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Where Globalities Are Made

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How will we benefit from Benedikter and Kofler's call to "re-globalize" the science of globalization to keep pace with rapidly changing circumstances? There are two elephants in the room for this discussion and neither is welcome. First, for all its insistence on the need to challenge, and even overturn, usual science, global studies may still suffer from a debilitating imposter syndrome on the part of some devotees. Second, global studies labors under the Sisyphean burden of being seen as inauthentic by an army of disciplinary critics. Their complaints are not likely to be assuaged.

At one remove all such reflection is testimony to the self-questioning stance taken by those who reflect on the ever-changing global condition and who are concerned to make its scholarship fit for current purpose. Happily, gone are the days when it was commonplace to bracket interventions as *hyperglobalist*, *skeptical* or *transformationalist*, and be satisfied with the simplification each of those labels implied. Equally welcome is the growing attention to the subjective aspects of global constitution that are revealed in the routines of day-to-day life when situated agents confront and accommodate global scripts, as well as in the playing out of world-historical moments and trends even though it is sometimes hard to identify the latter and to weigh their significance. We are also pretty much at ease with the idea of plural "globalizations" to denote different historical and cultural paths to whatever passes for modernity.

Some current scholarship even counsels jettisoning, or recalibrating, what was the holy grail of global studies—a multidimensional and interdisciplinary address to social constitution. Entirely laudable in pursuit of a more nuanced understanding of world-making practices and embedded and emergent globalities, multidimensionality often meant little more than a pious nod to the cultural aspects

of social formation, and then only as a kind of equation filler when material considerations failed to pass muster.[1] There were always exceptions to that failure. These days, who would expect to pare off economics from culture, and both from politics in pursuit of good social science? Meanwhile, for all the lip-service paid to the idea, interdisciplinarity still struggles to breach methodological redoubts.

The 5-Rs' agenda for "re-globalization" certainly offers a set of considered intellectual and "engaged"—responses to the changing qualities of 21st century globalizations. That agenda is driven by awareness of dislocation in many facets of the global political and cultural economies. Benedikter and Kofler opine that "globalization as we knew it is undergoing a rupture" and that "a turning point has been reached." All of which is very dramatic, but probably accurate. Global scholarship must attend to the causes, symptoms and effects of such dislocation; whether these are found in the impact of social media and A.I. on human consciousness and intimacy, the awesome implications of the Anthropocene, or the "exuberant expansion of neo-authoritarian societies." It must examine trajectories of change and weigh the harm or good they might visit on us. Moreover, global studies must never abjure the task of revealing hegemonic orders or particular mobilizations of bias, and charting their careers. In this respect pedagogy is always "engaged."

I do not have a problem with any of this. On the contrary, I am encouraged by the intellectual commitment and ambition on offer in the prospectus. The 5-Rs bear witness to the dynamism of, and contradictions in, globalization processes and then hold out the promise of critical global studies. Far from globalization having stopped at some point in the past twenty years, or even never begun, as some skeptics like to maintain, the world is now more interconnected than ever, and more conscious of the promise and threat in that condition. It is true that we live in turbulent times, but this too is an aphorism that describes dynamic systems and reflexive actors, as well as signaling entropy and dissolution. Either way, we may not like the direction of travel.

To take one example: global flows of data are comprised of information searches, one-to one and one-to many communications; video and organizational traffic among governments, enterprises, and other non-state actors. Individuals too participate in global and glocal communication networks directly and promiscuously, using digital platforms for leisure, to learn, to combat or guard against illness, in search of work, and to build inter-personal relationships. In the Internet of Things

(IoT) data speaks to data, mediated by smart machines. There are even “bot” wars. The prospect of a “datafied” world draws attention to the post-human features of a new global cultural economy, wherein communication technologies constitute an indifferent globality of machines and the hidden agency of algorithms. Sometimes this is treated as a reflex of mediatized capitalism, complete with the potential for modal surveillance. At other times it is bruited as a new way of global becoming, featuring both repressive and liberating globalizations.

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So, if I evince general approbation for the 5-R’s agenda put forward by Benedikter and Kofler, why cavil? What would I inflect differently? I favor a cast of mind as much as an analytical position or methodology. It starts with the broad remit of global studies—to comprehend the global wherever and whenever it manifests—and thus embraces the potential of the re-globalization agenda. Key to that intent is what we understand as *global*, and in that regard, some permissiveness must rule. While the character and perception of the term *global* as denoting “world-wide” consciousness and practices is a given, particular conceptions and spatial configurations, as well as the forces driving them, can change. What constitutes the global may or may not equate to planetary scope, but that is of less definitional importance than whether world-making practices carry global content or address. These too are elusive concepts, but for practical purposes allow me to decant this.

In the digital platforms example used above, the requirement is that they provide for both shared meanings and interdiscursiveness. Here, carrying global content refers to the ways in which digital technologies enable us to surmise and relocate distant contexts and relate to people, things, and events that are remote from and even alien to our everyday lives. Digital and all other globalities are made at the confluence of connection, consciousness and institutionalization. As Manfred Steger argues, together they constitute globalization as “the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-space and world-time.” Such an approach is commodious, and allows that globalization is not just about transitional phases, or rudely transformative, but is apparent too in the interstices of relations where situated individuals parlay global constraints. It is both humdrum and climacteric.

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This would be my agenda. Bearing in mind that what I counsel is at a pretty high level of generality, I still think that it gets over the understandable limitations in the 5-Rs agenda. My schema applies to all globalizations, everywhere. It does not advocate a presentist stance, the seeming abrogation of history outlined in the 5-Rs; it admits the possibility that all globalizations may be alike—but that they may not be so, especially where it matters in the register of human happiness and progress. And it works with concepts—world-making practices, emergent globalities, connectivity, consciousness, and institutionalization—that do service for all globalizations. That is my tool-kit for analysis. Of course, none of it detracts from the agenda set up by Benedikter and Kofler, and the importance of investigating the boisterous and sanguineous feel of the changes to current globalization they describe. But it does push us to address (again) the questions that have troubled all introspection about global scholarship: what is the global?; where and how does it subsist?; how best to study it (them)?, and of course, where do we go from here?

Notes

1. Steger, M.B (2019) "Globalization 3.0: Where Does it Go from Here?" Position Paper delivered to the NIC Workshop (Global Trends), December 13. Washington DC.

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