Glocalization as Globalization: Evolution of a Sociological Concept

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution and transformation of the concept of globalization highlighting the tangled relationship between the discipline of sociology and globalization. The paper will also trace the history and the development of the concept of "glocalization", which originated in Japan as a popular business strategy. Professor Roland Robertson, a sociologist at the University of Pittsburgh, introduced this concept to the Western social scientific discourse. Robertson was well aware of the changes of this concept in Japanese society. This paper will trace the roots of the Japanese concept and its use in sociological discussions. The paper will also examine in broad terms concepts, theories and paradigms in sociology. The paper will also touch on the problems of the application of the sociological concepts developed in the western sociological and social scientific discourses in the local contexts such as those of Singapore and Malaysia.

1. Introduction

In social sciences it is often difficult to trace the origin of concepts. Concepts, theories and ideas are often products of collective endeavors. It would be extremely difficult to identify who used the term "globalization" for the first time. According to Malcolm Waters (1995) whose book titled *Globalization* is a fine primer, Roland Robertson was one of the early users of the term. More recently, Roland Robertson and Kathleen White edited *Globalization: Critical Concepts* in 6 volumes is a tour de force which present some of the most important essays on this subject.

No matter who coined it first, at the dawn of the 21st century globalization as a concept, as a slogan, as a term is used more frequently than any other terms. In Singapore, from the inflow of foreign capital, technology, workers or "foreign talents", music, movies, popular culture, almost everything has resonance with globalization. Globalization is a heroic process, globalization is a sinister process, depending on which side of the debate one stands. Some tend to see globalization as a brakeless train crushing everything in its path, others see benefit in getting on board the train towards economic growth and modernization.

2. Sociology and Globalization

Globalization as a concept in social science has a short history. Even in the revised version of Raymond Williams' *Key Words* (1983) there is no entry on globalization. The Harper Collins *Dictionary of Sociology* (1991) has an entry on "globalization of production" but no entry on globalization as such. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Sociology* (1994) has an entry on globalization together with globalization theory. It

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says, "Globalization theory examines the emergence of a global cultural system. It suggests that global culture is brought about by a variety of social and cultural developments…". The entry refers to the book edited by Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King (1990) *Globalization, Knowledge and Society*. The term globalization was probably first used as a book title in the Albrow and King edited book (1990) which was published drawing on the essays published in various issues of *International Sociology* the journal of International Sociological Association (1986-1990) Some of the journal articles contained globalization as a phrase in the titles in the 1980s and even earlier (see Moore, 1966, Meyer, 1980; Robertson, 1983a, 1983b, 1985). One could even claim that the first social science text that dealt with the subject of globalization was *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). One could even argue that Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), the author of *Prolegomenon to the Universal History* was the real claimant of the credit. Globalization as a social process is old and has a much longer history. Many writers have traced the early globalizing processes in the dissemination of religion and culture, interactions of people, groups, communities through trade and commerce from the ancient times.

Sociology has been traditionally defined as the study of society. And as the boundaries of society have expanded from local community, through states to global society, sociology has become the study of the global society. This is a good illustration of how ideas, knowledge and (social) sciences expand with the changes and expansion of realities.

Sociology, it is often said, deals with the social life. In fact, all social sciences deal with social life or its various aspects. It is difficult to conceptualize *social* as a category. In sociology, there are two meanings of social. Social used in the sense of Wallerstein or for that matter Marx, encompasses technology, economy, politics and culture. Sociology is interested in the understanding of these broad processes, especially at their interrelatedness.

There is, however, a narrow meaning of social, which is often equated with social system, or what some people call societal. Here society is an abstract system of social relations, a web or network of social relations. Following Talcott Parsons, (and before him, Durkheim) some social scientists sought to view sociology as the *scientific* study of society. I put the stress on scientific because one of the goals of science is to define one's field narrowly so that specialized and predictable knowledge can be produced and accumulated. Sociologists with a positivistic bent of mind were quite happy with the narrow definition of sociology, hence the delimited conceptualization of society in the sense of social system. In this formulation, the field of study of economics is economic system; the field of political science is political system and so on. All social sciences could live happily in a world of segregated systems of knowledge!

However, a large number of sociologists having dissatisfied with this narrow conceptualization of society, sought to view society and the scope of sociology broadly. They also found the earlier compartmentalization unnecessary, unproductive and overly abstract. All these so-called subsystems interact. Albert Hirschman called for the need of trespassing into each other's domains. The rise of macro-sociology is a clear response to the attempt to overcome a delimited view of sociology. Barrington Moore, Wallerstein, Tilly, Skocpol and others have looked at society in the broadest sense of the term, in that the inspiration came from Marx, Weber and later Braudel and other social historians.

Globalization, though it means many things to many people, is one of the master processes of our time. Globalization as a field in sociology is a legatee of the macro-sociological interests and development. Globalization study addresses itself to the connectivity of broad processes of technological, economic, political, cultural interrelationships. Whether one looks at the economic, cultural or media connectivity worldwide, one has to take a much broader understanding of society and social institutions. Sociology focuses its analytical lenses on the flows and processes in society whether at the local, national or global levels. In other words, sociology has a genuine claim over the field of globalization.

Some contemporary writers accuse sociology, an archetypical social science, as a prisoner of nation-state. Anthony Giddens and Immanuel Wallertsien have both lamented that sociology has been the study of modern nation states. The definitions as well as the boundaries of society, which sociology seeks to

study, often overlap with those of nation-state. Since the interest taken by sociologists such as Roland Robertson of Pittsburgh and others since the late 1970s, sociology has redefined its scope and field as the social scientific study of the global processes. Ulrich Beck has explicitly called for the development of new concepts to capture the new realities of interconnectedness, plurality, multi-locality and multiplicity.

Sociology has established its claim over globalization as a field of study historically. A return to national society centered focus would be a major regressive step towards objectivist, scientistic sociology and a return to what C Wright Mills called "abstracted empiricism". Or worse, sociology might become a residual discipline busy picking up areas left unattended by other social sciences. Sociology is not the only branch of social sciences that has a claim to study society because other branches of social sciences do study aspects of society. For example, institutional economists deal with social structure and cultural values to explain economic processes and market behaviors. Political scientists such as Robert Putnam have done important sociological studies of political processes. Such fields as political sociology illustrate the cross over of political science and sociology all the time. Social sciences are tasked to analyze society in all its various aspects and constellations.

The long-standing relationship between sociology and globalization, gives sociology as a discipline a unique position to study all aspects of the field of globalization, a master process in human society. This does not preclude the claims of other disciplines to the subject of globalization and it reminds us the importance of each field's autonomy to venture out and explore using its own traditions and conceptual frames.

While globalization as a framework is naturally biased in favor of macro-sociological issues, questions were raised to the viability of using this framework to study social realities on the ground. This led to a rethink of macro-macro relationship. Glocalization as a concept arose to help alleviate the conceptual difficulties of macro-micro relationship.

Although it would be difficult to trace the first user of the term "glocalization" in its original Japanese usage, the first time the term was used in English can be attributed to Professor Roland Robertson, a British/American sociologist, who migrated from United Kingdom to the United States where he spent most of his academic career at the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. Robertson's original interests in sociology were in the areas of sociology of religion, sociological theories and cultural sociology. He also ventured into areas of comparative sociology and modernization studies. His interest and knowledge of Japanese society led him to find out the use of the term "glocalization" in Japan in Japanese language, a term the marketing experts were using by which they meant that products of Japanese origin should be localized – that is, they should be suited to local taste and interests – yet, the products are global in application and reach, hence a new term "glocalization" was coined. Robertson and other sociologists interested in the subject of global processes could not help noticing that many of the social categories and practices assume a local flavor or character despite the fact that these products were invented elsewhere. Dutch sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse has for some time used terms such as mélange, hybridity, syncretism to capture similar processes with regard to culture. According to Nederveen Pieterse, (2004) there are three views on the issue of globalization of cultures. The first view is the clash of cultures view expressed in terms of clash of the civilizations by writers like Samuel Huntington. The second notion is best expressed in the phrase of "McDonaldization" of the world (Ritzer, 2000). This view obviously suggests a homogenized world, a world dominated by a single culture that erases differences of local cultures. The third view is that of hybridization or synthesis. Much of human evolution of culture can be seen as exchanges, diffusion, etc. where cross-breeding, borrowing and adjusting to the local needs and so on were very common. I argue below that although glocalization belongs to the same genre or has resonance with those categories there are some important differences as well.

3. Evolution of the Concept Glocalization

According to the dictionary meaning, the term "glocal" and the process noun "glocalization" are "formed by telescoping global and local to make a blend" (*The Oxford Dictionary of New Words*, 1991:134 quoted in Robertson, 1995:28). The term was modeled on Japanese word *dochakuka,* which originally meant adapting farming technique to one's own local condition. In the business world the idea was adopted to refer to global localization. The word as well as the idea came from Japan (Robertson, 1995:28). According to Wordspy, glocalization means "the creation of products or services intended for the global market, but customized to suit the local cultures." (http://www.wordspy.com/words/). Although the term glocalization has come to frequent use since the late 1980s, there were several related terms that social scientists used and continue to use. One such related word, which has been in use in social sciences and related fields for quite some time is, indigenization.

Some social scientists claimed that social sciences such as sociology and political science, even psychology were products of western social experiences therefore when these fields of inquiry were transported and transplanted to non-European or non-western contexts such as Latin America, Asia or Africa there was a need for indigenization of these subjects. The idea of indigenization has created quite a controversy among social scientists because it raises fundamental questions about the applicability of social scientific ideas and concepts. However, indigenization can be seen as similar to localization. In both these concepts, there is an assumption of an original or authentic "locality" or "indigenous system". One of the consequences of globalization is that it opens up doubts about the originality and authenticity of cultures. If one takes a long-term view of globalization, "locality" or "local" itself is a consequence of globalization. There are hardly any sites or cultures that can be seen as isolated or unconnected from the global processes.

Robertson, one of the pioneers in the study of globalization, did not view globalization as a recent phenomenon nor did he see it as a consequence of modernization. The theories of modernization came under serious attack in sociology because of such assumptions as unilinearity and convergence. As our knowledge of the world increased, many writers pointed out that the cultural differences are not all that superficial and nonlinearity and mutiliniearity are better descriptions of global modernity. Besides divergence rather than convergence seems to have been the consequence of modernization. Yet the divergent cultures and societies can be studied with the help of a globalized social science and there was no need for diverse, indigenized social sciences. Social sciences to claim scientific status could not afford to forfeit its claim to universality and universal knowledge. Social sciences must be context sensitive but not context dependent. It is in this context that Robertson   conceptualized globalization in the twentieth century as "*the interpenetration of the universalization of particularization and the particularization of universalism*" (Robertson, 1992:100 emphasis in the original). Khondker (1994) building on Robertson's framework argued that globalization or glocalization should be seen as an interdependent process. "The problem of simultaneous globalization of the local and the localization of globality can be expressed as the twin processes of *macro-localization* and *micro-globalization*. Macro-localization involves expanding the boundaries locality as well as making some local ideas, practices, institutions global. The rise of world wide religious or ethnic revivalist movements can be seen as examples of macro-localization. Micro-globalization involves incorporating certain global processes into the local setting. Consider social movements such as the feminist movements or ecological movements or consider new production techniques or marketing strategies which emerge in a certain local context and over a period these practices spread far beyond that locality into a larger spatial and historical arena. Consider print industry or computer industry with a specific location of its emergence has now become a global phenomena. Overcoming space is globalization. In this view of globalization, globalization is glocalization. This view is somewhat different from the way Giddens conceptualizes the relationship between the global and the local. Globalization, for Giddens, "is the reason for the revival of local cultural identities in different parts of the world" (Giddens, 2000:31). While in this view local is the provider of the response to the forces that are global, we argue that local itself is constituted globally. Ritzer in discussing glocalization has added another – should I say, redundant – convoluted term "grobalization" to refer to what he calls "growth

imperatives [pushing] organizations and nations to expand globally and to impose themselves on the local" (2004:xiii). For Ritzer, globalization is the sum total of glocalization and "grobalization".

Wong argues, following Wind (1998), that a global company does not mean that it has gone global all the way. There are companies that are part global, part regional or part local involving different domains such as portfolio, supply chain, research and development and business processes. In terms of mode of business practices, there could be independent operations, joint venture or alliances (Wong, 1998:156).

4. Key Propositions

The main propositions of gloclaization are not too different from the main arguments of a sophisticated version of globalization. 1. Diversity is the essence of social life; 2. Globalization does not erase *all* differences; 3. Autonomy of history and culture give a sense of uniqueness to the experiences of groups of people whether we define them as cultures, societies or nations; 4. Glocalization is the notion that removes the fear from many that globalization is like a tidal wave erasing all the differences. A number of books and articles on the subject of globalization give the impression that it is a force that creates a uniform world, a world where barriers disappear and cultures become amalgamated into a global whole. The tensions and conflicts between cultures are nothing but the problems of a transitory phase. Ironically, the phase of transition has been around for a long period of time. And as we have entered the third millennia many of the age-old problems of differences of cultures and religion remain. 5. Glocalizaton does not promise a world free from conflicts and tensions but a more historically grounded understanding of the complicated – yet, pragmatic view of the world.

5. Globalization is not Westernization

Some writers view globalization as the worldwide spread of "westernization". This view is either erroneous or contains only partial truth. From a superficial point of view, various processes outwardly seem that the world is, indeed, becoming westernized. One could see the popularity of the western music, movies, and "McDonalds" as examples of westernization. More and more countries are seeing the opening of McDonalds. More and more countries playing the top chart of the pop list of USA and Hollywood movies and US-made television serials (such as, *Friends* and *The Simpsons* are becoming ubiquitous to the extent that some writers even use the term "Americanization" to describe these processes of cultural transmission. However, a closer look will reveal that these cultural goods have different meanings in different societal and cultural contexts with uneven impact on classes and age-groups. Some of the products are consumed without any modification, others are modified and indigenized to suit the local contexts and there are exceptional situations where the intentions are completely inverted.

In the past, many writers found it necessary to distinguish modernization from westernization. Modernization was believed to be a set of cultural practices and social institutional features that historically evolved in Europe and North America, commonly referred to as the West. The need to separate westernization from modernization (in the past) was motivated more by nationalism than pure intellectual reasons, because historically speaking, most of the modern cultural traits began in the West, a historical fact which was difficult to accommodate in a nationalistic political culture. The Western scholars in the nineteenth century were also guilty of making exaggerated claims of western superiority. Max Weber, a German sociologist was correct to claim that the western rationality and science had become universal but his denigration of non-western cultures did not sit well among the larger intellectual community. Many Indian sociologists took pains to delineate the differences between modernization and westernization. Similar discussions exist with regard to so-called westernization of the Ottoman Empire, modernization of Japan since the Meiji restoration of 1868 or modernization of China in the early part of the 20th century such as the May 4th Movement of 1919. In the modernization process, many of the late modernizing societies were borrowing ideas and knowledge and technology most of which were generated in the early modernized societies in Europe. The geography of the West kept shifting. In the nineteenth century, when Germany was modernizing, the idea of the West was limited to Western Europe

only (mainly Britain and France). In some post-colonial situations the demarcation was based more on political expedience than logical or intellectual merits. Good westernization came to be regarded as modernization and bad modernization was designated as westernization. The distancing from westernization can also be understood as a reaction to centuries of domination and exploitation of the colonies by the western (mainly European) powers. However, over time a more objective consideration of history indicate that many of the traits that spread worldwide originated in certain geographical regions yet as these traits were transplanted elsewhere, they became mutated and assumed different forms in different contexts. For example, parliamentary democracy evolved in England, with roots that go back to *Magna Carta* of 1215. However, as Westminster-style parliamentary democracy was institutionalized in India, Malaysia, and other former British colonies, they mutated in light of the local milieu.

Westernization as a term is not equivalent to globalization. Nevertheless, westernization can be seen as an aspect of globalization. Certain institutional features and cultural traits that originated in the west were put in place in many other geographical regions lock stock and barrel under the framework of global interconnections and diffusion or forced implantation under colonial age. Yet, over time these institutions and practices mutated and assumed new meanings. Therefore, westernization can be seen as the beginning of the process. The cultural features borrowed or imitated themselves mutate in the source countries. Thus, westernization as a category has limited conceptual value. One can associate certain literary forms, genres, and traits as part of the cultural zone we vaguely call "the west", yet these are mere influences as one can see in artistic, literary, architectural styles. For example, the great Indian film maker late Satyajit Ray was influenced by Hollywood films and the art of film making, but he did not want to replicate Hollywood movies in Calcutta. His movies were modern capturing local themes which he projected with a modern art form and technology. Hence it was truly global, or more appropriately, glocal. Presently, Singapore is establishing linkages with both Bollywood and Indian film industries as well seeking to play the role of an outsourced location for hi-tech Hollywood productions. Globalization, like modernization, is often a fusion. Westernization as a concept has some value if used only as a descriptive rather than analytic category. As an analytic category it is rather limited.

Writers such as John Meyer have used the idea of isomorphism (a term borrowed from science, botany, in particular) which means replication of the same form yet separated from the main source. His research has shown that modern education – not western education though it was perhaps modified and institutionalized in the west – has spread worldwide and a similar set of values and practices have emerged in diverse settings. For example, college graduates command more social prestige and respect almost regardless of cultural contexts. Some cultures can give more rewards than others. Globalization shows tendencies towards isomorphism, yet some people may continue to mistake this process for westernization.

In the context of Singapore, the first generation leaders always emphasized the fact that although Singapore's economic development was dependent on western technology and capital, and it was reliant on multinational corporations to foster economic growth, the state maintained a certain degree of autonomy and formulated broad social development strategy.

6. Glocalization and hybridization

In the discussion of glocalization some writers tend to conflate it with hybridization. This may be somewhat misleading. Glocalization involves blending, mixing adapting of two or more processes one of which must be local. But one can accept a hybrid version that does not involve local. In the context of higher education in Singapore a hybridized version comprising the original British model and the US model was accepted. One could find many such examples in matters of technology and business practices where two different systems or modes are combined for better results. Glocalization to be meaningful must include at least one component that addresses the local culture, system of values and practices and so on. One of the areas in Singapore where the evidence of glocalization is quite visible is the area of mass communication and especially in the area of television programming. From televised drama, sitcoms, and even "reality shows" one finds attempts of glocalization. Although some attempts are

not always successful and there are instances when one can see unabashed imitation, by and large the idea of glocalization and fusion remain appealing to many Singaporeans.

7. Technology and glocalization

Singapore, located in Southeast Asia, has attained the developed country status or High Income Economy according to the World Bank classification. Having experienced rapid state-led economic development under a favorable global economic climate, Singapore has been pursuing the goal of creating a knowledge-based economy since 1990s. Singapore's economic growth since her emergence in 1965 as an independent state entailed heavy investment in education and development of human resource in science and technology. Singapore's advancement in areas of knowledge and high technology is dependent to a large extent on international collaboration. Two aspects of Singapore's growth are striking: linkage with global market and a highly rational approach to governance, which is often evidenced by a near-absence of corruption. These two aspects have direct bearing on the issues of technological developments in Singapore. An additional factor that one has to take into account is the cultural diversity of Singapore's population. Singapore is both a multiethnic and multi-religious society, which provides an added dimension to the context of formulation of ethical standards. Its 4 million people (in 2004) comprise 76% Chinese, 14% Malay, 7% Indian, and 3% others. As many as one quarter of Singapore's population is non-citizens which indicate Singapore's reliance on foreign human resources both at working class jobs as well as high end knowledge workers. Multicultural population-base and the varying sensitivity of various groups have influenced policies concerning biotechnology.

According to Stephen Haggard, "Singapore had already broken away from the typical policy pattern of a developing country as early as 1970. By the 1980s Singaporean policymakers were identifying the country with small European economies such as Switzerland" (Haggard, 1999:355). It has been noted by a number of writers (Rodan, 1989; Wade, 1990 and Haggard, 1999) that Singapore's economic development and social modernization did not take place following a pure free market model. Singapore state was very much involved in guiding the market forces. On the one hand Singapore has relied heavily for multinational corporations to launch economic growth but it also built a high rate of savings through central Provident Fund. Singapore's development model showed certain mixed or hybrid quality.

Soon after Singapore's independence, policymakers began to focus attention on development in sciences and technology. The strive for such development was aided in the process by close relationship with the Multinational Corporations who brought investments and employed technically qualified Singaporeans. Right from the early days of national development, Singapore was well integrated with not only the international economic system bit also with global knowledge systems. Singapore's export-oriented economic development in the 1980s was dominated by IT and computer peripherals. In the 1990s emphasis on biotechnology followed an earlier emphasis on IT.

Singapore's development since her independence in 1965 can be described as a transformation from a Third World society to a First World economy. Much of that development can be attributed to Singapore's adoption of modern technology. Choices of technology were not always preceded by controversies and debates. Both the government and the general public showed a great deal of pragmatism in the choice of technology. Although in most instances, technology was adopted without much modification, the mode of use, and so on there were imprints of adaptation and glocalization. One such area is in the area of electronic road pricing system. The technology of monitoring cars from a scanner fitted in a gantry was not a Singaporean invention, but they way that technology was used was very Singaporean. Because of the drive to catch up, Singapore has always been ahead in adopting new technology. It is in recent years having achieved the developed status; some Singaporeans are showing concern with issues of privacy and so on because some of the new technology is intrusive. Singapore's love affairs with technology is evident in the fact that Singapore ranks among the top three countries in the world in terms usage of personal computers as well as hand phones. The only country ahead of Singapore in the number of Short Messaging Service (SMS) is Hong Kong. Whenever a new technology is invented, Singapore would be one of the first places where that technology would show up.

Singaporeans have a favorable attitude towards technology. Singapore International Airlines as well as Port Authority of Singapore (PSA) remain equipped with the state of the art technology. ATM machines in Singapore were introduced in the early 1980s. Singapore's public transport system is another place where one would find a great many applications of new technology. However, all cases of adaptation technology may not be seen as examples of glocalization. In many instances, for example, computer technology in Singapore was implemented without any modifications. However as Singapore entered a new phase of research in the 1990s, namely in the area of biotechnology we fins evidence of glocalization. Biotechnological research calls for a careful consideration of and orientation towards local cultural and ethical contexts. A good deal of attention has been given to these areas in Singapore.

Another area where examples of glocalization can be found in both Malaysia and Singapore is the area of architectural designs. In the post-socialist world, Singapore remains a unique society where 90% of the population lives in the houses built and then sold to the citizens. When Singapore was embarked on massive public housing program, it borrowed the so-called international style of very basic and practical designs, yet a new concept of public space – though limited to the residents of the housing blocs – evolved. These spaces known as void-decks were places for wedding, funeral or any such communal gatherings. New designs blending the western and local motifs emerged in Singapore.

Although the initial architectural thrust of Singapore can be viewed as "brutalism" driven by a sheer pragmatic consideration, over the years more attention has been given to the notions of fusion and hybridity, or in other words glocalization.

8. Conclusions

Singapore's development experience, which was underpinned by appropriate science and technology policies, provides a convincing example of the effectiveness of glocalization as a conscious development strategy. Although the strategy was not always perfect and there were lapses from time to time but on the whole Singapore has shown that cultural fusion can be an asset if properly harnessed for the objective of attaining socioeconomic growth without creating gross inequality and social dislocation.

The sociological concepts of globalization in general and glocalization in particular can be of great value in understanding the dynamic social transformation in Southeast Asia, especially in Singapore and Malaysia. It is always possible to be carried away with "methodological nationalism", a position that says each country or society should be examined in light of its own context through the devices of its own homegrown methodology. Such a position would lead to intellectual closure foreclosing dialogue and understanding between societies. In the globalized world such discourses have limited value. Yet, it is important to take the local context and variables and not to fall into the trap of blind imitation or aping of western ideas and concepts. However, in the end what is needed is a set of globally valid concepts that will help us examine processes of social transformation that is inextricably connected with global transformation.

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