Introduction – The challenge of globalisation

What connection is there between globalisation and the central concerns of this book? It is certainly true that the globalisation debate looms large in much recent state theory, and it is certainly of prime interest to Marxists. On these accounts it seems to merit some consideration here. The central ‘problem’ analysed in state theory is the disjuncture between the stretching of social interaction that is the hallmark of globalisation and the territorial confinement of the nation-state. Or, between political power and other forms of social power. Thus far we have not considered the nation-state explicitly and the argument has largely been conducted in abstraction from the spatial dimension. This is because our focus has been on the state in the theory of history, as an aspect of the superstructure, and we have followed Cohen’s highly abstract exposition of the theory. In considering the nature and implications of globalisation we can integrate a spatial dimension into the theory of history. This is particularly appropriate for an analysis of the capitalist state, given the close connection between capitalism and globalisation.

The concept of globalisation (if not the word itself) is central to Marx’s characterisation of capitalism as an economic system. Indeed, ‘Marx has some claim to the status of the first major theorist of globalisation’ (Bromley, 1999, p. 280). However, even if Marx’s analysis of capitalist globalisation is accepted as broadly valid, this does not mean there is consistency with other areas of Marxist theory. In particular it is worth enquiring whether there is a proper connection between the analysis of economic globalisation and the theory of history and the theory of the state.
If globalisation is seen as essentially an economic process, connected to the nature of the relations of production, this raises questions about the functional relationships between the forces and relations of production, and between the base and superstructure (i.e. stage 1 and stage 2 of the theory of history). The question here is: is there a plausible account of economic globalisation that is consistent with the central claims of the theory of history and, more specifically, the theory of the state? Or, does globalisation undermine these areas of Marxist theory?

What is globalisation?

‘Globalization, simply put, denotes the expanding scale, growing magnitude, speeding up and deepening impact of transcontinental flows and patterns of social interaction’ (Held and McGrew, 2002, p. 1). Scale refers to the spatial or geographic reach of social interaction. Thus the term ‘refers to a shift or transformation in the scale of human organization that links distant communities and expands the reach of power relations across the world’s regions and continents’ (ibid.). Similarly Bromley defines globalisation in ‘general and abstract terms ... [as] ... the disembedding of social interaction from particular local contexts and its generalised extension across space’ (1999, p. 281). In other words, globalisation involves the ‘stretching’ of social relations in space. We can say that expanding scale or reach is the essence of globalisation, being contrasted with more limited scales such as, notably, the national. In this sense the notion of ‘the global’ is largely synonymous with ‘beyond the national’. For example, the idea of an emerging global economy may be contrasted with a previous era of national economies. Thus the process of globalisation can be defined in terms of ‘the expansion and intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across borders’ (Sorensen, 2004, p. 23), meaning across national borders. Much of the debate about globalisation and its implications concerns precisely this disjuncture: between social interaction that reaches across the world’s regions and continents, and a world that is divided up into territorial nation-states with borders. The challenge this poses is one of regulation and control, where the reach of economic and other relations and interactions is increasingly moving beyond that of the territorially bounded nation-state as the still predominant form of political power.

Although globalisation involves the stretching of social relations across borders beyond the national scale, Jessop says it denotes