

Book Review

# Demystifying The Abstract Scheme Of Globalization

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Mathews, Gordon, Gustavo Lins, Ribeiro, and Carlos Alba Vega (ed).  
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My dad bought me my first UNIQLO shirt from a thrift-store in a small town of Java, miles away from the nearest shopping mall, and some years before the Japanese fashion brand opened its branch stores in metropolitan cities of Indonesia. I had no idea until recently that my shirt comes from one of Asia's fastest-growing fashion companies. Secondhand clothing centers like the one I visited in East Java resell apparels from all over the globe. They scatter in both big and small cities, mostly in developing countries. Clothing centers are a proper example of global nodes where traders and buyers engage in the circulation of things that are produced and consumed globally. The experience of people in this kind of node—which geographically labeled as 'locale'—often missing from the study about globalization.

Traditionally, social scientists and economists perceived globalization as an abstract scheme to help to explain supranational forces that operate transnationally toward a borderless world. Focusing on the global movements of capital, ideas, and people, conventional scholarships of globalization examine Multi-National Corporations (MNC), international development agencies, transnational association, and partnerships, or regional economic market. These movements usually flow from the developed world or the north part of the globe to the less-developed or the south. However, globalization also touches the lives of communities at the 'local' that scattered all over the globe who are both producers and consumers of globalization. These people are often unnoticed in the production of knowledge about globalization

which too often put a great emphasis on the big transnational capital, organizations, or political entities.

Burawoy (2001) in the “Manufacturing the Global” sheds some lights on the notion that social scientists need to recognize the experience of globalization at the local level. Globalization has heterogeneous effects that reshape, reorganize, and divert the economic, cultural, and political experience of people at different locales. In contrast to the national or regional level analyses, the effects of globalization that operate at the local level are often overlooked the literature. He also aspires to demystify globalization by recognizing the production of globalization from below. The rise of large-scale manufacturing industry in China, which is responsible for the circulation of consumer goods with alternative price tags and quality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has overturned the status quo of the Western hegemony as the central producer of globalization. This recent development in the tide of globalization demands an alternative perspective that incorporates the experience of peripheral global nodes as where people are experiencing and producing globalization from below.

The edited volume of *Globalization from Below* presents a revealing perspective to assess the movement of goods and people in the global setting that helps us demystify the narrative of globalization as a hegemonic world-system. In the introduction of this volume, Mathews and Alba Vega present premises of the project. First, globalization from below looks at the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and organized informally that often involves a semi-legal or illegal transaction. Second, globalization from below provides employment and cheap products that otherwise inaccessible for the poor portion of the global population. Third, it is embedded at the local level in a social, cultural, and political system that finds support in traditional familial structures and other social networks. Fourth, globalization from below is in many respects not opposed to globalization from above as it is located in complementary and contradictory relations with the powerful agents of globalization from above. It is in direct confrontation with neoliberal financial and economic institutions but also embody free-market principles. Fifth, it is not enacted by states; in fact, it can prosper where state has less capacity or will to regulate transnational economy. The state attempts to turn globalization from below into globalization from above through means of banking, formalization, and fiscalization.

In chapter 4 of this volume, Rabossi presents an empirical case for the globalization from below by assessing the historical development of Ciudad del Este, a Paraguayan city that emerges as a node for commercialization and distribution of imported goods throughout Brazil and South America. Following circuits of *sacoleiros* (persons who carry smuggled products), Rabossi explains the fourth premise of globalization from below: it poses a complementary nature to globalization from above. These *sacoleiros* circuits show the complexity that structures flow of international trade in Ciudad del Este. These circuits are preconditioned by agents of globalization from above, and they challenge the distinction between legality and illegality enacted by established institutions.

In Chapter 5, Matthews presents the case of Chungking Mansions in Hongkong which is an exceptional case of globalization from below located in a developed country. He argues that the developed world usually “largely shuts out people from the developing world, and stringently enforces legal codes, making informal trade difficult.” Chungking Mansion can thrive as a center of globalization from below in the wealthy city of Hong Kong because of the emergence of China as the economic powerhouse of globalization from below and because of Hong Kong’s neoliberalism. Chungking Mansion is also a case of how the globalization of labor allowed, unlike common neoliberal practices that strikingly enforce globalization of capital but limit the transnational mobility of labor. It also to some extent shows how actors in the globalization from below “out-neoliberalizing those who embody globalization from above in their ability to follow the paths of the world market unimpeded by the structures of state control” (p.83).

Gauthier (Chapter 8) shows the case of unsuccessful countermeasure ordered by the Mexican state to control the globalization from below through the implementation of a new state border inspection system. She depicts globalization from below as an example of “slantwise” behavior. She argues that globalization from below often comprises of a complex net of trust system and interests established by smugglers, sellers and law enforcement agents that are overlooked by top-down security policies. Lins Riberio concludes the volume by accentuating important points around globalization from below. First, globalization from below is characterized by il(licit) activities that are “legally banned but socially sanctioned and protected.” Second, it is structured by the nodes of the non-hegemonic world system that “provides employment

and access to flows of global wealth that otherwise not reach the more valuable rank of any society. Third, the main difference between globalization from below and from above is a power difference due to unequal access to economic, fiscal, and political state controlling power. Fourth, non-hegemonic and hegemonic world system processes thrive on each other, the two systems keep the complex and profound relationship of complimentary.

Overall, the book presents interesting and rich empirical cases that help readers to debunk the myth that globalization only operates at the supranational level. From the ‘ant traders’ in Mexico to street hawkers in India, we learned that people at the locales all over the globe experienced globalization in different ways. Globalization does not only reorganize their economic activity at the local level but also their political reality, by which they navigate subtle unequal power relations with the government or with other ‘formal’ entities.

Several noteworthy questions related to other relevant readings are as follows: (1) While Sassen’s *Global Cities* offers a perspective on assessing interconnectivity among nodes of “globalization from above”, can we extend her framework to study nodes of “globalization from below”? What are the advantages and limitations to do so? (2) Most of the empirical chapters we read from *Globalization from Below* seem to employ the global ethnography approach by looking at one site and incorporate contexts such as capitalism, history, and the nation-state in their analyses. How does multi-site ethnography design add to the theoretical/empirical leverage of globalization from below studies? Can we study globalization from below using quantitative methods? (3) This volume presents many cases where globalization from below brings economic/material benefits for previously excluded economic actors, can we identify cases where globalization from below is harmful to “local economy”? (4) One premise of globalization from below is that it is in a complementary relationship with the globalization from above. If we extend our definition of globalization from above by including the flows of transnational discourses/knowledge such as ‘democracy,’ ‘developmentalism,’ ‘empowerment,’ etc., what would globalization from below look like? (5) Globalization from below also facilitates the circulation of labor outside the control of the (neoliberal) states and thus creates transnational mobility of precarious labor. Do neoliberal agents of ‘globalization from above’ do a better job in guaranteeing labor welfare than those who engage in the globalization from below?

How do we approach the problem of illegal migration and human-trafficking amidst the expansion of the global from below? (6) What are the incentives of states in developed and developing worlds in keeping the globalization from below intact? In another word, to what extent does globalization from below complement the globalization from above so that the first can only exist when the later thrives? (7) How do we incorporate our previous understanding of the informal economy and 'glocalization' into the conceptualization of globalization from below?