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The Globalization of Nothing

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George Ritzer, *The Globalization of Nothing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004, 259 pp., ISBN 0761988068 (hbk), US\$80.95, 0761988076 (pbk), US\$34.95.

keywords: consumption ♦ globalization ♦ globalization ♦ social criticism

With *The Globalization of Nothing*, George Ritzer delivers a highly readable and deeply critical look at the relationship between globalization and consumption. Ritzer boldly rejects the postmodern turn away from grand narratives in social science and offers a new grand narrative of his own: the contemporary era of globalization is marked by crossing the great divide from 'something' to 'nothing'. By 'something', Ritzer means 'a social form that is generally indigenously conceived, controlled, and comparatively rich in distinctive substantive content' (p. 7), and by 'nothing', Ritzer means 'a social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content' (p. 3). Globalization, defined as 'the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organization of social life on a global scale and growth of a shared global consciousness' (p. 72) is replacing something with nothing, shifting society generally toward the nothing end of the something–nothing continuum. Ritzer worries that 'there is a long-term trend in the social world in general, and in the realm of consumption in particular, in the direction of nothing' (p. 138).

The fun and fast introduction provides several interesting if problematic examples of nothing (credit card companies, pre-approved credit card loans, telemarketers and automated teller machines) and something (community banks, personal loans, personal bankers and individualized assistance). The seven subsequent chapters (1) conceptualize nothing and something in finer detail, (2) offer examples of varieties of nothings and somethings, (3) distinguish glocalization and 'globalization' as conflicting processes of globalization, (4) discuss the relationship globalization and nothing, (5) treat 'large scale consumption sites on the internet' as ideal-typical forms of nothing, (6) reconsider the rise of nothing in a broader context and (7) set globalization and consumption in a broader context and consider forms of resistance to globalization. The book concludes with an appendix that delves more deeply into some of the theoretical and methodological challenges and commitments that are left implicit in the main body of the text.

After introducing something and nothing, Ritzer raises the contrast between something and nothing with a discussion of the five subcontinua of the something–nothing continuum. These are: unique–generic, local geographic ties–lack of local ties, time-specific–time-less, humanized–dehumanized and enchanted–disenchanted. Ritzer uses several contrasting examples to illustrate these continua: a gourmet meal (unique) vs a microwave-ready meal (generic); handmade Oaxacan pottery (local ties) vs mass-produced pottery (lack of local ties); 1960s US-made 'muscle cars' (time-specific) vs mass-produced cars from brands like Kia (time-less); the small teaching college (humanized) vs the Internet university (dehumanized); and the magic of a home-cooked meal (enchantment) vs mass-produced meals like Domino's Pizza or Kraft's Lunchables (disenchantment). Ritzer argues that social forms falling at the nothing end of these continua, all of which lack, to varying

degrees, distinctive substantive content, are on the rise, while those at the something end are in decline through globalization.

Having set out these subcontinua, Ritzer turns to the various *types* of something and nothing and the conflicting relationship between somethings and nothings. He contrasts *places* (like local restaurants) to *non-places* (like McDonald's), *things* (gourmet Italian Culatella ham) to *non-things* (Big Macs), *people* (bartenders in traditional taverns) to *non-people* (Disney employees donning the Mickey Mouse costume), and *service* (waiters in gourmet restaurants) to *non-service* (waiters on cruise ships). In all these cases, subcontinua of something–nothing are used to explore the characteristics of these types of somethings and nothings.

Ritzer argues that the rise of all these nothings and the decline of all these somethings are related to globalization. To explain how, he separates globalization into two constitutive but contradictory processes: glocalization, Roland Robertson's concept of the creative integration of the global and the local that produces 'unique outcomes in different geographic areas' (p. 73); and Ritzer's own new concept, 'grobalization', which emphasizes 'the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like and their desire, indeed need, to impose themselves on various geographic areas' (p. 73). The term grobalization references the interests of such organizations in 'seeing their power, influence, and in some cases profits *grow*' (p. 73; emphasis in original). Ritzer allows that the term 'grobalization' is, borrowing a phrase from Charles Peirce, 'ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers' (p. 231). In general, grobalization (and its subprocesses of capitalism, Americanization and McDonaldization) fosters nothing, while glocalization fosters something. Grobalization wins and spreads nothing because 'there is too much power behind the forces pushing grobalization, the forces opposing it . . . are far too weak, and there are far too many real and imagined gains associated with it' (p. 95). Ritzer identifies 'large-scale internet consumption sites' such as Amazon.com as 'perfect examples of nothing' (p. 117) and its grobalization.

The Globalization of Nothing deserves praise for staking out bold moral positions on globalization and consumption, offering examples of cultural globalization that should spark interesting discussion in university courses, introducing concepts that are useful for thinking about globalization, and presenting arguments with a light and engaging style. But while this book shows clear strengths, it also suffers some shortcomings. In the appendix, Ritzer confesses that he is inclined 'to being both elitist and incurably romantic, nostalgic about the past, and desirous of a world more characterized by something than nothing' (p. 213), so I will not make more here of the obvious elitism of drawing distinctions between mass-market beers and 'the better varieties' of beer (p. 102), or the obvious nostalgia for the American diner implicit in the contrast of 'great good places' to 'McDonaldized non-places' (pp. 42–5). To his credit, Ritzer takes pains to point out that somethings (like home-cooked meals) can be cheap, nothings (like Gucci bags) can be pricey, and all was not right with the world in the 1950s, not even in 'small town America'. But elitism and nostalgia are not the book's only limitations.

First, as Ritzer defines them, the concepts of globalization and nothing overlap so much that the argument that globalization replaces something with nothing comes close to truth by definition. It seems that something more (or less?) than elective affinity is in play here. If 'nothing' is by definition 'a social form that is

generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content', then any given thing that is global must also be nothing. Globalization is implicit in this definition of nothing, because if nothing is 'centrally' conceived and controlled, there must be a center. For there to be a center, there must be spatial variation in the locations of the social form, a point from which things diffuse. Globalization is also implied by the essential characteristic of nothing ('devoid of distinctive substantive content') because a thing cannot be distinctive if it is everywhere, and a thing must be distinctive if it exists in only one place. Ritzer argues that some somethings are global, but the examples of these global somethings (traveling concerts and art exhibits, p. 99) seem to conflate temporal with spatial diffusion. There is an important distinction between the (still centrally controlled) diffusion of one thing to various places over time, and the simultaneous presence of the same (or nearly the same) thing in different places at the same time. This overlap between nothing and globalization suggests that a better title for this book might have been *Globalization and Nothing*.

Second, the book's relatively restricted empirical material cannot support all of its claims. Privileging conceptual development over empirics is consistent with the book's goal of introducing, through social criticism, some new concepts for thinking about globalization. But, non-US readers should be forewarned that nearly all the examples offered in support of the book's claims come from the US context. This US-centrism should provide more grist for the mill of conversation, as students encounter the concept of globalization in the classroom. Conversation could also be directed to how some specific claims, such as the claim that social relationships are less likely to form in 'non-places' like chain restaurants than in 'places' like local diners, might be evaluated with evidence.

Third, the book does not do enough to place its argument in context of the dramatic historical and cross-national variation in the timing and extent of globalization. Indeed, a key contradiction within the growing but still immature globalization literature is that markers of globalization – international brands, multinational corporations, telecommunications infrastructure and even international organizations – are not smoothly spread around the globe, but instead are densely clustered in some places and virtually absent from others. Another key debate within the globalization literature concerns the timing of globalization, with some analysts arguing that certain forms of globalization can be traced back through centuries of the evolution of the world-economic system. Ritzer sidesteps these debates by delimiting the scope of the book to consumption in the contemporary West (particularly the US), but this treatment of cultural globalization would be richer for a serious engagement with cross-national variation in globalization, and with earlier forms of cultural globalization, especially the formation of global churches.

Fourth, even if we accept the argument that globalization is replacing something with nothing, we can still ask how much any of this matters. *The Globalization of Nothing* succeeds in connecting the abstract process of globalization to everyday life in a way that should be very useful to those teaching courses on globalization, but students in those courses may question the ultimate significance of the proliferation of things that annoy many academics (Internet universities, pre-approved credit cards, McDonald's, products of the Disney Corporation, Starbucks,

Lunchables). There is substantial evidence that globalization does mean more than this, and I hope that future editions of *The Globalization of Nothing* will do more to connect the realm of consumption to other pressing social problems.

Although, like any book, *The Globalization of Nothing* is not able to engage every relevant issue, its morality, readability and pedagogical utility make it worthwhile as a sharply critical take on globalization and consumption.

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His research focuses on regional integration in Western Europe, and the social structure of the world polity. His other projects examine the world city system (with Arthur Alderson), economic globalization and the welfare state (with David Brady and Martin Seeleib-Kaiser), comparative socioeconomic gradients in health (with Sigrun Olafsdottir) and women's political representation in developing countries (with Jocelyn Viterna and Katherine Fallon).

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T. K. Oommen, *Crisis and Contention in Indian Society*. New Delhi: Sage, 2005, 245 pp., ISBN 0761933581 (hbk), Rs 560, 076193359X (pbk), Rs 320.

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The book under review comprises 12 essays on themes as varied as pluralism democracy and conflict, challenges to citizenship, Dalits, Gujarat riots, Indianization of the church and its implications, linguistic reorganization of Indian states, sources of internal threats to India's security, social movements in northeast India, Indian federalism, 20th-century Indian society as well as a prognostic essay on the challenges before Indian society in the 21st century. Anchored in the historical and contemporary experiences of Indian society, all the chapters derive their substantive content from the exclusive attention accorded to the chequered trajectory of such a complex and multifaceted civilization. Yet, readers are well advised to note that most of these essays are the unmediated publication of six talks and six seminar papers delivered by the author at different forums and at different points in time. Six of them have previously been published in journals and edited volumes, and have been collected here for the benefit of concerned social science scholars as well as lay citizens.

Notwithstanding the author's eminence as a sociologist, most of these essays are in the mode of generalist reflections on topical themes of public interest. True, a sociologist is not barred from pontificating on issues of 'national' concern. Though one is somewhat disconcerted when ideology and propaganda masquerade as received sociological wisdom even when one is aware that sociology has never been a value-neutral enterprise. The contents, like the tone and tenor of Oommen's essays, are polemical in the extreme. While being unsparing in his critique of his political and ideological opponents, he fails to submit to critical