

WHAT IS GLOBAL AND WHAT IS LOCAL?
A THEORETICAL DISCUSSION AROUND
GLOBALIZATION
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ABSTRACT This article develops a new sociological understanding of the difference between global and local relating to the phenomena of globalization. Globalization itself is redefined as one of society's self-description insofar as, following Niklas Luhmann's theory, society is conceived as a cognitive system that can only handle information (about the world, about itself) only through its own specific operation (communication), so that globalization affects society solely when the later communicates about the former. This effectively happens, it is argued, because communications about globalization convey an account of society's current state, i.e. a description of society within society, hence fulfilling the system's need for self-knowledge. The global value then coincides with the content of the particular self-description that globalization is, whereas the local value corresponds to the content of all other self-descriptions as seen from the previous perspective. Global and local are not spatial structures (levels, scales, places, distances, etc.), but different representations of space competing each other in a process to determine within society the reality that society is. In the second part of the article, the ideas of Roland Robertson about globalization are reinterpreted so as to provide support to this new understanding of the difference global/local. Robertson distinguished four images of world-order which can be taken as equivalent to four self-descriptions of society. Globalization is precisely one of them. Contrasts between images of world-order as imagined by Robertson himself can thus illuminate what the global and the local have in common and how they diverge from each other.

KEYWORDS globalization, distinction global/local, Niklas Luhmann, Roland Robertson, self-description, image of world order.

“Puisque l’univers n’existe qu’autant qu’il est pensé et puisqu’il n’est pensé totalement que par la société, il prend place en elle ; il devient un élément de sa vie intérieure, et ainsi elle est elle-même le genre total en dehors duquel il n’existe rien.”

— Emile Durkheim

INTRODUCTION In this article, I discuss the twin concepts of the global and the local. My main contention is twofold: (1) the global and the local are best understood as the two opposite sides of the same distinction; (2) this distinction is used in communication as a code to generate information about society or the world. Needless to say, the terms “global” and “local” help describing various objects: symbols, events, organizations, networks, flows, social movements, inequalities, crisis, identities, etc. Knowing this, the fundamental question I want to raise is the following: “Why call one object global (or local)?” or more accurately: “What is going on when one object is being called a global object (or a local object)?” I want to suggest that global objects or items or phenomena (global social movements, global inequalities, global crisis, etc.) are not called global for the simple reason that “this is just what they happen to be for real.” Therefore, when talking about the global and the local, the issues at hand are here framed as epistemological ones. Moreover, a constructivist epistemology will be promoted in place of a representational one. Thus by talking about concepts in this way, I hope to shed a new light on empirical reality itself.

When one looks at the literature on globalization in social sciences, one can already identify three current definitions of the global and the local. In the first definition, formulated by George Modelski as the layer-cake model (1972, see also McGrew and Lewis 1992), global and local are taken as equivalent with the concept of whole and the concept of part respectively.¹ In this way, the local is necessarily contained within the global. In the second definition, global and local refers to opposite modes of integration. This definition has its strongest expression in the theory of structuration of Anthony Giddens (1984). On one hand, the local is delineated by social integration, i.e. face-to-face interaction or interaction between individuals physically co-present. On the other hand, the global is a function of system integration or interaction between individuals away

from each other in time or space or both. This time around, because we take human beings as our point of departure (instead of the world – that is, the concept of totality – as in the first definition), it is the global that reappears inside the local in the form of distant influences impinging on personal lives and daily activities (Giddens 1990, 64, and 1991, 21). In the third definition, global and local are understood basically as specific sizes and/or ranges. Essentially, global means big and local small. For instance in Marxist (or Neo-Marxist, or Post-Marxist, or Pseudo-Marxist) literature, we often hear about global capitalism, global corporations and global hegemony as opposed to local resistance, local communities and local solidarity. As sizes or ranges, global and local have no pre-determined special connection on the conceptual plane. The relation between the two depends on the relation between the concrete actors or settings or conjunctures characterized by them. More precisely, the global would be like the queen in the game of chess, whereas the local would like the king. The global/queen is capable of great movements across the board, whilst the local/king can only move one square at a time. Otherwise, both the global and the local ought to be envisioned as chess pieces engaging each other in a common open space.

Arguably, these definitions overlap with one another or presume each other to a large extent. Although a certain number of critiques could be addressed to each of them separately, I dismiss all of them for a single reason. The current definitions of the global and the local are flawed inasmuch as they miss the issue at hand. These definitions are attempts made to discipline social communications making use of the concepts of the global and the local. What I propose instead is to listen to these communications.² In order to develop this strategy, let me begin by discussing the idea mentioned earlier: the global and the local form a distinction. Following Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, this distinction should be seen – paradoxically – as a unity (Luhmann 1995, 20). This means that in my model, neither the global nor the local can appear without the other. This also means that ultimately, the only thing that matters under the circumstances is the fact that what is global cannot be local at the same time and vice-versa (contra Wilson & Dissanayake 1996). This is how distinctions help generating information for an observer: they create sets of possibilities making room for variety and thus enabling variation. Indeed, the value any piece of information has can only be relative, i.e. pieces of information only trigger effects (make a difference)

when considered within a finite ensemble of alternative pieces of information (Shannon & Weaver 1963; for discussion see Baecker 2005). Accordingly, to benefit from the information the distinction global/local makes available, an observer must first select the distinction itself. Hence, reality as it is differentially qualified by the terms “global” and “local” only exist for the observer operating with these concepts.

What about geographical or physical space? If the distinction global/local forms a unity and if global and local express different values by virtue of their reciprocal difference only (what is global is global only because it is not local and vice-versa), then in the model I offer space is irrelevant at the level of the distinction. I say “at the level of the distinction” because geographical or physical space may still have a role to play nonetheless: it can serve as a criterion. Still one may be under the strong impression that “certainly, what is global must have something to do with large distances” (see for instance Held & al. 1999). I argue however that distances as measurements (in kilometres for instance) are quantitative matters, whereas the distinction global/local has to be a qualitative issue. To put it in another way, measurements rest on continuity, whereas distinctions rest on discontinuity. The point is that distances and other spatial measurements simply cannot tell us where to draw the boundary separating what is local and what is global or where the local ends and where the global begins. Spatial measurements are referred to only when applying the distinction global/local so as to justify the indication of one side of the distinction or the other: global or local. Otherwise, measurements in space (or in time) cannot be taken in themselves as the primal reason why we speak of a difference between global and local.

We must proceed by first reminding ourselves that by now, words like “global” and “local” have gained a meaning of their own outside of the academic circles.³ We must realise that in its current state, society is such that evoking possible things like global poverty, global insecurity, global recession, etc., is enough to prompt an immediate response in the system. In effect, debates in the mass media are regularly launched around these topics. University courses in various fields (business and management, journalism, history, etc.) are rearranged so as to include them. Politicians are called forward to take these matters in their hands. Public figures (private business leaders, singers, authors, etc.) reach new level of fame by trying to raise awareness about global dangers or global challenges. In short, the words “global” and

“local” have become culturally meaningful throughout contemporary society — not only for professional social scientists.

We must ask ourselves: “Why do people in society talk about the global and the local? Why do they use the distinction global/local to communicate about actions and experiences in the world? What is the purpose behind all this?” Again, without thinking twice about it, one might answer that people talk about global things because there are global things taking place in reality. And again, this would amount to say that global things are called global because this is what they truly are. Unfortunately, calling global what is global (and local what is local) doesn’t explain anything at all. More precisely, when one calls global what is global, one doesn’t articulate any research problem and as a result, one excludes himself or herself from the field of scientific investigation. To avoid this, we must stress the fact mentioned above, namely that whatever ends up being labelled as global (persons, corporations, fashions, trends, etc.) catches society’s attention. The empirical phenomenon that the difference global/local is pointing to consists precisely in this social reaction.

It follows that the distinction global/local has to be released “in the wild”: it has to be taken away from the hands of social scientists and given back to the rest of contemporary society. Consequently, deciphering the distinction global/local doesn’t amount to solving a methodological difficulty, but to analysing of living practices. Accordingly, when pondering about why people in today’s world find it relevant to make a distinction between global and local, we should see a direct analogy with the distinction between normal and pathological. This other distinction doesn’t report an actual state of affairs in an objective, straightforward, unbiased manner. Rather it is a matter of social construction. It’s not about telling things the way they are, but telling things the way we see them. I assert that the same goes (or should go) for the distinction global/local.

In order to successfully reinterpret the global and the local, a new model of globalization is needed just as well. Whereas it is usually conceived as some sort of historical process of social change, I propose to define globalization as one of contemporary society’s self-descriptions (Guy 2007). As such, globalization corresponds to a discourse or a narrative telling society what’s going on throughout the world as we speak. Globalization is not exactly happening in reality along side some other phenomena. Rather globalization is a vision of everything there is in

reality ordering all phenomena within a coherent frame. This being said, it remains possible nevertheless to describe (or re-describe) reality in other ways. Indeed, globalization is not the only perspective on the world available in society. This brings us back to the distinction that interests us. Global and local are different values inasmuch as they indicate different perspectives on the world. On one side, the global value indicates the perspective, or frame, that globalization is itself. On the other side, the local value indicates any other perspective or frame as seen from the perspective of globalization.

On its own account, such reasoning depends on the capacity to differentiate many perspectives or frames from one another. For this purpose, I will take advantage of Roland Robertson’s works. Robertson has his own theory of globalization and it should be clear at all times that it is not the same as the one sketched out in the previous paragraph. Nevertheless, it is possible to alter Robertson’s ideas so as to illuminate a series of ideal-types that will serve the theory I defend myself. Robertson distinguished four images of world order capable of affecting globalization conceived as a historical process. This approach will be here modified in two ways. First, in accordance with what has been stated above, globalization will be reconceptualised not as a historical process affected by various images of world order, but as one — and only one — of these images. Second, Robertson’s images of world order will be reconceptualised as self-descriptions of society or perspectives on the whole world (these two concepts are synonymous with each other). In the aftermath of this double modification, I shall reconstruct the distinction global/local in the light of the contrasts between the various self-descriptions.⁴

THE SELF-DESCRIPTION OF SOCIETY The concept of self-description is directly borrowed from Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory. Luhmann asserts that society is a self-referential system. In other words, the system is defined as a closed network of operations. The system has an environment and consequently, something exists outside of the system and independently of it. However, the system doesn’t have access to what lies beyond the boundary separating it from its environment. That boundary can be displaced, but this can only be done from the inside by means of the system’s own operations. In effect, a system’s operations connect only with other operations within the same system and that’s exactly how a boundary separating an inside (the system) from an outside

(the environment) is produced and reproduced. To underscore the importance that ought to be given to the concept of self-description, I will concentrate on a particular aspect of Luhmann's systems theory, namely cognition. This will reveal the constructivist epistemology mentioned in the introduction.

When talking about cognition, I wish to address a series of questions dealing with the way society effectively functions as a self-referential system. Broadly, I want to enquire: how is knowledge of society made available to society? It should be clear right away that for society (as for any system), self-knowledge cannot be a simple matter of sense-impression. The problem in the present case is not so much that society can solely produce operations of communication (Luhmann 1989, 1990, 1995), so that literally it doesn't have any eyes or ears or tongue that would enable it to see or hear or taste. The actual source of difficulties is this: since society produces communications and nothing else, knowledge of society becomes available to society only when such knowledge is conveyed in communications. Under such conditions however, knowledge cannot be assessed or kept under control by comparing it with its presumed object. In short, knowledge of society turns out to be part of its own object.

This is not to say, of course, that knowledge of society cannot be conveyed in communications or that society has no knowledge of itself. Still the situation is such: knowledge of society and its object are not external to each other. Consequently, if there is knowledge of society constantly made available to society, we would be well advised to treat this knowledge as non ordinary. "Non-ordinary knowledge," which means that it is still knowledge somehow, and yet it cannot be considered as derivative of reality or secondary to it. Quite on the contrary, it is no less than constitutive of reality. How can it be? We can assume that knowledge of society basically refers to questions like: "What is going on in society right now?" At any given moment, there ought to be more than one answer to this kind of questions. In these conditions, society proceeds by making a selection among all the available answers. The chosen answer is taken to be the good one, i.e. the accurate expression or representation of reality, the key to the enigma: "What is going on right now?" Hence, when choosing one answer over the others, the system actually turns itself into this answer insofar as the former comes to see the later as corresponding precisely to the reality that it is itself. In other words, the system exists as the reality it observes and/or the system constructs reality

as it constructs itself. The construction of a reality and the construction of a system (as it is carried by the very same system through its observations) are the same process. The two constructions are coextensive with each other.

I don't mean to suggest that reality can be modified at will. As a matter of fact, it is not the events themselves (as contents or substances) that are at stake, but their signification or else the relationship between them. Sets of events become meaningful when the individual events are connected with one another so as to reveal a pattern (an example would a relation of causality, quite simply, establishing that event A) happened because of event B). One single set of events can give support to various, mutually exclusive interpretations, considering how the same events can be connected with one another in multiple ways (see Watzlawick & al. 1968, on the punctuation of the sequence of events).⁵ The problem of figuring out which interpretation is the correct one can be solved by expanding the set of elements, i.e. by producing more events in order to put any available interpretative pattern to a test. Indeed, by adding new elements, the patterns are pushed to their limits. As the situation evolves and changes, some patterns turn out to be untenable. On the other hand however, it also becomes possible to envision patterns never thought before. Thus the cycle must go on and on and consequently, any solution to the aforementioned problem can only be a temporary one.

This quickly covers what we need to know about cognition, self-reference and self-description in Luhmann's theory. The prefix "self-" in "self-description" implies two things. To begin with, when talking about society's self-descriptions, we mean descriptions of society (naturally enough). Furthermore, we also mean descriptions made by society. It should be clear that the system cannot do without self-descriptions, for only through its own operations can it entertain some knowledge of itself. But why is there in society more than one self-descriptions of the whole system at the same time? And how does society make a selection among all its self-descriptions? Finally, what is society then if it is so that it effectively describes itself in various ways at the same time? For the sake of clarity, let me take the time to provide a few more details. The following points elucidate the questions above in the same order:

For self-referential systems, knowledge is not simply established or secured by "having a good look" at the object it refers to. Like the brain, society cannot step out of itself so as to stare at itself, because as a

closed network of operations, society can only produce more operations on the basis of the operations it has already produced. Hence knowledge is more akin to an internal process of evolution by way of trials and errors. It is for this reason that a multiplicity of self-descriptions must be in circulation at all times in society. To put it in another way, knowledge is not gained by mere contemplation, but by experimenting simultaneously with multiple hypotheses or scenarios constructed in a preliminarily manner. The various scenarios are as many versions of society's current history. By retelling society's historical trajectory in non concordant ways, these scenarios set up opposing expectations about the next events. Hereafter, the happening of the subsequent events, potentially surprising, provides the means for determining which scenario fits the on-going reality the best: it ought to be the one confirmed by both the previous and the new situations. In essence, experience is called in to help stabilize society's sense of its own reality.

Of course, the aforementioned events (i.e. the events coming after the structuring of expectations in the form of various self-descriptions) take place in society and are produced by the same system as further communications. Yet at the moment of their production, they are not entirely under society's control. Accordingly, there is always a risk for previously defined expectations to be contradicted by the subsequent course of action. This probability is guaranteed, so to speak, by the fact that society partly depends on its environment to complete one operation, whilst the environment lays outside society's reach. Thus the aforementioned events are society's own operations, but the former are no simple occurrences, since the later requires that some other occurrences take place in society's environment at the same time. The principle or mechanism in action here is the following: for one thing to happen, other things must happen too. In the end, this is how self-descriptions come to be selected in/by society: with the help of the environment, which means with the help of chance. Thus although all self-descriptions are necessarily produced within society and through society's operations, the business of selecting one self-description over the other cannot be handled with total freedom (as if any self-description could fit the situation just as satisfactorily).⁶ This was already implied by the fact that the selection process feeds on experience.

For the system of society, the process of self-description is therefore the process of selection of self-descriptions. Could we imagine society selecting more than one self-description at a time? In the light of the preceding explanations, one may answer spontaneously: no. Because the many self-descriptions of society are such that they contradict each other, the selection of one self-description ought to go hand-in-hand with the rejection of its competitors. This being said, it is nevertheless possible for society to embrace more than one self-description at a time. One must remember that society is not a homogeneous space. In society, numerous operations are being produced at the same time. If the system can indeed be seen as a space, then its operations are not evenly distributed in it. Rather they gravitate around "strange attractors." Each of those constitutes a panoramic site offering a unique view over society as a whole. In one single site, only one self-description can be selected at a time. However, as these sites multiply, the unity of the system comes to be reflected in more and more different ways (for this reason, Luhmann speaks of society's unity as "unitas multiplex," i.e. as a paradox). Thus we say that in society there is room for more than one self-description at a time insofar as there is more than one of those strange attractors in action in the system (there are multiple attractors because society is differentiated into many subsystems – see Luhmann 1989). Yet from one site to the other, the various self-descriptions continue to contradict and oppose each other, for each single site ultimately corresponds to one self-description in particular (so that sites come to eclipse or absorb one another as self-descriptions substitute each other through the flow of society's operations).

The visual metaphors of space and site require us to remain careful, as they can easily mislead us under the circumstances. We wrote that sites are located in space. In a way, the opposite is true just as well: each site contains space (not some space, but all the space there is). The point is that the constitution of sites in space is necessary for space to reveal or unfold itself. Each site is a recreation of space inside of space. Accordingly, differences in sites are differences in the way space is recreated or duplicated. Indeed, different self-descriptions give us different accounts of societies past evolution, present state and potential future. Therefore, when talking about space, we are not talking about normal, classical, Euclidian geometrical space. This is something worth keeping in mind, since we want to discuss globalization.

GLOBALIZATION AS SOCIETY'S

SELF-DESCRIPTION When saying that globalization is one of contemporary society's self-description, the goal is to compare it with other self-descriptions and also to examine how the relation with other self-descriptions is reflected in globalization. But what reasons do we have for suggesting that globalization could be one of society's self-descriptions? To start with, globalization presents itself in society by first appearing at the level of discourses. To put it in another way, globalization is something society communicates about. It's not enough – much worse: it's inaccurate – to ascertain that people talk about globalization because they happen to have become aware of it one way or another (for a critique of the empiricist imagination implied here, see Guy forthcoming). Without communications about it in society, globalization wouldn't be somewhere “out there” waiting for people to become aware of it.

For society, globalization exists only to the extent and as long as the system continues to generate communications on such topic. Thus the study of globalization must begin by adopting a second-order point of observation (Luhmann 2002, Von Foerster 2003). The objective therefore is not to undergo “quality control”, i.e. to double-check on-going communications about globalization by verifying their truth-value or reality-value one more time. Instead attention must shift from reality to the observer behind it. This is not to say that globalization is not real at all, but that as a reality, globalization is nevertheless the construction of some observer. Those who wish to decipher globalization's secrets are here told to examine how the observer observing globalization proceeds to do so. And this observer happens to be the system of society.

Another worth-noting detail is the fact that communications about globalization are at the same time communications about the state of the world (the globe) insofar as globalization qualifies the world as a whole. This is exactly for this reason that globalization ought to be admitted as one of society's self-descriptions. In essence, society and the world are the same. This is valid if the world is understood in its phenomenological sense. In effect, in Luhmann's theory, society is the system encompassing all operations of communication (Luhmann 1990, 1995). Consequently, at the level of communication, society is the horizon that cannot be crossed nor left behind. Hence at this level, society is quite simply inescapable and this is precisely why society can be seen as coextensive with the world. That the term “the world”

can otherwise refer to planet Earth is not a counter-argument, for even this has to be signified in society by way of communication – like all the rest. In these conditions then, we can assume instead that portraying the world as planet Earth is directly implied (among other features) in the specific self-description of the system of society that globalization has to offer.

A notion of insurmountable unity is embedded in both the concept of the world and the system of society. Moreover, a similar unity is expressed in the general discourse on globalization. This is the chain of elements that gives support to our hypothesis. We now understand why the observer producing observations on globalization (by engaging in communication about it) must be the system of society itself. Finally, as a discourse or stream of communications carrying a self-description of society, globalization amounts to a cosmology in its own right. Whereas the idea of cosmology probably sounds more familiar (or less puzzling), the concept of self-description has been preferred anyway, as it specifically enlightens the two aspects central to our argument: (1) communications about globalization are produced inside society (the fact that this is the case is necessary); (2) communications about globalization are propositions about society (that is, the world, the horizon).

Of course, admitting that globalization is a self-description of contemporary society doesn't force us to conclude that there are no other alternative self-descriptions in the system. As explained earlier, it is the opposite situation that ought to be case. Each self-description defines a site or a point in space (in society) where the whole space (society) can be looked at. By moving from one site to the other, we see society (space) changing faces, taking different aspects. The key to understand the distinction global/local lies in the relation between these other alternative self-descriptions and globalization itself. Essentially, what is local is so only relatively to what is global, which in turn corresponds to how reality is accounted for in the self-description of society that globalization corresponds to. What could these other alternative self-descriptions possibly be? The moment has come to call Roland Robertson for help – if only to betray (respectfully) his ideas for our own purpose.

ROLAND ROBERTSON'S THEORY OF

GLOBALIZATION Robertson defines globalization as a process of structuration through which the world as a whole (the globe, planet Earth) is increasingly reorganized as a single place (Robertson 1992). This is not to say necessarily that the world is becoming

more and more unified or homogeneous. The globalization of the world is expressed by patterns of inequalities across regions or continents just as well. The concept of structuration in Robertson's definition needs to be studied closely. On one hand, the concept is meant to underscore a non exhaustive list of major social transformations in history, such as the creation of the United Nations for instance or the spread of new information technologies throughout the globe (ibid., 58-59). On the other hand, the concept is also meant to draw attention on the reflexive nature of social activities. Human beings do not react to the situation they face in a mere mechanical way. Human beings give meaning to their lives. They interpret their experiences as they go through them. Essentially, human beings do what they do because of the way they understand the circumstances they found themselves in. Such understanding motivates individuals to engage in specific forms of social activities and organizations so as to reproduce them and sustain them across space and time with unforeseen consequences (Giddens 1984). Accordingly, globalization doesn't simply take place all by its own. The series of historical changes behind it are carried by human beings. Thus there must be a cultural (interpretative, reflexive) dimension in globalization (Tomlinson 1999, 11-12).

In order to remind us of this fundamental dimension, Robertson suggests thinking of globalization as a problem. People currently live in a world which has been changing and which continues to change under the impact of globalization. Moreover, people are more and more aware of the fact that their world is increasingly reorganized as a single place (again, for a critique of the idea of "growing global awareness" and the empiricist imagination behind it, see Guy forthcoming). By way of consequence, people now have to make a decision for themselves: where do they go from here? Robertson calls globalization a problem because he wants to put emphasis on this human factor precisely. Indeed, in order to answer the question "what to do next?" people must first figure out what globalization actually means for them. They must find a way to make sense of the mass of events that they are experiencing, some positive, some negative. Needless to say, as social scientists, we can expect people coming from different background to have different interpretations of globalization. As a process of structuration, globalization is propelled in turn by these interpretations. Robertson believes that due to the discrepancies between these many interpretations, we should also expect globalization to be

pulled in different directions, possibly in complete opposition with one another.

Finally, Robertson sees a close relation between globalization and modernization. As the history of sociology reveals it, the major changes that rocked Western countries on a scale never seen before from the nineteenth century onward (industrial production, market economy, democratic ideals, bureaucratic state, workers movement, etc.) left many social commentators apprehensive or puzzled. For example, Emile Durkheim worried about the risk of anomie due to a higher level of division of labor, while Max Weber feared that newly established democracy would be the death of charismatic leaders. Nobody ignored or could deny that the world wasn't the same anymore. Whilst the evidences were irrefutable, opinions remain hesitant as people were asking themselves: is the world changing for better or worse? Are new plagues coming our way? What can be done about them? This is to say, Robertson explains, that many people of this period pictured themselves as coming to a cross road. As they were witnessing modernization's unprecedented consequences on social order and in human affairs, they were presented with a dilemma. In Robertson's analysis, they understood this dilemma as being forced to choose between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* as Ferdinand Tönnies defined these terms.

The concept of *Gesellschaft* (or society) designates a voluntary legal association based on personal rational self-interests. The concept of *Gemeinschaft* (or community) on the other hand depicts a group of individuals tied to a common place of origin and by a sense of collective identity embedded in shared values, ideas and experiences. At the end of the nineteenth century, *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* were seen as meeting face-to-face. The confrontation was taken as the central feature of the new unsettling age. Accordingly, in order to move toward more peaceful times, it was understood that one of the two options had to be picked at the expense of the other. Preferences given to one option or another were linked to specific visions of modernization: optimistic or pessimistic. Some were convinced that the new historical conjuncture was a disaster –considering for instance how the on-going transformations were damaging to the traditional authority of Christian faith – and privileged *Gemeinschaft* over *Gesellschaft*. Others believed that modernity was not a poison, but a cure, arguing that any current social difficulties were not representative of the new age at all, but were in fact caused by the presence of old elements that had to

erase. Those other ones preferred *Gesellschaft* instead of *Gemeinschaft*.

To sum up, modernization exemplifies what Robertson has in mind when he sees globalization as an analogous problem in an attempt to bring back the concept of culture (as implemented by individuals caught up in history) in the sociological analysis of the phenomena. For Robertson, a good theory of globalization shouldn't limit itself to describe important evolutionary trends and structural patterns at the level of the globe (international division of labor, monetary flows, migrations flows, etc.). Such a theory must also take into consideration the different meanings ascribed to globalization in general by the individuals living under the conditions created by it. Robertson believes that the concepts of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* can help us circumscribe the actual variety of interpretations and reactions. Robertson therefore identifies four "images of world-order" (Robertson 1992, 78-79): global *Gemeinschaft 1* (or many communities throughout the world), global *Gemeinschaft 2* (or one world community), global *Gesellschaft 1* (or many societies throughout the world) and global *Gesellschaft 2* (or one world society).

Images of world-order are connected with dimensions of what Robertson calls the global field (also known as global-human condition) (ibid, 27). The later corresponds to the overall conjuncture of the process of structuration of the world as a whole has progressively constituted. In this way, a new set of analytical distinctions has taken shape today thanks to globalization, like in the past a conceptual opposition between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* emerged out of modernization. In this new set, the concepts of individuality, national society, humankind and world-system of societies have been separated from each other (see also Waters 1995, 42-43). Each of these concepts constitutes a dimension of the global field as Robertson talks about it. The global field circumscribes human activities, both materially and ideally (or ideologically). In this context, the many dimensions of the field are like backgrounds of symbolic references or resources for human behavior. In other words, human beings can make use of the four concepts mentioned above to interpret their life and decide a course of action thereafter. Yet this ought to be done by siding for one concept or dimension at the expense of all the others.

Robertson's four images of world-order are detailed below (for more discussions, see Beyer 1994, Holton 1998):

Global Gemeinschaft 1: this image depicts the world as inhabited by numerous communities mostly closed to each other. This image stands in relation with the concept of individuality for the reason that each community is conceived as unique when compared to the others (considering its customs, its institutions, its history, etc.). There are two versions of this image: one symmetrical and one asymmetrical. The symmetrical version states that the numerous communities are all equal to one another. The asymmetrical version states on the contrary that one community in particular rises above all the others as a morally superior civilization.

Global Gemeinschaft 2: this image is linked to the concept of humankind and consequently depicts the world as inhabited by one single global community. There are no frontiers, no division in the world, we are told, since all humans presumably belong to the same tribe or family. The whole globe is nothing more than a big village. Again, the same image exists in two different versions: the world community can either be centralized or decentralized. Religious movements and peace movements are given by Robertson as examples for the centralized version and the decentralized version respectively.

Global Gesellschaft 1: this image refers to the concept of national society. In its symmetrical version, this image portrays the world as consisting of many politically autonomous units. These national societies are thought to be more open than their counterparts previously sketched in "global Gemeinschaft 1." They interact and exchange quite a lot with one another, but only as long as it serves their respective self-interest. Thus each national society remains master of its own destiny and relation in-between societies are built and broken without much difficulty. In the asymmetrical version, one national society reigns supreme over all the others as a hegemonic power.

Global Gesellschaft 2: In this last image, the world is said to be structured as a whole on the basis of some kind of organization global in scale and in scope. However, the unity of the world is not natural as in "global Gemeinschaft 2." Rather it is an institutional achievement with a social history behind it. Furthermore, this achievement can assume a decentralized form (as in the case of a world federation) or in centralized one (as in the case of a world government). Naturally enough, this image is tied to the concept of world-system of societies, the last dimension of the global field.

FROM IMAGES OF WORLD-ORDER TO SOCIETY'S

SELF-DESCRIPTIONS In Robertson's theory, the relation between globalization and the images of world-order goes like this: by imagining a formal set including four different elements, we would agree to say that in Robertson's mind, the images are represented by the elements inside the set, while globalization corresponds to the whole set. In the light of the same metaphor, this is how I now wish to recapture Robertson's ideas for the benefit of my own theory: for me, globalization does not coincide with the whole set, but only with one element inside of it. The other elements along side globalization are alternative self-descriptions of society, whereas the whole set indicates the general process of describing the system of society (as the process of selection of one self-description or another by means of society's own operations). In other words, my wish is quite simply to take Robertson's images of world-order and turn them into self-descriptions of society. Such translation is justified by the fact that the system of society as Luhmann conceives it is already interchangeable with the whole world or the horizon, whereas speaking of "the globe" is nothing more than one of the stratagems to address the world's unity (the system's unity) within the world (within the system).⁷

We should recall that for Robertson, none of the images of world-order actually depicts what the world (or planet Earth) has become today. Indeed, the images of world order are not to be confused with the global field (or global-human condition) itself. The images delineate what the world could become henceforward would the human beings work to change their conditions one way or another. This is an interpretation I break away with for the sake of my own theory of globalization. Following Robertson, I still seize the four images as if they were meaningful propositions alluding to the world as a whole. However, the content I ascribe to them is factual in nature (or descriptive) rather than moral (or prescriptive). This is to say that for me, the intent behind these propositions is not to specify how society or the whole world could be organised in the future, if not right now, but only how reality happens to be working in the present moment in time.

Such move to adapt Robertson's ideas automatically raises one very important question: among the four images of world-order imagined by Robertson, which one should be considered as equivalent to globalization as one of society's self-descriptions? The answer is global *Gesellschaft 2*. The matter

almost speaks for itself. There is not much more secret about the many phenomena globalization supposedly involves. We all learned the song and we all know it by heart by now. When it comes to globalization, we all start to talk about free trade, transnational corporations, financial integration and currencies markets. We go on and discuss a bit about business practices like outsourcing and subcontracting. Then we continue and say something about the new information technologies, from microprocessors to fibre optic to Internet, providing the infrastructure which supports most of the economic side of globalization. A few words are mentioned about the emergence of new economic powers like India and China. Some comments are added about worldwide migration movements triggered (at least partly) by the new international division of labor. This eventually draws attention on some of the cultural aspects of globalization, since ideas and symbols characterizing collective identities (ethnic, racial, religious or other) are travelling along side money, commodities, knowledge and workers. Sooner or later, some people cannot help themselves but to remind the rest of us that globalization produces as much poverty and risks as wealth and opportunities and that there is a huge gap between globalization's winners and losers. Moreover, at one time or another through the discussion, the role of organisations (national and international as well as governmental and non governmental) is addressed, since it is they that do most of the work supplying globalization with standardized frameworks for interaction (human rights regimes, environmental protection regimes, national policy blueprints, etc.).⁸

When Robertson is saying that the image *Gesellschaft 2* entails a form of global organisation, he's thinking about one possible solution to the problem of globalization. For this reason, he seems to be talking about a bureaucratic type of organisation with staffs, offices, hierarchies, budgets, etc. While I want to use the same image, I give the word "organisation" a different meaning, since I confound this image with globalization rather than opposing the two. For us then, "organisation" is meant to designate the kind of state we find the world in. Hence what globalization implies essentially is that today's world is organised, that it is effectively structured, although maybe loosely only, through a range of networks and flows of electronic bits, material goods, abstract ideas, human beings, etc. None of the three other images of world order adequately replicates this scene or stage. In *Gemeinschaft 1* and *Gesellschaft 2*, the whole world's unity or the world's autonomy as a unit of its

own is underrated or neglected, if not dismissed. This is not the case in *Gemeinschaft 2*, but in this last instance, the world's unity is given as natural, whereas it has to be considered as an achievement.

THE DISTINCTION GLOBAL/LOCAL Let us return to the distinction global/local.⁹ The first side of the distinction, namely the global value, is the one attached directly to globalization as a self-description of society. In this self-description, the system of society, the world which is our horizon, is depicted as being determined, in most part at least, by global factors of one sort or another (see previous section). Accordingly, one can catch a glimpse of globalization whenever one comes across communications evoking such factors. What about the other side of the distinction? In the same way I have joined globalization with the image of world order called *Gesellschaft 2*, I now link the local with the other images of world order, the ones Robertson calls respectively *Gemeinschaft 1*, *Gemeinschaft 2* and finally *Gesellschaft 1*. It should be noted that this list is not limited in principle. What matters in all cases is the contrast (the distinction) with globalization. More precisely, the local corresponds to these other descriptions of society as seen from the perspective of globalization. The fact is that the observers who observe society and who describe it in the form of globalization are also capable of observing other observers who observe society like they do, but who otherwise describe society in different ways. It is these other observers and their observations that embody what expresses a local value according to the first observers.

When globalization is selected as the best description of society under the immediate circumstances, globalization appears as reality itself. To be exact, what is at stake is not the mere existence of certain social practices, or transnational corporations, or technological equipments, etc. In other words, the precise object of the debate is not, or not solely, to decide whether these phenomena are concretely taking place or not. What matters more is the actual influence these phenomena may have on the on-going course of events. When globalization is accepted as the reality we live in, it follows that a special causal power is attributed to networks and flows that cross over state boundaries, so that they are interpreted as the main forces that currently cause things in society to be what they are. Consequently, within this perspective, whichever observer thinks and acts as if society was on the contrary animated by some other

forces – like the mutually agreed partnership between free sovereign states as in the symmetrical version of the image *Gesellschaft 1* or the division between civilized people and barbarians as in the asymmetrical version of the image of world order entitled *Gemeinschaft 1* – will be found to be “out of touch” with reality (that is, with globalization). Such observers will still be admitted as part of globalization (as part of reality), but only by being placed at a local level (it's still convenient to talk about levels, although it may be misleading too – see below).

Where is the local to be located then? It turns out that this is not exactly the right question to ask, for what we are dealing with is something that has more to do with time than with space. Indeed, one steps into, or otherwise falls at, the local level whenever the world stops being described in the form of globalization or whenever globalization is replaced with another description of society. Accordingly, if the local is framed with boundaries, one must realise that the later doesn't exist in geographical or physical space, but only in the streams of communication the system of society generates as it continuously reproduces itself. Accordingly, one doesn't move from the global to the local by covering a certain distance so as to reach a certain place on the face of planet Earth. Rather the passage from the global to the local corresponds to or is triggered by a change in social interaction. At the local level, the world (more precisely, to repeat again, the phenomenological horizon the system of society coincides with) doesn't take the aspect of globalization anymore, but some other aspect. This difference in aspects or appearances necessarily translates into a difference in social behaviour and social coordination. People don't talk about and react to the same things anymore. Above all, people don't talk about globalization and react to it, or else they don't see it as the reality they already all live in, but instead as an alien force coming from afar. In brief, the local pops up wherever this change happens and in theory it can happen anywhere.

When it comes to the local, we must therefore distinguish two perspectives: one external and one internal. It is only from the external perspective that the local adopts such a title. From the internal perspective, the local is not the local, but a complete vision of the world (once again, the phenomenological horizon) and accordingly a world of its own. Following this reasoning, we must dismiss two common ideas about the relation between the local and the global. First, contrary to what the distinction

between whole and parts leads us into thinking, the local is not contained inside the global. Rather the former is as big as the latter and therefore has to be positioned next to it, since both of them show us an entire world. Actually, they both show us the same world: society. Second, contrary to what the distinction between modes of integration implies, the local and the global do not merge or mix or fuse with one another. This confusion may be caused by the fact that society can virtually be described in different ways at all times. Social scientists may react to this situation by trying to include all descriptions of society into one coherent frame. Yet this only produces poor results, as the frame is not so coherent in the end. Again, social scientists move around this difficulty by claiming that ambiguities are intrinsic parts of today's reality. For those aiming at observing how other observers go on with their observations (and their self-observations), this is not entirely convincing. For instance, it is not quite clear whether the ones some social scientists are eager to call hybrids actually define themselves as such (see for example Pieterse 1995). I believe there is a better solution to account for the relation between global and local (namely, between the many descriptions of society). Quite simply, I suggest introducing time as a variable. Thus in time, and contrary to the third definition mentioned in the introduction, global and local never meet face-to-face with each other. Rather they alternate with one another.

There are many descriptions an observer can use to make sense of or give shape to reality. Moreover, descriptions are akin to points of view inasmuch as different descriptions can show us a same object while ascribing different meanings to it. Accordingly, there are objects that globalization as a point of view enables us to observe that can be observed from some other point of view just as well. Although these objects' meaning varies from one description to the other, they never take more than one meaning at a time. It is so, since no observer can proceed by embracing all points of view simultaneously. It follows that the multiplicity of descriptions, perspectives and meanings doesn't reveal itself at one particular point in time (that is, instantaneously), but only across time (through a chain of consecutive events). As the chain of events continues to extend, a chance (or risk) arises for oscillating from one side of the distinction global/local to the other. In fact, observing systems periodically revise the operations of observations they previously produced. In this way, values ascribed to objects in the world are occasionally inverted: global objects

are turned into local ones and vice-versa. Hence objects adopt alternatively one value and the other, but at no time can one object take on both values concurrently.

A word on globalization and region before the conclusion. Although there is a strong tendency to think so, regions are not irreducible to what is global and what is local. In the context we are concerned about, phenomena are either global or local. There are no other possibilities. Accordingly, the concept of region cannot be accepted as a third term. On the other hand, we can perfectly conceive things like global regions and local regions. But otherwise, within the perspective of globalization – considering that globalization is precisely that: a perspective – potential entities like “regional phenomena” are dismissed. How so? In many cases, on closer inspection, “regional phenomena” are in fact explicitly offered or implicitly portrayed in opposition to global ones. As a result, “regional phenomena” are actually meant or ought to be understood as synonymous with “local phenomena” and so the logic of our arguments reaffirms itself. We don't mean to suggest that there is something fundamentally wrong with region as a research concept. Again, it is of course perfectly possible to talk about regions. But anything that is distinguished must be distinguished from something else, so we cannot help but work with binary codes or bivalent tools. Trios as elementary forms (like say, local-regional-global or local-national-global) are rejected on this ground. Still it should be clear that all this relates to globalization as a specific self-description of society. Accordingly, one could suggest that region belongs to a self-description other than globalization (perhaps *Gemeinschaft* 2 which presumably articulates itself around the distinction between universal and particular).

CONCLUSION In his book about the system of the mass media, Luhmann writes:

The media designate what they are communicating about and must therefore distinguish it. For example, they inform people about scandals and in doing so must presuppose that non-scandalous behaviour would have been possible as well. What is not reflected here, however, is that one could pose the question (which a sociologist might pose) why something is even being observed in the schema scandalous/non-scandalous at all (...) (2000, 118).

What we explained in this article about the distinction global/local is essentially equivalent to what Luhmann says here about scandals. Let me

restate my central ideas. To being with, there is a connexion between the system of society as Niklas Luhmann understands it and the world inasmuch as the later doesn't refer to the planet Earth, but to the phenomenological horizon meaning is associated with. This connection goes as follow: society is the world, because it constitutes the aforementioned phenomenological horizon. Accordingly, statements aiming at describing the world – like for instance “we now live in a globalizing world” – depict society by the same token. Hence the idea that globalization has to be interpreted as a self-description of contemporary society, rather than an actual process of social change. Despite that, globalization doesn't appear as the sole self-description made available in social communication. The distinction global/local comes about as a reflection on the relation between the many self-descriptions of society. This is all in accordance with the specific content globalization as a one potential self-description of society concretely has to offer. In this self-description, the world (the system of society) is portrayed as being determined by networks and flows leaping across state boundaries. When globalization is selected as the best description of all within one particular context, the other descriptions are conversely found faulty. They don't seem to concur with the on-going events and thus they are labelled as local by default.

The relation between the various self-descriptions of society can be exposed furthermore with the help of Roland Robertson's ideas. Robertson speaks of globalization as the structuration of the world as a whole. This process can take different directions in so far as different worldviews can propel it. Robertson himself identifies four worldviews, so that in the end his fundamental proposition can be formulated as X: {a, b, c, d}, where X stands for the structuration of the world (or globalization), whilst a, b, c and d stand for the various worldviews. Knowing that the world refers to society itself (following the above reasoning), I give the same variables alternative definitions. First, X indicates the generic activity of describing society. Second, globalization becomes one way to achieve such a goal among many others (one letter among the four contained in the whole set). The reader should keep in mind that descriptions of society are parts of the system they presumably describe, considering that they have to be produced necessarily through operations of communication. In these unsettling conditions, taking the good descriptions apart from the bad ones turns out to be highly problematic. The many pictures of reality cannot simply be put side by side

with reality itself. The way out consists in confronting the many pictures with one another. As Robertson indeed shows us, there are effectively many possible images of the world and globalization is ultimately weighted against them.

One could say that what is global and what is local have no reality, a sociologist, i.e. for a second order observer. However, I contend that global and local are very much real for the system of society, whereas society in turn is real for a sociologist, for it is the observer that he or she wishes to observe. Admittedly, the method I advocate (Luhmann's method) doesn't help people (experts or laymen) to deal “more effectively” with their lives or the work they have to do (by reducing “costs of operations” for instance). Rather this method aims at making room for more complexity in our scientific descriptions. What about research in the future? How to study globalization once we replace first order observation with second order observation? We can start anew by looking for specific social situations where the description of society arises in the flows of communication. We can then examine how various self-descriptions are disseminated depending on the situations' practical requirements. As an illustration, we can think of the universities' advertisement campaigns for recruiting new students. In this case, what we call a social situation is created as many universities address the same public. In their advertisement campaigns, the universities proceed by making a statement about themselves, but also about society as a whole, so as to convince their targeted audience of their respective value as higher education institutions. Since the potential students or future clients are not part of the universities just yet, the later must position themselves within the wider society if they want to reach the former. Therefore, we are dealing with a triangular configuration made up of the organizations of universities, the population or targeted audience and society as a whole. There are of course numerous differences between universities (size, location, history, programs, etc.) and we cannot presume that they all advertise themselves in the same way. But precisely for this reason, we can expect universities to give diverging accounts of society in order to achieve their goals (this brings back the metaphors of space and sites, i.e. a multiplicity of sites, each of them reflecting in a different way the common space they all are part of). Some universities try to attract students by inviting them to contribute to some sort of universal objective of high importance, like the production of scientific knowledge or the social

development of the humankind. By doing this, these universities promote the self-description of society we call, following Robertson, *Gemeinschaft 2*. Other universities choose to present themselves in relation to the nation-state they belong to. For instance, University of Ottawa is Canada's university. This other strategy denotes the self-description called *Gesellschaft 1*. Finally, there are universities depicting themselves as global institutions or research centre, thus relaying the self-description called *Gesellschaft 2*, otherwise recognized as globalization itself as explained in this article. By comparing many universities in this way, it could be shown how globalization expands across society and under which conditions.

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(ENDNOTES)

¹ When one aligns the distinction global/local with the distinction whole/part, the so-called layer cake turns into... a pie!

² I don't mean to say that as a rule we shouldn't bother clarifying the scientific concepts we work with. The point is that under the circumstances, the distinction global/local is not taken as an analytical tool for studying one research object. Rather the distinction is hereby conceived as the research object itself insofar as its use is embedded in discursive practices.

³ In fact, these words most probably already had a meaning of their own even before university researchers started using them on a regular basis (Waters 1995, 2).

⁴ I must mention two other (very stimulating) papers also dealing with the distinction global/local with the help of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory: Wastell 2001 and Staheli 2003.

⁵ One finds a brilliant illustration of this principle in Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth" (in Borges 2004). The story revolves around an improbable maze, a king in exile, his servant and an unidentified body. The reader is presented with two different ways to assemble this handful of elements so as to give support to two contradictory accounts. For instance, in one account, the body is the king's, whereas in the other it is his servant's; in one account, the maze is a protection against an enemy, whereas in the other it is a lure driving the same enemy into a trap; etc.

⁶ For this reason, there should be no confusion between "selected by chance" and "selected with the help of chance".

⁷ For another reflection on the concept of the world in sociology that otherwise also finds its inspiration in Robertson's work on globalization, see Turner 1994.

⁸ The relation between globalization, the invention of microprocessors and the transformation of the production system, work organization and business practices in the second half of the twentieth century is described by David Harvey (1990) and Manuel Castells (1996). Moreover, both authors explain how the technological and economic changes behind globalization alter our experience of space and time. In a subsequent work, Castells also highlights the interface between globalization and social movements (Castells 1997). The cultural side of globalization (collective imaginaries, ethnoscape, mediascape, ideoscape, etc.) is explored by Arjun Appadurai (1996). The institutional side of globalization (organizational models, legitimating discourses, goals, ideals, programs, etc.) is studied by John W. Meyer and his collaborators (e.g. Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez 1997). Zygmunt Bauman insists that globalization is not only advantageous for some, but also – and simultaneously – disadvantageous for others (1998). Finally, David Held, Anthony McGrew and others provided us with a wide series of textbooks covering the many aspects of globalization: economic, political, cultural, technological, environmental, etc. (Held & al. 1999, Held & McGrew 2000, 2007a, 2007b, Held & Kaya 2007).

⁹ The distinction global/local has also been dealt with by Roland Robertson himself (1995, see also Beck 2000, 47-52). In Robertson's opinion, global and local should not be conceived as mutually exclusive. Accordingly, Robertson wants to promote the concept of glocalization. The present article develops a different approach.