

# Globalization as a political invention: Geographical lenses

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## Abstract

In this essay, I emphasize that politics does exist at a global scale, though it exists in a non-conventional way, far from the times, places, people, and objects by which we are used to analyzing its existence. Geography can be used as a vehicle or a special lens to ensure that these emerging realities are not missed. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## A reconstructive approach

‘Ces choses-là sont rudes,  
Il faut pour les comprendre avoir fait ses études.’  
Victor Hugo, *La légende des siècles* (1859).

Globalization is often seen as a solely economic phenomenon, or, similarly, as a process mastered and steered by economic forces. This is a commonplace but relatively new hypothesis, even though the idea of a worldwide hierarchical geographic division of labour can be found long ago in the works of Ricardo, Marx and Lenin. Some other scholars see what is called ‘globalization’ as nothing but the old-fashioned IR revamped as geopolitics. This view originated from the founders of geopolitics as a rational action-oriented discourse such as Friedrich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellen or Halford Mackinder. A third cluster of approaches can be called ‘culturalist’, which deny history the power to change the basic map of the world, which is viewed as

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a mere partition of irreducible civilization areas. This view originated with the emergence of structural anthropology at the beginning of the 20th century. A last set of visions has emerged which sees the world as a society. Its first dramatic upsurge happened with the success of McLuhan Marshall and Quentin Fiore's (1967) concept of a 'global village'.

I will adopt a reconstructive approach following Jean-Marc Ferry (1991), so I will not oppose those four ways of understanding the world as outlined in the first paragraph. On the contrary, I suggest that all these approaches are true and produce truths. Once we have accepted the double paradigm of *realistic constructivism* (reality does exist, but not independently from our constructions of it) and *dialogical systemism* (society is a system of interactive actors and objects) as our guide, we know, as is usual in the social sciences, that our job consists less of refuting wrong propositions coming from outside academia than of setting up a comprehensive cognitive device to allow us to combine various truths. Constructing a consistent theory of *truth regimes* that make apparently incompatible statements compatible is, in a way, the challenge that scientific actors must accept when they investigate objects that are made up by and of other competent actors. This is, I believe, the only procedure to escape the epistemological deadlock that Pierre Bourdieu has been trapped in all along, as a social scientist, I cannot conceive of the world in such a way that the result of my thinking is to pretend that this world structurally precludes those who live in it, including me, from thinking about it. Overhang stances are comfortable but they generate dire internal contradictions that finish in a hangover, and these contradictions will become more and more untenable as ordinary citizens assert and exercise their strategic competences.

This complexity can be usefully examined with the help of spatial concepts. Globalization is beyond any doubt an event that involves scale. But if we believe, like some authors including geographers, that we can play our part by limiting the spatiality of globalization to a scale problem such as a 'space-time contraction' or other kind of down-market approximation, we are probably wrong. Globalization is a long process which began 100,000 years ago, when our ancestors started their migration that resulted in the outcome of the creation of a world-scale *ecumene*. This means that scale is an insufficient concept to distinguish between the different kinds of globalization or the different features of globalization.

We need to explore different kinds of *metrics* (the different logic and measurement that distances encompass). We also need to include in the construction of spatial objects their non-spatial components (their *substance*). This seems to be an efficient approach for geographers to enter the shared house of social sciences with a comparative advantage. For instance, the awareness that geopolitics makes sense in a universe of bordered territories as transactions which need and provide open networks helps us to understand that the discrepancies between states and companies are not based only on scale. Or when we see the US administration desperately seeking a territory to invade, we can insist on the fact that al-Qaeda is not a state but a hub, is not located in a place but a mobile node, and that this changes the sort of actor it can be.

The four ways of thinking of the world are also four distinct spatialities as Fig. 1 suggests (Figs. 1–3 adapted from Durand, Lévy, & Retailé, 1992).

## The emergence of global politics

The question for the social scientist is how the various contrasting models of the world can be used as contributions to a comprehensive representation of globalization. The first approach is synchronic. As Fig. 2 shows, we can imagine today's world as a set of four interacting sub-systems: cultures, geopolitics, exchanges, and society.

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