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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)

The first time I encountered this book was in 2006, not long after I had traveled from England to the US to start my PhD in Geography at the University of Washington. Matthew Sparke was my supervisor and I was a Teaching Assistant for his *Introduction to Globalization* course. The class enrolled some 500 undergraduates from across campus, and his textbook, which was work-in-progress, was required reading. If I remember correctly, at that point it comprised around five chapters and a handful of keyword definitions, all held together with a large bulldog clip. Just as the term finished, the subprime mortgage market began to unravel, soon rendering the chapter on money in need of some major reworking before a full draft of the manuscript was even complete. No doubt the threads of many other chapters have been unpicked and stitched back together in the time it has taken to complete this work.

The core themes and arguments remain recognizable though. The book is structured around a series of topics, with chapters on commodities, labor, money, law, governance, space, and health. Each topic underscores just how interdependent our world is. What happens ‘here’ has profound impacts on what happens ‘there’ and vice versa. More importantly, each of these interdependencies is marked by profound inequalities. Some people are able to accumulate greater power and wealth as a consequence of new forms of global integration. Others are exposed to ever-greater insecurity, ill health, and

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exploitation. At the macro scale, it makes sense analytically to talk in terms of a global North and South. But Sparke shows how neoliberal globalization produces a more complex geography of uneven development with zones of affluence and abandonment often juxtaposed next to one another.

To understand this unevenness, Sparke argues that we need to think in terms of different forms of power. We continue to see the more brutal sides of state power being exercised. In particular, military force is still frequently deployed as a force for global integration. The ‘war on terror’, Sparke reminds us, was partly justified on the grounds that it was the only way to dragoon a supposedly ‘non-integrating gap’ of rogue regimes into the global market. But it is crucial that we consider these geopolitical struggles in relation to more subtle and sometimes consensual forms of governance and governmentality that are mediated by global markets.

The chapter on money is exemplary in this respect - as well as the most challenging for students, in my experience. Sparke shows how the US was able to consolidate its position of economic dominance at the end of the WWII by pushing for the dollar to be the *de jure* world currency at the historic Bretton Woods meeting. Nixon’s abandonment of the gold standard system in the early-1970s helped to create convulsion in the global economy that would ultimately lead to the debt crisis of the 1980s. Yet the dollar has remained the *de facto* global currency as other governments continue to build their currency reserves to ward against financial speculation that might drive down the value of their own currencies. Throughout the book, Sparke’s analysis is carefully attuned to the ways in which US dominance is structured into globalization.

In the chapter on governance, Sparke shows how a host of US- and Europe-based institutions, including private bond-rating agencies and law firms, and, not least, the IMF, WTO and World Bank, have also expanded their global reach since that debt crisis. By

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establishing the metrics, benchmarks, and best practices by which progress is measured, these institutions also ultimately work to entrench neoliberal norms. We now see similar kinds of practices in the field of global health. Philanthropic-led efforts to address health issues in the global South are often lauded for trying to expand treatment programs for infectious diseases. But they also tend to support very targeted interventions that obscure the wider processes that create such vulnerabilities to ill health. Again, we find islands of high quality healthcare within countries that are otherwise hampered by under-funded national health systems.

Sparke develops a rich and multilayered framework for understanding the inequalities and injustices associated with neoliberal globalization. But the question many students will ask, of course, is how to change it. This brings us to one of the key strengths of the book. Much like J.K. Gibson-Graham's (2006) rethinking of 'the economy', Sparke begins by carefully deconstructing the dominant discourse associated with 'globalization'. He identifies three common myths about globalization that are circulated through statements made by pro-market politicians and influential analysts such as Thomas Friedman. The first is that globalization is new, which elides the much longer and still relevant histories of integration associated with imperialism. The second is that globalization is inevitable, as opposed to something that has to be continually made and remade by the interventions of many powerful hands, some more visible than others. And the third is that globalization is leveling the playing-field and shrinking space; as Sparke notes, for global elites it may feel like the world is getting smaller but business class travel and expedited border crossings are privileges enjoyed by the very few.

Unpacking the discourse opens the way for different kinds of visions of global interdependency founded on principles of care, respect, and equality. Sparke points to organizations promoting fair trade, environmental regulations and debt relief (for the

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poor, as opposed to Wall Street!) as examples of such alternatives. He also emphasizes that the way we teach and learn about globalization in privileged universities can play an essential role in changing how people think and act as responsible global citizens. Many teachers and students alike will have experienced the ramping up of rhetoric around education for ‘global competency’. But Sparke argues that we need to carefully parse the meanings associated with this claim. Often, it is about equipping students with the skills needed to compete in the global economy. We need to instead think about how we can train students to be caring global citizens, aware of their own privileges and alive to the possibilities for change.

Throughout the book, Sparke continually invites critical reflection on how the analysis is informed by his own positionality. So, what other narratives about globalization are left unsaid or undeveloped in the book? Reflecting on this question, I find myself again returning to my PhD work. Shortly after I had finished TA-ing the course in 2006, I traveled to Andhra Pradesh, India to conduct fieldwork on the expansion and commercialization of microfinance programs. By this point, microfinance had been widely embraced as a key tool in reducing poverty around the world. As Sparke notes in the text, the World Bank was instrumental in pushing for a more ‘financially sustainable’ (read: ‘for-profit’) model of microlending by this point. However, I was also struck by the important role that lower-middle-class Indian men played in driving this expansion. Working as managers and middlemen they were far from the avatars of World Bank economists. Rather, they blended together attributes associated with global success with a sense of business acumen and enterprise that was more regionally specific (Young 2010). This theme has re-emerged in recent collaborative work on educated young men working as entrepreneurs in the education sector in north India (Jeffrey and Young 2014).

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As Sparke notes, it is important not to romanticize the enterprise of non-elite populations as a way to detract attention from wider, structural inequalities. And it is certainly true that the college entrepreneurs were mostly making money off the backs of poorer students. But maybe these enterprise cultures challenge us to rethink how we conceptualize neoliberalism. Most of the recent critical work on marketization has focused on different circuits of knowledge production that are centered in powerful locales (see Roy 2010; McCann and Ward 2012). However, my own research, and a growing body of work on the economic practices of young people in the global South, suggests that ideas about enterprise are also created and circulated outside the purview of powerful institutions (see Jones 2010; Thieme 2013). I would be interested in Sparke's reflections on how his own thinking on neoliberalism has shifted during the writing of the book and how we might think through examples of what we might call 'vernacular neoliberalism'.

A second point concerns the question of alternatives to neoliberalism. Sparke outlines a diverse array of alter-globalization movements that are focused on enhancing the wellbeing of people and the planet. But can some of these diverse practices be articulated together and institutionalized at some level? The book points to certain spaces of hope in this regard. The 'Battle in Seattle', the World Social Forum, and the Occupy movement were not without their limitations but they did seem to open up the potential for a wider, more unified social movement. But compared to the 'fast-policy' networks through which market-based policy models seem to travel, these alliances often seem to be stymied by the sheer range of political and organizational challenges that need to be confronted.

I wonder whether there are also alternatives emerging, however, that are being overlooked? One example that has intrigued me recently is the implementation of cash

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transfers and now basic income programs in parts of Latin America, Africa, and, most recently, India. These programs did not start out as a challenge to neoliberal orthodoxy. On the contrary, they were originally formulated to include a series of conditionalities that seemed to encapsulate the main principles of neoliberal poverty management programs (Peck and Theodore 2010). Yet, whilst they may still retain some of the language of neoliberalism, some programs are now being remade to work in a way that is more in line with the kinds of redistributive politics that Sparke calls for. As Richard Ballard (2013) argues, this is no magic bullet solution. But I think it points to the problems in always thinking in terms of ‘neoliberal’ and ‘alter-’ globalization. There doesn’t seem to be a major social justice movement around cash transfers and it’s easy to see this as just another case of neoliberal populism – a palliative program to prevent real social change. In some instances this may be true but I’m not sure that’s the whole story. If we look again, they might also offer insights into how principles of redistribution, collective provision, and the right to a decent standard of living for all can be institutionalized and expressed. We hear lots about how radical ideas and movements can become co-opted. Why not the other way around?

Having completed the PhD, I now teach a large course on globalization at the ‘other UW’ in Madison, Wisconsin. Finding a text that is engaging and accessible for undergraduates but that also does justice to the complex historical geographies of globalization remains a challenge. This book accomplishes that fine balance. Although he adopts an interdisciplinary approach, Sparke’s writing is especially effective at cultivating the kind of geographical imagination required to come to terms with global interconnectedness. The culmination of many years of teaching as well as research, this is a book that highlights the important role that geographers can play in challenging the common sense of neoclassical economics when it comes to debates about globalization.

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I'm sure there will be much more re-stitching to be done down the line but, for now, this book has significantly raised the bar when it comes to teaching undergraduates about the unequal world they live in.

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