

Preface

Globalization falls outside the established academic disciplines, as a sign of the emergence of a new kind of social phenomenon, fully as much as an index of the origins of those disciplines in nineteenth-century realities that are no longer ours. There is thus something daring and speculative, unprotected, in the approach of scholars and theorists to this unclassifiable topic, which is the intellectual property of no specific field, yet which seems to concern politics and economics in immediate ways, but just as immediately culture and sociology, not to speak of information and the media, or ecology, or consumerism and daily life. Globalization—even the term itself has been hotly contested—is thus the modern or postmodern version of the proverbial elephant, described by its blind observers in so many diverse ways. Yet one can still posit the existence of the elephant in the absence of a single persuasive and dominant theory; nor are blinded questions the most unsatisfactory way to explore this kind of relational and multileveled phenomenon.

In this situation, in which the concept has no firm disciplinary home or privileged context, it would seem only natural to be pressed initially for a definition. Such requests are both comprehensible and suspicious: Nietzsche famously warned about the inevitable recursiveness of definitions. In much the same way, one often has the feeling that the call for a definition of globalization, preliminary to any discussion of the thing itself, betrays a certain bad faith; and that those who insist on it already know what it is in the first place, at the same time seeking to prove its nonexistence by way of the confusion of the hapless definer. In my own contribution to this volume, I will try to show that as a concept, “globalization” knows its own internal slippages among various zones of reference. Nonetheless, it is worth trying to formulate some provisional starting point.

Clearly enough, the concept of globalization reflects the sense of an immense enlargement of world communication, as well as of the horizon of a world market, both of which seem far more tangible and immediate than in earlier stages of modernity. Roland Robertson, surely one of the most ambitious theorists of the matter, has formulated the dynamic of globalization as “the twofold process of the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular.”¹ This is a valuable lead, even though Robertson is

intent on offering something like a utopian vision of “globality,” of some new global ethic and consciousness in the world today, rather than a structural account of the forms globalization takes in the various realms of the political, the economic, and the cultural. I believe that it is necessary to add a dose of negativity to his formula, and to insist on the relations of antagonism and tension between these two poles. I thus propose to “define” globalization as an untotalizable totality which intensifies binary relations between its parts—mostly nations, but also regions and groups, which, however, continue to articulate themselves on the model of “national identities” (rather than in terms of social classes, for example). But what we now need to add to the other qualifications implicit in the formulation—binary or point-to-point relations already being rather different from some plural constellation of localities and particulars—is that such relations are first and foremost ones of tension or antagonism, when not outright exclusion: in them each term struggles to define itself against the binary other. We must therefore now add that such relationships (between a state claiming universality, for example, such as the United States or the West, and another claiming local particularity; or between particulars; or between universals) are necessarily symbolic ones, which express themselves in a range of collective Imaginaries. This does not of course mean that they are somehow *merely* cultural, let alone unreal: for such symbolic transmission requires the preexistence of economic and communicational channels and preestablished circuits. What emerges worldwide are then patterns of negative and positive exchanges which resemble those of class relations and struggles within the nation-state, even though, as I have insisted, they do not (yet) define themselves in that way and currently remain fixed and thematized at the level of the spatial and the geopolitical. I should add that, even in this provisional “definition,” the status of the older nation-state under globalization remains a topic for heated debate: it will be more productive to keep this matter open, and in particular to insist that the definition does not imply any transcendence of the older form of the nation-state, nor even a form that might be thought eventually to replace it (world government, world culture, or whatever). Indeed, the purpose of the “definition” is precisely to encourage disagreement and debate about just this question, along with many others.

For it turns out that the intellectual space of “globalization” involves the intersection of a number of different conceptual axes (my essay makes an attempt to model these patterns of opposition on the classic philosophical

debates they seem to articulate). At one level, it is the evaluation of globalization that is itself at stake: Is it a matter of transnational domination and uniformity or, on the other hand, the source of the liberation of local culture from hidebound state and national forms? For this second position, the transnational rejoins the regional and the local and substitutes NGOs (non-governmental organizations) for the corrupt and ossified one-party state. This marks a return to the ideal of civil society, as that was first theorized during the emergence of bourgeois society from feudalism. But “civil society” is an idea that has two distinct levels, which it sometimes slyly substitutes for one another in a kind of ideological prestidigitation. For it can mean the political “freedom” of the various social groups to negotiate their political contract, or the economic “freedom” of the marketplace itself, as a plural space of innovation and production, distribution and consumption. The authority of the work of Néstor García Canclini (whose absence from our conference was greatly regretted) reinforces this dual vision of freedom, and celebrates the creativity and vitality of peasant markets as an augury of a new political freedom to come (not the least interest of *Hybrid Cultures*’s account of peasant markets, by the way, lies in his demonstration of the globalization, *avant la lettre*, of peasant artisanal production).²

Manthia Diawara’s essay in this collection makes a strong case for this vitality on the local level, although the restoration of the concrete African setting with all its constraints makes his account something other than a mere ideological celebration of the market. Ioan Davies rehearses the intellectual vitality and variety of African cultural life by contrasting two theorists of African “identity,” Valentin Mudimbe and Anthony Appiah. Meanwhile, on another continent and in a quite different transcolonial situation, Walter Mignolo comes to cultural variety by way of the multiplicity of indigenous Latin American languages and the emergence of local peasant political movements. Alberto Moreiras, finally, theorizes a new philosophical defense of this local emergence of difference in his account of the emergence of the category of “specificity” as over against the old universalism that so often merely underwrote an imperial knowledge/power system; with this essay, however, the dialectical view that some new transnationality served to liberate the local and the regional from specifically national constraints seems on the point of turning over into a critique of globalization as a new power system.

But Diawara’s celebration of local culture did not exclude the observation of negative features of transnationality; in particular, he rejoins Sherif Hetata

in a more somber evaluation of the deleterious effects of the U.S. dollar as a new world currency standard (along with the worldwide spread of American mass culture that accompanies it). Subramani chronicles in the case of Fiji the difficulties any regional culture meets in achieving autonomy, while Barbara Trent offers the unfamiliar perspective of a left-wing new world film market. These reflections find their sociological underpinnings in Leslie Sklair's identification of an essentially American consumerism as a new worldwide ideology, with its effects on local movements and local culture, while Masao Miyoshi, after a review of the transformations brought about by the new transnational corporations, turns to the question of critique and resistance on the part of intellectuals, and offers a bleak view of the effects of globalization on the university system.

But these perspectives find themselves modified when, between the level of the new transnational system (whether it be welcomed for its liberatory effects or denounced for its increasing standardization and control) and the level of the local and regional, the third term of the individual nation-state is introduced. The critique of the nation-state, identified with a virulent "nationalism" (that can extend all the way to local ethnic violence), was a stock-in-trade of internationalism all the way back to the end of World War II, when the vision of the United Nations was opposed to the supposedly nationalist expansionism of the defeated fascist powers. This critique only occasionally developed as far as a projection of some new value of federalism, on a world or regional scale. Nor has the evolution—in full globalization today—of vaguely "federalist" regional blocs gone unnoticed, along with the immense hinterlands they drain: Latin America for the United States, the former Soviet bloc for the European community, and a new East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere for Japan. At the same time, the palpable evidence of a crisis of the very idea of federalism has been less often addressed: something that might lead the disinterested observer (if there could be one) to characterize the upheavals of the present age less in terms of the death of communism or socialism than in the very agony of the various federalist experiments themselves, and not only in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, but also in Canada and Spain.

However, when one positions the model at a somewhat different angle, everything changes and it is no longer the bureaucratic state apparatus that restricts the burgeoning of local cultures and local political freedoms, but

rather the transnational system itself that menaces national autonomy, and that on all levels: socially, by way of Sklair's "culture-ideology of consumerism"; culturally, by way of American mass culture; politically, by the emergence of a world policing system; and economically, through the demands of IMF and the structural requirements of the "free market." Under those conditions, the older idea of a national project and a national culture reemerges as an oppositional value. Liu Kang reminds us of the uniqueness of the Chinese experience, and the various recent Chinese theorizations of possibilities that might still be realized within its framework. But it is with speakers from other Asian civilizations (which had to coexist with and to develop against imperial occupations and a capitalist system) that it remains to reassert the role that the national "collective project" may still have to play today. Paik Nak-chung reminds us of the oppositional power of a national literature in the uniquely beleaguered situation of Korea, while Geeta Kapur offers a comprehensive view of the social power of a national art and cinema in India. These interventions suggest that the modernist project itself—repudiated by a certain postmodernity in speakers who celebrate the conjunction of the global and the local—is still alive and well in some parts of the world today, and they remind us of the energizing and enabling claims of an older modernism to reinvent the collectivity and to change the world and the self, claims now so often dismissed as evoking a repressive unity and a stifling of social and regional difference. They suggest that alongside a multiple and postmodern postcoloniality, there also exists a modernist one, for which the "liberation" brought by Americanization and American mass culture and consumption can also be experienced as a threat and a force of disintegration of traditions from which new and alternative possibilities might otherwise have been expected to emerge. It is a modernism very different from the older traditionalisms, and also from the Westernizing "modernisms" that once struggled against them.

A further ambiguity in this play of different axes of opposition in the globalization debate turns on the way in which the new global system is identified. For there result very different emphases when it is philosophically characterized in terms of Eurocentrism and when it is economically identified in terms of an essentially American worldwide capitalism. This is the moment to evoke Enrique Dussel's astonishing proposal for the construction of a new non-Eurocentric world historiography, and also Noam Chomsky's de-

tailed but impassioned account of the impact of Reaganite and Thatcherist market “deregulations” and restructuring on a hitherto flourishing and semi-autonomous national space (New Zealand).

But there are other global dilemmas that seem to lie outside these frameworks, and this symposium has scarcely been able to touch on all of them: the conflicted strategies of feminism in the new world-system, for example; or the politics of AIDS on a worldwide scale; the relationship between globalization and identity politics, or ethnicity, or religious fundamentalism; the impact on science and the academic disciplines. As for ecology, however, an area in which a truly global strategy has seemed both urgent and realizable, the very rich essays of Joan Martinez-Alier and David Harvey implacably criticize the oversimplifications and naïve fantasies often associated with contemporary ecological movements, while at the same time making modest yet tangible and productive proposals. Martinez-Alier dispels the traditional opposition between ecological thought and Marxism or socialism, while Harvey patiently unmask the unspoken contradictions and wishful thinking of current middle-class ecological programs.

These essays therefore offer the picture of a mobile exchange of perspectives on globalization today; indeed, they show this area up, not as a new field of specialization, but rather as a space of tension, in which the very “problematic” of globalization still remains to be produced. It would therefore not be desirable to emerge from those shifting theoretical models and oppositions with anything like a new and definitive concept of globalization, or even some new theory of its possibilities and dilemmas, although we have chosen to conclude the debate with a series of reactions by younger scholars and graduate students that can serve to suggest both the actuality of these questions and also future lines of explorations. What seems clear is that the state of things the word *globalization* attempts to designate will be with us for a long time to come; that the intervention of a practical relationship to it will be at one with the invention of a new culture and a new politics alike; and that its theorization necessarily uniting the social and the cultural sciences, as well as theory and practice, the local and the global, the West and its Others, but also postmodernity and its predecessors and alternatives, will constitute the horizon of all theory in the years ahead.

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Notes

- 1 Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London, 1992), 177–178. Robertson’s most intriguing (and “Weberian”) idea in this book is the proposition that it was precisely the syncretism and eclecticism of Japanese religion that prepared Japan uniquely for a privileged role in the current state of globalization. See also, for a full and useful review of current theories on globalization, Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System* (Baltimore, 1994).
- 2 Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chippari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis, 1995).