

Globalization and Cultural Studies: Introduction

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Globalization is at present a contested concept in social and cultural theory. From triumphalist analyses of the spread of capital and technology around the globe to explorations of the profound inequalities that the new world of “flows” promotes, globalization has been intensively studied, but much about it remains unknown. From analyses of the structure of capital and cultural flows, which see their origin in the First World, to explorations of the cultural and social effects of these structures on Third Worlds, much work on globalization suffers from an either/or perspective: one is asked to be either for or against globalization, to look at its structures or at its effects, to see it from above or below. Disrupting the binary understanding of the phenomenon provides an important critical service. What the literary critic Richard Terdiman has called “our current confusion over globalization” provides an apt way of introducing the articles in this issue, which all reject simple definitions and easy assessments. No single or synthetic definition of globalization is offered here. Rather, the authors present the hard work of criticism and critical recovery of the objects, things and people, that haunt what Rebecca Saunders calls “the discursively constructed presence of globalization—a vision of free trade, liberalization, openness and opportunity.” They ask what Terdiman calls the “hermeneutical question”: what else is there?

To think about globalization, Terdiman writes, we need a level of analysis deeper than either celebratory accounts or analyses of destruction, what he characterizes as “media images of depredations.” We need a form of interpretation and analysis that is more social, more historical and more political. Globalization itself is not new, he claims; the development of a “world system” of capital flows goes back to the nineteenth century. Likewise the work of cultural studies, which has contributed to our understanding of the global contexts of culture, continues a critical tradition of thought that Terdiman locates in the early nineteenth century. In place of unidirectional accounts of globalization, in which one side either spreads technology or domination (often one and the same) to the other, Terdiman’s focus on cultural practices and symbolic processes advocates a multiperspectival analysis. This perspective “conceives relationality and complexity as fundamental to any artifact.” For “one thing is clear,” he claims, “by themselves, formalisms of any stripe simply can’t represent this globalized world very well.” An “expansion of the analytical field” is needed as well as an emphasis on dialogic interaction. This Terdiman calls “bi-directional exchange,” a form of communication “in which *each* party has the capacity to *send* as well as to receive messages, to *originate* as well as to accommodate them.” A dialogic perspective restores agency to those things that haunt (in Derrida’s sense from *Spectres of*

Marx) triumphalist accounts of globalization, the selves that are erased, the discourses that are marginalized, the agencies and meanings that are denied but which play a constitutive role in generating meaning.

This challenge is taken up directly by Rebecca Saunders, who explores “the spectral presences that haunt the circumstances and discourses customarily gathered beneath the name of *globalization*.” She focuses on the “global foreigner,” someone who is by definition “unfamiliar, improper, incomprehensible, unnatural, uncanny,” whom she calls “foreign to globalization itself.” The migrants, immigrants and refugees, forced into the global stream by economic change, present “that which globalization does not recognize in and as itself.” As such they become, she claims, the “repository of a social unconscious.” “Not only do these global foreigners remain largely unacknowledged in global media, national economies, corporate reports, and the language of trade and development,” she writes, “but they are quite literal objects of repression: of forgetting, public erasure, disenfranchisement, dismissive stereotyping, and economic marginalization.”

Likewise Vaheed Ramazani, in his analysis of the hegemonic discourse of the U.S. administration following the terrorist attacks of September 11, draws attention to the meanings and subjects that haunt the speeches on the global foreign policies of the Bush administration. Ramazani points to the “violence...and considerable injustice” found in “our wartime language of rights and reason”; its appropriation of others’ experience in the service of militarism; its fetishization of technology and distance; and its belief in an impermeable boundary between the United States and the rest of the world, which is defined, not least, through the national(ist) mythology of the U.S. as a world apart. “The attempt to inscribe an impenetrable boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ inside and outside,” Ramazani writes, “ignores the hard lesson of September 11—that the dangerous outside is already inside us; that globalization *means* vulnerability, the interdependence of ‘First’ and ‘Third’ Worlds.”

The articles by Manu Bhagavan and Faisal Bari, Kamrouz Pirouz and Valentine Moghadam focus more directly on recovering knowledge erased by misrepresentations and misconceptions of economy, history and current politics. Bhagavan and Bari analyze the misrepresentation of South Asian economies that “saturates the Western public medium.” They show how western media outlets are guilty of “exaggerated stereotyping” in which India appears in one of three guises: impoverished, exotic, or as a new land of technological opportunity. As Bhagavan and Bari show, the power of media outlets in the West and the dissemination of their reporting downward into newspapers of all sizes and stripes, gives them considerable power and influence in

shaping public (dominant) opinion. They focus on the many infelicities that haunt these accounts: the absence of the mention of the informal sectors of South Asian economies and the way that spot exchange rates skew an understanding of actual purchasing power, to name two. The work of Kamrouz Pirouz and Valentine Moghadam rounds out the issue with their analyses of hidden histories. Pirouz focuses on Mossadegh and the nationalization of oil in Iran, analyzing the events leading up to the 1953 CIA coup. Moghadam looks at the currently forgotten, more recent history of the making of Islamic fundamentalism in South Asia and the Middle East from the 1970s to the present day, focusing primarily on what she calls the “gendered aspects of terrorism and violence.”