

Thinking Globally

Chapter 2 focuses on the concept of globalization, which arose at the beginning of the 1990s as a key word not only for sociological analysis but also, in general, for all the social sciences. Globalization is still a key concept, but it is also controversial in that its importance and its validity are not accepted by all scholars. In particular, numerous authors have emphasised that the close interdependence among different areas of the world – a distinctive feature of globalization – is not a novelty but has instead characterized the planet's entire modern history. From this perspective, therefore, the dynamics apparent in recent decades are nothing more, on the best of hypotheses, than an intensification of processes long in progress. Contrary to this interpretation, the chapter rightly emphasises that although it is undeniable that many of the current dynamics originated in a non-recent past, globalization exhibits aspects which are markedly discontinuous with respect to the past. One of these aspects – on which I shall dwell in what follows – consists of “new experiences of time and space”. In this regard, the chapter refers to the concepts of “deterritorialization” and “compression of the world”.

A first point that I wish to emphasise is that the transformation of the dimension ‘space’ does not signify that it is of lesser importance in shaping social processes and individual experiences. The dimension ‘space’, in fact, continues to perform a crucial role, although it does so in ways different from in the past. In particular, it seem to me that as space and spaces lose importance from a quantitative point of view – due to the extraordinary development of means of communication and transport – their qualitative aspects tend to acquire increasing importance: “as spatial barriers diminish so we become much more sensitized to what the world's spaces contain” (Harvey 1990: 294). When individuals – be they persons or firms – are technically free to go to the places which they prefer, they will tend to choose those that offer the best contents.

The second point to stress is that this transformation of space does not uniformly involve all of the Earth's places or all of its inhabitants. Firstly, with reference to the concept of “compression of the world”, it should be pointed out distances have not all contracted to the same extent. Whilst it is true, as recalled in the Chapter, that “we judge distance in terms of the time required to complete a journey rather than by the number of kilometres between two points”, it should also be noted that this same distance depends on the transport infrastructures of the places between which one wants to travel. For this reason, for example, whilst the main European cities – thanks to direct air connections, often at low-cost tariffs – are by now all very close to each other, this is not the case of numerous small cities or towns, even within the same country, connections among which may be slow and infrequent. But the degree to which distances have been compressed depends not only on the places involved but also on the people who intend to travel such

distances. For a citizen of the Schengen area, with a good knowledge of English and a credit card, Kenya or any other African country is only a few hours' journey away. Vice versa, this same space that separates Europe from Africa may be impossible to travel for most citizens of the latter. The above-mentioned transformation of space is therefore accompanied by a *twofold relativization* of space and distances, the real extent of which depends both on the characteristics of the specific places concerned and on the characteristics of the people that must cover those distances (Caselli 2012: 11-12).

To conclude, globalization is indubitably both a key concept in contemporary society and a notion essential for its interpretation. But it should always be borne in mind that globalization is an extraordinarily complex process, and that part of its complexity consists in having diverse effects on different people and different places.

References

Caselli, M. (2012), *Trying to Measure Globalization. Experiences, Critical Issues and Perspectives* (Dordrecht: Springer).

Harvey, D. (1990), *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell).

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