

## INTERNATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL, MULTINATIONAL, GLOBAL

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What are the differences between international, transnational, multinational, and global? People's uses of the terms and the distinctions they are meant to mark vary enormously. Here's one way of thinking about the relations among them that makes sense to me:

(1) **International** refers to interactions or arrangements *between* nations (where nation is commonly treated as a synonym for country). It's often taken to refer to interactions among the governments of these countries (e.g. international relations) but it's also used to refer to interactions between people, organizations, or groups associated with different countries — e.g. international conferences or international soccer matches.

(2) **Transnational** refers to processes or arrangements that *span* the boundaries of two or more countries. It's often used to refer to processes or arrangements generated by people or organizations other than the governments of countries — e.g. transnational corporations orchestrating processes of production and distribution that span national boundaries or the transnational social fields created by cross-border migrants who remain actively involved with people and places in the countries from which they've moved.

In my mind, the "transnational" is not just a sociospatial term but what Mikhail Bakhtin called a chronotope, as much about time as space — specifically suggesting processes that not only span boundaries but also do so in a manner involving (or coming close to) *simultaneity* (consider, for example, the relatively recent ability of corporations to use computers, satellites, and cables to orchestrate "just-in-time" production processes that respond almost immediately to information from in-store scanners about how rapidly particular products are selling, or the difference between migrants sending messages or money to people back home that take three weeks to arrive and migrants able to communicate and wire money instantaneously).

(3) **Multinational** -- Some people distinguish transnational corporations from *multinational* ones that are understood to run largely distinct operations in a plurality of countries. People who highlight this distinction often argue that, since the mid-1960s, transnational corporations have increasingly displaced multinational ones as the dominant organizational vehicles for the pursuit of profit; think of the auto industry, where companies like Ford used to produce cars in the U.S. largely for the U.S. market, in Britain for the British market, and so on but now have different parts of a car produced for them in different parts of the world and then bring them together for final assembly in the country where the cars will be sold or in a country from which they will be exported to their final destination.

(4) **Global** strictly speaking refers to processes, interactions, and arrangements that encompass the entire planet or, perhaps, affect the entire planet even if they don't operate in every part of

it. However, the term is often used more loosely to refer to any processes and arrangements that operate beyond the limits of a single polity, especially ones that operate over long distances and connect people in different world regions (however those are defined). Some people who recognize that these processes don't encompass or even affect the entire planet are still willing to use the term in part because words that include "nation(al)" (especially as a synonym for sovereign territorial states) are, strictly speaking, only appropriate once a division into formally sovereign territorial states (or, more fully, those quasi-mythical things we call "nation states") has become widespread if not ubiquitous. They're not really appropriate to earlier periods characterized by the dominance of empires and other kinds of polity; indeed, one might argue that it was not until the 1970s, with the disappearance of most formal colonial systems, that most of the world was organized around a system of formally sovereign territorial states, which may seem paradoxical given that this is precisely when some people see "global" arrangements as displacing earlier "national" ones to produce what they claim is a "post-national" world.

Some people prefer "transnational" to "global" because they want to be attentive to the specific and often limited geographies of processes and arrangements that span "national" boundaries and/or because it suggests the *coexistence* of countries (and their governments) and the processes that span their boundaries (including possible tensions between the two) rather than the *disappearance* of both state boundaries and the power of "national" governments that is sometimes implied in references to the global.