

Globalisation as a Problem of Political Analysis: Restoring Agents to a 'Process without a Subject' and Politics to a Logic of Economic Compulsion*

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Abstract *Globalisation, in both the popular and academic vernacular, is presented as a non-negotiable external economic constraint, which must simply be accommodated. Consequently, it is a process whose content, nature and consequences are not amenable—either in practice or in principle—to political, far less democratic, deliberation. It is not at all surprising, then, that the invocation of globalisation should be associated with the logic of economic compulsion and the absence of political choice. This paper argues that the perception of the non-negotiable character of globalisation is both misleading and, at the same time, intimately connected to its depiction as a causal 'process without a subject'. For it is only by failing to specify the mechanisms of complex change, in which agents are necessarily implicated, that generic and agentless processes such as globalisation acquire their necessitarian, non-negotiable and apolitical character. Restoring subjects to the process of globalisation and assessing the extent to which their behaviour is informed by constructions of globalisation are urgent challenges for critical political analysts. They are crucial to the broader task of demystifying globalisation, of holding it open to democratic political scrutiny and, in so doing, of challenging its perceived logic of no alternative. If we are to do this, we must develop an account of globalisation capable of acknowledging and incorporating a dynamic understanding of the relationship between conduct and context, and the material and the ideational. In short, if the character, content and consequences of the process of globalisation are to be held to account, we must first restore agents to this process without a subject and politics to this logic of economic compulsion.*

Despite the prevalence of 'sophisticated' understandings of the relationship between structure and agency in contemporary social science, that most fashionable of concepts—*globalisation*—is invariably presented in most unfashionable terms, as an unambiguous and non-negotiable structural constraint. There is a deep irony here. For whilst deterministic metanarratives have seemingly been ever more comprehensively discredited in political science and international relations theory, many of the empirical assumptions which currently inform the

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discipline hail from a deeply deterministic, indeed economic, rendition of the globalisation thesis. Thus even Anthony Giddens, the founder of structuration theory itself, repeatedly presents globalisation as a harsh structural reality, which must simply be accommodated.¹

In this paper I explore this seeming tension, relating the question of structure and agency directly to that of globalisation. In so doing, I problematise the appeal to globalisation as a causal 'process without a subject' which has tended to dominate the academic and lay vernacular, suggesting that globalisation is a far more complex and contingent process than that we have been led to assume. Yet in drawing attention to the dynamic relationship between economic context and political conduct in the structuration of globalising tendencies and counter-tendencies, I seek also to accord a rather greater role to ideas in the unfolding relationship between agents and the environment in which they find themselves. For, ideas about globalisation may come to exert a powerful causal effect independent of the process they purport to represent. Whether actors believe the globalisation thesis or not may be a more significant determinant of their behaviour, than whether they are right to do so. Policy makers who embrace and internalise its assumptions may well serve, in so doing, to bring about outcomes consistent with the thesis, irrespective of its veracity.²

The argument unfolds in three stages. The first section briefly establishes the distinctiveness of the 'constructivist institutionalist' approach to the question of structure, agency and ideas that this article defends.³ Having done this, the article then seeks to demonstrate how such a perspective might approach the question of globalisation, restoring conceptions of subjectivity, agency and strategy to a process without a subject. The conclusion assesses the implications of this for contemporary political analysis, examining in particular the causal significance of the rhetorical appeal to globalisation as a logic of no alternative. I begin, however, with the place for discourse in the relationship between structure and agency.

Connecting Structure, Agency and Discourse

In establishing the centrality of discourse and discursive processes to the relationship between structure and agency it is important that we begin with the simplest statement of the ontological assumptions which inform the analysis which follows. In so doing it is useful to start with the twin terms *strategic selectivity* and *discursive selectivity*. Taken together they might be seen to characterise the constructivist institutionalist approach.

Strategic Selectivity

Structures are selective of strategy in the sense that, given a specific context, only certain courses of strategic action are likely to see actors realise their intentions.

¹ See, for instance, Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World*, London, Profile Books, 2000.

² Colin Hay and Ben Rosamond, 'Globalisation, European Integration and the Discursive Construction of Economic Imperatives', *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2002, p. 148.

³ For a more detailed exposition, on which the following section draws, see Colin Hay, *Political Analysis*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002.

Social, political and economic contexts are densely structured and highly contoured. As such they present an unevenly distributed configuration of opportunity and constraint to actors. They are, in short, strategically selective, for whilst they may well facilitate the ability of resource- and knowledge-rich actors to further their strategic interests, they are equally likely to present significant obstacles to the realisation of the strategic intentions of those not similarly endowed.⁴ Moreover, patterns of strategic selectivity—and hence the complex configuration of constraints and opportunities that a context presents to a given strategic actor—are temporally and spatially specific. The strategic selectivity imposed by the financial markets looks rather different for an investor seeking an immediate return on an investment than it does for one projecting a similar return over a rather longer period of time. Similarly, the conditions of economic success for a small locally based firm in a declining national economy are likely to prove fundamentally different from those of a transnational corporation more free to relocate its productive capacity in line with changing labour costs and market share.

Discursive Selectivity: The Place for Ideas

Thus far we have tended to assume that strategic actors have a fairly direct and unmediated access to the contours of the terrain they inhabit, such that they can effectively 'read off' the likely consequences of their action from their knowledge of the context in which they find themselves. It is akin to the perfect information assumption of many neoclassical economists, and much rational choice theory and neo-realism. Though convenient and parsimonious, it is unrealistic.

Actors are reflexive and strategic and they orient themselves and their strategies towards the environment within which their strategic intentions must be realised. Yet they are by no means blessed with perfect information of that context. At best their knowledge of the terrain and its strategic selectivity is partial; at worst it is demonstrably false.

Given, however, that actors are reflexive, routinely monitoring the consequences of their action, one might expect their perceptions of the context to evolve over time—if not, perhaps, to a situation approximating complete information, then at least to one of relatively reliable reconnaissance. Yet a moment's reflection reveals that this, too, may be an unrealistic assumption. For whilst actors might well acquire cumulative knowledge over time in an environment that is essentially unchanging, this is rarely, if ever, the case in situations characterised by a density of existing institutions and practices and a proliferation of strategic actors. Invariably, it is precisely such contexts we are interested in investigating. Moreover, even were we to assume complete information of a current context (based, presumably, on extensive reconnaissance of prior strategic interventions), this would be insufficient to predict the likely consequences (even over the short term) of a particular course of strategic action. For the effects of a specific and given intervention are not merely determined by the strategic selectivity of the context at the moment at which the action occurs. A range of additional and—from the vantage-point of the actor about to make an intervention—contingent and unpredictable factors are also relevant. These

⁴ See also Bob Jessop, *State Theory*, Cambridge, Polity, 1990.

include strategic responses made to the intervention itself as well as the quite independent actions of others. In principle, this gives social and political interaction an inherently indeterminant, unpredictable and contingent quality. When the incomplete information of any given actor is also considered, it is hardly surprising that strategic action almost always includes unintended consequences.⁵

Nonetheless, whilst all contexts exhibit this complex, contingent and unpredictable quality, some are clearly more contingent than others. Interestingly, arguments pointing to the globalisation of social, political and economic relations often identify the growing interconnectedness between once separate contexts.⁶ Insofar as such claims for complex interdependence are warranted, this suggests a tendency for ever escalating complexity, contingency and unpredictability.

In such a world it should come as no surprise that actors routinely rely upon cognitive short-cuts in the form of more or less conventional mappings of the terrain in which they find themselves. Thus, for instance, policy makers typically conceptualise the policy-making environment through the lens of a particular policy paradigm—such as Keynesian or monetarist economics.⁷ Once again, access to the context itself is discursively mediated. How actors behave—the strategies they consider in the first place, the strategies they deploy in the final instance and the policies they formulate—reflect their understanding of the context in which they find themselves. Moreover, that understanding may eliminate a whole range of realistic alternatives and may, in fact, prove over time a systematic misrepresentation of the context in question.

Nonetheless, for particular ideas, narratives and paradigms to continue to provide cognitive templates through which actors interpret the world, they must retain a certain resonance with those actors' direct and mediated experiences. The discursive or ideational is only ever relatively autonomous of the material. In the same way that a given context is *strategically selective*—selecting for, but never ultimately determining, certain strategies over others—it is also *discursively selective*—selecting for, but never ultimately determining, the discourses through which it might be appropriated.

What the above discussion hopefully demonstrates is the centrality of ideas to an understanding of the relationship between agent and structure, conduct and context. It also suggests the power of those able to provide the cognitive filters, such as policy paradigms, through which actors interpret their strategic environment.

Power and Levels of Structuration

Thus far we have dealt with the complex interplay of structure and agency as if all aspects of context were potentially amenable to transformation by all actors.

⁵ See also Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge, Polity, 1984, pp. 293–97.

⁶ See, for instance, Philip G. Cerny, 'Globalisation and Other Stories: The Search for a New Paradigm in International Relations', *International Journal*, vol. 51, no. 4, 1996, pp. 617–37; Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity, 1990; Peter J. Taylor, 'Beyond Containers: Internationality, Interstateness, Interterritoriality', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1995, pp. 1–15.

⁷ Peter A. Hall, 'Policy Paradigms, Social Learning and the State: The Case of Economic Policy-making in Britain', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1993, pp. 175–96.

This is to exclude from the equation the crucial concept of power, understood here as the ability to shape the contexts within which others formulate strategy. We must then differentiate between what might be termed *levels of structuration*—with higher levels of structuration relating to structures over which given strategic actors (over a particular time horizon) can be said to have minimal impact.⁸ Such structural constraints (and the opportunities they imply) are shaped and reshaped by the actions of the (more) powerful (whether intentionally or unwittingly), setting the (external) context for the (relatively) powerless. From the vantage point of such actors, these might be considered non-accessible levels of structure/structuration. They condition the possible range of strategies and actions within a specified social and political context but are not immediately accessible to transformation by the agents that they embed within such a context.

It should be emphasised immediately, however, that this attribution of power to particular actors or organisations is conditional upon time horizon. Structures that might appear non-accessible to particular actors and organisations over a particular time horizon may well become subject to strategic transformation over a longer period. For, by identifying a collective interest, actors may overcome their powerlessness by pooling their resources and thereby constituting themselves as strategic actors at higher levels of structuration. Consequently, the attribution of power is dependent upon the context being interrogated, the form of that interrogation, the vantage point from which the context is viewed, and the time frame considered. This multi-level and relational concept of structure and agency provides the basis for the discussion of globalisation in the following section.

Over a given time frame, the actions of the most powerful take place within a strategic context which is 'always already there' and which favours certain strategies over others. This imposes strategic constraints upon even the most powerful of actors. Nonetheless, the strategic conduct of such actors has the effect of transforming (however partially) the contours of that strategic context. This action setting is thus dynamic and constantly evolving. Its strategic selectivity is not, however, purely the product of the effects (intended and unintended) of the actions of the powerful. It is also shaped, if to a lesser and more mediated extent, by the actions of the (relatively) powerless and the (often contingent) effects of their interaction. Thus, crucial aspects of the strategic selectivity of the terrain inhabited by the powerful include the likely reactions of the powerless to particular strategies, and the latter's ability to mobilise strategic resources to empower themselves.

Nonetheless, from the vantage-point of the less powerful the structures, say, of the global political economy appear as external constraints over which they can exercise minimal, if any, strategic or intentional influence. The powerless do

⁸ By this I mean that their impact upon the process of structural reproduction and transformation, such as it is, operates principally through the unintended consequence of actions oriented towards the realisation of intentions at lower levels of structuration. Consequently, actors cannot be said to be empowered by their contribution to such dynamics. An example might be the (unintended) contribution to global environmental degradation arising from a national policy initiative designed to boost inward investment. The fact that this may have global implications is hardly empowering to the government in question.

not (by virtue of their powerlessness) exist as strategic actors able to make a decisive intervention on this terrain (at least within the given time horizon). The strategic context inhabited by less powerful strategic actors thus comprises accessible levels of structure amenable to strategic action and non-accessible levels of structure beyond their immediate strategic reach. Power resides in the capacity (whether intentionally exercised or not) to transform aspects of the context in which other less powerful groups and individuals are constrained to formulate their strategies.

Globalisation: A Process without a Subject?

This brings us to the question of globalisation. In the previous section I have sought to develop a conceptual schema capable of interrogating the relationship between causal processes at a variety of spatial scales, a conceptual schema that takes a strategic and ideational approach to the question of structure and agency. It is perhaps important to emphasise before proceeding that what follows is an attempt to trace the implications for an analysis of globalisation. It is not an attempt to argue for the objective superiority of the resulting account or for the ontology upon which it is predicated. Different ontological assumptions entail different standards of explanatory adequacy and the choice between ontological assumptions is not one easily subjected to empirical scrutiny. Consequently, the case for an account of globalisation that places at centre stage the dynamic relationship between political actors and the contexts in which they find themselves must, in the end, be a normative one. It can be relatively simply stated. An emphasis upon the negotiated and, at least in part, discursively constituted nature of political and economic constraints places greater emphasis upon the capacity of political actors to shape the context in which they find themselves. In so doing, it offers the prospect of holding such actors accountable for their conduct in a way that is simply not the case for more structuralist accounts that present globalisation as an inexorable and non-negotiable external economic constraint.

Before proceeding to this attempt to restore notions of political accountability to the process(es) of globalisation, it is important also to note the problem of ontological consistency. In the context of discussions of globalisation this is, perhaps, particularly significant. There is nothing especially original about an account of globalisation linked explicitly to an ontology that emphasises the dynamic relationship between structure and agency. Yet all too frequently the substantive claims made about globalisation in the name of such ontologies are profoundly structuralist and hence considerably at odds with their claimed ontological premises. Philip G. Cerny's suggestive account of the development of the 'competition state' is a particularly prominent case in point.⁹ For whilst Cerny claims that his work (including that on globalisation) is informed by a 'structurationist' ontology, his analysis of the unapologetically inexorable transition from the 'welfare state' of the post-war period to the 'competition state' of

⁹ See, especially, 'What Next for the State?', in Eleonore Kofman and Gillian Youngs, eds, *Globalisation: Theory and Practice*, London, Pinter, 1996; 'Paradoxes of the Competition State: The Dynamics of Political Globalisation', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1997, pp. 251–74.

today is deeply deterministic.¹⁰ It turns a well-observed empirical generality into a structuralist logic of economic determinism. In so doing, it seems to belie any notion of the negotiated nature of economic constraint. Similar observations might be made of Bob Jessop's albeit more complex and qualified rendition of the transition from the Keynesian welfare state to the Schumpeterian workfare state.¹¹ Yet, qualifications notwithstanding, how is the non-negotiable and deterministic/functionalist logic of economically driven political development to be squared with either author's attempts to develop a dynamic understanding of the relationship between context and conduct? In fact, it may not be impossible to reconcile what is, in the end, an empirical claim that globalisation entails a very significant loss of political autonomy at the national level with a strategic-relational or structurationist ontology.¹² Nonetheless, the point is that neither author has made any attempt so to do.¹³ Consequently, the accounts they have offered seem to mutate from relational ontological assumptions to deterministic, even functionalist, substantive narratives.

If we are to develop a constructivist institutionalist account of globalisation, what is first required is a theoretical apparatus capable of linking the relationships between agents and their structured contexts at a variety of spatial scales. This is developed schematically in Figure 1, in which different spatial scales (chosen on the basis of their heuristic utility) are treated as levels of structuration in the broader process of globalisation/counter-globalisation. The dynamics of the global political economy are captured in the complex and unpredictable interaction between these various levels of structuration.

Beginning at the level of sub-national processes and economic dynamics we can identify a range of strategic actors (businesses, governmental and extra-governmental actors, for instance) formulating a variety of strategies (be they specific production–distribution regimes or economic growth strategies). If such strategies are to prove successful in their own terms, they must be oriented not only to the configuration of opportunity and constraint provided by the immediate sub-national economic and political environment, but also to the broader national, regional and, indeed, global context. These higher levels of structuration are inaccessible to direct intervention by the sub-national actors themselves

¹⁰ The core tenet of a 'structurationist ontology' is the claim that 'social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of its constitution'. Anthony Giddens, *The New Rules of Sociological Method*, London, Hutchinson, 1976, p. 121. For a fuller discussion see Colin Hay, *Political Analysis*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, pp. 118–21.

¹¹ See, for instance, Bob Jessop, 'Towards a Schumpeterian Workfare State? Preliminary Remarks on Post-Fordist Political Economy', *Studies in Political Economy*, no. 40, Spring 1993, pp. 7–39.

¹² Indeed, we must be very careful not to adjudicate empirical issues in an ontological court and ontological issues in an empirical court. What would be required to reconcile a seemingly structuralist (empirical) narrative and a structurationist ontology would be an account, demonstrating the complex interplay of structure and agency, of the process by which political and economic actors served to bring about this qualitative shift in the parameters of political possibility. This neither author has offered.

¹³ Interestingly, Cerny is closest to doing so in his earliest account of the origins of the competition state. Philip G. Cerny, *The Changing Architecture of the State: Structure, Agency and the Future of the State*, London, Sage, 1990, chapter 8. See also, Cerny, 'Globalisation and Other Stories'.

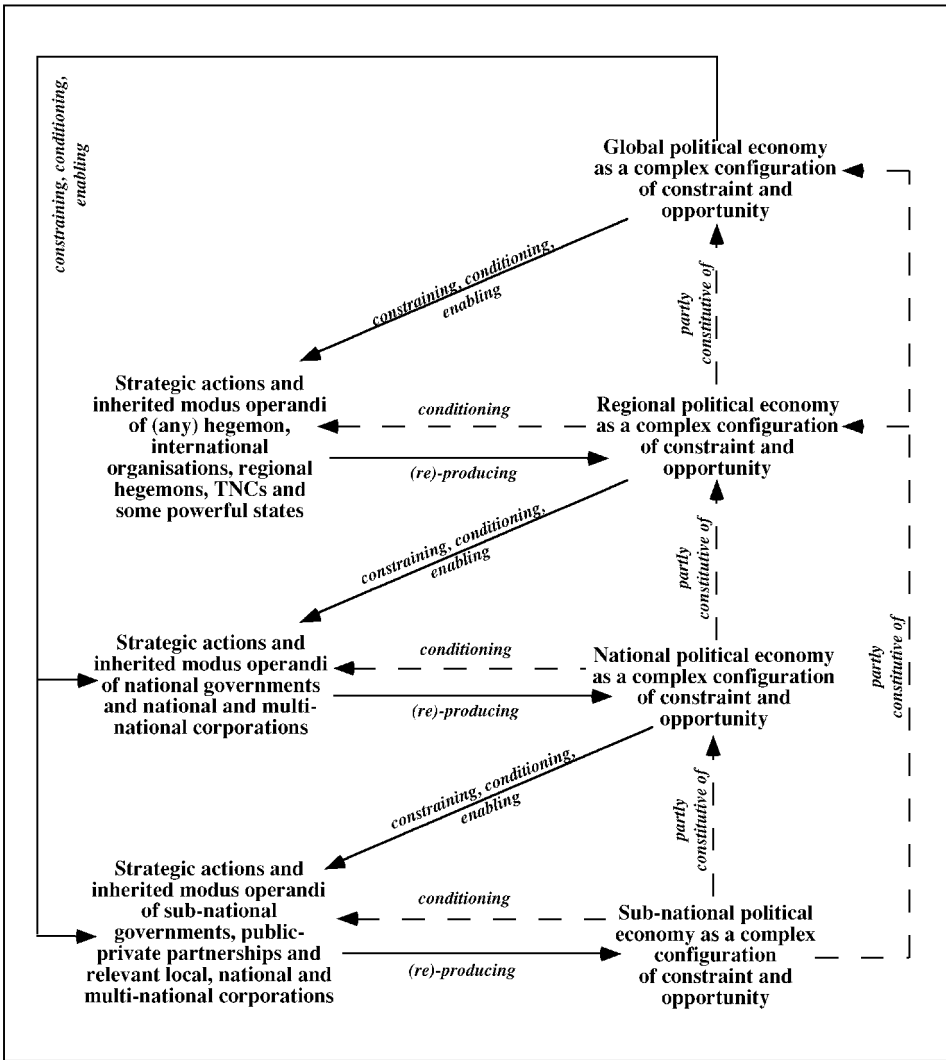


Figure 1. Levels of structuration in the global political economy.

but nonetheless have a crucial bearing upon the latter's ability to realise their strategic intentions.

At higher levels of structuration (say, the national level) we can identify a range of potentially more influential actors, the effects of whose strategies may significantly alter the context in which, say, sub-national actors operate. They, too, however, must adapt their strategies to the environment in which they find themselves. Once again, that environment contains significant external constraints passed down to them from higher levels of structuration (say, those operating at regional and/or global spatial scales). These aspects of context are, consequently, not amenable to direct intervention by the actors themselves. They become, in effect, external constraints. As at lower spatial scales, these actors have no privileged access to the contours of the strategic terrain they inhabit and will tend to adapt existing understandings of the operation of the system to their

own situation and experience as a guide to formulating strategy in a changing environment.

At the very highest spatial scales (the global, for instance) something very interesting and significant occurs—we effectively run out of strategic actors capable of making decisive interventions at the level of the system itself. This raises a seeming paradox. For if no strategic global actors can (as yet) be identified, how it is that we can speak meaningfully of a process of (global) structuration at all, let alone one that restores actors to the process of globalisation? The answer is to be found in unintended consequences.¹⁴ For whilst there is a deficit of actors capable of purposively refashioning the global political economy itself, there is a whole host of actors capable of contributing unintentionally to a series of global processes, tendencies and counter-tendencies.

The classic example here is that of global environmental degradation. Here a complex array of sub-national, national, multinational and transnational actors contribute, through the more or less unintended consequences of their actions, to a genuinely global process of structuration. Clearly the potentially global significance of individual acts of ecological degradation hardly empowers the actors involved, but it does nonetheless contribute to a global process. Moreover, in the absence of genuinely global governance mechanisms or alternative strategies for ensuring concerted global solutions to such global 'bads', little is likely to be done to counter such a tendency. This is perhaps one sense in which we can usefully speak of globalisation as a process without a specific subject.¹⁵

This observation has important implications for the attempt to restore active (and hence potentially accountable) subjects to a process of globalisation widely appealed to as a process without a subject. It suggests, in particular, the need to differentiate between: (i) genuine processes of globalisation in which, in the absence of genuinely global actors, developmental tendencies and counter-tendencies are generated and sustained through the unintended consequences of actions pursued consciously at lower spatial scales; and (ii) processes pursued consciously by strategic actors at the national or regional level which are (falsely) appealed to as processes of globalisation. In this second case, restoring subjects to the process of globalisation may entail challenging the appeal made by politicians and commentators alike to globalisation as the proximate cause of political decisions pursued for strategic advantage at the national or regional level. In this vein, a critical political analysis of globalisation discourse in contemporary Britain might point to an apparent duplicity in the appeal to the imperatives of globalisation to justify, say, a strategy of labour-market flexibilisation. Here the contrast between rhetoric and reality is stark indeed. For the empirical evidence reveals not a globalisation of the British economy in recent years, but a consistent and accelerating regionalisation of its external economic relations.

It is interesting at this point to note, however, that although globalisation is frequently—and, as we shall see, problematically—referred to as a process without a subject, it is rarely in the sense identified above. In the final and concluding section of this paper I examine the popular invocation of globalisa-

¹⁴ On this see Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, pp. 8–14.

¹⁵ Though note that it is still a process to which specific subjects might be linked, and in which they might be implicated.

tion in such terms and turn to the broader question of restoring active subjects to the process of globalisation.

Bringing the Subject Back in: Structure, Agency and Globalisation

Insofar as political scientists and international relations theorists tend to speak of a structure–agency ‘problem’, it is because they think that they have a ‘solution’. That solution invariably involves some claim to have identified a middle way between the twin extremes of structuralism and intentionalism or holism and individualism. Such middle ways have the obvious appeal of acknowledging the dynamic interaction of structure and agency, of context and conduct. Consequently, they tend to place the emphasis not upon the explication of deterministic structural logics or the identification of hegemonic actors but upon the elucidation of processes, in which structure and agent are intimately interwoven, over time. Given that globalisation is a ‘process’ term, one might be forgiven for thinking that the analysis of globalisation naturally lends itself to a subtle and complex rendition of the structure–agency relationship to elucidate the causal mechanisms involved. Sadly, nothing could be further from the truth.

This is because, whilst globalisation may masquerade as a process term in both the popular and academic vernacular, it is a ‘process without a subject’. It is, in short, a process to which no actors are linked, a process that rapidly becomes a deterministic logic of structural inevitability the closer one looks. Accordingly, the term globalisation as used in most popular and academic debate is on obfuscation, and a potentially dangerous one at that.¹⁶ For it tends to conjure a sense of inexorability and inevitability, mapping a path to an end-state (a condition of pure globalisation) never fully realised yet always in the process of being realised. This represents a dangerous conflation of process and teleology that can only serve to hide the complex causal processes that generate the evidence frequently cited in support of the globalisation thesis.¹⁷

It is important to be clear about this. To point to the dangers of appeals to globalisation as a causal process is not to insist that globalisation is a figment of the imagination. It is merely to suggest the need for considerable caution in the use of the term if we are not further to mystify phenomena that might genuinely be regarded as evidence of globalisation. The challenge posed by this article (not, it should be noted, an entirely novel one) is to build upon the foundations laid

¹⁶ Clearly much of the technical ‘second’ and ‘third wave’ literature on the subject avoids this tendency. Rather than treat globalisation as a causal process it seeks to challenge what it takes as the frequently overblown empirical claims made in support of the globalisation thesis. For reviews of this literature see Eleonore Kofman and Gillian Youngs, ‘Introduction’, in Eleonore Kofman and Gillian Youngs, eds, *Globalisation: Theory and Practice*, London, Pinter, 1996; Colin Hay and David Marsh, ‘Introduction: Demystifying Globalisation’, in Colin Hay and David Marsh, eds, *Demystifying Globalisation*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2000. Nonetheless, wherever globalisation is appealed to as a causal process, the danger of offering an obfuscatory explanation without an actor raises its head.

¹⁷ Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalisation in Question*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, Polity, 1999; Peter J. Taylor, ‘Isations of the World: Globalisation, Modernisation, Americanisation’, in Colin Hay and David Marsh, eds, *Demystifying Globalisation*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000; Daniel Wincott, ‘Globalisation and European Integration’, in *Demystifying Globalisation*.

by the critique of earlier, more cavalier, appeals to the notion of globalisation, to further unpack and demystify this 'process without a subject'. This in turn suggests that we should view globalisation not so much as a process or end-state, but, at best, as a *tendency* to which *counter-tendencies* may be mobilised. Once viewed as tendential, the challenge is to reveal the dynamic and contingent interaction of processes in certain spatial contexts at certain moments to yield effects that might be understood as evidence of globalisation.¹⁸ Such scrutiny invariably reveals the causal significance of processes operating at spatial scales below the global and for which strategic political actors might be held accountable. Our aim, then, must be two-fold: (i) to explain the complex causation (often by appeal to logics of unintended consequence) of those genuine—if rare—processes of globalisation which escape the intentions of the actors involved; and (ii) to demonstrate (where this is not the case) that key actors retain considerable control over what they choose to appeal to as a globalisation process which they claim to be powerless against.

If we are to do this, it is imperative that we reverse the conventional direction of causality appealed to in the academic literature as, indeed, in the popular discourse of globalisation. *We must ask not what globalisation might explain, but how we might account for the phenomena widely identified as evidence of globalisation.* If we are to resist and reject the deterministic appeal to a process without a subject we must excise all reference to globalisation as an explanatory (or independent) variable. Within such a schema, the term globalisation becomes little more than a convenient short-hand for a confluence of processes which might together be seen as constitutive of any observed globalisation tendency. The existing literature has, to date, given far too limited attention to such genuine (causal) processes, like financial liberalisation, to which actors might be linked directly.¹⁹ Financial liberalisation is, perhaps, a good example. For many accounts of globalisation's seeming 'logic of no alternative' or of neoliberal convergence, in the end, rely on claims not of globalisation *per se* but of financial liberalisation and consequent heightened capital mobility. In such cases, appeal to the term globalisation is quite simply an obfuscation—if the causal agent is the (quite conscious political) decision to engage in a process of financial liberalisation, why not call it as it is?

In sum, there is simply no need to make essentialising assumptions about the effects, consequences, or even the existence, of globalisation. For, in so far as globalisation can be identified, it is better understood as a tendency to which there may well be counter-tendencies. Globalised outcomes and effects might then be the product of different and often independent mechanisms and pro-

¹⁸ See, for instance, Robert W. Cox, 'A Perspective on Globalisation', in James H. Mittelman, ed., *Globalisation: Critical Reflections*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 1996; Robert Helleiner, *States and the Reemergence of Global Finance: From Bretton Woods to the 1990*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1994; 'Post-globalisation: Is the Financial Liberalisation Trend Likely to be Reversed?', in Robert Boyer and Daniel Drache, eds, *States against Markets: The Limits of Globalisation*, London, Routledge, 1996.

¹⁹ Though see Helleiner, *States and the Reemergence of Global Finance*, 'Post-globalisation'. It is perhaps important to emphasise again that standards of causal adequacy vary between ontologies. Thus, for structuralists the invocation of processes without subjects is sufficient to explain a given event since actors are merely bearers of structural logics. When I speak of 'genuine (causal) processes' I here refer to standards of causal adequacy associated with an ontology of structuration.

cesses of causation (financial liberalisation, European integration and policy transfer to identify merely three) that can only be obscured by appeal to a generic (and causal) logic of globalisation. Whilst problematising and interrogating the processes which underpin globalising tendencies, then, it is important to resist the temptation to appeal to globalisation itself as a causal factor or process working apparently independently of the actions, intentions and motivations of real subjects. It is precisely this appeal to causal processes *without subjects* that summons the logic of necessity and inevitability so often associated with the notion of globalisation.

If we are then to demystify globalisation, we must ensure that in making what we think are causal arguments we can identify the actors involved, thus giving due attention to the 'structuration' of globalising tendencies whilst rejecting structuralist or functionalist 'logics' operating over the heads or independently of social subjects.

It is only by paying careful attention to the problem of structure and agency in this way, dismissing accounts which privilege either structure or (far less frequently in analyses of globalisation) agency in the determination of outcomes, that the notion of globalisation might be used to open up and not merely to obfuscate the analysis of social, political and economic change.

It is one thing to restore subjects to the process of globalisation within academic debate. Yet the use of the term globalisation is not merely confined to the common room. It has become a key referent of contemporary political discourse and, increasingly, a lens through which policy makers view the context in which they find themselves. If, as I have argued consistently in this article, strategic actors have no privileged vantage point from which to view their environment and, as the vast majority of commentators would surely concede, one of the principal discourses through which that environment comes to be understood is that of globalisation, then it is imperative that we consider the causal significance of ideas about globalisation for contemporary political and economic dynamics.

For, despite a growing literature that seeks to demystify the often exaggerated and distorted claims made by the business school globalisation thesis, it continues to prove highly influential in elite policy circles. Consequently, as even the most cursory analysis of contemporary European popular and political discourse on the subject can hardly fail to attest, the ideas about globalisation which animate public policy making are frequently based on at best a casual and highly selective appeal to the empirical evidence.²⁰ This has important implications when it is considered that governments acting in accordance with the globalisation thesis may well serve to summon precisely the consequences the thesis would predict. The globalisation thesis has it that, in a (globalised) context characterised by the heightened mobility of capital, states simply cannot afford but to reduce the level of corporate taxation. Any failure to do so, it is argued, will result in a punitive depreciation in net revenue as capital

²⁰ Colin Hay and Matthew Watson, 'The Discourse of Globalisation and the Logic of No Alternative: Rendering the Contingent Necessary in the Political Economy of New Labour', *Policy and Politics*, vol. 30, no. 1, March 2003; Vivien Schmidt, 'Convergent Pressures, Divergent Responses: France, Great Britain and Germany between Globalisation and European Integration', in D. A. Smith, D. J. Solinger and S. C. Topik, eds, *States and Sovereignty in the Global Economy*, London, Routledge, 1999.

utilises its newfound exit option. The irony of such a thesis is that if governments believe it to be true, they will act in a manner consistent with its predictions, thereby contributing to an aggregate depreciation in corporate taxation—whether it is true or not. This is but one example. What it, and others like it, suggest is that the discourse of globalisation may play a crucial independent role in the generation of the effects invariably attributed to globalisation and invariably held to indicate its logic of inevitability.²¹ This in turn suggests that not only must we give rather greater attention to the discursive mediation of political and economic change, but that we must retain the capacity to expose to critical public scrutiny the dominant ideas which pass in the name of globalisation. It is, above all, crucial that we differentiate clearly between the effects of globalisation itself and the effects of having internalised popular constructions of globalisation. All too frequently the latter are mistaken for the former.

One brief example will perhaps suffice. Consider the following statement, familiar from both the academic literature and the pronouncements of politicians on the subject: 'globalisation places pressures on western states to roll back their welfare provision'. Statements such as this imply a loosely articulated explanation for welfare retrenchment along the lines, 'globalisation causes (or necessitates) welfare retrenchment'. Here, as is so often the case, globalisation is invoked as a process without a subject; no agent is identified. This, it need hardly be noted, is highly convenient for politicians wishing to legitimate otherwise unpalatable social and economic reforms. Yet if we seek to restore active subjects to this hypothesised process, its logic of inevitability and indeterminacy is rapidly tempered. Better, then, is the following: 'the ability of foreign investors to move capital and assets rapidly from one national context to another undermines the state's capacity to raise revenue to fund the welfare state through corporate taxation'. Such a statement has the clear benefit of identifying a series of agents with the capacity to act. Yet there is still no direct attribution of causal agency to identifiable subjects. Moving further to restore actors to this process without a subject, we might suggest a second modification: 'the perception on the part of many western governments that investors are mobile and will exit high taxation environments has driven a process of corporate tax cutting, thereby undermining the revenue basis of the welfare state'. This is, once again, an improvement. We have identified a rather different set of potential actors rather closer to decisions relating to welfare expenditure and we have introduced their perceptions into the equation. Yet we have still not directly attributed welfare reform to identifiable subjects in a genuinely causal explanation. One final step fully restores agency to the (now considerably weakened) relationship between globalisation and welfare retrenchment: 'government X, acting on its belief that (mobile) investors will leave high taxation environments for low taxation environments, has reduced the rate of corporate tax, with consequent effects for the revenue basis of the welfare state'. This is what is meant by 'bringing the subject back in' to the logics and illogics of globalisation.

Again, this is but one example. Yet as an example it suggests once again the centrality of ideas to the relationship between structure and agency and, more

²¹ Hay and Rosamond, 'Globalisation, European Integration and the Discursive Construction of Economic Imperatives'.

specifically, to the complex causation of the processes invariably attributed to globalisation.

Finally, and in a similar vein, it is important that we acknowledge the strategic use made of the rhetoric of globalisation. For, as a process without a subject, seeming to operate above the heads of elected officials it provides, or is capable of providing, a most convenient scapegoat for the imposition of unpopular and unpalatable measures. By restoring active and strategic subjects to the process of globalisation we contribute not only to the demystification of this process without a subject, but also to the repoliticisation of political and economic debate.

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