

“Globalization”

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“Geography is still important. Globalisation has not diminished the economic significance of location” - John Kay proudly declared in his fortnightly column in the world’s famous pinkish newspaper, *The Financial Times* (10 January 2001: 14). The fact that business gurus like Kay write about globalisation is absolutely nothing new; indeed, some geographers have associated the dreaming up of “globalisation” as a key word in the new century with such business gurus (Taylor et al., 2001). What is particularly interesting in Kay’s FT column, however, is his unreserved defence for the importance of place and location in globalisation. Coming from outside Geography as an intellectual discipline, his views on globalisation therefore provide significant legitimacy for the claim that geographers might have some very useful things to say about globalisation.

Globalisation as both material and discursive processes

Although the now influential text on globalisation by economic geographer Peter Dicken’s—*Global Shift* – was published as early as 1986, geographers had not been very evident in the “globalisation debate” until the early 1990s when “the end of geography” thesis became increasingly popularised in the media, policy circles and even academic worlds (see Ohmae, 1990; O’Brien, 1992). In its essence, this thesis argues that the juggernaut of globalisation, as a planetary force, is capable of penetrating all kinds of national boundaries and eroding any geographical differences therein. The convergence effects of globalisation are so strong that there is no place for geography in the processes of global change.

The critique of this strong convergence thesis of globalisation has reverberated seriously in the social sciences (Held et al., 1999) and notably in human geography (Yeung, 1998). In their laudable efforts to relate geography to globalisation, Taylor et al. (2001: 1) noted that “[w]hatever your own opinion may be, any intellectual engagement with social change in the twenty first century has to address this concept [globalisation] seriously, and assess its capacity to explain the world we currently inhabit”. It is now generally agreed among human geographers that globalisation should be viewed as both a set of material processes of transformation and resistance *and* a set of contested ideologies and discourses that operate across a variety of spatial scales., globalisation has seemingly led to significant material transformations in the global economy, most appropriately termed “global shift” by Dicken (1998). These global transformations entail the rapid proliferation of cross-border trade and investments by global corporations and financial institutions, the ruthless penetration of global cultures epitomised by McDonald’s, Hollywood movies, MTV and the internet, and the reluctant power shift from nation states to global governance.

These global transformations, nevertheless, are not geographically even and without their resistance at different spatial scales and in different countries/regions. First, the global reach of corporate activities has failed to transform the world economy into a singular global production factory. In fact, what appears to be more convincing is the phenomenon of regionalisation through which regions have emerged as the major motor of the global economy (; Scott, 1998). Global production seems to be taking place in such high-tech regions as Silicon Valley (northern California), Third Italy (Emilia-Romagna) and Baden-Württemberg (southern Germany). Global finance remains highly rooted in such existing global finance centres as the City of London, New York and Tokyo, and new international financial centres as Hong Kong and Singapore) Economic

geographers have therefore argued for the examination of specific regions and territorial ensembles in order to appreciate the inherently geographical nature of globalisation processes. Other geographical studies have shown that while economic globalisation has been spearheaded by the cross-border operations of transnational corporations, the spatial transfer of business and industrial practices is by no means unproblematic (Leyshon and Pollard, 2000). There remain significant place-based institutional limits to the globalisation of business cultures and economic practices (Yeung, 2000). For example, while capital can be transferred almost effortlessly across space, labour remains highly place-bound and locally embedded (Martin, 2000). In other words, globalisation encounters most “friction” over space at the local and regional scales. It is clearly unable to erase spatial differentiation even in the realm of economic processes and governance. To cite the example of Singapore, even though it is often hailed as one of the most globalised economies of the world today, the state remains firmly the key driver behind Singapore’s developmental trajectories. In fact, each round of economic liberalisation and deregulation in Singapore is accompanied by another round of state re-regulation, albeit in different organisational and institutional forms (see also Yeung and Dicken, 2000).

Second, the arrival of global cultures has further accentuated the awareness of local differences and cultural responses. While the global flows of information, images and artefacts are greatly facilitated by the advancement in telecommunications and transport technologies, the recipients and consumption of these flows remain highly territorialised and embedded in specific geographical boundaries. Although few people in developed countries do not have access to global cultures in their embodied and commodified forms, a large segment of the population in developing countries are still highly dependent on localised products and cultural services. Most Filipinos and Brazilians, for example, are still drinking their local beverages instead of Coca Cola and Pepsi. Furthermore, global cultures are equally resisted in many countries that view these cultural inflows as threatening to their national interests and political legitimacy. There are counter-movements to the globalisation of cultures through the reassertion of local/national cultures, religions and other forms of social identities. Despite the dominance of American movies in the English-speaking world, the local movie industry in India and Hong Kong continues to thrive from strength to strength. These counter-movements, enmeshed in the global web of cultural flows, have created a world of cultural mosaics and differences. We are certainly still far away from a culturally homogeneous world of a global village.

Third, the political economy of globalisation does not necessarily indicate the demise of nation states as the primary locus of political governance. Some geographers have argued that the world is not becoming more unruly and disorderly in the governance sense (Herod et al., 1998). Rather, there is a reconfiguration of political governance and institutional power through which the nation state is joined by supra-national institutions and others institutions (e.g. Non Governmental Organisations) to govern globalisation. Just witness the immensely complex organisation behind recent anti-globalisation protests in Seattle (USA), Melbourne (Australia) and Genoa (Italy). Nation states worldwide are experiencing a relative decline in their capacities to control the whereabouts of global corporations, to provide social welfare for their citizens, and to contain the post-Cold War world threats. These states are, however, not fixed entities to be overwhelmed by the unruly processes of globalisation. Indeed, some nation states are active agents in promoting globalisation, for example through the liberalisation of financial markets) Still other nation states have globalised themselves by building inter-state consensus and contributing to trans-state sources of power and authority. It is therefore too premature to proclaim the death of nation states.

Globalisation is also as much a set of material processes as a set of contested ideologies and discourses (see Leyshon, 1997) The ways through which globalisation is represented can have equally significant impact on material processes. While we cannot equate globalisation with neoliberalism *per se* (i.e. defined as a political-economic ideology in favour of market mechanisms

in lieu of state intervention), it is true that neoliberal programmes of policies have greatly facilitated the advent of globalisation. Just think of how liberalisation and market-based economic policies have enabled certain giant corporations to emerge and dominate the global economy. In other words, globalisation cannot proceed smoothly without its supporters and champions. As expected, business gurus, media pundits and policy makers (and even academics) are often the strongest supporters of globalisation. In championing for globalisation and making it appear as a natural force, these people have essentially “naturalised” globalisation processes and portrayed them as “necessary”, “inevitable” and “beyond our control”. Powerless citizens have to choose either wholesale embracing of globalisation or economic decline and social exclusion.

What’s so geographical about globalisation

What geographers have plainly shown in their recent work is that this either/or ideological choice of globalisation should be questioned (see Cox, 1997). In fact, localities can reassert their power in the global economy through certain discursive practices and/or constructing alternative globalisations. These practices include the building up of social capital, the experimentation with non-market forms of economic exchanges, the reorganisation of local work practices and so on. To challenge the ideological supremacy of neoliberalism and its much broader processes of globalisation, some localities and communities have actively demystified globalisation as a necessary and inevitable phenomenon. The rise of local civil societies in many parts of Western Europe, for example, is a direct answer by localities to regulate the apparently unruly effects of globalisation.

To sum up this discussion so far, globalisation is understood in Geography as a set of material processes and discursive practices that operate across different spatial scales. The differences that these spatial scales make are that globalisation is about changing relationships between geographical scales and that these scales are socially constructed through ideologies and discourses (Taylor et al., 2001: 3). Geography’s greatest contribution to the globalisation debate is the recognition of how spatial scales matter in our understanding of the complex operations of globalisation processes. Globalisation is sometimes highly localised, whereas in other times it is the region that contain most of the effects of globalisation. Viewed in this geographical perspective, globalisation is *not* necessarily an essential global force that homogenises national and local differences. It has as many local and regional dimensions as being a global force.

Bringing Geography back into the globalisation agenda

Now that we have a better appreciation of the geographical specificity of globalisation, it is perhaps time to move beyond the simplistic notion of globalisation as merely a set of end-state phenomenon. There are at least three important geographical questions for the study of globalisation by future researchers. First, we need more balanced empirical assessment of globalisation processes. At both research and policy levels, it is really not helpful just to embrace globalisation wholeheartedly or to condemn it unreservedly. We know from previous studies that like the two-headed Roman god, Janus, globalisation can harm as well as benefit localities. It is imperative for future researchers to focus on the uneven geographical outcomes of globalisation processes and to evaluate critically these outcomes in order to arrive at better-informed policies. Second, there seems to be too many top-down studies of globalisation. There is clearly a role for bottom-up studies of globalisation by taking an agency approach, i.e. paying more attention to what people do and say. We need to understand not only the strategies of global corporations and international organisations. But equally important is the demand on us to appreciate how globalisation is contested by social actors like you and me and those anti-globalisation protestors (and their executive counterparts in transnational firms and banks) at various geographical scales, whether at the level of the regional resurgence of religious activities or at the level of individual household decisions. Last but not least,

future researchers need globally coordinated research that is well executed locally. In other words, globalisation research inherently requires global cooperation in research initiatives and networks across various countries and regions. Through these cross-national/regional efforts, we might have a better chance of coming to grapple with globalisation as a complex set of phenomenon that are increasingly shaping the life of most people on this planet.

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