Theories of Globalization
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Acknowledgements

During the course of writing this book I have incurred many debts, not the least of which is the forbearance shown by Louise Knight, David Winters and others at Polity. Readers for the Press also offered strong support for the book in manuscript form, while pointing to the virtues of severe editing. Magnus Ryner and Tina Miller at Brookes read a draft of the book and I am grateful for their encouraging opinion of it and for their useful criticisms. Part of the argument in chapter 1 was based on an article in the journal *Globalizations* in 2007, and on a special issue I edited in that journal in the same year. Justin Rosenberg’s response to the former, also in *Globalizations*, was a model of succinct critique, and enormously helpful in reframing chapter 1. I have been fortunate to present early versions of chapter 6 to research seminars at Oxford Brookes, at the annual conferences of the Global Studies Association in 2008, and at the ISA in San Francisco in the same year. The interpretation of world society found in chapters 2 and 8 is trailed in an article in *Protosociology* in 2012.

Barrie Axford
Oxford, December 2012
This book offers a critical examination of the concept of globalization as it has been deployed across the social sciences and of its impact on social-scientific inquiry. It also offers pointers to a transdisciplinary and multidimensional, as well as a transformative scholarship of globalization, a concept that has resonated across the social sciences for the past few decades. When I first began to think about the book, colleagues advised me of the need for a comprehensive and critical treatment of the ways in which globalization has been theorized across disciplines and sub-fields, and to what effect. But on the face of it nothing could be further from the truth. There are many volumes that offer both exegesis and critical commentary on globalization, and even more that have tried to fashion a theory of globalization, or treat it as a prime, if inchoate, causal factor when explaining long-term, large-scale social change. Sometimes these offerings are not so much theory as hortatory remarks and either ideological or polemical in tone.

None of this is surprising. Globalization is a compelling idea that arouses strong feelings even among researchers who caution only that the concept needs more careful specification to be useful. There is also a wealth of more impassioned commentary from those exercised by the perceived benefits or ills of globalization. Globalization sceptics in the academy and beyond remain thick on the ground and, if anything, their complaints have been intensified by the faltering of the global economy since 2007. And even though much criticism points to under-specification of the concept, the fact is that there are many definitions of globalization clustered around common indicators and themes. So, if there is a problem, it lies elsewhere, perhaps in the curiously elliptical treatment of the concept. Thus globalization understood as ‘space-time compression’ is a notion that is wonderfully plausible, yet rarely grounded, or only vaguely construed, in empirical research. Conceivably, the problem resides in the blanket application of the term – globalization translated as interconnectivity leaves almost nothing outside its remit. Even ‘difference’ has been subsumed under the rubric, for diversity is not only seen as an enduring feature of a globalized world but often deemed integral to its constitution. Globalization as the process through which the world is being made into a single place has an intuitive appeal, until one begins to unpack precisely what is meant by that strong attribution. Finally, there is the matter
of normative and ideological engagement. In some tracts the temper of commentary has an almost Orwellian gloss, where globalization is cast as good or bad by definition.

While this makes for compelling reading, it is not always good social science. Arguably, and despite its appeal as a ‘must-have’ concept, there is still a relative dearth of empirical-analytic investigation, especially at the micro and meso levels of experience and enactment and on the ‘softer’ aspects of globalization. Most notably, there is little work that connects individual lives and global constraints. At the same time, the scholarship is littered with work on globalization and the environment, security, gender and so on, or else with research on vicissitudes in the globalization of such issue areas. In short this is a field seemingly without boundaries and promiscuous in its appeal to many researchers and disciplines. So what am I trying to achieve in this book?

The first thing to say is that I am not trying to construct a new theory of globalization; still less elevate the concept into the sole explanation of recent or long-term social change. Such debates are important because they highlight the extent to which globalization and globalization research are challenging, if not transforming, social theory. For the study of globalization has yet to effect a paradigm change in the social sciences, though it may well constitute a ‘positive problem shift’ in how knowledge about the social is constituted (Lakatos, 1970). Here I have something of a normative as well as a scholarly intent to declare, at least where the future of globalization scholarship is concerned. I endorse treating globalization as more than a scholarly zeitgeist; seeing it as the catalyst for significant change in the focus and conduct of the social sciences. To achieve this end involves recognizing and, more to the point, operationalizing and implementing the transformative potential carried in the very idea of globalization, but only sometimes realized through its scholarship. The disciplinary and cross-disciplinary scholarship discussed in this book is interrogated with regard to whether it underwrites usual science or contributes to its transformation.

So, this is resolutely a book about how the global is theorized and how the idea of transformation appears positively in the work of some scholars and is derided by their opponents. As well as analysing the ways in which the transformative motif has been couched, in chapter 9 I offer pointers to how it might be realized through a scholarship not in thrall to disciplinary regimes and social-scientific givens. Throughout the book I canvass and critique different ways of theorizing globalization from across the social sciences. I also explore different academic traditions and reflect on how particular schools of thought have framing effects on debate that are often left unexamined. The continued imprint of methodological and theoretical nationalism on global theory provides a narrative thread through chapters 1–3 and particularly so where political science and sociology are concerned. Even the stuttering evolution of critical thinking from hyper-globalists, through sceptics to
transformationalists, from so-called first to third wave theory, often fails to shake off these trammels.

Yet globalization is a concept that, in principle, forbids compartmentalization in any one area of social science. And indeed, though many disciplines have engaged with the idea, none has embraced it fully. But, as we shall see, strict allegiance to disciplinary traditions and ontological givens vitiate the possibility of a social science of the global and often trivialize contemplation of it. In this book I try to draw out commonalities and differences in focus and approach, the better to understand the provenance and findings of a diverse scholarship, and to look for pointers to a non- or trans-disciplinary approach to globalization research and theory. The remit of globalization scholarship is very wide, taking in both hard issues (patterns of economic globalization) and tantalizingly soft features (what is global consciousness?). To do justice to all this is a monumental task and I have had to simplify it for purposes of analysis and presentation. In chapter 1, I justify my decision to keep the remit of the book to scholarship that emerged across the social sciences from the 1980s onwards, when a body of literature specifically about globalization was first published. In the event, this restriction is not observed fully, since one has to acknowledge the influence of earlier social theory on contemporary scholarship.

Throughout, I prefer the term ‘scholarship’ to ‘theory’ because the second is subsumed under the first, and because not all of what we will canvass can be understood as theory. The Ancient Greek word for theory, ‘theoria’, had objective and subjective connotations; the first suggests seeing and observing ‘outside’ the self, and the second refers to one’s own emotions and needs. This is a necessary tension in good social science.

The main task was to decide how to organize the material. I had three main presentational tasks in mind to embed my substantive goals. The first was to identify and evaluate the work of important authors in the broad field of globalization studies and cognate areas of the social sciences. While globalization appears as an integrating or a divisive topic in many disciplines and sub-disciplines, it is only recently that one can talk with any validity about a field of globalization studies, and more often than not that is just an amalgam of scholars from different disciplines who see some common ground under the globalization umbrella.

But I did not want to write a book so reliant on specific authors and particular texts that the broader warp of globalization theory gets lost in an exegesis of their work. At the same time I have tried not to undervalue the contribution of individual scholars by limiting their contribution to one area of globalization theory. So it is that Saskia Sassen, Anthony Giddens and Roland Robertson, to name but three, weave in and out of the narrative. The upshot is that there is, necessarily, a cumulative feel to chapters 1–3, where the same concepts and issues are inflected differently through the work of diverse authors and the framing of the subject by different disciplines.
This seems apposite, allowing me to develop my second concern, which is to examine some of the key themes that have emerged in attempts to theorize globalization. Five such themes are central to the scholarship on globalization as it has emerged since the early 1980s, and they can be used to assess its quality and impact. Obviously, there are other areas of concentration that could have done service here. The themes are organized as chapters 4–8. They include globalization as a spatial and temporal phenomenon (chapter 4), the eminently normative theme of globalization and governance (chapter 7) and what many commentators take as the valence issue for contemporary globalization: the relationship between it and capitalism (chapter 8). Two other thematic or conceptual-thematic chapters are deployed. The first (chapter 5) fills what is still something of a lacuna in globalization research by examining culture and the treatment of globalization as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The second (chapter 6) addresses how globalization is theorized as a historical process and how such theorization is informed by and impacts on modernization theory and theories of modernity; both intimately linked with treatments of globalization.

My third concern was to delineate the main strands in globalization research and to identify disciplinary contributions to it. Thus, I reserve the first part of the book for a review of the main currents in globalization scholarship and for definitional matters. Chapter 1 develops some important themes in globalization research and offers a critical unpacking of global concepts that share the same root – global – but inflect it differently, resorting to quite different, and sometimes incompatible, approaches to its study. It is followed by two chapters of disciplinary contributions to research on globalization. These chapters are succeeded by the five themes outlined above. Chapter 9 looks at globalization research less in thrall to usual science, and at the possibility for a social science of the global being made out of the wrack or transcendence of discipline-based social research. In this chapter I explore the promise of a paradigm shift and a two-way transformation – in how the world is ordered and in the social science of globalization.

When thinking about which disciplines to examine, my choices were directed by the significance of the concept in the field concerned. I advert political science, especially international studies, sociology, anthropology, geography and cultural and communication studies. Economics appears, but hardly from the mainstream of the discipline, which has largely eschewed globalization research; except, of course, in the work of apostates who have come over from the dark side of positivist theory and neo-liberal economics in search of a normative critique of globalization. Law too is deemed to show limited engagement as a discipline. I fear as well that I have been somewhat cavalier in my direct treatment of some cross- or non-disciplinary areas of research as these have inflected globalization scholarship in particular and often beneficial ways. Feminist theory is a major contender here. Also, despite my protestations that research on globalization has tended to marginalize
some voices, especially where these spring from activist accounts, as well as from those outside Anglophone academic exchanges, I must confess that the coming pages are dominated by research from the Western academy. I can only plead the magnitude of the task and the need to treat main currents and modal concepts – themselves globalized – in detail to retain coherence and allow the book to flow.