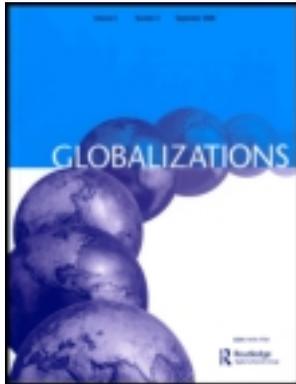


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COMMENTARY

It's About Globalization, After All: Four Framings of Global Studies. A Response to Jan Nederveen Pieterse's 'What is Global Studies?'

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The three core arguments of Jan Nederveen Pieterse's (2013) thought-provoking examination of 'global studies' (GS), recently published in the pages of this journal, are seemingly straightforward: (1) GS emerged from a qualitatively different 'earlier wave' of 'uneven' and 'discipline-bound globalization studies'; (2) 'Global Studies as it actually exists' in academic settings around the world is intellectually 'barely developed' and its programs and conferences are like a 'scaffolding without a roof'; (3) As envisioned by Nederveen Pieterse, GS is 'different from studies of globalization' in that it 'adds value *beyond* studies of globalization and international studies' by pushing interdisciplinarity, multicentrism, and multilevel thinking.

My critical response to Nederveen Pieterse's arguments comes in three brief sections. First, partly drawing on my own academic experience with various GS programs and GS schools and centers on three continents, I note that I can find no empirical evidence for his posited linear chronology of a current wave of GS allegedly preceding an 'earlier wave of globalization studies'. I also contest his claim that earlier studies of globalization tended to be intellectually thin, uneven, and discipline-bound. The lack of evidence for his allegations also buttresses my dismissal of what I call his 'difference thesis' in the second section. Focusing on the conclusion of his article, I uncover severe contradictions in his notion that there exist substantive and meaningful differences between 'globalization studies' and GS. Reaffirming 'globalization' as the master concept at the heart of GS, the final section of this response essay offers my sketch of the four framings underpinning 'actually existing GS'.

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Nederveen Pieterse's 'Earlier Wave of Globalization Studies'

Section 2 of Nederveen Pieterse's article (2013) offers a brief account of an 'earlier wave' of 'discipline-bound globalization studies'. The author's main claim is that 'globalization studies' were 'uneven' to 'the extent to which they are organized according to disciplinary conventions'. Moreover, he bolsters his claim of the disciplinary tightness and unevenness of 'globalization studies' by arguing that 'There is no consensus on the definition of globalization, its effects, and periodization' (ibid., p. 503). The trouble with these assertions is twofold. First, there is no empirical evidence for the existence or actual establishment of a recognized academic category of 'globalization studies' comprising authors who approach the study of globalization strictly from within their narrow disciplinary perspective. Second, much evidence points to the fact that earlier studies of globalization were every bit as transdisciplinary as later globalization research.

But Nederveen Pieterse misses in his account that 'Global Studies as it actually exists' ultimately emerged in the mid- to late 2000s as a pragmatic consensus label adopted by many globalization researchers around the world. Panel discussions and papers presented, for example, at the annual meetings of the Global Studies Association or the Global Studies Consortium—two large international networks of globalization scholars—reveal a more complex and accurate historical picture. One group of globalization scholars used the term 'GS' referring to both their work and newly established programs and centers at their respective universities already from as early as the late 1990s or early 2000s. Others experimented with 'globalization studies', 'critical globalization studies', or 'transnational studies' before settling on 'GS' (some of these labels still exist). Others tried 'globalism research' before adopting 'GS'. But there was never a delineated field of 'globalization studies' as described by Nederveen Pieterse—one that was coherent and established enough to be characterized as 'discipline-bound' and intellectually 'barely developed'. In fact, globalization researchers used the related terms 'GS' and 'globalization studies' loosely, interchangeably, and without much system-building ambition in the pursuit of their transdisciplinary globalization projects. Looking back, Victor Roudometof (2012, p. 740) confirms that 'global studies' was one of several labels available to emerging globalization researchers during the last 15 years or so. In their 'Introduction' to their important reader, *Critical Globalization Studies*, Richard P. Appelbaum and William I. Robinson (2005, pp. xi–xii) use 'global studies' and 'globalization studies' interchangeably. Paul James (2012, p. 753) notes perceptively that 'Studies of globalization and, more generally, studies in the broad and loosely defined field of global studies did not become conscious of themselves as such until the 1990s.' And the list goes on.

Let me offer a personal story to further illustrate this point. Arriving in 2005 as the new head of the School of International and Community Studies at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, I was soon charged with setting up a larger transdisciplinary School. We ultimately settled on the name, 'School of Global Studies, Social Science, and Planning', even though I had at first suggested 'School of Globalization Studies, Social Science, and Planning'. I happily agreed to 'Global Studies' after being told that the new School name was already far too long and required shortening. I did so without a second thought, because, in my mind, these terms signified the same thing, namely, the collective and conscious academic effort to advance the *transdisciplinary* understanding of globalization. Since 2005, many colleagues from around the world have told me similar stories about how they came to rely more exclusively on the label 'GS' for equally pragmatic reasons as they were developing relevant academic programs. In fact, the empirical referent of both 'GS' and 'globalization studies' is the same global network of scholars dedicated

to the transdisciplinary study of globalization. Nederveen Pieterse is right to note that globalization scholars often disagreed with each other about matters of definitions, methodological approaches, and perspectives. But he omits that we also developed strong agreements around important themes and insights (see Steger, 2004, pp. 1–4). Just because most of us emerged, necessarily, from conventional disciplinary backgrounds in the social sciences and humanities does not mean that our global imagination was ‘colonized by the disciplines’ as Nederveen Pieterse alleges. Quite to the contrary, nearly all globalization scholars writing between 1996 and 2006 emphasized inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinarity as one of the defining hallmarks of globalization research. Here are some examples: David Held (and co-authors), *Global Transformations* (1999); John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (1999); Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (2000); James Mittelman, *The Globalization Syndrome* (2000); Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization* (2005); and, indeed, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture* (2004). A characterization of these books as ‘discipline-bound’ does not stand up to critical scrutiny. It seems to me that positing a surprisingly linear chronology of an ‘earlier wave’ of ‘discipline-bound globalization studies’ followed by an equally intellectually ‘barely developed’ field of ‘actual global studies as it is researched and taught at universities around the world’ (Nederveen Pieterse, 2013, p. 504), primarily serves the purpose of allowing Nederveen Pieterse to don the mantle of intellectual innovator in the form of his ‘programmatic perspective on global studies’.

Nederveen Pieterse’s Difference Thesis

There are a number of places in Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s ‘What Is Global Studies?’ (2013), where the author’s core arguments and findings seem strangely at odds with his difference thesis—namely, that ‘globalization studies’, ‘actually existing GS’, and ‘value-added GS’ constitute different categories. Although the very rationale of his essay rides on this difference thesis, the author ultimately downplays its significance in the concluding paragraph: ‘The difference between studies of globalization/global studies should not be overdrawn. There are analytical differences but they exist more as a potential than as reality. The issue isn’t belaboring the difference between globalization/global studies, which is partly semantic; the issue is advancing the understanding of globalization, no matter the heading’ (Ibid., p. 511–12).

This crucial passage makes three interlinked points. First, it reiterates the difference thesis only to warn against ‘overdrawing’ differences. Second, it freely concedes that the differences in question are ‘analytic’ and ‘partly semantic’ in nature and exist more as a ‘potential’ than as ‘reality’. Third, the ‘issue’ at stake is advancing the understanding of *globalization*—a task more important than the ‘heading’. Let me take up each of these points in turn.

With regard to the first point, one wonders what, concretely, constitutes ‘overdrawing’ the differences? Would it be, as Nederveen Pieterse claims, that his ‘value-added GS’ is different from both globalization studies and ‘real-existing GS’, because the former, unlike the latter, is ‘multicentered’ and encourages ‘multilevel thinking’? If we keep in mind his conclusion, however, then these alleged (and very substantive) differences cannot be serious enough to qualify as ‘overdrawn’ because they originate with the author himself. Still, Nederveen Pieterse never offers a concrete illustration or a single empirical example of what ‘overdrawing the differences’ would look like. Thus, he misses a crucial opportunity to clarify with necessary precision the nature of these alleged differences.

At first glance, the second point of the cited passage seems to be rectifying this deficiency by noting that the differences between studies of globalization and GS are ‘analytic’ and ‘partly semantic’. But what qualifies as ‘analytic’? The author does offer a clue as to what he seems

to have in mind: ‘Global studies are different from studies of globalization; they differ just as *global sociology* differs from the *sociology of globalization* and *global history* differs from the history of globalization’ (Ibid., p. 505). As he emphasizes, ‘the global’ before the disciplinary marker makes all the difference: ‘Most history has been national, regional, or civilizational, and global history represents a more comprehensive and advanced perspective’ (Ibid., p. 505).

While this observation might explain the difference between conventional history and global history, it hardly sheds light on the ‘analytic’ differences between the ‘history of globalization’ and ‘global history’. It simply assumes that the comparison will also hold in the GS case, meaning that studies of globalization must be as nationally and regionally focused as global history. As we have seen in the previous section, there is no empirical evidence for the existence of ‘globalization studies’ as described by Nederveen Pieterse. Moreover, the very scholar approvingly cited by Nederveen Pieterse as an authority on ‘global history’—Bruce Mazlish, a pioneer of global history—actually affirms the reverse: the history of globalization lies at the very heart of global history. As Mazlish (2006, p. 2) notes, ‘New Global History [NGH], the name taken to set off the study of present-day globalization from previous manifestations of the process, has been reluctantly embraced by some of my colleagues and myself as a necessary demarcation of inquiry.’ Contra Nederveen Pieterse, then, Mazlish not only equates the study of globalization with global history but also limits the latter to the study of the *present-day* historical phase of globalization.

It seems to me that GS works much the same way. Indeed, the proper reassertion of globalization at the heart of GS leads to the breakdown of Nederveen Pieterse’s difference thesis—even in its supposedly ‘analytic’ formulation. This conceptual collapse means that the author’s admission of the ‘partly semantic’ nature of the difference thesis must turn into ‘fully semantic’, that is, a difference in wording only. And that’s my point: the differences between GS and ‘globalization studies’ are purely semantic. It appears that Nederveen Pieterse himself comes to this conclusion when he speaks of these differences existing ‘potentially’ rather than in ‘reality’. But ceding empirical ground on his core argument is a move fraught with danger. One is reminded of Niccolò Machiavelli’s (1992, pp. 41–2) famous caution to the prince: ‘But since it is my object to write what shall be useful to whosoever understands it, it seems to me better to follow the real truth of things than an imaginary view of them.’ As we have seen in the previous section, the Florentine statesman’s warning also applies not only to Nederveen Pieterse’s difference thesis but also to his imaginary view of an ‘earlier wave of globalization studies’ preceding GS.

In a more constructive spirit, then, let me offer a brief sketch of my own programmatic understanding of the growing field of GS—as it actually exists in most universities.

Four Framings of Global Studies

First, GS relies on a *globalization framing*, which reflects the field’s focus on the expansion and intensification of social relations across world-time and world-space. Understood as a multidimensional set of processes, globalization also involves people’s growing awareness of these global interdependence dynamics. Although globalization has remained a hotly contested concept, even Nederveen Pieterse admits in his conclusion the centrality of globalization for global studies. Like ‘modernization’ and other verbal nouns that end in the suffix ‘-ization’, ‘globalization’ corresponds to the idea of dynamic change across and within national and local boundaries. This focus on global change also reaffirms the globalization prism at the heart of GS, which privileges the examination of flows, nodes, networks,

movement, and shifting scales at the expense of static entities, fixed relationships, or frozen social and spatial hierarchies.

Second, GS favors a *transdisciplinary framing*, which challenges the Eurocentric disciplinary framework shaped by the national imaginary of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As noted, the new field's globalization framing captures the multidimensionality of these processes whose exploration must rely on radical forms of *trans-* and *multidisciplinarity* at the expense of limited forms of *interdisciplinarity* involving, for example, the forging of links between two or three disciplines. Far from merely constituting the latest fad in a rapidly globalizing higher education environment, transdisciplinarity and its corresponding methodological toolkits steeped in pluralism and eclecticism have become indispensable modes of expanding the knowledge base and research capabilities of academic institutions. As Wendy Russell (2005, pp. 35–41) argues, new modes of knowledge production associated with globalization processes require diverse, problem-based, and collaborative forms of research capable of transcending both methodological nationalism and disciplinary boundaries in the integration and synthesis of multiple contents, theories, and methodologies.

But the pursuit of such radical transdisciplinarity is no easy task. In order to be effective within the still dominant academic order of largely self-contained, traditional disciplines, GS faces considerable pressures to join the club as—yes—a separate discipline. In other words, this formidable disciplinary imperative of drawing boundaries thwarts the transdisciplinary ambitions of GS. The task, then, is for the new field to gain a foothold in the current academic landscape while at the same time working against the hegemonic order. To do so, GS must project 'globalization' across the conventional disciplinary matrix while at the same time nurturing the global as part of the conventional disciplines. To be sure, such attempts to reconcile these diverging impulses forces GS scholars to play at least three distinct roles: 'mavericks' bent on establishing global studies as a separate discipline; 'insurgents' seeking to globalize established disciplines from within; and 'nomads' travelling across disciplines while at the same time (re)ordering existing and new knowledge around concrete globalization research questions and projects. The nomadic role, in particular, demands from students of GS to familiarize themselves with vast literatures on related subjects that are usually studied in isolation from each other. This means that one of the intellectual challenges facing the new field lies in connecting and synthesizing the various strands of knowledge in a way that does justice to the fluidity and connectivity of our globalizing world. In short, GS must be sufficiently broad (but not too grandiose) to encourage the revival of 'grand narratives' or other 'big picture' approaches yet remain specific enough to nurture indispensable mid-range and micro-level analyses.

Third, GS scholars apply a *spatio-temporal framing* to their themes under investigation. After all, spatial reconfiguration dynamics such as 'deterritorialization' and 'denationalization' are the principal reason that the term 'globalization' was coined in the first place. Still, it must be emphasized that the global should not be equated with an isolated spatial dimension sitting on top of a nested scalar hierarchy running from the global to the regional, national, and local. Instead, GS scholars encourage the rethinking of historically contingent categories of vertical spatiality in chronological time to account for overlapping forms of horizontal spatiality in real time. Globalization is not just about processes of deterritorialization—the transcending of traditional boundaries—but also about processes of reterritorialization, that is, inscriptions and eruptions of the global *within* the national and the local. As Saskia Sassen (2010, p. 1) puts it, whether encountered as an institution, a process, a discursive practice, or an imaginary, the global 'both transcends the exclusive framing of nation states and also partly emerges and operates within that framing'. If, therefore, the local and the global are not mutually exclusive

endpoints on a fixed spatial scale, then globalization is really ‘glocalization’. Thus, an excellent terrain to study the global would be the local: global financial flows converging in Tokyo or London; the impact of globalizing ideas and discourses on localized social struggles in Seattle or Athens; or the Korean manifestation of rap music ‘Gangnam style’.

Fourth, GS relies on a *critical framing* manifesting in a variety of ways such as: methodological skepticism regarding positivistic dogmas and ‘objective truths’; suspicion toward meanings and interpretations established by institutions such as corporate media; the assumption that facts are socially constructed and serve identifiable interests; the decolonization of the (Western) imagination; and an understanding of the global as a multipolar dynamic emerging from the global South as much as from the North. As Nederveen Pieterse (2013) emphasizes, GS relies on multicentric chronologies that eschew conventional Eurocentric historical narratives and present globalization not merely as a linear, diffusionist process starting in the West but as a multi-nodal, multidirectional dynamic full of unanticipated surprises, violent twists, sudden punctuations, and dramatic reversals. James Mittelman (2004, pp. 224–5) suggests that a robust conceptualization would include the following five interacting components: reflexivity, historicism, decentering, disciplinary crossovers, and strategically informed, transformative thinking about how to engage hegemonic power, upend it, and offer emancipatory visions. Similarly, William I. Robinson (2005, pp. 15–16) describes GS’s critical framing as encouraging a form of engagement that not only links intellectual production and knowledge claims to progressive projects but also enjoins ‘discursive with material struggles, lest the former become reduced to irrelevant word games. That, I [Robinson] would say, are essential epistemological “ground rules” of a critical globalization studies.’

This critical grounding of GS in emancipatory practice also informs the new field’s mission to advance ‘global citizenship’. Scholars like Mark Juergensmeyer (2011), for example, argue convincingly that the field seeks to create ‘global literacy’—the ability of students to see themselves as ‘citizens of the world’ by understanding both the specific aspects of diverse cultures and economic practices as well as commonly experienced global trends and patterns. In the same vein, Hans Schattle (2012, p. 14) suggests that globalization can be seen as an ‘open invitation to citizenship and a critical way of ‘thinking and living within new geographical, intellectual, and moral horizons’.

As should be readily apparent, my account of GS contains many of the features contained in Nederveen Pieterse’s ‘value-added’ GS. Thus, it is important to note that we have much in common when it comes to our programmatic articulation of the emerging field. What separates us, however, is my treatment of GS and globalization studies as functional equivalents as well as my insistence that ‘actually existing’ GS is in better condition than Nederveen Pieterse would have us believe. Many GS programs and centers around the world already incorporate a good number of the desired qualities we identified. Where Nederveen Pieterse sees intellectual underdevelopment and ‘scaffolding without a roof’, I observe intellectual innovation and thriving teaching programs. However, as GS evolves as an attractive transdisciplinary field, there is always room for further improvement. Still, as Nederveen Pieterse (2013) actually concedes in the third point of his concluding paragraph, the central ‘issue’ in both GS and globalization studies is the advancement of our understanding of *globalization*. Here I fully agree with Jan: it’s about globalization, after all. But let’s not get hung up on ‘headings’. Belaboring purely semantic differences between globalization studies and GS merely confuses the ‘issue’ and adds little to the pressing task of advancing globalization research.

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