

CHAPTER

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1 What is globalization?

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the notion of globalization. In line with the new Global Studies academic framework, the definition of globalization revolves around planetary interconnectivities, mobilities, and imaginations. The four major forms of globalization are embodied globalization, disembodied globalization, objectified globalization, and institutional globalization. They contain four distinct qualities or characteristics that involve the creation of new social networks, expansion of social relations, intensification of worldwide social interactions, and the subjective plane of human consciousness and imagination. The chapter then considers the correlation between globality, global imaginary, globalism, and globalization. It notes how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the alleged indestructible global networks.

Keywords: [globalization](#), [globality](#), [global imaginary](#), [Covid-19 pandemic](#), [Global Studies](#), [social networks](#), [embodied globalization](#), [disembodied globalization](#), [objectified globalization](#), [institutional globalization](#)

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The earliest appearance of the term ‘globalization’ in the English language can be traced back to the 1930s. But it was not until the 1990s that the concept took the world by storm. The new buzzword captured the increasingly interconnected nature of social life on our planet and foregrounded the global integration of markets turbocharged by the ICT revolution. Three decades on, globalization has remained a hot topic. Today, one can track millions of references to the term in both virtual and printed spaces that range from enthusiastic embrace to blanket condemnation. In recent years, critical voices have become louder in the light of the nationalist resurgence around the world and the devastating COVID-19 pandemic that has disrupted seemingly indestructible global networks.

To make sense of these conflicting perspectives on globalization, let us start with matters of definition. Both the popular press and academic literature have been using ‘globalization’ in confusing ways to describe a process, a condition, a system, a force, or an age. Given that these concepts have very different meanings, a sloppy conflation of ‘process’ and ‘condition’ produces circular definitions that explain little. The often-repeated truism that globalization (the process?) leads to more globalization (the condition?) does not allow us to draw meaningful distinctions between causes and effects. ↴

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Key concepts: *globality*, *global imaginary*, *globalism*, *globalization*

To equip our definitional toolbox, let us distinguish between four different, but related, concepts. First, *globality* signifies a *social condition* characterized by tight global economic, political, cultural, and environmental interconnections and flows that challenge most of the currently existing borders and boundaries. Yet, we should not assume that globality is already upon us because it is an evolving condition. Nor does it suggest a fixed endpoint that precludes any further development. In fact, we could easily imagine different social manifestations of globality: one might be based primarily on values of individualism, competition, and deregulated capitalism, while

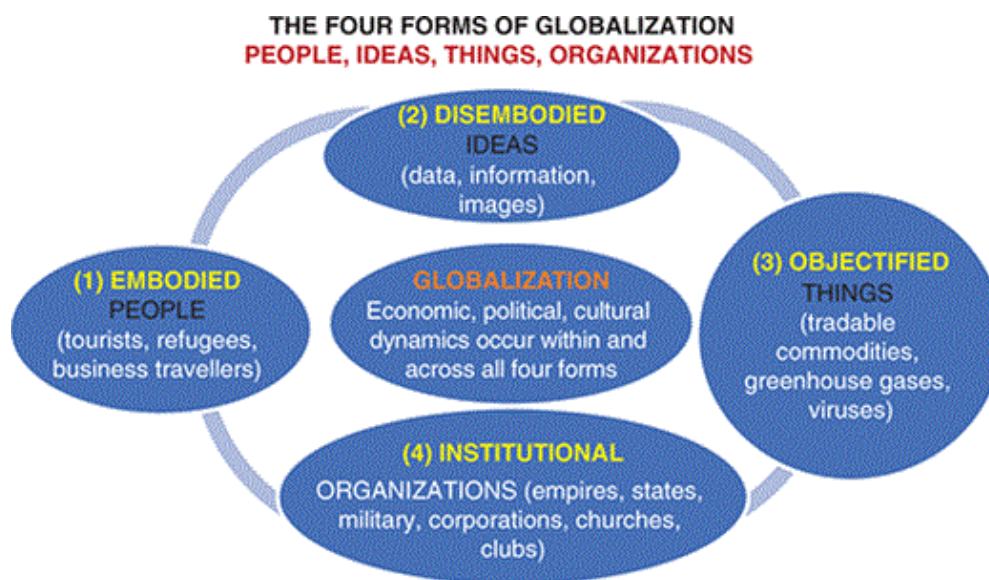
another might draw on more communal arrangements, cooperative values, and the democratic regulation of economic arrangements. Second, *global imaginary* refers to people's growing *consciousness* of the world as a single whole. This does not mean that nation and locality have lost their power to provide people with a sense of home and identity. But it would be a mistake to close one's eyes to the weakening of the national imaginary, as it was historically constructed in the 19th and 20th centuries. The intensification of global consciousness destabilizes and unsettles the nation-state framework within which people imagine their communal existence. The rising global imaginary is linked to the rise of *globalisms*, our third concept. These new political ideologies articulate the overarching global imaginary into concrete policy agendas and political programmes. Globalisms spin stories about our increasingly interconnected world that serve particular power interests and contain value judgements about whether globalization should be considered a good or bad thing. We shall explore the various types of globalism in Chapter 7.

p. 3 Our final, and most significant term, *globalization*, is a spatial concept referring to a *set of social processes* that is transforming our present social condition of conventional nationality into one of globality. Like 'modernization' and other verbal nouns that end in the suffix '-ization', the concept suggests a dynamic that evolves along discernible patterns but can also go into reverse at certain historical junctures. The root term 'global' indicates processes that operate at the transnational level such as the operation of global markets, worldwide investment flows, or the global dissemination of new styles of music such as Techno or K-Pop. Yet another set of globalizing processes operates below the scale of the 'global'. In other words, globalization also takes place deep inside 'regional', 'national', and 'local' arenas. Rather than becoming irrelevant, these subglobal spaces get entangled with the global to produce multi-spatial forms of human contact. Globalization experts often refer to this complex interplay between the global and the local (and national) as *glocalization*. Think, for example, of major cities like Shanghai or Sydney that combine their specific urban environments with global standards for residential high-rise

buildings, shopping malls, cultural events, and so on. Many people still have trouble recognizing that globalization affects all geographical scales ranging from the local to the global. Hence, it is crucial to bear in mind that globalization also manifests as glocalization.

Forms of globalization

These spatial complexities confirm that globalization should not be seen as a monolithic process. Rather, it is a set of dynamics that assumes four distinct, but interrelated, *social forms* (see Figure A).



A. Four forms of globalization.

The first social form, *embodied globalization*, manifests as the interconnectedness and mobility of *people* across our planet. As we shall discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, this is the oldest form of globalization and remains enduringly relevant in the contemporary movement of refugees, migrants, travellers, entrepreneurs, temporary workers, tourists, and so on. Concrete 21st-century examples include African political refugees crossing the Mediterranean into Europe and Central American migrants trying to trek across the Rio Grande valley into the United States in search of more sustainable lives. Privileged tourists can now complete

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intercontinental trips in mere hours in the comfort and security of a first-class aeroplane cabin. Only a century ago, the same journey would have taken several gruelling and dangerous weeks spent on a combination of ships, trains, motorcars, and horse- or oxen-drawn carriages.

p. 5 The second form, *disembodied globalization*, is characterized by the worldwide interconnectedness and mobility of *ideas*, *data*, and *information*. As we shall observe in Chapters 2, 3, 5, 7, and 8, these include words, images, and electronic texts, and encoded capital such as blockchain enabled crypto-currencies like Bitcoin and Ethereum. This form has taken an enormous qualitative leap with the digital revolution, prompting commentators to speak of a ‘new era of *digital globalization*’. There is little doubt that disembodied dynamics are emerging as the dominant form of ↪ globalization in the 21st century. Worldwide digitization has been greatly accelerated by the coronavirus-induced explosion of work and communication online. The third form, *objectified globalization*, refers to the worldwide interconnectedness and mobility of *things* and *objects*. As discussed in Chapters 2, 3, 6, and 8, it includes tiny particles like GHGs and COVID-19 viruses, as well as large goods travelling on the ancient Silk Road from China to the Roman Empire or modern standardized shipping containers criss-crossing the world’s oceans. Consider, for example, traded commodities such as a ‘pre-loved’ pair of Levi’s jeans produced in the sweatshops of Bangladesh and destined for the coolest fashion temples of Milan; treasures of antiquity sold at skyrocketing prices at an international Internet auction in London; or your latest iPhone assembled and distributed via powerful global value chains. These contemporary manifestations of objectified globalization depend on digitally controlled delivery systems (such as amazon.com) that might offer AI-driven, drone-operated services in the near future.

p. 6 The fourth form, *institutional globalization*, corresponds to the worldwide interconnectedness and mobility of *social* and *political institutions*. As discussed in Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8, it includes empires, states, TNCs, NGOs, churches, clubs, and so on. Its history can be traced back at least as far as the expansionist empires of Egypt, Persia, China, and Rome, and the proselytizing of the agents

of Christendom and Islam more than a millennium ago. More recent examples include the half-million US military personnel stationed around the world; the global franchises of fast food enterprises like Subway or KFC; the hundreds of worldwide fan clubs of football favourites like Manchester United or Bayern Munich; and China's mind-boggling 'One Belt One Road' initiative—a monumental infrastructure project designed to extend Chinese economic and political influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe. ↵

Qualities and dimensions of globalization

These four forms of globalization contain four distinct *qualities* or *characteristics*. First, they involve both the *creation* of new social networks and the *multiplication* of existing connections that cut across traditional political, economic, cultural, and geographical boundaries. For example, today's giant media corporations combine conventional TV coverage with multiple apps that feed into digital devices and social media sites that have long transcended nationally based services.

A second quality inherent in these four principal forms of globalization is the *expansion* or *stretching* of social relations, mobilities, and connections. Today's financial markets reach around the globe, and electronic trading occurs around the clock. Gigantic physical and virtual shopping malls cater to consumers who can afford commodities from all regions of the world—including products whose various components were manufactured in different countries and involve global supply chains.

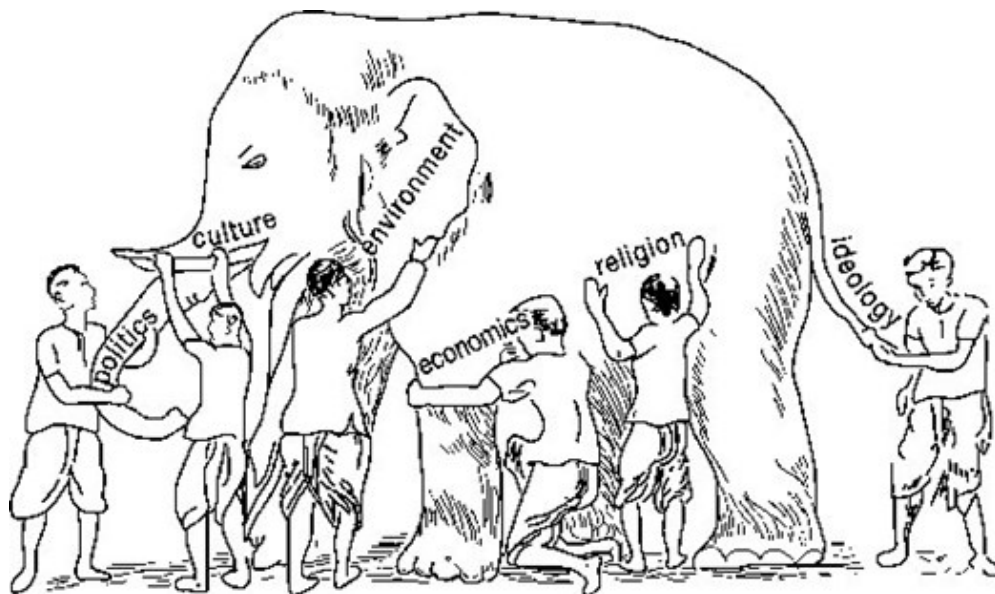
Third, all forms of globalization also involve the *intensification* and *acceleration* of worldwide social interactions. As the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells has pointed out, we have witnessed the creation of a *global network society* fuelled by what he calls *communication power*. This new form of power draws its strength from digital technological innovations that are reshaping the social landscape of human life.

p. 7 Fourth, globalization does not merely unfold on an objective, material level but also involves the *subjective* plane of *human*

consciousness and *imagination*. Without erasing local and national attachments, the *compression of space and time* has increasingly made the whole planet the frame of reference for human thought and action. In other words, globalization involves both the macro-structures of a global community and the ↪ micro-structures of global personhood. Mediated by digital technology largely controlled by large TNCs, the global extends deep into the core of the personal self, facilitating the creation of multiple and more fluid individual and collective identities.

All of these *forms* and *qualities* of globalization operate across the familiar social dimensions of everyday life: economics, politics, culture, ideology, and so on. However, given the increasing differentiation and specialization of knowledge creation, globalization dynamics tend to be analysed and explained in a rather one-dimensional manner. Dominated by economic perspectives on globalization, the debate over the relative importance of various domains has been raging for decades.

The ancient Buddhist parable of the blind scholars and their encounter with the elephant helps to illustrate the academic controversy over the significance of various dimensions of globalization. Since the blind scholars did not know what the elephant looked like, they resolved to obtain a mental picture, and thus the knowledge they desired, by touching the animal. Feeling its trunk, one blind man argued that the elephant was like a gigantic snake. Another man, rubbing along its enormous leg, likened the animal to a rough column of massive proportions. The third person took hold of its tail and insisted that the elephant resembled a large, flexible brush. The fourth man felt its sharp tusks and declared it to be like a great spear. Each of the blind scholars held firmly to his own idea of what constituted an elephant. Since their scholarly reputation was riding on the veracity of their respective findings, the blind men never ceased arguing over the true nature of the elephant (see Figure 1).



1. The globalization scholars and the elephant.

p. 8 The academic quarrel over which dimension contains the essence of globalization represents a postmodern version of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Scholars who equate globalization with a singular process clash with others over which aspect of social life constitutes its primary domain. Many experts ↪ argue that economic processes lie at the core of globalization. Others privilege political, cultural, or ideological aspects. Still others point to environmental processes as being the essence of globalization. Like the blind men in the parable, each globalization researcher is partly right by correctly identifying *one* important dimension of the phenomenon in question. However, their collective mistake lies in their dogmatic attempts to reduce such a complex phenomenon as globalization to one or two domains that correspond to their own expertise.

The rise of Global Studies

To make matters even more complex, globalization is a geographically uneven set of processes that not only connect but sometimes also disrupt existing relations. Moreover, people living in various parts of the world are affected quite differently by today's gigantic compression of space and time. Unsurprisingly, then,

scholars who approach the study of globalization from different academic fields not only hold different views with regard to primary dimensions of globalization, they also disagree on its scale, causation, chronology, impact, trajectories, and policy outcomes.

p. 9 For this reason, they have raised myriad research questions that run in all directions. How does globalization proceed? What is driving it? Does it have one major dimension or is there a combination of equally significant domains? Is globalization a continuation of modernity or is it a radical break? Does it create new forms of inequality and hierarchy or offer new opportunities for poor and marginalized people? Notice that whenever researchers try to bring their object of enquiry into sharper focus, they also heighten the danger of provoking scholarly disagreements. Our subject is no exception.

One successful way of trying to improve the quality of communication among globalization researchers and develop a common framework has been the establishment of *Global Studies* starting in the 1990s. Although it has been extensively studied in traditional fields, globalization falls outside the established disciplinary framework. It is only of secondary concern in these conventional disciplines organized around different master concepts: ‘society’ in sociology; ‘resources’ and ‘scarcity’ in economics; ‘culture’ in anthropology; ‘space’ in geography; ‘the past’ in history; ‘power’ and ‘governance’ in political science, and so on. By contrast, global studies places ‘globalization’—a contested keyword without a firm disciplinary home—at the core of its intellectual enterprise.

Today, Global Studies has emerged as a popular field of academic enquiry organized around four major conceptual pillars: globalization, transdisciplinarity, space and time, and critical thinking. Hundreds of Global Studies programmes have been established in universities on all continents. They invite millions of students to study globalization across traditional disciplinary boundaries in the social sciences, humanities, and even the natural sciences. The surging field covers vast literatures on related subjects that are usually studied in isolation from each other. The greatest challenge facing Global Studies lies, therefore, in bringing together

the various strands of knowledge in ways that do justice to the fluidity and interdependencies of our fast-changing world.

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International Relations versus Global Studies?

In the academic world, the term ‘*international relations*’ (IR) refers to a subfield of Political Science dedicated to the systematic study of changing connections among territorial states and nationally bounded societies. Thus, IR scholars treated the nation-state as the main actor—and thus *the* central unit of analysis and the principal mover—of world politics. This framework is called *methodological nationalism* because it focuses on the self-interested actions of nation-states—especially with regard to security issues—and often at the expense of other crucial dimensions such as culture, ecology, and ideology. By contrast, Global Studies relies on *methodological globalism*. This framework treats transnational interconnections, mobilities, and imaginations as the basic units of analysis. Although Global Studies scholars acknowledge the enduring importance of states, they also emphasize the growing significance of non-state actors on the world stage such as NGOs, TNCs, churches, educational institutions, and other civil society organizations. Finally, Global Studies scholars also engage themes often neglected in IR, such as ecology, social space, media and communication, ideology, history, gender, race, ethnicity, technology, and poverty.

Our examination of the key concepts, forms, qualities, and dimensions of globalization—embedded in a new Global Studies academic framework—have prepared us to respond to the question that frames this chapter: ‘What is globalization?’ So let us attempt to formulate a *general definition* that satisfies experts and neophytes alike:

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Globalization refers to the multidimensional and uneven expansion of social relations and consciousness across world-space and world-time.

Given the subtitle of our book, however, we ought to do better. So here is a *very short* definition of globalization in a mere eight words:

Globalization is about planetary interconnectivities, mobilities, and imaginations.