

GLOCALIZATION: SELF-REFERENTIAL REMEMBRANCES

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Abstract: This intervention is comprised of a sketch of the ways in which I have encountered the concept of glocalization, as well as glocality, during the past thirty-four years. In one sense this means that it is extra-autobiographical. In saying this I have strongly in mind the not infrequent maxim that all good sociology, as well as anthropology and other social sciences, are at the same time extra-autobiographical. As will be seen in what follows this relationship between the autobiographical and the extra-autobiographical is part and parcel of the intellectual image that is presented here. My first conscious encounter with the word and idea of glocalization was an indirect result of the intellectual concern that I developed with globalization in the 1980s or, perhaps, even before then. It should be said in this respect that there were a number of binaries that were prominent in social scientific discourse in the 1960s and 1970s that undoubtedly had a strong bearing on my thinking about globalization and later glocalization. These included such conceptions as cosmopolitanism-localism and various others of that nature. Even less obvious were such distinctions as transcendence-immanence and sacred-profane. The genealogy inspired by such binaries were undoubtedly in my mind as I began explicitly to enter what might well be called the “glocal fray”. Moreover, I was to learn after I first used the concept of glocalization in 1992 that an anthropologist, Eric Swyngedouw, had used this concept around the same time as myself; both of us inspired by Japanese business discourse. As the 1990s wore on more and more people joined in the debate with varying degrees of hostility and enthusiasm, more frequently the former than the latter. In tracing this history, I shall obviously speak about the changes in, and fortunes of, the better-known concept of globalization as well as the “lesser” concept of localization. Being a sociologist – more appropriately now, a trans-disciplinarian – I shall also focus upon the increasingly significant branch of social/natural science that addresses such issues as climate change, biodiversity and the debate about the Anthropocene. This paper is being composed during the tragic and global phenomenon of the Covid-19 pandemic. The latter surely exhibits glocal characteristics in the large.

Keywords: glocalization, glocality, globalization, glocal fray, social sciences.

What follows is not so much a substantive contribution to the theme of glocalization per se, even though there is some of

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that, but rather it consists in a contextualization of this theme from a self-referential perspective and a considerable amount of speculation concerning the differential pursuit of matters glocal. To put this a different way, I discuss glocalization, as well as glocality, within the context of binaries and antinomies that have been deployed in social science. At the same time, I briefly glance at what I call calculated avoidance of “the glocal”. It will be seen that over the years there has been much less of the latter compared with the present, but that it is well-worth noting the strong residue of a kind of embarrassment about directly invoking the global-glocal connection. This, I claim is well-worth exploring, largely because it is my belief that accomplishing this will greatly enhance the significance of the global-local relationship, particularly at a time when the latter is so salient. Its salience is to be vividly witnessed in the current wave of populism and populism’s connection with the rise of the new forms of authoritarianism.

My first conscious encounter with the word and idea of glocalization was an indirect result of the intellectual concern that I had strongly developed with globalization in the 1970s and particularly the 1980s. It should be said in this respect that there were a number of binaries, and antinomies, in social scientific discourse in the 1960s and 1970s that undoubtedly had a strong bearing on my thinking about globalization and subsequently glocalization. These included such conceptions as universalism-particularism, cosmopolitanism-localism, center-periphery and others. There were also older pairings such as transcendence-immanence and sacred-profane. In any case, the genealogy inspired by such binaries and/or antinomies was undoubtedly in my mind as I began to enter what turned out to be, what might well be described as, the glocal fray. However, it should be emphasized that in the present context the latter formulation is somewhat misleading. I say this because at that time I genuinely thought that I was using the word glocalization before anybody else had used it. However, I was wrong for, in fact, Erik Swyngedouw had used this concept very cogently around the same time. I actually learned this much later, in 2001 (Robertson 2014: 27; Swyngedouw 2004).



The phrase glocal fray that I have just invoked is particularly relevant for the simple reason that tussles over glocalization and associated terms have been the hallmark of debates around this topic. More specifically, appreciation of the vacillation between positive and negative attitudes to this theme is vital to the comprehension of the subject at hand. In fact, comprehending the bumpy career of the idea of the glocal is of great relevance in the understanding of concepts in general. Having said this I should emphasize strongly that the glocal is now rapidly gaining ground in various countries and disciplines.

The beginning of my own direct involvement in the theme of glocalization can be dated to a paper I gave at a conference in Darmstadt, Germany in 1992 (Robertson 1995; see Robertson 2004, 2014); although I had very briefly invoked it in my book that was published in the same year (Robertson 1992). Of particular importance in the present context is the fact that the conference in question was entitled “Global Civilization and Local Cultures”. It was advertised and promoted via the highlighting of a pictorial image of the local being erased by the global. This seemed to me at the time to be particularly German and the paper that I presented constituted my original attempt to overcome the latter. In any case, regardless of this “Germanic” tendency it was clear to me that this erasure of the local by the global was not satisfactory for a potentially world-wide readership.

It so happens that shortly before I began to compose the present article I was also, virtually simultaneously, being interviewed by the editor-in-chief of the journal “Theory Culture & Society”, Mike Featherstone (2020). During the course of this, I had occasion to mention how important was the fact that during my upbringing I had become increasingly enthusiastic about the discipline of geography; particularly, but not exclusively, human geography. At that time geography was not highly valued, at least in the British educational system, whereas now it is a pivotal subject in most educational systems across the world. This realization neatly fitted with what has long been my ongoing interest in the paintings and life of Johannes Vermeer. Indeed, my interest in geography may in a subtle way have influenced my interest in Vermeer himself. In fact, a recent

biography of Vermeer makes much of his geographical location with regard to adequate appreciation of his art. It is well known that his paintings have much to do with the Dutch city of Delft; despite the fact that Delft appears in only five of his paintings. One of these, entitled *The Geographer*, illustrated the wider world that was, so to speak, enveloping and invading Delft.

The Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) was founded in 1602 when a number of other European trading companies were entering Asia. The VOC was, during the seventeenth century, so prominent in Delft that it was common knowledge there that there was a strong connection between Delft and East Asia (Testot 2020: 216-217). In fact, tens of thousands of Dutch people worked for the VOC, including three of Vermeer's cousins. In the concluding chapter of his biography of Vermeer, Brook (2008: 217-230) based his thinking about him on the well-known statement by the English poet, John Donne, "No man is an Island, entire of himself". Indeed, Donne emphasized the geographical layers of man's location in continents and in the world as a whole. He also remarked that any one person's death diminishes him, precisely because he or she is involved in mankind as a whole. In any case, Brook remarked that when Donne spoke in 1623 it was because it was the first time in human history that, not merely was Donne himself not an island, no other human being was. "No longer was the world a series of locations so isolated from each other that something could happen in one and have absolutely no effect on what was going on in any other". The idea of a common humanity was emerging, and with it the possibility of a shared history (Brook 2018: 221).

Brook's biography of Vermeer is one of an increasing number of books published during the present century that claims the author was adopting a global perspective and/or that the subject in question was of significant global relevance. At the same time Brook is, like many others, emphasizing the view of the global from the perspective of a local location. My argument in this respect is that extensive highlighting of the notion of "the global" is largely a product of our time, meaning that we now live in a fast-globalizing world and that we almost inevitably think globally. Paradoxically, this is why we now find so much

anti-global sentiment. Here it should be pointed out that the latter is at the very core of populist thinking. In fact, this conflation of the local and the global is, very ironically, at the center of what we now call glocal analysis; but not, it should be very strongly emphasized, in the same manner, nor for the same motive.

Another highly relevant person from the “intellectual world” that deserves mention here, not least because he is one of my favorite novelists, is Joseph Conrad. He warrants attention because in his novel entitled *Victory* (Conrad 1915) he states the following: “I am the world itself, come to pay you a visit”. In fact, this declaration is in the frontispiece of a recent biography of Conrad by Maya Jasanoff (2017) called *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World*. In this book Jasanoff characterizes Conrad as a stranger in strange lands, an author writing at what she calls the dawn of globalization. It is more accurate to say that Conrad writes about glocalization rather than the globalization that is often said to be accelerating around the beginning of the twentieth century. By this I mean that Conrad’s image of the world is constrained by the particular places that he is living in or visiting at any given time. In any case Jasanoff centers her characterization of Conrad on connectivity as the defining feature of globalization. However, even though this is a very common practice she errs in confining globalization in this way. Simply put, she omits the crucial factor(s) of culture and/or consciousness. Instead, she concentrates entirely on Conrad’s extensive travels in many parts of the world and also dwells on the partitioning of the country of Conrad’s birth, namely Poland. Jasanoff’s image of Conrad centers upon his being a striking reminder of an age when writers usually worked on a very limited geographical scale, whereas Conrad’s arena spanned the entire globe. In a sense this was his major claim to fame. In sum, Jasanoff fails to give her attention to the cultural dimension of Conrad’s travels. This is a common error among many scholars of globalization – and, of course, glocalization.

It is appropriate at this point to mention the pivotal significance of Japan in my thinking about glocalization. However, before directly detailing this I should bring into consideration the manner in which Japanese Zen Buddhism flowed from

Japan to Brazil. A volume, *Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity* (Rocha 2006), was given to me by the author on the occasion of my visit as an invited speaker to the University of West Sydney. Rocha says early on that Brazil is a very rewarding site for an examination of the ways in which “global flows acquire local forms, and consequently how multiple modernities have emerged” (Rocha 2006: 3). Rocha’s approach is both historical and anthropological. This is the way in which she attempts to embrace the transnational flows of Zen in Japan into Brazil. Even though she does not specifically use the concept of glocalization hers is most definitely a glocal approach. More generally, she is examining the connections between Japan and Brazil using a glocal methodology. I say this because it is at the core of what otherwise might be called glocal and it does not fall into the category of what I have previously called calculated avoidance. I shall deal with the latter tendency more fully at a later stage, emphasizing at this point that the phenomenon of calculated avoidance was for long a dominant characteristic of glocalization.

Rocha’s book may usefully be compared with – better, brought into line with – Gary Okihiro, *Island World: A History of Hawai’i and the United States* (2008). The general thrust of the latter is the study of what the author calls Oceanic islands, defined as small, young, isolated, simple and influenced by a limited range of environmental factors. Among other themes in his book, Okihiro attempts to situate islands such as the Hawai’ian Islands and the Okinawa Islands in comparative perspective, to conceptualize what he calls a “black Pacific”. Moreover, and I quote, he “articulates [...] the intersections of land and sea and their biotic communities, of the Atlantic and Pacific, of Hawai’ians and Europeans, Africans, American Indians, and Latina/os, and it transgresses sites of nation, discipline, subject, and, at times, even narrative form” (Okihiro 2008: 5). Okihiro situates much of what he says about the island world within the context of what he calls Oceania and the Polynesian triangle.

I had been writing about globalization and related matters since the late 1960s, although globalization as such was not to become vital and central to my teaching and writing until the

late 1970s or early 1980s. Here it should be emphasized that the idea of glocalization was not considered at all, certainly not by me, during this period. It should be said however that comparative sociology was well developed by that time; but this focus hardly ever touched upon inter-societal relations, nor did it involve matters outside the frame of the international. The latter had become the more or less separate discipline of international relations (in fact, the latter did not become truly developed until the early 1920s).

During the decades of the 1980s and 1990s I wrote numerous pieces and presented many papers on the topic of globalization and, to a somewhat lesser extent, on glocalization. Many of these were published as articles in edited books and in a large number of countries. Of particular relevance in the present context, and with respect to glocalization, is a paper that I gave at Syracuse University in 1999. Subsequently the proceedings of this series in which my paper was given were published as *Globalization and the Margins* (2002). The significance of this was that it was announced by the editors, Richard Grant and John Rennie Short, as being based largely on my own work on globalization, specifically my article entitled *Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity* (1995). It should be noted that this succeeded my *Globalisation or Glocalisation?* (Robertson 1994) that was published in the very first issue of an Australian journal, "The Journal of International Communication". Contrary to the claim of at least one author this article was significantly different from my article of 1995. Moreover, it was based upon a paper previously given at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association in Miami Beach, Florida, in 1993 (the latter has never been published as such, but will appear shortly in a new, Polish edition of my *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* – Robertson 1992).

By 1999 I moved from Pittsburgh, USA to the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, where shortly thereafter I was to found the Centre for the Study of Globalization. The theme of globalization played a rather large part in the affairs of the latter. While there, I collaborated considerably on the topic of globalization with Richard Giulianotti. In fact, we jointly published eight or more articles together (mostly listed in Giulianotti,

Robertson 2013). By far the majority of these concern the application of the idea of the glocal to the theme of sport. It should be emphasized in this respect that sport is a particularly prominent arena for the use of glocal approaches, combining as it does a great concern with, on the one hand local – indeed often, “hyperlocal” – teams or clubs and, on the other hand, international – better, global – teams.

In the late 1970s I began what became my numerous trips to Scandinavia, starting with Sweden in 1978 (I was to return to Sweden a number of times between then and the present). This was to be followed significantly later by engagements in Finland, Denmark and Norway. As will be seen towards the end of this paper I was, during this period, beginning to become increasingly conscious of the great significance of archipelagoes, peninsulae and islands to the idea of the glocal. I should emphasize that during my visits to Sweden I became acquainted with Ulf Hannerz, who was, and still is, one of the outstanding global sociologists of our time. Being an anthropologist he had, almost by definition, a great interest in local matters (e.g. Hannerz 2004). My visits to Sweden were quite often sponsored by the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study based in Uppsala. In Uppsala I was fortunate enough to become acquainted with social scientists from various countries.

I first went to Italy in the 1980s and once I had been there I became virtually obsessed and, more relevantly, it more than consolidated my increasing interest in glocality. Inter alia, among the cities that I visited for academic purposes were Rome, Florence, Trento, Rimini, Milan and, within Sardinia, Nuoro (I also visited Italy, including Sicily, separately strictly for vacations). It was in Nuoro that I was to undertake the teaching of a series of annual short courses usually on tourism. The latter enhanced my accelerating interest in matters glocal, largely because Sardinia is an island.

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s was the period when I became rather closely acquainted with Japan and learned thereby much that was to influence my ideas about glocalization. I first visited Japan in 1986 for a rather extended stay, during which I visited about eight or so cities, and there were two critical intellectual circumstances that were to have a great

effect in shaping my thoughts on globalization and glocalization. On the one hand, I had great difficulty in conveying the idea of globalization to my Japanese audiences. Time and again, “globalization” was translated into Japanese as “internationalization”. I should say here that my principal book on globalization (Robertson 1992) was not to be translated into Japanese – and then only in part – until later in the decade. Meanwhile, I had become acquainted with the Japanese notion of *dochakuka*, this broadly meaning in English, indigenization. This Japanese term was, unbeknown to me at that time, widely used in business circles in Japan and to some extent in the USA. However, upon my attending a conference in Tokyo in 1996 entitled “Globalization and Indigenous Culture” where my own contribution was entitled *Comments on the “Global Triad” and “Glocalization”*. Ironically, I used the concept of glocalization without any apparent problem for my audience. Moreover, upon visiting Japan again at the beginning of the new century, I read in an English language Japanese newspaper (“Japan Times”) that a new word had entered Japan. The word in question was no other than glocalization (even though the latter had apparently been used there in business circles for a number of years). This ostensibly new word was said to enable the Japanese populace to protect their own culture. My last visit to Japan was to the Center For Glocal Studies, Seijo University in Tokyo and the University of Fukui. In Fukui itself to talk and specifically about glocalization (Robertson 2019). During the period of my frequent visits to Japan, mainly in the 1990s, I also had occasion to visit South Korea on at least two occasions (see Robertson 2003).

I turn now to a particularly striking aspect in the genealogy of glocalization. To be more specific I am concerned here with the ways in which the word glocalization has been puzzlingly omitted. First, I invoke the volume published in 1996 and edited by Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake entitled *Global/Local*. The puzzle concerns the glaring omission, particularly in retrospect, of the seemingly obvious word glocalization. I know that some of the contributors to this volume were familiar with my writing on this concept. In any case, quite apart from this, there remains the issue as to why the authors came so

precariously close to using the word but veered away from actually using it. For example, the editors introduce the volume by stating that they are tracking the global/local. Arif Dirlik's chapter is entitled *The Global in the Local*; Dana Polan's chapter is entitled *Globalisms Localism's*; Paul Bove's chapter is entitled *Global/Local Memory and Thought*; while Ping-hui Liao's chapter has the subtitle *Global/Local Dialectics*.

My next exhibit of "delinquency" is much more recent. It is Vanessa Ogle (2015) *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870-1950*. In an otherwise extremely impressive volume, Ogle's first chapter is entitled *National Times in a Globalizing World* and the rest of her book implements this program without ever mentioning the obvious word, glocalization. One should note in this respect that this volume was published about twenty years or more after the word glocalization, and the processes to which that referred, was first announced (much of it was, of course, talked about and applied in the intervening years). Moreover, much is said in this book about the local standardization of time, and one might well say here, in invoking this volume, that it virtually cries out for the use of the specific term glocalization.

Well before the early 2000s I had become increasingly aware of the significance of the history of global thought. If one were to pinpoint the clear starting point for the not unproblematic merging of history and the study of the global/local it might well be the article by Michael Geyer and Charles Bright entitled *World History in a Global Age*, in the "American Historical Review" (Geyer, Bright 1995). My principal argument in review of this piece was that the authors had drastically misunderstood the nature of intellectual work on the global by social scientists generally – or, more specifically, the theme of globalization. As not a few others had done, they presented an image of globalization as a process that resulted in the world as a whole becoming normatively integrated. This view was, of course, one to which I strongly objected and was indeed a major aspect in my rejective intervention (Robertson 1998).

Among the many books by historians involving use of the global perspective the most significant, in my view, have been written by Jurgen Osterhammel. The latter's first significant

contribution, at least in English translation, was *Globalization: A Short History* (Osterhammel, Petersson 2005). Also, and much more importantly, Osterhammel was to publish the magnificent *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Osterhammel 2009). Even though he does not explicitly mention glocalization in the latter it is particularly clear from his pages on space – what he calls “spaces of interaction” – that he is definitely conscious of the empirical phenomena that have been dealt within the frame of glocalization. Osterhammel was also to make an important contribution to the book *The Prospect of Global History* (Belich, Darwin, Frenz, Wickham 2016). The latter resulted from a conference entitled “New Directions in Global History” that took place at the University of Oxford in 2012. Osterhammel’s chapter is particularly relevant and significant not least because its title was *Global History and Historical Sociology*. Of all the historians involved in the development of globe-oriented history Osterhammel surely deserves very high praise. His work has been, not merely well informed about sociology generally, but particularly about up to date work in the field of globalization, as well as exhibiting knowledge of the significance of the idea of glocalization, if not using that precise term.

It is rather ironic that the “flag” of globalization – and to some extent glocalization – has been kept flying more by historians than by other disciplines, apart from sociology (see Colley 2013). It is more than worth mentioning that global history or, as John Darwin (2016) puts it, “the appeal of global history will lie in its capacity to enhance our knowledge of the ‘local’”. He goes on to say: “To an extent that would astonish historians of a generation or two ago, the global and the local have converged – to the intellectual benefit of both” (Darwin 2016: 183). While none of the contributors to the volume at issue mentions glocalization there can be no doubt particularly in view of Darwin’s statement that it has a strong connection and that it is highly relevant to this book. Indeed, this volume *The Prospect of Global History* (2016) constitutes a crucial point in the meeting of history and the transnational field of global studies (Steger, Wahlrab 2017).

In drawing these “remembrances” to a conclusion I should briefly convey my thinking concerning the countries or regions that have been most, as it were, welcoming to the theme of glocalization – at least in my own experience. This involves a kind of sociology-of-knowledge stance. As might well be clear from the preceding it is Japan, Italy and to some extent Scandinavian as well as British countries that have been the most receptive. I should stress that this generalization is by no means based on a rigorous survey. Rather it results from an intuitive consideration of what I have written, institutions that have welcomed me, colleagues with whom I have collaborated, and fruitful correspondence. In a sense, to quote in part from the title and theme of a book that I have mentioned before, it is occasions involving some kind of marginality that I have in mind. I speak specifically of Grant and Short, *Globalization and the Margins* (2002). I mention Japan and Italy in particular because these are the countries where my books and/or articles have been most translated, as well as invitations received to give papers at conferences.

What Italy and Japan have in common is that they are peninsulas and, in a special sense, islands. The same is true of Britain and of Scandinavian countries (as far as Britain is concerned there are a few names that deserve particular mention in connection with glocalization among them Paul Kennedy – 2010 – and John Tomlinson – 1999). I should say, however, that this short list of countries is by no means exhaustive with respect to those whose “citizens” have promoted or shown enthusiasm for ideas concerning the glocal. One has to ask the question why is this so? My basic proposal in this regard is that these are regions where people are not inclined to regard their peripherality or marginality in a negative way. They take it for granted. Members of these countries or regions, on the whole, tend to embrace their own glocality and do not find this at all uncomfortable. In fact, it is part and parcel of their everyday identity. It would be impossible here to investigate this conclusion in anything like a rigorous manner. However, it would certainly form the basis for a serious research program. I would add to these thoughts one other important consideration, namely the significance of the imagining of “faraway” countries. I have in mind here what I have previously said about the relations between

Holland and East Asia, as well as the connections between Japan and Brazil, not to speak of the thoroughly rounded set of islands bearing the name of Hawaii.

I should add that I have, in a very significant sense, come full circle in this regard. I speak initially with respect to my place of birth, Norwich, a medieval city in East Anglia, England. East Anglia is a kind of peninsula of England, jutting out into the North Sea. During my teen years I lived in various parts of England and travelled quite frequently to Scotland, where I was eventually to reside for about ten years. On two, more or less separate, occasions I had emigrated from the UK to the USA and that is where all my immediate offspring live at this moment.

When I was in and eventually became a citizen of the USA from 1967-1970 and 1974-1999, I resided in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and when I was there initially it felt like being on an island. This was because Pittsburgh was about five hundred miles from the nearest coast, while the city itself is at the junction of three large rivers (Ohio, Allegheny and Monongahela).

As I approach the end of this entry it would be appropriate to invoke the words of Peter Burke (2009: 105) when he states that heterogeneity applies mainly to what he calls the local level while at the global level we find considerable narrowing of this. And finally we might well add to this a quote from the work of the late British sociologist, John Urry. Urry bases his statement on his reading of my own book of 1992 (Robertson 1992). He states that “globalization-deepens-localization-deepens-globalization and so on” (Urry 2003: 84). He goes on to say that the “global-local develops in a symbiotic, unstable and irreversible set of relationships, in which each gets transformed through billions of worldwide iterations dynamically evolving over time” (Urry 2003: 84).

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