

# European Journal of Social Theory

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## **Book Review: The Globalization of Nothing**

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*European Journal of Social Theory* 2005; 8; 241

DOI: 10.1177/136843100500800209

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foundations. Social solidarity has to do with an existential condition common to every human being, a condition characterized by an infinite and unfulfilled desire of a unity without contradictions, by the ignorance of the last meaning of our existence, by suffering and weakness. Following the lines of reasoning of authors such as Maurice Blanchot, Jean Luc Nancy, and Roberto Esposito, the awareness of a common ontological condition characterized by basic emotional tonalities such as anxiety, joy, fear, tedium, suffering should stimulate us to think of social solidarity more in terms of need than in terms of what we have in common. Finally, this common ontological condition should press us to think about tolerance in terms of epistemic modesty towards our own claims, more than in terms of indifference or radical relativism, and should foster a sense of ethical responsibility towards other people and their authenticity.

## References

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## ■ Review

**George Ritzer**, *The Globalization of Nothing*. London: Sage, 2004. xix + 259pp. (inc. index), £58.00/\$74.95, ISBN 0761988068 (hbk); £16.99/US\$32.95, ISBN 0761988076 (pbk)

In the wonderfully titled *The Globalization of Nothing*, George Ritzer attempts to bring all the elements of globalization within the purview of a single, all-encompassing theory. The problem, according to Ritzer, is that thinking about globalization has become enmeshed in trying to understand the local impact of transnational processes rather than looking to understand the dynamics of global transformation. Studying globalization does not mean that we have to abandon the sociological traditions of modernity which have served us so well: globalization is wrapped up in the dynamics of modernity itself and our sociological approaches to globalization should reflect this.

Ritzer approaches this task through an examination of the 'globalization of nothing'. According to Ritzer, 'nothing' is dominating our lives. By nothing, he is referring to 'social forms which are centrally conceived, controlled and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content' (p. 3). Four types of nothing are elaborated upon: non-places; non-things; non-people; non-services. Fast food restaurants – McDonald's and Starbucks are singled out – are replacing local cafés. Shopping malls are replacing local markets. The supermarket and the fast-food restaurant are 'classic examples of non-places where non-service is the norm' (p. 69). Nothing cannot properly be understood except in relation to something. Something is defined as social forms which are indigenously conceived and controlled, and relatively rich in distinctive substantive content. In other words, something is unique. Every place, thing, person, and service can be placed on a continuum with nothing at one end and something at the other. The point, states Ritzer, is not that the world is increasingly full of nothing, but that nothing is proliferating around the world as a result of the globalization of nothing (p. xii). That which is centrally conceived and controlled is relatively easy to globalize.

The problem with this aspect of Ritzer's thesis is that it seeks to develop a social theory which is rather too neat and tidy, with all loose ends tied up. In seeking a unified theory of globalization, Americanization, and McDonaldization (thereby linking this book with much of his earlier work), Ritzer claims rather too much for the 'globalization of nothing'. Of particular concern is Ritzer's mono-perspectival reading of nothing: the idea that non-places, non-things, non-people, non-services cannot be viewed, experienced or interpreted in any other way. In other words, there is no opportunity for us to experience hamburgers, airports, call-centres, Internet shopping, or a cup of coffee at Starbucks in a way which accords them the status of things, places, services, etc. But contrary to the globalization of nothing thesis, for many people, McDonald's or Starbucks exist as places rather than non-places: the people who work there perhaps, or customers who find the openness and general atmosphere less exclusive, homophobic or racist than the local pub, for example. Also, I was always given to believe that Howard Schultz, the driving force behind Starbucks' growth, modelled the friendly café-style and the open seating arrangements on the sociological idea of the 'great good place' to use Oldenburg's phrase, quoted by Ritzer to emphasize the distinctiveness of places vis-à-vis the kind of non-place represented by Starbucks. In short, Ritzer does not allow for the possibility that what he believes are non-places could be experienced in other ways by other people, and his line of argument contains more than a whiff of high versus low culture snobbery. The result is that this aspect of Ritzer's theory is every bit as 'centrally conceived and controlled' as the social forms which are deemed 'nothing' in this book.

The growth and spread of nothing in all its forms can be accounted for in terms of 'grobalization' which Ritzer defines as a supplement to the idea of 'glocalization' as developed by Roland Robertson (Robertson, 1992). Grobalization – the growth strategies of corporations, organizations and nation-states – involves various sub-processes: capitalism, Americanization and McDonaldization. Ritzer argues that conventional approaches to globalization and social change have focused on the conflict between the global and the local. The key dynamic, however, is the conflict between grobalization and glocalization. Whereas, glocalization involves the interaction of the global and the local, grobalization is the expansion of homogeneity (p. 75). Grobalization suggests a unidirectional, homogenizing process whereby local groups lose ability to innovate and manoeuvre. Put simply, the argument is that 'capitalism, McDonaldization, and Americanization are all grobalizing processes deeply implicated in the proliferation of nothing throughout the world' (p. 90). Grobalization centres on the imperialistic ambitions of nation-states, organizations, and corporations, and in particular the ways in which they are impelled to expand and impose themselves over large areas, thereby aiding the spread of nothing. For Ritzer, the idea of grobalization is necessary in order to provide a more balanced view of globalization (p. 73), and in particular a more balanced view of the relationship between the global and the local. This is necessary because the idea of glocalization (as developed by Roland Robertson) lays too much emphasis on the creative potential of glocalization; new spaces, new meaning, new experiences, heterogeneity, etc. The idea of glocalization suggests that the conflict between the local and global can be resolved in terms of the glocal, but in doing so it seriously downplays the extent to which the local is disappearing. In other words, the idea of glocalization does not recognize that grobalization represents the death of the local. Rather than globalization being conceived as the struggle between the global and the local, it can be more productively thought of as a conflict between the grobal and the glocal.

In terms of understanding the dynamics of globalization, it could be argued that we need a concept like grobalization, particularly if we are persuaded by Ritzer that at root

globalization is located in western imperialism, capitalism expansion and Americanization. This has the major advantage of according globalization a centre, a dynamic, and an expansionist logic. One thrust of his argument is that sociologists have been distracted from apprehending the full import of globalization because of a costly dalliance with postmodernity. Whereas globalization emphasizes transnational expansion and global conformity to common cultural codes, glocalization suggests diversity, hybridity, irreverence and pastiche, all themes associated with postmodernity. Ritzer writes, 'it should come as no surprise that globalization and glocalization offer very different images of the impact of transnational processes. After all, they tend to stem from the antithetical bases of modern and postmodern social theory' (p. 75). For Ritzer (borrowing a distinction made famous by Zygmunt Bauman), what is needed to properly apprehend globalization is a sociology of postmodernity rather than the development of postmodern sociology. Ritzer aligns himself with the former and his reinterpretation of globalization represents a 'decidedly modern approach' (p. xvi).

So in addition to approaches to globalization being divided according to the emphasis placed on glocalization or globalization, they are divided along an axis formed along the lines of whether they exhibit modern or postmodern tendencies. However, it is not helpful or accurate to characterize either Robertson's position or the idea of glocalization more generally as postmodern. Robertson (1992: 138–45) has outlined his own position on the relation between globalization and postmodernity, and it is much more sophisticated than seeing globalization in terms of the global expansion of modernity. In choosing to categorize the social science literature on globalization in this way Ritzer sacrifices a great deal in order to maintain the orderliness and simplicity of his thesis. What emerges is little more than an over-wrought version of a thesis that was doing the rounds a few years ago: globalization is an economic process the cultural logic of which is postmodernity.

Ritzer sees globalization as a unidirectional process of transformation which has an origin, a centre, a single dynamic, and a cultural logic which is spreading to encompass the world. Theoretically, this is a wholly regressive step. The debate on whether globalization is best seen as the spread of a single modernity throughout the world or whether globalization represents the entanglement of a multiplicity of modernities, which is what Robertson's intervention has in part stimulated, has developed apace in the last decade or so, although that is not reflected in Ritzer's work. Perhaps thinking about globalization has become too complex, unruly and open-ended and is in need of some intellectual pruning. If that is the case, Ritzer has performed a salutary task. Globalization is a simpler and more straightforward process after Ritzer's treatment, which renders the world intelligible within a single, unified theory.

## Reference

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