Manufacturing the global

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Surely, 'global ethnography' is an oxymoron? How can the global be ethnographic? How can ethnography contribute to the understanding of globalization? After all, in anthropology, we stereotypically picture the lone ethnographer settled in his or her village, itself isolated from the world around. In sociology, we think of the ethnographer as the specialist of face-to-face relations or of situational analysis, but with the context firmly bracketed. Or perhaps we think of the ethnographer-sociologist studying conflict and cohesion in the urban community; but, as with the anthropologist, it is a community cut off from the world beyond, often by physical barriers such as buildings, parks or railroad tracks. What could be further from global ethnography?

After three-quarters of a century of professional anthropology and sociology, global ethnography appears oxymoronic because we have blotted out the prehistory of our professions. Global ethnography is not new at all. As Joan Vincent (1990) has argued, before the First World War anthropology was swept up in debates between evolutionists and diffusionists who saw the world as their canvas. James Clifford (1997) makes a similar point: with peripatetic missionaries and colonial administrators monopolizing knowledge about 'the native', anthropologists had to seek out their own niche of expertise, which they found in the careful, systematic and prolonged observation of indigenous peoples in a single place. This professionalization of fieldwork led to its circumscription, its concentration on dwelling rather than traveling. In overlooking the vast web of Empire, the multiple and asymmetrical connections between metropolis and colony that made focused field research possible, anthropology bracketed its own global underpinnings.

Similarly, in sociology, the first great ethnography (in the broadest sense of the term), William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918), had a transnational scope, linking sending and receiving communities, locating each in the intertwining histories of nations. But as sociology became more established, its ethnography became more confined – first burrowing into the urban metropolis, and then into the interstices of organizations. It too lost sight of its national framing, let alone its original global moorings.

Today the return of global ethnography is a reaction to the globalization of scientific communities. Jet-setting academic cosmopolites measure their status by their world travel. They think nothing of attending conferences in the furthest capitals of the world, negotiating international linkages through electronic communication, or organizing multi-national research projects. They paint a picture of a new community of transnational connections, and of globalization as a veritable force of nature, a juggernaut sweeping up everything that lies in its path. For these cosmopolites, ethnography – the focused attention to detail and process by assimilating the point of view of participants – is replaced by tourism, tripping around from site to site. Global ethnography, on the other hand, speaks, first and foremost, to those left behind on the ground. It shows that time–space compression or time–space distanciation are not as universal as the cosmopolites would claim. It shows globalization to be a very uneven process and, most important, an artifact manufactured and received in the local. Globalization is produced and consumed not in thin air, not in some virtual reality but in real organizations, institutions, communities, etc. From this point of view *the global becomes ethnographic.*

Global ethnography reacts not only to the illusions of the present but also to the blindness of the past. Until the passing of the colonial world the ethnographer's dependence on a global nexus had gone largely unremarked. With the end of colonialism, it was no longer possible to deny that ethnographic practice arrived on the coat-tails of colonial administrations. As entry into Third World 'postcolonial' terrains became more problematic, anthropologists, at least those still interested in doing ethnography, were driven toward global ethnography, examining the world from the standpoint of participants located at the intersection of the most remote forces, connections and imaginations. *The ethnographic becomes global.*

If global ethnography was thrust upon the anthropologist, the ethnographer-sociologist has traveled there with much greater difficulty. She has not had to face a crisis of working conditions. Where anthropology was interwoven with the colonial order, sociologists were bound to the metropolitan nation-state. Despite all the talk, the nation-state is not in crisis, let alone about to disappear, so the connections between sociology and the state can go unremarked and unreflected. Of course, they have been noted on

occasion. Most famously, 30 years ago Alvin Gouldner (1973) scolded urban ethnographers for dwelling on the objectivity of their studies and the exoticism of their subjects, thereby concealing their own dependency on the social problem apparatuses of the welfare state. More generally, as Antonio Gramsci pointed out long ago, sociology's raison d'etre was to focus on the burgeoning national civil society, on family, unions, parties, community, and organizations, but it did so *as though these organs of civil society were unconnected to the state*. For Gramsci, by contrast, civil society organized capitalist hegemony by serving as a hidden extension of the state – its autonomy was only apparent. Yet, at the same time, civil society was Janus-faced: while its apparent autonomy was a source of hegemony, it was also a terrain for challenging that hegemony.

To the extent that the present era of globalization springs not only from the erosion of colonial orders but also from the decentering of the nation-state, so we come to recognize the ties between state and civil society precisely when and because they are becoming weaker. The direct connection of 'national' civil societies to one another (circumventing the state through transnational flows of people, discourses, commodities, media, etc.) and the unmediated connection of civil societies to supranational agencies (corporations, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, etc.) change the terrain and conditions of sociological research. To be sure, the nation-state, even if decentered, is still alive and well, and so sociology's move toward the global arena has been hesitant, weighed down by its nation-based disciplinary canon. However, there *is* movement and thus an opportunity for ethnographers from anthropology and sociology to find common cause with other disciplines, such as geography, in the study of globalization.

What, then, should we mean by global ethnography? As I alluded to above, the global can become ethnographic in two ways – from the standpoint of its experience (reception or consumption) or from the standpoint of its production. In the first and most common approach, global ethnography opposes itself to the abstract schema of globalization with what we might call a study of 'globalization from below'. Here one studies the *experience* of 'globalization', to insist that the effects of globalization, however understood, are not homogeneous and ubiquitous but specific and concrete. Only in the locality – the ethnographer's hearth – can one study these concrete effects of globalization. There are at least three categories of experiences. In the first, globalization is an inexorable *supranational force* that reshapes, mutilates and overturns the local. Indeed, much of our lives is composed and recomposed by remote forces that are often either invisible or appear invincible. Social science can help to identify, demystify and denaturalize those forces. In the second category, globalization is experienced as *transnational connections*, such as the connections between individuals or communities brought about by migration or immigration, by traveling

discourses, by flows of goods, services or information. In the third experi-
ence, the inexorability of globalization as force is contested, and globaliz-
ation becomes an ideology countered by a *postnational imagination* that
galvanizes collective action.[1]

Much work in global ethnography uses experience as its point of depar-
ture. The four essays in this issue of *Ethnography*, however, take a different
tack. They show that not only the experience of globalization but also the
very *production of globalization* can be properly the subject of ethnogra-
phy. What we understand to be 'global' is itself constituted within the local;
it emanates from very specific agencies, institutions and organizations whose
processes can be observed first-hand. As social scientists are drawn into
legitimating these global agencies, especially as they face growing contesta-
tion, so increasingly social scientists have access to their inner workings. In
demystifying the supranational agency, they also begin to recognize its limi-
tations. These are not all powerful behemoths that carve up the vulnerable
as they will. Their policies do not result from a seamless conspiracy of global
elites. Their programs are hotly contested within the agencies themselves,
and national, regional and local groups appropriate their effects for their
own interests.[2] Indeed, globalization is produced as much in the communi-
ties of the weak as in the organizations of the powerful.

From the vantage point of its production, globalization appears more
contingent and less inexorable than it does from the standpoint of its experi-
ence or reception. From the perspective of their production, global 'forces'
are the manufacture of *powerful connections* or, as we shall see, *disconnec-
tions*. Money, technology, goods, services and people do not flow on a level
plain, but are propagated through inequalities of power between trans-
mitter and receiver. There is a hierarchical chain, but like all social chains it
can be disrupted and diverted. At the same time, globalization cannot be
reduced to the links of a chain. Just as important as the links within the
chain are the ruptures and local violences produced beyond the chain.
The marginalization of people denied access to the chain is as important as
the appropriation of resources along the chain. Structural irrelevance can be
as devastating as structural dependence.

Globalization is not just the production of (dis)connections, but simul-
taneously it is the production of a *convincing ideology* that obscures the
source of those (dis)connections and presents them as something natural and
eternal. These four essays seek to demystify globalization, to display the con-
tingent processes of production behind its objectification. They examine the
internal workings of supranational agencies such as the World Bank, trans-
national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and internationally
sponsored agencies of the state, but they also examine these in their con-
nections to and disconnections from social movements, communities,
indigenous knowledges and rural poverty. In focusing on the social relations

of production, the contributors are ineluctably led to a politics of production, pointing to the contested character of globalization at all nodes in its chain.

The contingency of globalization may originate in its production but it can be discovered in its variation. As the commentaries of Maxine Molyneux and Michael Watts demonstrate, taken together these four cases offer the opportunity to study the varying conditions and consequences of globalization. Thus, globalization is produced differently in small, rural countries like Burkina Faso and Laos as compared to large, industrializing countries such as South Africa and Brazil. But there are also differences between Burkina and Laos just as there are between Brazil and South Africa. As ever, comparison allows us to see what seems natural and inexorable as the product of specific conditions that are not eternal. Our goal in this special issue, then, is to defetishize globalization as Marx defetishized the commodity by entering its hidden abode of production.

Let us begin with the (dis)connections produced by international or, better, 'supranational' agencies. Legal anthropologist Sally Falk Moore was hired as a consultant by the Paris-based Club du Sahel, itself funded by the United States AID and the European OECD. Her article underlines the 'disconnection' between, on the one side, the ideology of international donors – a succession of panaceas including democratization, participation, autonomy and decentralization – and, on the other side, the practices of authoritarian states that leave untouched the dependent rural existence of their hinterlands. Thus, when the World Bank calls for privatization of land tenure, the government of Burkina Faso 'complies', but the actual program is buried in some larger piece of legislation and communal land tenure is left intact.

This is disconnection through the *suppression* of intended linkages. Disconnection is just as easily manufactured through *irrelevance*. Thus, the World Bank sponsors a project for Community Resource Management in Burkina that presumes a standardized village with codifiable needs. Moore shows the absurdity of the standardized village. Assigned to oversee the administration of the survey, she disrupts the plan by insisting on case studies that demonstrate the diversity of local economies, exposing the mythology of the 'average', isolated village. Typical here is her experience with a well-intentioned German NGO that seeks to mobilize local resources to control floods. Village self-reliance turns out to be a pipe dream as dependence on foreign resources continues. While on a site visit to the village, Moore discovers that many of the able-bodied men are away, working in neighboring Ivory Coast. Again the specifics of the local economy escape the vision of the development agency. She wonders whether it might not have been more 'rational' to drop development by design and instead work with existing realities, which in this case might mean training programs for migrant workers.

Rather than initiated from below, development plans are projected from above. They are justified with the rhetoric of the time. Thus, believing that democracy will bring development to Burkina, international agencies oversee the introduction of elected mayors and a galaxy of associated offices. But starved of resources they are ineffectual. In another case, believing that decentralization will bring democracy, agencies propose the principle of 'subsidiarity' to push decision making down to the lowest levels. But this only reinforces the authoritarian powers of village leaders. Finally, the Convention to Combat Desertification, in aiming to halt droughts, reorganizes relations among regional and even national entities, leaving localities to fend for themselves. Here disconnection is brought about through *reorganization*.

While the disconnection between plan and reality has often been remarked upon, and by none more effectively than James Scott (1998), Moore is concerned to show how this decoupling is produced by the collusion of international agencies and national governments for their mutual advantage, while abandoning poverty-stricken populations to their own fate. This collusive arrangement is obscured by ideologies of democracy, subsidiarity, local participation, decentralization, etc. that proclaim the inclusion of the popular classes. A welter of position papers circulates between international agency and national government, cementing their conspiracy and obfuscating the realities of underdevelopment.

In Sally Moore's portrait the subjugated populations are inert before the collusion of international agency and national government. Michael Goldman, on the other hand, analyzes the 'disconnection' as something that is produced against the will of subjugated populations. His is a case study of the World Bank's project to build the Nam Theun 2 dam in Laos, which became a test case for the Bank's commitment to environmentally sustainable development. Like Moore's international agencies, the World Bank sought to present its projects in the best light. But it went beyond expounding a legitimating ideology; it attempted to incorporate the recommendations and evaluations of independent NGOs and their experts. These attempts to neutralize challenges initially emerged from popular protests such as those against the Indian Narmada Dam, which led to an independent review, forcing the World Bank to abandon the project. Such challenges persuaded the World Bank to attend to environmental consequences. In practice, however, as Goldman goes on to show in the case of Nam Theun 2, the World Bank either co-opted or suppressed dissent. Experts were employed to evaluate the project but were not given sufficient time to carry out the appropriate research. Alternatively, the expert knowledges they produced were simply filed away. Similarly, local knowledge was effectively suppressed through forms of mock consultation in which native voices were effectively silenced.

The government of Laos collaborated in this silencing of experts and locals alike, but – and here lies a difference from Moore's account of Burkina Faso – in the process, the World Bank brought about major institutional changes: new apparatuses of the state to oversee the country's natural resources, new laws to protect national forestry and biodiversity and entirely new conceptual frameworks to regulate the environment. These new apparatuses are the effect not just of a conspiracy of World Bank and national governments but of challenges to the Bank that led to new forms of regulation and, as Goldman calls it, the 'birth of a new discipline', a new cooptative discourse of environmentalism. Still, in the final analysis, the state becomes an instrument of the World Bank, and the dislocation between the people and its government continues. Again a powerful connection produces a devastating disconnection.

In her analysis of the South African government's Commission for Gender Equality, Gay Seidman develops a very different account of global (dis)connection. Set up in the immediate post-apartheid period, the Gender Commission lays out an ambitious program to advance women's 'strategic' rather than 'practical' interests,[3] seeking to challenge the structure of gender inequality as well as alter the distribution of resources. While they finance much of the Gender Commission's work, international donors do not shape its agenda or its activities. Seidman argues that the concerns of those international donors are too general to be used as guidelines. Rather than collusion, therefore, there is disconnection between international agencies and the national terrain while at the same time the state is reconnected to its citizenry. That's in theory. In practice, however responsive the Commission may be, it is still hamstrung by a series of dilemmas.

The first of these dilemmas is how to choose from the vast ocean of grievances and problems. The Commission's strategy has been to turn precedents into projects, but this approach is beset by contradictions. For example, the Commission takes on a case in which a woman loses her possessions to her husband because customary marriage is not recognized by law. The Gender Commission proposes to alter this legislation, but in so doing it creates a new set of problems, including the endorsement of polygamous marriage. Another ticklish issue is the decriminalization of sex work, promoted by white feminists but regarded by the African Commissioners as a slur on the morality of black women. The Commission splits and the issue is abandoned. The need to maintain internal unity on the one side, and to preserve external support from within the state on the other, leads the Commission to steer clear of controversial issues, effectively undermining its goal of transforming institutions of gender inequality. In taking a more cautious road, it fails to live up to its promises, and alienates its most active support. Specifically, transforming structures of gender inequality appeals most strongly to urban constituencies, yet the Commission directs its attention

toward poor rural women. This focus is consonant with the ideologies of international donors, but it is motivated by fears of accusations of elitism, should any member of the Commission try to cater to the interests of 'privileged' urban classes. Thus, pressures both on and within the Commission can lead to disconnection from its most active supporters. Finally, another source of disconnection is Commission members' interest in government careers, which makes them less likely to rock the political boat by taking up controversial 'strategic' issues.

While it is true that the Commission's embeddedness in the post-apartheid state goes a long way toward explaining its disconnection from client groups, it is also true that donor provision of resources means the Commission need not cultivate domestic constituencies. If they did not have external resources to rely on, they might have to mobilize a popular base. Thus, international donors do not have to intervene directly on individual cases in order to have effects. Their influence is often more subtle. Another example would be the way international agencies establish the assumptions with which the Gender Commission understands its mission. Its very language is shot through with Northern feminism, not least Molyneux's foundational distinction between strategic and practical interests. Just because these conceptual distinctions are taken for granted does not mean that they are any less powerful in framing debates and struggles.

Just as one should not overlook the significance of discursive borrowing, one should not think that it is always disabling and restrictive as Moore and Goldman imply. Millie Thayer's study of women's movements in the poverty-stricken *sertão* of northern Brazil shows how Northern feminist discourses can have important liberating powers when appropriated in and shaped by the local context. Thayer does not deny that global economic forces have destroyed the economy of the *sertão*. Like Moore, she sees droughts not as natural disasters but as the product of man-made social injustice. But in contrast to Moore, she sees how economic destitution can activate organization by rural workers, who demand inclusion and economic justice. Thayer focuses on one particular women's movement, the MMTR, that has benefited from being connected to feminist agencies beyond the *sertão* and beyond Brazil. She shows first how international agencies and especially urban NGOs require for their own legitimacy access to social movements such as MMTR. The urban-based NGO, SOS Corpo, must demonstrate to its Northern donors that it has the support and participation of grassroots organizations. In other words, the very process of seeking legitimation vis-à-vis international agencies that Moore sees as producing *disconnections* in West Africa, in Brazil turns out to be a vehicle for *reconnections* among local groups, NGOs and these agencies. Whereas in West Africa legitimation is concocted on the basis of the consent of governments or ruling elites, in Brazil, with its more active civil society,

legitimation demands the active consent of the poor themselves. Poverty becomes a legitimating resource that the poor can leverage into economic and other resources. Globalization does not only produce structural irrelevance, it can also produce new patterns of interdependence, giving new weapons to the weak.

This difference, however, is not simply to do with how poor communities can seize and reconstitute 'globalization' in their own interest, but is also tied to the supranational agencies that are producing 'globalization'. Thayer suggests that the staff of global women's agencies have their own reasons to support popular feminism. They are not as cynical in their deployment of resources as the World Bank in that they genuinely seek out popular movements they wish to foster. To this end, they may studiously avoid the nation-state for fear of being submerged in its bureaucratic labyrinths. What would have happened to MMTR and the dense array of similar movements across Brazil if international donors had sponsored a government Gender Commission? Would there be a synergy between the two, or would such movements atrophy?

Thayer also points to the power of feminist discourses themselves. The urban-based NGO, SOS, and the MMTR itself appropriate Northern feminism, first around reproductive rights and the politics of the body, inspired by Boston-produced *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, and then around Joan Scott's theory of gender. Thayer especially focuses on the latter and the way it is imaginatively recomposed by MMTR to foster a more inclusive workers' movement in the *sertão*, a movement that embraces both men and women on an increasingly equal footing. This is very different from the discursive world of participation, decentralization and democracy described by Moore and from the circulating knowledges of environmental sustainability described by Goldman, both of which serve to disconnect the local poor from cosmopolitan elites. But, as we learn from Seidman's discussion of the South African case, feminist discourses do not of themselves lead to a radical politics. If they are not organized and appropriated in movements from below, they can be effectively bureaucratized.

Thayer takes Jim Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994) to task for its sweeping indictment of supranational agencies as substituting technocratic decision making for politics. In Ferguson's account of Lesotho, the effect of the World Bank is to depoliticize communities, absorbing, deflecting and disarming their demands for social and economic change. How different from Thayer's description of the *sertão*. As Michael Watts writes in his commentary, all four of our case studies problematize Ferguson's depoliticization thesis, raising the question: to what extent is (de)politicization a function of international agencies and to what extent is it a function of the infertile political ground upon which they act? As Thayer points out, much Brazilian feminist activity originated in struggles against authoritarianism and for the

liberation of autonomous spaces in civil society. In this context Northern feminisms are strategically appropriated and imbued with local meaning. As Maxine Molyneux writes in her commentary, the political terrain of Brazil and indeed of South Africa – also recently released from authoritarianism – is very different from that of Burkina Faso and Laos. Perhaps this explains the different political effects of 'globalization'. Michael Goldman begins his ethnography with Indian villagers protesting a World Bank project that is eventually abandoned. Why are the Indian villagers seemingly so much more politically active and effective than those of Laos? Was it that the World Bank was caught by surprise by such opposition and has now elaborated sophisticated processes of cooptation and depoliticization? Or is it that the World Bank is still vulnerable, but only when the national political terrain is effervescent? If the national political terrain is so important, why, one might ask, do we get such different perspectives from South Africa and Brazil – in the one case a progressive state-based Gender Commission seemingly demobilizing women's movements, and in the other a popular feminism seizing northern discourses for purposes of assertive mobilization.

One answer to this question is that the differences among our case studies are not 'real', but epistemological, that is they are differences of perspective. 'Globalization' is produced through a chain of (dis)connections and dissemination of ideologies, but it looks different from different nodes in the chain – from the international agency, from the NGO, from within the nation-state, and from the urban or rural community. From different sites you get divergent visions of globalization. The same phenomenon can look like anti-politics from within the international agency, like political paralysis from within the state, like a social movement from the ground. There is no doubt about the importance of 'location' for vision, which is why all four ethnographies are also multi-sited researches. Each undertakes the study from different sites, from within the state but also from the community, from the community but also from within the agency, from within the agency but also from within the state. In conducting such multi-sited ethnography the purpose is not to contrast the perspectives from each site but instead to build a montage that lends greater insight into the whole, into the connections, disconnections and reconnections.

If differences among our cases cannot be reduced to perspectives from different, methodologically privileged sites, how then are we to understand their divergent visions of globalization and its effects? We have already spoken of the differences among international agencies and among national terrains, but perhaps there is a deeper issue here. Perhaps the very conceptualization of globalization separate from its effects is a false posing of the problem. Globalization cannot be separated from its effects. Globalization is not a cause but an effect of processes in hierarchical chains that span the world. In this productivist perspective the global-local antinomy is itself

misleading, for if something is global there can be nothing outside that is local. Thus, it is misleading to talk of the supranational agency as global and the infranational *sertão* as local. As Thayer is at pains to argue, the *sertão* is a locale where, along with other actors, the women of MMTR constitute globalization. At the other end of the chain, the World Bank is another locale for constituting globalization. It is not an isolated behemoth of 'globalization' but a locale connected to other locales, which react back on its operations. The Indian peasantry mobilized against the Narmada Dam is a vivid example. Globalization is produced through a conflictual, negotiated process within and between nodes of a global chain.

But it would be misleading to think of these nodes, these locales, as homogeneous entities. Like any other center of production they are sites of contestation. The production of globalization, of connections, disconnections and reconnections, is a political process whether within the *sertão* (between the MMTR and SOS, within the MMTR), or within the South African state's Gender Commission, or within the World Bank. Michael Watts opens his essay with struggles within the World Bank between the apostles of 'structural adjustment' and rebels organized around 'social capital'. To speak of the World Bank as an 'anti-politics machine' is to misunderstand its organization. It is not a machine but a production process with its own politics, no less and no more than every other node on the global chain – even if its resource and organizational endowments can subjugate nodes further down the chain.

Here lies the specificity of global ethnography. Watts presents the four studies as 'development ethnographies'. They certainly concern countries that have been called developing. To call them development ethnographies, however, is to compartmentalize what is connected in a global ethnography. A global ethnography recognizes developing countries as nodes of a global chain in which effects produced in one node reverberate down but also up the chain. Global ethnography does not balkanize the world into developing and developed countries. It implies that we can and must study the United States from the standpoint of globalization no less than Burkina Faso. Immigrant communities, Silicon Valley, and the New York Stock Exchange are affected by distant locales just as they affect locales in other parts of the world. Global ethnography thematizes these processes.

So many theories of globalization are accounts of unauthored, abstract forces that operate above and beyond everyday life, the quotidian. The first step made by global ethnography is to restore history and agency to the reception and contestation of the global in the 'local', to give life to the local. The second step is to regard the global as produced in the local, which can be the supranational agency, branches of the transnational corporation, the state apparatus, the urban community, or the family. Here globalization is the production of (dis)connections that link and of discourses that travel.

The 'local' no longer opposes but constitutes the global. The third step is to recognize that in every process of production there is a politics of production. Up and down as well as beyond the global chain there are interconnected political struggles. These, then, are the agendas of global ethnography – to replace abstract globalization with a grounded globalization that tries to understand not only the experience of globalization but also how that experience is produced in specific localities and how that productive process is a contested and thus a political accomplishment.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 These are the categories Burawoy et al. (2000) used to theorize their global ethnographies.
2 In focusing on supranational agencies, whether struggles within or against them, we too easily overlook the importance of transnational corporations that operate silently in the night. This is one of the shortcomings of the selection of case studies presented here. Of course, supranational agencies are more accessible to the social scientist than the likes of Ford, IBM, Nike, etc.
3 This distinction between 'practical' and 'strategic' interests was first made by Maxine Molyneux (1985, 1998). It has been widely used to distinguish between the defense of women's interests within existing structures of inequality and the transformation of those structures.

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