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aspatial globalisation

'Globalisation' is currently one of the most frequently used and most powerful terms in our geographical and social imaginations. At its extreme (and though extreme this version is none the less highly popular) what it calls up is a vision of total unfettered mobility; of free unbounded space. In spite of searching and provocative interventions from the likes of Anthony King, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Michael Peter Smith, Arjun Appadurai and many others, this vision persists. In academic work, it perhaps finds its most characteristic presence as a summary of economic globalisation in the opening paragraphs to a treatise on something 'more cultural'. But it is an understanding which also thoroughly permeates popular, political and journalistic discourse. At its worst, it has become a mantra. Characteristic words and phrases make an obligatory appearance: instantaneous; Internet; 24-hour financial trading; the margins invading the centre; the collapse of spatial barriers; the annihilation of space by time. In these texts, the emerging world economy will be captured by an iconic economics: reference to CNN, McDonald's, Sony is frequently considered enough to convey it. And judicious alliterations will strive to convey the mazi-ness of it all: Beijing – Bombay – Bamako – Burnley. What are at issue in all of this are our geographical imaginations. (And in this regard the alliterations are of particular interest: how often they reveal, in their expectations of the effects they will produce, an imaginative geography which still knows which is 'the exotic' and which 'the banal' and when it is bringing them into unexpected (though in fact now so common a trope) juxtaposition.) It is a mantra which evokes a powerful vision of an immense, unstructured, free unbounded space and of a glorious, complex mixity.¹¹

It is also, undoubtedly, an imagination of the world's geography (a political cosmology in Fabian's terms) which contrasts radically with the modernist one. In place of an imagination of a world of bounded places we are now presented with a world of flows. Instead of isolated identities, an understanding of the spatial as relational through connections. The very word 'globalisation' implies a recognition of spatiality. It is a vision which in some sense glorifies (as so much current writing does) in the triumph of the spatial (while at the same time

speaking of its annihilation). Yet if the picture of global space which 'globalisation' evokes is in contrast to the dominant imaginary under modernity, the structuring characteristics of the conceptualisation of space are disarmingly similar.

Most obviously, just as in the old story of modernity, this is a tale of inevitability; and this in turn is enabled by an unspoken concept of space. Clinton's analogy with the force of gravity only highlights in a particularly striking way what is routinely taken for granted. Whether through an unthinking technological determinism or through a submission to the inevitability of market expansion, this version of globalisation comes to have almost the ineluctability of a grand narrative. Globalisation, here, is as inevitable as modernity's story of progress, and the implications, again, are enormous. Yet again, and just as in modernity's discourse, spatial differences are convened under the sign of temporal sequence. Mali and Chad are not 'yet' drawn into the global community of instantaneous communication? Don't worry; they soon will be. Soon they will, in this regard, be like 'us'.

This is an *aspatial* view of globalisation. The potential differences of Mali's and Chad's trajectories are occluded. (The essential multiplicities of the spatial are denied.) Such countries are assumed to be following the same ('our') path of development. (The openness of the future which is in part a consequence of the multiplicities of the spatial is reined in. This is a tale with a single trajectory.) The effects are political. Because space has been marshalled under the sign of time, these countries have no space – precisely – to tell different stories, to follow another path. They are dragooned into line behind those who designed the queue. Moreover, not only is their future thus supposedly foretold but even this is not true, for precisely their entanglement within the unequal relations of capitalist globalisation ensures that they do not 'follow'. The future which is held out as inevitable is unlikely to be reached. This convening of contemporaneous geographical differences into temporal sequence, this turning it into a story of 'catching up', occludes present-day relations and practices and their relentless *production*, within *current* rounds of capitalist globalisation, of increasing inequality. It occludes the power-geometries within the contemporaneity of *today's* form of globalisation. Even within the West, European governments following the US model appeal to the 'future' in justification, thereby closing down a politics in which a European approach might challenge that of the USA. As Bruno Latour has written, 'Just at the moment when there is much talk on the topic of globalisation, it is just the time *not* to believe that the future and the past of the United States are the future and the past of Europe. A left party should produce a new difference' (1999a, p. 14).

It is, further, significant that such tales of inevitability require dynamics which are beyond intervention. They need an external agent, a *deus ex machina*. The unquestioned motors of 'globalisation's' historicising of the world's geographical inequalities are, in various mixtures, the economy and technology. By this means, a further political result is achieved: the removal of the economic and the

technological from political consideration. The only political questions become ones concerning our subsequent adaptation to their inevitability. Latour (1999a) has written powerfully of this widespread move to protect 'the economic' – that is, the capitalist market – from political questioning (he writes also of an equivalent move in relation to Science). All this has as a necessary grounding the conversion of space into time: the consequent occlusion of the contemporaneous multiplicity of the spatial occludes also the nature of the relations in play.

Further, the particular form of globalisation which we are experiencing at the moment (neoliberal capitalist, led by multinationals, etc. etc.) is taken to be the one and only form. Objections to this particular globalisation are persistently met with the derisive riposte that 'the world will inevitably become more interconnected'. Capitalist globalisation is equated with globalisation *tout court*, a discursive manoeuvre which at a stroke obscures the possibility of seeing alternative forms. It is globalisation *in this particular form* which is thereby taken as being inevitable. The 'achievement' here is to make into the political stake an abstract spatial scale ('the global'), and incidentally to stimulate a response which defends 'the local'. It is, rather, the relations which mutually construct them both which need to be the object of dispute.

Finally, that way of seeing globalisation as inevitable, of placing economics/technology beyond the reach of political debate, also renders globalisation as the One story. 'Globalisation', just as the term 'Capitalism' was before it (and for which, as did modernity in its own day, it frequently stands in as an obfuscating euphemism), is the one (self-referential) Identity in relation to which all else is defined (see Gibson-Graham, 1996). That, again, is to fail to recognise the multiplicities of the spatial. Globalisation is not a single all-embracing movement (nor should it be imagined as some outward spread from the West and other centres of economic power across a passive surface of 'space'). It is a making of space(s), an active reconfiguration and meeting-up through practices and relations of a multitude of trajectories, and it is there that lies the politics.



The imagination of globalisation in terms of unbounded free space, that powerful rhetoric of neoliberalism around 'free trade', just as was modernity's view of space, is a pivotal element in an overweening political discourse. It is a discourse which is dominantly produced in the countries of the world's North (though acquiesced in by many a government in the South). It has its institutions and its professionals. It is normative; and it has effects.

In the South it is this understanding of the space of the future (as unbounded global trading space) which enables the imposition of programmes of structural adjustment, and their successors. It is this understanding of the unavoidability of this form of globalisation which legitimises the enforcement

of export orientation on the economy of country after country; the prioritisation of exports over production for local consumption. It is this discourse of, this particular form of, globalisation in other words which is an important component in the continuing legitimisation of the view that there is one particular model of 'development', one path to one form of 'modernisation'.

In the North, too, this geographical imagination has effects: the constant talking about it, the endless describing it in a particular form, is part of the active project of its production. It becomes the basis for decisions precisely to implement it. On the one hand globalisation is represented as ineluctable – a force in the face of which we must adapt or be cast into oblivion. On the other hand some of the most powerful agencies in the world are utterly intent on its production. The duplicity of the powerful in this is deep, and has been characterised by Morris (1992b) in terms of eroticism (see also, for an alternatively ribald account, Lapham, 1998). World economic leaders gather (in Washington, Paris or Davos) to congratulate themselves upon, and to flaunt and reinforce, their powerfulness, a powerfulness which consists in insisting on *powerlessness* – in the face of globalising market forces there is absolutely nothing that can be done. Except, of course, to push the process further. It is a heroic impotence, which serves to disguise the fact that this is really a *project*.

This vision of global space, then, is not so much a description of how the world is, as an image in which the world is being made. Just as in the case of modernity, here we have a powerful imaginative geography. It is a very different imagination: instead of space divided-up and bounded here is a vision of space as barrier-less and open. But both of them function as images in which the world is made. Both of them are imaginative geographies which *legitimise* their own production.

Clearly, the world is not totally globalised (whatever that might mean); the very fact that some are striving so hard to make it so is evidence of the project's incompleteness. But this is more than a question of incompleteness – more than a question of waiting for the laggards to catch up. There are multiple trajectories/temporalities here. Once again, as in the case of modernity, this is a geographical imagination which ignores the structured divides, the necessary ruptures and inequalities, the exclusions, on which the successful prosecution of the project itself depends. A further effect of the temporal converging of spatial difference here again becomes evident. So long as inequality is read in terms of stages of advance and backwardness not only are alternative stories disallowed but also the fact of the *production* of poverty and polarisation within and through 'globalisation' itself can be erased from view. This is – again – a geographical imagination which ignores its own real spatiality.

Forget, for a moment, Sony and CNN. An alternative iconic economics will tell a tale of the *production* of inequality, division and exclusion. Like the old story of modernity, the new hegemonic tale of globalisation is told as a universal story, but the process is one which is not (and on current terms cannot be) universalised.

The debate about globalisation is often asserted to be about how new it is and how far it has progressed, and there clearly *is* argument about this. There are 'hyperglobalisers' such as Ohmae (1994). And there are sceptics. Hirst and Thompson (1996a, 1996b), for instance, argue that the major world national economies are no more open in terms of trade or capital flows than they were in the period of the Gold Standard. They point out that over the medium term (say the last century), there has been no monotonic linear direction of change. Instead, the degrees of openness have fluctuated over time with the nature of economic development. Their argument is well taken. However, to restrict the argument to this matter of the *degree* of globalisation is gravely to impoverish it. What should be at issue is also the *form* of globalisation: the social form of the relationality which structures it. There may be disagreements over the changes in the degree of openness of national economies over the period studied by Hirst and Thompson (and much squabbling over the details of which measures are the most appropriate), but what surely cannot be in doubt is that the world geography of those relations has been transformed. Global space, as space more generally, is a product of material practices of power. What is at issue is not just openness and closure or the 'length' of the connections through which we, or finance capital, or whatever ... go about our business. What are at issue are the constantly-being-produced new geometries of power, the shifting geographies of power-relations. The *meaning* of economic openness to, say, the UK at the start of the twentieth century, with the country still clinging on to its imperial pomp and this the high point of the Gold Standard, is quite different from its meaning now, with the country's dependence on foreign inward investment and, after the ravages of the 1980s on its production of the means of production, its need to bring in from elsewhere so many of the tools of its trade. In the earlier period 'openness' spoke of dominance; the openness of today is far more ambiguous. The reluctance to address the changing form of globalisation over time is on a par with, and reinforces, the blindness to the possibility that it could take different forms *now*. Space – here global space – is about contemporaneity (rather than temporal convening), it is about openness (rather than inevitability) and it is also about relations, fractures, discontinuities, practices of engagement. And this intrinsic relationality of the spatial is not just a matter of lines on a map; it is a cartography of power.



All of which raises a final source of concern about this formulation of globalisation. It returns us again to the discursive strategies of free market (so-called) globalisation. The dominant institutions and governments which clamour most strongly in favour of globalisation argue for it in terms of free trade. And they argue for 'free trade' in terms which in turn suggest that there is some self-evident right

to global mobility. The very term 'free' immediately implies something good, something to be aimed at. It is self-evidently right that space should be unbounded. Yet, come a debate on immigration, and they immediately have recourse to another geographical imagination altogether, another vision of global space which is equally powerful, equally – apparently – incontrovertible. This second imagination is the imagination of defensible places, of the rights of 'local people' to their own 'local places', of a world divided by difference and the smack of firm boundaries, a geographical imagination of nationalisms. In one breath such spokespeople assume that 'free trade' is akin to some moral virtue; in the next they pour out venom against asylum-seekers (widely assumed to be bogus) and 'economic migrants' ('economics', it seems, is not a good enough reason to want to migrate – *what* was that they were saying about capital?).

Hélène Pellerin (1999) has analysed the shift from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism, and the different spatial settlements involved in each. As she points out, neoliberalism in practice is *not* simply about mobility: it too requires some spatial fixes. And of singular importance among them is the spatial organisation of labour. (And just as the imposition of free trade is contested so too is the attempt to engineer a new geography of labour – in particular she points to illegal migration flows and to aboriginal alliances.)

So here we have two apparently self-evident truths, a geography of borderlessness and mobility, and a geography of border discipline; two completely antinomic geographical imaginations of global space, which are called upon in turn. No matter that they contradict each other; because it works. And it 'works' for a whole set of reasons. First, because each self-evident truth is presented separately. But second, because while neither imagination in its pure form is possible (neither a space hermetically closed into territories nor a space composed solely of flows) what is really needed politically is for this tension to be negotiated explicitly and in each specific situation. This parallels the structure of Derrida's (2001) argument on hospitality. Each 'pure' imagination on its own tames the spatial. It is their *negotiation* which brings the question (rights of movement/rights of containment) into politics. The appeal to an imagination of pure boundedness or pure flow as self-evident foundation is neither possible in principle nor open to political debate.

And so in this era of 'globalisation' we have sniffer dogs to detect people hiding in the holds of boats, people dying in the attempt to cross frontiers, people precisely trying to 'seek out the best opportunities'. That double imaginary, *in the very fact of its doubleness*, of the freedom of space on the one hand and the 'right to one's own place' on the other, works in favour of the already-powerful. Capital, the rich, the skilled ... can move easily about the world, as investment, or trade, as sought-after labour or as tourists; and at the same time, whether it be in the immigration-controlled countries of the West, or the gated communities of the rich in any major metropolis anywhere, or in the elite enclosures of knowledge production and high technology, they can protect their fortress

homes. Meanwhile the poor and the unskilled from the so-called margins of this world are both instructed to open up their borders and welcome the West's invasion in whatever form it comes, and told to stay where they are.

Once again there are echoes here of how the story of modernity was told. Just as was Toussaint l'Ouverture's claim to participate in the principles of modernity's legitimating discourse, so too today the claim to free mobility (the discourse of globalisation) by the world's poor is rejected out of hand. (Though – as with the Haitian slaves – the proclamation of 'free trade' has made the challenge possible.) The current world order of capital's (anyway highly unequal) globalisation is as predicated upon holding (some kinds of) labour in place as was early modernity upon slavery. Pellerin's account of the bullying disdain with which the US government treated the issue of Mexican migration during the negotiation of NAFTA reminds one of nothing so much as C.L.R. James' account of the Parisian reply to the claims of Toussaint l'Ouverture. If, in Bhabha's words, the discourse of modernity fuelled 'the archaic racial factor in the society of slavery' (1994, p. 244) (although of course it was anything but archaic), then, too, the discourse of globalisation as free movement about the world is fuelling the 'archaic' (but not) sentiments of parochialism, nationalism and the exclusion of those who are different.

Today's hegemonic story of globalisation, then, relates a globalisation of a very particular form. And integral to its achievement is the mobilisation of powerful (inconsistent, falsely self-evident, never universalisable – but powerful) imaginations of space.

How easy it is to slip into ways of thinking that repress the challenge of space; and how politically significant spatial imaginaries can be. 'Globalisation', told in this way, is like the old story of modernity. Once again it convenes spatial difference into temporal sequence, and thereby denies the possibility of multiple trajectories; the future is not held open. This rendering of globalisation provides the framing inevitability for the construction of politics such as the 'Third Way' with its abolition of Left and Right and its political closure around a discourse which doesn't allow for dislocation – what Chantal Mouffe has called 'a politics without adversaries' (1998). It installs an understanding of space, the 'space of flows', which, just like the space of places of modernity, is deployed (when needed) as a legitimisation for its own production and which pretends to a universality which anyway in practice it systematically denies. For, in fact, in the context of and as part of this 'globalisation' new enclosures are right now being erected.



And, just like the old story of modernity too, this imagination of globalisation is resolutely unaware of its own speaking position: neoliberal to be sure, but also

more generally Western in its locatedness. This point has been well made in relation to the geographies of current analyses, and celebrations, of hybridity (Spivak, 1990; King, 1995). It applies also to some of the arguments about openness. As was pointed out above, the sudden consciousness of globalisation in the West cannot be as a result of a new 'openness' in general. What has more likely brought about the flurry of concern is the changing terms, and geography, of that openness. *Western* regions become dominated by foreign capital. The old mythical coherence of place is challenged by capital and labour from outside (not exactly a new experience, nor specific to this form of globalisation, in the majority world). It is now the West which is subject to inward investment. It is Western cities which have, in the medium term, been experiencing the arrival of people from other parts of the world. As has often been remarked, much of the work on hybridity has been stimulated by the famous 'arrival of the margins at the centre'. (This was one provocation to re-tell the history of modernity.) In that sense it is already acknowledged to be a story told from 'the first world'.

Except that, this is more of a Western story even than that account indicates. For the margins have *not* arrived at the centre. This is the view of those who were already 'in the centre' and of those from the periphery who have managed over the years to get in. Most of 'the margins' – even should they wish to migrate – have been very strictly excluded.

This is a story of globalisation which has been (as was the story of modernity) largely provoked by what is happening to the West, by the experiences of that West; it is in some measure (just as was colonial discourse) founded upon a Western anxiety. Moreover, just as in the case of modernity, this discourse of globalisation provides a legitimisation of things; an imaginative geography which justifies the actions of those who promulgate it, including – and to come full circle – a particular attitude towards space and place.

My argument is that this narrative of globalisation is not spatialised. By this I do not mean simply that the picture is more geographically complex than is usually claimed: that there is significant spatial variability, or that 'the local' consistently in one way or another reasserts itself. These things are true, but they are not the argument I am making here. Indeed, Low and Barnett (2000) have accused geographers of focusing too much on this aspect of their potential contribution to the debate over globalisation. It is a focus, they argue, which reduces the discipline of geography to a concern with the local, the empirical and the a-theoretical. (I agree with the general burden of this critique. Spatialising social theory is categorically *not* reducible merely to insisting on local variation. But I remain extremely wary of any assumption of a necessary association between the terms local/empirical/a-theoretical; see Massey, 1991b.) So local variability is not what is at issue in this chapter. Rather the argument is that really 'spatialising globalisation' means recognising crucial characteristics of the spatial: its multiplicity, its openness, the fact that it is not reducible to 'a surface', its integral relation with temporality. The a-spatial view of globalisation,

like the old story of modernity, obliterates the spatial into the temporal and in that very move also impoverishes the temporal (there is only one story to tell). The multiplicity of the spatial is a precondition for the temporal: and the multiplicities of the two together can be a condition for the openness of the future. Low and Barnett (2000) argue that geographers' focus on asserting 'more complex or sophisticated conceptions of space' (p. 54) (by which they mean in practice greater spatial variability) is mistaken in that we should criticise instead the *historicism* of the standard story of globalisation. My argument is that criticising the historicism of that version of the story of globalisation (its unilinearity, its teleology, etc.) precisely also entails reframing its spatiality. The reconceptualisation could (should) be of temporality and spatiality together.

But this is still one view. If space is genuinely the sphere of multiplicity, if it is a realm of multiple trajectories, then there will be multiplicities too of imaginations, theorisations, understandings, meanings. Any 'simultaneity' of stories-so-far will be a distinct simultaneity from a particular vantage point. If the repression of the spatial under modernity was bound up with the establishment of foundational universals, so the recognition of the multiplicities of the spatial both challenges that and understands universals as spatio-temporally specific positions. An adequate recognition of coevalness demands acceptance that one is being observed/theorised/evaluated in return and potentially in different terms (see, for instance, Appadurai, 2001; Slater, 1999, 2000). Recognition of radical contemporaneity has to include recognition of the existence of those limits too.

Just as the postcolonial reworking of the former story of modernity productively disrupted so much about it, so too would a genuine spatialisation of how we think about globalisation enable a very different analysis (or very different analyses) (a genuinely spatial narrative). Perhaps above all it would involve challenging that 'all-pervading denial of coevalness'. Fabian has written that it 'takes imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West (and to anthropology) if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by the Time of the Other' (1983, p. 35). The same is true of so many of the ways we currently picture globalisation.