
Commodities, Capitalism and Globalization— Introduction

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Much, probably too much, has been written about globalization. According to Kalb (2000: 3), globalization has become the dominant political and economic discourse of the developed world—“a grand narrative of our time.” As part of public discourse, it is ideological to be sure, yet also traceable in political action and in social and economic effects. Indeed, before the onset of discourses about globalization, the global itself was exposed, subjected to scrutiny in the various discussions that have interlinked anthropology and different projects focussing upon transnational relations and translocal reconfigurations. The anthropologists who have contributed to these discussions also embrace a global historical perspective in their work and many have noted how our discipline itself became historically embedded in various regions of the world colonized by Europeans and later the United States (e.g. Anderson, 1998; Asad, 1973; Nash, 2002). Thus, discourses concerned with the processes, relations and forces that transcend the local and the national, now discussed as globalization, have circulated widely in the anthropological context through both time and space (see for example Friedman, this volume; Wolf, 1969; Wolf and Mintz, 1957).

In the current context, anthropological writing continues to grapple with the global and efforts are devoted to defining the forces and effects of globalization. Numerous questions have been raised in the many debates that have occurred over the political and economic consequences of globalization as well as its social and cultural possibilities. It is not our intention here to revisit the familiar terrain of different debates in anthropology regarding the nature of globalization, or indeed, to present another exegesis on globalization, itself. It is not the case that we think that enough has been said, nor that new insights cannot be received as processes of globalization continue to unfold. On the contrary, we feel that more must be said and other insights offered. Our contribution here is not to abstractly theorize globalization, nor to

align ourselves with one or other school of thought in the debates. Rather, we offer a view of globalization through the concrete. In this volume, our focus is on the commodity, and the political, economic and cultural conditions implicated in its production and circulation around the globe.

While reflections on the nature of globalization are extensive, the exploration of its relation to commodities seems rather more limited and specialized, taken on by only a very few in anthropology (see Haugerud, Stone and Little 2000, for example). Still, it is arguable if this area of investigation is any more recent or newer than the current focus on globalization. The work of Mintz (1979, 1985), Roseberry (1996) and Wolf (1982) reminds us that indeed discussion about commodities, the development of a world economy of capitalism and global trade, preceded the period when globalization came to be the grand narrative of our time. In problematizing the relationship between globalization and commodities our perspective reinforces Stone, Haugerud and Little's assertion that a focus on commodities "offers a window on large-scale processes that are profoundly transforming our era" (2000: 1). We would add that an ethnographically sensitive study of commodities not only enhances our understandings of globalization as a transformative force in the real world, but it is also a prerequisite, as Friedman (this volume) asserts, for informed engagement in debate. Indeed, we refrain from providing an overview of the contemporary debates in this Introduction as many of these are actually addressed in this volume by the authors themselves. In their efforts to detail the social and political relations of production, distribution, deployment and consumption of such global commodities as wine, cognac, gold, Rai music, olive oil, used clothing and migrant labour, each of the authors locates their discussion within a framework of analysis, or a debate that appears in the globalization literature.

Both Aiyer, whose discussion focuses on gold and Ulin, on wine, engage with the foundational debate over whether global forces represent forms of novel transformation or a phase of predictable cultural and economic changes that accompany the latest stage of capitalism. Ulin, for example, sees that the two positions in the debate are embodied in the work of Wolf, on the one hand and Appadurai, on the other. According to Ulin, Wolf (1982 and 1999) emphasizes the idea that globalization is neither unprecedented as a set of processes nor novel in its effects. As the latest phase of change within capitalism, globalization implies a similarity in the kinds of transformations that occur in different places around the globe. Appadurai (2002), like Lash and Urry (1987), argues that the processes encompassed by globalization are unantic-

ipated and new, involving disjuncture—and thus considerable social, cultural and economic differentiation—within the capitalist world system. Dissatisfied with the dichotomies often produced through this debate regarding homogenization and diversity, oldness and newness, Ulin proposes a compromise. Drawing from the work of the Frankfurt School, as well as world system theorists, he suggests that a bridge between the two positions can be formed by combining the idea of the relative autonomy of culture with the notion that human subjects can be situated in differentiated fields of power. The case of winegrowers in the Bordeaux region of France and also in Michigan in the U.S., is used to illustrate the merits of this perspective.

Aiyer's intervention, by contrast, seeks to make no compromise. His paper challenges claims made by other scholars such as Held (1999) that globalization implies new forms of interconnectedness, as well as the assertion that capitalism is pervasive in all parts of the world. Through a discussion of the changing relationships between small mining, gold production, and globalizing processes in the context of Nicaragua, Aiyer argues that the persistence of small mining and struggles over commodity production highlight the uneven and incomplete nature of capitalist globalization and the role of long-term historical processes in shaping contemporary local-global encounters.

In addition to addressing such central debates, the authors in this thematic issue engage with a series of recurrent questions that emerge in analyses of the nature and effects of globalization. For example the question of the transformative effects that globalization has on identities, both individualized and collective, as well as subjectivities, is frequently raised (see for example Friedman 1994a and 1994b). Many also ask who the agents of globalization are. Are they elites, classes, states, political activists, im/migrants, or combinations of these groups (for example, Edelman, 1995; Gill, 2001; Harvey, 2000; Nash, 2001)?

Meneley's contribution attempts to address these questions in her discussion of the production, marketing and consumption of a luxury commodity—olive oil produced in the regions of Tuscany and Umbria. In addressing the question of why northern Italy's extra virgin olive oil has become such a desirable commodity in urban centres in North America and the U.K., Meneley employs Bourdieu's (1984) idea of class and distinction to argue that marketing strategies which reinforce class as a social and cultural identity have been key to the development of global consumers of extra virgin olive oil. This is particularly the case for oil of Northern Italian origin. Here,

Meneley also documents a process akin to a reversal of what Said identified as “orientalism” as central to the marketing strategies of traders and producers of Tuscan olive oil. Said’s concept of “orientalism” emphasizes the devalorization of “otherness.” In Meneley’s case, there is an over-valorization of Tuscany as an “other” place, which is imagined as desirable—“Tuscanopia”—to be marketed by the global traders and consumed in the commodity.

The question of the relationship between the processes of globalization and identities in relation to the valorization of “alterities” is also taken up by Swedenburg who outlines the paradoxes of marketing Arab society and cultural products. Swedenburg probes the significance of the role of global commodities in reinforcing cultural differences by focussing on the invidious dilemmas of the global marketing and consumption of Middle Eastern music. From this process, he notes, a paradox results. On the one hand, the Arab wave in world music is celebrated, by some, for bringing about greater understanding of Other cultures and contributing to global solidarity. Yet, on the other hand, it is criticized by others for exploiting Third World musicians and employing exoticist discourses to sell products. Swedenburg analyzes the increased production, marketing and consumption of Arab music, also noting how the process of commodification on a global scale has also refashioned the commodity itself through “hybridization.” Thus, he also addresses the question that is frequently raised as to how globalization might produce or reinforce the processes associated with what appears to be cultural hybridity, or homogeneity, or indeed, heterogeneity. This of course is a dimension of the larger question of the effects of globalization.

Similar questions are explored in Milgram’s article which focusses on the significance of the refashioning and consumption of second-hand clothing in the Philippines. Milgram illustrates the ways in which consumers and traders in Ifugao Province, have remade this transglobal commodity into locally meaningful economic and cultural forms in the market and in dress. Following Miller (1995) and Friedman (1991), she presents consumption as a means to craft a personal modernity, i.e. to craft an identity in a globalizing world. Smart too focusses on the ways in which a global product, in her case, cognac, is refashioned according to local tastes and habits, reinforcing, so she argues, the resilience of cultural diversity in the face of forces of homogenization under globalization. Also addressing questions regarding the agents of globalization, Milgram proposes that in her case, trade is embedded in a “system of provisioning” which places traders as “technicians of globalization.” In Smart’s case, it is the cognac houses in France that play a key role in selling this

product to the newly affluent in the Asian market, for whom cognac represents an item of prestige and a marker of high status in networks of reciprocity and gift exchange that prevail during wedding banquets and business dinners.

The articles contributed by Meneley, Swedenburg, Milgram and Smart reinforce the idea that at each stage of the circuits of the exchange of commodities, people relate to and through commodities in specific ways and the relations of production and exchange take place in specific symbolic contexts. Thus as Carrier (1994) points out, in market economies, transactions that centre on the commodity are not simply economic exchanges. Rather, following Mauss’s important work on the social and cultural significance of the non-monetary exchanges of the Kula, the commodity transports, reinforces and shapes cultural messages (see also Haugerud, Stone and Little, 2000). The contributors point out that not only do the relations of commodity production and exchange reinforce class differences, they also reproduce them. The contributions of Meneley, Milgram, Smart, Aiyer and Barber particularly consider the question of how class is reproduced through production and consumption. The commodities and relations mediated through the commodity play a significant role in the social reproduction of class distinctions.

Studies of commodities and globalization often emphasize transnationality focussing on the chains and networks through which people and objects move. These circuits are seen to extend across the globe through borders that have been rendered permeable as both a process and product of neo-liberal transformations in the nature of the nation and the state. (Appadurai, 1986; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc, 1994; Glick Schiller, 1999 and 2004; Shipton, 1986). Academic discourse that emphasises movement, circulation and far-reaching cross-global connections has arisen in a context in which the tenets of neo-liberal ideology have gained such wide acceptance that ideology is taken by many to represent reality. Thus, much research on commodities is articulated in terms of circulation as transnational flows. While we accept the importance of Carrier’s (1994 and 1995) call to attend to the social relations of circulation, in our view attention has been drawn away from relations of production, transnational as well as local, toward the consumption of commodities. Hence, for example, in the growing literature that focuses on the consumption of luxury commodities, less attention seems to be paid to the ordinary people whose lives are devoted to producing these items for a luxury market (see Miller, 1995). Meneley reinforces this point by focusing on the political struggles surrounding

the industrialization of food production. In linking the class relations of production and transnational consumption, she exposes how the Slow Food movement, itself, deflects attention from inequalities in production to a concern with relations in consumption.

The commodity indeed offers a window through which to view how consumers' lives are being transformed by processes of globalization. However, in order to understand how these processes operate, we need to redirect attention to the political and economic forces that construct localities as sites where people are engaged in the production of particular commodities, as well as how the labour of people, themselves, becomes transformed into a commodity. Aiyer's and Barber's contributions confront these issues and attempt to redress this imbalance in contemporary studies of commodities. They stress the ways in which local power dynamics in their relation to international economic interests, contour the local conditions for the production of gold, on the one hand, and migrant labour, on the other. In her study of Philippine migrants, Barber, for example, argues that in the current literature on migration there is a discursive elision of the class effects of migration and suggests that this is a consequence of an overemphasis upon the consumption of labour at the expense of questions about its production and social reproduction. While stressing that in order to understand migrants as agents of globalization, attention should be accorded to the consumption dynamics associated with migrants' remittances she argues, nonetheless, that analysis and research has been skewed toward the consumption of migrant labour. Barber further contends that the privileging of consumption is possibly a result of a theoretical turn away from Marx combined with the fetishization of globalization as circuits and flows.

Aiyer's paper also reinforces these points in a case study of gold production in Nicaragua. He documents the cultural basis of local struggles to define rights to gold exploitation against national and transnational corporate interests. By arguing that the struggles over commodity production highlight the uneven nature of contemporary globalization, Aiyer is able to illustrate how the study of the production of gold sheds light on the nature of globalization itself. In addition he questions some of the dominant trends being stressed in the academic debates referred to earlier.

Although references to globalization in its clichéd contemporary form have been traced to the 1960s by some authors (see Held et al., 1999), the concept of globalization did not take hold in academic discourse until later (see also Friedman, this volume). Indeed, the history of the concept of globalization, as we encounter it in cur-

rent discourse is paradoxically connected to the emergence of postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial thinking in the academy. This is paradoxical for several reasons. First, as has been stressed in many interventions and reiterated by various authors here, claims about the novelty of globalization seem historically inappropriate given that imperial projects and anthropological recognition of these, have a much deeper history than does writing about globalization as such. In addition, "post" thinking, certainly as associated with questions of meaning and identity, is profoundly relativistic and directs a focus upon individuation, albeit complex and diffused. This seems precisely the opposite of what many of globalization's interpreters (pro- and anti-) seek to demonstrate: global interconnections, emergent similarities and, in extreme arguments (from both ideological polarities), global culture. Of course, anthropologists have had much to say about how ethnographic evidence speaks back to these themes. While we have refrained from offering in-depth analyses of the historical articulation of globalization discourse, and tracing in detail its connections to various theoretical perspectives, our contribution to the current discussions of globalization will take the form of a reflection. Therefore, by way of conclusion, we briefly take this opportunity to mention some further themes and take note of some recent trends in the literature in anthropology and more broadly in the social sciences and humanities.

Some Reflections

A critical historical moment for the re-emerging interest in global questions now glossed as globalization occurred during the mid-1980s when various shifts in economic and political relations—for example events in eastern Europe (the communist bloc decline), and Latin America, and Southeast Asia's shifting economic capacities—marked the apparent ascendance of a western-centred capitalist economic paradigm on the world stage. Also influential were the models of British and U.S. politics and economy provided by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, as they launched their respective versions of neo-liberalism and set about undoing their welfare states. Such reconstituted ideologies provided a benchmark for other related efforts, for example in New Zealand, Australia and Canada. The groundwork for claims about a post-modern global economy had been laid in the post-war period with the granting of independence to previously colonized nations whose economies became the target of western development aid, the goal being modernization. By the 1990s, globalization had captured the attention of numerous scholars and become a prominent

feature on the research agendas of many disciplines, among them, anthropology. Globalization as a concept has become associated with a literature on flows, whether of people, products and capital, images and/or ideas as they move across territories and national boundaries. As noted here, there are vigorous debates about whether such flows produce integration or disintegration, homogeneity or diversity and these debates tend often to occur in the rarefied space of metahistory and abstract generalities (see Held et al., 1999). To counter generalized assertions, ideological claims about global cultures and the like, and macro studies, anthropologists have appealed to ethnography. This, of course, is the common thread in anthropological writing and it defines the purpose of this volume. But in addition, anthropologists have often claimed, ethnographically and otherwise, that globalization is unlikely to produce similar cultural outcomes from diverse situations. In this counter claim, perhaps the most common reference to globalization in the discipline, anthropologists see local settings as sites for resistance to, if not refusal of, global processes (see Friedman, 1994 and also this volume).

In reviewing the literature at least two predominant strands can be read in the recent social science literature on globalization, particularly in anthropology. We will just briefly mention them here. There are those writers who are influenced by what Eric Wolf calls Marxian scholarship (1982). There are also those who can be broadly linked to a Foucauldian, poststructuralist mode of scholarship. While some contemporary anthropologists combine both of these perspectives, normally one or other framework remains privileged. Authors in the theoretical tradition of Marxist or materialist scholarship tend to see contemporary globalization as having historical antecedents often linked, as Wolf himself notes, to processes associated with the development and geographies of capitalism. Anthropologists in this tradition often refer to Harvey's (1989) seminal work on flexible accumulation under the postmodern condition. They attempt their "ethnographies of globalization" by problematizing the many ways in which capitalism alters people's living and livelihoods. An emphasis on work and livelihoods is particularly revealing, because such an emphasis draws attention directly to globalization as a set of political and economic conditions. A number of ethnographies posit the globalization problematic explicitly (see for example, Edelman, 1999, Gill, 2000) Others, by contrast, emphasize globalization more in terms of identities that are challenged, constructed and emergent in workplaces directly shaped by the processes of flexible accumulation. For example, Freeman (2000) offers a poststructuralist per-

spective on globalization and subjectivity in a study of class and gender dynamics in data processing centres in the Caribbean. The emphasis on subjectivity and political economy is revealing. Still other ethnographies frame understandings of local subjects against global processes without as much attention to political economy. Donham (1999) and Rofel (1999) for example, employ globalization discursively as a similar order of trope to modernity (see also Tsing, 2002). A recent discussion of anthropology and globalization (Inda and Rosaldo, 2002) marks out a literature that reflects rather more a fascination with global flows and cultural exchange than with livelihood per se. This is likely in part a product of concerns within U.S. anthropology and perhaps reflects a rejection, distancing, or more accurately, simply a lack of interest in working out understandings of Marx and materialism in cultural anthropology, to the detriment of a deeper understanding of globalization. This point is also reinforced by Friedman (this volume and 2004) and Smith (1999) who suggests that an emphasis on cultural artefacts, performances, and practices makes for a more manageable doctoral research project than detailed historically attuned work on livelihoods and attendant sociopolitical questions.

In terms of interdisciplinary theoretical work, Harvey (2000) and Bauman (1998) both offer important arguments about globalization. Bauman's argument posits a model of space and mobility-related class differentiation and social inequality, with the juxtaposition of the metaphor of the tourist with that of the vagabond. Tourists are those who have the means and resources to travel, literally or virtually. Vagabonds are condemned to their locales and their social locations, disempowered by global processes upon which they have no purchase. Also locked into vagabond status are the swelling ranks of the under-classes. The under-class encompasses those who constitute the partially employed, the working poor, and the unemployed, the homeless, the incarcerated and so on. While there are extreme positions on both ends of this distinction, those in the middle, who function as tourists (*and consumers*), are vulnerable, at risk of becoming vagabonds. Sociologically it would seem Bauman has in mind here the indebted middle classes, the consumers of different places and cultural products who are mobile up to a point but can also risk losing their jobs as companies relocate, down-size and so on in response to globalization's numerous opportunities. Harvey's argument in *Spaces of Hope* (2000) also turns on a distinction between local and global, or universalism. He draws upon his previously expressed interest in ideas developed by Raymond Williams in the volume *Resources of Hope* (1989) on militant particularism (1995); how political expressions in local settings are prone to be reactionary when cal-

culated against progressive political movements across spatial scales. A further strand of Harvey's argument seeks to link two prominent contemporary academic discourses; globalization and embodiment, as discussed by postmodern theorists. It is the connection between globalization and embodied labour in social reproduction (not simply production) that establishes a terrain for thinking about globalized commodities. Kalb's perspective remains relevant here as well. He reminds us that the empirical results of globalization "depend on social power relationships, local development paths, territorially engraved social institutions, and the nature of and possible action within social networks" (2000: 7). Such results, viewed through a lens which "brings society back in" defy reductionist, universalizing versions of the grand globalization narrative, hence Kalb's call for the "End of Globalization."

A similar argument holds true for empirical studies of the relations between globalization and commodities where there is an equally cogent claim to be made about the need to investigate the ways in which global commodities are socially produced and enter into the market place in contingent and complex ways. As authors in this issue demonstrate, commodities are produced in particular local environments and sets of social relations and institutions. They have local histories that become subject to renegotiation as they engage with global markets. Thus globalization is by no means an irreversible or linear process. Each of these papers demonstrate the complexities of global processes by engaging in different ways with the questions that have emerged in the literature on globalization as they focus on the commodities which circulate through the market routes of capitalism.

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