8. Globalization and distribution
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Globalization: Theories of convergence and divergence in the world-system

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Introduction

Theories of globalization and its causes and consequences are a dominant area of scholarship in macro-comparative sociology. A key focus is the degree to which expansion of the world-system causes the economic, military, political, and cultural conditions of nations and interrelations among them to converge or diverge. Some contend that there are greater international connections among states and as a result, there are increasing similarities in state attributes on the domestic level. For example, many scholars point out that as a result of converging international linkages, nation-states exhibit a great deal of isomorphism in their structures and policies (e.g., Boli and Thomas 1997; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Meyer et al 1997). Indeed, these approaches see globalization as a homogenizing force; escalating flows of people, information, and commodities increase various forms of integration, producing a single world society or global culture (Meyer et al 1997).

As an example of an alternative perspective, some emphasize that despite increasing integration, including economic realms such as international trade, international lending, and cross-boarder mergers and acquisitions, the degree of structural inequality between nations has only continued to increase over time (Robinson 2004). Indeed, despite rising interconnectedness and the adoption of common policy scripts, nation-states occupy similar hierarchical positions today as they did 40 years ago (see Kick et al 2011; Snyder and Kick 1979). Much of the world-system remains fragmented, as less-developed or periphery nations continue to have fewer and less beneficial international linkages than more-developed or core nations (e.g., Beckfield 2003, 2010). It is important to note that these perspectives address the degree of convergence or divergence across two dimensions: the interconnections among states and the domestic attributes of states. Although the distinction between these two dimensions is often taken for granted in the theorization, the convergence/divergence debate as it applies to international linkages and domestic attributes represents one of the central points of inquiry among globalization and world-system scholars, thus signifying an issue that deserves our further theoretical and analytical scrutiny in this essay.

Convergence in the world-system

Perspectives highlighting patterns of convergence in international linkages and nation-state attributes in the world-system include modernization theories of development and world-polity
approaches to globalization. The modernization school is a historical product of several events in the post-World War II era, including the rise of the United States as an international superpower and the disintegration of European colonial empires in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These dynamics led nation-states to search for optimal models for development (So 1999). With significant support from the US government, private foundations, and international organizations such as the World Bank, the development “movement” spread around the world (Stiglitz 2007).

Modernization theory adopted both evolutionary and functionalist approaches in an effort to illuminate the development experiences of poor countries. Functionalist perspectives center on interrelations and interdependencies in institutions in society (e.g., Parsons 1951), and evolutionary theories (e.g., Durkheim 1893; Tonnies 1887) see social change as unidirectional, moving societies from a primitive to an advanced state, asserting that this transition is fundamentally favorable. Thus, modernization perspectives argue that tradition is one of the greatest barriers to modernization; traditional ways block the development of scientific rationality, the employment of advanced technologies, and specialized integration into the economic world-system (Rostow 1960). In essence, poor nations can benefit by adopting the domestic conditions found in Western states, as modernization is perceived as a phased, homogenizing and Americanizing process (So 1999).

Modernization perspectives thus represent a convergence standpoint for nation-state attributes as they advocate Western cultural, political, and economic models for development, such as the spread of achievement motivation and policy scripts that call for increased economic integration, often in the form of free-trade or increased foreign investment (Inkeles and Smith 1974; McClelland 1964; Rostow 1960). Additionally, this approach, therefore, implies rising international linkages through the incorporation of domestic economies into global systems of exchange. A contemporary perspective that highlights these trends is the world-polity perspective. This strand of theorization points to increased interstate contact through the increased isomorphism of institutions, state structures, and policies across nations (Meyer 2000; Meyer et al 1997). Accordingly, worldwide structural convergence is occurring both across states and within them (e.g., Bell 1973; Meyer et al 1997). The diffusion and convergence of institutional forms has been observed for a number of outcomes, including scientific research (Schoefer et al 2000), worldwide environmental regimes (Frank et al 2000), and technology (Bell 1973).

Another cultural interpretation that adopts an alternative position is the world civilizations hypothesis. This line of thinking contends that there is no single global culture, but rather several distinct cultural groups that have a high degree of integration within each world-cultural region. For instance, Huntington (1996) argues that the world is divided into roughly nine different civilizations—Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Chinese, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese—each with a distinct value system. Cultural differences are expressed here as civilization divides; thus this perspective recognizes both convergence and divergence in the world-system, expecting convergence within civilizations and divergence across them (Huntington 1996).

Taken together, these comparative perspectives emphasize that the world-system is characterized by a trend toward convergence both in interstate contact and in domestic conditions (although for Huntington [1996] this would exist on a civilization level), and this can be evidenced, for instance, in the growth of interstate relations and adoption of similar fiscal policies, institutional arrangements, and perspectives on individual freedoms and rights (Meyer et al 1997). Whether or not these structural adoptions result in actual changes is debatable, as some studies point to the purely symbolic character of nations’ participation in global society (Hafner-Burton and Tsuitsui 2005). Nonetheless, world-polity theorists maintain that globalization leads to increasing cultural and political contact and isomorphism in institutional and organizational forms among nations, and insights from
modernization theory contend that cultural and political convergence will lead to increased economic convergence as well. In fact, one recent assessment using a within-regions approach finds that economic development is indeed associated with shifts away from traditional norms and values toward increasingly rational and participatory values (Inglehart and Baker 2000). Interestingly, some theorists (e.g., Robinson 2004) see the homogenization of national identities and state structures as part and parcel of the globalizing trend of transnational capital accumulation. This approach views societal arrangements and state institutions as constructed in accordance with the drive of capitalism to become both more intensive and extensive in the production and accumulation of wealth. Thus, any observed similarity of structure across nations or of interstate contact is the direct result of the expansionary imperative of capital (Lenin 1917; Mezaros 1995).

Divergence in the world-system

While international exchanges of all sorts are prominent among nation-states in the world-system, scholars point out that this may be producing divergent rather than convergent patterns of interstate interaction and attendant outcomes. The “divergence” camp of theorists (e.g., Giddens 2000; Guillen 2001; Held et al 1999) critique the claim that nation-states converge as part of the globalization process in the modern era. These scholars view globalization as a dialectical process that can result in opposing forms and increased fragmentation (Giddens 2000; Held et al 1999). For instance, Giddens (2000: 31) argues the events of globalization, “often produce divergent or even contrary occurrences” among nation-states.

World-systems theory emphasizes divergent development dynamics among nation-states, which are attenuated and enabled by uneven interstate interactions. The strata of the world-system—the core, semiperiphery, and periphery—represent functionally distinct positions in the global division of labor and world-economy that are the direct result of cumulative power advantages in an unequal capitalist world-system. This hierarchy allows the more-developed nations of the core to use their advantaged political-economic power to maintain both their privileged status and the inferior positions of non-core nations (Chase-Dunn 1998; Wallerstein 1974). Despite some relative gains, structural inequality among nation-states has remained fairly constant over time, and in the most recent decades, international inequality has actually increased (Robinson 2004). Additionally, this perspective emphasizes that states have been interacting with one-another since at least the colonial era, but that these patterns in interaction are not even. Rather, core groups have always maintained higher levels of international contact, often through political-military conquest and the securing of power relations. Thus, the world-system perspective emphasizes patterns of divergence across and among states as central to the operation of the capitalist world-system.

From this perspective, a world-polity or global culture may still be in evidence, but it develops within the existing hierarchical organization of nation-states (Boswell and Chase-Dunn 2000). A number of world-system analysts argue that world orders are established by core hegemons to benefit elite classes and core states, and that political organizations simply become “boards of directors for ruling states” (Boswell and Chase-Dunn 2000: 238). Core nations have powerful international ambitions for the accumulation of wealth, and establish political and cultural representation in every corner of the world in order to monitor local investments and labor conditions, and expand their sphere of influence. Structurally, this implies a dominance of the core over the polities of states, with core nations being highly integrated, and semiperiphery and periphery nations engaging in limited participation with each other.

Although world-system scholars identify patterns of divergence, this perspective is often criticized for focusing exclusively on economic factors. A body of literature has emerged that
combines economic and non-economic data to assess structural interrelations among states and related domestic outcomes, such as economic growth (e.g., Snyder and Kick 1979; Kick et al. 2011; Van Rossem 1996). As relationships of divergence or convergence can be evidenced through patterns of nation-state interaction, scholars often employ network analysis across multiple dimensions to assess the structure of relational ties among states and resultant changes to domestic conditions.

Some studies utilizing network techniques examine patterns in nation-state interaction across multiple indicators; as a landmark study, Snyder and Kick (1979) utilize network data for trade flows, military interventions, diplomatic relations, and conjoint treaty memberships for the 1960–65 period. Their results indicate significant levels of hierarchy and inequality across all four dimensions, suggesting that the world-system features a high degree of divergence across contacts in economic, military, cultural, and political realms. Additionally, this research finds that states are also distinguished by divergent levels of economic growth. A replication of this study for the contemporary period (Kick et al. 2011) supports the claim that these patterns of divergence are maintained in the world-system over time, as the structural positions of nation-states in the world-system today are largely consistent with the arrangements identified by Snyder and Kick (1979) over 30 years ago. Thus, this body of research emphasizes patterns of continuing divergence in nation-state interaction and domestic attributes, especially in economic and military spheres.

Convergence and divergence? Embassies and intergovernmental organizations as illustrative networks

Given the emerging importance of non-economic international linkages, we consider the role of embassies and intergovernmental organizations in transmitting political and cultural information between nation-states. An intergovernmental organization (IGO) is an organization composed primarily of sovereign states (referred to as member states), or of other intergovernmental organizations. Intergovernmental organizations differ in function, membership, and membership criteria. Some IGOs are developed to fulfill a need for a neutral forum for debate or negotiation to resolve disputes, such as the United Nations. Others are developed to carry out mutual interests in a unified form. The network of IGOs has been shown to influence patterns of democratization, international trade, neoliberal restructuring, international conflict, and social movements.

Embassies also encompass an important aspect of global ties, especially in an era of globalization, insofar as they are established to represent governments in foreign locales. In general, embassies convey their countries’ policies to international organizations and states abroad, while negotiating agreements and treaties on a variety of issues, ranging from trade to weaponry transfers (Feigenbaum 2001; Gills 2002). Embassies also perform a diversity of other important functions, such as coordinating and supporting international activities of other government agencies, hosting official visits, promoting and assisting their countries’ business interests, protecting their citizens abroad, managing international educational exchanges, accepting and adjudicating requests for visas, and managing the allocation of resources for foreign relations (Feigenbaum 2001).

Embassies and IGOs as institutions shape the actions of foreign states and their economic interests, thus exerting influence in cultural, political, military, and economic spheres (Beckfield 2010; Gills 2002). Political-cultural institutions such as these do more than orient action; however, they also constitute or legitimate actors. Embassies and IGOs, therefore, represent informational ties between nations, transmit influence to receiving nations, and signify the legitimacy of sending nations. The breadth of these activities has grown exponentially over the last century (Beckfield 2010; Feigenbaum 2001). In particular, there was a dramatic rise in the number of embassies and IGOs in the post-World War II era, not only due to an increase of “watch dog”
efforts during this time, but also widespread decolonization led to the development of institutions that could exert long-distance political influence in foreign places. Indeed, whether or not the dramatic rise in these institutions signifies increased interstate contact is up for debate; some argue that nations were more connected in various dimensions in the 1800s and earlier 1900s, as this historical period is marked by direct colonial ties which could have linked states more significantly than the political-cultural linkages that we see today (e.g., Waltz 1999).

The recent study by Kick and colleagues (2011) utilizes network data for both intergovernmental organizations and embassies. Their results reveal that the embassy network is relatively sparse, however, with the strongest connections amongst core and Western European nations. While almost every nation has ties to the core/Western European groups, the periphery groups lack strong embassy relations among each other. In fact, only six nations (the isolates) of a sample of 166 are not linked to the international embassy network. Thus, there is significant potential for convergence in domestic attributes, as the majority of nation-states in the world-system are integrated into the global field of embassy relations. Yet, the embassy density matrix demonstrates uneven levels of embassy integration, with core/Western European groups having the highest levels of international participation and the periphery groups having much lower levels of participation.

Considering the network of IGO ties, Kick and colleagues (2011) find that although this system is much denser than the embassy network, the IGO density matrix still illustrates a high degree of fragmentation. The results of the blockmodeling analysis also reveal noticeable clustering along regional lines (Kick et al 2011). In order to fully assess the degree of convergence or divergence in the world-system, it is useful to consider changes in political-cultural networks over time. Although many studies report growth in the number of IGOs and embassies during the twentieth century, only a few studies have been able to examine changes in the structures of these networks over time.

One recent longitudinal study by Beckfield (2010), which utilizes IGO and state data dating back to 1820, finds that states have indeed become more interconnected through common memberships in IGOs; nearly every state holds at least one IGO membership in common with every other state in the world-system. Additionally, inequalities in the level of state involvement in IGOs are shown to be deceasing substantially over time. However, Beckfield (2003, 2010) also finds that the network of IGOs has become more dense and centralized, where, while states are growing more similar in the number of IGOs they belong to, they increasingly belong to different IGOs. Overall, there is evidence of growing disintegration, unevenness, and regionalization over time in the global IGO system. Thus, while states are increasing in levels of participation and interaction with one another, the organizations that link them are becoming more fragmented over time. Additionally, Beckfield (2010) analyzes the different types of IGOs separately (general purpose, social/cultural, economic, and military/political), and finds that the economic IGO network is especially fragmented, largely along regional lines.

Taken together, these examples illustrate that while the amount of world-polity activity as measured by embassies and IGOs has increased dramatically over time, these world-polity networks are largely hierarchical and divided along regional lines. Much of this growing fragmentation is a newer trend, as political-cultural networks identified here were largely static in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After 1945, the world-polity grows more disintegrated and structurally uneven. Both of the current embassy and IGO networks described by Kick and colleagues (2011) and Beckfield (2010) resemble a star-shape, with Western European core groups sharing many political-cultural ties to each other and more peripheral groups, but with peripheral groups exhibiting few ties to other peripheral groups. Additionally, these studies emphasize the regionalization of cultural-political ties as clustering for both types of networks is evidenced within
major geographical spaces. In particular, Kick’s findings reveal that sharing a geographic region often predicts the presence of embassy ties among states, and Beckfield reveals that connections among states in the IGO network are strengthened significantly within regions. Not surprisingly, many of the more recently developed IGOs are regionally exclusive in nature, such as the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

It has been argued among world-polity scholars that political-cultural networks tend to be more evenly distributed, as there is a significant degree of political and cultural convergence among nation-state embassy and IGO ties in the world-system. Thus, it is possible to argue that there is evidence for mounting convergence in the world-system as the size of these networks has grown over time. Yet, the organization of international embassy relations and IGOs reveals that political-cultural networks exhibit a significant amount of divergence, which is therefore likely to produce uneven state attributes. If convergence were the dominant trend, we would also see a proliferation of embassy and IGO ties across the periphery groups. A relative lack of connections across non-core groups signifies the relative maintenance of structural divergence in the world-system.

Further, there is strong evidence for the civilizations hypothesis as this body of research finds considerable fragmentation in embassy and IGO networks along regional lines. It is also important to recognize that historical patterns in economic development are strongly regional, for example, with Western Europe/North American regions continuing to exhibit the highest degree of economic power and Sub-Saharan African nations exhibiting enduring legacies of deep impoverishment. Additionally, health outcomes research indicates that despite some increased convergence in physical well-being measures over time, such as life expectancy, the majority of the world-system remains marked by extreme disparities in quality of life, with 2.5 billion people lacking improved sanitation, 1.1 billion of which are still defecating in the open (WHO 2010). Thus, hierarchy and inequality most prominently characterize the structure of interstate relations and resultant national-level conditions. Economically powerful core groups, largely in the North Atlantic region, dominate the global embassy and IGO networks, and periphery groups fail to converge across each other. Thus, core nations are able to use political and cultural influence to maintain their advantaged status in the world-system. For example, the majority of embassies in the world-system are either hosted in or established abroad by core nations, therefore a rise in the number of embassies signals increasing global dominance by powerful states, rather than convergence which evenly integrates and affects the rest of the system.

Despite this, the proliferation of similar institutional forms and the propagation of common policies do signal the possibility of world-system convergence toward Western cultural and developmental models. But to what end? The world-system is a capitalist world-system, and many of these shared policies and institutional forms make it easier for states to interact economically, and function to draw more states into the networks of production and exchange. Capitalism depends on the increasing accumulation of capital, and the expansionary imperative demands that more states are integrated into international networks and exhibit similar state structures (Bunker and Ciccantell 2005; Mezaros 1995). Thus, capitalism and globalization are seemingly twin dimensions, where common policies and similar cultural perspectives across states make the world “safer” for core capital accumulation.

While many emphasize the fundamentally new components of globalization (e.g., Robinson 2004; Sklair 2001), classical world-system theory reminds us that states have had political, cultural, military, and economic exchanges on a global level since at least before the fifteenth century (Wallerstein 1974). States are integrated into global networks and exhibit similar institutional attributes in order to increase the possibilities for capital growth for the powerful and privileged core (Lenin 1917). Hence, while nation-states and supporting institutions may have become more similar in many political and cultural forms with increasing contact, these elements
of world society are largely transmitted from a small group of powerful actors that seek to maintain their structural advantages. Additionally, institutional pressures are increasingly likely to be channeled through regional polities, which might signal local convergence and global divergence. Many of these regional polities could also be a direct response to globalizing pressures; nation-states may seek protection from international capital or attempt to increase their autonomy and relative power through regional alliances.

The world-system is thus marked by patterns of divergence and convergence embodied in globalization processes. However, the greatest evidence for convergence across and among states constitutes only a small group of Western nations. More states are being pulled into international networks and changing some of their domestic attributes, such as institutional structures, but this largely occurs through and by core group influence. Periphery groups have little contact among each other, and economic inequality among nation-states has only widened over time. Most prominently, the world-system is systematically and historically typified by structural divergence and regional clustering. However, core nations would be unable to maintain their privileged status without a high degree of cultural and political assimilation among dependent semiperiphery and periphery states; thus patterns of convergence and divergence are both central and functional to the operation of the capitalist world-economy. Indeed, capitalist development is characterized by dialectical processes, as the expansionary imperative of capital demands both competition and coordination among nations in the world-system.

Advancing theoretical synthesis on globalization

We began by recounting the view that globalization dynamics are resulting in convergent patterns of interstate linkages and institutional isomorphism among nations in the world-system. This line of reasoning appears to be most consistent with modernization theory and world-polity perspectives. Yet, other theorists such as Huntington (1996) argue these patterns of convergence are most pronounced within civilizational divides, with greater divergence across civilizations resulting from conflicting worldviews, religions, and cultures. World-system theorists posit continuing divergence across and among states, due to unequal power, currency, and status differentials that uphold core nations in superior positions of power, while relegating the bulk of the world into structurally disadvantaged semiperiphery or periphery positions. Finally, a new group of globalization scholars, echoing themes of early theories of imperialism, conclude that any detectible degree of convergence across nations is an agent of capital accumulation and exists exclusively to facilitate its expansion (e.g., Robinson 2004). That is, greater similarity of domestic institutions, market economies, and state structures among nations, as well as increasing interstate contact, assists ever-growing trends of capital accumulation in the core.

Certainly these analytical models can be encapsulated by a world-system theoretical framework that articulates the logic of production, consumption, and division of labor in the global system, and the nation-states that are constituent parts of it. In addition, world-systems theory and its extensions in particular explain how the forces of the system may produce dynamics of convergence and divergence across hierarchical categories of the world-system. Indeed, our empirical examples of the global networks of embassies and IGOs demonstrate both patterns of convergence and divergence, as the majority of nations have adopted these forms of political-cultural integration and resultant state structures, but the organization of these networks remain highly fragmented and hierarchical. Further, it is unclear if like institutional forms prompt homogenization of domestic conditions, or whether participation in world society is purely symbolic (Hafner-Burton and Tsuitsui 2005). We hope that future analyses will build on this argument by continuing to draw from the full range of possible theoretical explanations, viewing
them for their synergies instead of their incompatibilities. Thus, we advocate a synthetic theoretical approach and companion modeling. We recognize that a common disciplinary approach is to view strands of theoretical approaches as competing, rather than complementary, paradigms. But we are far less certain that this approach to theorization is optimal for achieving maximum explanatory power.

Theoretical synthesis as opposed to a disparate approach to theory construction and refutation/validation has been advocated in a number of sociological treatments over the last two decades. Although our list is incomplete, we draw attention to the work of Ritzer (1991), Collins (1989), Giddens (1996), and Habermas (1984). Aiding in theoretical synthesis, we contend that multiple-network analysis is especially well-suited to examining the nature of global linkages and hierarchical domains of different scopes, and structural equation modeling is a methodology that can assist in the blending of multiple perspectives. As elaborated by Bollen (1989), structural equation modeling techniques allow researchers to specify direct and indirect effects, include latent (unmeasured) concepts, achieve unbiased estimates even when independent variables are intercorrelated, and judge the “fit” of the model specified to the data provided, all of which promote theory synthesis rather than refutation/validation of specific hypotheses. In concert, we suggest a wedding of the central themes examined in the present essay, as theoretical synthesis and compatible modeling techniques provides a far more complete picture of globalization dynamics than does treating perspectives as competitor theories.

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