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Introduction

A misleading dichotomy

Global theory provides the mood music of contemporary academic and political commentary.¹ The formulas of global theory are as ubiquitous as their purported global content. It is, though, difficult to identify and to appraise global theory, even though, or perhaps because, it constitutes the *Zeitgeist*. Global theory is not one thing. Neither what is meant by 'the global' nor its theoretical framing are things, and putting the two together does not make one big thing. They are concepts that function differently insofar as they are related variously to other concepts. Theoretical understandings of the world can take many forms, embracing causal analysis, historical periodisation, ethical and ideological appraisal and conceptual clarification. The term 'globe' can stand for the planet Earth, the totality of things and the myriad relations that compose Earth. Global theory can focus on the goal of future development or point to contingent possibilities that lie ahead, and may also signify the ways in which people might and should identify themselves and relate to one another and to their environment. To envisage global theory as univocal is misleading, given the variety of ways in which it can function. The tendency to essentialise global theory neither begins nor ends with the contemporary situation. While contemporary global theory represents a diversity of ways of understanding the world, it would also be a mistake to accept the prevailing presumption that preceding theories either ignore the global context or lack the conceptual means to explore global connections. To deprecate preceding

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theories for failing to conceive of global developments distorts both the understanding of contemporary global theory and the conceptual range and empirical reach of preceding theories.

As the dust settles on the profusion of theories which focus on the global in the twenty-first century, it is evident that there are as many divisions between global theorists as there are between the proponents and opponents of globalisation.² The multiplicity of the concerns, styles and claims of global theorists tends to be underplayed, not only by global theorists, but also by their detractors. Rosenberg's *The Follies of Globalisation Theory* is a thoughtful and radical critique of global theory, emphasising how its dismissal of classical modern sociology is both unjustified and misleading, and highlighting how the causal claims of key global theorists, such as Scholte and Giddens, are unsubstantiated.³ In *The Follies of Globalisation Theory* and in subsequent essays, Rosenberg is an acute critic of aspects of global theory, and yet it is not altogether clear that global theorists standardly make causal claims on behalf of globalisation.⁴ Global theorists without exception canvass the significance of a global perspective, maintaining that a global reference point is a necessary feature of theories of contemporary society, but they do so from a variety of vantage points and for numerous reasons. Likewise, they converge on a common critique of preceding theories, which they disparage for a variety of reasons. These reasons tend to converge upon perceived inadequacies in content and form. The content of preceding theories is held to neglect the global context of social and individual development; their form is criticised for confusing contingency and necessity by taking the course of contingent historical events to represent a necessary development and by presuming that the ideological commitments which inform their accounts of historical development are incontestable rather than fallible judgements.

The focus of global theorists' critique of predecessors is on the modern theorists, who review, theorise and evaluate modern society, for global theorists tend to distinguish global society from preceding modern developments. The self-image of the modern world is framed by theories that reflect upon it, distinguish its characteristic features, and formulate a normative basis for its further development. Conceptions of modernity are products of modern theorists' theoretical explorations of its character. Global theory in part defines itself via a critique of modernity. Global theorists are united in their

assumption that the process of globalisation has constituted a break from preceding social formations. The ways in which this break is formulated reflect the distinct modalities of global theory. Giddens, for instance, takes globalisation to constitute a distinct form of modernity, namely late modernity. Albrow and Beck conceive of globalisation as ushering in a new postmodern global age; whereas Hardt and Negri, after associating global developments with postmodernism, appear to have settled for adopting the language of altermodernity to characterise the age in which they frame their radical critique of contemporary global power.⁵ The common assumption entertained by global theorists, however, is that preceding modern theories fail to recognise the global character of the social world. Global theorists also tend to agree that theory is not to be conducted in the guise of modern predecessors.

Global theorists' critiques of the form and content of modern theory are inter-related in that modern predecessors are disparaged for misrepresenting the mobile and malleable character of social structures by exaggerating the independence and stability of such entities as the industrial proletariat, the nuclear family and the nation-state. From the global theorists' perspective, these structures are misconstrued if they are identified and presented as being fixed and durable outside an informing global context. The moral universe of modern theorists is also perceived to be partial because of their adherence to the perspectives of particular peoples, nations and classes, and because of their failure to embrace a universal worldwide standpoint. The limits of modern theorists are also detected in their presumption of a teleological pathway that circumscribes the directions along which the course of history is imagined to proceed. Global theory indicts preceding theory for its foreclosure on the possibilities of the future. In preceding theory, technological, economic and political forms of global inter-action are unrecognised and unanticipated because of a blinkered vision in which present social and political arrangements are mapped on to the future. Global theory indicts modern theorists for overriding contingency and difference in their obsession with sketching grand narratives of progress which project the future in the light of a contemporary admiration of rational liberal regimes or disciplined communist utopias.

Global theory follows postmodernism in its negative and essentialised reading of predecessors, and thus commits a performative