

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)

In my senior undergraduate seminar on globalisation in early 2013, I asked my students whether they felt prepared to participate in the kind of competitive, knowledge-driven global economy described in their readings. This is a common routine during the week in which we cover issues of labour and migration, and the discussion typically turns to students' experiences, expectations, and prospects. Most are on the cusp of graduating with a BA degree and are making hard decisions about graduate school, employment, and whether or not they plan to (or must) move to pursue educational and career opportunities. In this particular course, my students provided answers strikingly different from those their predecessors often gave to me. Past groups of students had been by and large optimistic about their chances following graduation. Meaningful careers with good pay and benefits, flexible hours, and the chance for advancement and connections with co-workers and the world were, for most, just around the corner. It was difficult to discern whether this was a brave face on what many knew would be a hyper-competitive and difficult situation, or the internalization and acceptance of the promotional culture of higher education advertised in glossy university brochures, but in general students seemed eager to take on the challenge.

While not unanimously held, the sentiment within my recent class posited that there would be no such boundless opportunity for their cohort. Their previous work experience had

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

occurred primarily in heavily surveilled and decidedly unrewarding retail environments, call centers, and the hospitality industry, and they had few illusions about the meaningfulness of the wage labour available to them. They likewise felt little affinity for unions or collective action and solutions to inequities in the labour market or society more broadly. While some expressed hope of breaking out of the cycle of low-paid, and even unpaid, internships they expected to encounter following graduation (or had already endured), they were also acutely aware of the often inhumane and degrading conditions in which workers around the world toiled. Yet they had little sense of how they might make connections outside the realm of commodity circulation and abstract sympathy for the poor Chinese women making their iPhones. While I am reluctant to generalize too much from this one small group of students, their responses to my questions about work and postgraduate prospects indicated that they felt they had little agency in a globalizing world, and were unsure how to confront or correct this.

In turn, I had little idea of what to tell them that would not, in the short term at least, compound their sense of powerlessness. The readings I typically assign for that week of the term (Castree *et al.* 2004; McDowell *et al.* 2007) are excellent for introducing students to ways of understanding the choices workers make as they confront and participate in globalisation, and students can make direct connections to their own experiences. But these readings do not begin from the point of articulating how undergraduate readers themselves might want to think about and exercise their own agency in a global context. Indeed, few and far between are readable, comprehensive texts on globalisation which do not hinge on abstract divisions of globalisation processes into various constituent elements, usually with sections on economic, political, and cultural globalisation, or which avoid the use of ‘middle ground’ metaphors for staking out a claim to what’s *really* going on in a global world. Fewer still are those that take seriously the agency of their intended audience - undergraduate students - to understand globalisation as

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

something more than the realization that Apple makes products half a world away, that international institutions matter, and that ‘globalism’ is qualitatively different than previous social formations and ideals. This is due both to globalisation’s banality, and to an often condescending underestimation of students’ ability to understand *and take part in* the processes so strongly shaping their lives and ideals.

Matthew Sparke’s exemplary *Introducing Globalisation* corrects for much of this, and begins and ends with the reader’s (*i.e.* the student’s) positionality and agency amid the complex web of interdependencies constituting globalisation. Sparke addresses his audience directly throughout the volume, stating in the preface that his intention was to write a book that could “allow [students] to join efforts to redefine and remake globalisation in the world beyond the university” (p.xvi). Likewise, he concludes the text by considering how “utopian demands that universities develop forms of global knowledge and global education that support new forms of global citizenship” have supplanted universities’ deeply institutionalized and strongly embedded role in the production of national citizens and identity (p.412). This has created tensions for students and faculty, as we struggle to work out contradictions between what Sparke identifies as two competing ideal-type subjectivities produced by the global university: the neoliberal global entrepreneur and the caring global citizen. This resonates strongly with my own experiences teaching globalisation, political geography, and international political economy, in which students often struggle to reconcile individual skill acquisition and refinement with a dawning social awareness of injustice, compassion, and connectivity. Sparke hits a familiar note here and throughout the text by usefully reprising arguments on geographies of responsibility-cum-*response-ability* made in much of his other work (Sparke 2007a; 2007b), highlighting the kinds of agency students can exercise through the process of education, even as this is constrained by the discipline of student debt and austerity’s impacts on education funding.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

In the interim, Sparke usefully and with great detail delves into how powerful discursive formations (especially widely circulating ‘myths’ about globalisation’s newness, inevitability, and leveling tendencies) and the materiality of long-distance interdependencies and connections shape one another. Using a big ‘G’/little ‘g’ breakdown comparable to Gillian Hart’s (2001) analysis of D/development (Development as the post-war project of planned interventions across the Third World, and development as the uneven and contradictory geographical development of capitalism), Sparke addresses and moves beyond contemporary debates over globalisation in readable and relevant fashion. The book’s thematic and conceptual organization addresses the discursive and material constitution of G/globalisation in ways that translate complex and often jargon-laden academic parlance into readable prose without losing complexity and insight, and highlights themes that are often downplayed or neglected in other undergraduate texts on globalisation. Most important here are those chapters on commodities and labour; on transnational law and the constitutionalisation of neoliberal forms of globalisation; and on health and inequality. In relation to the last of these, for example, Sparke examines how neoliberal forms of economic globalisation have strongly shaped global responses to pandemic disease, reproducing older forms of inequality and inscribing them across numerous new contexts and registers, such that “our ability to turn shared vulnerability into division persists”, despite claims to the contrary by Globalisation advocates (p.355). The tensions and contradictions between the flattened hierarchies and borderless world envisioned by Globalisation proponents, and the uneven and often unjust geographies of global interdependency, are an enduring theme across the book, and anchor the analysis provided, even amid an occasional overabundance of detail.

Sparke’s approach thus brings theoretical nuance and empirical richness to themes that are often sidestepped in the all-too-common and increasingly stale debate about whether globalisation is new, or whether it has altered the state’s regulatory capacity and functions, or

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

what matters most (economic connection? political governance? cultural identity?) in understanding, explaining, and contesting globalisation. Sparke identifies all of these as subsidiary questions under the broader issue of how subjects of globalisation can meaningfully, responsibly, and justly understand and participate in the webs of mutual interdependence that shape daily life and global flows of goods, services, people, and knowledge. Throughout the book, Sparke provides helpful extras in summaries of main points and key ideas at the outset of each chapter; individual and group exercises at the end of each chapter; lists of recommended extra readings; and a thorough glossary of terms that, frankly, could set a standard for glossaries. I typically neglect these kinds of extra features when using textbooks, as they can sometimes appear tacked-on - the kind of thing publishers push for in such volumes because they think it might provide a marketable edge over competing texts in a crowded marketplace. *Introducing Globalisation* not only integrates these well into the text and its larger purpose, but also earnestly tries to make meaningful connections to students' experiences in the globalizing university. The group exercise provided at the end of the chapter on labour, for instance, directs students to the [Worker Rights Consortium](#) as a starting point for a commodity chain analysis of where their university's sportswear is made (this is in some ways a uniquely American example, but can be adapted to garments and textiles in general). Sparke suggests not only that students use the array of language skill that may be available to them in the classroom through their peers, but also that "[i]f your university or college is not part of the consortium, the group's research project should instead be focused on asking the university administration why they have not done so" (p.135). Such structured exercises open the door for students to engage globalisation as students, consumers, and advocates, reproducing but also challenging the tensions between entrepreneurial and caring citizen subjectivities.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Though *Introducing Globalisation* offers in many ways a comprehensive and immensely detailed overview of globalisation and discourse, practice, and material connection, it nevertheless has one major gap, namely in its treatment of environmental and ecological aspects of globalisation, which are addressed all too briefly in the penultimate chapter on health and inequality. While the links between environmental harm, justice, and quality strongly shape individual and public health, and increasingly do so through global scale processes, Sparke spends precious little space on the complexities of global environmental change, moving quickly past questions of the racialization and securitization of climate change and its impacts to discuss the specific issues of global health. There is little said about the vast inequities between and differential capacities of different states to mitigate and adapt to climate change, or the ways in which environmental vulnerabilities become geopolitical threats in a radically interconnected world of global interdependence, or the important influence of environmental movements and activism in constructing alternative discourses and practices of globalisation centered on the right to land, water, and community.

This stands out as a missed opportunity for providing a different kind of insight into the limits of Globalisation as triumphalist discourse, especially when stacked against, for example, the quite insightful three-plus pages on the human organ trade that come later in this chapter (see p.358-361). It is also in the discussion of environmental globalisation that we can perhaps ask a probing question of how *Globalisation* shapes *globalisation*, and what the limits of this discursive formation and the power relations articulating it might be. Is the myth-making and myth-propagating discourse of Globalisation, hinging on the notion of globalisation's newness, inevitability, and levelling capacities, capable of identifying, managing, and mitigating (or even reversing) the effects of climate change, which in fundamental ways reproduce the deep inequalities on which numerous other webs of global interdependency depend? Alternative

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

globalisation discourses and practices appear sometimes to be too little, too late in relation to global-scale processes of warming and change already underway, and as Lilley *et al.* (2012) cogently examine, often resort to localization and catastrophism themselves, eschewing the kinds of alternative globalisation to which Sparke points. While Sparke does address environmental globalisation at various points in the book, a more sustained and synthetic account (in a separate chapter, perhaps) would allow us to better ask how Globalisation as discursive shorthand and politically significant myth-making is limited by the kind of globalisation produced by and through climate change and ecological interdependencies, since these processes are not in the end dependent on our understanding and discursive framing for their continuation. They are underway, they cannot likely be reversed to a zero-state, and their outcomes and feedbacks are contingent in ways that we are not currently (or maybe ever) able to predict with precision. Sparke's outstanding volume nevertheless takes these forms of contingency head-on in numerous other ways, and speaks to the need to reimagine and reassert questions of responsibility, agency, and justice within such processes while providing students with the conceptual tools to do so.

References

- Castree N, Coe N, Ward K and Samers M (2004) *Spaces of Work: Global Capitalism and the Geographies of Labour*. London: Sage
- Hart G (2001) Development critiques in the 1990s: *Culs de sac* and promising paths. *Progress in Human Geography* 25(4):649-658
- Lilley S, McNally D, Yuen E and Davis J (2012) *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*. Oakland: PM Press
- McDowell L, Batnitzky A and Dyer S (2007) Division, segmentation, and interpellation: The

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

embodied labours of migrant workers in a Greater London hotel. *Economic Geography*

83(1):1-25

Sparke M (2007a) Acknowledging responsibility for space. *Progress in Human Geography*

31(3):7-15

Sparke M (2007b) Geopolitical fears, geoeconomic hopes, and the responsibilities of geography.

Annals of the Association of American Geographers 97(2):338-349

Jamey Essex

Department of Political Science

University of Windsor

jessex@uwindsor.ca

November 2013