American Studies and the Challenge of Globalization

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The field of American Studies today faces a host of unprecedented challenges—and opportunities. This is especially so for academic programs and departments situated outside the United States. The current wave of anti-Americanism, spurred by the widespread unpopularity of the Iraq War and unease with the George W. Bush administration’s penchant for unilateral actions and its seeming disregard for the give-and-take of diplomacy, has politicized the study of American history and culture. The growing difficulty of attaining visas for travel to and study in the United States ever since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has compounded the problem. Inevitably, American Studies programs in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere have become lightning rods for criticism aimed at their central object of study. Significant opposition among scholars and citizen-activists to the phenomenon of globalization has added fuel to the fire, particularly since globalization is often seen as loosely synonymous with Americanization.

Yet these current trends also offer unique opportunities to American Studies scholars. The ongoing debates about globalization and its relationship to the United States, and to Americanization, demands the more informed judgments and perspectives that those immersed in American history, society, and culture can provide. American Studies specialists who live and work outside the United States can play an especially valuable role in these debates since they are well positioned to assess the relative significance of the role exerted by American power, products, and culture within their own societies and regions. Globalization thus offers, in many respects, an important opening for scholarly interventions on the parts of American Studies
Over the past decade and a half, globalization has become a ubiquitous buzzword—in public discourse, in governmental pronouncements, among economists and businessmen, and, not least, within various academic disciplines. This has been the case not just in the United States but throughout the world—non-Western as well as Western. It has, arguably, become the key term, concept, and theory being employed by those who seek to identify and comprehend what is most significant, and what is most historically distinctive, about the contemporary, post Cold War world. That globalization’s ascendancy has transpired in so short a period of time, and without a consensus about how precisely either to define the term or to assess its impact, is nothing short of remarkable.

“‘Globalization’ is the buzzword of the late twentieth century,” observed journalist John Cassidy, in a New Yorker article in 1991, and “is set to become the biggest political issue of the next century.”¹ “Globalization may not be a particularly attractive or elegant word,” proclaimed the British political philosopher Anthony Giddens, perhaps globalization’s foremost theorist, in 1999. “But absolutely no one who wants to understand our prospects at the century’s end can ignore it.”² Plainly, it is being anything but ignored. As Paul Kirkbridge, a British business professor, wrote recently: “If the shelves of airport bookstalls are any indications, the 1990s were the decade of globalization. Whether in the fields of business, management, economics, information technology or e-commerce the word appears to be on everyone’s lips.”³ In 1997, the International Herald Tribune blared the headline: “Globalization Vaults into Reality”⁴ while the number of entries on globalization in the catalogue of the Library of Congress mushroomed from a mere 34 in 1994 to 693 in 1999.⁵ A recent check of the popular internet search engine “Google,” perhaps the most telling gauge, revealed that more than thirty million items or “hits” can be found within that basic category.

Within academe, globalization has proven the hottest of hot topics, encouraging a growing spate of scholars to frame their particular research projects within a globalist
rubric—whether such offers a comfortable fit or not. The University of Florida, where I formerly taught, provides a telling microcosm of this tendency. In the 2001-2002 academic year, its Religion and Political Science departments co-sponsored with the International Studies Program a series of high-profile lectures organized around the theme, “Religion and Globalization,” while the English Department hosted a conference on “America and Globalization.” The former featured a stirring jeremiad by renowned University of California, Berkeley, sociologist Robert Bellah, which amounted to an updated New Left critique of American corporate capitalism as the sole author of globalization as well as the source of virtually all the world’s ills. The latter included topics that testify unmistakably—even somewhat comically—to the amazing elasticity of the globalization framework. It included papers with titles such as, “Family Values in the Post-Cold War era”; “Like an Asian Epidemic: Moving Between Bodies after HIV”; “Ambiguity of Borders: The Implications for American Citizenship”; and “American Intellectual Property and Global Yoga.” The international relations scholar Justin Rosenberg has wryly observed about this trend: “We live today in a veritable ‘age of globalization studies’, in which one academic discipline after another is gaily expanding its limit into the ‘global’ sphere and relocating its own subject matter in a geographically extended, worldwide perspective.”

In the event, grand, oftentimes extravagant, claims have been made for the transcendent importance of globalization in human history. “Just as postmodernism was the concept of the 1980s,” asserts Australian sociologist Malcolm Waters, “globalization may be the concept, the key idea by which we understand the transition of human society into the third millennium.” The editors of a much-cited collection on globalization label it today’s “central thematic for social theory.” Back in 1991, Anthony Giddens declared that “the emergence of globalized orders means that the world we live ‘in’ is different from that of previous ages.” “I would have no hesitation in saying,” he has written more recently, “that globalization as we are experiencing it, is in many respects not only new, but also revolutionary.” In a similar vein, Renato Ruggerio, the Italian Director General of the World Trade Organization, remarked in 1996 that
globalization was a reality “which overwhelms all others.”\textsuperscript{11}

Thomas Friedman, the \textit{New York Times} columnist and author of the best-selling books about globalization, \textit{The Lexus and the Olive Tree} and \textit{The World is Flat} has emerged as perhaps the most visible public proponent and interpreter, within the United States at least, of what he claims to be the dominant trend in the contemporary world. “If you want to understand the post-Cold War world,” Friedman insists, “you have to start by understanding that a new international system has succeeded it–globalization. That is ‘The One Big Thing’ people should focus on. Globalization is not the only thing influencing events in the world today, but to the extent that there is a North Star and a worldwide shaping force, it is this system. . . . Globalization has replaced the Cold War as the defining international system.”\textsuperscript{12}

But what, exactly, is globalization? What, precisely, are all these observers referring to? The concept, it bears emphasizing, is a highly contested one about which little consensus exists. In fact, the sociologist Jan Aart Scholte, who has written one of the more thoughtful books about the phenomenon, says that “the only consensus about Globalization is that it is contested. People have held widely differing views regarding definition, scale, chronology, impact and policy.”\textsuperscript{13} Scholte insists–correctly, in my judgment–that globalization encompasses the cultural, the ecological, the economic, the historical, the legal, and the political; and yet he notes–also correctly, in my judgment–that many of those who write and talk about globalization focus on only a single one of those various interrelated aspects. Key areas of dispute include, in addition to the definitional one, what is the driving force or forces behind globalization, the extent to which the recent process is with or without significant precedent, and the issue of whether it is a positive or a negative force.

With regard to the latter point, even those who may be unsure exactly what is meant by globalization are doubtlessly aware of the increasingly vocal \textit{anti}-globalization movement, a movement that garnered world headlines during the disruption that followed recent international forums at Seattle, Genoa, Quebec City, and elsewhere. In one, not atypical anti-globalization tract, a Canadian academic charges: “Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, corporate financial
interest and their mass media vehicles have together stormed governments with an overwhelming agenda for world corporate rule.” Further, he declares that “on almost every indicator of social and ecological life... the restructuring of societies for corporate globalization has been increasingly life-destructive.”

A book that has received perhaps more attention than any other academic work in recent years, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s, *Empire*, focuses centrally on globalization, a process that the authors equate with empire. The *New York Times* has referred to their book as “a heady treatise on globalization that is sending frissons of excitement through campuses from Sao Paulo to Tokyo.” Hardt and Negri argue that globalization is not simply the latest phase in the history of imperialism and the nation-state, but that it signifies something radically new: “a fluid, infinitely expanding and highly organized system that encompasses the world’s entire population.” An “irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges” has occurred over the past several decades, they contend, that represents nothing less than “a new form of sovereignty.”

Although there is no one agreed definition of globalization, the term is most commonly used to refer to a process of accelerating integration, especially in the economic and cultural realms. Roland Robertson provided one of the earliest definitions, calling globalization “a concept [that] refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.” In other words, it encompasses “both concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole.” Giddens has offered a similar definition. “Globalization can,” he proposes, “be defined as the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”

Malcolm Waters, building on both of those, calls globalization “a social process in which constraints of geography on economic, political, social and cultural arrangements recede, in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding and in which people act accordingly.”

Others present more narrow, economically-based definitions. The preeminent political scientist Robert Gilpin, for example, identifies globalization as “the increasing linkage of
national economies through trade, financial flows, and foreign direct investment (FDI) by foreign firms.”

And historian Thomas Zeiler, focusing on the core economic mechanisms of globalization, defines it as “the organization of production, involving transnational networks that seek out cost and political advantages and that are financed by a virtually unregulated system of exchanges in money, credit, and equities.”

Former president of the American Historical Association (AHA) Lynn Hunt, a historian of modern France, observed recently that the relative decline within the historical discipline of such once hotly debated theoretical perspectives as postmodernism, feminism, and Marxism has been paralleled by the ascendancy of globalization. Hunt defines globalization quite succinctly and reasonably as “worldwide integration through technology and market exchange.”

As Hunt’s comments suggest, historians have hardly been immune to the globalization mania that has swept so many sister disciplines and that has proven so galvanizing in contemporary public discourse. Some historians have, in fact, brought the tools of their discipline to bear in efforts aimed at historicizing the globalization process—at situating it within a longer continuum. Thomas Zeiler, for example, used his 2001 Bernath Lecture to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations to do precisely this. He emphasized that the period from the late nineteenth century up through World War I represented an era of incipient globalization with some important parallels to the contemporary era.

A few months earlier, Eric Foner devoted his presidential address to the AHA to an examination of “American Freedom in a Global Age.” Acknowledging that “the flow of people, investment, production, culture, and communications across national boundaries” was rapidly accelerating in our own age, and that many prominent social scientists were deeply engaged in efforts to explain and interpret this phenomenon, he offered a historians’s caveat about interpreting contemporary developments as a wholly new epoch in human history.

He is worth quoting at length. “As a historian,” Foner emphasized, “I feel it necessary to point out that, like every other product of human activity, globalization itself has a history. The dream of global unity goes back to the days of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan.
The internationalization of commerce and culture and the reshuffling of the world’s peoples have been going on for centuries. Today’s globalized communications follow in the footsteps of clipper ships, the telegraph, and the telephone. Today’s international movements for social change—including protests against some of the adverse consequences of globalization—have their precedents in transnational labor and socialist movements, religious revivals, and struggles against slavery and for women’s rights. As for economic globalization, Karl Marx long ago pointed out that capitalism is an international system that “must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.”

Walter LaFeber, in a suggestive 1999 book titled Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism, also joined the debate, provocatively exploring the nexus between technology, the media, the information revolution, and popular culture in our own age. LaFeber argued that the enormously successful global marketing of sports over the past decade and a half stands as a microcosm of a much broader process, one that has led to the unprecedented worldwide dominance of U.S. capital and U.S. culture. With the perspective and sensibility of a historian, he identified the antecedents of this development, calling it the latest wrinkle in the long history of imperialism, and specifically of the century-long U.S. drive to dominate international markets, while also stressing the much greater magnitude and impact of recent developments. “A new era did not begin with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991,” LaFeber insists, “but with the information revolution, the new power of U.S. capital and transnational corporations to drive that revolution, and the reaction—sometimes violent—in the United States and abroad to the revolution.” Whatever the era is termed, “it marks the beginning something different in world history.”

Yet those and other important examples aside, it certainly remains the case that neither historians nor American Studies specialists have assumed a lead role in the examination of globalization. In large part, one can assume, this stems from the scholarly training and inclinations that characterize the discipline of history and the interdisciplinary field of American Studies. Hence, scholars in those areas have been much less likely to step forward boldly as
interpreters of the present than political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and other social scientists. Instinctive caution and skepticism when faced with sweeping declarations about the onset of new epochs in human history also typifies both historians and American Studies scholars. Many of the bedrock assumptions and assertions about the “newness” of globalization are rooted in what is presumed to be taking place right now, a time many globalization theorists take to be one of profound, revolutionary changes of an unprecedented nature. As one puts it: “Contemporary patterns of global economic, military, technological, ecological, migratory, political and cultural flows are historically unprecedented.”

Because this debate hinges to such a great extent on judgments about historical transformation, historians surely have much more to contribute than they have thus far. The fact that historians belong to a discipline that, by its very nature, tends toward the longer view regarding human affairs makes them particularly well positioned to mediate and temper some of the more breathlessly extravagant claims about the “uniqueness” of the present age and the relative absence of meaningful historical parallels.

Past AHA president Wm. Roger Louis, in his valedictory essay to the association, ruminated in 2002 about how the terrorist attacks of the previous year may come to be seen as a historical watershed. “The question of an era in history—what we call periodization—is one of the eternally fascinating problems we ponder in both teaching and writing,” Louis remarked. In that important sense historians are, in fact, much better suited than those in rival disciplines to assess whether long-term developments such as globalization and concrete events such as those surrounding the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, represent true historical watersheds. To what extent do the events of September 11, and the broader wave of anti-American, anti-Western terrorism that they sprang from and formed a major part of, represent something sufficiently new and sufficiently distinctive to warrant attention for the sake of periodization? Does either the “Age of Terror” or, perhaps more broadly, the ideological contest between Western, modernist values and those of radical Islam warrant recognition as marking a distinctive era? Those questions cannot be disentangled from
the subject of the present essay on globalization. Indeed, globalization, especially the international reaction against a globalization perceived by many as an effort to Westernize or Americanize the world, offers one interpretive framework within which we can begin to comprehend the events surrounding the Al Qaeda/jihadist phenomenon.

Historians thus need to plunge more actively into the ongoing debates about globalization and its impact. Diplomatic historians, cultural historians, social historians, historians of science and technology—all have an important role to play in the delineation of some of the distinctive and not-so-distinctive features of what so many now see as the dominant trend in today’s world. American Studies scholars, for their part, need to join these discussions as well. In view of the central role, for better or worse, that the United States has played in these developments—as actor, as symbol, and as target—their voices are needed to lend perspective, nuance, and depth to often polemical debates.

The period from the late nineteenth century up to World War I forms an era of at least proto-globalization, as a number of scholars have pointed out. Historians are well equipped to help trace the similarities and dissimilarities between that epoch and the one we now find ourselves in. In terms of international migratory flows, for example, those years were actually more mobile than our own age: some 60 million Europeans moved to the United States, Australia, Latin America, and elsewhere during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time in which passports were unnecessary and immigration restrictions minimal. International trade was, arguably, freer in the late nineteenth century as well, with substantially fewer trade barriers than exist in our supposedly open world. Alan M. Taylor of Northwestern University recently remarked: “To me as an economic historian, it was the 19th century that represented the birth of the global economy. These days, it’s just getting back to where it was 100 years ago.”26 In a similar vein, Charles W. Calomiris, a professor of finance and economics at Columbia University, notes: “We’re still not back to where we were 100 years ago.”27 Robert Gilpin has similarly observed that “despite the increasing attention given to economic globalization, the world in important ways is actually less integrated in the late twentieth century than it was in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Recent integration of aspects of the world economy has been highly uneven, limited to particular economic sectors, and not nearly as global as many believe.”

Pre-World War I globalization, according to Zeiler, “was greased by the technological leaps of transportation improvement like the steamship, and marvels like the Suez and Panama Canals, which sped European and American commerce around the globe. Transatlantic cables, then direct telegraph links to Latin America and connections through British cable to Asia, allowed American investors and merchants to communicate faster abroad, thus expanding their markets. . . . Global connections shrunk the world itself.”

Like globalization, “Americanization,” too, has a history—or, perhaps more accurately, the fear of Americanization has a history. It is certainly not a wholly new phenomenon, nor is the tendency to conflate a shrinking world with the dominance of American products and ideas. “Early in the twentieth century,” notes Zeiler, “some Europeans worried about the American ‘invasion,’ and the ‘Americanization of the world’.”

During the 1920s, popular culture–especially jazz and movies–became the most common manifestation of Americanization, and the principal foil of its critics. Frank Costigliola has offered a pioneering analysis of this development in his book, Awkward Dominion. By 1925, American films made up 95% of the total shown in Britain, 70% in France, 65% in Italy, 60% in Germany, and 95% in Australia and New Zealand. Trade tended to follow, with many consumers demanding the products pictured in American movies–much as occurs with the blatant “product placement” we see in films and television programs today. “America has colonized us through the cinema, one Frenchman charged. Another, a member of the French Chamber of Deputies, complained that Europeans had become “galley-slaves” to American finance and culture. “The film is to America what the flag was once to Britain,” warned the London Morning Post. By its means Uncle Sam may hope some day, if he be not checked in time, to Americanize the world.”

A tumultuous decade-and-a-half of global depression and global conflict brought an abrupt halt to fears about the Americanization of the world. But they returned with a vengeance
during the Cold War era, as American military, economic, and cultural power reached hitherto unimagined heights. These renewed fears were often framed in terms of the need to resist American “cultural imperialism,” the so-called cocoa-colonization of the world. A substantial, and rapidly growing, literature now exists on the enormously important and complex subject of America’s cultural impact on other peoples and societies during the second half of the self-styled “American century.” Yet the current debate about globalization-cum-Americanization curiously proceeds with barely a reference to this literature and oftentimes seems to overlook one of its central findings: namely, that cultural transmission is a more apt term than cultural imperialism. “Cultural imperialism misconstrues Americanization in several ways,” observes cultural historian Richard Kuisel, author of the wonderfully titled Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization. “It emphasizes imposition and coercion; assumes audience passivity; postulates cultural coherence for both exporters and importers; and anticipates global homogeneity as the outcome.”

Still, as exaggerated as the claims for the complete absence of historical precedents for today’s era of globalization may be, there are significant differences—in volume, scope, and intensity—between this and previous eras, and historians and American Studies scholars are particularly well positioned to identify and assess them. As Zeiler notes, in the process of detailing the nascent globalization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “The sheer velocity of globalization today is staggering when compared to the earlier time. So are the volume and scope. The past two decades or so have witnessed a fundamental transformation in the global economy; the period before World War I was not globalized in the sense we use the term today.” To be more concrete: In 1900, daily foreign exchange trading was measured in the millions of dollars. In 1992, it was $820 billion a day. By 1998, it was up to $1.5 trillion a day. Around 1900, private capital flows from developed to developing countries could be measure in the hundreds of millions of dollars, with relatively few countries involved. By 2000, it was being measured in the hundreds of billions of dollars, with dozens of
countries involved. As recently as 1975, foreign direct investment totaled only $23 billion. By 1997, it had swollen to $644 billion.  

A case can be made that America’s cultural impact today is of a completely different magnitude as well. This area of inquiry, though, poses much trickier and more complex standards for accurate measurement. Friedman makes the case powerfully in his characteristically colorful language: “Today,” he write, “globalization often wears Mickey Mouse ears, eats Big Macs, drinks Coke or Pepsi and does its computing on an IBM PC, using Windows 98, with an Intel Pentium II processor and a network link from cisco Systems.” He adds: “In most societies people cannot distinguish anymore among American power, American exports, American cultural assaults and plain vanilla globalization. They are now all wrapped into one.” Rising resentment of the United States, moreover, derives in large part for “a globalization system” that, in Friedman’s views, is “so heavily influenced today by American icons, markets, and military might.”

The fact that nine out of ten of the world’s most recognized brand names are American is certainly a matter of no small significance. It is also telling that McDonald’s franchises have become a symbolic target in Europe and the Middle East for local protests against the process of cultural homogenization throughout the world—even if ample evidence suggests that even that ubiquitous symbol of Americanization takes on very different cultural and social meanings in different societies. Globalization is not Americanization, though the fact that the two are so frequently conflated stands as a critical subject that demands the most careful scrutiny and analysis by historians, social scientists, and American Studies specialists.

In conclusion, American Studies scholars should find in the concept of globalization an important point of entry into a range of broad intellectual debates about the nature of the contemporary world and its antecedents. Those whose institutional affiliations and professional lives lie predominantly outside the United States can play an especially useful role. Their expertise in American history, society, and culture, in conjunction with their knowledge of and insights into the societies in which they themselves reside and work, permits them to occupy a
mediatory, middle ground—and thus to traverse physical, intellectual, and metaphorical borders far more permeable to them than to most fellow scholars.

Notes


pp. 4-5.


20. Lynn, “Where Have All the Theories Gone?” Perspectives 40 (March 2002), 5-7.


26. Quoted in Nicholas D. Kristof, “At This Rate We’ll Be Global in Another Hundred Years,” New York Times, May 23, 1999, IV, p. 3.

27. Quoted in ibid.


30. Ibid., p. 538.

32. Quoted in ibid., p. 177.


34. Zeiler, “Just Do It!,” p. 534.

