

Localizing Global Affairs

Abstract: The aim of this article is to challenge the paradigm of global and explain why we need a more localized approach to *doing* global affairs and how we might consider more innovative and creative ways of *doing* global affairs by re-scaling global affairs towards local places and 'localizing global affairs.' It argues for greater attention to place and local scales in global affairs. *Doing* global affairs with place in mind will make rich contributions to our understanding of the world and issues of global affairs. It will greatly improve our understanding of the multiplicity of issues involved with global affairs and re-scaling global affairs towards the local will bring about a stronger understanding of the multi-scalar dimensions of global affairs.

Localizing Global Affairs

Global affairs provides a unique way of looking at the world. It provides a dynamic way of seeing the international linkages of politics, business, economics, and society as they all come together across the globe. However, I have a concern with some of the ways we – global affairs practitioners, scholars, academics, critics, and researchers – pursue topics, conduct research, and *do* global affairs. As a trained geographer, my perspective on the world and issues of global affairs takes a firm root in the position that place matters! Yet, in much of what I read, I often see a failure in global affairs to fully incorporate local places and everyday aspects of global affairs. My aim in this article is to challenge the paradigm of global and explain why we need a more localized approach to *doing* global affairs and how we might consider more innovative and creative ways of *doing* global affairs by re-scaling global affairs towards local places and 'localizing global affairs.'

Admittedly – again, as a geographer – I draw inspiration for writing this piece from recent debates in the field of political geography and critical geopolitics. Recent debates in these subfields of geography call for new approaches to research that “demonstrate how geopolitics 'works' in everyday life”¹ and call for 'localizing geopolitics' through more grounded positions accomplished through ‘on the ground’ fieldwork, especially in conflict zones.² Therefore, part of my aim is to bring these debates to a wider audience in order to help influence how we might go about re-scaling global affairs in the

1 Dodds 2001, 469-484.

2 O'Tuathail, 2010.

future. Moving towards the local and a better understanding of place is a positive direction for geopolitics, international affairs, and global affairs.

In the last twenty-five years several major global changes have taken place that allow me to argue for a greater need to understand local places in global affairs. First, since the end of the Cold War and the break up of the Soviet Union, geopolitics is in a state of reorganization away from the binary between the two great powers of East and West. Issues of global affairs are no longer concerned with this global power struggle but we have not yet arrived on a new way of organizing global geopolitics.³ There is plenty of room in the re-organization of global geopolitics to consider place.

Second, globalization literature demonstrates that there is an increasing interconnectedness between places across globe.⁴ While world-systems theory illustrates that global connectedness has existed for many centuries,⁵ the recent literature on globalization dynamically frames the world in a new era that is less centered around the state and demonstrates that the world is becoming uneven and fragmented. In other words, the fear that globalization would homogenize and deterritorialize the world has now passed as we realize processes of globalization make places in the world more diverse, complicated, infinite, and multi-scalar.^{6, 7, 8}

Third, the state, while still an important player in global affairs and in structuring the world, is losing power to new global and local players. There are many non-state agents above the state, such as transnational corporations (TNCs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs),⁹ as well as below the state, such as local community groups that develop power from the 'ground up' and resist and act back on powers that attempt to overpower them, which is often the state.^{10, 11} All of these non-state actors

3 Agnew 2003, 116-126.

4 Harvey 2002, 82-91.

5 Wallerstein 1974.

6 Appadurai 1993, 269-295.

7 Massey 1994, 146-156.

8 Brenner 1999, 39-78.

9 Kearns 2008, 1599-1620.

10 Slater 2003, 75-92.

are important for understanding changes in global affairs but they are largely unexplored due to an over attention to the state. Global affairs could benefit by paying greater attention to these non-state entities and the powers they produce by resituating the state in relation to these non-state entities in *local* contexts.

Finally, the nature of war, violence, and conflict changed during the past twenty-five years. Research shows that wars are increasingly intrastate conflicts and are shifting away from interstate conflicts. Moreover, intrastate conflicts are protracted and conflicts are more and more likely to experience intervention by U.S. military power.¹² In addition, conflicts are becoming increasingly 'rescaled' to the urban and local levels as “civilian and domestic spaces of urban civil societies emerge, or in many cases *reemerge*, as *geopolitically* charged spaces”¹³ and as cities become direct targets and strategic sites of war.^{14, 15} Further, 'netwar' and 'the global war on terror' forces geopolitics to reorganize between state and non-state nodes.¹⁶

For these reasons, we need to better understand the different ways global affairs play out across multiple localities and recognize that geopolitics and global affairs can revolve around issues of the state without being state-centric. Without an explicit attention to the local, we ignore the uneven reality of global affairs and the diversity of ways global affairs and geopolitics play out in everyday life. Localizing global affairs will help us to see struggles and tensions that might exist between local and global issues. For example, as Dahlman and O'Tuathail¹⁷ demonstrate via the case of attempting to implement the Dayton Peace Accords in Bosnia, we need to better understand how international and transnational policies are carried out in places where these policies are not created. Re-scaling global affairs will allow us to ask questions that include: What are the problems with practicing global affairs

11 Routledge 1996, 509-531.

12 O'Loughlin 2005, 85-86.

13 Graham 2004, 1-30. emphasis in original

14 Bishop and Clancey 2004, 54-74.

15 Luke 2004, 120-136.

16 Flint and Taylor 2007, 67-69.

17 Dahlman and O'Tuathail 2005, 644-662.

without attention to local outcomes; how are large scale policies locally accepted, blocked, or resisted in different places?; and what are the localized effects of these policies on local populations, local economies, and local ways of life? Or one might flip the perspective around to ask: how are local power struggles, local conflicts, and local issues global affairs?

Localizing global affairs might mean new things for how we *do* global affairs. Megoran advocates for the incorporation of ethnographic research methods to balance geopolitical discourses of the elite with the discourses of 'ordinary people.'¹⁸ These methods help to show that the state is not the sole power and it does not have the ability to reign consistently over the whole territory of the state. These methods begin to reveal alternative types of global powers that originate from the ground up. O'Tuathail (2010) posits that localizing practice would potentially require a return to regional expertise as well as timely and costly dedication to learning local languages.¹⁹ While we may take cues from these ideas, it is largely up to us, the next cohort of global affairs practitioners and scholars, to figure out how we might go about *doing* global affairs differently and to consider the implications it will have for future practice. Overall, a change in practice will require *doing* global affairs that focuses less on the state and formal discourses of state geopolitics and a greater attention to place.

Doing global affairs with place in mind will make rich contributions to our understanding of the world and issues of global affairs. It will greatly improve our understanding of the multiplicity of issues involved with global affairs and re-scaling global affairs towards the local will bring about a stronger understanding of the multi-scalar dimensions of global affairs.

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¹⁸ Megoran 2006, 622-640.

¹⁹ O'Tuathail, 2010

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