5. Critical contributions to world-systems analysis
5.4 Challenges of globalization theory to world-systems analysis

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Introduction

Globalization has become a very unwieldy idea. In some senses it has replaced twentieth-century staples of social thought such as social change and development. A sampling of the variety of approaches to, and theories of, globalization reveals an overlap that is probably less than you would find in equivalent volumes covering most of the recognized sub-fields in the social sciences. This probably reflects the relatively chaotic (unparadigmatic) nature of globalization studies. My own version of globalization theory—a theoretical framework for analyzing social change and development in their widest applications in the global (post 1950s) age—is one among many attempts to make sense of globalization. It presents some challenges to world-systems analysis (hereafter w-sa). My theory is based on the following distinctions intended to deconstruct and then reconstruct the concept of globalization in a dialectic of thesis (generic globalization), antithesis (capitalist globalization), and synthesis (alternative globalizations). The argument is that the emancipatory potential of generic globalization has been subverted by the repressive class-based exploitations of capitalist globalization (paralleling the ways in which the progressive aspects of the capitalist mode of production have been undermined by the social relations of actually existing capitalisms), and that the way forward is to be found in a number of non-capitalist alternative globalizations, of which socialist globalization appears (to me, at least) to be the most promising in the long term.

Challenge Number 1: Dating globalization—
A world-historical phenomenon versus a late twentieth-century phenomenon

Generally, w-sa treats globalization as a long-standing feature of historic world-systems. “Globalization, in the sense of the expansion and intensification of larger interaction networks, has been increasing for millennia, albeit unevenly and in waves. … Rather than a wholly unique and new phenomenon, globalization is primarily international economic integration, and as such it is a feature of the world-system that has been oscillating as well as increasing for centuries. Recent research comparing the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has shown that trade globalization is both a cycle and a trend” (Chase-Dunn 2007: 1061). However, many if not most globalization theorists and researchers conceptualize it as a much more recent phenomenon. I have argued that we need to deconstruct the almost uselessly general term globalization into generic, capitalist, and
alternative globalizations. The productive force of generic globalization dates from the inception of the electronic revolution, around the 1960s, which transformed systems of production, distribution, and exchange—capitalist globalization, in effect, creates a new mode of production. Also fundamental to generic globalization are postcolonialisms, the creation of transnational social spaces, and qualitatively new forms of cosmopolitanism. Capitalist globalization undermines the emancipatory potential of the four elements of generic globalization, resulting in a new type of class polarization crisis and the crisis of ecological unsustainability (Sklair 2009). All these factors, I argue, challenge the rather dated conceptual framework of w-sa.

Challenge Number 2: Capitalist globalization—transnational practices versus state centrism

My approach to capitalist globalization is based on the concept of transnational practices, practices that cross state boundaries but do not necessarily originate with state agencies or actors. The concept of transnational practices is an attempt to make more concrete the central issues raised in the debate over globalization: notably, the role of the national economy, the state, and local and global cultures. Analytically, transnational practices operate in three spheres: the economic, the political, and the cultural-ideological. The whole is what I mean by the global system. The global system at the beginning of the twentieth-first century is not synonymous with global capitalism, but the dominant forces of global capitalism are the dominant forces in the global system. To put it simply, individuals, groups, institutions and even whole communities, local, national, or transnational, can exist as they have always done outside the orbit of the capitalist global system but this is becoming increasingly more difficult as capitalist globalization penetrates ever more widely and deeply. The building blocks of the theory of the capitalist global system are the transnational corporation (TNC), the characteristic institutional form of economic transnational practices, a still-evolving transnational capitalist class in the political sphere and in the culture-ideology sphere, the culture-ideology of consumerism (Sklair 2002). W-sa, for all its global potential, seems unable to distinguish clearly between transnational and state-centrist levels of analyses, notably in the still central core/semiperiphery/periphery country framework which, I would argue, is rendered redundant by the transnational practices approach to globalization.

Challenge Number 3: Culture (again)

The long-standing and often damaging criticism that w-sa either ignores cultural factors or when it gives them attention, does so in an “economistic” fashion, is also valid in terms of the w-sa approach to globalization. In particular, all the practices, institutions, beliefs, and aspirations that swirl around what we can term the culture-ideology of consumerism—a central issue for non-economistic research on globalization—have little resonance in the w-sa corpus of work.

Conclusion: Can the world-systems approach be globalized?

In my sense of the term, it is difficult to see how w-sa can be adequately globalized. Having said that, it is only fair to acknowledge that some globalization scholars appear to agree that there is nothing essentially new about globalization. This is ironic due to the fact that without the stimulus of w-sa from the 1960s onwards, the more recent flowering of globalization theory and research (in sociology at least) might have been far less fruitful. As things stand, however, there is every
chance that W-sa may eventually take its place as one of the many approaches to globalization as well as a dynamic, if flawed, general approach to historical change in its own right.

References