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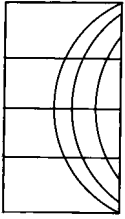
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**Martha C. E. Van Der Bly**

## Globalization: A Triumph of Ambiguity

### Sign of the Times

Recently, I attended a theatre performance for deaf children. While we were waiting for the performance to begin, the group of children circulated in the hall of the theatre in a whirlwind of movements and gestures driven by what seemed to me unusually strong and intense emotions. Their teacher explained to me that deaf children who have not yet learned to express themselves through sign language show significantly more aggressive behaviour than children of the same age who express themselves through normal speech. 'To discipline them, we need to teach them sign language as soon as possible', he said, apologetically. 'Do you not like strong emotions?', I asked him while we were watching the extraordinarily vivid group of children. He smiled and said: 'Well, maybe, I do but . . . I don't like chaos.' And then he ran off to a little boy who had suddenly begun pawing a little girl with braids in her hair.

Just as earlier sociologists faced the challenge of contributing to the establishment of *national* societies, so contemporary sociologists face the challenge of contributing to the understanding and the building of a *global* society. Finding a satisfying and indeed practical definition for a word that describes those processes should be at the heart of contemporary sociology.

Economists seem to have succeeded in reaching more or less a commonly accepted definition of globalization, namely as international economic integration that can be pursued through policies of 'openness', the liberalization of trade, investment and finance, leading to an 'open economy' (see, for example, Khor, 2001: 7; World Bank, 2002: 23). The main point of discussion is now to what extent this economic integration stimulates economic growth and can lead to poverty reduction in developing countries.

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Indicators<sup>1</sup> have been developed aiming to measure the openness of an economy such as trade flows, amount of foreign direct investment, portfolio capital flows and investment. Closely related to this definition is a notion of *unilateral inequality*, implying usually that the western world provides the standards on certain indicators that cannot yet be met by other parts of the world, and that policy should aim to neutralize that inequality. Even though the indicators might be disputable and the concept of unilateral global inequality is certainly questionable, progress is being made in an agreement on the definition.

In this article, I argue that I do not see that kind of development in sociological studies on globalization, which seriously hinders the progress of empirical studies on the subject. It needs to be specified from which point of view the researcher is approaching the concept of globalization. Currently, these conceptualizations often remain unspecified and implicit.

A first step towards a commonly accepted definition could be the design of a theoretical framework that comprehensibly positions current sociological concepts of globalization. This article aims to provide such a framework.

I see this theoretical framework as being composed of three dialectical approaches of globalization. These approaches I call dialectical, in a Platonic rather than a Hegelian sense: as a method to acquire knowledge by interrogatory dialogue, rather than as a process whereby contradictions are overcome through synthesis.

In fact, the very conclusion of the debate on the definition of globalization could be a fundamental recognition of the impossibility of overcoming contrary concepts, and indeed a possible rejection of the necessity for doing so in favour of an approach of question and response, of dialogue based upon mutual equality. But let us not jump to conclusions.

For now, I argue that sociologists should aim for a distinctive sociological theoretical framework of globalization in which empirical fieldwork can be carried out, refined, tested and specified, in order to provide society with a better understanding of the transformation of contemporary societies under the influence of a process that is commonly known as 'globalization'.

The proposed framework is based upon an overview of some major sociological conceptualizations of globalization and upon a systematic, formal analysis of a popular sociological definition of globalization. But first the common-sense definition of 'globalization' is explored, as I believe that sociology cannot define its main definitions isolated from the common-sense meaning of words, but should aim to counterbalance the common sense.

## Common Sense and the Definition of 'Globalization'

Science is nothing else but refinement of every day thinking. (Einstein)

Whereas dictionaries are neither normative nor prescriptive, they generally aim to reflect the meaning words have within the common sense. The word 'globalization' as such does not surprisingly enough have its own entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*,<sup>2</sup> but is mentioned under the section 'global'.

Global means, first:

1. Spherical, globular. *rare*.

1676 R. DIXON *Nat. 2 Test.* 2, I could challenge the best Mathematician . . . to demonstrate . . . that they can so much as . . . frame a Global Circle without the least gibbosity or concavity therein. 1848 *Lond. Mag.* 119 According to the modern System . . . there is no Upper nor Under, the Earth being global. 2. [After Fr. *global*.] Pertaining to or embracing the totality of a number of items, categories, etc.; comprehensive, all-inclusive, unified; total; *spec.* pertaining to or involving the whole world; world-wide; universal.

The second meaning of global directly refers to McLuhan's (1968) 'global village' and 'globalization' is mentioned.

**b. *global village***, a term popularized by M. McLuhan (1911–80) for the world in the age of high technology and international communications, through which events throughout the world may be experienced simultaneously by everyone, so apparently 'shrinking' world societies to the level of a single village or tribe; also in extended use. Hence '**globalism**, internationalism; **globali'zation**, the act of globalizing; '**globalize** *v. trans.*, to render global; so **globalized** *ppl. adj.*

Interestingly, the second meaning of 'global' seems to somehow precede the first meaning. When events are experienced simultaneously all over the world, they might become all-inclusive, worldwide. Thus 'globalization' as the 'act of globalizing', which is 'to render global', culminates eventually in the first signification of 'global': to become universal.

Nonetheless, while related concepts are in an exclusive entry extensively defined, including several quotations, globalization is not. This could be explained by its novelty. Yet the word 'globalization' is not that new. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'globalization' was used for the first time in 1962, in an article in *The Spectator* (Cerami, 1962). In this article, titled 'The US Eyes Greater Europe', it occurs in the following sentence, 'After so long privately chiding the French for their fear of *mondialisation*, the Americans are struck by the thought that globalisation is, indeed a staggering concept'.<sup>3</sup>

The vocabulary in a dictionary generally omits words that are too fashionable, too technical, or only marginally used. Globalization is neither new, nor only in usage for a short period of time. Maybe the word is only rarely used?

On Monday 9 August 2004, at 15.06 I searched the web through [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) for the word 'globalisation' (spelled with an s). I found 1,580,000 pages for 'globalisation'. A search for 'globalization' (spelled with a z) resulted in 3,130,000 pages. In a search for the word 'socialism' (which has its own section in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and was first mentioned in 1837)<sup>4</sup> on the same day I found 1,420,000 pages; for 'communism': 1,490,000 (which also has its own section in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and was first mentioned in 1840)<sup>5</sup> and 2,510,000 pages for 'capitalism' (which again, has its own section in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and was first mentioned in 1854)<sup>6</sup>.

The word 'globalization' on that particular day had more hits on the Internet than 'socialism' and 'communism' together and more than 'capitalism' on its own, while these words have their own sections in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Apparently these established words referring to older theories play a less important role at the moment in the public debate. One might argue that the Internet is pre-eminently the medium for debate on globalization and that the distribution will be overestimated, and this seems to be the case.

In the British Library, on 9 August 2004, I found 575 hits for 'globalisation' in the subject search of the online catalogue, 2986 items for 'globalization' and on the same day 10,546 hits for 'socialism' and 8837 for 'communism'. While more manifest within the context of new channels of communication than through the established ones, globalization still seems to be subject to intense public debate. So the infrequency of its use could hardly justify its rather volatile position in the dictionary. But the argument here is of course not about a word being represented in a dictionary.

The argument is that within the context of common sense the concept of globalization is currently so diffuse and multi-interpretable, that it is difficult to define, or give meaning to it other than semantically, as in 'the act of globalizing'. When McLuhan refers to a situation of global experiences, one assumes these shared experiences will lead to a shared language. With the word 'globalization', society has not yet found that shared language.

This is not just a theoretical problem, but has very practical consequences too. As I illustrated with the anecdote about the theatre visit of the deaf children, one of the capacities of words is to regulate emotions both as transmitters and as organizers of unstructured feelings. In that sense, words in themselves can be instruments for disciplining behaviour and transmitters of harmony. The word 'globalization' seems unsuccessful as a streamliner of thoughts and emotions. On the contrary, it gives rise to passionate expressions worldwide and is clearly a subject of recurring aggression.

One might argue that this has nothing to do with the very nature of the word as such, but everything with the subject it represents. I would agree with the latter but disagree with the first part of the argument. The discussions around globalization are obviously rooted in the problems it refers to, but, as I argue in this article, stem from the very nature of the word and its meanings as well. Forty years after first being mentioned,

globalization still seems to be a staggering concept that has apparently not lost any of the overwhelming connotations of its imagination to the limitations of reality.

Yet the profound changes that are currently unmistakably taking place, and which add to a growth of insecurity, cause at the same time a deep felt need for a concept, a framework to understand and interpret these changes. The challenge for sociology is to offer this clarification to society and to reduce uncertainty, while at the same time acknowledging the growth of complexity.

The current sociological concept of globalization, being not a grand theory but open to various interpretations, offers both the advantages *and* the disadvantages of an undefined subject. The advantage might be the freedom to highlight the concept in a broad variety of ways and from various perspectives, which is an interesting intellectual exercise from a sociological perspective.

The disadvantages arise exactly because confusion is caused by the combination of broad and yet undefined and implicit points of reference in the subject. If something is everything, eventually it becomes nothing, and at this point *The Globalization of Nothing* (Ritzer, 2004) has become a tautology.

True freedom and progress come only when certain limitations are acknowledged. When sociologists want to strive for a commonly accepted definition of globalization, new choices have to be made and implicit choices have to be made explicit. In the next section, I distinguish three dialectics that seem to characterize the current sociological debate on globalization, based upon an overview of the literature.

### Three Dialectics within Globalization as a Sociological Concept

One example of dissatisfaction with existing conceptual approaches to globalization can be found in the work of James Rosenau (1996: 249–50). ‘Does globalization’, he asks, ‘refer to a condition, an end-state, or to a process? Is it mostly a state of mind, or does it consist of objective circumstances? What are the arrangements from which globalization is a departure?’ Common sense is apparently struggling with defining the word, while at the same time globalization is not a grand theory like communism or socialism with founding fathers, which main themes can be discovered in the approaches taken by sociologists?

I distinguish three dialectics within the conceptualization of globalization: the dialectic between globalization-as-a-condition vs globalization-as-a-process; between globalization-as-a-reality vs globalization-as-futurology and one-dimensional globalization vs multidimensional globalization.

#### Globalization-as-a-Condition vs Globalization-as-a-Process

For most thinkers, ‘globalization’ refers in some way to global proximity and to a shrinking world, echoing its origins as laid out in McLuhan’s ‘global

village'. Tomlinson (1999: 2) highlights this aspect in his understanding of globalization as: 'an empirical condition of the modern world, which I call *complex connectivity*. By this I mean that globalization refers to the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterizes modern social life.'

Within this basic idea of complex connectivity, Tomlinson emphasizes the multidimensionality of globalization: 'the economic, the political, the social, the interpersonal, the technological, the environmental, the cultural and so forth' (Tomlinson, 1999: 13); and highlights in his further analysis 'the cultural dimension'. One of the interesting premises that Tomlinson does not share with other approaches is that his concept of globalization is mostly 'an empirical condition of the modern world', i.e. a tangible situation rooted in the here and now of modern life, rather than a process.

Globalization defined as 'complex connectivity, an empirical condition of the modern world' is clearly incompatible with an idea that globalization is 'at least as old as the rise of the so-called world religions two thousand years ago', as Roland Robertson (1992: 6), argues. When Hirst and Thompson (1996), in *Globalisation in Question*, aim to counter what they call 'the strong variant of the economic globalisation thesis', they do not necessarily argue that globalization is age-old, but they do oppose – among other things – the idea that globalization is 'unprecedented in history', arguing that in fact some manifestations of globalization (such as openness of the markets and immigration flows) were stronger between 1870 and 1914 than they are now. Unlike Tomlinson, though, they emphasize that globalization is a process rather than a condition, yet criticize the idea that all the manifestations of this process of globalization are 'new'.

In Tomlinson's definition, globalization is explicitly not perceived as 'a process', but explicitly defined as a 'condition',<sup>7</sup> moreover a 'modern' condition. Against this approach, one might argue that by its very semantic meaning every '-ion' word represents a process and not a condition.<sup>8</sup> Even though every process creates certain conditions that are measurable at any moment in time, one might argue that quintessentially globalization as a 'word' refers to a process rather than to a condition: to 'an act of globalizing', rather than a situation of 'being globalized'.

On the other hand, considering globalization as an age-old process denies the fact that something has changed. What happened from around 1960 that made it necessary to find a new word for a new reality? Has the process changed, has it been intensified, become manifest? Something has changed, or in the words of W. B. Yeats:

All changed, changed utterly  
A terrible beauty is born.

In his poem 'Easter 1916', Yeats asserts that Ireland and its people have 'changed utterly', through 'a terrible beauty' of rebellion and chaos,

suggesting that Ireland had to affirm its independence and national identity through rebellion and the passionate pursuit of change. Is there a 'terrible beauty' the birth of which we are witnessing during our times: an act of rebellion and a passionate pursuit of change? Is this terrible beauty that will change the world and its people utterly needed to affirm a global identity? Or is the comparison too daring?

Something has changed, changed utterly. And that is why any argument that globalization is an age-old process, even though the argument in itself might be valid, is in the end unsatisfying to explain the contemporary phenomena. How can we capture the dialectic between the idea that what is happening in our times is structurally different from what happened before and at the same time acknowledge the fact that processes like these might in fact be age-old?

As one of the main issues in defining globalization, I distinguish a tension between the idea that somehow the processes that we are witnessing here and now are not new, have been there before, yet in another form and shape and to another extent; while on the other hand, undeniably these processes *are* very new, they *do* refer to something unprecedented – for which it was even necessary to create a new word.

The question is in this case: is globalization as a process new, or has the process come to a certain stage in which it has grown from a latent process, to a dominant process; from an invisible motion of societies to an undeniable development influencing all humankind? 'Globalization as an empirical condition of the here and now' might be new, while 'globalization as a process' might be dating back to ancient times. This is what I call the dialectic between globalization-as-a-condition and globalization-as-a-process, and I call it a true dialectic as in the dialogue between these two characteristics' accumulation of knowledge is generated, albeit not an amalgamation.

When globalization is considered an empirical condition it only can be contributed to modern times, or in Tomlinson's interpretation: 'an empirical condition of the modern world'. One might argue that there was once an era that was an 'era of globalization' in ancient times, but then inevitably the question arises as to what extent the condition of that specific era relates to the present condition, thus returning to a concept of globalization as a process, and not as a condition. If globalization is a condition, it is a modern condition.

On the other hand, if globalization is considered a process, then the cross-tabulation with the factor 'time' creates a wide number of undefined matters and possibilities. First of all, one might ask when did this process start. Is it a new process or an old process? If it is an old process, questions might be asked such as: how old? As old as mankind? Or a product of a recent history? Of western history? If it is so old, what is new about the process? Why do we need to define it *now*?

If globalization is considered as a new process (and this definition comes



close to the idea of globalization as an empirical condition of modern times), the question that needs to be asked is: what exactly is new about the process? Which elements form part of the process with the generic term 'globalization'? This is what I call the dialectic between multidimensional and one-dimensional globalization, and I discuss that later.

The dialectic between globalization-as-a-condition and globalization-as-a-process does not only generate discussion about the history, but about the future as well, and in doing so, about the sociology that is produced by certain definitions of globalization. Sociological studies of globalization, I argue, easily fall into the trap of futurology, because it is not clear to what extent the reality relates to the concept of globalization that is sketched. This I call the dialectic between globalization-as-reality and globalization-as-futurology.

### Globalization-as-Reality vs Globalization-as-Futurology

When globalization is considered as an empirical condition of the modern world, it is clearly defined by the occurrence of contemporary manifestations. On the other hand, when globalization is defined as a process, questions about the beginning of the process need to be answered, even though that might be mostly a task for historians, but most importantly, for sociologists, questions are raised about the *direction* the process is going in.

In their definition, Hirst and Thompson sum up various features of the direction that globalization might be leading to. In the strong variant<sup>9</sup> of the economic globalization thesis, they argue, globalization is portrayed as a process that leads to a highly internationalized and open economy, unprecedented in history, driven by the power and the will to expansion of transnational companies, with no roots in any country, thus enforcing huge amounts of capital mobility and eventually people all over the world.

Central in this definition of globalization is that it refers to a world that might come, *the outcome of the process* and does not necessarily refer to the characteristics of today, or the 'empirical condition', which Tomlinson places at the core of his analysis. The way of analysing the process is to formulate a theoretical idea about the outcome situation, and then – as we cannot empirically research the future – question to what extent we see these trends in the here and now.

Once globalization is considered as a process that is mostly defined by the outcome of the process, a broad variety of scenarios arise: we might see the rise of a homogeneous culture and that culture might be Americanization (Schiller, 1976); or it might be mostly based on business principles of multinationals and then it might be McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 2000); it might lead to global consumer capitalism (Barber, 1995); or a heterogeneous culture with hybridization (see, for example, Hannerz, 1990; Nederveen Pieterse, 1995); a polarization, such as a clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1993); or

a McWorld vs Jihad (Barber, 1995). In fact, we might see it all happening at the same time.

The very basic idea of defining globalization as a process implies that it intrinsically refers to an outcome situation that lies in the future, which is by definition immeasurable and indefinable. This implies that the possibilities of the concept as a research framework for empirical research are restricted, and one needs to turn to the discipline of futurology to find appropriate research methods, such as scenarios, trend analysis, chaos theory, simulation games or mathematical modelling (see, for example, Malaska, 2000).

Besides the fact that the empirical research techniques to collect knowledge about the future are intrinsically different from those techniques that aim to provide us with knowledge about contemporary society, the approach of globalization-as-futurology implies that it is very unlikely that consensus will be found over the definition. A statement such as 'globalization is cultural homogenization' is irreconcilable with the statement 'globalization is cultural heterogeneity'. How can consensus be achieved when the roots for definition are to be found in the future: invisible, unclear?

Globalization-as-futurology has very little ability to reduce information, narrowing down fears and aggression by capturing the ever-wandering mind in clear definitions. On the contrary, its power for imagination is unlimited, which is theoretically challenging, but again might not always be the best way towards progress of knowledge.

Not only for the academic community is globalization-as-futurology a limited and in the end unfruitful concept. If it is presented to the public without making clear that it *is* futurology, it creates either fear (in the case of a nightmare scenario) or false hopes (in the case of a Utopian scenario), and in both cases it creates the image of a powerless individual, or even a powerless society, which has no free will to construct its, always unknown, future. The sociology of globalization in the form of futurology is in the end deterministic, and therefore limits freedom.

### **One-Dimensional Globalization vs Multidimensional Globalization**

Another difference between the approach of Tomlinson and that of Hirst and Thompson is that the latter choose a one-dimensional approach: the economic dimension of globalization. Tomlinson, on the other hand, places his argument on cultural globalization explicitly within the multidimensions of globalization. Even though at the moment the concept of a multidimensional globalization is more or less accepted, this is, from the point of view of trying to find a definition for globalization, not necessarily a step forwards.

In fact, globalization's multidimensionality makes it even more difficult to clarify the word and give it meaning through reducing the possible significances. Whereas, on one hand, a one-dimensional approach of globalization

offers more clarity, but as a consequence of the reductionism denies the broad variety of fields in which processes of globalization occur, a multidimensional approach of the subject faces serious problems of loss of meaning as well.

According to Mittelman (1996: 2), the manifestations of globalization include:

... the spatial reorganization of production, the interpenetration of industries across borders, the spread of financial markets, the diffusion of identical consumer goods to distant countries, massive transfers of population within the South as well from the South and the East to the West, resultant conflicts between immigrant and established communities in formerly tight-knit neighbourhoods, and an emerging world-wide preference for democracy.

Somehow, intuitively, we might agree that indeed such a broad variety of developments stems from something that we might call 'globalization', yet at the same times the question arises what the common identifier is. In this case, the common identifier does not lie explicitly in the future, so the processes must be united by something else other than the expected outcome.

Can all these developments stem from one common identifier? Is it still justified to name them all under the same denominator, or do we simply need more words? Do the political manifestations have the same character as the economic manifestations of globalization? Or the same driving force? One might oppose the capitalist form of globalization, the expansion of the multinationals, but what if that brings a wider spread of different art forms all over the world at the same time? Would one oppose that too?

Who can oppose or favour a term that is in itself contradictory and ambiguous? Yet it might be exactly this ambiguity, this lack of clarity of the idea of globalization that arouses aggressive reactions, just like the lack of an ability to use sign language leads to aggressive behaviour among deaf children. For sociologists, this multidimensionality involves extra challenges, as we need to define what the sociological aspect of globalization is. Is it the cultural dimension? Is it the dimension of class and status, or inequality? What is the sociological dimension of globalization?

Whereas the common-sense definition of globalization is remarkably open and undefined, so is the conceptual framing of globalization among sociologists. Incompatible definitions between globalization-as-a-condition, leading to the conclusion that 'globalization is unprecedented in history', juxtapose definitions of globalization as 'an age-old process'. A multidimensionality approach to globalization does justice to the reality of growing interconnectedness between different fields of society and human behaviour, yet blurs the term with intrinsic contradictions and paradoxes that a more one-dimensional definition of globalization lacks.

The idea of globalization-as-a-process tends to lead towards futurology, as the common identifier of the underlying processes is often the direction that the processes are supposed to head for and by definition are not

knowable. I further elaborate on these dilemmas based upon a formal semantic analysis of a definition that is commonly used among sociologists.<sup>10</sup>

### Formal Analysis of a Commonly Used Definition

Albrow's definition in the preface of *Globalization, Knowledge and Society* (Albrow, 1990) is not only one of the first conceptualizations of globalization among sociologists, it also offers an elegant and commonly used definition:

Globalization refers to all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society. (Albrow, 1990: 9)

With all the elegance of the definition, the very nature of this idea of globalization implies its limitations as well. I do not criticize the definition as such or offer an alternative definition, but point out the limitations of the concept, intrinsically linked to this definition, based on a formal semantic analysis. With this I hope to show the dilemmas that every definition of globalization faces and highlight the previously discussed dialectics.

#### A Process: Underestimation of the Present

In Albrow's definition, globalization is seen as a process, not as a condition. Since globalization is considered a process, or more precisely as a sum of different processes (see the following subsection) defined by a future that is supposedly the destination of these different processes and which can be opposed with the past, which is supposedly the origin of the different processes (see the subsection 'The Common Identifier is Destination'), the main focus of refining the definition is drawn to the form and the shape of the future, and the extent to which it distinguishes itself with the past. This implies that there is relatively little attention paid to the actual here and now of the processes of globalization.

In this here and now, all these different processes might actually happen at the same time. Obviously, there *are* in the present traces of what can be described as either Americanization, westernization or McDonaldization, but there are counterprocesses as well. One could, for example, distinguish what I call here 'Sushi-nation': an infiltration of eastern practices such as yoga, food like sushi, Buddhism, or tai-chi into the western hemisphere. These counterprocesses are either undervalued or even ignored as practices when attention is too exclusively drawn from the present to a future extrapolated from restricted features of contemporary society.

In other words: the future cannot be unveiled by just looking at one aspect of society; if sociology wants to draw maps of society and offer a framework for understanding change, we cannot draw a map of the future, we have to draw a map of the here and now. Within the context of globalization-as-a

process there is very little space for the static character of globalization's present reality – which will be different tomorrow.

### **Multidimensional: Neglect of Internal Contradictions**

This process of globalization is in Albrow's definition, in fact, the sum of a broad variety of processes of change, which occur in a broad variety of sectors – in the field of economy, of tourism, of law, international trade, music, of politics and of religion – thus being multisectoral, embedded in every sector of the society. This defines globalization intrinsically as a multidimensional process. Research done on globalization therefore has to mention specifically which aspect of globalization it discusses, and involves all humanities. As all the globalization processes influence one another and together make up a process in itself, called globalization, an interdisciplinary academic approach is required.

The use of globalization as a singular word representing a multidimensional concept poses the serious problem that the different processes of the dimensions might refer to different realities, to different possible outcomes, which could be paradoxical or even contradictory. For example, one might argue that globalization leads to more uniformity and to capitalist/western domination. Even if this might be true for *economic* globalization, does it mean that *cultural* globalization leads to more uniformity and to capitalist western domination?

Quite the opposite, one can argue: there is a growing exchange of cultural patterns all over the world, with a growth of diversity – at least *within* European societies. Setting aside this specific argument, it seems to hold that when globalization refers to quintessential pluralistic processes, statements like 'globalization will lead to more inequality' cannot be made. Yet if the different globalizations lead to different destinations, what do the processes have in common? What is the single cause the different processes are referring to and what makes it possible to represent them with one single term?

### **The Common Identifier is Destination: Ignoring Unique Features**

The last part of Albrow's definition is focused on the common identifier: the processes incorporate the 'peoples of the world ... into a single world society, global society'. This implies that the common identifier is not found in a single feature that the different processes have in common, but lies solely in the destination that they are heading for. This approach of defining the common identifier is very different from Tomlinson's approach.

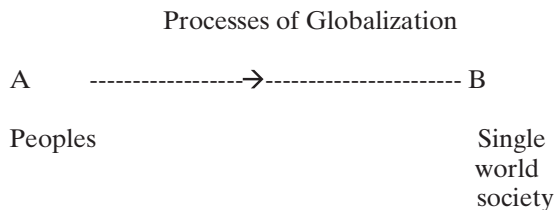
Tomlinson, as I argued earlier, sees globalization as a multidimensional modern condition, with all the different features having one single feature, which he calls 'complex connectivity'. Here the common identifier is defined as a singular feature of all the different processes, precisely because the basic

premise of the concept is that globalization is a condition rather than a process. This premise forces one to consider the present rather than the future and thus discourages futurology.

If globalization is the sum of different processes, which are all heading for the same direction, the question is: what are the characteristics of this destination and what are the characteristics of the origin? Or in other words: what is the nature of the transformation that takes place? To analyse the nature of this transformation, a formal semantic analysis of the definition is presented in the following.

### The Nature of the Transformation: Overestimation of Uniformity

Globalization is in Albrow's definition essentially considered as a process of transformation with an initial situation A and a new situation B. One parameter of the initial situation is mentioned and three of the possible outcome situations. The definition – 'Globalization refers to all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society' (Albrow, 1990) – can formally be described as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1**

The transformation process is defined mostly by the direction of its possible outcome, albeit it mentions one characteristic of the initial situation, A: 'peoples'. According to the definition, in the initial situation A, there are 'peoples' who are along the lines of the transformation processes, incorporated into the new situation, B, in a 'single world society'. Can any more information about the initial situation A be derived from the definition?

In order to characterize the initial situation, it must be defined as being intrinsically different from the outcome situation, or else it would simply not be a process of profound change. If, according to the definition, the outcome of the processes of globalization will be a single world society, then in the initial situation at least there was *no* single world society, or not anything that with any logical reason could be called a world society.

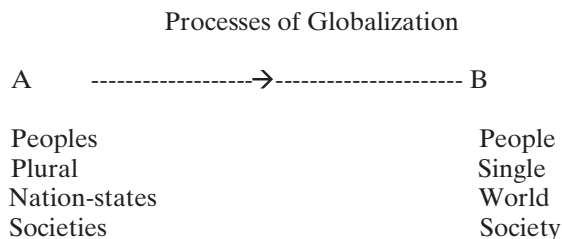
The concept of the outcome situation B can thus be broken up into three terms: single, world and society. To begin with the last: if under B one

'society' can be distinguished, then under A at least that must not have been the case, so the initial situation must have been characterized by 'societies'.

In the outcome situation, if the society is defined as 'world', the territorial embeddedness of the societies under A cannot be distinguished as 'world', but should be characterized by other geographic areas, maybe nation-state. It is equally arguable that the societies referred to could be embedded in smaller (provinces or counties) or bigger (continents) geographic entities. As 'society' tends to be associated with the boundaries of the nation-state, we might choose this as the main feature under A.

Now a common identifier of both the initial and the outcome situation unfolds itself. Opposed to the singularity of the outcome situation (see subsection 'No Causality'), reflected in the aspect of a 'single', 'world' 'society', the feature of 'pluralism' can be attributed to the initial situation A. Along the same lines, another characteristic can be added to the outcome situation B: as under A there are 'peoples', under B, after a process of profound change, there must be 'one people'.

Thus arguing that globalization is a sum of transformation processes that mainly have in common the direction in which they are pointing, and assuming that the initial situation must be intrinsically different from the outcome situation, the initial situation (under A) can be defined as a situation of peoples operating in societies embedded in nation-states, together creating a truly pluralistic situation. This is, of course, indeed a rough reflection of our world today (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2**

But will the outcome of these processes indeed be a single world society inhabited by one people?<sup>11</sup> On every level of the transformation, the process refers to a transformation of a situation with a pluralistic character to a situation with a singular character. This is reflected as well in the second part of the definition: 'We are indeed seeing the rise of humanity as a collective actor' (Albrow, 1990: 8).

Within this interesting concept, the idea of pluralism as a distinct feature of humanity is replaced by a notion of humanity as a collective actor, facing

strengths, challenges, responsibilities and vulnerabilities as if it were one person. The transformation that is implied by the definition is even more profound. The peoples of the world will not only be incorporated into a single society – which could still be considered largely an external change – but at the same time they will be transformed *per se*, acting no longer as ‘peoples’, but as ‘people’: a collective actor involving the whole of humanity.

The common identifier of the different processes is not then just the direction that the processes are heading for, but also a principle that they share: a notion of transformation from pluralism to singularity. Even though this principle is not inevitably linked with a notion of uniformity, the association is easily made. This is being reflected in the doom scenarios of globalization, which most often foresee the loss of individual uniqueness in favour of anonymous group generality.

As uniformity is a strictly human concept, nothing that grows from nature is completely uniform; uniformity can only be generated as the result of a human group process, involving the exercise of one person or group of persons over the others.

If a hundred different people were provided with the same materials and were asked to build a house, a hundred different houses would be built. Yet if one company was asked to build a hundred houses for a hundred people and was provided with the same materials for each house, a hundred identical houses might be built.

The transformation from singularity to plurality does not necessarily have to be based upon the idea of uniformity though; it might be based on the principles of homogeneity or universality as well. And these notions tend to be underestimated when the outcome of the process seems to be a given fact and the concept in itself highly deterministic. Because what is the driving force behind the processes and how can the outcome be altered?

### **No Causality: Determinism and Neglect of Human Agency**

In later work, Albrow (1996) explicitly replaces the notion of globalization as a process with the hypothesis of a Global Age,<sup>12</sup> thus leaving space for human agency and avoiding both the trap of futurology and determinism and rejecting the view that globalization is an irresistible one-way direction in history. In the previously mentioned definition of globalization, though, there is no place for causality: processes of globalization are being described as they occur and related to the direction they are moving in, without mentioning the driving force.<sup>13</sup>

When the causality is unspecified, the concept of globalization faces the serious danger of underestimating human agency. Globalization, instead of being the product of different types of processes that are all the outcome of human actions, is perceived as a *deus ex machina*, a panacea or a disaster.

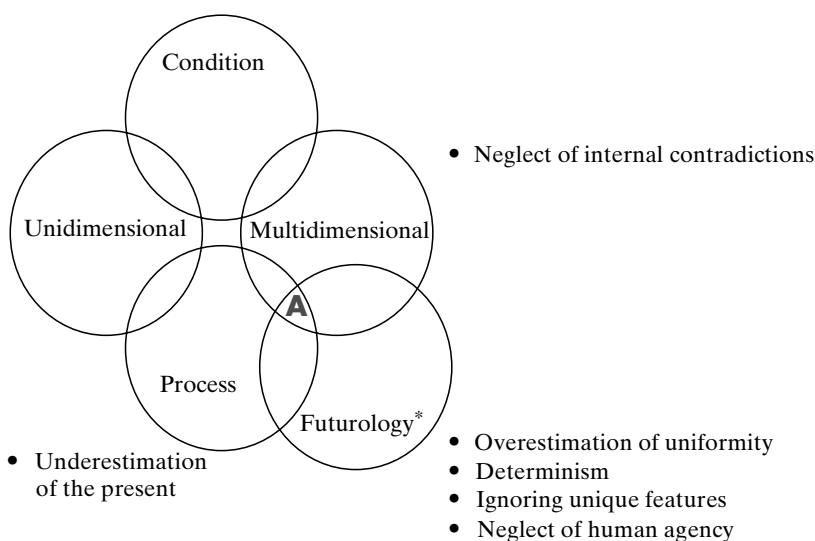
The myth of globalization, as Hirst and Thompson argue, exaggerates



the degree of human helplessness in the face of contemporary economic forces in the same way primitive myths were a way of masking and compensating for humanity's helplessness in the face of the powers of nature. But nature's forces did not aim for money and profit. One of the major representatives of the contemporary economic forces, Bill Gates, writes in *The Road Ahead*: 'One thing is clear: we don't have the option of turning away from the future. . . . I believe that because progress will come, no matter what, we need to make the best of it' (Gates, 1995: 11).

Portraying globalization as inevitable is instrumental behaviour for those who will profit from the foreseen developments. This kind of economic determinism, often in the name of 'freedom', is in fact a threat to human agency and therefore to human freedom. Sociologists therefore should aim to bring back human agency in the conceptualization of globalization and explicitly face the causality question.

The place of Albrow's definition within the dialectic framework is represented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3** Dialectic Globalization Framework – to Position Sociological Theories on Globalization. Positioning Albrow's (1996) Definition (A) and its Limitations.

\* Versus dialectic 'reality' (not included).

### A Triumph of Ambiguity

Is 'globalization' an adequate 'word' or 'sign' for a new social reality? This article argues that the concept is quintessentially ambiguous, thus creating an

accumulation of confusion rather than an accumulation of knowledge. This ambiguity is not only reflected in the obscurity surrounding the meaning of globalization in common sense, but in sociological debate as well. Three main dialectics in this debate are distinguished.

First, I see a discrepancy between those who approach globalization-as-a-condition and a feature of modern reality, versus those who envision globalization-as-a-process. Second, I have distinguished the dialectic between those who approach globalization-as-futurology and those who study globalization-as-reality. The third dialectic is seen as between a one-dimensional and a multidimensional approach to globalization.

The dilemmas that go hand in hand with the three dialectics, I have illustrated via analysis of a commonly used definition of globalization: focusing on globalization as a process leads to a neglect of the present, whereas the multidimensionality leads to an underestimation of internal contradictions. Defining the process by a common destination leads to an overemphasis on the danger of uniformity and determinism, while specific features of the process and, above all, human agency are neglected.

Whereas economists have rather successfully defined globalization as ‘an open economy’, sociologists might switch the debate and consider the idea of globalization as the idea of ‘an open society’, and discuss which empirical parameters indicate the level of ‘openness’ of a society. As both the ambiguity and the determinism might serve those who will profit from the processes of globalization, sociologists should aim to strive for a commonly accepted definition that explicitly creates space for human agency and focuses on clarity.

At the moment, we might be just like young deaf children, watching the theatre performance of everyday life unfolding before us, without having the sign to express the observations we make and instead angrily and fearfully watching the curtains fall over a triumph of ambiguity.

## Notes

I want to thank the Institute for International Integration Studies and the Sutherland Centre in Trinity College Dublin for their research facilities and Professor R. J. Holton and Dr Gerry Boucher of the School of Sociology and Social Policy, Queen’s University Belfast for their help and valuable comments.

- 1 See for example, *Foreign Policy* magazine’s ‘Globalisation Index 2004’ (Kearney, 2004).
- 2 Online version.
- 3 ‘1959 *Economist* 4 Apr. 65/1 Italy’s “globalised quota” for imports of cars has been increased. 1961 WEBSTER, Globalism . . . Globalisation. 1962 *Spectator* 5 Oct. 495 Globalisation is, indeed, a staggering concept. 1962 *Sunday Times* 28 Jan. 12/2 Our own comparatively timid intentions towards globalising the Common

- Market. 1965 *Economist* 23 Jan. 316/1 Between globalism and isolationism there is extensive middle ground' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, online).
- 4 '1837 *Leeds Times* 12 Aug. 5/1 *Socialism*. – Messrs. Fleming and Rigby. – On Monday evening . . . these two gentlemen attended [*sic*] an audience . . . on the topics of the real nature of man. 1839 J. MATHER (*title*), *Socialism Exposed: or 'The Book of the New Moral World' Examined*. *Ibid.* App. 22 To explain and expose what Robert Owen's Socialism is' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, online).
  - 5 '1843 *New Age* 20 May 24 Works on Communism, Religious, Political, and Domestic. 1844 *The Movement* 25 Sept.' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, online).
  - 6 '1854 THACKERAY *Newcomes* II. 75 The sense of capitalism sobered and dignified Paul de Florac. 1877 A. DOUAI *Better Times* (1884)' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, online).
  - 7 'Globalisation refers us to an empirical condition: the complex connectivity evident everywhere in the world today' (Tomlinson, 1999: 32).
  - 8 Apart from 'condit-ion'.
  - 9 See for example: 'The strong version of the globalisation thesis requires a new view of the international economy . . . one that subsumes and subordinates national-level processes' (Hirst and Thompson, 1996: 4).
  - 10 Before the formal analysis, I want to make explicitly clear that the following analysis is a formal, semantic analysis, and does not necessarily refer to the developments in the 'real world', and is certainly not necessarily the description of what the real outcome of globalization will be – after all, there *is* free will.
  - 11 The situation of a single world society is obviously not necessarily the description of what the real outcome of globalization will be. Figure 2 is merely the translation of a frequently used definition into a formal figure. After all, for every process of transformation, it holds that there might be some security about the direction, and the outcome cannot be defined until it has realized itself.
  - 12 See, for example, Albrow (1996: 214, note 1): 'We follow Robertson (1995: 35) here in stressing the importance of referring to globality as distinct from globalization when we want to avoid the connotations of process'.
  - 13 This refers to the discussed definition. In other work, such as *The Global Age: State and Society Beyond Modernity*, Albrow (1996) explicitly emphasizes human agency through knowledge and the importance of a 'history of the present'.

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