This chapter presents the debates involving globalization and the environment. A general introductory discussion of the phenomenon of globalization is needed before the relationship between globalization and environment can be examined. There is no single discourse on globalization, or on globalization and the environment. Rather, globalization is a multifaceted phenomenon and this is reflected in the literature on globalization as well as on globalization and ecology. In order to structure this chapter, we have used the traditional distinction between political, economic and sociocultural globalization as heuristic categories. However, we have added an introductory historical section in order to place our understanding of globalization in a historical context. We conclude by illustrating our analysis with a case study on trade and agriculture. Throughout this chapter, we address a variety of schools of thought and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Our understanding is that most attempts at conceptualizing, or theorizing, about globalization from an international political economy (IPE) perspective tend to sideline the environmental and social consequences of globalization and that these issues are usually treated as part of an analysis of global civil society and new social movements. As a result, we find that only transnational actors representing social and environmental issues are incorporated into the analysis rather than the structural and systemic forces, as well as constraints, within which actors operate. Thus an integrated study of environment and economy eludes much of social science analysis and is the biggest challenge faced by environmental social science researchers – whether in the field of globalization or in general – at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This position necessarily influences the way we interpret existing writings on globalization.
Debate about the origins and historical beginnings of globalization can generally be traced back to the author's disciplinary focus. Whilst globalization is generally perceived to be a recent phenomenon, its starting date is often placed much earlier – be it the beginnings of trade, modernity, early capitalism, late capitalism, or the collapse of the Bretton Woods system. The structural origins of globalization are also contested: they are political, economic or sociocultural. Thus, a starting point for any text on globalization has to be an analysis of this literature and an explanation of the wide-ranging differences in the definition of both globalization and its historical origin. This needs to be followed by a discussion on the origins of environmental degradation in order to understand the relationship between environment and globalization.

Globalization both as a concept and as a process is a contested term – its usage has become generally accepted but there is no generally accepted definition of what constitutes globalization and/or its empirical features.

Having said that it is generally agreed that in the 1970s fundamental changes in the way the international political economy is organized led to a more global approach both in IPE/GPE (global political economy) but also environmental studies (Lipschutz and Mayer, 1996; Mittelman, 1997; Scholte, 1993; Strange, 1996). However, it is debatable whether these changes are deserving of the term ‘globalization’ that has been assigned to them. Amongst IPE/GPE scholars the age of globalization is taken to be the post-Fordist era that has engendered economics of flexibility, increasing trade liberalization, financial deregulation, an increasingly global division of labour and a transnational capitalist class (Lipietz, 1997; Sklair, 2002; Strange, 1996). Although the phenomenon of globalization itself is contested, these changes in the international political economy and other globalizing tendencies are not. So in a way there are two parallel debates about globalization as a phenomenon: whether there is such a thing and whether changes in the global/international political economy during the past 30 years are a historically new phase or the continuation of a historically rooted phenomenon (Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Schwartz, 2000).

Some academics argue that globalization started with the formation of societies and the social relations between them and that we have now entered a higher stage of a linear, historically-determined process (Frank, 1998). Others would see globalization as coexisting with capitalism or modernity and again, depending on one’s definition of capitalism and its