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The Globalization *Problematique*:¹ A Review Essay

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Jonathan Friedman (ed.)

Globalization, the State, and Violence

Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003, £25 pbk (ISBN: 0 759192813), 352 pp.

David Held and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi (eds)

Taming Globalization: Frontiers of Governance

Cambridge: Polity, 2003, £13 pbk (ISBN: 0 745630774), 208 pp.

Frank J. Lechner and John Boli (eds)

The Globalization Reader

Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003, £18 pbk (ISBN: 1 405102902), 472 pp.

George Ritzer

The Globalization of Nothing

Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004, £58 hbk (ISBN: 0 6761988068), 362 pp.

Introduction

Whatever your stance on globalization, this is one contemporary hot potato that cannot be ignored. Such is the prominence of this issue, that even critics or sceptics are forced to produce anti-theories of globalization. The presence of this issue in social analysis is ubiquitous, standing as an equal alongside established ideas like class, power, gender and bureaucracy. It is a theme not only confined to academic discourse. Broadcasters and journalists, politicians and policy-makers, novelists and cultural commentators, business leaders and management gurus: all elements of the

free-floating intelligentsia have embraced globalization as their own. But this recognition of the global is far from being unproblematic, certainly within academia. The key issues of globalization research – its historical phasing, socio-economic causes and its repercussions for humanity – have been subject to intense speculation. Different interpretations abound. Reflecting the diversity of opinion, the range of themes covered by contemporary globalization research is vast. Such work also spans different social science disciplines and sub-disciplines (Brenner, 1999: 39). As well as emerging themes, some of the key sub-plots within the interdisciplinary parameters of globalization research are considered in this review essay.

The Globalization of Social Science: Between the National and the Global?

The track record of social scientists in advancing a global level of analysis, until recently, is insubstantial. In much social science work, the abstract entity ‘society’ is effectively synonymous with nations, particularly countries like America and Britain. But society and nations, as Yearley has pointed out, are not the same thing (1996: 11–12). Although much social science is focused on a national level of analysis, social theorists, including classical thinkers, have embraced a global frame of reference. The modern era of globalization theory can be traced to the 1970s, whose intellectual trailblazers included Louis Dumont and Immanuel Wallerstein. As well as being given intellectual credence, the concept of globalization seemed to capture what was happening to post-war societies. The post-war world was one in which global integration supposedly usurped national borders. Moving on a few decades, globalization is now a concept whose time has come; the debate is no longer emerging or inchoate. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in globalization across the humanities and social sciences. Reflecting the growing stature of globalization within the human sciences, Featherstone and Lash, writing back in 1995, declared that globalization has taken over our late 20th-century intellectual obsession with modernity and post-modernity.

With such a relatively new field, especially one that covers a wide range of disciplinary concerns, an edited reader that brings together state-of-the-art writings is a useful tool. One notable example in the market is Frank Lechner and John Boli’s *The Globalization Reader*, which has been sufficiently popular to justify a second edition. This reader brings together a selection of articles and a wide variety of authors, mainly academic in orientation but not exclusively so. In the collection, you get notable scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm, John Gray and Immanuel Wallerstein rubbing shoulders with major actors in global politics like Subcomandante Marcos, Kofi Annan and Mary Robertson. There is also sufficient new material when compared to the first edition to warrant interest in the second edition.

The advantage of the reader over an edited collection is that the material is hand-picked from the vast and multiplying literature on globalization. With any reader, the job of the editor(s) is vital. The task is to organize this diverse literature under coherent themes. The editors of this collection have not only chosen well but

they have brought the articles together in a way that is user friendly and understandable. There are 58 chapters, each penned by different authors. These chapters are arranged into 10 sectioned themes – from economic globalization to the experience of globalization. Each section is prefaced by a useful summary introduction. The chapters in this collection tend to be quite short, most of them keeping within the 10 page mark. It could be said that there are possibly too many themes here and the editors might have been better off concentrating their efforts on a more limited range of themes. The one consequence of covering a wide number of themes is that you potentially end up with too many ‘filler’ chapters, where any real insight might prove marginal. The ‘filler’ chapters in this reader tended to be penned by non-academic contributors and anonymous contributions. Prominent examples were the extracts written by Salman Rushdie and Mary Robinson. That said, there were also some outstanding non-academic specialist contributions, such as James Harding’s article on counter-capitalism. And there is such a variety of writings in the reader that the decent stuff tended to outweigh the filler.

Like all edited readers, there is sufficient material here which reflects both standard classics on globalization (see the contributions by Ohmae and Robertson) and state-of-the-art thinking (refer to the respective extracts by Garrett and Mathews). Most of the academic contributions originate from the mid to late 1990s. This is not a problem as such. But the literature on globalization is quickly expanding and diversifying. Hence, the section on resisting globalization – a theme of emerging prominence in the literature – is a bit thin intellectually. The difficulty here is that some of the more interesting material on anti-globalization has seen the light of day only in recent years.

Overall, the Lechner and Boli reader is a useful collection of key articles. The nearest competitor on the academic market to this reader is the *Global Transformations Reader* edited by Held and McGrew (2000). Both readers complement each other very well, with little overlap in terms of the authors that appear in both collections. Moreover, the Held and McGrew reader has longer and more in-depth chapters, whereas Lechner and Boli go for shorter chapters, covering a broad range of topics. Overall, Lechner and Boli’s second edition reader would prove a worthy purchase for academic practitioners. And if it is not already, it would be a useful inclusion on any undergraduate or postgraduate reading list on globalization.

Theorizing the Global Polity: Between Anarchy and Stability?

As a sub-discipline of political science, international relations scholars have added much to our understanding of global politics. The field of international relations has historically been dominated by the realist tradition. For the realist approach, the nation state, or a system of competing nation states, is central to international politics. The dominance assigned to the nation state by the realist school has not gone unchallenged. The anti-realist rearguard, spearheaded by the likes of David Mitrany

(1966), enlisted what it saw as the growing significance of non-governmental organizations, as well as transnational social movements, to establish an alternative perspective to realism (Wapner, 1995: 316–7). The forcible role that non-state actors have in geo-politics was demonstrated further by events during the late 1980s. The international deregulation of financial markets and the collapse of the Iron Curtain provided significant grist to the anti-realist mill (Peterson, 1992: 371).

The emergence of non-state actors, for proponents of anti-realism, also has implications for transnational political and social relations. As the nation state becomes less significant, internecine conflict between independent national or regional entities is a distant prospect – so the argument goes. The concomitant is that the growth of non-state actors helps to build solidarity and cosmopolitan unity between nation states. This was a view held by theorists of different political persuasions, whether libertarian marketeers, liberals or neo-Marxists (compare Cox, 1999, with Ohmae, 1996). But the anti-realist emphasis on how a transnational huddle has emerged beyond the nation state overlooks the dystopian elements of global integration. The process of global integration has its own inherent hazards and threats. This has been brought into sharp relief by the 9/11 attacks. As well as mass casualty terrorism, globalization has established an infrastructure for the transnational spread of organized crime, drug trafficking, disease, environmental degradation and economic crises (Sørensen, 2004: 127). What we have is an anarchical society beyond formal state institutions.

It is the anarchical features of globalization that Jonathan Friedman attends to in an edited collection entitled *Globalization, the State, and Violence*. The book is the product of an interdisciplinary research project into globalization, multiculturalism and the nation-state financed by the Frank Guggenheim Foundation. In the light of recent geo-political developments, Friedman's edited collection is certainly pertinent. The articles contained in this collection attempt to understand the global processes responsible for the increase in political violence on a worldwide scale. And it was certainly with an amount of expectation that I came to review this book. My expectation was that the book would shed significant insights on matters of contemporary relevance. However, most of the 12 chapters in this book failed to deliver a decent and well-rounded analysis of issues pertaining to globalization, the state and violence, save for the respective contributions by Sampson and Wieviorka.

I envisaged, from the title and the publisher's preamble, a collection of articles focusing on the political economy of global-generated violence. Although touching upon such matters, a number of the chapters were anthropological in emphasis. This might have something to do with the fact that 10 of the 14 authors assembled in the collection are anthropologists. Hence, a number of the chapters, especially the latter ones, provided descriptive overviews of how violence generated by global forces has impacted upon the lives of people and communities in such far flung places as Haiti, Chad and the Congo. All very important. All very honourable stuff. But this was not what I had come to expect from reading the cover. Indeed there was the occasional chapter that seemed completely out of place. One definite culprit is Kapferer's analysis of witchcraft and sorcery in Sri Lanka.

The other difficulty with this edited collection is that most of the articles have a rough and ready view of globalization. The analysis is all very jaundiced and, as such, one-dimensional. Here, globalization is portrayed as an economic process spearheaded by all-powerful multinational enterprises. The omnipotence of the modern corporation is at the expense of national sovereignty and indigenous communities. But is globalization really a capitalist conspiracy? The wider literature suggests a more nuanced view would be in order.

Linked to this one-dimensional theorizing is the stylistic tendency, across many of the chapters, for authors to make sweeping and controversial statements without supporting evidence. I am not suggesting that we must reference every opinion or thought but some supporting evidence, on occasion, would be nice. Without such support, you get scholarly sounding proclamations that are made in a theoretical and empirical void. Take the following examples from Friedman's collection: 'Rioting, for example, whether on the basis of identity, ethnic origin, or religion, is all to some extent informed by a high degree of subjective unhappiness.' Or in another chapter we have: 'Yet, new flexible patterns of labor also bring to the fore a highly skilled and privileged labor force with the capability of protecting itself from the uncertainties of the labor market.' Such sloppy analysis is not helped by the quality of writing demonstrated here. The style of writing is of the sort that gives academic authors a bad name: opaque, jargon-laden and verbose. This book is definitely one for the library rather than the personal collection. And even here, it should be approached with caution. For a better coverage of globalization and violence, readers should look to Booth and Dunne's (2002) edited collection, *Worlds in Collision*, and Charles Tilly's (2003) *The Politics of Collective Violence*.

Theorizing the Global Political Economy: From Prosperity to Poverty?

There is a highly significant political debate within the globalization literature. This debate considers the costs and benefits of a world that is increasingly globalized. Such matters have been subject to varied and different interpretations. A key contribution to these discussions has been made by those neo-liberals, like Kenichi Ohmae (1996), for whom globalization constitutes a new and distinct historical epoch. The new global era is one marked by the triumph of a unified free market over the freedom-sapping nation state – the so-called de-nationalization thesis. According to Ohmae's thesis, globalization has unified disparate national markets and economies, resulting in the global trickle-down of material prosperity to non-Western countries. As well as the material benefits, the de-nationalization effect, according to Ohmae, unites diverse cultures and groups. The same observation is nicely illustrated by the *New York Times* foreign correspondent, Thomas Friedman (2000). His 'Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention' states that no two nations possessing a McDonald's restaurant ever went to war with each other – until the US-led air attacks in Yugoslavia. The view that we are entering a new global

period of existence, where world-wide markets predominate, is also shared by commentators on the radical left. But for these thinkers, globalization is far from bringing prosperity and freedom to humanity. Rather, globalization is the harbinger of widespread poverty, disease and transnational conflict (see Callinicos, 2003). Two recent books have sought to add to this debate from a critical perspective but with varying results: Held and Koenig-Archibugi's *Taming Globalization* and Ritzer's *The Globalization of Nothing*.

Globalization is currently a cash cow for Polity Press. In Polity's effort to cover every aspect of the globalization market, it has published *Taming Globalization* by Held and Koenig-Archibugi. This edited collection assembles various leading thinkers to pontificate on the relationship between economic globalization and human development. The six chapters that comprise this rather slim collection are revised versions of the Miliband lectures for 2000 on global economic governance. All the contributors examine the economic repercussions of globalization. In terms of its impact, globalization is viewed as detrimental: it reinforces existing inequalities as well as creating new socio-economic disparities. Unfettered global markets are part of the problem. But all the contributors to this volume believe that global political mechanisms, institutions and policy interventions should be part of the solution.

The chapters included here really summarize positions that are more extensively pursued by each of the authors in their respective writings on globalization. The chapters themselves are of variable quality, which is to be expected considering they started life as lecture presentations. For instance, Stiglitz's effort is an anecdotal critique of the economic strategies pursued by the World Bank and IMF vis-a-vis developing states. But this is a critique with limited analytical or original insight. This is a pity as Stiglitz was for a time an insider within the World Bank. Goodin's effort on the globalization of social justice is prefaced by a meandering philosophical discussion of globalization, confining the main substance of his argument to a couple of short sections at the end of the chapter.

That said, some of the contributors do posit notable insights and arguments. For instance, Robert Wade places World Bank statistics on global poverty under scrutiny. The statistical debunking of the World Bank is part of a more fundamental critique of the neo-liberal idea that the invisible hand of global markets can reduce poverty and inequality. In addition, Robert Keohane offers a useful analysis of cosmopolitan democracy, which acknowledges, at the same time, the importance of rendering global institutions politically accountable.

Each author sets out his own set of recommendations for reforming economic globalization. Whilst these opinions are significant, my preference is to learn how existing practices and actions are endeavouring to produce a better and fairer global society. But not all the articles in this edited collection opt for long-term vision over an assessment of real developments on the ground: there is Ruggie's analysis on voluntary codes of corporate social responsibility and Keohane's examination of accountability in the IMF, EU and World Bank.

This edited collection provides a contemporary snapshot of the thoughts and ideas of leading writers on globalization. It is a snapshot confined, in the main, to

the political economy of globalization. In addition, as a collection of lectures, this one is more a collector's item rather than essential reading for those interested in global issues. Readers wishing for a better coverage of these ideas should consult the recent literary output of the thinkers assembled under this collection.

It is interesting to come across a book that purports to be about nothing. This is exactly what George Ritzer attempts in his latest opus. In writing about *nothing*, Ritzer was influenced by the work of French geographer Marc Augé and his study of non-places. Ritzer's ideas also have an indirect affinity to philosophical luminaries such as Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre and Jerry Seinfeld. All these thinkers, in their different ways, have made a philosophical contribution to our understanding of *nothing*. These philosophical influences on Ritzer's study of nothing are outlined in a separate appendix, forming one of the best chapters in the book. But the connection to continental philosophy is a loose one. Ritzer is not a sociologist muscling in on philosophy. *The Globalization of Nothing* is a critique, a critical political economy of globalization.

Ritzer's latest oeuvre pursues a number of themes that will be familiar to those that are well versed with his malediction against the fast-food industry, *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993). Like the McDonaldization thesis, this new text is concerned with how the worst excesses of American capitalism are being aggressively exported around the world. Except that the focus in *The Globalization of Nothing* is on brand-led, mass consumerism. The central thesis here is that there has been an historical shift away from *something* to *nothing*. What Ritzer means by this is that mass consumerism is threatening distinctive and locally controlled patterns of social life and economic activity: the family-owned *trattoria* versus the fast-food restaurant chain; the local grocer versus the supermarket giant; the arts screen cinema versus the multi-screen multiplex. And so on. Modern global consumerism has been aggressively promoted and exported by highly powerful (mainly American) corporations. These companies build their empires and vast profits through the proliferation of nothing, namely: mass-produced, brand-led, globally distributed products – Disney, McDonald's, Amazon.com, Gucci, Nike, Ikea; and mass-consumerist devices – ATMs, internet commerce and credit cards.

To capture theoretically the global pressures being exerted on the local, Ritzer introduces a neologism which sounds unappealing – *grobalization*. This subcategory of globalization is distinct from that other well-worn neologism – glocalization. The glocal is about global localization, about the importance of the parochial in the midst of universal tendencies, about the celebration of the local. By contrast, grobalization stresses how local cultures and indigenous social forms are being overwhelmed by global commercial interests.

In developing a *grob* assessment of the *global*, Ritzer's proclaimed aim is to introduce distinct and fresh insights on the process of globalization. Despite the efforts to make a distinct contribution, Ritzer's arguments are not especially new or original. They form a conventional leftist or neo-Marxist critique of globalization: an economic process spearheaded by all-powerful, corporate multinational companies who are only concerned with profits, without any consideration of how they are achieved, and who threaten to overwhelm the small and vulnerable, exploiting

everything that moves. In *The Globalization of Nothing*, historical change is seen to be driven by economic forces. Unlike other radical appraisals of globalization, the emphasis is less on production than on mass consumerism. There is also a critique of e-commerce – often overlooked in leftist diatribes against the global market (chapter 6). And this is far from being a crude deterministic analysis. As Ritzer acknowledges, it is not necessarily the case that the local and distinctive is a progressive force. By the same token, activities that lack distinctive substance can be socially useful and a force for good. Moreover, nothing and something exist in a dialectical relationship. The two are never static. At this juncture of modern capitalist development, according to Ritzer, *nothing* has more resonance with the capitalist system.

Despite certain reservations, I would thoroughly recommend this book as a contribution to both globalization and social theory. Indeed, *The Globalization of Nothing* offers a fine example of theory building and construction. Social theory is difficult to do. It is sometimes an even greater chore to read. That said, Ritzer's writings put the fun, as well as the interesting and the accessible, back into social theory. He is not afraid to bring in popular illustrations like films to make serious theoretical statements. In this respect, Ritzer is in good company. The current philosopher king, Slavoj Žižek, uses similar literary devices. His writing echoes the style of grand American sociologists such as Becker, Goffman, Gouldner and Nisbet. The style is clear and unpretentious but, at the same time, precise and elegant. He keeps to C. Wright Mills' dictum: 'To overcome the academic *prose* you have first to overcome the academic *pose*' (Wright Mills, 1970[1959]: 240). All the more, his arguments chime with, and provide a theoretical sheen for, what is happening all around us. Ritzer's work forms an important part of the conscience not only of American sociology but also of American society.

Note

- 1 The title of this essay is borrowed from a phrase used by Featherstone and Lash (1995).

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