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George Ritzer, Globalization: A Basic Text

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George Ritzer, *Globalization: A Basic Text*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 (592pp.), ISBN 978-1-4051-3271-8, US\$ 64.95

Reviewed by Paul Monaghan

Sociologist George Ritzer, the author of this textbook, has taken on a massive task: to define, analyze and illustrate the entire scope of a process that encompasses the whole planet and everyone on it. Simultaneously he wants to make it accessible to undergraduates. The author also hopes it will be useful to beginning graduate students and even scholars looking for an overview of the field. To accomplish this, the author draws together information from a wide array of disciplines and domains, including economics, science, history, politics, and culture. An appendix provides brief summaries of globalization's impact on the disciplines of anthropology, psychology and literary criticism. The result is a text as large and complicated as one might expect.

The author defines globalization as the process by which people, objects and information flow in multiple directions across the planet as well as the structures they encounter, which can be barriers or catalysts to the flows. The continued existence of barriers (including the new ones created by flows) is important to Ritzer's definition because the presence of barriers contrasts with the view found in many discussions of globalization that integration is the inevitable result of the globalizing process. The author invents his approach to globalization using the metaphors of solids, liquids, flows, and structural barriers. The liquidity of things that flow around the world can be seen in fruit from Chile or tuna from Japan, but also in communications technology, migrant labor, disease, and criminal behavior. As globalization has made things more liquid, they have overcome the traditional barriers of national borders, treaties or even the weight of goods that once prevented their movement. As the author notes, once things and ideas become liquid, the speed of movement becomes ever faster and more difficult to stop. These metaphors of solids, liquids, flows and barriers are introduced in the first chapter of the book. From the perspective of an undergraduate however, they are complicated and a bit abstract.

Chapter Two focuses on the debates about globalization, and for a student it provides a good place to start discussion on the topic. Throughout the text, the author notes that globalization is not just an economic process but a technological, social and cultural one as well. While he presents plenty of evidence for this, in

Chapter Two, he raises the question, “What Drives Globalization?” and the answer he provides is a little vague, trying to highlight both material and ideal factors. The text gets stronger in the next chapters as he explains imperialism, Americanization, and finally, the neo-liberal model (Chapter Five), which is truly the driver of our current form of globalization. This is followed by strong chapters on the structures of the global economy (policies and institutions) and the global economic flows of production and consumption. The author adequately covers the downside of our consumer-driven global economy, and the resulting inequality and environmental degradation. By continually focusing on different aspects, from cultural change and religion to the globalization of salsa (the Latin dance, not the dip) the author expands beyond just the economic forces and thus sets up debates that students would welcome. Indeed, he often contrasts different authors, interpretations and schools of thought to give a complete picture.

While the scope of the book is fascinating, is it successful in its quest to be an undergraduate text? For such a complicated and wide-ranging subject, the book could serve as a main text for a class. There are 16 chapters, each about 25-35 pages, which could be easily assigned to fit in with a lecture. Each chapter has a summary, suggested readings, extensive notes and discussion questions. There are 29 maps and figures and brief glossary boxes scattered throughout that define terms—such as sustainable development, migrants, orientalism, and pluralism to name only a few. Despite this student friendly approach, the text is dense and often unbroken by enough subheadings or sections. The maps and illustrations are too small and often too complicated to really illustrate such diverse concepts as trade flow, core and periphery, the global geography of fiber optic cables, and renewable energy.

Ritzer admittedly takes a popular culture approach, using examples from the current news, magazines, bestselling authors and tv shows. This tactic has its shortcomings; events that have occurred since the publication of the book give it a feeling of being outdated already. For example, his discussion of the role of Lou Dobbs as a critic of globalization (his show on CNN has since ended) or by having more references to Thomas Friedman than to Milton Friedman, whose influence on the spread of the neo-liberal model is much greater. In the discussion of social media for example, the book came out too early to include the “Facebook” revolutions in the Middle East or the looming debt crises in Europe and the United States. As the author says, the speed at which these new phenomena are created, spread and have an impact are proof that the global age we are in currently is qualitatively different from earlier stages.

No matter how much one knows about the globalization, this book is guaranteed to reveal something new for most readers, from the discussion of China's recycling of the world's scrap metal and waste paper to the variety of resistance movements. Yet for every new insight, there are important phenomena missed, such as the consolidation of pork and poultry production worldwide by a handful of companies or the global reach of the Simpsons (dubbed in more than 20 languages). With such a wide-ranging scope, it often means that important topics, such as persistent organic pesticides or electronic waste, are given short blurbs and not much context. As an introductory text however, the wide variety of issues, topics and references are useful; students can easily research them online and discuss them in more detail in class.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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