

# Disembedded Democracy? Globalization and the ‘Third Way’

*Joseph D. Lewandowski*

CENTRAL MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY, USA

## Abstract

This article is an analysis of Anthony Giddens’ attempt to articulate a globalization-friendly alternative to traditional social democracy (the ‘old’ Left) and neo-liberal market fundamentalism (the ‘new’ Right). Specifically, I focus on Giddens’ insistence that globalization is not merely an economic phenomenon but also, and more profoundly, a political and cultural force of ‘time–space distanciation’. Whereas Giddens conceives of a direct causal connection between the disembedding forces of globalization and outcomes of democratization, I argue that such a conception is deeply flawed. Indeed, rather than develop a politically useful explanatory social theory of the complex relationship between globalization and democracy, Giddens’ ‘third way’ theorizing merely hypostatizes the former by invoking it as a cause of the latter. I provide a series of arguments designed to highlight the weaknesses of Giddens’ position, and conclude by questioning the general thesis that underlies Giddens’ account of globalization.

## Key words

■ democracy ■ globalization ■ Third Way ■ time–space distanciation

In the past several years, social theories of globalization have begun to present themselves as political theories of democracy. In fact, recent discussions of globalization have begun to stress the *political power* of globalization to ‘democratize’ the world. Most generally, the claim is that those skeptical of globalization were wrong to view globalization as an increasingly deregulated and technologically sophisticated form of capitalism writ large. Instead, the forces of globalization, so the argument goes, produce not merely world-wide financial systems and real-time market interdependencies but also, and more profoundly, a more open, culturally pluralistic and democratic globe. The basic if somewhat elusive idea is that the radical forces of globalization, powered by information and communication technologies, promote democratization by lifting agents out of the spatio-temporal confines of the local and linking them to ‘the global’. In this way globalization is characterized not as a hegemonic agent of world-wide capitalism but rather as a disembedding agent of global democracy and social equality,

and thus as a transformative force to be welcomed by democratic theorists and intensified by global policy-makers.

Such a characterization of globalization – one which pins its hopes of global democracy not so much on the collective will-formation or actions of situated human beings but primarily on the disembedding power of globalization itself – implies a kind of causal link between forces of globalization and outcomes of democratization, and is the unifying thread that runs throughout Anthony Giddens' recent formulations and defense of a political theory of the Third Way. Indeed, that intensifying the 'runaway' forces of globalization holds the *causal key* to promoting global democracy is the central thesis of Giddens' recent foray into political theory and attempt to find an alternative to classic social democracy (the 'old' Left) and neo-liberal market fundamentalism (the 'new' Right) (Giddens, 1998; 1999; 2000). As we shall see in what follows, at its core Giddens' Third Way is perhaps best described as a political sociology that seeks to tie the future of social democracy directly to the emancipatory forces of globalization.<sup>1</sup>

It is the overarching thesis of this article, however, that in formulating a socio-political theory of the Third Way, Giddens' peculiar embrace of globalization as an objective and promoting force of democracy is deeply flawed. Rather than develop a robustly explanatory and politically useful social theory of the complex relationship between globalization and democracy, Giddens merely hypostatizes the former by invoking it as a cause of the latter. Indeed, in this article I want to criticize Giddens' attempt to establish a causal connection between disembedding mechanisms or macrological forces of globalization and actual outcomes of democratic equality. The Third Way's vision of disembedded democracy relies far too heavily on mechanisms of globalization – mechanisms that in themselves cannot be depended upon to produce such a global political form. Thus it is not the politics of the Third Way but rather the account of globalization that helps to justify such a politics that I want to question here.<sup>2</sup> Put simply, my argument is that Giddens' 'third way' renewal of social democracy is badly served by his theory of globalization.

To develop such an argument I shall begin by presenting central features of Giddens' theory of globalization and the Third Way, focusing especially on his discussions of 'time-space distanciation' and the effects of such temporal-spatial disembeddings at the level of culture and politics. Once the basic tenets of Giddens' account of globalization and the Third Way are outlined I want to go on to develop a series of arguments designed to highlight the weaknesses of Giddens' position. First, I want to argue that while Giddens is perhaps right to argue that globalization may diversify or hybridize existing ways of life by uncoupling symbolic forms from their local contexts, such an insight tells us only something about the *symbolic power* of globalization to de-contextualize and pluralize local cultures, and nothing substantive about the *political power* of globalization to democratize the basic social structures and institutions – the social geography – of a given society. Second, I want to argue that Giddens overburdens the emancipatory promise of communication and information technologies. 'World-wide' global technologies such as the web and satellite television

do not simply democratize information and communication. They also pre-structure and pre-screen what counts as information in ways that are often profoundly de-democratizing. Third, I want to show how the Giddens' discussion of the democratizing power of the public sphere in global civil society is empirically naïve. Emergent deliberative publics, however global, too often lack what they most need: not space and a voice but the decision-making power necessary to bring about concrete political and social change.

### The 'Third Way' Theory of Globalization

In his Reith Lectures, entitled *Runaway World* (1999), Giddens divides existing views on globalization into two camps.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand stand the skeptics – those, mostly on the political left, who view globalization as a quantitative phenomenon, a kind of capitalism writ large. On the other side stand the radicals – those, mostly on the political right, who view globalization as a qualitative change, a revolution in the way the world 'does business', as it were. Giddens thinks it is the radicals who have the upper hand in debates on globalization. But in formulating a 'third way' he faults both groups for seeing the phenomenon of globalization almost exclusively in economic terms; indeed, throughout his recent work Giddens himself repeatedly emphasizes the need to reject the view that globalization is primarily an economic process in which the ever-expanding interdependence of real-time financial markets produces a global society. For Giddens, this kind of world economic interdependence thesis may be correct insofar as it goes, but it does not adequately capture the cultural and political forces and emancipatory flows of globalization made possible by new forms of information and communication technologies. Globalization, Giddens insists, is a uniquely political, technological and cultural phenomenon.

Indeed, what is distinct about globalization is that it signals 'the transformation of time and space in our lives' (Giddens, 1998: 31).

Globalization is changing everyday life, particularly in the developed countries, at the same time as it is creating new transnational systems and forces. It is more than just the backdrop to contemporary policies: taken as a whole, globalization is transforming the institutions of the societies in which we live. (Giddens, 1998: 33)

According to Giddens, globalization is a process that transforms existing everyday routines and local rhythms (time) as well as the cultural locations, institutional and social structures, and political forms (space) in which such everyday routines and rhythms are situated. Globalization is thus a socioculturally transformative force in the sense that it de-situates or 'distanciates' – de-temporalizes and dislocates – everyday life from the temporal-spatial contexts in which it was pre-globally embedded and couples it instead to 'the global'.<sup>4</sup> Such disembedding of the local and coupling of the global means, for Giddens, that 'globalization has something to do with the thesis that we now all live in one world' (Giddens, 1999). Globalization does not simply introduce new commodities or more things

– such as videos and televisions – into existing frames of reference and daily rhythms of experience. Rather, globalization is a force that transforms and interconnects such frames and rhythms; it alters and couples the most basic locations and routines – the very circumstances or ‘being’ or lifeworld – in which everyday human life transpires.<sup>5</sup>

This view of globalization as a process of time–space distanciation not only distinguishes Giddens’ ‘third way’ position from both Left and Right views of globalization. It also allows Giddens to shift the focus of globalization to the cultural and political levels in unique ways. From Giddens’ perspective, the idea that globalization ‘Westernizes’ or ‘Americanizes’ the world reduces complex multi-directional cultural flows of globalization to a one-way street.<sup>6</sup> What Giddens wants to maintain is that globalization disembeds, however unevenly at first, *all* temporal routines and spatial locations and re-situates them in the global. Hence Giddens characterizes globalization not as a destructive imperialist force of cultural homogenization but more deeply as a creative power that shakes up established traditions and ways of life and, indeed, generates new possibilities for human identities by freeing them from the confines of traditional Western *and* non-Western locations (Giddens, 1998: 31ff.). Or, to paraphrase Giddens’ formulation of the matter, under the impact of globalization the institutions and everyday practices of Western countries are persistently being freed of the hold of tradition, while other societies across the world that hitherto remained more traditional are being detraditionalized (Giddens, 1999).

Though he does not put the matter in quite this way, I take Giddens’ point about the culturally disembedding force of globalization to be that it is sociologically naïve to think that the forces of globalization are unreflexively absorbed into the practices and world-views of actors. Hip-hop in Tokyo or London, for example, is not merely an expression of the Americanization of Japanese or British culture – as if Japanese or British youths were simply culturally inculcated ‘global dopes’. Instead, Japanese (or London) hip-hop is a unique, hybridizing appropriation of an already hybrid (African-American) cultural form made possible by global communication and web technologies such as MTV and Napster. Put another way, it seems right to argue, as Giddens does, that the force of globalization at the level of culture is not inherently colonizing but rather potentially pluralizing. The ‘pushing down’ of globalization on culture, as Giddens describes it, means that dominant (Western) cultural forms do not merely obliterate the local, as if the disembedding force of globalization could lift actors out of their context *without a trace* (Giddens, 1998: 31). Instead, the global and the local intersect at the level of culture in ways that transform both: the local is ‘detraditionalized’, as Giddens says, while the global becomes pluralistically ‘indigenized’, to borrow a useful term from Arjun Appadurai (1996).

At the level of politics Giddens wants to tell a similar story of the causal power of globalization, and it is precisely for this reason that he connects globalization to social democracy. On Giddens’ account, globalization both ‘pushes down’ on cultural norms and ‘pulls away’ from nation–state political forms (Giddens, 1998). The force of globalization is democratizing in the sense that it disembeds

not merely symbolic forms but also *political power*. Globalization lifts political power out of its locations in traditional institutional structures peculiar to the nation-state. In so doing, globalization creates new opportunities for non-governmental organizations to develop innovative forms of public and direct democratic action – what Giddens calls ‘globalization from below’ (Giddens, 1998; Giddens and Hutton, 2000). For Giddens, the disembedding of political power is precisely what makes mechanisms of globalization a force of genuine democratic transformation. Such a free-floating but interconnected form of globalized political power restores democracy to street level, empowering minority, interest and pressure groups to associate and work to transform not only their own streets and neighborhoods but also the ‘global village’ in which they now live (Giddens, 1998: 72).

In large part Giddens’ argument about the ways in which globalization democratizes from below relies upon the persistence and expansion of a vibrant ‘public sphere’ – an open and transparent arena of public dialog and deliberation that makes the political authority of the state accountable, less bureaucratic, and more responsive to the collective will of everyday citizens. As is well known, the idea of the public sphere appears in both ancient Greek and Enlightenment political theories of the state. The structural transformation of the public sphere has been studied and theorized most notably by Jürgen Habermas (1962). Today the public sphere has become a kind of centerpiece not only for ‘third way’ theorizing but also for deliberative theories of democracy. The attraction of an account of the public sphere for those globalization advocates who, like Giddens, want to argue for the democratizing power of globalization is rather clear. The public sphere is a political venue of civil society – an open, transparent theater of rational dialogic interaction among everyday citizens that is ostensibly shielded from the authority of the state and the getting and spending of globalized market relations. For the Third Way, the global expansion of the public sphere is crucial inasmuch as the public sphere enables individuals to associate freely with one another and express views that are typically ignored by ‘globalization from above’ or poorly represented by more traditional forms of democratic action. The democratic promise of the public sphere is that in such a location it is not the economic force of global capitalism but rather reason, or, to borrow Habermas’ phrase, the ‘unforced force of the better argument’, that prevails.

Like his account of globalization and culture, Giddens’ account of globalization and the public sphere depends upon a particular philosophy of technology – one in which technology becomes not merely a medium but also the world-disclosive engine of cultural and political change. For Giddens, recent technological innovations alter the very frameworks and fabric of human life in *democratizing ways*: they disclose new worlds, create new publics, open up new frames of reference for dialog and new spaces for democratic action. In particular, Giddens signals out global communication and information technologies such as television and the World-wide Web for their democratically disclosive power to fostering local public spheres and at the same time connect such localities to one another in a global democratic public sphere. For Giddens it was

satellite television that fundamentally enabled the various non-governmental democratic movements that beset the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the closing decades of the last century (Giddens, 1998; 1999).<sup>7</sup>

### Globalization and Equality

To a certain degree, Giddens' cultural account of globalization – his emphasis on the effects of the cultural disembeddings wrought by global technologies – helpfully demonstrates various non-economic (cultural or symbolic) dimensions of globalization. Clearly globalization, as Giddens, among others, stresses, has a profoundly cultural component.<sup>8</sup> Inasmuch as local cultural identities are not merely homogenized by increased contacts with dominant cultures, it can be said that, *at the level of symbolic forms*, globalization also disembeds rather than merely colonizes existing ways of life. Thus it seems right to suggest, as Giddens does, that in the disembedded global village, cross-cultural encounters, however imbalanced or asymmetrical, leave neither party untouched.

Having said this, however, is only to acknowledge the potential of the symbolic economy of globalization to foster cultural pluralism and hybridity. It leaves the question of the *political economy* of globalization – in particular, the political economy of place in global capitalism – unanswered. Certainly, Giddens' commitment to social democracy leads him to consider the problem of inequality and social dislocation in the context of globalization. But it is difficult to see how, on Giddens' account, globalization may be said to play a causal role in disembedding agents from their entrapment in what Giddens calls mechanisms and locations of social exclusion (Giddens, 2000: 104ff.).

For example, Giddens cites the importance of fostering globalized economic development in places where socio-economic and ethno-racial mechanisms of exclusion are most durable – in long-term poverty locations such as inner cities, whose populations, according to Giddens, have been badly served by various 'hand-out'-style welfare programs characteristic of the 'old Left'. Drawing on Michael Porter's (1998) work on the competitive advantage of the inner city, Giddens argues that the answer to urban poverty is not state-funded 'hand-out' programs but the development of globally competitive 'info-tech' and service industries. Adopting the rhetoric of the American (Clintonian) New Democrats, Giddens claims that such globally positioned, growth-driven industries offer a 'hand-up' by creating new jobs and new wealth, thereby lifting agents out of locations of durable poverty (Giddens, 2000: 106).

Inner-city business could and should be positioned to compete in regional, national and even international markets. We should seek to redistribute wealth by creating new wealth . . . Inner cities sit in geographical areas that should be prized – think of the proximity of London's East End to the financial centers of the City. (Giddens, 2000: 115)

Giddens' claim here is that the global restructuring of the urban economy will promote greater inclusion and socio-economic equality among city residents – it

will help to eliminate the durable inequality that divides the East End and the City of London.

Yet recent social research devoted to the effects of the New Economy generated by globalization suggests just the opposite: shifts in the global economy from manufacturing to service industries in cities generate not globally inclusive but powerfully exclusionary and highly undemocratic enclaves of gentrified neighborhoods, cappuccino bars and militarized 'public' spaces surrounded by ghettoized, dilapidated slums.<sup>9</sup> Globalized urban economies do not redistribute wealth so much as polarize inequality, producing a new class alignment of high-income service providers and low-income informal and casual workers, and exacerbating spatial concentrations of wealth and poverty in the urban milieu. Put differently, the geographical proximity of and socio-economic distance between London's East End and the financial centers of the City of London are, pace Giddens, not suggestive of an unrealized redistribution of urban wealth but a literal expression of the new landscape of urban socio-economic inequality in the wake of global restructuring.

This description of the way in which globally restructured economies polarize the social geographies of the urban milieu finds extensive and richly detailed empirical support in Saskia Sassen's *The Global City* (1991), a study of New York, London, and Tokyo. In her research Sassen documents the ways in which the decline in manufacturing jobs and economic restructuring in the urban setting has altered the social geography of global cities in powerfully divisive and unequal ways.<sup>10</sup> What Sassen's empirical research illustrates is that the shift from manufacturing to globally oriented service economies in cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo cannot be relied on to redistribute wealth and promote equality in the ways Giddens suggests.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, New York, London, and Tokyo have experienced new and greater forms of socio-economic inequality among urban workers than had existed *before* the loss of major portions of the manufacturing sector in each city. Further, Sassen's analyses make clear what terms such as 'growth', 'job creation', 'development', and 'mobility' in fact mean in the context the new 'global' service and information economies.<sup>12</sup> Such economies do indeed create jobs: a limited number of high-end employment opportunities in sectors such as banking, finance, and information technology that in turn rely on a vast army of low-wage, informal and casual laborers, such as clerks, cleaning and maintenance personnel to sustain them. The presence of so many low-wage workers in cities is not coincidental to but constitutive of the kind of 'growth' and 'development' wrought by global economic restructuring.<sup>13</sup>

The undemocratic result of global economic restructuring, Sassen goes on to demonstrate, is a particularly insidious form of increased income and social polarization. On the one hand, such restructuring effectively dismantles a system that once 'provided a measure of job security, health benefits, and other components of a social wage to a critical mass of workers' (Sassen, 1991: 333); on the other hand, in orienting itself 'to a world market and to firms rather than to individuals', global economic restructuring erodes local political power and accountability (p. 334). Businesses and corporations become disembedded

– responsive only to ‘the global’ – while armies of workers remain embedded in local contexts of rising inequality. The kind of distancing generated by globalizing imperatives of economic restructuring fosters not democratic equality and wealth redistribution but a peculiarly divisive political economy of place, one that is class and spatially polarizing. To put the matter in Sassen’s stark terms, what results in global cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo, is not ‘third way’ urban democracy but an ‘urban regime’ in which a new global aesthetic of everyday life replaces the functional criteria of the middle class with highly stylized modes of conspicuous consumption – ultramodern loft-living, nouveau restaurant dining, and international boutique shopping (p. 335). Meanwhile, for those who do the labor-intensive work necessary to gentrify such lofts, wash the plates on which such meals are served, and operate the cash registers where such shopping is done, life in the city becomes increasingly socio-economically polarized, de-democratized, and caste-like.

### Globalization and Technology

Faith in the power of technology to deconstruct existing and often rigid cultural frames of reference and authoritarian political institutions and disclose new possibilities for global democratic action is, as we have already seen, at the heart of Third Way social democratic political theory and politics. Indeed, for Giddens and Third Way politicians such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, belief in the innovative power of information and communication technologies to disclose not merely new but also *more democratic* forms of collective human existence has become a kind of religion. In particular, television, as well as other ‘world-wide’ technologies such as instantaneous electronic communication and information technologies such as the Internet have been singled out by Giddens for their democratization of information and knowledge, and ability to generate new global public spheres.

Such appeals to the inherent democratically disclosive power of technology are, however rhetorically suggestive, not easy to defend. It seems naïve to suggest, as both Giddens and practitioners of the Third Way persistently do, that the causal effect of web-based technologies is simply to create an open global network for the storage and democratic exchange of free-floating information. Networked societies exert profoundly ambiguous mechanisms of social causation.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the rise of global networks of communication and information can be said to present new opportunities for ‘wired’ individuals to emancipate themselves from local constraints on senses of self, horizons of experience, and shared stocks of knowledge and information.<sup>15</sup> In this way web technology liberates and pluralizes social life. On the other hand, such global technologies are also profoundly pre-structured and pre-structuring of *what counts* as communication and information and identity.<sup>16</sup> In this way web technology places new constraints on social life. Indeed, the World-wide Web is a true ‘network’ or information- and communication-filtering mesh. The power of the ‘information

superhighway' lies in the ways it structures in advance the types of informational and communicative traffic that may travel on it. Such a superhighway is as much networked marketplace as it is agora, a congested motorway of economic exchange and an arena of dialog. And yet the extent to which the durable features necessary for genuine democratic deliberation – accountability, cooperation, mutual trust, unfettered association, etc. – can be located in the increasingly market-driven domain of cyberspace remains an open question.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, Giddens insists that web-based technologies foster public spheres of political dialog. Indeed, global governance from below is according to Giddens very much enabled by technologies that make it possible for everyday citizens to monitor and publicly criticize the political (and corporate) powers that oppress them (Giddens, 1998: 144ff). This may occasionally be the case, but as an explanation of the democratic effects of globalization it is surely incomplete. The very technologies that, according to the Third Way, globalize from below also make the global surveillance of consumers' preferences and citizens' actions possible for the first time in world history. In many ways the World-wide Web has made it much easier for corporations and nation-states to monitor citizens and their habits and dialogs, rather than vice versa. As an example of such authoritarian monitoring, one needs only recall the well-publicized case of Huang Qi of Chengdu, in the southwest of China. Mr Huang established a web page for locating missing persons. His online activities were rewarded with his arrest, which he recorded on his website with the following lines: 'They are here now [the policemen], so long. Thank you all: thanks to everybody devoted to democracy in China' ([www.6-4tian-wang.com](http://www.6-4tian-wang.com)). The haunting farewell registered on this website – a website that has now been shut down by Chinese authorities – is a chilling reminder of the power of global technology to disclose not merely new forms of democracy from below but also new forms of political totalitarianism from above.

A related claim about the pre-screening power of global technology could be made vis-à-vis television. The influence of 'Western' (privatized or commercial) satellite television is, as Giddens claims, significant in today's world, though not precisely in the ways that Giddens thinks. Under the imperatives of free-market economies, the 'television revolutions' of yesterday, as Giddens describes the political events that transformed Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, become the corporate television democracies of today – democracies in which profoundly market-oriented broadcasting networks colonize public airways, turning potential spheres of public deliberation into political infomercials.

The ongoing effects of television democracy have been anything but unambiguously democratic.<sup>18</sup> What appears on the television screen is typically the result of pre-screening mechanisms devoted mostly to consumption and ratings. World-wide television contains a carefully packaged, increasingly globally marketed, and always consumable point of view, and may in the long term actually *discourage* the kinds of associational activities characteristic of robust civic participation in a global village.<sup>19</sup> Television, like the world-wide web, does not simply open up new frames of reference or create new public spheres. It also

enframes politics in highly de-politicized ways – as events designed to inform and entertain without turning off viewers.<sup>20</sup> Broadcasts devoted to covering the origins, meanings, and goals of political protests, or to the airing of robust disagreements about complex political issues, simply do not fit within the institutional enframing of corporate television as a medium of information and entertainment. Not the argument but rather the image prevails in television democracy. Indeed, thanks to television, the image of Nelson Mandela may be globally recognizable in the way that Giddens claims. But the *substance* of Mandela's political views is not. At best, the technological force of globalized commercial television contributes to the globalization of culture. Television disembeds, say, the clothing styles of a Michael Jackson rather than the politics of a Mandela.

### Globalization and the Public Sphere

Of course the fact that the Internet and satellite television do not readily generate a politically democratic public sphere is no reason to deny the importance of such a sphere. Giddens is right to include a conception of the public sphere in his account of the renewal of social democracy. Indeed, it would be historically naïve to dispute the crucial role of the public sphere in democratic societies. Numerous historical transformations in the structure of modern societies have been profoundly effected by and are unthinkable without collective expression and coordinated actions in public space. In the American context one thinks especially of the Civil Rights Movement, in which the immorality of everyday practices of ethno-racial degradation and the illegitimacy of institutionalized forms of apartheid in 'democratic' White America were made visible and criticized in public forums by everyday agents. In such forums, the rational core of arguments about judging people by the 'content of their character', to borrow Martin Luther King's phrase, rather than by skin color were an effective counter to the irrationality of racial hatred and ethnic violence. In Europe, one thinks of the widespread student protests during 1968, or the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s, to cite just two additional examples where collectively orchestrated agitation in public space generated profound political and social changes in the structures of existing societies.

But it is important not to overestimate the concrete democratizing power of acting in the public sphere, wherever that sphere is created or emerges in a global world. Indeed, the Third Way's faith in the democratic promise of the global public sphere needs to be tempered with a more complex understanding of the practical nature of democratic political power and the public sphere itself. While most criticisms of public sphere theories of democracy focus on the problem of how to reconcile ideals of public reason with the realities of cultural complexity and pluralism in such a way that the validity claims of the former transcend the contexts of the latter, I want here to raise an even more basic objection to Giddens' discussion of the globalization of the public sphere. I want to argue that

Giddens' theory of the public sphere is far too de-differentiating. That is, the problem with Giddens' account is that he does not distinguish between (at least) two kinds of democratic publics.

As Nancy Fraser has pointed out, theories of the public sphere need to maintain a distinction between what she calls 'weak' and 'strong' publics (Fraser, 1992). The former are distinguished merely by their deliberative power to shape opinions. The latter, by contrast, do not merely shape opinions and existing beliefs; they also have the *institutional power* to make decisions, write and enact policy, and establish binding laws. One of the central problems with Giddens' account of the public sphere is that it does not preserve such a crucial distinction. Instead, Giddens conflates the *consciousness-raising power* of the associational groups of civil society (weak publics) with the *legislative power* of sovereign parliaments and senates (strong publics).

The difficulty here is simply that globalization does not alter the political fact that many of the collectives that inhabit the public sphere have no real decision-making (institutional) power. Non-governmental organizations, street protestors, online discussants, members of counter- or sub-cultures, participants in and viewers of televised town-hall style meetings – the multiplication of such publics might play an important role in making visible a certain issue in a way that raises 'global consciousness'.<sup>21</sup> But these kinds of weak publics, however numerous, do not make policy and do not write laws. Indeed, for all the paradigmatically public actions and dialogs carried out during the Civil Rights Movement, it was, in the end, the strong public (legislative, and, ultimately, military authority) of the state that was needed to de-segregate America's schools and places of work.

Certainly, developments in information and communication technologies may in fact, as Giddens suggests, make it easier for weak publics to associate, coordinate their efforts and be heard in a broader, more public, way. Yet no feat of global technology can magically transform weak publics into strong ones. And that weak, street-level publics are *heeded* in politically meaningful ways – that they are able to convince not only other global members of weak publics but also strong publics to change laws and institutions – is a question not satisfactorily answered by a social theory of democracy content to invoke the causal power of globalization to shape human lives.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion: Explaining Globalization

This article has raised three specific objections to core features of Giddens' theory of globalization and social democracy. First, it was argued that Giddens is wrong to claim that globalization promotes socio-economic equality and democracy in locations of durable ethnoracial and class division. The shift from manufacturing to information economies that is the hallmark of economic globalization produces increased spatial and economic polarization in urban settings. Second, it was claimed that Giddens mistakenly overburdens the democratizing power of global technologies. Such technologies are perhaps best capable of globalizing

cultural forms, but cannot in themselves be depended upon to democratize information or foster genuine public spheres. Finally, it was argued that Giddens' reliance of the transformative power of a globalized public sphere fails to distinguish between two forms of democratic power: the weak, consciousness-raising power of deliberative publics and the strong, legislative power of institutionally sovereign bodies.

I want to close by returning to Giddens' general thesis about the disembedding force of globalization. The Third Way's central theoretical justification for embracing globalization is, as we have seen, that globalization is a force of time-space distancing. Powered by information and communication technologies, the force of globalization generates disembedded or global democracy. The problem with such an explanation of globalization is simply that it cedes too much to the 'runaway' power of macro-level mechanisms and offers too little in the way of micro-level accounts of the everyday situations, perspectives, actions, and oppositions of those who inhabit and themselves shape the global world. What is missing in Giddens' discussion of globalization – and what is already being developed in the literature under the rubric of 'global ethnography' – is the inclusion of what we might call 'the global actor's point of view'.<sup>23</sup> Such a point of view, badly obfuscated in macrological accounts of globalization such as that of Giddens as well as in most Third Way policy discussions, indicates that globalized contexts and practices cannot be adequately explained as disembedded from relations of spatial domination and locations of temporal constraints. On the contrary, those who in fact experience globalization on the ground come to discover rather quickly that with globalization emerges not disembedded democracy but new forms of spatial and temporal control.<sup>24</sup>

In short, the thesis of time-space distancing underlying Giddens' account of globalization does not adequately explain *how* the mechanisms of globalization function. While it may go some way towards describing the effects of globalization at the level of symbolic forms, Giddens' distancing thesis is far too macrological to explain sufficiently the concrete political effects of globalization on specific contexts, relations, individuals, and ways of life. Rather than merely temporal-spatially disembedding, globalization also intensifies space-time relations, hyper-embedding human actors and often burdening them with the spatial and temporal pressures – the weight, as it were – of the global world. There are, or so I have tried to argue here, good reasons to doubt that the Third Way's insistence on the continued intensification of such pressures will contribute to the renewal social democracy. Indeed, the difficult task of renewing democracy in a globalized world falls not to mechanisms of globalization but to those actors who, for better or worse, are persistently embedded in such a world.

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**Notes**

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- 1 This attempt to claim that, far from threatening democracy, globalization actually generates and promotes it, has not surprisingly made Giddens' Third Way attractive to globalization-friendly New Democrats in the USA and New Labour in the UK. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Giddens' Third Way fusion of globalization and democracy has played an influential role in helping to define and direct the policies of former and current global democratic leaders, such as Bill Clinton and Al Gore, and Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder, as well as emergent global leaders such as Brazil's president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. In the US context see, for example, the New Democrats' 'progressive declaration' (1996); in the UK context, see Tony Blair (1998); in Germany, see Blair and Gerhard Schroeder (1999); in the Brazilian context, see Cardoso (2001).
- 2 Criticisms of Giddens' politics are well known, and will not be rehearsed in what follows. Instead, my discussion of Giddens will focus exclusively on developing an overdue critique of his sociology of globalization; indeed, the target here is a political sociology that views globalization as democratizing, that is, as a promoting or causal force of democracy. But for a discussion of the extent to which the Third Way has surrendered the mantle of the Left and ultimately adopts the very neo-liberalism of market fundamentalism it promises to supersede, see especially Hall (1998). For a discussion of the peculiar Anglo-centrism of the Third Way, see Tuomioja (1998). Tuomioja argues that Giddens fails to demonstrate the relevance of the Third Way for more social democratically evolved countries such as Finland or Sweden. Giddens' response to such criticisms is to argue that while capitalist markets may not be self-regulating, they are also not the necessary enemies of democratic equality, and that the historical lesson to be learned from those countries that have survived the storm of neoliberalism (Thatcherism in the UK; Reaganism in the USA) is that the future prosperity of democracy depends upon the introduction of new, unorthodox forms of social democracy, even in places such as Scandinavia, where 'third way'-style policies are already well entrenched (Giddens, 2000).
- 3 The text of the lectures to which this essay refers is available on the World-wide Web: [http://news.bbc.uk/1/hi/english/static/events/reith\\_99/](http://news.bbc.uk/1/hi/english/static/events/reith_99/).
- 4 Giddens' discussion of the distancing power of globalization is most fully elaborated not in his discussion of the Third Way but rather in his analyses of modernity (Giddens, 1990). In this regard globalization is for Giddens very much the culmination of the political project of modernity. For a productive discussion of the tenability of such a thesis, see Beck et al. (1994).
- 5 In a less existential vein, the following anecdote provides a glimpse of how, according to Giddens, globalization disembeds culture: 'A friend of mine studies village life in central Africa. A few years ago she paid her first visit to a remote area where she was to carry out her field work. The evening she got there, she was invited to a local home for an evening's entertainment. She expected to find out about traditional pastimes

of this isolated community. Instead, the evening turned out to be a viewing of "Basic Instinct" on video. The film at that point hadn't even reached the cinemas in London' (Giddens, 1999).

- 6 On this point, see also Giddens and Hutton (2000).
- 7 On this point, see also Beck (2000), who emphasizes the role the global network of CNN played in enabling the political changes in the former Soviet Union.
- 8 For related discussions of the cultural force of globalization, see especially Jameson and Miyoshi (1998), King (1997), and Appadurai (2000).
- 9 This is especially evident in the 'third way' democracy of America, where four-fifths of the workforce is now employed in service industries. For detailed accounts of the effects of such economic restructuring on the American urban milieu, see Zukin (1989; 1995), Davis (1992), and Vergara (1997). For a related discussion of the contemporary social geography of São Paulo, Brazil, see Caldiera (1996). And for a global perspective on cities, see Sassen (1991; 1994).
- 10 In a summary of her comparison of employment and earning trends in the pre- and post-manufacturing economies of New York, London, and Tokyo, for example, Sassen is able to conclude that all three cities: 'experienced losses of manufacturing jobs and above-average growth in producer services, though the timing and magnitude varied. Finance paid the highest average salaries in all three cities, but the gap between men and women is enormous. Among the fastest-growing jobs are professional and clerical occupations, the former paying some of the highest salaries and the latter paying increasingly lower salaries. Furthermore, where the evidence is available, clerical jobs in the new service industries tend to have lower salaries than do clerical jobs in manufacturing and transportation, while the reverse is the case with professional jobs. This suggests growing inequality in earnings insofar as the new service industries and professional and clerical jobs are among the fastest-growing elements in these cities. Finally, in all three cities, part-time jobs have increased and are disproportionately held by women; the available evidence shows that part-time jobs tend to be more lowly paid than full-time jobs. Perhaps the most acute case is Tokyo, where the majority of new jobs in the 1980s were part-time jobs and temporary employment agencies constituted one of the fastest growing industry branches' (Sassen, 1991: 224).
- 11 For a related set of arguments, see Frank (2000).
- 12 For a more detailed account of worker 'mobility' under the imperatives of globalization, see Sassen (1990) and Sassen and Appiah (1999).
- 13 In fact, producer services, Sassen writes: 'generate low-wage jobs directly, through the structure of the work process, and indirectly, through the structure of the high-income lifestyles of those therein employed and through the consumption needs of the low-wage work force. Even a technically advanced service industry, such as finance, generates a significant share of low-wage jobs with few educational requirements. High-income residential and commercial gentrification is labor intensive and raises the demand for maintenance, cleaning, delivery, and other types of low-wage workers' (Sassen, 1991: 281).
- 14 On this point, see especially Castells (1998; 2001).
- 15 Though even here there is reason to be cautious. Talk about the emancipatory 'global' reach of web technologies is meaningless for those citizens who lack the basic infrastructures – phone lines and personal computers – needed for web access. According to the *2002 World Development Indicators* database used by the World Bank, phone lines and personal computers are in short supply in many of the most densely populated parts of the world. Indeed, whereas the 474 million residents of Europe

- and Central Asia have 314 fixed line and mobile telephones and 45 personal computers per 1,000 people, their 659 million 'global' counterparts in Sub-Saharan Africa must make do with 32 fixed line and mobile telephones and 9 personal computers per 1,000 people; meanwhile those 1.355 billion residents of South Asia fare even worse, with 31 fixed line and mobile phones and 4 personal computers per 1,000 inhabitants (see [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)).
- 16 For a related set of criticisms of the limited democratic power of Internet technology, see Bauman (2000).
  - 17 See, for example, Poster (2001).
  - 18 For a relevant discussion of the relationship between corporate television and democracy, see Mazzocco (1994).
  - 19 See, for example, Putnam's (2000) discussion of the effects of television watching on civic engagement in America.
  - 20 On precisely this point, see Bourdieu (1998).
  - 21 Giddens points out that 'in 1950 there were only two or three hundred [non-governmental organizations]. Now there are more than 10,000 and the trend is still sharply upwards' (Giddens, 2000: 123). But the sheer increase in the number of such organizations is not a necessary indicator of their political effectiveness. In fact, precisely the opposite might be the case.
  - 22 But for an insightful series of ethnographic case studies devoted to exploring the possibilities of linking the street-level democracy of weak publics to the institutional power of strong publics in a global world, see Barker (1999) and Low (2000).
  - 23 For two recent examples of what 'global ethnography' looks like, see Bourdieu et al. (1999) and Burawoy et al. (2000).
  - 24 This is true even of the most technologically globalized locations, such as 'wired' workplaces. See for example O'Riain (2000). And for other discussions of the global actor's point of view, see Haney (2000), Gowan (2000) and Blum (2000). In the French context, see Pialoux (1999), Beaud (1999) and Champagne (1999).

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■ **Joseph D. Lewandowski** is a former Fulbright Graduate Fellow (1997–98) in Philosophy at the Free University, Berlin, and is currently Associate Professor of Philosophy, Central Missouri State University (USA). He is the author of *Interpreting Culture: Rethinking Method and Truth in Social Theory*, Lincoln, NE and London: Nebraska Press, 2001, and of essays that have appeared in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, *Cultural Critique*, and elsewhere. Address: Central Missouri State University, Department of Philosophy, Martin Building, Warrensburg, MO 64093, USA. [email: jdlewandowski@mail2world.com]