Globalization Theory and the West: The Integration of Temporal and Spatial Considerations

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Abstract: This paper examines the way understandings of temporal change and spatial change are integrated in globalization discourse. Most theories fail to maintain a sufficiently complex tension between these two axes. Globalization discourse is concerned with the effects of spatial change—changes in the shape, scale and extensity of social processes—and the effects of temporal change, particularly changes to, or away from, modernity. This paper argues that many accounts of globalization accord primacy to one of these axes, which results in them being conflated. In doing so this distances two central debates: the way modernity changes; and the relationship between the nation-state and capitalism. Some authors such as Giddens, Harvey and Robertson, focus on temporal narratives of change. Others like Sassen and Scholte focus on the constitutive role of spatial changes. Important to this is the way in which the non-West is conceptualized in globalization discourse. Globalization discourse—at least in its strong formations—is understood as occurring through the spread of a particular social formation from the West, globally. It negates the constitutive role of the non-West and it downplays the particular relationships between the West and the non-West.

Globalization discourse tends to present social change in highly systemic terms. This is especially the case in the ‘stronger’ formulations of globalization, including those of Giddens, Harvey, Robertson, Sassen and Scholte. In contrast the more ‘critical’ or sceptical literature provides less systemic approaches to globalization. Globalization is presented both as a highly determined process and as a process which has a large and intensive scope. It cojoins many aspects of social change. Particular systemic dynamics or variables, especially relating to capitalism, are understood as highly determinative, as are particular spatial aspects, especially the scale of social processes. Globalization discourse cojoins a wide range of issues. This includes questions regarding changes to modernity or capitalism, often described variously as postfordism, late or postmodernity and which among other
things relate to changing work patterns such as ‘flexibilization’. Globalization discourse is concerned with technological changes, especially IT changes which diminish spatial and temporal barriers. Questions of geopolitical changes are also a significant aspect of the globalization discourse. Some of these issues are expressed in the globalization discourse predominantly in a temporal narrative of change - in particular the question of modernity. Other issues, especially focusing on the question of the nation-state, tend to be expressed predominantly in a spatial narrative of change. It is argued in this paper that this involves a collapsing of the distinction between these two axes of change and leads to an overly systemic understanding in which the role of the non-West is obscured and historical agency is diminished. A more adequate integration of the temporal and spatial processes, it is suggested, makes the highly systemic understanding of globalization less sustainable.

Globalization discourse suggests that the spatial is important in constituting the social. This challenges the tendency in social theory to focus on the temporal aspect. It is a particular virtue of the globalization discourse that there is a concern to theorize both temporal and spatial dimensions and to understand these in relationship with each other. For example Giddens (1990), in his work on globalization, theorizes the interconnections between time and space in modernity. Castells similarly is concerned with this relationship, linking spatial changes, including what he refers to as the new ‘spaces of flows’ to temporal changes, including, he suggests, the ‘dehistoricization of time’ (Castells 1997). But it is argued that while globalization discourse draws on both temporal and spatial discourses of change there is an insufficient integration of the two axes. In many accounts of globalization, primacy is accorded to one of these axes and they are conflated rather than an adequate tension being maintained between them. On the one hand, globalization is
expressed in temporal terms, that is in terms of change over time. In this discourse modernity or capitalism, understood as a historical period, are the central referents. This tends to be an internal discourse of social change. On the other hand globalization is also expressed in spatial terms and in this discourse the main referent is the changing relationship between the nation-state and capitalism. It is argued that there is an inadequate integration of these discourses, one is focused on and the other is assumed to follow from this. Such a duality of discourses renders them less able to disrupt each other, and there is a tendency for them to become either a fairly singular discourse of either change through time or change through space.

**Times of globalization**

While globalization is in a definitional sense a theory of spatial change, the dominant narrative of change in many theories of globalization is a temporal rather than a spatial one. Change is expressed principally in terms of change occurring over time in reference to ‘internal’ dynamics. In this temporal discourse of globalization, change is expressed particularly in terms of modernity or capitalism; changes are explained, for example, in terms of ‘late modernity’, ‘post fordism’ or a period after modernity. Change occurs through historical development, historical stages or cycles. Globalization tends to represent either the most advanced form of modernity, or capitalism, or a stage which has surpassed modernity.

This is exemplified in the work of Anthony Giddens (1990) and David Harvey (1990, 2000). Both writers theorize both time and space and link them as part of a single dynamic of social change. In Giddens’ case this dynamic is one of time-space distanciation and for Harvey the dynamic is of time-space compression. In these approaches time and space are
understood as linked aspects but these are predominantly temporal narratives of change. Giddens indicates his thinking in the title of his main book examining globalization. Globalization is chief among ‘The Consequences of Modernity’ (Giddens 1990). For Giddens (1990), globalization refers to the stretching of social relationships. This occurs, he argues, when time and space are ‘stretched’ from each other due to the dynamism of modernity. Space and time become more universal and less embedded in particular locales. This, he suggests, is a core dynamism of modernity which has gained intensity over time leading industrial societies at least to enter a new period of ‘radical’ or ‘high’ modernity. While the spatial is brought in to the theory of globalization it is in an abstract sense, his approach focuses more on the way modernity changes over time with reference to its internal dynamics. There are distinct temporal periods but space is universalized. There is little analysis of the way in which globalization is affected by the space it expands upon except that it operates on a larger scale in which the social world is stretched.

Similarly for David Harvey (1990, 2000), globalization expresses an intensification of an internal trajectory, in this case of capitalism rather than modernity. Globalization, for Harvey, is a recurrent process where space is ‘annihilated’ by time in order to avert capitalism’s inherent crisis tendencies. The annihilation of space creates a ‘time-space compression’ in which the world is experienced as socially and materially as a smaller place. It is again a process of the overcoming of space even while ‘place’ is conceptualized as more significant to this process and understood is less abstract terms.

Another temporal narrative of globalization is provided by Roland Robertson (1992). Robertson, in comparison to Giddens and Harvey, focuses more on cultural explanations.
Robertson argues that globalization is a socio-cultural system which develops in intensity over time. It develops through a series of stages with four component parts or reference points—the national societies, the world system of societies, humankind and selves—each of which develop in regard to the others and become more dominant as the socio-cultural system progresses. They form something of a ‘mould’, which allows for change within the system, but at a certain stage, the ‘take-off stage’ the process becomes inexorable. His approach deals explicitly with space. Rather than a conception of the ‘local’ being overridden with the ‘global’ he suggests that there is an interpenetration between the local and the global. This creates greater cultural diversity rather than homogenization and he refers to this as ‘glocalization’. In this approach, the space that globalization expands upon is not understood as an absence, it contains differing socio-cultural contents. The spatial creates diversity in the socio-cultural system. Nevertheless this is still a system which has become ‘inexorable’. These four components or reference points of globalization are highly content rich concepts and the problematic aspect is the way in which this analysis of the development through time a system based on these four reference points interacts with specific particulars. It also internalizes space within globalization, there is heterogeneity but all heterogeneity is formed in reference to globalization.

**Spaces of Globalization**

For other theorists of globalization, it is the spatial rather than the temporal narrative that dominates. That is they focus on the spatial changes as constitutive, and examine how changes in locations, distributions, flows and patterns of social interactions affect social change. In the spatial discourse there are two dominant themes. First, changes to the nation-states and, second, changes in the scale of social processes. While these are inter-connected issues, they are not necessarily interconnected as strongly and consistently as is suggested
in discourses of globalization. The relationship between the nation-state and globalization tends to be conceived either in terms of a ‘clash’ or ‘intrusion’ or between two distinct spheres, the global and the nation-state, or as a transformation of the nation-state. The second major theme of the spatial discourse is that of the question of scale. There is a tendency in some of the literature to associate globalization with large scale over-arching processes and to treat this as a particular sphere in and of itself, for example the ‘global economy’, or ‘global cities’. Changes in spatial patterns are understood to benefit some actors and hinder others. Capitalism (or the economy) is often understood as having a particular affinity with the global scale. Power is also associated with the global scale, and disassociated with the nation-state. At this global scale, capitalism is often taken to be highly disembedded. Questions of temporal change are often subsumed under the narrative of spatiality. Two examples of theories of globalization in which the spatial narrative is dominant are those of Jan Aart Scholte (2000) and Saskia Sassen (1998, 2000).

Jan Aart Scholte (2000) refers to globalization as the rise of ‘supraterritoriality’. He argues it is a space in which territoriality is transcended, where place is no longer fixed, distance covered instantly. Territorial worlds do not come to and end but rather supra-territoriality is an important adjunct to it, changing social geographies. People no longer have most of their interactions with people who share their territorial space, whether understood as a village or a continent (Scholte 2000:44-50). Aspects of this supraterritorial zone include global finance markets, credit cards -because they are globally transportable- and ecological problems which are not contained within the bounds of any particular nation-state. He does not argue that the global space is the only space, but it is a ‘seamless’ one – place and distances are insignificant. Like many other theories of globalization, Scholte argues that in
important respects these spatial changes strengthen capitalism and diminish the state, strengthening the scope of accumulation and changing the organization form of capitalism. It could be argued, he suggests that globalization is linked to ‘hypercapitalism’ and has expanded the scope of capitalism by expanding the sphere of commodification (Scholte 2000:112). Scholte argues that these spatial changes have strengthened capitalism they have decreased state power. Globalization has been integral to what he refers to as ‘post-sovereign governance’ and he suggests that the state has been reshaped through the loss of the idea of sovereignty, of states as supreme and exclusive - even if in reality states never were (Scholte 2000:141). State power has become more diverse and privatized. Scholte draws on ideas of temporal change and he discusses modernity. Modernity he suggests has ‘propelled’ globalization. But he understands the spatial changes to be predominantly constitutive of these social changes, it is the change in the scale at which these social processes operates that is the dominant factor in these changes. His examination understands globalization to entail the spread of modern rationality, and he argues that this as creates new forms of marginalization throughout the globe. But there is little analysis of the way in which the non-West can be taken to be constitutive rather than just reacting to these powers.

Another approach in which the spatial is dominant is found in the work of Saskia Sassen (1998, 2000). Sassen, like Scholte, focuses on the new spatial forms of supraterritoriality and argues that we are seeing a ‘new geography of power’. Her work however shows a greater sense of the interconnections between the global and the nation-state than does Scholte’s work. Her work focuses on the idea of global cities which she argues are become orientated towards the global economy and other global cities and as such become
disembedded from their nation-state. Sassen argues that economic globalization has significantly transformed the territoriality and sovereignty of the national state. There is a process of ‘de-nationalization’ as the state loses the ability to control certain activities within their territorial boundaries - especially through the virtualization of some spheres of economic activity due to digitalization. She argues that sovereignty has been partly decentred and now located in a multitude of areas including private legal regimes and human rights codes. But while economically driven she suggests that globalization is not formed by the claims of global economic actors at the expense of the national state. Rather she argues the intersection between the two creates a complex set of processes in which states still have significant power, which she describes as a ‘new frontier zone’. The question of changes to modernity is significant but changes to modernity are understood predominantly to result from changes to the spatiality of social relations. It is the result of the interaction between spatially constituted actors, especially nation-states and global economic actors.

Most approaches to globalization are concerned with the interplay between the temporal and the spatial changes and with the processes contained within both these discourses: modernity, the scale of social processes and the relationship between the nation-state and capitalism. But, it is argued that the connections between these processes are assumed and they do not challenge each other sufficiently. In the temporal discourse there is a focus on the changes to modernity over time, it tends to remain an internal, highly systemic discourse, which shapes inter-place processes but is not constituted by them to a significant degree. On the other hand there is a tendency to create a quite a-historical narrative of change in the spatial discourse, focusing on the power of spatiality not the processes which
have caused them. Integrating them more sufficiently means examining the way in which they are mutually constitutive: modernity is not just an temporal process but shaped by spatial changes, including processes coming from the ‘outside’, spatial changes need to be examined in their historical context, the way in which these processes are constructed historically. It is argued that by not integrating these two discourses the messiness of actual historical change can be bracketed off: in the spatial to a pre-global arena, in the temporal to a place which is not yet globalized.

A significant reason that the temporal and the spatial aspects can remain poorly integrated in globalization discourse is the way in which a strong distinction between ‘place’ and ‘space’ in globalization discourse is constructed. One of the central claims of much of the globalization discourse is that there is a disassociation of space from place. Space and place become understood as distinct spheres which contain distinct processes. Place is downplayed as a site of culture, history and the container of ‘differences’ but as lacking in power. Space is understood as the locale of power. Divorced from a concern with questions of place there is a tendency for the spatial aspect to be treated as a systemic variable, allowing globalization to be understood as a series of changes occurring outside of certain contexts. ‘Place’ can become a way of bracketing off those aspects that do not accord with a systemic understanding of globalization, whether these are understood temporally or spatially.

But in less abstract terms, the tendency in western social theory to maintain a dualistic relationship between the West and the non-West is an important reason why the temporal and the spatial can remain as parallel discourses. There is a tendency for the non-West to
play ‘local’ to the West’s ‘globalization’, culture to globalization’s power. The understanding of the relationship between the West and the non-West in dualistic terms means that particular contexts can be underplayed and power become understood in a singular fashion. Globalization can be taken as an expansive dynamic which expands without changing because of the contexts it is expanding upon but rather because of an abstracted temporal or spatial change. That is, the ‘non-west’ is necessary in the theoretical frameworks of globalization as the site of expansion and spread and increases in the scale of social processes. But these dynamics are understood as minimally affected by the people or process in the regions in which they are spreading.

In doing so it both downplays the importance of the constitutive role of the non-West in globalization as well as downplays the importance of the ‘horizontal’ relationships, the relationships between places, in shaping globalization. Rather it focuses on the ‘vertical’ relationships between the ‘local and the ‘global’. Globalization discourse often treats the non-west as an absence, whether one in which globalization constitutes the ‘lifting up’ of the entire globe to modernity or is understood entirely in terms of the expansion of exploitative relations. On the one hand this downplays the way in which the processes referred to as globalization are contextually based. That is, the social forms of globalization are contextually based, shaped by the interactions in ‘local’ contexts which involve a variety of structures of culture and power, and which suggest that globalization is a looser and more diverse set of processes.

The other side of this is that is means horizontal relationships between places are downplayed while the focus is on the vertical relationships between the global and the
local. In particular this downplays the way in which state processes are involved in globalization. While globalization is treated as a form of neo-imperialism in some approaches, it has tended to be understood as a predominantly economic form of imperialism. This downplays both the importance of the state’s role and the importance of inter-place processes and relationships more generally. There is a tendency to treat these economic processes as amorphously or systemically directed processes, over-arching forms of power, downplaying the specific inter-place relationships involved in this. The separation between the temporal and the spatial discourses allows for the downplaying of the state’s role as the state seems to sit somewhere between both discourses – in the temporal change is a somewhat internal process, in the spatial the nation-state is understood as the party loosing power.

There is a tendency in the globalization discourse for changes to modernity, the nation-state and the spatial extension of social processes to be treated as a singular if multidimensional process. A more adequate integration of the temporal and spatial axes suggests globalization is a more partial and inconsistent set of processes. This is suggested in the argument put forward in the critical globalization literature, by writers such as Michael Mann and Göran Therborn. The argument that is being made here is in opposition to the sense of inevitability that accompanies much of the globalization discourse. Globalization has a tendency to be understood as a process outside people’s control - large scale processes or systemic dynamics that we can only respond to. This downplays the way in which, while we may not be able to control our world, globalization is still a set of processes which is caused, substantially, by decisions that people make. It is not pre-determined either by the scale of these processes or by a system that we exist in. Power and
inequalities are still constructed, constructed in places. Globalization downplays our sense of political possibilities by suggesting otherwise.

References


