Globalization, Schmobalization?

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Nick Bisley, *Rethinking Globalization* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xii p 255 pp., \$64.00, ISBN 9781403986955

Jeffrey A. Frieden, *Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 576 pp., US\$17.95, ISBN 9780393329810 (pbk)

David Held and Anthony McGrew, *Globalization Theory: Approaches and Controversies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), xii p 273 pp., \$46.95, ISBN 9780745632117

Andrew Jones, *Dictionary of Globalization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 258 pp., £12.99, ISBN 0745634419

Rudiger Safranski, *How Much Globalization Can We Bear?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), xiv p 72 pp., \$35.95, ISBN 9780745633893

In recent years, books or articles on globalization often begin with apologies. It is as though continuing to find globalization interesting or relevant is similar to an addiction or, perhaps worse, that it represents a vested interest in a once trendy phenomenon that is well past its use-by date. These apologies make the reader suspicious that the author is trying to squeeze out one more publication from a labour of love. A colleague recently told me – and it must be confessed that I have squeezed out a few publications on the topic – that ‘globalization is over and that it has always been over-rated’. This criticism of globalization was not a judgement about increases or decreases in political, economic or cultural connections, rather it was a condemnation of the concept itself. ‘Globalization,’ he said, ‘has gone the way of post-modernism, whatever they both were or meant.’ Another colleague likes to tell me that the concept is so general as to be theoretically vacuous; so all-encompassing as to be meaningless. Although slightly jovial, such views are common, and important critiques of this most dominant of contemporary concepts.

My response is that no apologies are really necessary because globalization continues to be a convenient term to describe a set of processes and ideas about the world and its constituent parts. Generality, contestation and complexity do not render a concept worthless – think of the terms

power, politics, policy, the state, interdependence, empire, hegemony, or even international relations, just to name a few key terms in political science. Should we question the utility of these terms just because we cannot agree on what they mean and what they encompass? The processes and ideas that the term globalization describes will continue to be important and have an impact on our lives. Like other key concepts and issue areas of the social sciences, we will continue to debate its meaning, significance and utility. Indeed, if we were to abandon the term we would need to think of another to encompass what globalization, in its many and contested meanings, describes. The debate over globalization – as a concept and a process – is not over, nor should it be. This does not mean that challenges and even reversals to aspects of globalization – especially economic and political connections – are not possible. There are storm clouds on the horizon and policy makers and business people will need to address the sustainability of economic globalization if they are to maintain the social support required for continuing economic integration, which is, overall, the driving force of globalization.

Rather than offer a step-by-step review of these mostly excellent books, I follow a framework for conceptualizing globalization. The idea of a framework is to develop some guiding principles for assessing these contributions to the debate and involves assessing globalization, firstly, as a (historical) process; secondly, as a complex, contradictory and uneven phenomenon; and, thirdly, as a (contested) set of ideas.

Globalization as a (Historical) Process

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, some scholars keen to make the academic equivalent of a quick buck argued that the end of the 'age of globalization' might be near (Gray 2002; Ferguson 2005; Rosenberg 2005; Saul 2005; for critique, see Kearney 2002; Naim 2002). In *Globalization Theory: Approaches and Controversies*, editors David Held and Anthony McGrew argue that globalization is far more resilient than critics presume. Temporary reversals of economic integration

do not count as evidence of the demise of globalization. Globalization is a historical process with ebbs and flows that will continue to find both support and opposition.

Thomas Friedman (1999, 8) defines globalization as 'the spread of free-market capitalism to virtually every country in the world'. Such a definition implies that globalization is a recent phenomenon that has emerged since the entry of China and other former socialist states into capitalist world political economy. Jeffrey Frieden, in *Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century*, begs to differ. Frieden argues, 'The opening years of the twentieth century were the closest thing the world had seen to a free world market for goods, capital and labour' (p. 16). Frieden has no problem designating this earlier period as globalization plain and simple (pp. 54 – 5). The earlier globalization 'reinforced itself' until it became very costly to move away from openness. However, move away the world eventually did, with the tragedy of two world wars and the Great Depression.

Frieden's historical analysis provides some pertinent comparisons for today. For example, although Britain's economy doubled during the period from 1870 – 1913, the gap between it and the United States and Germany narrowed. The growth slowdown led to a questioning of the suitability of Britain's free trade policies. This was an issue for the global economy because 'Britain's commitment to free trade and financial openness was central to the structure and functioning of the world economy' (p. 109). Although the nineteenth century world economy had its flaws, Frieden contends that it was better than what came before and definitely better than what came after, but 'the one undeniable failing of the world economy in the decades before 1914 was that it was incapable of avoiding – indeed may have contributed to – what came after it' (pp. 122 – 3). In 1932, Britain abandoned a century of free trade and the year before the government took sterling off gold, 'devaluing it for the first time in peacetime since the gold parity was established by Sir Isaac Newton in 1717' (p. 184). Frieden points out that the 'Depression destroyed the established order . . . and the calamity of the 1930s swept away the classical order's commitment to the international economy and the market' (p. 249). Changing times lead to changing attitudes. One probably does

not need to spell out how this relates to the role of the United States in the world today. Frieden's analysis of the Great Depression shows how vulnerable globalization remains to politics.

Ikenberry (in Held and McGrew) tells the post-war story of globalization from an American point of view and explains – as he has done many times before – how American postwar strategy tied in with the reinvigoration of a liberal economic order, which was more socially embedded than the earlier classical liberal version. It is a simple and, perhaps, too neat a picture. Nevertheless, it is a canvas understandably attractive to American liberals, particularly in the wake of the disasters of the Bush presidency. Frieden reminds us that 'America turned outward after 1945 because of changed conditions, not changed minds' (p. 262). Ikenberry's argument is that 'American hegemony facilitated economic globalization' (p. 57), whereas Frieden emphasizes the interaction of domestic and international forces. Reflecting views about the social foundations of globalization (Cameron 1978; Katzenstein 1985; Rodrik 1998; Garrett 2001, Liebfried and Rieger 2003; Cameron and Kim 2006), Frieden contends the postwar expansion of public spending 'may itself have been a prerequisite of economic integration' (p. 297).

Frieden's detailed analysis regularly points out the problems of global integration both in its earlier manifestation and since World War II – the instabilities, the losers, the ignored and the downright exploited – but he is, overall, a true believer that the advantages of globalization outweigh the disadvantages: 'international economic integration generally expands economic opportunities and is good for society' (p. 475). Mostly, however, this is a book about the possible lessons of history:

By the 1990s global capitalism was in full flower. As before 1914, capitalism was global and the globe was capitalist. The history of global capitalism, from its earlier zenith, through its fall after 1914, to its gradual rise since 1970, illustrates the crucial tests that will determine the future of global economic integration. (p. 476)

The biggest challenge for globalization in the twenty-first century is 'to combine international integration with politically responsive, socially responsible government' (p. 476). Ikenberry contends that the major issues for the future – as hegemony and globalization continue to decouple

– are whether a more strategically and militarily divided and competitive world will undermine the rules and institutions necessary for continuing globalization and whether a United States that is more ambivalent about global rules will itself be a threat to globalization.

McGrew (in Held and McGrew) provides a much needed addition to the accounts of Frieden and Ikenberry, outlining the oft-neglected role of organized violence in the making (and remaking) of globalization: ‘The primacy of economism and the “cultural turn” discouraged a focus upon the coercive or, as some would have it, the “dark side” of globality’ (p. 15). It is impossible to think of globalization as a long-term process and not associate it with violence –the violence of struggles between states and societies to shape domestic power configurations and interactions with the outside world; and the violence of colonialism, imperialism and conquest. McGrew rightly points out that globalization will continue to coexist with – to be shaped and to shape –organized violence.

Alex Callinicos, like Ikenberry, also sees design in the progress of globalization, but his argument is that it has definitely not been benign in nature. Globalization, he contends, cannot simply be equated with imperialism; rather, ‘Imperialism is what happens when two forms of competition – the economic struggle among capitals and geopolitical rivalries between states fuse’ (p. 70).

Callinicos concludes that US hegemony ‘has been experiencing a “crisis of legitimacy”’ (p. 74). He criticises David Harvey’s support for a ‘new “New Deal” led by the United States and Europe’ and no doubt would have little time for Frieden’s vision of a socially sustainable globalization (my term, not his). Instead, he argues, ambitiously, that opponents of neo-liberal globalization and imperial war should target ‘the entire capitalist system’ (p. 75). Unfortunately, the longer-term view of globalization provided by Frieden does not give us much cause to be hopeful about either the possibility of capitalism’s demise or that a replacement would be any less brutal. All the same, Callinicos’s account, when considered alongside those of Frieden and McGrew, provides evidence of the complexity, contradictions and unevenness of globalization and capitalist development.

Globalization as a Complex, Contradictory and Uneven Phenomenon

Andrew Jones argues that his Dictionary of Globalization is needed because globalization 'has become what Raymond Williams calls a keyword' (p. 2). The problem with keywords is that they are bound to mean different things to different people. For Jones, 'globalization is arguably becoming more of a problem than a solution for understanding the world' (p. 2). The dictionary provides short entries on key terms and major players in the globalization debate from the academy, although there are some important omissions, such as Martin Wolf and Jagdish Bhagwati; Marx gets an entry, but Smith and Ricardo do not (although they are mentioned under other topics).

From government, Tony Blair is the only politician included and Bill Clinton, surprisingly, is left out. No bureaucrats, not even Alan Greenspan, are rated as relevant. Of course, such an exercise is inevitably fraught and the entries are short, to the point and informative. It also shows effectively the breadth of scholarship on globalization.

Held and McGrew argue that 'much globalization scholarship recognizes that, in different narrative contexts, it is both the phenomenon that requires explanation but also one which can do the explanatory work'. This is obviously correct. For example, although the global integration of financial markets can provide an explanation for some of the actions of states in recent years, we also need to generate an explanation of the development of globalizing finance that outlines the role of politics, economics and technology. Nick Bisley, in *Rethinking Globalization*, also argues that it is necessary to distinguish between globalization as a cause and as a consequence (p. 26). His preference is to define globalization as 'a set of related social, political and economic consequences', and to argue that:

[G]lobalization refers not to specific changes in the way trade is conducted, or to a particular firm's reliance on global markets for inputs and sales, but to the broader consequences that derive from the increase in speed and rate at which goods, services, people, capital and knowledge moves around the world. (p. 30)

My concern is that this unnecessarily complicates our understanding of globalization. If we think of globalization as a process, then it does refer to changes in the conduct of trade or a firm's reliance

on global inputs or sales. If trade and foreign investment become more important – that is to say, they increase as a percentage of production – then they both should be considered as markers of (at least economic) globalization. This is not to argue that we should only see globalization as a process; clearly, it is more than this. Bisley is right to argue that we need a manageable definition of globalization because too many policy makers and commentators use it as a loose, catch-all explanation or justification of change.

Globalization has been particularly critical for political science as it became obvious in the 1980s that analyses of domestic politics required a more thorough consideration of the impact of global factors – the ‘second image reversed’, as Gourevitch (1978) presciently designated it in the late 1970s.

Globalization was especially important in Australia for both analytical and normative reasons because policy makers and commentators increasingly saw insularity as a fundamental cause of Australia’s economic woes. Political scientists wanted to understand how globalization affected Australia, and there was a mini publishing revolution in the 1990s trying to make sense of change. The conclusion of books by Kelly (1994), Catley (1996) and Bryan and Rafferty (1999) was to see globalization as an inevitable and irreversible process that had weakened the state. These analyses (and many others) argued that globalization had neutered domestic politics. In what is becoming a new orthodoxy, Bisley takes issue with such a contention. He contends that many state-decline arguments misunderstand the ‘character and role of the modern state’:

Globalization is not destroying the state. It is not doing so because its extent is often overstated and the capacity of the state to respond to changing circumstances – of which globalization is clearly a form – has been a requirement from its emergence in the 17th century. The adaptability of the state has not only been a hallmark, but central to its success. (pp. 80–1)

Bisley is not only concerned with the relationship between the state and globalization. Rather, his book ‘offers a reflection on globalization viewed from the empirical and theoretical perspective of world politics’ (pp. 2 – 3). He has two aims: (1) to make sense of a debate often beset by hyperbole and diversity; and (2) to ‘determine the nature and impact of the changes associated with

globalization on the structures, norms and institutions of the contemporary international system' (p. 3). The book provides an excellent summary of debates about globalization and about its impact on the state and the international system. Bisley's argument is that 'globalization is changing world politics, but not nearly so much as its enthusiasts may claim nor in the ways in which we might have expected even five years ago.' This might not be an argument that sets the world on fire, but Bisley provides a very balanced assessment of globalization and the book would make a good introductory text for undergraduates. I am not sure, however, that the material constitutes a 'rethinking' of globalization.

Layna Mosley (in Held and McGrew) harks back to some old thinking in international relations and equates globalization with interdependence. She stresses the political underpinnings of globalization arguing that: 'While the trend toward greater economic interdependence draws partly from technological change, in terms of firms' and investors' ability to disregard political boundaries, it also results from deliberate decisions by political leaders to embrace more open markets' (p. 106). Mosley's main concern is to point out that states, albeit to varying degrees, still have 'room to move' even in the face of global financial pressures (p. 114). The argument that states must follow a particular path dictated by the imperatives of globalization is now such a cliché that it is hard to believe that anyone would still believe it. Although the contention that states must compete to survive is too simplistic to be taken seriously, it still has rhetorical power. States don't compete in this way and even if it is taken as a metaphor for GDP or productivity growth, it is obvious that a variety of policies are possible, all with differing distributional consequences. The role of the state has been fundamental to capitalist success (and failure). This is unlikely to change in the near future.

Of course, interest in globalization goes way beyond political science, economics and political economy. Sociologists were quick to embrace the concept and provided many of the most comprehensive accounts of globalization, even if, sometimes, there has been an inclination to exaggerate globalizing tendencies. Geographers have also made major contributions to the debate.

Saskia Sassen (in Held and McGrew) makes a claim for what she no doubt considers to be a necessarily complex analysis of globalization. She argues that globalization encompasses 'two distinct sets of dynamics'. The first set involves the formation of global institutions and processes, and the second set 'does not necessarily scale at the global level', taking 'place deep inside national territories and institutional domains' (p. 82).

What makes these processes part of globalization even though localized in national, indeed subnational settings, is that they involve transboundary networks and formations connecting or articulating multiple local or 'national' processes and actors (p. 82).

Sassen claims significant novelty for her account, but she appears fixated on delineating between what is nationalised and what is denationalised. Her account of the 'denationalising of state work', for example, 'emphasises the work of states in the development of a global economy,' and she notes that 'certain wings of the state become more powerful'. While this is an important insight and involves processes of state adaptation to changing circumstances, it is not entirely clear that it amounts to a process of denationalising.

In *How Much Globalization Can We Bear?*, Rudiger Safranski approaches globalization philosophically, and the title of the book is not an apology for yet another book on globalization; instead, it covers the impact of long-term processes of globalization on the human condition. Such a task is a big ask in just 70 pages and, although the essay is at times hard going, it contains enough little gems to be worth the reader's while. Safranski argues that humans are 'torn between being a god who sees the whole and an animal that belongs to the whole . . . man is by nature dependent on artificiality, and therefore upon culture and civilization' (pp. 1 – 2). Although technology and science are generally beneficial, Safranski argues that nuclear weapons and other technological 'achievements' mean that 'we begin to suspect that it might be better if we knew less than we do' (p. 3). The vital question is how far humans can depart from nature. Safranski stresses the need for a long-term perspective on globalization, noting as vital markers of globalization the first production of

a map of the Earth in the form of a globe in the sixteenth century and, five hundred years later, the first visions of the Earth from space. 'The moon landing in 1969, with its view from space over this blue planet of ours, was probably the moment at which modern global consciousness was born, the beginning of the fall from euphoria into panic.' This, he suggests, is the beginning of the suspicion that 'there might be too much globalization'. My initial sceptical concern is how we might actually know such things, but then I remember that this is philosophy and 'evidence' is not really necessary and should not eclipse the enjoyment or symbolism of such sweeping assertions. Safranski is definitely in the 'glass half empty' school: 'modern globalization begins with the globalization of fear and terror' (p. 6). Ecological disaster, disease and terror add to the mix of impending doom. On top of all of this, the collapse of the Eastern bloc has led to a single economic model, which is 'irrational overall' (p. 7). Safranski worries about the losers of globalisation, looking to those who invoke the name of God: 'The West has found happiness in disenchantment and estrangement, and is therefore under attack from a religious fanaticism that has again set its heart on the totality' (p. 33). Safranski defends the Western model – 'a rather rare specimen in human history' – but fears that our secular society may ask too much of individuals.

Safranski contends that politicization (emergent in the early nineteenth century) and economism (emergent in the mid nineteenth century) have converged in contemporary globalism (p. 38). Both have led to widespread unease and constriction. Safranski yearns for true cosmopolitanism and space, and argues that the way out of the constriction created by globalization entails shaping individuality. One can almost visualize the mouths of all but the most utopian of liberals gape as they read such a sentence, but they should remember that the individual remains a fundamental, even if idealized, essence of the Western political tradition and the ideal, even if not the practice, of liberal democracy. Globalization, which makes us feel 'powerless and insignificant', means that humans need to find a 'clearing' so as to find 'freedom and sovereignty'. But just how are we to find such a space in this globalizing world? Rousseau's solution was to look inwards into the self, whereas Marx's solution was to look outwards to society. What is needed, Safranski argues, is a middle route, one

that does not necessarily look backwards for origins or forwards for constant growth and progress. We need 'to stop at the point of present confusion and, without worrying about origin or destination, to cut a clearing there' (p. 63). Safranski's view of globalization is profoundly negative, but he does not rule out the possibility of salvation:

I wish that we could keep globalization similarly at a distance, between parentheses, only loosely associated with our lives through an in the meantime'. But perhaps such a way of looking at the things of life demands the cleverness of those giants who created the first clearings in the forest.(pp. 68 – 9)

Safranski's philosophical musings will not be to everyone's taste, and a harsh interpretation would be that the essay is an exercise in showing off just how well read and erudite he is. It might also be argued that Safranski's focus, despite its scope, is too narrow, too Western and too liberal. But this would be to miss the point of his exercise in reasoning, and his ideas about just how much globalization we can actually bear. Undoubtedly, doing something about the uneven outcomes of globalization, both within and between countries, will be as important as the cultivation of individualism.

Globalization as a (Contested) Set of Ideas

Safranski makes it clear that ideas are important. The necessary final element of the framework proposed to understand globalization, therefore, is to consider it as an idea (or a set of ideas), discourse(s) or even metaphor(s). Globalization, Cameron and Palan (2004, 3) point out, 'is a mediated concept – what we know about globalization comes to us through a filter of theories and images that prescribe both its form and consequences and our responses to them. Globalization is not just a phenomenon. It is also a story.' More to the point, it is a series of stories. Such stories, especially dominant narratives, are ideas with impact. As Cerny (1996, 620) pointed out a while ago, a crucial aspect of globalization is its role as a discourse that 'alters the a priori ideas and perceptions which people have of the empirical phenomena which they encounter; in so doing, it engenders strategies and tactics which in turn may restructure the game itself.' In other words, predominant

ideas about globalization can bolster the process of globalization, acting in a self-reinforcing way as policy decisions based on them transform economies and policy structures. In sum, perceptions of the world are fundamental to the shaping of social, political and economic 'realities'.

Safranski distinguishes between what he calls factual globalization and globalism as an idea or ideology. He nominates three normative variants of globalism: neo-liberalism; anti-nationalism; and ecological ecumenism. He pithily characterizes neo-liberalism as 'Think ideologically, act globally', and notes how neo-liberals often neatly combine the 'is' and the 'ought' in their analyses (p. 11). Globalization is often seen as an imperative, forcing a reduced role for the state, or politics more generally (the 'is'), rather than as a complex phenomenon, wherein a reduced role for the state might be beneficial for economic growth, social morality, or whatever (the 'ought'). The problem with anti-nationalism, for Safranski, is that it disregards the need for placement: 'We can communicate and travel globally, but we cannot take up global residence' (p. 12). It also fails to account for the competing tendencies of globalization to both universalise and particularise (see Tomlinson in Held and McGrew). Although global influences are unavoidable with the movement of goods, people and ideas, these cross-border impacts both shape and are re-shaped, supported and resisted. Safranski's third major variant, ecological ecumenism, 'is the globalism with which modern thinking about globality really began'. It sees the Earth 'as a global biotope' and, as a consequence, is also the gloomiest form of globalism because 'technological hubris' threatens the Earth's destruction. Unfortunately, state power continues to determine the possibility of environmental salvation – "'humanity" has no power' (p. 13).

What Safranski calls 'globalisms', Thomas Risse (in Held and McGrew) designates as discourses. Risse offers a social constructivist 'contribution' to understanding (rather than a theory of) globalization. He criticises the notion of globalization 'as a given'. Thinking about globalization as a discourse is essential: 'if we want to understand and explain social behaviour, we need to take words, language and communicative utterances seriously' (p. 131). Communicative practice and language are

processes by which meanings are constructed, interpretations given and social order established (p. 136). Risse contends that here are three ways that social constructivism can contribute to an understanding of globalization. First, 'accepting the mutual constitutiveness of structure and agency allows for a deeper analysis of the social construction of globalization'. Second, 'emphasizing the constitutive effects of international social order enables us to study how globalization processes shape social identities and interests of actors. And vice versa!' Finally, 'focusing on communicative practices permits us to examine more closely how globalization practices are constructed discursively and how actors try to come to grips with their meanings' (p. 132).

Risse believes that 'critical deconstruction' of globalization discourse can help to uncover structures of domination and subordination 'that this discourse itself establishes and reproduces'. But he rightly points out that, 'to argue that globally oriented capitalists are the sole sources of a globalization discourse would reduce the complex story of social and intersubjective meaning construction to an almost mono-causal account' (p. 138). Instead, he contends that the neo-liberal discourse of globalization has been so challenged by 'transnational activists' that a 'counter discourse' has been established. I would argue that counter discourses are more complex and varied than Risse implies and have been propagated by parts of business, labour, policy makers, commentators and academics. Although some of these counter-discourses can be described as anti-neoliberal, most are not anti-capitalist. Far from it. These more moderate counter-discourses have effectively challenged the ubiquity of the neo-liberal discourse. Neo-liberalism has also been negated by the fact that it was eventually seen as an unrealistic portrayal of the interaction of political and economic factors and forces. States were obviously not less important, and spending patterns and policy continued to underpin (or undermine) economic development.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that new work on old topics should try to generate new insights or criticise old ones; it is also not surprising that authors try to sensationalize what is happening in the world. Given

that the novelty of earlier breathless accounts of globalization is past, it is perhaps inevitable that today's novel approach often entails an accentuation of the opposite. 'Endism' is likely to continue over the next few years, especially as the world economy goes through tough times. But it is now in reverse: it is not globalization that is seen to be leading to the end of the nation state, geography, certainty and much else; rather, it is the end of globalization that is the most sensational story. A more moderate picture – that globalization is likely to continue, but with ebbs and flows – is less likely to attract much interest, even if it is a more accurate reflection of current developments and future possibilities.

Globalization will continue to be an essential concept for students of politics, not only because of its ability to capture longer-term developments and recent intensifications of connection, but also because scholars, policy makers and commentators will continue to use and abuse it. With perhaps the exception of Safranski's slightly eccentric, but very enjoyable, account of globalization, all of these books provide a balanced assessment of globalization. Most provide support for claims about the primacy of politics and the need for sustainable political choices. Throughout history, politics has shaped economic connections between countries, and the problem with earlier conceptions of globalization that saw it as an inevitable and irreversible development is that they did not tell us enough about the historical struggles to shape, advance and resist integration and interdependence. Into the twenty-first century, the progress of globalization will continue to be dependent on political support. Although economic globalization has exploded since China's and other former socialist states' entry into the capitalist world and the developing world's abandonment of insularity, it is possible that globalization could slow or even reverse in the coming years. Globalization, however, would still remain as a vital reference point for change, even if politics were to damage its progress. Despite continuing disputes about the term, and regardless of continuing criticism, most of the world has accepted globalization as the sine qua non description of the contemporary era and as providing as many opportunities as constraints. Globalization, schmobalization? Not yet, not soon.

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