According to the UK Commission on Social Sciences (2003), ‘globalization’ has become one of the ‘big issues’ of our times. It is difficult to believe that barely two decades ago the term was virtually unknown. One of the first authors to take up the concept was Anthony Giddens, in the mid-1980s, and since then the literature on the subject has mushroomed. According to Richard Dore (2001), of the 271 books in the Harvard University library in mid-2000 with the term ‘globalization’ in the title, only five had been published before 1990, and some 85 per cent dated from the last half of the 1990s. The number has continued to expand apace: my own search of the catalogue of Cambridge University Library in April 2004 revealed no fewer than 742 books and monographs on globalization. A similar search of journal articles containing the term revealed nearly 4000 since 1995! Such has been the academic and political impact of the notion that it has also stimulated new journals and even new research centres devoted to the topic.

As this interest has grown, so academic discussion of globalization has widened to embrace a diverse range of issues: the global financial system, information technologies and global capitalism, global trade, global economic regulation and governance, global elites, global culture, the political economy of global warming, and global terrorism, to name but some. More than any of the other numerous concepts and neologisms that have swept into social science and beyond in recent years, the term has become firmly established as an essential part of our lexicon. For some, and neoliberals especially, globalization is seen in highly positive terms, as presenting new opportunities and scope for economic development, spreading prosperity, promoting multiculturalism and tackling environmental problems; others, particularly of a neorealist bent, view it much more negatively, as reinforcing uneven development, threatening jobs and communities, eroding national identity and autonomy, and devouring vital natural and environmental resources.

Indeed, from the very first, the term has been fiercely contested and debated. Among the key issues around which discussion has centred, the following have been particularly prominent:

- What is globalization, and what are its causes and dynamics?
- Is it really a new phenomenon, or the latest stage of a much longer historical process?
- How far is globalization eroding and undermining the sovereignty of nation-states and national institutions, and reducing their autonomy in policymaking?
- What are the consequences of globalization for the distribution of incomes, both among and within nations?
- Should global finance be left to unfettered market forces, or should it be regulated by new global institutions?
- How far is globalization an economically, socially and culturally homogenizing force?
- What are the environmental consequences of economic globalization, and what scope exists for local solutions to global environmental problems?
- How far does globalization imply the delocalization of economic and social relations and the ‘end of geography’?

If by globalization we mean increasing trans-border interdependence, integration and interaction, in the realms of trade, economic and social relations, finance, knowledge, ideas, culture and politics, then the process is certainly not new, but...
arguably has been underway for the past three or four centuries, if not longer. The nineteenth century is argued by some to have witnessed a major step in the historical development of globalization: the spread of capitalism, the great wave of imperialism, the expansion of trade and finance this engendered, the invention of international telegraphic communication and the adoption of the international gold standard, among other things, all served to promote an unprecedented extension and intensification of economic interdependence across the globe. For some, then, what we are currently experiencing is but the latest stage in this evolving history. Claims about novelty, new eras and ‘breaks with the past’ should thus be played down. For others, however, both the pace and nature of contemporary global integration and interdependence are emphatically different from what has gone before, and sufficiently distinctive and dramatic as to signal the advent of a qualitatively new phase of capitalism and a wholly different geo-political economic condition, a radical restructuring of the world’s economy and politics as profound as anything since the Industrial Revolution (Hutton and Giddens 2000). According to this group of observers, two key features in particular make this latest phase in the development of globalization quintessentially different from previous eras: the new information and communications technologies, and the dominating power of transnational and multinational corporations.

The challenge posed to the social sciences by globalization has been doubled-edged. The problem is not just one of explicating the complex processes and impacts involved: difficult enough though that is. It is also that globalization has brought into question many of the basic tenets, assumptions and subject matter of social science itself. For example, in the case of economics, globalization raises real questions about the meaning and role of ‘national’ economies, and about the need to rethink macroeconomic and international economic theory (Ohmae 1995). Similarly, in political and cultural theory, globalization challenges the conventional notions of the nation-state, national polity and national identity (Bauman 1998). It is geography, perhaps, that is confronted by the most potentially destabilizing implications, for according to some commentators globalization is expunging local difference and hence the relevance of space and place.

There can be little doubt that powerful forces of economic, social and cultural homogenization and convergence have been unleashed over the past quarter of a century, not least by the spread of information and communications networks and flows linking virtually all parts of the globe; the integration of money and finance markets into a world wide system; the triumph of (mainly Western) transnational corporations (including media) as conveyors of global products, consumer norms and cultures; and the spread amongst the majority of the OECD nations of a neoliberal economic ideology that both accepts and promotes the imperatives of a global market place and global competitiveness.

In response to these forces, many non-geographers have argued that globalization spells the ‘death of geography’, or as Dore (2001) puts it: ‘globalization is about the accumulating consequences of the annihilation of distance’ (Dore 2001, 1; see also Cairncross 1997). The view seems to be that globalization is necessarily the opponent of the local. ‘Delocalization’, these authors argue, is the inescapable obverse of globalization: location no longer matters in today’s global political economy. This claim has been made in two senses. First, the annihilation of distance in economic, social, political and cultural relations brings the global to, and into, the local, emptying the latter of much of its distinctiveness and autonomy in the process. As John Gray has graphically put it:

Behind all these ‘meanings’ of globalization is a single underlying idea which can be called ‘de-localization’: the uprooting of activities and relationships from local origins and cultures. It means the displacement of activities that until recently were local, into networks of relationships whose reach is distant or worldwide. Domestic prices of consumer goods, financial assets such as stock and bonds, even labour – are less and less governed by local and national conditions; they all fluctuate along with global market prices. Globalization means lifting social activities out of local knowledge and placing them in networks in which they are conditioned by, and condition, world-wide events. (1998, 57)

Globalization, then, is deemed to be eliminating the difference of place.

Second, it is also often asserted that the new information and communications technologies confer functional propinquity without the need for spatial proximity: businesses can supply customers wherever the latter are located, and customers have access to products and commodities from the world over, thereby linking them into complex global commodity and service chains. Thus, in the view of Robert Reich we now live in a global bazaar in
which we are firmly on the way to getting exactly what we want, instantly, from anywhere, at the best value for money:

In the emerging global bazaar, distance is on the way to all but vanishing. The economy is moving away from things towards weightless services that can be transmitted anywhere around the world at almost no cost. With everything a click away, there’s less reason to shop locally. Local economies won’t vanish any time soon, but the Internet will steadily erode them. ... You no longer need the local pharmacist to fill your prescription, or even a local doctor to give you one ... You’ll circumvent local car dealers and garage mechanics. An ever larger proportion of international commerce comes in the form of videos, music, film, television shows, news, designs, software, and business services (management consulting, marketing, financial, legal, engineering) that no longer need to be located near their clients. (2001, 18–19)

There is, of course, real substance to these claims. The ICT revolution has indeed annihilated distance (and time). The Internet, the growth of truly global commodity networks and transnational corporations, have simultaneously linked and internally disarticulated local communities. For example, over the past 25 years international and global brands have come to dominate the goods available to an increasing proportion of the world’s consumers. While the multinational purveyors of fast food, clothing, leisure, entertainment and media goods may have expanded the range of goods and services available at the local level, as Reich argues, nevertheless that range is basically the same everywhere so that what was once local diversity is fast being replaced by a monotonous and depressing formulaic uniformity.

Yet, as geographers have repeatedly rejoined, the ‘death of distance’ does not imply that place and geographical difference no longer matter. To the contrary, they have become more not less important. Globalization is itself a multi-scalar set of processes and developments, emanating from a whole variety of spatial levels. While many of the dynamics of globalization derive from explicitly global institutions and processes, such as the WTO, the IMF, the OECD, global financial markets, the War Crimes Tribunal and the like, many other processes do not necessarily scale at the global level, but are just as integral to globalization. Some of these processes are national in scale; others take place deep inside national territories and institutional domains. Studying the global, then,

Entails not only a focus on that which is explicitly global in scale, but also a focus on locally scaled practices and conditions articulated with global dynamics, and a focus on the multiplication of cross border connections among various localities fed by the recurrence of certain conditions across localities. Further, it entails recognizing that many of the globally scale dynamics ... are actually embedded in subnational sites and move between these differently scaled practices and organizational forms. (Sassen 2003, 3)

In other words, the global is not simply ‘out there’, but also ‘in here’ (Amin 2002).

The fact is that globalization, no less than previous stages of capitalism, is an inherently geographically uneven process. It is geographically uneven in the sense that while some nations are leading and benefiting from the process, others are being left behind (Kaplinsky 2001). It is also geographically uneven in the sense that not only are explicitly global-scale processes impinging differently on different places in locally specific ways, many of the mechanisms and institutional dynamics that are driving globalization are themselves local – and locally varying – in nature. Geographers have thus strongly contested the view that accelerating globalization is disembedding economic, social and cultural relations from their local contexts, on the grounds that this fails to recognize the multi-scaled nature of globalization and the fact that much of what we call globalization is being organized from and articulated by specific places. Indeed, as the work of Allen Scott, Michael Storper and numerous other economic geographers has demonstrated, economic globalization is inextricably bound up with the resurgence of regional and city economies, with increased spatial agglomeration of production, technology and services, with the heightened importance of global city regions (Scott 2001), and with the emergence of highly creative places (Florida 2002). These cities and places form the key nodes in global networks of flows and relations. Distance may have been annihilated, but geographical difference remains of paramount, even added, significance.

At the same time, it is no accident that as globalization has intensified so a new sub-national territorial development paradigm has been gaining momentum across the globe (OECD 2001). Policy devolution seems to be going hand in hand with globalization. The two trends are interdependent. National governments are recognizing that many policy responses to globalization are best made at
the regional and urban scales, in part because this allows policies to be better tailored to the specific circumstances and opportunities in different places, and in part because it is at the regional and city levels that many of the factors shaping economic competitiveness, innovation, social exclusion and environmental degradation are constituted. To be sure, much of this policy devolution is preoccupied with improving the ability of places to compete in the global economy, and hence is locking them into a neoliberal globalization ideology. But the devolution trend also confers potential scope for a transfer of power to the local level, and is acting as a stimulus for new ‘bottom-up’ initiatives aimed at developing networks of local institutions, coalitions, and even links with other regions and cities, to forge place-specific development strategies that escape from nationally imposed ‘one size-fits-all’ policies and which reflect local socio-economic-political priorities and agendas (Cox 1997). For some, the aim should be to harness this new territorial development paradigm in a fight to halt the onward march of globalization in favour of an alternative goal of ‘relocalization’ (Mander and Goldsmith 1996; Hines 2000). However, this is perhaps to miss the basic point: globalization is not simply a top-down, global level process, but also a local one, with locally varying dynamics that require locally varying policy responses. What is clear is that the ‘death of geography’ at the hand of globalization has been much exaggerated. The nature of the local is undoubtedly being reworked by globalization, but it is not receding in importance. The global and the local are inextricably linked (as geographers have tried to capture in such terms as ‘glocalization’ and ‘glurbanization’). It seemed both fitting and timely, therefore, when the RGS-IBG invited me to guest-edit a special issue of Transactions to mark the International Geographical Congress in Glasgow in August 2004, to bring together a collection of papers that testify to the enduring salience of geography in a globalizing world. Each of the six authors here – all leading scholars in the respective fields – illustrates the importance of geographical difference and the local, and how they relate to and intersect with more global scales, whether it be in the context of economic development, economic regulation and governance, culture, social relations, or environmental politics. I am deeply indebted to them all for working to a punishing deadline, and for re-affirming the difference that geography makes.

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