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Problematizing the Global: An Introduction to Global Culture Revisited

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Special section on Global Culture Revisited, *Theory, Culture & Society Annual Review* 37(7-8), December 2020.

Abstract

This paper serves as an introduction to the special section on Global Culture Revisited which commemorates the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the 1990 Global Culture special issue. It examines the development of interest in the various strands of globalization and the question of whether there can be a global culture. The paper discusses the emergence of alternative global histories and the problematization of global knowledge. It examines the view that the current covid-19 pandemic signals a turning point, or change of epoch, that marks the end of peak globalization (Gray, Mignolo). The paper also discusses the view that global was always a limited cartographic term which failed to adequately grasp our terrestrial location on the Earth (Latour). Currently, there is considerable speculation about the emergent politics of a new world order, with civilizational states set alongside nation-states, opening up an epoch of greater pluriversality, and at the same time greater uncertainty.

Keywords

Globalization; global culture; Roland Robertson; global knowledge; migrants; pandemics; Walter Mignolo; pluriversality; cosmopolitics; Bruno Latour; cosmotechnics; civilizational state.

It is now thirty years since *Theory Culture & Society* published what became seen as a pathbreaking special issue on Global Culture in 1990.¹ Globalization was very much in the air in the wake of the integration of the world's financial markets in 1986,² and the increasing dispersal of industrial production around the world.³ Yet relatively few people considered the implications of a wider set of processes outside the economic, or attempted to systematically theorize the various dimensions of global processes. It seemed to us in *Theory Culture & Society* that the cultural aspect of globalization in particular had received little

¹ The special issue was simultaneously published as a volume in the newly inaugurated *Theory Culture & Society* book series entitled *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (Featherstone, 1990).

² Yves Dezalay's (1990) article in the issue on 'the big bang' dealt specifically with this process.

³ A process which became known by series of terms such as disorganized capitalism, flexible specialisation and postfordism; see Lash and Urry (1993).

attention. That the topic became central to the journal's agenda was in large part the result of the major contribution of Roland Robertson, who had written a series of articles on globalization and helped develop the special issue. As he indicates in the interview in this section, he had been one of the first theorists to address globalization. He had first started to focus on international and global issues in the 1960s, at a time when many sociologists in the United Kingdom and United States were hostile to the idea that sociologists should deal with extra-societal issues. The thought of a global society or global culture made little sense to sociologists brought up to see society as coterminous with the bounded nation-state. Relations between nation-states were regarded as the province of international politics. Nevertheless, Robertson was able to connect with those who were reluctant to observe this division of labour, or follow disciplinary boundaries, such as Max Weber and Georg Simmel. Weber's sociology of religion along with the broader interest in civilizational formation, long-term historical processes and struggles between emergent nation-states pointed to a very different sociology.

Society and culture could not just be scaled-up to the global level on the model of the nation-state. Yet there were tantalizing processes underway, which drew attention to the need to theorize this 'something beyond.' Marshall McLuhan's (1962) striking term 'global village,' had captured the imagination in this way and pointed to a new form of connectivity through the globalizing mass media. While the term 'globalization' seems to have first been used in the 1980s (Robertson, 1992), debates emerged in the 1980s and '90s about the nature of globalization and whether there could be a global culture. The 1990 *Theory Culture & Society* special issue answered in the negative – there was clearly no possibility of a global culture akin to the culture of the nation-state writ large (Featherstone, 1990:1). As Roland Robertson reminds us in the interview in this issue, it all depends on the level of abstraction; and with the increasing consciousness of cosmology, the sense of our place in the universe, means we have a greater sense of the world as a whole.⁴ Yet in the 1980s and '90s there were a range of notable transnational processes taking place involving more intensive flows of people, money, information, goods which involved the construction of new sets of technological apparatuses and means of orientation that formed and transmitted various operative cultures (Featherstone, 1995, 2001). At the same time, for some there was still the

⁴ For many academics in the social sciences and humanities, especially those who are influenced by cultural studies, what was seen as more important was to resist the violence of abstraction committed against the complexity of real life. In effect, as Adorno argues, we must endeavour to 'save the particular.'

concern that the processes were leading to an imposed uniformity as the use of terms such as Americanization and McDonaldization indicated: the dangers of the ‘globalization of the culture of the dominant particular,’ a phrase generally attributed to Stuart Hall. There was also the perspective that Roland Robertson drew attention to in which globalization could be seen as providing a new form in the Simmelian sense, effectively a global stage which made for greater visibility of a wider range of local cultures – the globalization of diversity.

One aspect of this process which became increasingly evident at this time was the way in which our knowledge, in particular academic knowledge, was necessarily formulated from a particular time and place. There had of course been a good deal of interest in German sociology and historical studies (Dilthey, Weber, Mannheim, Elias) in trying to think through the problems of historicism and the time-bound nature of knowledge. But the spatial dimension, that knowledge was not just produced in a particular time, but in a located place too, now became an evident problem. A series of books emerged around the end of the 1990s which sought to uncover alternative global histories and reverse the Western-centric version. Works with titles such as *Re-ORIENT* (Frank, 1998), *Provincializing Europe* (Chakrabarty, 2000), *On the Postcolony* (Mbembe, 2001), *The Colonizer’s Model of the World* (Blaut, 1993), *The East in the West* (Goody, 1996), *The Theft of History* (Goody, 2006), *Occidentalism* (Venn, 2000).⁵ Such works effectively problematized global knowledge, and this became the title of a *Theory Culture & Society* special issue in 2006 which sought to address the question from many angles (Featherstone and Venn, 2006). The issue offered a number of related entries juxtaposed by deconstructive supplements. One short supplementary contribution captured the central concern by pointedly asking the question: ‘why is there no Korea in South Korean cultural studies?’ (Kang, 2006). If there is increasingly a common global history in the process of formation, who should write about it and from where?

In part such questions were generated through the visibility of the globalization processes taking place around us, especially the movement of people around the world carrying different lifestyles and knowledge. Steger and James in their contribution to this section, draw attention to what they refer to as ‘embodied globalization,’ the mobility of human

⁵ In 2009 the journal ran a special section on the work of Jack Goody which addressed this theme and featured articles by Peter Burke (2009), Walter Dignolo (2009), Ken Pomeranz (2009), Boaventura Sousa Santos (2009) and others (see Featherstone, 2009).

bodies through the global space – refugees, migrants, workers, travellers, entrepreneurs, tourists. In this context it could be useful to add a further category to the set; in his piece in the Global Culture special issue, Zygmunt Bauman (1990) drew attention to those who are neither friends nor enemies, but strangers - the indeterminate ‘undecidables’ who challenge our classificatory clarity. Bauman (2008) had little time for the mobile elites and super-rich who at one point he described as ‘the real cosmopolitans,’ for his sympathies were always with the outcasts and the vulnerable (Campbell et al, 2018).⁶ The problem is that the indeterminate stranger, may all too readily transform into the migrant. As Randeria and Karagiannis indicate in their paper in the section, the migrant, has ceased to be a neutral descriptive term, and has become instead a category of exclusion. Migrants are increasingly seen as persons out of place, people who are ‘foreign bodies,’ dangerous and undesirable as they bring with them unbridgeable cultural differences. This type of imagery has been a stimulus to the resurgence of right-wing nationalism and populism, which often is characterised as a defensive reaction to globalization. At the same time, this countertrend has to be set against the way in which the global media, advertising and consumer culture industries constantly search out and replay cultural differences taken from around the world. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse, mentions in his contribution, one of the dominant forms of globalization remains hybridization, the mixing of cultural elements across locations and identities to provide a global melange. Of course, there are various strands to globalization and one of the common mistakes is to assume they somehow necessarily cohere and integrate; as Arjun Appadurai (1990) indicated in his piece in the 1990 *Theory Culture & Society* special issue, it could be better to regard the processes as disjunctive.

This becomes clear when we consider the present situation in the face of the covid-19 pandemic: as Roland Robertson reminds us, the global dynamics of epidemics and pandemics do not easily fit into conventional views of globalization as a project. For some the current pandemic signals a turning point, a break or the end; John Gray (2020), for example, remarks

The era of peak globalisation is over. An economic system that relied on worldwide production and long supply chains is morphing into one that will be less

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman was a writer who invariably managed to produce memorable formulations. This is evident in the titles of his many books. The title of the book in which he mentions that the super-rich are the real cosmopolitans runs: *Does Ethics have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* For a related discussion of super-rich mobility and their global lifestyles see Featherstone (2013, 2014).

interconnected. A way of life driven by unceasing mobility is shuddering to a stop. Our lives are going to be more physically constrained and more virtual than they were. A more fragmented world is coming into being that in some ways may be more resilient.

John Gray seeks to redirect our thinking and there could well be some plausibility, especially if there are further waves of covid-19, or the emergence of new viral pandemics. Yet as Steger and James suggest, the shortening of supply chains in global production coupled with the slowing down of trade does not signal the end of globalization. The world may be more fragmented, on one level, but it may be more connected on another, as new technological developments such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, blockchain, 3-D printing, robotics, facilitate working at a distance and greater global connectivity. Social distancing and the prohibition of direct face-to-face interactions, necessarily stimulate other forms of indirect and virtual communication. Deglobalization could well be occurring on some levels, while re-globalization intensifies on others.

As Walter Mignolo, following José de Souza Silva, reminds us in his contribution to this collection: the key question is whether we are ‘living and experiencing a change of epoch and no longer an epoch of change.’ For Mignolo, modernity’s obsession with unilinear change needs to give way again to a multiplicity of local temporalities; as he remarks

A single lesson that the pandemic and the economic-financial turmoil accelerated in our understanding is that the present cannot be understood in the old frame of an “epoch of change.” We in the planet are experiencing the “change of epoch” no longer reducible to the hegemony of one universal and one unipolar world. The change of epoch is a change grounded in bringing gnoseological pluriversality and multipolar world order to the surface in the present, and it is in this present that the future is unfolding. The change of epoch can no longer be the outcome of global designs.

Mignolo’s invocation of pluriversality, suggests two further thoughts. Firstly, the terminology to describe the entity or medium in which we live and co-habit: does a change of epoch mean we have moved beyond the global? Secondly, what exactly does a multipolar

world order mean when we transcribe it into the field of contemporary international/inter-state power struggles?

With regard to terminological shifts beyond the global, it is clear that there is a growing dissatisfaction and search for alternatives. The term global is associated with the construction of globes in the age of European explorations from the late 15th century onwards as Sloterdijk (2005) argues in his discussion of spheres (Raschke, 2013; Rashof, 2018). It involves the assumption that the earth represented a sphere that could be accurately mapped, surveyed and navigated - open for travel and discovery (Sloterdijk, 2005; Morin, 2008). But more recently there has been an increasing dissatisfaction with the associated modernist cosmology and cartographic imaginary with its related linear timeline and view of planetary order. Bruno Latour (2018), for example, argues against the territory-global, with its emphasis on seeing from a distance and connotation of something flat and accurately divisible as in cartographic abstractions. Rather, we should consider using the term terrestrial, as this term suggests, not looking from above, but being *in* it. It points to the land, the earth beneath our feet which reacts to our actions: to being located (Stein Pedersen et al, 2019). This contrasts to the detached relationship to the earth, in which nature and the planet Earth are seen as a chartable munificent resource field always open for exploitation. Yet the awareness of accelerating global heating, climate change and the Anthropocene, point to a new phase beyond the wide-open spaces of the global economy. Latour (2016) comments:

...this planet Earth does not in any way resemble the globe of globalisation. To put it bluntly: there is no planet corresponding to the Promised Land of globalisation.

This disjuncture, between the globe and the planet becomes more significant when Latour goes further to suggest that the globe implies a single mode of relations between humans and non-humans.

What if people inhabit not just different cultures, but different natures – this destroys the notion of nature as an overarching concept covering the globe (Descola, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1992; Latour, 2009). While this points to the important concept of ‘multi-naturalism’ to set alongside multiculturalism,’ in reality the current pairing is multiculturalism with mononaturalism, in which the West alone was permitted to arbitrate and adjudicate. In Latour’s (2002) words ‘The one world is ours, the many worlds are yours; and if your

disputes are too noisy, may the world of harsh reality come in to pacify your disputes.’ This stands against the notion of a common humanity moving towards shared cosmopolitan forms (Beck, 2007; Mythen 2020). But what if there remain those who stubbornly refuse to cosmopolitanize on our terms? Could it be better to acknowledge that we do not live in one cosmos governed by common value complexes; rather the cosmos is the multiverse, (or pluriverse in Mignolo’s terminology). If we resist the forced integration of worlds constructed from different blueprints, could it be better to acknowledge irreconcilable difference? This entails the movement from cosmopolitanism to cosmopolitics (Stengers, 2005), along with the acceptance that in this new conflictual condition diplomacy becomes absolutely necessary (Conway, 2019).

Especially so as we endeavour to face global warming, the Anthropocene and the consequences of our over-consumption society and reach for the modernity reset button (Featherstone, 2018, forthcoming). How do we come to terms with ‘the art of living on a damaged planet?’ (Tsing et al, 2017). The problem lies with not just the climate-change deniers funded by the super-rich, but something more fundamental and pervasive, grounded in the relationship between the Western modern cosmology and technology. There are those who argue this situation should compel us to focus on how to overcome modernity by rethinking the conceptualization of nature within Western cosmologies by reconsidering the different cosmologies that occur in other parts of the world that point to very different ways of thinking and living. Instead of a single nature and technology, could there be multiple cosmotechnics, with some of them incorporating the potential to open up new directions for envisaging technological development and ways of living in the future? (Hui, 2016, 2017).

The second question that needs to be addressed relates to the emergent international and inter-societal struggles and the emergent politics of a new global order. There have been numerous speculative attempts to herald the move into a new global order. In recent years, there have been discussions of: ‘the end of history,’ (Fukuyama, 1992), a new ‘clash of civilizations,’ (Huntington, 1996), the move from unipolarity to multipolarity (Posen, 2011). The latter view is very much in vogue, with the relative decline of United States’ power and rise of China. Andre Gunder Frank (1998) was one of the first to mount a sustained attack on Eurocentrism which draw attention to what he catalogued as the short 200-year Western interlude in the 19th and 20th centuries between Chinese historical domination of the world economic system. But he did not consider the stacking up or doubling of the historical

geopolitical shift with the planetary global heating crisis, which urgently calls for new modes of cooperation and a different type of politics.

One of the potential ways to tackle global heating would be concerted collaborative action on the part of global agencies. Yet global institutions building, through the United Nations and its affiliates along with a long list of international non-government organizations (INGOs), show a limited capacity to agree common goals and work together. It is hard to see how such institutions, even if coupled to a more responsive global public sphere could generate the capacity to bring nation-states into line with policies. Of course, if the nation-states were persuaded or forced to give up some of their sovereignty to a new global entity, such as a nascent world state which was able to work towards the monopolization of the means of violence (Weber) and taxation (Elias), things could be very different. But currently the chances of existing states ceding power to some supranational authority are pretty much non-existent. Rather, Max Weber's view of the future of international politics as more of a continuing Darwinist struggle between nation-states continues to be relevant, and gains support from the recent unfolding of history. From this perspective history is seen as an elimination contest between nation-states, super-states, civilizational states and blocs, many of which operate with incompatible systems of government, values and objectives. This chimes with the type of argument put forward by Christopher Coker (2019) in his discussion of the rise of civilizational states, which seek to challenge and undermine the rules of Western-conceived notions of global order. This suggests that the rise of civilizational states, such as China and Russia, could well entail a shift in the global balance of power that signals the end of the Western liberal world order (Pabst, 2020). As Walter Mignolo reminds us 'in a world order in which modern (Western European and American), modern-colonial (former colonies) and civilizational states (China, Russia, Turkey) could be working together for the well-being of life in the planet, including human life,' the current covid-19 pandemic could easily have been taken care of. Yet the generation of a world order of cooperation among states, in an emergent epoch of pluriversality, is challenging indeed.

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This paper is part of a special section Global Culture Revisited – [put in usual type of link to section contents].

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