

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## *Book Review Symposium*

**Matthew Sparke**, *Introducing Globalization: Ties, Tensions, and Uneven Integration*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-631-23128-8 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-631-23129-5 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-118-24106-6 (ebook)

Textbooks provoke lots of questions for academics. These questions are not limited to those that appear at the end of textbook chapters, the ones intended to spark seminar debate. Instead these are far-reaching questions about the very practices of teaching and writing in the contemporary university. Unfortunately, systems of research measurement tend to direct academics' writing-time towards activities and outputs that are measurable and therefore are deemed to be of more value. As a result, colleagues, understandably, ask if they should spend their limited time writing textbooks. In many ways writing them, like writing book reviews, is to go against the flow. It is virtually an act of resistance. The fact that any quality textbooks actually get written is something to be celebrated – this review is written with this sentiment in mind.

I also admit to having other reasons to ponder when I'm presented with a textbook. I find that there are two specific difficulties I face when trying to incorporate textbooks into my teaching. The first is timing. When is it that you should use a textbook with students? By their nature textbooks are introductory. The problem is that students only need introductory materials for a fairly short period of time. They have often moved on to more complex or more focused material before a chunky textbook can be fully explored. So, I find it hard to pinpoint a moment in which a textbook is of most use in teaching. When I do manage to find such a moment it

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seems to pass fairly quickly. The second related difficulty concerns the scope of textbooks. However accessible the writing, textbooks are necessarily comprehensive, they cover a lot of ground. They are foundational and as such they leap across vast ranges of topics, whilst at the same time skipping over the surface and providing little meat. Textbooks are designed with this type of approach very much in mind; it is their aim whilst also being their weakness. Given that we often want students to stop and dig rather than skim the surface, textbooks can be too comprehensive and thus don't always fit well with teaching practices.

Given these difficulties, I tend to use textbooks as a contextual safety net for students. These books often appear as a kind of damp-course or backdrop resource to my reading lists, propping up the content by offering the security of a text that might be used to fill any gaps. These books do not often have a material presence in the course, they are not often mentioned in lectures nor are they attached to seminars as key reading. They exist in the shadows of the reading list with the intention of providing students with reference materials to support their work. They operate as backstops that can be used by students who are unsure, or by those who want to get a lot of context without having to wade through materials that will take them far longer than is feasible. I should pause there because Matthew Sparke's book has got me questioning my own practices. In *Introducing Globalization: Ties, Tensions, and Uneven Integration* Sparke manages to deftly traverse some of these difficulties and drawbacks.

Sparke has crafted a carefully designed textbook that is sympathetic to both students and lecturers. It is a book that has been meticulously put together. It is focused rather than amorphous. It is direct, rather than general. It complements overviews with timely examples. It is comprehensive whilst also providing direct insights into contemporary phenomena. It is a book that doesn't present difficulties or

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questions. Instead it is a book that suggests its own usefulness to the reader. In many ways this is a book that does manage to dig into a topic, rather than spending pages skimming across topics until it rebounds off some or other disciplinary boundary. Globalization is now a concept that is monolithic in its size, yet in the right hands it still provides a narrow enough remit for the book to be able to interrogate its key features without losing coherence. Indeed, this is a textbook that digs rather than skims. The chapters build upon one another and emerge out of the foundations of the opening section. This means that the book could work across a module, it could be returned to each week for more densely populated and challenging materials. Together the chapters form an excellent analytical framework that students can adopt and which can be easily transposed onto a module schedule. The material is also challenging enough to motivate students and to give them plenty to think about.

As this would suggest, the structure, and I mean this as a compliment, is extremely functional. Globalization is dealt with here in some detail through a focus upon its key components. These components include discourse, commodities, labour, money, law, governance, space, health, and, finally, the reactions and responses to globalization processes. These chapters have been written with a real sensitivity to students' perspectives and with empathy for the imagined reader – I find that it is this sensitivity that is often lacking in textbooks. There is an attempt to keep it lively, and to make the textbook a source of inspiration rather than a definitive statement on the way things are. It is a book with a plurality of perspectives at its core and with an invitation to the reader to use it to develop broader understandings and challenge established ideas. To give an example, I found the section on the myths of globalization to be really direct, and it is likely to be useful in helping students to break away from some of their established conceptions. The glossary is also

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indicative of this empathy; it provides a set of definitions that will be of use to students throughout their undergraduate degrees.

There is little doubt that globalization is something of a tricky concept. It is a concept with lots and lots of baggage accumulated over years of use and misuse. And we might wonder what real analytical value it still might have today, particularly as its meanings have become so broad and its key features so well-known. It is a catch-all term that has been doing the rounds for a long time. Sparke's book is no dusting-off of old positions on globalization; it touches on these well-worn paths without needlessly rehearsing. From the outset, for instance, Sparke deftly and concisely points towards the relations between processes of globalization and neoliberalization. There is no sense here that he feels the need to hold certain things back from the student reader; rather, he tackles them head-on and with real clarity. The book buzzes with the vitality and complexity of today's world. It is far from being a rehearsal of the familiar accounts of the globalization with which we may have become a little jaded. Indeed, this book seems to make globalization relevant again, not just for students but also for those for whom it may have become a buzzword that lost its buzz. This book shows the on-going analytical significance of globalization as a genuinely usable concept, it shows how the interdependencies and networks of globalization operate today (whilst maintaining a historical context). As a result, it updates the deployment of globalization theory by working with the concept so that the reader might see how it relates to the world in which they live.

If I was going to point at an absence, which I'm reluctant to do given what I have already said about the problems of scope and also given the level of work that has gone into this text, it would be the limited account of the globalization of culture. This is included under various other headings, perhaps most notably commodities, but we see little here about cultural globalization or the interdependencies of culture.

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Such content may have had the potential to tap further into the cultural experiences of students. But books need limits. Other than that, there are some other minor drawbacks. The inclusion of contemporary events and statistics may mean that the book will date quickly. I'm fairly sceptical about the use of the type of web resources that often now accompany textbooks, the one that comes with this textbook is notable and it may help in keeping students up to date with new developments (I particularly liked the global music playlist [provided by the author through the web resource](#)). Otherwise, on occasions the layering of details became a little overwhelming. These details, which are a key feature of this book, bring the grand idea of globalisation into a form in which the student might be able to relate it to their social world. The problem is that they sometimes pile up a little high. The chapter on money, for example, is fascinating but it takes some concentration to follow the detailed examples that are injected into the discussion. This, though, is a minor obstacle and the difficult balance between overview and detail has been negotiated here with some skill.

Perhaps overall, Sparke's book is evidence that textbooks are still of significant value, particularly when they take existing issues and reanimate them for students and lecturers. Textbooks, and the space to write them, need to be defended. As I intimated at the opening of this review, the current systems of measurement in higher education often, and with some force, discourage the writing of textbooks. Despite the difficulties of using textbooks and working them into teaching programmes, good textbooks can find a home. This particular safety net is very welcome, and I'm already thinking about how I can use it to revamp some lectures I need to do next term. This particular book has real purpose and instead of presenting the difficulties of timing and scope, it suggests answers and ideas. If we are questioning the way we might use textbooks in our teaching, or if we are worried

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about how we might productively write a textbook in the context of research assessment, then Sparke's book provides us with some real insights.

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