Book Review – *Understanding Cultural Globalization*
By Mehdi Nejatbakhsh


Paul Hopper has done a brilliant work in synthesizing the existing theories on and around cultural globalization. In his book, *Understanding Cultural Globalization*, he has looked through the major topics that are now in debate in this broad area. As he explicitly states, the book is “an introduction to cultural globalization and associated debates” and addresses “a range of issues and questions that are central to this subject, notably, what is globalization? What is culture? And, of course, what is the nature of the relationship between culture and globalization?” (p. 2). The book is very rich and easy-to-read and, although the author tries to be brief on each issue in order to be able to cover a vast range of topics, he doesn’t lose depth in discussing the issues. Thus, *Understanding Cultural Globalization* is a great starting point to become familiar with or to do a review of the existing literature in this broad topic.

The structure of the book is straightforward: it contains an introductory chapter, seven main chapters each addressing a specific issue regarding cultural globalization, and finally, a concluding chapter that reassesses the key themes of the book and proposes a new approach in studying the topic. At the end of each chapter, the author summarizes the discussions very well and also recommends further readings.

The *Introduction* articulates the main themes of the book and states that the nature of both globalization and culture, and thus of the cultural globalization, is complex, plural, and multidimensional. Consequently, he proposes to “pursue an interdisciplinary approach when investigating it” (p. 4). According to the book, there are three waves of approaches to globalization. While the first-wave approaches considers contemporary developments as a new phase in human history constituting a global economy, the second-wave approaches doubt this globalist position, both the globality and distinctiveness it claims for the new economy and its accompanied cultural changes. Third-wave theorists, however, consider contemporary transformations with regard to a new set of issues such as modernity and human agents rather than just the capitalist economy. Thus, third-wave theory, which is
also the approach of this book, deals more with the complexity and multidimensionality of globalization.

The main debate in the text starts by exploring the history of globalization. In fact, in order to answer what exactly globalization is and when it started, Hopper takes a long, analytical look at the history of cultural globalization from early human migration and the emergence of world religions up to the more modern and contemporary forces and transformations. By identifying these processes, he argues that cultural globalization is a long-term historical process built upon earlier patterns and tendencies, but at the same time constitutes a distinct epoch in our time with regard to the current extensity, intensity, and velocity of the cultural flows. This historical examination also shows that globalization has evolved from multiple origins and sources, thus it is multi-centered and uneven and we should avoid a Western-centric notion of it. Moreover, as is the main theme of the book, this chapter ends with arguing that, because of the different forces in relation to globalization in different stages, it would be better to speak of it as a plural, that is globalizations rather than a unitary phenomenon of globalization.

The author then turns to culture to consider its exact meaning and relationship with globalization. Drawing upon James Clifford, Hopper defines culture as a process as it always travels and thus changes and adapts. Consequently, we should not think of it as a static phenomenon while not overstating it, as there will be always moments of stability wherein people can identify with or inhabit cultures. Given its greater mobility and fluidity amid globalization, the book considers cultural flows, deterritorialization, and transnationalism, arguing that the latter two are the result of the increased cultural flows at this time. However, the reader is again cautioned not to overstate these phenomena, challenging their spread and their novelty in the contemporary period. Thus, it would be better to think of them as happening unevenly.

Next, the contribution of the media and contemporary information and communication technologies (ICTs) to cultural globalization are examined by discussing their rapid growth in past decades, which has resulted in more global connectedness as is evidenced by the increased coverage and usage of radio, television, telephones, the Internet, and also by the emergence of the global media, such as the BBC and MTV. However, the author raises some skeptical views arguing that the media condition is not
yet global. The digital divide – the unequal access to ICTs – is an important issue in this regard, both globally and domestically. Another issue is the greater individuation of the media that is accompanied by greater autonomy and choice. Thus, the author argues that media globalization should not be conceived of as an established condition, but as an ongoing project and that it would be better not to consider technology as driving globalization, but as providing much of the infrastructure for the evolution of it. The author also remarks on Manuel Castells’s masterwork on network society, which he believes is the characteristic of the contemporary information era.

Hopper goes on to contemplate whether a global culture is emerging from cultural globalization and, if so, what its form is. This discussion starts with arguments about cultural homogenization – such as Americanization, westernization, and McDonaldization – and its relationships with capitalism, consumerism, and modernity. However, this is approached mostly from a critical perspective expressing the inefficiencies of those perspectives in analyzing globalization. The author then turns to Roland Robertson’s idea of the global-local interpenetration that argues that this entails a two-way impact. Thus, responses to global forces are different in each place, and we will more likely see hybrid cultures rather than a homogenized culture. The book, then, suggests that it might be better to think of global culture in plural terms, that is global cultures, or at least globalizing cultures.

Whether globalization is undermining national culture is considered via the vast existing debates that posit that global processes are posing challenges to nations and national cultures. However, the book also presents other debates that show that national cultures continue to be important in the global era and thus are not diminishing. Hopper suggests that one of the reasons for these opposing arguments is that the effects of globalization, as discussed, are not similar everywhere, so there is evidence supporting both sides of the debate. However, if we consider culture as a process, as suggested earlier, then we will gain a clearer understanding of the interrelationship between globalization and national cultures and how the latter evolves rather than being diminished in relation with the former.

Hopper then takes a critical look into the arguments, which claim that globalization generates forms of cultural conflict. The works of Benjamin Barber, Samuel Huntington
Matthew Horsman, and Andrew Marshall are reviewed, representing some of the key scholars of these contentions. The possible ways that sociocultural and economic processes could contribute to cultural conflict are considered, for example through security or identity tensions, with a further investigation of fundamentalism and global terror in the case of al-Qaeda. However, Hopper believes that globalization does not cause those conflicts, but that they might be one of the effects of its multiple processes, including global-local interactions, happening in particular places. Thus, greater cultural complexity is more likely to be a feature of globalization rather than cultural conflict.

This is followed with a contrasting exploration into the potential for aspects of globalization that could foster cosmopolitan attitudes and lifestyles. This component of the text differs from the previous ones by being more “speculative” with an attempt “to think through the possible implications of more intensive forms of global interconnectedness in the contemporary period” (p. 157). Hopper studies the history of cosmopolitanism and its relations with globalizing cities, popular culture, education, and reflexive modernization, all of which might be some of the contributors to it. However, he suggests that we should not think that these necessarily produce cosmopolitanism, as many people will still remain tied with their national mentalities. Hence, cosmopolitanism also depends on the particular experiences of individuals and groups within their particular contexts. This also means that different forms and degrees of cosmopolitanism will emerge, which again evokes one main trend of the book in that it considers the presence of cosmopolitanisms in plural terms.

Finally, the book concludes by bringing together its key arguments, reviewing the concepts of globalization, culture, and their interrelationship amidst cultural globalization with an emphasis on the centrality of human agency in its investigation. Recent developments in globalization studies are presented, notably in relation to network analysis, and a case is made for a more “anthropological” or human-centered approach to cultural globalization.

As you can observe, and also discussed earlier, the book is intended to be a synthesis of the existing arguments rather than proposing a new one. Despite the multitude of masterpieces in this area, the book is quite successful in achieving this goal of providing a brief but complete review. However, the book is not completely without its own thesis, as it proposes a plural perspective of globalization throughout the book, although it could be
challenged for overstating this. In fact, globalization in plural terms and globalization in singular terms are two different words here which each carry different meanings and should not be confused with each other. While the former refers to particular subjects, the latter describes a general condition. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary approach the book suggests is a critical point, and we should consider it as we study cultural globalization.