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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)

Matthew Sparke's *Introducing Globalization* is a deeply informative, useful, and unique text, ideally suited for upper-level undergraduate courses on the geographies of globalization, either as a textbook or as a supplementary lecture and reading resource. Given that the majority of textbooks in Geography are written for introductory audiences and that the majority of scholarly books are designed for an audience of graduate students and beyond, this book makes a vital contribution to the college Geography classroom, serving as a bridge between introductory and specialized academic works. Moreover, Sparke writes the volume with a mission of demystifying globalization, resulting in a highly accessible and easily readable text. It begins with a thorough, critical discussion of globalization as both a reality and a discourse in the first two chapters, before guiding the reader through a "scaffolding" framework that builds from an understanding of commodities to labor, money, law, governance, space, and health, primarily focused around the idea and material effects of neoliberal globalization. The book concludes with a thorough discussion of the varied responses to this primary form of globalization.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is its thorough, critical approach to explaining the complexities and contradictions of globalization in a clear and comprehensible way. Sparke consistently addresses globalization's contradictory drives toward integration and differentiation,

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the often-blurred lines between globalization as a concept and material reality, and the dominant myths of globalization as new, inevitable, and leveling. Using the example of the elephant and the six blind men who can only touch a section of it, he argues for the importance of interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and a practice of demystification in understanding globalization. Writing to an audience of students, he convincingly argues for the importance of globalization scholars working together and for globalization scholarship to occupy a public realm of understanding that transcends specific disciplinary perspectives. At the same time, he writes, “[t]he elephant is more than the sum of its parts, but it is not a god!” (p.22): in presenting globalization, many scholars have the tendency to get religiously transcendental about its status. Sparke cautions us against this stance, and this work is proof of the meaningfulness that can result from approaching globalization with a mission of demystifying, and demythologizing, it.

While the text is clearly interdisciplinary in its approach to globalization as a discourse, it is also deeply disciplinary in its adherence to a Marxist political economy-inspired framework that is firmly entrenched in how many radical geographers have come to examine globalization over the past three decades. This approach perceives economic relationships as foundational to understanding globalization and builds out to other material realms from there. As such, important aspects of the study of globalization - most profoundly the cultural practices and experiences of globalization that Sparke outlines in his discussion of interdisciplinarity in the first chapter - do not receive attention in any kind of critical depth in the chapters that follow the two introductory ones. For a geographer like me, who perceives learning and teaching about everyday experiences of globalization to be of central importance in a course on the subject, this is a difficult textbook to imagine using as a primary text. Perhaps it would have been more accurate for the book to be called *Introducing Economic Globalization*, because of its thorough,

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central focus on economic concepts and relations. In its economy-centered focus, the text is not as interdisciplinary a text on globalization as Sparke claims it to be. In addition, this focus on economic concepts and relations means that the book often lacks an element of storytelling that could relate the everyday meanings and experiences of globalization to students in a way that a more thorough cultural perspective could provide. While Sparke's chapters are often engagingly and accessibly written, they do tend to be quite abstract and removed from everyday experiences of globalization, the penultimate chapter on health being a notable exception.

The other dimension of the book that left me feeling ambivalent about using it in a globalization course is its decidedly textbook-y format. Each chapter is formally organized with "chapter contents", "chapter concepts", and "key concept" sections at the beginning, and group and individual "student exercises", "notes", and "keywords" at the end. In some ways, this structure potentially serves the book and courses that may employ it quite well. I find this to be particularly true with the exercises, which often have the effect of getting students to investigate and think about the stories of globalization that the text itself does not include. For example, the labor chapter includes exercises that ask students to investigate the conditions under which their university sportswear is made and to reflect on anecdotes from the lives of different individual workers. These exercises have tremendous potential for insightful class discussions that break down an abstract representation of labor to everyday experiences and connections. At the same time, however, I feel that the textbook-y nature of the book in some cases blocks its narrative flow and momentum. For example, the combination of "chapter concepts" and "key concept" sections at the beginning of each chapter seems redundant and might be more effectively located at the end of the chapter, to summarize what the student has just read. Especially within the more challenging chapters that feature economic concepts foreign to many students, the list of complex

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conceptual statements at the beginning sets up a potentially daunting reading experience. Also, in some cases, the structure appears to be there for no meaningful reason other than to look like a textbook. For example, at the end of a 57-page chapter on space, there are only four “keywords” identified. Surely, there must be more keywords to understanding globalization through reterritorialization than that! I can already imagine students reading those four keywords and thinking that is all they will need to remember. In the end, I have mixed feelings about the extent to which the textbook structure contributes to the comprehensibility of the book. Sparke’s clear writing and engaging narrative, for me, goes much farther in achieving accessibility than the use of textbook conventions.

In sum, despite these limitations, *Introducing Globalization* is a welcome addition to the Geography classroom, given its clearly crafted, demystifying approach to understanding the complex theories and material realities and effects of neoliberal economic globalization. While I may not necessarily see use for it in my classroom, I can see how it could be compellingly useful in others as a thoroughly critical interdisciplinary and disciplinary introduction to neoliberal globalization.

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