Theories of Globalization
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Introduction

This book offers a critical examination of the concept of globalization as it has been deployed across the social sciences and of its impact on social-scientific inquiry. It also offers pointers to a transdisciplinary and multidimensional, as well as a transformative scholarship of globalization, a concept that has resonated across the social sciences for the past few decades. When I first began to think about the book, colleagues advised me of the need for a comprehensive and critical treatment of the ways in which globalization has been theorized across disciplines and sub-fields, and to what effect. But on the face of it nothing could be further from the truth. There are many volumes that offer both exegesis and critical commentary on globalization, and even more that have tried to fashion a theory of globalization, or treat it as a prime, if inchoate, causal factor when explaining long-term, large-scale social change. Sometimes these offerings are not so much theory as hortatory remarks and either ideological or polemical in tone.

None of this is surprising. Globalization is a compelling idea that arouses strong feelings even among researchers who caution only that the concept needs more careful specification to be useful. There is also a wealth of more impassioned commentary from those exercised by the perceived benefits or ills of globalization. Globalization sceptics in the academy and beyond remain thick on the ground and, if anything, their complaints have been intensified by the faltering of the global economy since 2007. And even though much criticism points to under-specification of the concept, the fact is that there are many definitions of globalization clustered around common indicators and themes. So, if there is a problem, it lies elsewhere, perhaps in the curiously elliptical treatment of the concept. Thus globalization understood as ‘space-time compression’ is a notion that is wonderfully plausible, yet rarely grounded, or only vaguely construed, in empirical research. Conceivably, the problem resides in the blanket application of the term – globalization translated as interconnectivity leaves almost nothing outside its remit. Even ‘difference’ has been subsumed under the rubric, for diversity is not only seen as an enduring feature of a globalized world but often deemed integral to its constitution. Globalization as the process through which the world is being made into a single place has an intuitive appeal, until one begins to unpack precisely what is meant by that strong attribution. Finally, there is the matter
of normative and ideological engagement. In some tracts the temper of commentary has an almost Orwellian gloss, where globalization is cast as good or bad by definition.

While this makes for compelling reading, it is not always good social science. Arguably, and despite its appeal as a ‘must-have’ concept, there is still a relative dearth of empirical-analytic investigation, especially at the micro and meso levels of experience and enactment and on the ‘softer’ aspects of globalization. Most notably, there is little work that connects individual lives and global constraints. At the same time, the scholarship is littered with work on globalization and the environment, security, gender and so on, or else with research on vicissitudes in the globalization of such issue areas. In short this is a field seemingly without boundaries and promiscuous in its appeal to many researchers and disciplines. So what am I trying to achieve in this book?

The first thing to say is that I am not trying to construct a new theory of globalization; still less elevate the concept into the sole explanation of recent or long-term social change. Such debates are important because they highlight the extent to which globalization and globalization research are challenging, if not transforming, social theory. For the study of globalization has yet to effect a paradigm change in the social sciences, though it may well constitute a ‘positive problem shift’ in how knowledge about the social is constituted (Lakatos, 1970). Here I have something of a normative as well as a scholarly intent to declare, at least where the future of globalization scholarship is concerned. I endorse treating globalization as more than a scholarly zeitgeist; seeing it as the catalyst for significant change in the focus and conduct of the social sciences. To achieve this end involves recognizing and, more to the point, operationalizing and implementing the transformative potential carried in the very idea of globalization, but only sometimes realized through its scholarship. The disciplinary and cross-disciplinary scholarship discussed in this book is interrogated with regard to whether it underwrites usual science or contributes to its transformation.

So, this is resolutely a book about how the global is theorized and how the idea of transformation appears positively in the work of some scholars and is derided by their opponents. As well as analysing the ways in which the transformative motif has been couched, in chapter 9 I offer pointers to how it might be realized through a scholarship not in thrall to disciplinary regimes and social-scientific givens. Throughout the book I canvass and critique different ways of theorizing globalization from across the social sciences. I also explore different academic traditions and reflect on how particular schools of thought have framing effects on debate that are often left unexamined. The continued imprint of methodological and theoretical nationalism on global theory provides a narrative thread through chapters 1–3 and particularly so where political science and sociology are concerned. Even the stuttering evolution of critical thinking from hyper-globalists, through sceptics to
transformationalists, from so-called first to third wave theory, often fails to shake off these trammels.

Yet globalization is a concept that, in principle, forbids compartmentalization in any one area of social science. And indeed, though many disciplines have engaged with the idea, none has embraced it fully. But, as we shall see, strict allegiance to disciplinary traditions and ontological givens vitiate the possibility of a social science of the global and often trivialize contemplation of it. In this book I try to draw out commonalities and differences in focus and approach, the better to understand the provenance and findings of a diverse scholarship, and to look for pointers to a non- or trans-disciplinary approach to globalization research and theory. The remit of globalization scholarship is very wide, taking in both hard issues (patterns of economic globalization) and tantalizingly soft features (what is global consciousness?). To do justice to all this is a monumental task and I have had to simplify it for purposes of analysis and presentation. In chapter 1, I justify my decision to keep the remit of the book to scholarship that emerged across the social sciences from the 1980s onwards, when a body of literature specifically about globalization was first published. In the event, this restriction is not observed fully, since one has to acknowledge the influence of earlier social theory on contemporary scholarship.

Throughout, I prefer the term ‘scholarship’ to ‘theory’ because the second is subsumed under the first, and because not all of what we will canvass can be understood as theory. The Ancient Greek word for theory, ‘theoria’, had objective and subjective connotations; the first suggests seeing and observing ‘outside’ the self, and the second refers to one’s own emotions and needs. This is a necessary tension in good social science.

The main task was to decide how to organize the material. I had three main presentational tasks in mind to embed my substantive goals. The first was to identify and evaluate the work of important authors in the broad field of globalization studies and cognate areas of the social sciences. While globalization appears as an integrating or a divisive topic in many disciplines and sub-disciplines, it is only recently that one can talk with any validity about a field of globalization studies, and more often than not that is just an amalgam of scholars from different disciplines who see some common ground under the globalization umbrella.

But I did not want to write a book so reliant on specific authors and particular texts that the broader warp of globalization theory gets lost in an exegesis of their work. At the same time I have tried not to undervalue the contribution of individual scholars by limiting their contribution to one area of globalization theory. So it is that Saskia Sassen, Anthony Giddens and Roland Robertson, to name but three, weave in and out of the narrative. The upshot is that there is, necessarily, a cumulative feel to chapters 1–3, where the same concepts and issues are inflected differently through the work of diverse authors and the framing of the subject by different disciplines.
This seems apposite, allowing me to develop my second concern, which is to examine some of the key themes that have emerged in attempts to theorize globalization. Five such themes are central to the scholarship on globalization as it has emerged since the early 1980s, and they can be used to assess its quality and impact. Obviously, there are other areas of concentration that could have done service here. The themes are organized as chapters 4–8. They include globalization as a spatial and temporal phenomenon (chapter 4), the eminently normative theme of globalization and governance (chapter 7) and what many commentators take as the valence issue for contemporary globalization: the relationship between it and capitalism (chapter 8). Two other thematic or conceptual-thematic chapters are deployed. The first (chapter 5) fills what is still something of a lacuna in globalization research by examining culture and the treatment of globalization as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The second (chapter 6) addresses how globalization is theorized as a historical process and how such theorization is informed by and impacts on modernization theory and theories of modernity; both intimately linked with treatments of globalization.

My third concern was to delineate the main strands in globalization research and to identify disciplinary contributions to it. Thus, I reserve the first part of the book for a review of the main currents in globalization scholarship and for definitional matters. Chapter 1 develops some important themes in globalization research and offers a critical unpacking of global concepts that share the same root – global – but inflect it differently, resorting to quite different, and sometimes incompatible, approaches to its study. It is followed by two chapters of disciplinary contributions to research on globalization. These chapters are succeeded by the five themes outlined above. Chapter 9 looks at globalization research less in thrall to usual science, and at the possibility for a social science of the global being made out of the wrack or transcendence of discipline-based social research. In this chapter I explore the promise of a paradigm shift and a two-way transformation – in how the world is ordered and in the social science of globalization.

When thinking about which disciplines to examine, my choices were directed by the significance of the concept in the field concerned. I advert political science, especially international studies, sociology, anthropology, geography and cultural and communication studies. Economics appears, but hardly from the mainstream of the discipline, which has largely eschewed globalization research; except, of course, in the work of apostates who have come over from the dark side of positivist theory and neo-liberal economics in search of a normative critique of globalization. Law too is deemed to show limited engagement as a discipline. I fear as well that I have been somewhat cavalier in my direct treatment of some cross- or non-disciplinary areas of research as these have inflected globalization scholarship in particular and often beneficial ways. Feminist theory is a major contender here. Also, despite my protestations that research on globalization has tended to marginalize
some voices, especially where these spring from activist accounts, as well as from those outside Anglophone academic exchanges, I must confess that the coming pages are dominated by research from the Western academy. I can only plead the magnitude of the task and the need to treat main currents and modal concepts – themselves globalized – in detail to retain coherence and allow the book to flow.
CHAPTER 1

What’s in a Name? Themes, Concepts and Obfuscations

Introduction

Although the genealogy of the term ‘globalization’ reaches back to the 1920s, it is possible to identify the precursors of contemporary global theory in the writing of luminaries such as Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx and Georg Simmel; while the study of global history has its roots in the historiography of civilizations with considerably less than planetary extent (Spengler, 1918; Toynbee, 1934–61; Robertson and Inglis, 2004; Browning, 2011). Writing about the key concept of globality, Jens Bartelson (2009b, 113) refers to a ‘medieval cosmology’, perhaps even a scholarship, which entertained the idea of what we now call statelessness. We should also remember that any discussion of global change involves both human biological and social change as well as changes in the natural world. So it could be argued that we have chosen an arbitrary starting point from which to launch this analysis, while being unduly limited about its scope.

But as James Mittelman notes, although globalization is a concept whose early study owed much to developed research on social change under modernity, the rise and spread of capitalism and the origins and development of the state system – in other words, to classical social theory – it is really only towards the end of the 1980s that anything resembling a theoretical and empirical literature explicitly about the global begins to emerge (2004; Sklair, 2007). Some early and popular work on globalization tended to abrogate history and the influence of key historiographies in pursuit of the claim that the last decades of the twentieth century constituted a major rupture with preceding modernity. There may be some empirical weight to this view, but as we shall see the idea of the global cannot, or should not, be bracketed within a scholarship that not only claims globalization’s novel ontology, but is cavalier in its treatment of earlier readings of world-making practices (Rosow, 2003; Browning, 2011; Featherstone, 2006).

The search for tight conceptualization and analytical rigour has to be uppermost in the minds of those who study globalization, but its popularity and notoriety have meant that almost any discussion of the concept leaves room for obfuscation and ideological special pleading. We will adopt a more forensic and interrogative stance on the ways in which globalization has been
theorized during its brief period of intellectual and popular celebrity. In that pursuit, we will canvass the breadth of social-scientific scholarship on the theme of the global, since not all reflection can be understood as theory and not all theory is good scholarship (Shaw, 2000; 2003). Threaded through the critical account is the awkward and, for scholars of globalization, enduringly sensitive question of just how much we have learned about the world and how far the social sciences have developed through employing globalization as a descriptive term and a concept that fosters and perhaps transforms social-scientific explanation (Albert, 2007; Leander, 2009).

Scholarship on globalization is driven by both normative considerations and the pursuit of an empirically rigorous and historically informed social science; not always an easy mix. While it is the product of a number of disciplines it is probably no exaggeration to say that today much of it is located within the, admittedly broad, field of international studies, especially international political economy (IPE) – standing as a feature of that field’s continuing search for intellectual identity – and, of course, in sociology (Bruff, 2005; Berry, 2008; Mittelman, 2004; Sassen, 2006). Which is not to claim that contributions from other disciplines have not had a significant, even seminal, influence on the canon, or that there is no developed globalization scholarship outside international studies and sociology (Sassen, 2007; Tomlinson, 1999; 2007; Rossi, 2007; Modelski et al., 2008).

Contributions from geography are among the most ambitious and most cited in globalization studies; while anthropology, cultural and communication studies, history and, in considerably smaller measure, mainstream economics all contribute to a rich weave of research on the complex theme of the global. Cross- or non-disciplinary themes such as gender, health, poverty and war have also inflected their research with a global(ization) dimension. In turn the study of globalization has drawn on these themes to produce more fine-grained accounts of, *inter alia*, migration, pandemics, inequalities and violence in the contemporary world. But in the case of economics a word of caution is necessary. While a good deal of globalization scholarship has addressed the economics of globalization, or considered globalization as an economic phenomenon or ideology, economics as a discipline has not engaged wholeheartedly with the concept (Stiglitz, 2002; Rodrik et al., 2004). The dominant approach from mainstream economics consists of cost–benefit analysis of globalization effects and, from authors like Joseph Stiglitz and Dani Rodrik, quite impassioned critiques of market economics. In these accounts commentary has passed over from the formal scientism of neoclassical economics to the realm of normative engagement.

In work on globalization from IPE the engagement has been much more wholesale around the interplay of states, non-state actors, markets, commodity chains and networks, as well as around the staple antinomy of agency versus structure as the ontological basis for social inquiry. On some accounts, IPE research, especially in the USA, has been depleted by a desire to ape more
scientific, positivist work from mainstream economics at the expense of the investigation of big ideas and grand themes, including globalization (Cohen, 2009; Keohane, 2009; 1986). At the same time, the effects of neo-Gramscian ideas and constructivist thinking on understanding the political economy of the global may have been to soften the analytical cutting edge of mainstream economics unduly. Despite its normative or ‘black-letter’ approaches to global themes such as human rights and corporate governance, international law has also been less than engaged over globalization, especially from within the academic core of the discipline. Today, synergies between international law and international relations (IR) are receiving much more attention (Cutler, 2005; Noortmann and Ryngaert, 2010). And disciplines aside, there are many authors whose ideas have been extensively borrowed across fields contributing, as Martin Shaw says, to a ‘relativisation of . . . historic disciplines’ (2003, 42; Giddens, 1990; 1992).

Yet the grail of critical globalization scholarship – *multidimensionality*, by which is meant a systematic account of the analytically separate but interconnected and perhaps mutually constitutive dynamics of economics, politics and culture, delivered through a robust *interdisciplinarity* or *transdisciplinarity* – has proved elusive, approximated only in a small number of studies, achieved in even fewer (Robertson, 1996; Rosenau, 2003; Hay and Marsh, 2000; Appelbaum and Robinson, 2005; Featherstone, 2006; Rosow, 2003; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2009; *International Political Sociology*, 2009). On the face of it this dearth is strange, because as Roland Robertson says (2007a, 406), ‘[c]ategories for the comprehension of human life are . . . becoming destabilized’ mainly as a result of our growing sense of the global. As our consciousness of the world grows, so do our fears about its fate, along with the recognition that we cannot contain many problems and crises at particular scales, or provide understanding of them from within the confines of normal social science (Albert, 2007).

This same awareness conjures its own brands of protectionism, ones not confined to personal and collective coping strategies for a world perceived as unsafe through the threats of planet death, pandemic, global terrorism or economic slump. Within academia the walls between disciplines remain extant to a degree that mocks the ambition to create – Ulrich Beck says ‘reframe’ – analytical categories for a globalizing world (Beck and Sznaider, 2006; Scholte, 2000; 2005b; Rosenau, 2003; Rosow, 2003; Rosamond, 2006; Robertson, 2007a). Much social science suffers from the propensity to analyse areas of collective life in terms of discrete categories – a besetting weakness – and the study of globalization, a concept that challenges the very idea of boundaries, has not been well served by scholarship largely predicated on their maintenance.

Globalization is no journeyman concept and yet it remains infuriatingly ambiguous and elusive. While sceptical commentary suggests that this is a necessary consequence of an unworkable, perhaps unteachable, idea, in no
small part ambiguity results from a recurring failure to separate ‘global’ concepts – globalization (process), globalism (ideology) and globality, a notion which musters as consciousness, condition, framework, even system – which share the same root but often reflect different discourses about, and sometimes cleave to diverse theoretical positions on, the ‘global’ (Harvey, 2000; Shaw, 2003; Caselli, 2008; Meyer, 2007). We will examine these consequential differences later in the chapter.

The study of globalization also triggers powerful normative and ideological sentiments. At their most stark or most facile, these turn on the question of whether globalization is a good or a bad thing. Such accounts sometimes rehearse the case for alternative forms of globalization to subvent progressive and humanitarian goals or else offer prescriptions for different kinds of universality. This empirical-normative agenda has spawned a number of key research questions. First, what is globalization and what is not? Second, does globalization deliver massive and disjunctive social change? Third, are apparently dramatic changes in world politics and economics merely an unfolding of world history as universalizing modernity achieves its denouement? Fourth, can the idea of the world being made into a single place, demonstrating a systematic rather than a jobbing unicity, be taken seriously? Other important questions address the provenance of globalization, asking whether it is a purely contemporary or a historical phenomenon; whether it musters as a progressive or a regressive force (Wallace-Brown, 2008); whose interests are best served (Woods, 2006; Abdelal, 2007); and finally, whether the idea of the world’s unity also requires what Jean-François Bayart (2007, 31) rather inelegantly calls its ‘uniformization’ (see also Guillen, 2001).

Undoubtedly these are important issues, but more challenging for the social sciences is the claim that globalization confounds conventional thinking about the organization and conduct of social life and thus requires a transformation of social scientific knowledge (Scholte, 2000; 2005b; Cameron and Palan, 2004; Rosow, 2003; Shaw, 2003; Bartelson, 2009b). For as Saskia Sassen notes, when discussing globalization, the issues are rarely confinable to the perspectives of one branch of knowledge, even though the tradition in the parvenu fields of social science has been to organize knowledge about different spheres of social life under specific disciplines, each with its preferred epistemologies and methodologies. Instead, good scholarship on globalization requires, at the least, ‘operating at the intersection of multiple disciplinary forms of knowledge and techniques for research and interpretation’ (Sassen, 2007, 11).

Much scholarship on globalization engages with the concept forearmed by established (Western) intellectual and disciplinary traditions, which can make it hard for scholars to speak to each other across disciplinary boundaries (Cameron and Palan, 2004; Rosamond, 2006; Mittelman, 2010). As a result, the study of globalization occupies a rather uneasy space between disciplines and paradigms; which is a weakness, because its study is often
seen as in some way inauthentic, or merely diversionary; and a strength, because it might hold out the prospect of a social science more in tune with twenty-first-century social and political realities.

**Theory and the Scholarship of Globalization**

Early claims that globalization had achieved the status of an ‘ascendant paradigm’ were manifestly overblown (Mittelmann, 2004). Yet disputes about globalization’s theoretical status are productive because they highlight particular moments of intellectual doubt and excitement as well as reflecting the turbulence and enduring complexity of the real world. Indeed, Martin Shaw has argued that the emergence of globalization scholarship itself reflected the crisis and demise of the old Cold-War system and gave a decidedly geo-political twist to an already advanced crisis of modernity (2000).

When ideas about postmodernity ‘first emerged in the 1980s, predominantly in the cultural sciences, they reflected a general sense of [an] emergent crisis that had not yet reached the stage of decisive political change’ (Shaw, 2003, 35). Prescriptions for a new ‘post-Cold-War’ world appeared at the beginning of the 1990s as the Soviet world-empire broke up and a prevailing sense of epochal change also shaped emerging trends in social theory. The idea of ‘globalization’ became dominant in the mid-1990s, just as that turbulence was partly resolved and new world power relations – driven by liberal economics and new communication technologies – became modal (2003, 35). In Shaw’s estimation, our obsession with globalization and our attempts to gloss it as a new theory of the present and paradigm for the future are part of a wider crisis or transformation of world order yet to be resolved fully.

All theories simplify social complexity; while social life is rarely ‘cut from whole cloth’ (Giddens, 1990, 27). To be convincing, theory – other than normative theory, which expresses values and cannot be disproved by pointing to actual features of the world around us – should permit some existential reference and thus afford a purchase on what is happening in the world. Theory should also be clear about its explanatory limits, and in this respect, as Shaw also reminds us, since the mid-1990s ‘the decline in the fashion for naïve globalization-thought enables us to see what is more fundamental and durable in global development’ (2003, 35).

**Globalization scholarship: Globalization as a proto-paradigm**

The scholarship of globalization is riven with disputes, many of them reflecting quarrels within and between disciplines. Within international studies James Mittelman (2004) identifies a robust and continuing battle between those he labels ‘para-keepers’ and ‘para-makers’. The former are protectors of existing paradigms who resist the claim that globalization offers a new way of organizing social life and constituting knowledge about it. Para-keepers,
says Mittelman, are found among realists, including Marxist realists, interdependence theorists, world-systems analysts, some social democrats (often under the anti- or alter-globalization banner and in certain brands of constructivism) and new institutionalists (Wallerstein, 1974; Keohane and Nye, 2000; Hirst et al., 2009). Para-makers claim to have ‘shifted to an innovatory paradigm’ (Mittelman, 2004, 21) wherein globalization reveals deep flaws in modernist social science. Recent work by sociologists Ulrich Beck, John Urry and Martin Albrow are avatars of such radical approaches (Beck, 2006; Urry, 2003; Albrow, 1996).

The ranks of para-makers include a tranche of theorists conveniently mustered as ‘de-territorialists’, some apostate or post-Marxist treatments of empire, complexity theorists and a smattering of writers who see modernity as giving way to globality (Scholte, 2005a; Cerny, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Rosenau, 1997; Albrow, 2007a). What divides proponents within and between camps are mainly questions of epistemology and methodology (what globalization means for our understanding of the world around us and how it should be studied). These intellectual differences have translated into an increasingly dynamic scholarship of globalization where the temper of commentary and the objects of research have changed since the early 1980s. Beck and Sznaider opine that as the distinctions between national and international and local and global have become blurred or dissolve, so have the ‘premises and boundaries that define the units of empirical research and theory’ (2006, 13).

Robert Holton (2005) suggests that over this period globalization research has come in three overlapping but recognizable waves – hyper-globalist, sceptical and post-sceptical or, as some would have it, ‘transformationalist’ – each more self-conscious and cautious than its predecessor (Hay and Marsh, 2000; Martell, 2007, Bruff, 2005; Berry, 2008; Rosamond, 2006; Bartelson, 2009a). The wave motif also receives endorsement from Held and McGrew (2007), who identify four such waves: theoretical, historical, institutional and deconstructive. The waves are by no means discrete, but taken together, they describe a shift to a more textured, historical, agent-aware, multi-layered, culturally informed and, arguably, undogmatic scholarship of globalization. Oblique or sweeping statements about global issues give way to ‘more middle-range explanations [which] account for the complex manifestation of global processes within particular social realms’, including religion, sport, health and sexuality as well as the staples of economics and politics (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2009, xiii; Maliniak and Tierney, 2009; Keohane, 2009).

First wave globalist or hyper-globalist positions are associated with early globalization theory from the 1980s to the mid-1990s when, often in neo-liberal guise, they enjoyed a vogue far beyond the academy. Post-Washington-consensus and in the wash from the global economic crisis which began in 2007, their appeal in some business and policy-making circles is diminished but not extinguished. Although the gist of such interventions was to treat
globalization primarily as an economic phenomenon, in fact there are important differences of emphasis and diverse normative prescriptions in globalist accounts. Berry (2008) distinguishes between neo-classical and Marxist globalists, who share the view that globalization is a material reality centred on economic processes and the completion of a global economy, but differ in their approbation of such developments. True to their epistemological roots, neo-classical arguments (Ohmae, 1990; 2001; Wolf, 2004) explain global markets as the expression of rational behaviour by individual actors, an assumption at one with the tenets of economic neo-liberalism. Such positions also adopt a realist stance on agency, such that the assumed rationality (self-interest) of all actors is held to engender both dynamic and stabilizing effects in much the same way as the imputed behaviour of states in realist models of the international system, or consumers in the market place.

Marxist globalists treat the making of a global, market-driven economy as the latest twist in the development of capitalism as an exploitative system of wealth creation and uneven development (Callinicos, 2009; 2002; Harris, 2006; McMichael, 2001). In these accounts agents are more red-blooded and certainly more reflective than in neo-classical theory, but still severely constrained by their structural location in the social division of labour in class-divided societies. But eminently materialist and usually structuralist positions are themselves challenged, or perhaps just glossed differently, in work influenced by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1971; Robinson, 2006), which gives more credence to the role of ideas, to contingency, and to agents being active in reproducing or transforming the conditions of their existence.

Gramsci’s work has had a considerable influence on some brands of theory, particularly in ‘critical’ IPE and ‘open Marxism’ (Cox, 1987; Gill, 2000; Rupert, 1998; Drainville, 1994), where the focus has been on the role of ideas in shaping perceptions of and accommodations to globalization. Critical theory, as it is often labelled, is generally offered as a useful step away from the brute materialism of mainstream Marxist arguments and the simple ontology of realism. But it may do no more than muddy the water around the issue of the dominance of either agency or structure, by seeming to flirt with a more voluntaristic and action-centred interpretation of globalization while still clinging to an implicit theoretical essentialism which privileges capitalist production forces and material factors as (ultimately) determining (Cox, 1987; 1989; Bruff, 2005; Guzzini and Leander, 2006).

This gloss on their arguments will be anathema to neo-Gramscians, but Gramsci himself noted that social theory must always be sensitive to the ‘decisive nucleus of economic activity’ (1971, 161). In a useful exegesis on this conundrum in IPE literature, Ian Bruff (2005) has recourse to the sophisticated neo-Gramscian arguments of Stuart Hall, doyen of cultural studies in the UK (1996; Hall and Soskice, 2001). Hall paints globalization as a complex, contradictory and above all negotiated process and this, on the face of it, gets him off the hook of economic determinism. In the event the same
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obfuscations around the interplay of agency and structures are apparent in his account. In Hall’s work, how globalization appears to us is shaped by interpretation, which is socially constructed. But any indeterminacy in outcomes implied by such a view is offset by the sense that material considerations are key to the maintenance and reproduction of the capitalist system. As we shall see, what are often called ‘third wave’ positions on globalization do battle on the same ground as Hall, and their reliance on the socially constructed or discursive nature of globalization leaves them with unanswered questions.

Second wave or sceptical accounts of globalization have little time for any of this. They hold that anything resembling a globalist thesis rests on very thin evidence and that such evidence as exists actually reveals globalization as neither new nor particularly global (Hirst and Thompson, 1996; 2000; Hirst et al., 2009; Krugman, 1996). Moreover, there is little good data to support the claim that the world (economy) is becoming or has become globalized. Unsurprisingly, sceptics retain states and national economies as the key players in what they depict as an inter-national rather than a global system and, on first reading, their views too have a decidedly realist flavour. But neo-institutionalist variants on the sceptical theme are more inclined to see states as institutions with variable power, so that the effects of globalization are not the same on all states and in all parts of the world. Instead of the realist stance that all states are grey in the dark, regardless of circumstance and history, institutionalists prefer to see them as distinct entities, each with its own traditions, cultural practices, policy preferences, legitimacy and capacities (Weiss, 1998; Mann, 1997; Mosley, 2005; Rodrik, 2000). Because of this variability, globalization too is better seen as an uneven process, less inclusive than globalists suggest and contingently detrimental or galvanizing in its impacts on states, economies and cultures (Martell, 2007).

Sceptical positions on globalization are a necessary antidote to zealous hyper-globalism and are capable of generating useful hypotheses about the dynamics of the global economy (Berry, 2008). But they smack too much of unreconstructed realism and are often remiss in their neglect of agency and the importance of ideas in shaping the world and consciousness of it. Because they are troubled by the very idea of globalization as an empirical reality, there is usually very little attempt to accommodate, let alone subscribe to, the globalization hypothesis. But some forms of sceptical thinking do venture beyond a largely economic focus to offer a critique of the hyper-globalist claim that economic globalization is being accompanied and accelerated by the growing cultural homogeneity or cultural hybridization of the world (Barber, 2007). For example, research on the role of new media in transnationalizing communication and facilitating the creation of a global civil society or a global public sphere is frequently sceptical of globalist claims to have compressed time and space, thus eliminating what Kai Hafez calls ‘the fundamental character of “ego-centric” national media systems’ (2007, 3; Inglehart and Norris, 2009; Chandler, 2007).
And in works which achieved recognition well beyond the academy both Benjamin Barber (1995; 2007) and Samuel Huntington (1996) do not so much reject the idea of globalization as point to the vitality of its antithesis in the shape of alternative or anti-globalization ideologies and movements, whose very existence suggests greater cultural fragmentation and political polarization rather than homogeneity or hybridization. Whatever their faults, the real value of positions which stress the contested nature of globalization against bland claims of global convergence is that they qualify the totalizing and probably unsustainable claims of hyper-globalists, without rejecting all evidence of growing interconnection and interdependency. In this respect they are hardly pure globalization sceptics but remain agnostic and/or ambivalent about its progressive nature and possible outcomes.

In this brand of commentary, the set of papers edited by Hay and Marsh, which looks to ‘demystify’ globalization (2000), serves as a conceptual taster for the shift away from zealous hyper-globalism and the more curmudgeonly treatments of the sceptics, to what is generally understood as the third, post-sceptical or transformative wave of theorizing. At first glance their position is self-consciously sceptical, but it intimates a new wave of thinking determined to rescue globalization scholarship from the excesses of and gaps in the first two waves. In these authors’ view, globalization is a discourse which is not itself material in the way hyper-globalists insist, but which has profound material effects when realized through the actions of agents who either subscribe to the discourse or are affected by its adoption in, for example, government policy on regulation of labour conditions. These material effects make globalization ‘real’ in ways airbrushed out of most sceptical accounts.

Hay and Marsh’s volume appeared in 2000 and by the noughties the research emphasis begins to reflect a greater variety of influences, including – *inter alia* – post-Marxist structuralism and constructivism and forms of ‘critical scholarship’ (Held and McGrew, 2007). These accounts all emphasize the discursive and contingent construction of global social ‘reality’ while, at least in some versions, looking to retain the idea that globalization is transformative of social relations (Held and McGrew, 2007; Hay and Rosamond, 2002; 2004; Callinicos, 2003; Risse, 2007; Rosamond, 2006). In such interpretations, globalization ceases to be ‘out there’ in the sense rightly dismissed by Anthony Giddens (1990; 1992) or imposed by dint of irrepressible world-historical forces. Instead, it is what actors perceive it to be and there are no givens, no structural necessities, no historical inevitabilities and no unfolding teleology of human progress or decay (Fukuyama, 1992; 1996). Expressions like ‘globalization as discourse’, ‘tendency’ or ‘cognitive structure’ begin to dominate the literature and, on the face of it, agency and ideas are back in fashion. Arguably, the most significant contribution of such scholarship is that it charts a course between the two poles of globalization theory: the sceptics’ insistence that the concept provides no real ‘guide to the interpretation of empirical events’ and the catch-all claims of hyper-globalists that signs
of globalization are everywhere and that it is unstoppable (Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Risse, 2007; Rosenberg, 2005, 1).

The almost common-sense quality of much third wave theorizing relies on the notion derived from interpretative sociology that all meaning is socially constructed and reproduced through social learning and forms of discourse (ideologies and texts of various sorts, including symbols) rather than through material factors. Of course, the intellectual provenance of social constructionism is pretty mixed. It takes in the ‘new science’ of Vico in the eighteenth century, some humanistic Marxism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and linguistic insights into relational practices, as well as the contributions from both micro and macro sociology (Lock and Strong, 2010). Out of such a rich intellectual context, globalization emerges as an (ideological) discourse that frames thought and actions by setting limits for what is desirable and even possible. In other words, the discourses allow actors to simplify and manage the environments within which they act (Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Cameron and Palan, 2004).

The approach is a refreshing contrast to all ‘inevitabilist’ and many structuralist positions on globalization because it underlines not only the contingent quality of what is often presented as given or else immanent in the ‘deep structures’ of social formations, but the capacity of agents to reproduce and alter the terms and conditions of their own existence (Chase-Dunn, 1989; 1992; Chase-Dunn and Gills, 2005). Framing globalization in this way is, or ought to be, an important advance in scholarship (Hay and Smith, 2008). Indeed, unless you are a dyed-in-the-wool structuralist, there is at least an intuitive plausibility about constructivist accounts of globalization and about the idea of globalization as a discourse which possesses almost mythological qualities – a conjured ‘reality’ narrated through the rhetoric of political elites, corporate public relations and even the musings of ‘first wave’ academics and publicists. Discussion of the international economic order from a purely sceptical and largely material perspective usefully counters the exaggerated claims about globalization as inexorable (Friedman, 1999), but constructivist political economy raises the analytical stakes by pointing out the ideological, political and highly contingent character of that process (Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Woods, 2006; Abdelal, 2007; Cameron and Palan, 2004).

Yet questions about the explanatory value of constructivist accounts remain and they qualify the plausibility of the arguments. First, although not debilitating in itself, as Thomas Risse states, we should be aware that constructivism is not a theory of globalization, more a ‘meta theory of social action’ (2007, 132). Second (and constructivists understand this), if globalization is a construct, then so is all social life. The logic of the thesis should then dictate that there can be no master or authentic discourse which can ‘objectively’ construct the best of all possible worlds (Wiener, 2008). The difficulty is that while the research offers useful insights into the workings of social relationships where hegemony is assured through non-material forms and some