

COPING WITH BINARIES: BAYS, SEAS AND OCEANS

ROLAND ROBERTSON
University of Aberdeen

Much of the present interest in difference has arisen from the long debate about globalization. It was only with the rise of anti-globalization movement(s) at the end of the 1990s that the theme of the relationship between the local and the global came to the forefront. Most, but certainly by no means all, of the participants in globalization discourse emphasized the motifs of homogenization and standardization. Running through much of this debate was the perception that there was a tension between the local and the global. However, as early as the mid-1990s a number of academics had attempted to combine or synthesize the local and the global – or transcend the binary.

It was in this context that the concept of glocalization came to the fore, at least in some quarters (Robertson 1995; 2014). Since this breakthrough in the mid-1990s or thereabouts, problems have increasingly arisen about the relationship between glocality and such motifs as poly-ethnicity; cosmopolitanism; interculturality; synchronicity; hybridity; transculturality; creolization; indigenization; vernacularization; diasporization; and yet others. Moreover, such terms can themselves be glocalized in the same way that the notion of the global has a variety of meanings in different “local” contexts. In the same way, the concept of the local can be globalized (Van Leeuwen and Suleiman 2013; Garrett 2013). The provincialization of planet earth and, indeed, of “our” universe must also be seriously considered.

My intention here is to raise questions concerning the viability of and relationship between the concepts just listed and the ways in which they have emerged from different regions, usually as a result of some kind of relationship between these. In particular, I discuss the relationship between globality and universality, on the one



hand, and locality and particularity, on the other. Even more specifically, I seek to explore the idea of there being what have been called competing universalisms, as well as competing particularisms. I have been inspired largely to undertake this task by the recently published *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants*. In this book Sunil Amrith (2013) raises this question in reference to the global significance of the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal in particular (see also Amrith 2011). The Bay of Bengal's role in global history has arisen from its being situated as a corridor between India and China, a position that is of great and increasing geopolitical significance. Driving home his historical positioning of the Bay of Bengal, Amrith gives as an example the fact that the Bay was "for a time, central to Henry Ford's revolution and the rise of an oil-hungry capitalism" (Amrith 2013, 29). Amrith emphasises that cultural encounters in the Bay, as well as the adjacent South China Sea, were as dangerous as they were productive. More generally, "the Indian Ocean's cosmopolitanism was messy and inconsistent, and often it shattered under pressure. It developed as a cultural response to the demands of living in a world of strangers; its archive lies in popular culture, in the unwritten conventions of urban sociability, and in the shape of the landscape as much as in the writings of poets and visionaries" (Amrith 2013, 29).

Amrith's justification for devoting so much attention to the Bay of Bengal is that it was once a region at the core of global history, only to be forgotten toward the end of the twentieth century, split up by the boundaries of nation-states and its shared past divided into the distinct components of national histories. In the present context, perhaps the true importance of Amrith's admirable discussion of the Bay of Bengal lies in its history having pointed to the limitations of "the artificial distinctions between economic, political, cultural and environmental history – and of those between South Asian and South East Asian history" (Amrith 2013, 3). Indeed these very distinctions are thrown into considerable disarray by the kind of discussion initiated by Amrith. We have been led to believe that such categories as economic, political and cultural are, so to speak, perfectly natural. However, we



are now increasingly recognizing that in numerous ways these are products of various specific contingencies.

It should be noted that the Bay of Bengal is indeed located within the wider Indian Ocean and that Larson's *Ocean of Letters* (2009) deals with the latter in specific reference to its being the largest African diaspora of the Indian Ocean, relating his study to such issues as slavery, creolization and modern African literature. There is an interesting degree of overlap between the works of Amrith and Larson, but in the present context I focus particularly on the Bay of Bengal. Needless to say, the issues of difference and the makings thereof can well be applied to a large number of seas and oceans. In this regard Amrith's discussion of the Bay of Bengal is but one crucial example of a much neglected focus of global study (Pain 2013).

In providing a rationale for his profound interrogation of the significance of the Bay, Amrith draws attention to the work of Braudel and the latter's claim that the Mediterranean of the sixteenth century was emphatically global and that its world horizon reached as far as the Azores, the New World, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Amrith's claim is that the global reach of the Bay of Bengal was even greater than that of the Mediterranean. As he puts it, "the cyclical life" of the Bay of Bengal is more dramatic than that of the Mediterranean, for "from month to month it changes more. Each monsoon season the average sea level on the Bay's northeast shore (...) fluctuates by four feet, apparently the largest on record in the world" (Amrith 2013, 30).

A very promising approach to the kind of question that I have raised is advanced by Moyn (2013, 194) when he addresses the issue of what he calls the nonglobalization of ideas: "What (...) explains the spread of (...) concepts if nothing about their formal universalism by itself does? Presumably, the only persuasive explanation is the action of subaltern appropriation that selects and reinvents. Although surely it is true that the contents of alternative versions of universalism differ in crucial ways, it is also the case that subaltern selection and reinvention depend on a range of nonconceptual factors the historian cannot ignore".



However, “subalternism” varies significantly over time and space. It is not globally homogenous. Moyn certainly concedes this, but perhaps does not take his concession far enough. In any case, my intention in this short contribution has been to move away from the Eurocentric nature of most contributions to the subject in hand. Indeed, much of recent scholarship has acknowledged the fragility of “old European” conceptions of the relationships between the particular and the universal and the local and the global – even though there has been little acknowledgement of the relevance of recent material cosmology – as opposed to anthropological-mythical forms of the latter (Frank 2011). In fact recent work, such as that of Frank, makes clear that we neglect the particularity of “our” planet in the universe(s) as a whole. Even with this caveat we cannot by any means be sure that the idea of universe(s) encompasses all that is to be known.

I have concentrated in this intervention on the relative uniqueness of the Bay of Bengal (in the Indian Ocean) in the unfolding and vicissitudes of the local-global connection and proximate binary distinctions. In the process I have undoubtedly neglected somewhat bays, seas and oceans other than those in the South or Southeast Asian area (see, for example, Gilroy 1993; Paquette 2013). In any case, by focusing on a region within Asia I have omitted the relevance of Australasia (Fox 2005; Walker 2005), not to speak of the entire Pacific Rim as a global region. In fact, the relationship between East Asia, particularly Japan, and Latin America must also be considered as relevant (Rocha 2006; Hendry 2000). Pursuing this line of inquiry undoubtedly enhances our comprehension of the motifs that I mentioned at the beginning of this brief article. For example, such motifs as hybridity, cosmopolitanism, interculturality, and diasporization undoubtedly “look” different in this much less Eurocentric perspective.

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