

Globalization: a brief exploration of its challenging, contested and competing concepts.

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Abstract

This article explores the often challenging, contested and competing concepts associated with globalization. It examines the foundations of ideas commonly advanced to explain globalization, recognising that these may have roots in disciplines other than geography. The underpinnings of globalization are discussed in relation to both processes and networks - as opposed to any narrow consideration of globalization as a singular condition - highlighting the significance, for geographers in particular, of its spatial aspects. Here education is selected for particular consideration - both as an activity that is prone to the forces of globalization, and with respect to what is taught to young people about globalization. The conclusions draw together some of the different approaches to, and understandings of, the concepts of globalization.

Globalization as concept(s)

Globalization as a concept - or, more accurately, as a variety of related concepts - is challenging to engage with for academics, educators and the general public alike. Although the word 'globalization' has been in common use in academic and non-academic discourse for over thirty years, it remains rather an oblique, slippery or 'spongy' term (Bonefeld 2006). Indeed, Beck (2000) referred to the concepts surrounding globalization as 'fuzzy', likening our efforts to define it as being similar to trying to nail a blancmange to a wall. The reasons for such 'slipperiness' are essentially twofold: firstly, the concepts that underpin the term are often contested, misunderstood or misrepresented; secondly, the word 'globalization' is adopted by a plethora of commentators in ways which are (unsurprisingly) best suited to their particular interests and arguments. Many employ the term - but often without recourse to definition, or any real attempt to provide suitable contextual justification for its use. For example, a politician (say) will use 'globalization' differently to an academic, while a journalist (say) will use it differently to an economist - each will apply concepts associated with globalization in ways which suit their case. 'Globalization' is a term which often appears in the public domain via popular media - frequently inappropriately, or inaccurately - 'to describe a wide range of multifaceted, complex, processes and outcomes' (Butt 2016), or simply as a 'scare-word' (Beck 2000) deployed as a reaction to fears about the inexorable rise of global capitalism. It has therefore become something of a portmanteau word - used to assert either the problems, or benefits, of events at the global scale that may be considered too involved to explain in detail to a lay population (see Garrett, Evans and Williams 2006). To complicate things further, the forces of globalization may cause considerable

short term change in some locations, while in others similar forces may have an almost negligible impact (Apple, 2010).

In summary, globalization – representing a series of concepts and associated processes – is a popular, but challenging, term (Amin 1997, Giddens 2002). It is difficult to understand, precisely because it is used so casually to reference a wide variety of social, political, economic and cultural factors (as well as processes and conditions) at a range of spatial scales (Butt 2016). As Hirst and Thompson (1996) asserted twenty years ago, there are so many versions of globalization that to review them all would necessitate a ‘lifetime’s work’.

Given these problems, and in an attempt to initially narrow our focus, let me start by restating the globalizing processes outlined by Lauder, Brown, Dillabough and Halsey in the introductory chapter to their collection of essays in *Education, Globalization and Social Change*. They identified the main aspects of globalization as follows:

- people and countries are becoming more interdependent globally, and as a consequence national and cultural boundaries are (for many) becoming less significant;
- national and regional economies are generally declining in importance, compared to the influence of global trade and markets;
- information technology (including the internet) has achieved greater connectivity between people globally;
- travel (particularly cheap air travel) has increased connectivity globally;
- global networks (of money, goods, services, migrants, students, knowledge, information, music, ideas, technology, etc.) are growing, and the flow within these networks is increasing rapidly;
- time and space are being compressed (after Lauder, Brown, Dillabough and Halsey 2006).

Here the integration of culture, trade, information, ideas, movement and networks at the global scale – all of which involve some compression of time and space – are duly acknowledged. Such integration almost inevitably leads to greater interdependence of people, hastened by rapid improvements in communications and connectivity across the globe (via the internet, mobile phones, and telecommunications) (Axford 2012, 2016). But, as mentioned above, according to the interests of those who use the term, the emphasis given to these key processes of globalization differs – for example, at the turn of the century, the International Monetary Fund

(IMF) (IMF 2000) stressed four basic aspects of globalization: trade and transactions, capital and investment movements, migration and movement of people, and the dissemination of knowledge. By contrast, environmental organizations may seek to promote their particular causes and concerns by focusing on the challenges of global warming, air and water pollution, or sustainability of the natural environment (Bridges 2002); while political groups might comment on globalization affecting the fate of the nation state and supranational institutions, or highlight its effects on exacerbating social, economic, or political inequalities (Wolf 2001, Fotopoulos 2001). While some of the concepts and processes captured under the umbrella of globalization are therefore common to all, the emphasis shifts according to the particular interests of the commentator.

Globalization clearly provokes different reactions from people. For some, global capitalism is laying waste to everything before it – severely damaging people’s culture, rights, identities, politics, or indeed the very idea of nationhood; for others its effects are more benign, even beneficial. In this regard, Jack Demaine (2002) helpfully reminds us of the ‘sometimes overly optimistic, sometimes overly pessimistic, ideas that characterise many accounts of globalization and its effects’ (p.118). Citing the work of Richard Falk (1993, 1999), he supports the conceptualization of globalization occurring both ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ – the former linked to the enterprise of transnational corporations (TNCs), international banks and more economically developed countries, the latter to ‘social forces, movements, voluntary, non-governmental organization that seek to promote ‘global civil society’; a community beyond the territorial state committed to human rights, economic fairness, social justice and environmental sustainability’ (Demaine 2002, p.121). Globalization ‘from above’ is more powerful and pervasive than that ‘from below’, but neither stands alone - they each have connections to the other. In essence, there are those who believe that globalization is an inevitable consequence of changes (predominantly) in technology and communication – the effects of which may be broadly beneficial to economies and societies, locally and globally – and those who see the forces of globalization as destructive and hegemonic, leading to a largely unregulated world economy. Such positioning may owe more to personal and political outlooks and values, than analytical enquiry.

For geographers, by virtue of our particular disciplinary focus, the spatial aspects of globalization often come to the fore – for example, among others, Held et al (1999) choose to refer to the ‘widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnection’ and to the global processes which form a ‘continuum with the local, national and regional’. Geographers would therefore argue that the concepts of space, place and scale should be central to any understanding of globalization, linking to notions of connectivity and relationality (Jackson 2006). Although geographers have made significant contributions (if, initially, rather belatedly, see Dicken 2004)

to understanding globalization, sociologists and social policy analysts have arguably better developed our conceptual understanding of the effects of globalization on people.

The social impacts of globalization should certainly not be ignored, despite a tendency among most academic disciplines to prioritise predominantly economic readings of its associated processes. As Barrie Axford explains, with reference to the impact of improved global communication systems on social process and social justice:

‘Instances and patterns of globalized connectivity through communication tell us something about the changing nature of social interaction and the very idea of sociality. They depict a world in process and of ties, both fleeting and long-term, established and afforded through the capillaries of communication. In this context the significance of adopting a theoretical lens which also allows us to focus on aspects of social justice, as a principle that should underpin any consideration of globalization, becomes clear’ (Axford 2016).

According to the sociologist John Holmwood (2007), the global mass media’s coverage of major world events has had ‘the paradoxical effect of rendering others as both immediate and remote’ (p.86) - a now frequently recognised effect of globalization, which can seemingly portray the global, as local. This conceptualisation sits easily with Amin’s (1997) notion of ‘out there – in here’ connectivity. It perhaps also connects with the popular aphorism that we should ‘think globally, and act locally’. We are well used to the ways in which modern media and communications can distort and confuse the boundaries of both territories and societies, making distant events appear immediate and bringing together the local with the national, international, or global. Pertinent examples often serve to illustrate such concepts in powerful ways. Demaine (2002), for instance, among others, cites Beck’s (2000) trenchant observation, made at the start of the millennium, that in Berlin’s Tegel airport:

‘During the evening, airport announcements heard in Berlin are made from California because the time difference allows an American worker to be paid a day-time rate whereas a German worker would have to be paid more for late working’ (Demaine 2002, p.119).

This speaks profoundly about the ways in which transnational corporations (TNCs) can operate to save money by exploiting the benefits of their global reach, and also as an illustration of the positive effects of increased global communications and connectivity. In a similar vein Butt (2016) observes:

‘The spatial shift which sits at the heart of globalization has been achieved by ‘cutting across’ political frontiers and by reforming ‘local’, ‘regional’, ‘national’ and ‘continental’ space. In essence, globalization has led to an expansion of the scale and spatial reach within which power is organised and exercised by countries, Trans National Corporations and other organizations; as a consequence our increasingly interconnected global system reveals that the exercise of power through the decisions and actions of agencies on one continent can have significant consequences for nations, communities, households and individuals on another’ (Butt 2016 pp. 47).

Globalization and education

It is worthwhile pausing to consider two aspects of globalization and education – firstly, the impact of globalizing processes on the *act of education* (that is, the effects of globalization on the spread of curricula, the sharing of educational aims, the growth of summative assessment systems, the ‘borrowing’ of education policies); and secondly, on which aspects of globalization are taught to young people, that is: the *content of education*. Both the act and content of education intersect.

The globalization *of* education, as opposed to the teaching of globalization *in* education, is in itself an interesting phenomenon. It is apparent that the forces of globalization currently have a direct impact on the uptake of particular education policies and practices worldwide – witness not only the ‘borrowing’ of policies (usually from more to less economically developed nations), but also the growth in movements of students internationally, the increasing uniformity of national curricula and national standards, and the proliferation of similar modes of teaching and forms of assessment across different jurisdictions (Butt and Lambert 2014). This is partly due to the impact of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, whereby education policy makers consider the ways in which education is delivered in nations where children perform well in these standardised tests and look to mirror such performance – sometimes by the uncritical adoption of the host country’s education policies and practices. This is, of course, a response that is fraught with issues, given the non-complementarity of different nations’ populations, cultures, historical background, and educational traditions. At the global scale state-sponsored education appears to be facing numerous challenges, exacerbated in part by policy makers looking abroad for easy solutions to their persistent education problems. Additionally public sector downsizing and creeping privatisation have had an impact on state provision of education in many countries (Apple 2005, 2010). Burbules and Torres (2000) were quick to recognise the effects of globalization on the adoption of education policies around the world, with the more economically developed countries often exerting a strong influence on the

practices of the less. The increased use of performance management in schools, the deregulation of education services, and the marketization of school choice have their antecedents in some of the leading world economies. This can tempt politicians into seeking market-led solutions to problems, accepting the gradual refocusing of education as a private, rather than as a public, good (Smith 2002, Butt 2011). In an increasingly globalized world, educationists are tasked by politicians to deliver greater international competitiveness and economic growth, with investment in education expected to have a direct, and measureable, impact on raising human capital (Spring, 2009). The need for nation states to produce globally competitive workforces has shaped education reform agendas in many countries (with direct impacts on the reform of teacher education programmes, schools and curricula (Furlong 2013, Wang et al, 2011)).

The theme of globalization, as a set of concepts and processes, offers distinct challenges to those who teach about it. Many educators choose to focus on economic aspects, while others may highlight a variety of social, political, cultural, ideological and technological themes. Within this context the consideration of social justice, alongside the understanding of processes and outcomes, should feature strongly. Globalization, after all, offers a convenient site from which to explore the interface between space/place, economic development and social justice. Geographers and geography educators undoubtedly have a significant role to play in highlighting the broad sweep of equality of opportunities issues and how these play out spatially, from local to global. These may, perhaps, include consideration of the efforts of different societies 'striving for equality of access to health care, employment rights, education, social security and public services' (Butt 2016 p.47). In turn this opens up enquiry into aspects of the fair distribution of wealth and social mobility – where individuals and societies ideally strive to share the benefits and burdens of globalization.

The need to develop in young people a sense of global mindedness is considerable, although it is easy to promote fears and anxiety about globalization without counterbalancing these with adequate explanations, or alternative conceptions. Explanation, as opposed to mere description, must be key. It is tempting to teach about the ways in which globalizing forces can reduce wages, despoil environments, promote exploitation and erode cultural norms. However, we must be mindful that the forces of globalization create both winners and losers, not just losers:

'It is .. simplistic to assume that all the pressures associated with globalization will fall upon the traditionally disadvantaged. Some lower waged workers in developing countries may actually benefit from enhanced employment prospects, subsequently forcing workers in the developed world to experience more challenging employment prospects (such as lower wages, contracted work,

poorer conditions of service, less job diversity). This situation is neither uniform, nor absolute' (Butt 2016, p.40).

In relation to analysing the effects of globalization, TNCs tend to come in for a substantial degree of criticism. Much of this is richly deserved. Many TNCs have serious questions to answer with respect to their role in worsening social injustice, reducing workers' wages, restricting unionisation of labour, ignoring or flouting workers' rights, and exploiting child labour. Nevertheless, it is also worth considering that in some countries (although certainly not all) TNCs offer enhance opportunities for gaining paid work – which are readily accepted by many, who seize their chance to achieve greater social mobility. The effects of globalization are often nuanced, and although we must be vigilant to the scandalous offences against human rights perpetrated by certain individuals and corporations, we should also be more magnanimous in recognising the opportunities offered to some workers, consumers and nation states (see Shipman, 2002, Norberg, 2004).

As a connected series of concepts, the theme of globalization can open up opportunities for exciting learning, relevant to the present day. For example, an emerging focus is the need for a 'globalised' appreciation of the effects of conflict and the means of its resolution. At a time when the global displacement of people due to conflict is at its highest for over 70 years, we are facing the biggest conflict-induced migration crisis in recent history; the curriculum opportunities to study such phenomena must not be missed (Bengtsson and Dryden-Peterson 2016, UNHCR 2014).

Conclusion

The consequences of globalization are not new. The processes that contribute to globalization are well established, having origins that go back many years. But concepts are open to challenge, contestation and change – they are prone to competing definitions and interpretations. Some have questioned the usefulness of the concept(s) of globalization in the strongest terms. In essence, if globalization is a term that is used to say everything, it says nothing. This echoes Hirst and Thompson's (1996) observation, from the mid-1990s, that globalization is neither as significant, nor as important, as many commentators have claimed. Indeed, Hay and Marsh (2000) also argued that its' most successful application was not in seeking new, *prima facie* explanations, but as a means of reframing *existing* processes.

Here I have urged that educators should resist the temptation to over-simplify, or casually demonise, the effects of globalization - as inevitable, unswervingly malignant and unidirectional. Studying the concepts of globalization offers opportunities not only to explore a variety of global

processes, but also the chance to raise important questions about social justice, inequality, identity, human rights and citizenship. By considering such issues young people can explore their own, and other peoples, values and attitudes. Sub fields in the study of globalization (re) appear regularly – a focus on the globalized effects of terror, conflict and forced migration (see Bengtsson and Dryden-Peterson 2016), and on time (Huebener, et al 2016), are among some of the more recent examples.

Young people need to embrace and understand how our increasingly globalized world functions – the music they listen to, the images they watch, the clothes they wear, the food they eat, who they associate with (either face to face, or virtually), and the jobs they will eventually do are all affected by globalization. Overlapping, networked, spaces of activity – which may not necessarily be measured solely by *geographical* distance, or understood with reference to what is close to hand - need to be understood by all those living their lives in the twenty-first century (Blundell 2016).

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