2004; Jones and Jones, 2004; Gilbert, 2005), to feminist investigations of the masculinism of arguments about the inevitability of global capitalist penetration (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Massey, 2005). Such examinations of the performance of globalization discourse can bring it down to size and allow academics and their audiences to see it ‘stutter’ (Larner and Walters, 2005, p. 20), but, just as importantly, they also clear the way for investigations of the actual power-geometries of globalization in the lived worlds beyond the buzzword and its flat-world imaginative geography (see also geographical imaginary).

Suggested reading
Full bibliography is available here.


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