

# Three Concepts of Globalization

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**abstract:** This article is a brief inquiry into the meaning and function of the concept of globalization within the social sciences during the last decade. Describing the ontological presuppositions and historical trajectory of the concept of globalization, this article distinguishes three distinct senses of the idea – transference, transformation and transcendence – and argues that these senses have emerged gradually within discourses on globalization. The article tries to demonstrate how the unfolding of these connotations has destabilized the ontological foundations of international theory by constituting ‘the global’ as a new object of thought and action, hence releasing political imagination from the limits posed by its largely statist past.

**keywords:** conceptual history ♦ globalization ♦ international relations ♦ social ontology ♦ state ♦ theory

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Today few doubt the reality of globalization, yet no one seems to know with any certainty what makes globalization real. So while there is no agreement about *what* globalization is, the entire discourse on globalization is founded on a quite solid agreement *that* globalization is. Behind the current and confusing debates about its ultimate causes and consequences, we find a wide yet largely tacit acceptance of the *factuality* of globalization as such, as a process of change taking place ‘out there’: even otherwise constructivistically minded scholars tend to regard globalization as an undeniable and inescapable part of contemporary experience (Bauman, 1998; Gill, 1991; Luke, 1993).

But what goes on ‘in here’, in the discourse on globalization? To my mind, the wide acceptance of globalization as a fact is *itself a social fact* worth investigating, especially since it might be argued that this fact is partly constitutive of what globalization is about: nothing changes the

world like the collective belief that it is changing, albeit rarely in directions desired by the believers.

So rather than being yet another attempt to summarize the globalization debate in terms of its forever multiplying points of difference, this article tries to unpack the terms of the conceptual consensus that informs it through a brief inquiry into the *ontological presuppositions* and *historical trajectory* of the concept of globalization over the last decade or so. Instead of focusing on globalization as such, this article focuses on *the constitution of 'the global'* as a common point of reference and an object of inquiry.

While there is no lack of recent overviews of the globalization debate (Clark, 1997: 1-33; Clark, 1999: 1-15; Hurrell and Woods, 1995), very little attention has been devoted to the concept of globalization from other viewpoints than those provided by globalization theory itself. To Ferguson (1992), the concept of globalization is little more than an expression of capitalist ideology; to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999: 42), the concept of globalization has the 'effect, if not the function, of submerging the effects of imperialism in cultural ecumenism or economic fatalism and of making transnational relationships of power appear as a neutral necessity'.

Whether catering to the needs of globalization theorists or political paranoia, attempts to analyze the concept of globalization normally start out lamenting its ambiguity, sometimes to the point of arguing for its abolishment within scientific discourse (Strange, 1996: xiii). As Bauman (1998: 1) has remarked, 'vogue words share a similar fate: the more experiences they pretend to make transparent, the more they themselves become opaque'. To Robertson and Khondker (1998), however, this ambiguity reflects the fruitful ambiguities of different discourses on globalization and *their* globalization, while to Rosenau (1996: 248) the same ambiguity indicates 'an early state in a profound ontological shift'.

I cannot but agree with this latter statement. Understanding the ambiguity of the concept of globalization is crucial to understanding the emergence of globalization as a fact. Yet this requires that we adopt an attitude to concepts slightly different from that underwriting practices of definition within the social sciences. The rationale behind conventional conceptual analysis is the desire to purge scientific discourse of ambiguity by stipulating connotations through clearcut definitions; definitions which hopefully also can provide the basis for further empirical investigation of the phenomena subsumed under the concept.

By contrast, the objective of *conceptual history* is to open the concept itself to investigation by asking how and why a given concept has managed to accumulate different and sometimes incommensurable meanings over time, and how those different connotations in turn have conditioned the possibility of thought and action (Farr, 1989; Koselleck, 1985a). Sociopolitical concepts are like sponges: they are able to soak up

and contain a variety of meanings as a result of being used in different contexts for different purposes. It is this sponginess that makes concepts increasingly ambiguous, and it is the resulting ambiguity that sometimes makes concepts constitutive of discourse. Rather than starting from a fixed definition of a given concept, conceptual history attends to what the practices of definition and usage *do* to a concept, and what the concept in turn *does* to the world into which it is inscribed. Phrased differently, conceptual history attends both to what a concept *means* within a given context and to what a concept *does to* a given context.

Practices of definition and usage are never innocent. They invariably reflect underlying presuppositions about the sociopolitical world and the conditions of its intelligibility. So in order for the concept of globalization to be meaningful – rhetorically as well as analytically – it has to be inscribed within an ontological framework that defines the identity of the sociopolitical world and its constituent parts. Before we can have a closer look at the concept of globalization and understand what it does to this world, we must therefore take a brief look into this world itself.

Since the emergence of the social sciences, this world has been stratified along lines handed down to us by western rationality (Luhmann, 1998: 22–43). According to this stratification, the sociopolitical world is intelligible in terms of parts and whole and their interplay: the whole is always something more than the sum of the parts, yet the parts are always something more than mere instantiations of the whole. Also, we find this world compartmentalized into categorically distinct sectors or causal dimensions, roughly corresponding to disciplinary divisions within the social sciences (cf. Fuller, 1993). The sociopolitical world is thus subdivided into rough categories such as ‘the political’, ‘the economical’, ‘the social’, ‘the cultural’, irrespective of whether those categories and the distinctions underlying them are regarded as inherent in reality itself or as mere constructs in the mind of the theorist.

Whereas the above stratification has been a perennial source of disputes concerning the logical and historical order of priority between units and systems, the largely parallel compartmentalization has given rise to a constant battle about causal and inferential priorities between different variables. The globalization debate is but the latest example of a debate that has been animated by the conceptual tensions built into this world, tensions that condition the possibility of knowledge yet simultaneously assure that the problems these tensions give rise to remain a priori insoluble.

Within academic international relations, the main expression of this inherited social ontology has been what Clark (1998, 1999: 15–33) has termed the ‘Great Divide’. International relations have conventionally been defined in terms of the interaction between sovereign units within

a larger system of states, a system which was anarchic insofar as the sovereignty of its parts ruled out the very possibility of any overarching authority (see Waltz, 1959; Buzan et al., 1993: 29–65; Hollis and Smith, 1990: 92–118). This neat stratification of the world into inside and outside – into unit and system – made sure that every phenomenon that did not belong at any of those levels of analysis fell outside the purview of this discipline (cf. Bartelson, 1998; Scholte, 1993: 4–8), as did the possibility of transformation and transcendence.

The concept of globalization stands in a double and paradoxical relation to this world of international relations. On the one hand, the concept of globalization seems to presuppose a stratification and compartmentalization of the world in order to be theoretically meaningful. On the other hand, the concept of globalization seems to transgress this stratification and compartmentalization. Indeed, the logic of the concept of globalization seems to undermine not only those distinctions that have conditioned the intelligibility and autonomy of international relations, but also to an extent the very practice of making such ontological distinctions. For example, according to Robertson (1992: 9) the concept of globalization enables 'social theory to transcend the limitations of the conditions of its own maturation'. Thus, globalization might well be inherently transgressive, yet many of its core connotations are such that they presuppose and thus are parasites upon the same social ontology it promises to transcend.

In the rest of this article, I analyze the concept of globalization in more detail and argue that the concept has undergone a series of ontological mutations over the last decade, gradually pushing its core connotations out of the ontological framework just described and into something that looks like an ontological interregnum. In doing this I describe what I take to be three distinct concepts of globalization, and how they have unfolded within different theoretical contexts. I treat the concept as self-referential: the logical succession between different connotations reflects the ideal trajectory of the globalizing process as it has been posited by those concepts themselves.

Finally, I will say something about what the resulting conceptual change has done to the ontology of the social sciences, as well as to the logical space of thought and action. Arguably, rather than simply referring to an already manifest process of change, the concept of globalization functions as a *vehicle* for the change it portrays as manifest. Using Koselleck's (1985b) terminology, it is possible to argue that the concept of globalization today functions both as a 'space of experience' as well as a 'horizon of expectation': a space of experience insofar as it draws upon and incorporates elements from modern social ontology; a horizon of expectation insofar as it contains an implicit promise to transcend modernity proper and the strictures it imposes on political imagination. It is thus a mediating concept

that *brings about* conceptual change, taking us from the stable world of classical social ontology right into the realm of pure becoming, before perhaps finally vanishing in front of our eyes.

### **Globalization as Transference**

Perhaps the first and most common sense of globalization is that of globalization as an intensified *transference or exchange* of things between pre-constituted units, be they political, economic or cultural. Thus conceived, globalization signifies *a process of change that originates at the level of the unit*, mainly in terms of the unintended consequences of the *interaction between units*. Globalization as transference thus implies *exchange across existing unit boundaries* and between units and system, but it still presupposes that this system as well as the units remain identical with themselves throughout the globalizing process.

Interpreted this way, the concept of globalization is ontologically individualist while being logically open to the possibilities of methodological structuralism, since the concept of globalization refers to observable change at the unit level as well as to the observable yet sometimes unintended outcomes of interaction between units. Ultimately, however, globalization is reducible to causes that are operative at the unit level, such as the conscious and intentional acts of particular agents, these agents and their acts being classifiable within different causal dimensions. Hence, according to the logic of this concept, globalization takes place *inside out*.

As Scholte (1997: 430–1) has noted, very little distinguishes this concept of globalization from the older ones of internationalization and interdependence. It means little more than intensified exchange or movement *across* unit boundaries but never anything that alters those boundaries or the nature of the units themselves. Focusing on the unit level means that whereas attributes such as interests, intentions and strategies may vary over time as both causes and consequences of globalization, the units will remain essentially the same. Of course, the accumulated consequences of interaction may change the structure of the system in which the units are situated, but since this system ultimately exists only by virtue of its component parts, *it will remain basically the same as long as its constituent units remain the same*, and vice versa.

One obvious example of such a conceptualization is provided by early theories of interdependence as they were articulated in opposition to political realism within international relations theory. In this context, interdependence 'refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries' (Keohane and Nye, 1977: 8). Allegedly, the main consequence of complex interdependence is that it pushes the rules of inter-state interaction away from

traditional concerns with military security, yet it does very little to change the basic stratification into systems and units (see Keohane and Nye, 1977: 23–37). A world of interdependent states may be different from one of fully independent states – had it ever existed – but it is nevertheless a *world of states* (see Keohane and Nye, 1998).

Another example comes from international political economy and the internationalization of enterprise. A similar logic applies here. Due to intensified competition, individual firms have gradually internationalized their production and sales, thus becoming more and more territorially disembedded. Yet there is nothing about the internationalization of enterprise that changes the basic fact that the firm and the national economy are the main constituents of an internationalized world economy, since the process of internationalization refers to the ‘growth of the flows of trade and factors of production between countries’ (Palmer, 1998: 12; cf. Dicken, 1998: 5).

As a consequence of such superficial integration, firms may become multinational or even transnational in character, yet a firm nevertheless always remains a highly specific form of organization, distinct from the global market in which it operates as well as from other organizational forms, such as its main rival, the state (cf. Strange, 1996: 44–65). As Thompson (1999: 142) has remarked, ‘an internationalized world economy would be one in which the principal entities remain national economies. . . . Although there is increasing integration and enmeshment between these entities, there is a continued relative separation of the “domestic” from the “international” arena.’

Early notions of cultural globalization obey a similar logic, albeit in a fuzzier way. Distinct expressions of particular cultures may spread and mingle across the globe, yet these particular cultures remain identical with themselves throughout the exchange, making the prospect of a genuinely global culture look utopian. As Smith (1990: 188) has remarked, ‘A world of competing cultures, seeking to improve their comparative status rankings and enlarge their cultural resources, affords little basis for global projects.’ Yet, from another perspective, if there is such a thing as a truly global culture, it is because ‘[a]ll the variously distributed structures of meaning are becoming interrelated, somehow, somewhere’ (Hannerz, 1990: 250), thus making *locality* the condition of possible *globality*.

Accounts of cultural globalization along these lines invariably accept that there are such things as distinct cultures in the first place, since otherwise questions about cultural globalization would fail to make sense. That is, cultural globalization may occur but as the result of *exchange between pre-existing cultural units*, thus paving the way for debates over cultural hegemony and imperialism (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999; Rothkopf, 1997).

Following the logic of globalization as transference, today we find an intense contestation of its consequences for the larger system coupled with a corresponding inability to account for how the units might be transformed in the process. One of the main controversies today concerns the effects of globalization upon the power and autonomy of the modern state. Yet by virtue of the strong ontologically individualist commitments that inform the notion of globalization as transference, the modern state is likely to look more like a *source* of continuing globalization than as its main *victim*.

So while globalization certainly affects the interests and intentions of particular states, it does not change any of the defining properties of statehood. Indeed, it is possible to argue that globalization has pushed forward a new geographic extension of state authority (Mann, 1997), or a scale transformation of state capacities (Shaw, 1997: 498–503), while insisting that the modern state remains a vehicle of globalization.

From a unit-level perspective, it is not meaningful to speak of 'the global' as something transcending the sum total of the units. From such a viewpoint, there is nothing irreversible or necessary about globalization, since globalization ultimately is the outcome of agency, however unintended. As Panitch (1994: 64) has argued, 'capitalist globalization is a process which also takes place in, through, and under the aegis of states; it is encoded by them and in important respects authored by them'.

So at the end of the day, globalization may well affect the attributes of states, yet without changing their basic identity or fundamentally disrupting their capacity to act. Since units are regarded as *prima facie* autonomous and thus at least potentially in charge of their own fates, it becomes equally meaningful to argue in favor of strengthened or reformed state institutions to fend off the more undesirable consequences of globalization (see Armstrong, 1998; Bienefeld, 1994; Drucker, 1997; Evans, 1997: 82–3; Hirst, 1997; Panitch, 1994: 88; Rodrik, 1997). And if the question of global governance ever should arise from within this perspective, it is likely to be answered in terms of either *multilateralism* (Hirst and Thompson, 1995: 428–37; Thompson, 1999: 144–9) – increased cooperation between states – or *internationalism* – as a joint effort of states to make the international realm more like the domestic one (see Bartelson, 1995; Goldmann, 1994).

### **Globalization as Transformation**

If globalization is understood in the first concept as a process of interaction and transference between pre-existing units, the second concept does much to reverse this picture: in this sense, globalization is a process of *transformation* that occurs at the systems level, and it affects this system as much as it affects the identity of the units.

Globalization takes place over and above the units as a result of the interaction *between* systemic variables *across* different dimensions and sectors of that system. Thus, globalization is by definition a multidimensional process that takes place *outside in*. To the extent that this process involves the units, it does so by turning them into reproductive circuits for those systemic processes and forces which ultimately will alter their identity and, eventually, the constitutive rules of the system in which they are situated.

The logic at work here is likely to be vaguely structurationist (Giddens, 1990; see also Tomlinson, 1994), and it now becomes much harder to make operational sense of the concept of globalization in terms other than its more observable consequences at *lower* levels of complexity and abstraction than it is at the systems level.

Even if this concept of globalization is distinct from the first one, there is a continuity between them insofar as the second concept theorizes exactly what was left out and rendered enigmatic by the first one, and it therefore renders visible – or helps to create and sustain – new series of phenomena that clearly were beyond the grasp of the first concept. Another way of putting it is to say that the second concept presupposes the articulation of the first one, since it is difficult to make sense of a system without units, yet it is fully possible to envisage a unit without a system.

The idea of globalization as that which takes place in a global *totality* presupposes that we can conceptualize the world as something more than the sum of its constituent parts, be they individual states or societies. In the context of modern social theory, perhaps the first theoretical articulation and empirical justification of such a viewpoint can be found in Wallerstein's seminal *The Modern World System* (1974a; see also Wallerstein, 1974b; for an overview, see Meyer et al., 1997). So rather than analyzing the trajectory of singular states or societies, changes in them could now be regarded 'as consequent upon the evolution and interaction of the world-system' (Wallerstein, 1974a: 7), and yet this world system 'has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence' (Wallerstein, 1974a: 347).

Integral to this conception is the idea of the world being intelligible as a *single place* that comprises the totality of all human relationships. This concept concerns 'the concrete structuration of the world as a whole' (Robertson, 1990: 20). Thus, the global field is comprehensible under the aspect of humankind as a whole, as well as under the aspect of a world system of such national societies (Robertson, 1992: 27), the latter 'constituting *but one* general reference point for the analysis of the global-human circumstance' (Robertson, 1990: 26).

This concept of globalization thus preserves the distinction between unit and system, but relativizes and problematizes it by turning the



system into a kind of unit situated at the same level of analysis as its constituent parts. It is this conceptualization that underpins talk of globalization as a distinct field of knowledge and 'the global' as a distinct object of investigation, now happily removed from the ontological limits defined by the unit focus of the first concept, since 'some of the most significant cultural phenomena of our time have to do with responses to and interpretations of the global system as a whole' (Robertson, 1992: 46). Yet this world is still compartmentalized into distinct dimensions of causality, the main source of debate being the character of multidimensionality and the interaction between systemic variables *within* different dimensions or sectors of 'the global'.

Outside the cultural turn, the systemic concept of globalization has informed a wide variety of theories within international relations and international political economy, theories now problematizing the relation between the political and economic sectors. As Cerny (1995: 596) defines globalization, it is 'a set of economic and political structures and processes deriving from the changing character of the goods and assets that comprise the base of the international political economy'. In political terms, globalization 'means that the playing field of politics itself is increasingly determined not within insulated units' (Cerny, 1997: 253). Thus, globalization is something a priori situated over and outside the grasp of the unit level, yet profoundly affecting the identity of the units over time.

When globalization is conceptualized in this way, the fate of the units is inextricably intertwined with that of the system as a whole, and it is hardly meaningful to speak of the former other than in terms of the latter. From this point of view, globalization might be made to look both necessary and irreversible, since it is defined in such terms that it seems to be out of reach of the strategies of singular agents.

Yet globalization has a profound impact on the *identity* of units and agents. When it comes to the modern state and its future, subscribers to the second concept tend to agree that it will be more or less radically *transformed*, and that its capacity for action is severely circumscribed by global structures and processes. Thus, according to Cerny (1997: 253–73), globalization has relativized the old notion of sovereignty and replaced the modern welfare state with a competitive and market-oriented state, which ultimately will 'lose its structural primacy and autonomy as a unitary actor in the international system' (Cerny, 1995: 625). According to Bauman (1998: 65), the dynamics of globalization have turned states into 'executors and plenipotentiaries of forces which they have no hope of controlling politically'. And to Sassen (1996: 28), while sovereignty and territory 'remain key features of the international system', they have 'been reconstituted and partly displaced onto other institutional arenas outside the state and outside the framework of nationalized territory'.

So while the state remains in place, its identity and core capacities are profoundly transformed, possibly leaving us with a residual state and few options to strengthen it. Naturally, this leads to discussions about the possibility of global governance, firmly centered on the prospects of cooperation between residual states and emergent loci of authority outside states in the global order (Falk, 1997; Held, 1997; Held and McGrew, 1993; Rosenau, 1995).

### **Globalization as Transcendence**

Thus far we have stayed within the limits defined by the ontology of the social sciences, within a world that comes stratified into units and systems and compartmentalized into sectors of human thought and action. Since this world defines itself as a prerequisite of its intelligibility, what takes place outside it by definition defies theorization in terms valid inside it.

So what takes place beyond this world can only be rendered transparent in new terms. The most recent set of connotations soaked up by the concept of globalization promises to escape the strictures of modern social thought by defying the standard ontologization of the world into units and system and by disputing its compartmentalization into sectors or dimensions. Thus understood, globalization implies the *transcendence* of those distinctions that together condition unit, system and dimension identity. Globalization is neither inside out nor outside in but rather a process that *dissolves* the divide between inside and outside.

This concept is even harder to make sense of than the second one, precisely because its referents are situated beyond conventional theoretical categories. Yet it presupposes what has been handed down to us by the second concept: the world as a whole as a point of reference, and 'the global' as an object of inquiry. Indeed, when conceptualized in terms of transcendence, globalization brings change not only to the identity of units and system but also to the *conditions of existence* of objects of inquiry and the fields where they are situated. Globalization thus *despatializes* and *detemporalizes* human practices as well as the conditions of human knowledge, and it projects them onto the global as a condition of its existence. Thus conceived, globalization is driven forward by a dynamic of its own and is *irreducible* to singular causes within particular sectors or dimensions.

Thus, to Lash and Urry (1994: 6–15), the old world is about to be replaced by 'information and communication structures' thanks to increased mobility, and the global itself is constituted by 'networks of flows' rather than by preconstituted units or agents. The world of objects is gradually replaced by a world of *signs*. Similarly, according to Castells (1991: 142), 'flows rather than organizations' constitute the basic units of an informationalized global economy.

These flows have a profound impact on the makeup of the world as we have come to know it:

Flows are decentering, despatializing, and dematerializing forces, and they work alongside and against the geopolitical codes of spatial sovereignty . . . there are new universals and new particulars being created by the networks of accelerated transnational exchange as fresh identities, unities, and values emerge from sharing access to the same symbols, markets, and commodities. (Luke, 1993: 240)

So while 'the international realm is a patchwork of countries . . . the global sphere is constituted by networks of supraterritorial flows' (Scholte, 1996: 572). Thus, global phenomena are neither systemic nor unit-level phenomena but cut across this distinction. In the words of Scholte (1997: 431), global phenomena are those 'which extend across widely dispersed locations simultaneously and can move between places anywhere on earth pretty much instantaneously'.

Within this view, globalization not only affects the attributes of individual states or the identity of the state as a political institution, but it *subverts the conditions of its existence*. This concept of globalization implies the possible dissolution of the sovereign state and the corresponding international system or society as a spatialized form of political life. To Scholte (1996: 581–607), this brings de-territorialization of identities and an uncoupling of identity and political authority. Also, according to Rose (1996: 338), globalization undermines 'the social' as an object of government and replaces it with community as the new target of governmental tactics.

Being portrayed as necessary, this process paradoxically opens the world up to total emancipation. So rather than being opposed, necessity and freedom are here understood as mutually implicating and sustaining aspects of the same transgressive logic. And if this raises questions of governance – which it inevitably does as the state dies – they are likely to be phrased and answered in terms of coordination among networks or in terms of cosmopolitanism (Ruggie, 1994).

## **Globalization, Experience and Expectation**

How can we understand the above sequence of concepts and meanings, and how do they relate to each other? To answer this question is to answer questions about the identity of the concept of globalization: what the concept of globalization *means* within different theoretical contexts and discourses. To a certain extent, the above concepts are all present within contemporary discourses on globalization, their theoretical incommensurability is perhaps one potent source of confusion. Inevitably, this

incommensurability forces us to consider whether we are dealing with *one* concept of globalization or *three*. Ultimately, however, this is a matter of perspective. I think these concepts could be placed in a vague historical succession and then interpreted as a reflection of the evolution of the discourses it informs, the phenomena which those discourses purport to render intelligible, as well as the aspirations of the field of globalization studies itself. So behind the apparent incommensurability between different concepts of globalization, it is possible to identify an element of continuity, since they are drawn together by their focus on globalization as a process of indeterminate change.

It is important not to overstate the degree of historical succession and continuity between these concepts because of the undeniable overlap that exists across different contexts, and the fact that these concepts are able to coexist rather peacefully within contemporary discourse. Bearing the above reservations in mind, the story told nevertheless indicates a few important things about the trajectory of the concept of globalization. First, it has become increasingly *abstract* through its usage, reflecting – and effecting – changes in the ontological presuppositions underlying different discourses on globalization. From having had its core connotations determined by its reference to fairly tangible unit-level phenomena, it has gradually come to refer to theoretical categories whose referents in turn gradually have become less tangible. It seems like the concept of globalization gradually has become a *condition of referentiality*: rather than referring to a *preconstituted* domain of objects, it has become a condition of their possibility by being *constitutive* of that domain.

Second, while remaining essentially ambiguous and essentially contestable, the use of the concept reflects an increasing certainty about the factuality of the globalization process itself. What is open to controversy in the globalization debate are the core theoretical meanings of the concept of globalization, not the very possibility of its reference or the empirical actuality of the phenomena to which it refers under different definitions. Hence, behind the veil of semantic ambiguity we find the conviction that globalization is *taking place*; without such a conviction constituting a common ground, there would be no discourse or debate on globalization. We might therefore conclude that while the concept of globalization has undergone a series of rather dramatic mutations during the decade it has been around, the main outcome of these mutations has been that the concept of globalization has become constitutive of a distinct set of discourses which take ‘the global’ to be a wholly autonomous domain of thought and action.

This brings us over to the actual use of the concept of globalization and what it has done to the context into which it has been inscribed. First, the concept of globalization seems to set everything it touches in motion. The

concept of globalization is today less of a rhetorical battleground or an ideological weapon than itself a *vehicle for conceptual transformation* and movement. The present significance of the concept of globalization lies not in the multitude of theoretical connotations it has been able to soak up and contain over the last decade, but more in what it has done to the conceptual world of modern social science. The concept of globalization has had a destabilizing impact upon the entire array of sociopolitical concepts that together constitute the main template of political modernity, making their meanings contestable and dissolving the distinctions upon which their coherent usage hitherto has rested. As we have seen earlier, this goes not only for abstract ontological categories like unit and system, but also for concepts like state, sovereignty, nation and society. The meaning of these concepts has become problematic by being grafted onto discourses of globalization. It thus seems as if the concept of globalization has attained a life of its own, gradually cancelling out the same ontological stratification which initially made it epistemically possible to posit globalization as part of a meaningful contemporary experience.

Second, as stated earlier, from having referred to fairly tangible portions of reality, the concept of globalization has become a condition of referentiality. Not only does the concept of globalization define a domain of its own and a global viewpoint from which change can be understood, but it has also opened a horizon of political imagination structured around expectations of transcendence. The concept has gradually moved from the domain of experience to that of expectation, from a realm where freedom and necessity are opposed to a realm where they are indistinguishable. It is therefore also a metapolitical concept insofar as it fuses the conditions of meaningful experience with the conditions of expectation. The emancipative power of the concept of globalization lies not in what it renders visible but rather in the posited necessity of globalization and the invisibility of its ultimate outcome, a necessity which in turn spills over into freedom; the freedom of imagining a new world that is radically different from the old one.

Through its various connotations, the concept of globalization functions as a mediating link between the modern world with its crusty social ontology and the brave new world that remains inaccessible and unintelligible not only to the subscribers to that ontology but also to the believers in global change as well. Not only is globalization a moving target for social inquiry, but it also signifies the movement of that inquiry itself. The concept of globalization thus makes modern political experience meaningful while simultaneously releasing political expectation from the strictures that the very meaningfulness of this experience has imposed on political imagination. It does so through a double gesture: by projecting expectations onto the global while simultaneously making those expectations constitutive of

globality as a point of reference and convergence. In this respect, the logic of the concept of globalization resembles that of the concepts of civilization and revolution as they were shaped before and during the French Revolution: these concepts also lacked stable referents, but functioned as *vehicles* of social change by *signifying* change in its purest, most necessary and irreversible form: change as the condition of possible objects and possible identities in a possible future. And like these concepts, globalization does not represent a mere prognosis for the future, but a *prophecy in quest for self-fulfillment*. So far from being here to stay, the metaphors of globalization will perhaps die when the concept has fulfilled its destabilizing task, that is, when globalization has become something that goes without saying and therefore no longer stands in need of being spoken about.

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