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Operations of the global: explorations of connectivity

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EDITORIAL

Operations of the global: explorations of connectivity

How to think the global – after two decades of globalization studies, this question seems to be far from answered. Instead, it has become a fresh object of inquiry. As many scholars of globalization currently point out, a problematic understanding of the global has been unwittingly presupposed in the previous debates. The global was erroneously depicted as an encompassing, overarching spatial scale (Brenner 1999). It was misleadingly assumed to lie beyond state authority and territory (Sassen 2006). It was one-sidedly characterized as an expansion of flows that eschew borders (Brown 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson 2008). It unconsciously conflated the diagnosis of globalization with a regulatory agenda, corporate vision, and cosmopolitan utopia (Tsing 2000, 332). In sum, the global 'as we knew it' is larger in scale, faster in pace, and more boundless in reach than anything else (Staeheli 2003). But as today's research makes abundantly clear, this notion of the global tends to underestimate the role of borders, state authorities, fragmentation, territoriality, and partiality that characterize and accompany processes of globalization (Cameron and Palan 2004; Collier and Ong 2005; Tsing 2005; Larner and Walters 2004). As a consequence, fundamental questions return: What is the global if it is as much a production of boundaries as their overcoming? What is it, if it is as much about immobilization as it is about fastness? What is the global, if it is to be found in enclaves and hubs that are not larger but smaller than the nation-state?

These questions about how to think the dimension of the global resonate with a much more general debate in the social sciences about the reconceptualization of macro phenomena. Instead of assuming that the dimension of the 'macro' is larger in geographical scale than the 'micro', the theoretical attention has shifted towards theorizing the macro as a specific type of relation that connects, translates, and transposes social practices horizontally (Latour 2005). In this perspective, the 'macro' and the 'micro' are not juxtaposed on a level of scale, but signify different types of relations that have different degrees of density, materiality, popularity, translatability *inter alia*. Inspired by the now reinstated classic of sociology Gabriel Tarde and by his 'followers' Bruno Latour and Gilles Deleuze, the so-called 'macro' is presented as a relatively stable configuration of relations, called assemblages or actor networks (Borch and Staeheli 2009; Deleuze and Guattari 2003; Latour 2005). They are stabilized by modes of control and material technologies of connecting (Galloway 2004). But these configurations are also contingent and breakable. They have tipping points and lines of flight that signal that their stability is always a precarious state of achievement (DeLanda 2006).

This special issue on 'Operations of the global: Explorations of connectivity' is inspired by these theoretical developments. Its aim is to shed light on the very diverse, partial, and fragmented production of the 'global' understood as a particular type of

connectivity. The contributors to this issue explore the production of the global as connectivity in various fields, such as culture, security, finance, law, logistics, and the media. While the domains and targets of these articles differ, they are all 'connected' in how they explore connectivity on theoretical and empirical levels. The terms 'global operations' and 'connectivity' are not belonging to any specific and shared theoretical vantage point. Rather, they signify a domain of common conceptual exploration for this issue. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have put it, each proper theoretical notion is motivated by a particular problem or concern (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). The terms of global operations and connectivity are introduced in order to point out a shared theoretical question which we consider to be pressing today: how to think the operative dimension of relations. This question sounds at first strange since the social sciences and humanities seem to be well versed in relational thinking. The list of classical authors that have explored relations of recognition, exchange, money, and gift-giving *inter alia* would be too long and too self-evident to rehearse. But the question of how to think relationality has returned and poses itself afresh in this context. Many terms that have been used so far to think relations in the context of globalization studies, such as networks, circulations, and flow, seem to suffer from the same ills as the implicit and inherited notion of the global: they, too, depict a flat world of boundless movement and borderless connections (Terranova 2004). As we will argue below, in order to avoid such unfounded presuppositions, we need to focus more on the operative dimension of relations than before.

The notion of the network can serve as a paradigmatic example for the need to rethink relations as operations. In recent decades, the notion of the 'network' has been one of the most prevalent terms for conceiving of relational configurations (Castells 1996; Knox, Savage, and Harvey 2006; Thompson 2004). In fact, the network is characterized by nothing but relationality. The associations that the network calls forth reach from images of electrical or other infrastructural grids, to 'loose' social ties between hierarchy and markets, to depictions of the World Wide Web and social theoretical accounts of structures without a center (Barry 2002; Hoerl 2012; Galloway and Thacker 2007; Riles 2001; Schuettpelz 2007). The notion of the network has been championed by advocates of transnational logistics and telecommunication and by critical social theorists alike. In fact, the very authors who have been leading the debate in the social sciences on rethinking the micro/macro divide have suggested the network as a central concept for thinking connectivity. While being aware of the 'corporate hype' around this notion, it is still considered to be a helpful tool for thinking about 'distributed agency' (Latour 2011). This claim notwithstanding, the notion of the network still carries with it a particular notion of relationality that requires refinement and critique. For example, the metaphor of the network eschews considerations of boundaries and territoriality (Strathern 1996). It inclines to take the nodes and the space of the network for granted (Harman 2009), and it does not promote a differentiated account of the temporalities, types, and modalities of relations (Maurer in this issue). Last, but not least, the network has become a device in governmental rationalities and techniques, which require critical attention: As Marieke de Goede unpacks in this issue, network models have become crucial for visualizing and problematizing security threats and for extending measures of control and surveillance.

The notions of 'global operations' and 'connectivity' take up this critique of the network. Connectivity signifies a relation if viewed from its operative dimension, understood here as an on-going, temporal, and always actualized 'putting to work'.

The term connectivity is meant to emphasize the different forms, dynamics, and spatial parameter of operations. This notion divests the concept of relationality from the model of the network. It does not think from node to node, but focuses on relational operations themselves in their distinctiveness. It takes relational operations to be always precarious and hence also asks how disconnectivities arise. The study of global disconnectivities brings into focus moments of stillness, waiting, and de-intensification (e.g. Bissell and Fuller 2011; Strathern 1996).

As suggested above, connectivity is not a term that could be tied to any particular theory. It is a theoretical tool, assembled through its use and shaped by such bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1968). In reflection of the different contributions to this issue and the theoretical inspiration that have motivated this special issue, we want to pinpoint three different dimensions of the term connectivity: (1) modalities and materialities, (2) dynamics and temporalities, and (3) topology and territoriality.

Modalities and materialities

The 'new materialist' turn in the social sciences and humanities has already put the question of objects and infrastructures, of 'nuts and bolts' in stabilizing and shaping social order high on the agenda (Braun and Whatmore 2010; Coole and Frost 2010). The actor-network theory (ANT) has been very convincing in demonstrating that the materiality of objects makes social operations 'durable' (Latour 1991). The socio-technical infrastructures necessary for making connections have thus already moved to the foreground. But is has been a lesser concern of the 'new materialism' to understand the specificity or distinctiveness of different of modes of connectivity. Modes are, employing and borrowing here the ubiquitous reference to Spinozist terms in this literature, about the specificity of the connectivity at hand (Deleuze and Guattari 2003; for an introduction to Spinoza see Bennett 2010): it matters, for example, if one seeks to explore the connectivity of money or law, gestures or lists, of affects or of logistics. It even matters if one considers connectivity in terms of cash or credit money, as Bill Maurer discusses in this issue. While in each case the materiality of objects, media, and infrastructures helps to define the kind of connection established, it does not suffice to focus on how they make relations durable. It is equally important to take note of how these modes of connectivity differ and how they mingle through and across their specificity. The diverse contributions to this special issue as a whole demonstrate that connectivity cannot be defined only through the materiality of infrastructures, but also by the distinct modes and modalities of connectivity.

The distinctiveness of diverse connectivities becomes especially visible in those contributions that focus on single techniques or modes of connection. As Urs Staeheli demonstrates, the most mundane and smallest ordering device, such as list-making, is a powerful and surprising tool for establishing connections which has unsuspected affinities for making things global. Tony Sampson investigates the 'boundless' spreading of affects from the vantage point of connectivity. He argues that affects not only have their own viral connectivity, but we even need to consider that different affects such as love or fear exhibit different degrees of viral contagiousness and hence connectivity. While the connectivity of affects can be described in terms of contagion, how do we understand the specific connectivity of gestures in human–machine interaction that the new digital devices enlist? Soenke Zehle explores this hybrid connectivity of gestures and alerts us to the projects of

control that such connectivity harbors. Celia Lury investigates global connectivities by focusing on the specific relation of indexicality: how are we to understand the intermingling of the abstract and the concrete that allows cultural products, such as standards, to travel 'globally' and to connect places and practices? She argues that we need to conceptualize how cultural objects produce their own context, maintain degrees of sameness, and yet allow connections across differences.

Dynamics and temporalities

The materialist turn in the social sciences and humanities needs to be accompanied by a second reminder: it is not only in danger of underestimating the different modes of connectivity, it is also prone to under-theorizing the temporalized 'making use' and 'putting to work' of objects and infrastructures for making connections. Producing connectivity has always a temporal dimension. The system theoretical perspective of Niklas Luhmann helps to push the dimension of temporality to the fore. For Luhmann, any social system is based on a fleeting stream of operations (Luhmann 1996). Systems do not exist except by the temporal chaining of one event to the next. System theory shifts the focus on how connections are more or less probable, how they engender a following one or fail to do so. It invites us to think about the event of connecting as well as about the ubiquitous possibility of disconnecting (Opitz 2010; Staeheli 2000). So far, 'new materialism' and media studies have not thoroughly engaged with Luhmann (for an exception, see Bryant 2011), but taking up his theoretical intervention – without needing to adopt this theoretical edifice as a whole – offers a valuable correction to the tendency of rendering infrastructures more static than they are. Bill Maurer also makes this point in his contribution on payment infrastructures when arguing that only by focusing on the 'event' of connecting can one understand the 'value chains' of fees and tolls tied to using infrastructures. Only by looking at the event can one start to explore the breaks and political indeterminacy of these socio-technical systems. Considering the temporality of connecting operations thus has profound theoretical implications on the conceptualization of connectivity and thus is a dimension in need of further exploration.

Topology and territoriality

How is the production of connectivity linked to the production of space? Even though the network depicts relations in space, the space of the network and the space of flows are often imagined as flat, abstract, and borderless, defined as they are by their opposition to the contained and contiguous territory of the state (Painter 2010). We assume that global flows run everywhere, forging their way across bounds and moving uninterrupted through space. But what happens if one sheds this unfounded presupposition that links globality with a larger and borderless space beyond the nation and focuses instead on how diverse spatial forms are constitutive for forging and maintaining particular types of connectivity? It allows one to recognize that global 'flows' might not be flowing at all, but rather 'hop' from hub to hub, eschewing the contiguousness of state space (Ferguson 2006). This perspective shifts our understanding of the global. As Mikkel Flyverbom demonstrates in this issue by exploring practices of tax planning in global wealth management, the globality of money emerges not in overcoming but using and juxtaposing different territorial jurisdictions as official localities of money. Sven Opitz and Ute Tellmann also

explore the interlacing of globality and territoriality by comparing financial and legal offshore zones as 'global territories'. They suggest that a study of global connectivity requires not only close attention to its spatial dimension, but, more radically, it requires rethinking the inherited notions of space and territory. The global is not beyond or larger than the state, nor is territory always contiguous or state-like. If the global is not an 'enveloping level of coverage superior to the national, but, rather, a form of point-to-point connectivity that bypasses and short-circuits all scales based on contiguity' (Ferguson 2006, 42), then we need to imagine the global as a 'hollowed' (Weizman 2007) space in which scales are mixed and assembled and are used to forge and buttress specific connectivities. As Luis Lobo-Guerrero explores, the port is such a strategically produced enclave for producing circulation, organizing a contiguity and smoothness of circulation through different governmental techniques that make the port a place of connectivity. Logistics, as Brett Neilson points out, is vital for such strategic planning of movement through space and the strategic production of locations in space. Historically, logistics has mutated from a military science to the management of global commerce and production. But how do we theorize these strategies of making and exploiting connections between labor, circulation, and space? Brett Neilson makes a case for addressing the politics and political economy of the connectivity produced through logistics that is able to acknowledge its military genealogy but is not bound by it.

All these cases of connectivity are different and specific. They do not form the material for a generalizable theory, but rather demonstrate the need for staying close to the specific modalities and operativity of relations that one seeks to investigate. While ANT has already pushed towards exploring how making relations is about enlisting different objects, practices, and places for stabilizing them, we suggest that understanding connectivity requires considering both materialities and modalities at once.

In addition to the thematic papers, this issue of *Distinktion* also contains an article by Alberto Cevolini which discusses how time and technology are used by organizations in their search for safety.

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