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Global Assemblages

Stephen J. Collier

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Max Weber began his 1920 'Prefatory Remarks' to the *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion* with a famous and provocative claim:

> The child of modern European civilization will inevitably and justifiably approach problems of universal history from the following standpoint: What chain of circumstances led to the appearance in the West, and only in the West, of cultural phenomena which – or so at least we like to think – came to have *universal* significance and validity. (2002: xxviii)

A series of illustrations follows: developments in history, music, science, architecture, bureaucracy, and, finally, 'the most fateful force in our modern life', capitalism.

Contemporary sensibilities balk. Few today would agree that the development in the West of an orchestra with a string quartet as its nucleus, or the East's lack of a solution to the problem of the dome, give either civilization a claim to phenomena with universal validity, even if one could find a serious scholar still willing to talk about 'the West' and 'the East' (or, for that matter, about 'civilization'). But the most crucial items on Weber's list – science, bureaucracy, and economic rationalism, to which Weber's work returned again and again – are harder to dismiss. Whatever misdirections resulted from discussions around globalization in recent decades, it is certain that at the beginning of the 21st century the ever-more pervasive spread of capitalism and the rationalization of what Weber called the 'life worlds' are central topics for a global knowledge. Indeed, the most relevant question today is not whether the significance of such forms is universal but whether they can be meaningfully associated with 'the West'. Twentieth-century developments in Japanese and Chinese capitalism, or in Russian, Indian, and Pakistani techno-science – to take a few among innumerable examples – should convince us that, whatever claims one might make about their patrimony, these forms no longer require the support of their conditions of origin.

What remains, then, is to ask how we might move beyond platitudinous proclamations to assess their significance for contemporary life.

An emerging body of scholarship has grappled with this question by examining what might be called *global assemblages* (Collier and Ong, 2005). Global assemblages are the actual configurations through which global forms of techno-science, economic rationalism, and other expert systems gain significance. The global assemblage is also a tool for the production of global knowledge, taken in the double sense of knowledge about global forms and knowledge that strives to replace space, culture, and society-bound categories that have dominated the social sciences throughout their history.

The term global refers to forms such as science, expert systems, or techniques of rational calculation whose validity, as Anthony Giddens has argued, rests on 'impersonal principles, which can be set out and developed without regard to context' (1994: 85). The implication is not that global forms are everywhere but that they have a distinctive capacity for decontextualization and recontextualization, abstractability and movement, across diverse social and cultural situations. It may be helpful to take a few contemporary examples. Developments in extraction, donor matching, and immunosuppressant drugs have made human organs an increasingly global form (Cohen, 2005). Certain organs can be abstracted from one context, a human body, and functionally embedded in virtually any other. A similar point could be made about the objects of standards regimes, from illness identified through diagnostic standards in psychiatry to agricultural products produced according to the strictures of production and quality standards (Dunn, 2005; Lakoff, 2005). Through standards, such objects gain a legibility and functionality in heterogeneous domains. Global forms do not, of course, hold a monopoly on mobility. Consider McDonald's or Coke. But the validity of the latter depends on meaning, belief, or desire, specific functions of subjectivity. Global forms, by contrast, are 'valid' in relation to the impersonal and self-referential terms of technical systems.

In many respects, global forms are akin to the 'boundary objects' and 'immutable mobiles' examined by scholars of science and technology (Latour, 1987; Bowker and Star, 2000). But if one's concern is not with the workings of global forms themselves but, rather, with their anthropological significance, a further conceptual turn is required, to the space of *assemblage*. A global assemblage is the actual and specific articulation of a global form. Thus, for example, the anthropologists Lawrence Cohen and Nancy Scheper-Hughes have analyzed assemblages comprising 'global' organs, networks of brokers and dealers, donors and recipients, sellers and buyers, who interact in various moral and money economies, and through various forms of technical and political regulation (Cohen, 2005; Scheper-Hughes, 2005). From this example it should be clear that the global assemblage is an alternative to the categories of local and global, which serve to cast the global as abstraction, and the local in terms of specificity. In the space of assemblage, a global form is simply one among a range of concrete elements.

The relationship among the elements in an assemblage is not stable; nor is their configuration reducible to a single logic. Rather, an assemblage is structured through critical reflection, debate, and contest. Thus, as Scheper-Hughes and Cohen have argued, communities, families, government officials, non-state organizations, and scholars debate organ transplants, proclaim their immorality in the name of the sanctity of the body, or promote their legalization in the name of better regulation, health, and allocative efficiency. As Andrew Lakoff (2005) has shown, psychiatrists with different areas of expertise dispute the ability of standards to yield adequate diagnoses, or, for that matter, the very possibility of establishing generalizable diagnostic standards for mental illness. And as Elizabeth Dunn (2005) has argued, agricultural standards may simultaneously unify some markets but also provoke small farmers to resist standards regimes by turning to informal markets, thereby perversely parcellizing economic exchange.

In pointing to instabilities and conflicts, the global assemblage serves as a tool for a critical global knowledge, though one that diverges from the standard fare of relativizing cultural analyses, sociological reductions to structures of power, or political economic analyses of hegemony that have dominated discussions of globalization. Investigations into global assemblages assume that Weber's provocative claim is still with us: the abstractability, mobility, and power of global forms make them 'fateful' for human life. And the secular trend of their expansion is a central problem with which critical purveyors of global knowledge must grapple. But such investigation cannot tell us whether the 'rationalization of the life-worlds' – biological life, the life of labor, or the life of the psyche – is, in general, a good or bad thing. Rather, it seeks to clarify moral or ethical positions, resistances, and possibilities that emerge around such processes, without knowing 'what lies at the end of this tremendous development' (Weber, 2002: 124).

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Mundialization/Globalization

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How can one understand the specifics of globalization from a cultural perspective? One possible answer would be to go back to the *world system* paradigm, for its critique of the nation-state as a unit of analysis opens a way to envision the world dynamics in other bases. This perspective, however, opens up other problems that, if ignored, will lead us into a dead end. There is, first, a strong economic inclination of the analyses, for the world system's history is conceived as the evolution of capitalism (Wallerstein, 1991). As the economic basis is the privileged unit of analysis, political and cultural manifestations appear as its immediate reflections. In fact, this way of understanding social phenomena transposes to a wider territoriality a well-known reasoning: society is formed by an economic infrastructure and an ideological superstructure. The material 'floor' would comprehend and determine the upper part of such architecture.

Another dimension posited by the analysis is its systemic character. A world system is an articulated set within which all elements are functionally integrated into the whole. An example is to be found in Luhmann's work, that, conceiving society as a system, can extend the concept to reach a planetary scope; in this sense, the world would be a sole communicative system, where the parts, in their differences, would be linked to the same set. There would even be a hierarchy among social systems, from simple to complex, i.e., from less to more differentiated. The difference, however, has a simply functional role, the part functions for the integrity and coherence of the whole.

This theoretical conception allows us to answer an array of questions related to the role of economic and political forces in the 'world system'. It includes, however, a series of contradictions that unveil its weaknesses. There is, first, a lack of social actors; a system-society does not need individuals and political actors: it consummates itself independently of their existence. The systemic approach encompasses the limitations of the sociological objectivism characteristic of Durkheimian or structuralist theories. By