Globalization: a geographical discourse

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Towards a definition of globalization

To what extent does the evolution of the discourse in the social sciences really reflect the evolution of its subject and to what extent does it simply reflect the formation of agreement about a useful framework? The contemporary debate about globalization seems to unleash the ambiguities of contemporary social research. On the one hand, it has contributed to abolishing the traditional boundaries between different social sciences: from sociology to geography, from ecology to anthropology, from economics to politics, all the disciplines are coming to terms with the definition and analysis of this process. On the other hand, the argument is about the existence of the object of the analysis. Is globalization a real process or is it just a metaphor of the scientific discourse? Even more radically, is globalization a mechanism or a project, is it a process or an ideological programme (Scott 1997)?

In this short contribution, we will try to understand from which standpoint geographical tradition and perspectives can be helpful in investigating globalization and in which ways this process shapes the main object of geography, the places and the scales.

Robertson gave in 1992 the broader definition of globalization as a process which ‘refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.’ (4) The two branches of the definition are usually considered separately. On the one hand anthropology and sociology are mainly concerned with reflection about the globalization of culture (Scott 1997; Hannan 1996, 1992; Friedman 1994; Featherstone 1995, 1990). On the other hand, economics and politics focus on the intensification of the flows of goods and services around the earth (Dicken 1998; Hirst, Thompson 1996; Castells 1989), mainly interpreted as a mechanical and necessary process which occurs without the mediation of the social and cultural structure.

Nevertheless, it is from the perspective of measuring the degree of globalization that the positions are more extreme, about the goodness or the badness of the process in itself, but even about its pervasiveness or, on the contrary, about its non-existence. In this context we can identify at least three main streams which characterise the criticism of the absolute interpretation of globalization as an irreversible mechanism homogenising local identity and deterritorialising production systems (Ohmae 1990; O’Brien 1991).

First, in the debate about global culture, many scholars are abandoning both the nostalgic worries about the loss of local cultures and the enthusiastic

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celebration of post-modern tolerance to focus instead on local interpretation of the heterogeneous input received through the market (Hannerz 1992, 1996) or on the relations which regulate the participation of local identities in global culture.

Second, other authors contest the idea of the inevitability of the meaninglessness of national regulation, arguing that globalization is not merely a technical shift but an ideology and a programme in the capitalist struggle (Harvey 1989; Scott 1997) and that the nation state is still an important source of competitive advantage for TNCs and national systems of innovation (Hirst and Thompson 1996; Lundvall 1992).

Third, other authors have stressed the connection between local systems of manufacture and the global oligopolies from several perspectives, from the social embeddedness of production (Dicken 1994; Grabher 1993; Granovetter 1985) to the processes of innovation (Malecki 1997), from institutional thickness (Amin and Thrift 1994) to the utilisation of tacit knowledge (Ashaim 1997; Malmberg et al. 1996; Beccattini e Rullani 1994).

To analyse its implication on the local scale we are going to define globalization as

1. the process which allow
2. a broad range of actors (global organisations, TNCs, networks of firms, banks, but also artists, consumers, tourists)
3. to reflect more and more easily
4. their perception of the world as a whole
5. in strategies and actions
6. that happen on the world scale.

This definition will allow us to throw light on different aspects of the topic. First, we are going to distinguish this process from other phenomena whose globalization apparently shares the scale, such as internationalisation and the creation of a world-economy. Second, we will focus on the character of globalization: we are going to show how the global versus local nexus can be understood referring to some basic features of globalization. Third, we will see how the definition of globalization in terms of cognition allows the redefinition of the nature and the role of the local in a new epistemological framework. Finally, we will be able to read the dynamic of the manufacturing local systems without deterministic predictions about their future.

The first consequence of the definition we have given is that globalization is not measurable in physical terms, but only in relational ones, involving both the perception of the globe as a ‘whole’ place and the capability of acting accordingly. World-system and internationalisation refer, instead, to the physical overcoming of geographical boundaries. Internationalisation refers mainly to the national scale and to the extension of economic activities across national boundaries. In the case of globalization, instead, the argument is not just about the loss of power of the nation-states or the role of the mother-country in shaping the strategies of TNCs, but also about the perception of the national and international scales in the making of the different actors’ strategies and the organisation of behaviour in order to achieve these aims (Dicken 1998).

On the world-system and globalization we can observe that the first concept refers to the world as a differentiated ensemble of areas hierarchically ordered — for example according to the four cardinal signs — or to dichotomies like centre/periphery (Vernon 1979; Wallerstein 1979). While the world can be described and represented on the basis of the relations between the ‘things’ on its surface, the globe can be defined referring to selective relations between relevant nodes. The geometry of the globe is variable because the importance and the location of the nodes vary with the perspective in which one observes it. In this way, the perception of differences among places becomes fuzzier when we pass from the former to the latter, and the hierarchies have now to be interpreted in terms of scales and networks (Brunet 1989). In other words the geomorphological order of the world seems less meaningful in explaining perceptions, strategies and fluxes.

We are not arguing that geography does not matter any more — on the contrary. Our point is that the meaning of scales is more and more mobile, no longer assuming a sense in the static boundaries of international divisions and morphological landscapes, but only in the perception of social actors, among which there are obviously also the national States. At the same time globalization is not an end-state which affects all the realms of reality uniformly, but a discontinuous process which connects in several ways different categories of actors in a broad range of scales.

A changing context for local manufacturing systems

Talking about globalization, the greatest temptation is to list contradictory aspects of the phenomenon merely as features, without distinguishing between causes and effects, aims and means, consequences and projects. For instance, the multiplication of financial growth is often presented as the simulacra of the disembedded economy, while locally specific networks of information remain a key factor in the success of financial activities (Clark and O’Connor 1997; Thrift 1994). In a similar way, the increasing role of monetary regulation and the passage of governance from the public-private sphere to a purely private one are not mechanisms undermining the nation state. The na-