

**Globalization: Theoretical Perspectives**  
**Professor R Santhosh**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Lecture 4**  
**What is Globalization?**

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## What is Globalization?

Roland Robertson and Kathleen E. White



Welcome back to the class. In the previous two sessions, we had a very broad overview of some of the key debates in sociological literature regarding the process of globalization. So, you must have understood the depth as well as breadth of debates within academia regarding this whole phenomenon of globalization.

These debates range not only in terms of some of these conceptual categories, but these debates also are quite vibrant in terms of understanding the extent of globalization to making sense of this particular phenomenon, the implication of this phenomenon, the kind of a political position that one requires to adopt whether it is desirable, whether it is not desirable, what are the kind of long-term implications of that. So, as I mentioned in the previous classes, the debates and discussions on globalization are so vast and so extensive and there is hardly any consensus on any of these major themes.

In today's class as well as the next class, I am going to discuss some of the very central themes of globalization— trying to understand what it means. I know that this very question itself is problematic because many of these scholars whom we are going to discuss would argue that you should not look at globalization as a particular thing— as if it can be described or as if something can be easily made sense of in a very simplistic manner.


Since this is the first week and an introductory class that we are having, I must provide some introductory remarks about globalization. What are some of the kinds of a consensus, some kinds of a consensus at least shared by some of the scholars who tried to design, understand and characterise this particular phenomenon?

Today we have this particular essay by Roland Robertson and Kathleen E. White. This essay is taken from the book 'Globalization: A Reader' edited by George Rickson. So, I mentioned in the previous class that this book will be one of our textbooks as it contains a lot of important essays that we will be referring to in the coming classes.

I also mentioned that in the majority of classes, I would be following one particular scholar or a particular article very clearly. Mostly I will be discussing a particular author based on his or her original works. You know why it is important because instead of beginning with giving a summary of certain ideas or concepts, it is important that we try to understand the scholarly arguments of some of these important intellectuals.

It is also important that we develop the ability to read the original essays, original books, original writings of these important scholars because that gives you some kind of clarity and insights about how these people write, what their basic arguments are, so you are directly dealing with the reader. So, this particular essay is a summary of the essay written by Robertson and Kathleen E. White, titled "What is Globalization?"

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- Many 'Globalizations' instead of a definitive definition of Globalization.
  - Globalization was discussed by that explicit name in sociology and anthropology, as well as in religious studies, as long ago as the late 1970s and early 1980s. However the fall of Berlin Wall was crucial.
  - Economic centric analysis- focus on economic liberalization, expansion of MNCs etc
  - Anti-globalization movements and the concerns about social and political implications



As I mentioned, there are many globalizations, instead of a definitive definition of Globalization. This point is something that we mentioned earlier because there is hardly any

consensus among scholars about how to define it, can we have a definition of Globalization that is agreed upon by everybody and chances are very slim because many scholars look at globalization from different vantage points, different disciplinary perspectives, different ideological perspectives.

Each of these definitions will give a kind of orientation of their orientations to these definitions and that necessarily is not a bad thing. I hope you understand that in social science, unlike, say, natural sciences or physical sciences, a definition is not a very definitive thing, it is not an absolute thing, an absolute result of an intellectual journey. Rather, definitions always give you broader indications, broader perspectives about the time and the context in which somebody tries to define a particular phenomenon.

Because of that very reason in social sciences, definitions keep changing and as I mentioned earlier, it is not necessarily a wrong thing, because it is not an inability of the social sciences to define certain things, but rather it is a reflection of the complexity of the subject matter that social sciences are dealing with. I will talk about culture next week.

Culture is such a dubious term, defined in so many ways. Once you understand different definitions and try to make sense of why such definitions emerged in different periods in time, then you understand much more about the intellectual trajectory, about the time, about the context, about the place, and why certain people defined culture in such a manner. So, globalization is also something similar to that, though it does not have that kind of a legacy like a term 'culture'.

Robertson and Kathleen argue that globalization was discussed by explicit means of sociology and anthropology, as well as some in religious studies, as long ago as the late 1970s and early 80s. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall was crucial. We know that the fall of the Berlin Wall which ended the Soviet Union and which also collapsed a communist economic system as an alternative to the capitalist system; the kind of a bipolar world that the has been witnessing since the end of the second world war came to an end and it was a unipolar world with the US and capitalist Europe at the central stage of the whole economic affairs of the world. The term was in use in sociology and anthropology from the late 70s and early 80s but was not conceptualised rigorously, but people knew that you require a term basically to indicate the larger processes taking place because of this global interconnectedness or the changes in capitalism, the late capitalist emergence and the changing forms of capitalism and these

transformations made it clear that scholars will have to look for a term that is capable of understanding and subsuming these larger changes taking place in the globe.

One of the important issues associated with the early attempts to define globalization was that they were all completely economic centric analysis. They all focused on the economic aspect and how different nation-states entered into free trade, the capitalist system, how various multinational corporations or national corporations emerged and how did they operate and how does the capital flow from one region to another, what are the ways in which production takes place, what is the connection or disconnection between capital and labour and geography.

We knew by the 1980s and 1990s that production is no longer the capital and production and the labourers are not confined to a particular geographic area. The transnational companies, transnational corporations spread across the globe. So, there was a major movement of workers of the capital and the production procedure, the distribution, the supply chain. Though they existed in the past, the kind of intensity of these changes was quite remarkable after the 1990s.

Mostly the definition of globalization revolves around the question of economic liberalization and the expansion of MNCs and other things. So, that is the reason why there were very strong anti-globalization movements from say in the late 90s and early 2000, you had a series of anti-globalization movements, there was something called the world social forum which you might touch upon in the coming classes.

A host of people looked at globalization as an economic phenomenon where the multinational companies especially from the US expanded to the rest of the world and they will exploit it so it was labelled as Coca-Colaisation, it was seen as Americanisation, it was seen as a kind of a new model of economic exploitation, new imperialism. New imperialism was the term used to explain the economic logic of globalization. This economic centric definition of globalization also as I mentioned earlier paved the way to quite a lot of anti-globalization movements and later it became evident that globalization cannot be reduced to its economic activity because the social, cultural and political implications of these processes are equally important.

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- Immanuel Wallerstein: the present world-system has been produced primarily by the expansion of capitalism over the past five or six hundred years. This expansion Wallerstein regards as now being increasingly challenged by what he calls anti-systemic movements. He still misses the cultural aspect.
- *First, and most obviously, there is what can, for simplicity's sake, be called the international-systemic aspect. Second, there is the aspect which covers the most general feature of global-human life, namely the concept of humanity. Third, there is another component which we have called (the totality of) individual selves. Finally, there is the principal 'container' of human beings for many centuries, namely the nation-state. (P.60)*



If you specifically try to understand what is the form of globalization, how can we characterise the form of globalization, the morphology of globalization, this has very different kind of arguments, for example, people like Immanuel Wallerstein, I hope you are familiar with him, he is a very important sociologist who provide a new Marxist argument to talk about the global developmentalism, global expansion of capitalism which he argued that what we are witnessing in the post-colonial era was nothing but a continuation of the earlier forms of colonial expansion.

He talks about the world's system as comprising of the core, the semi-periphery and the periphery countries and he argued that starting from the colonial period and through the post-colonial period the whole world has been integrated through the trade and economic relations and countries which are considered to be occupying the core positions mostly the European countries and then later America are the ones who controlled the flow of capital through unequal trade relations to the periphery countries as well as to the remote regions of the countries through what is known as this semi-periphery countries.

For Wallerstein, the world's system has to be understood not merely as the interrelationship between different countries but rather it has to be understood in the light of a much larger system. So, that is why he calls it a world's system theory. If you look into Wallersteinian argument, the present world system has been produced primarily by the expansion of capitalism over the past 500 or 600 years.

He is specifically mentioning colonialism, the emergence of colonialism and how colonialism was not only an attempt to create geographic dominance over larger societies but was also primarily for the capital. He explains and I think by now it is very evident, everybody knows

how raw materials were taken away from the colonies including India or Africa or Latin America and how that was transported into the colonies, into Britain, France. From there they were made into fine products and then brought back to these colonies and then sold at a much higher level. Thereby, crippling the local economy and secondly, making huge capital gains out of that.

The unequal development of the world is the key argument of Wallerstein. Of course, Wallerstein as well as those who propounded the dependency theories would simply answer this question— why is there so much unequal development in the world? Why are we forced to talk about the first world, second world and third world? Or why are we forced to talk about the developed world and developing world and underdeveloped world?

There were quite a lot of sophisticated sociological theories which mostly emerge from modernization theory which argued that the West can develop so fast mainly because of their cultural and social factors, whereas the traditional societies are lagging because they were inward-looking, traditional, orthodox, religious —all kind of stuff trying to provide a cultural explanation.

Both Gunder Frank as well as Immanuel Wallerstein appears in that particular scenario and argues that your theory which is modelled after modernization theory is completely ahistorical because you do not look into the actual process of colonization. After all, colonization is the main reason why certain countries became prosperous and this prosperity was at the cost of other countries which became very poor, whose economy was crippled, whose local economy, local trade systems and everything was systematically destroyed so that there is a flight of capital from these countries to so-called developed society.

Immanuel Wallerstein would argue that what we are seeing today as globalization is nothing but a continuation of the colonial period which is characterised by this arrangement of core, semi-periphery and periphery system and the capital moving from the periphery through the semi-periphery to the core countries. This expansion, Wallerstein regards as now being increasingly challenged by what he calls as the anti-systemic movements, but at the same time, he still misses the cultural aspects.

Wallerstein would suggest that these kinds of entrenched systems of having a core, semi-periphery and periphery, is being challenged now because, in the earlier scenario Europe, western Europe was firmly at the centre and after the end of colonialism, it shifted to America and later we see that the scenario is changing because you have more regional powers, China

emerged as a major power, then India emerged as a major power, Brazil emerged as a major power at least for some time and the northeastern, east Asian countries emerged as important players. So, Japan emerged as a major player.

Neat division of core, semi-periphery and periphery seems to be complicated now, but at the same time his analysis also completely revolves around the argument about capital. This particular quotation by the scholars named Robertson and Kathleen argues that first and most obviously, there is what, for simplicity's sake, called the interrelation systemic aspect. I will elaborate on that. Second, there is the aspect that covers the most general feature of global human life, namely the concept of humanity. Third, there is another component that we have called the totality of individual selves. Finally, there is the principal 'container' of human beings for many centuries, namely the nation-state. So, they identified some 3 or 4 important components as the form through which globalization unfolds and this is the theme that we will also continue in the next class when we talk about the major players of globalization. So, Kathleen and Robertson argue that these are the important forms of people through which globalization plays out.

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- International systemic aspect- European Union, BRICS, NATO, UN etc
- Concept of humanity- idea of humanity with respect to other species, environment, human rights etc
- Individual selves- greater forms of individuation. Fragmentation of individual identity
- Nation states- Globalization taking place through nation-states



So, what are these international systemic approaches? He would argue that instead of looking at individual nation-state as isolated individual entities, you need to rather look at the kind of international systemic aspects, for example, European Union, 24 or 25 countries European countries come together and they establish a common union with a single currency and with a single Visa rule and that was a kind of a revolutionary experience and if you look into the

history of Europe, bitter battles that they waged with each other, the kind of bloody history of Europe till very recently, nobody would have imagined this is possible.

Now, nobody is thinking about the possibility of a war between France and England or France and Germany for that matter, because now they realise that instead of war, more mutual cooperation and collaboration is what is required. Host of such international systems have come into existence which includes BRICS, NATO and UN and a host of other things. I will also discuss these in the coming class. So, he argues that this is one of the most important features through which globalization unfolds.

Now, you no longer will be able to see nation-states as an individual actor who is acting in isolation, what they do, what they do not do, how do they function, their operations, how they act, all these things are increasingly defined and designed by the larger systems, larger collaborations, larger treaties usually based on accepted terms and conditions, agreements and other things.

The second point he argues is the whole concept of humanity. So, Robertson and Kathleen would argue that we are having a completely different concept of humanity is emerging with respect to other species, with respect to the environment, there is an increased global consciousness that that humanity is something different or in other words, the kind of understanding about our self in comparison with the earlier periods is very different. We talk about the Anthropocene as a very important, distinct phase to describe our society.

The third point that they talk about is the individual selves, this is again a very important point which we will elaborately discuss. For example, what is happening to individuals, what is having to individual selves and there are greater forms of individuation, fragmentation of individual identity. What is happening to the whole question: who are you or who am I? I am not talking about the philosophical question but I am talking about the sociological question: who are you?

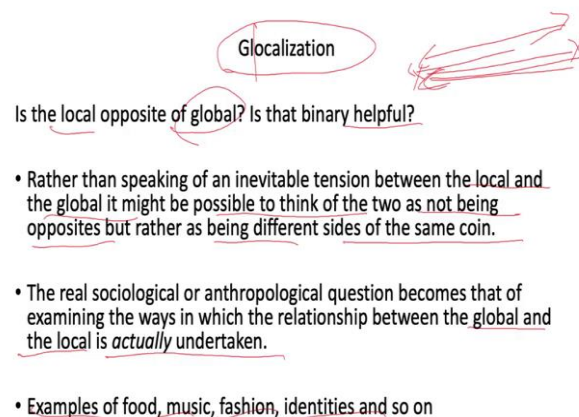
So, this is all an idea: who are you, how do we construct ourselves, how do we position ourselves, how do we understand ourselves via society. All these things are much more complicated than say maybe some 100 years or 200 years. So, it starts from philosophical questions to political questions to sociological understandings about sexuality, about identity, about colour, about caste, about religion, about ethnicity, a host of such kind of frameworks and idea of human rights, the idea of the whole argument that you belong to this particular species called as human and there are a host of new ideas of equality. So, they completely play



a fundamentally different role in defining who you are. We will come back to this point later when we talk about Giddens.

The fourth point is Nation-state— globalization taking place through the nation-state. This is a major theme of discussion about what is happening to nation-states: whether nation-states oppose the process of globalization or are they losing their significance in the whole process of globalization? Can we say that nation-states are losing their significance because the borders and the geography have become irrelevant, systems of flows, network society are becoming irrelevant? Now the consensus among social scientists is that it is not, globalization is also remodelling the nation-state. Globalization is also reconfiguring the nation-state. So, you cannot look at it by seeing the nation-state as either for or against globalization, it works through globalization.

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The slide features the word "Glocalization" circled in red. To its right, a red double-headed arrow points left and right. Below "Glocalization", the question "Is the local opposite of global? Is that binary helpful?" is underlined in red. The slide also includes three bullet points, each with red underlines for key phrases.

Is the local opposite of global? Is that binary helpful?

- Rather than speaking of an inevitable tension between the local and the global it might be possible to think of the two as not being opposites but rather as being different sides of the same coin.
- The real sociological or anthropological question becomes that of examining the ways in which the relationship between the global and the local is actually undertaken.
- Examples of food, music, fashion, identities and so on



Another very important form or another important term that they put forward is the term Glocalization. Glocalization, I hope you remember; I do not know how many of you have heard of that, it is not globalization. It is glocal, there is both global as well as local here. So, this particular term is very important because it challenges a very deeply entrenched idea or a practice of keeping these glocal and global as binary opposites.

So, the whole idea glocal opposite of global— Is this binary helpful? Can we always say that there is something global and there is something local, so you want to protect your local culture as if there is some untouched, uncontaminated local which should not be contaminated by the global which exists out there. If you look into a host of arguments of writers, politicians, leaders or religious figures, they all talk about this particular argument that there is a local culture here

and there is a global out there. So, this global is corrupting the local culture and we should protect that. The whole argument is to what extent it is helpful to keep global and local as completely separate and opposite? Rather than speaking of an inevitable tension between the local and the global, it might be possible to think of the two as not being opposites, but rather as being different sides of the same coin. Increasingly, globalization literature tells you that the global and the local are deeply interconnected, where there is nothing called as the local, as if it has been unchanging from the time immemorial and it should be protected or which is unconnected, it is not!

This local and global in every human society have been interconnected, entangled historically. So, we try to add this idea of local to some of these familiar contexts and then concepts while we say that the global is something else. They argue that it is always better to look at them as the two sides of the same coin because their interaction is something important. This interaction is again not unidirectional, it is not always that this local is being impacted by the global.

Our idea that our culture or morality is being corrupted because of western influence, because of globalization; “now your values are gone”! So, we think as if there exists a unidirectional change that everything from the globe is influencing the local. So, this glocalization would argue that that is not the case rather, it is different, it is a kind of mutual interaction. The real sociological or anthropological question becomes that of examining how the relationship between the global and the local is undertaken. So, this is the most fascinating aspect of sociological or anthropological research.

If you are researching anthropology or sociology, of course, you will have this conceptual idea, once you are on the ground you will get on to examine it and try to understand how this negotiation, how this interaction between the global and the local takes place on the ground? How do ideas change? How do materials change? How does the flow of ideas from other places to this place and from this place to that place work? How both the global as well as the local are reshaped is no longer a one-sided program, it is no longer a one-sided scenario, it is a two-sided complementary kind of scenario.

There are a lot of examples of food, music, fashion, identity—you name it! Now, we are already into an integrated, globally interconnected world so that there is nothing local as if it is completely unconnected or completely isolated from the global flows. So, whether it is the food, you know how popular Chinese food is? Gobi Manchurian: we do know whether it is an

Indian food or Chinese food; or a host of Burgers or everything, you name it. The food culture in the country has gone through substantial changes over the past 2-3 couple of decades.

It is not again a one-sided scenario; it is a mutual one. Indian curry or Indian masalas, Indian food is extremely popular in the west as well. So, it is not only the influence from the West but also the influence from the Middle East that is what we are seeing actually in contemporary India. So, you see whether it is music or fashion or identities, the whole questions about sexuality, colour, racism, ethnicity, all these arguments are getting more and more entangled between the local and the global. So, social science literature or sociology would rather prefer the term 'glocalization' rather than understanding globalization as a one-sided moment.

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- First, globalization consists primarily of two major directional tendencies, increasing global connectivity and increasing global consciousness. Consciousness does not imply consensus, merely a shared sense of the world as a whole.
- Second, globalization has a particular form, one which has been, to all intents and purposes, consummated by the founding of the United Nations organization. This means that, like the operations of the UN, globalization is focused upon four points of reference: nation-states; world politics; individuals; and humankind.
- Third, globalization is constituted by four major facets of human life – namely, the cultural, the social, the political and the economic. These dimensions are in reality heavily intertwined, one or two aspects being more prominent at any given time or place.



They summarize again, it consists primarily of two major directional tendencies: increasing global connectivity and increasing global consciousness. So, these are the two major dimensions of this form of globalization. One is increasing global connectivity: it includes both connectivities facilitated by the transportation of material as well as human beings. Connectivity through networks, communicational networks, internet cables, your telecommunication networks, a host of such infrastructural changes has facilitated a global consciousness and equally important is the increasing global consciousness.

Now, we tend to think about everything on a global level. We understand that things that happen at the local level have an impact at the global level or something that happens at the global level will have an impact at the local level. So, we know that, even in the case of this Covid-19. Covid-19 was an epidemic that broke out in the Wuhan city of China. And because of this extreme form of global connectivity, or people moving in a very-very dense manner, it

became a global pandemic in no time. Similarly, the kind of incidents that happen in different places, the 9-11, the attack on the twin towers had cascading effects on almost every part of the globe.

This interconnectivity as well as the global consciousness about the challenges that are faced by the world about environmental degradation, global warming, greenhouse effect, a host of such ideas give you this understanding of global consciousness. Consciousness does not imply consensus; it is merely a shared sense of the world as a whole. We do not think that globalization, global consciousness would lead to a kind of a consensus rather it is only a shared sense that the world is a whole and you need to approach it like that.

Second, globalization has a particular form, one which has been for all intended purposes, consummated by the founding of the United Nation Organization (UNO). This means that, like the operations of the UN, globalization is focused upon four points of reference: nation-states, world politics, individuals and humankind. This is something that we discussed earlier. So, especially systems like the United Nations (UN) which was established immediately after the second world war basically to prevent the recurrence of a world war, but it was seen as an institution that upholds certain universal values and which of course, recognises the existence of individual nation-state and has this four reference points: one is the nation-state, then the world politics which are regulated through this systemic arrangements, and individuals and humankind.

And the third, globalization is constituted by four major facets of human life – cultural, social, political and economic. These dimensions are in reality heavily intertwined, one or two aspects being more prominent at any given time or place. So, the latest or the current social science or sociological literature will argue that the cultural or political or social dimension of globalization is as important as that of economic globalization. So, from the earlier economic centric understanding of globalization, we have moved to a much broader, comprehensive understanding of globalization which includes the cultural, social, political and economic.

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- Globalization is not a thing, not an 'it'.

- Contested topic from diverse disciplinary and political perspectives



To conclude the argument, globalization is not a thing, it is not an 'it'. There is no globalization as such there for you to go and then describe and then analyse. So, globalization is a complicated multifaceted process having very specific consequences on different parts of society in an extremely contextual manner. Contextual in the sense of what happens at a particular time at a given place and that place becomes important given its historical context. That place becomes important because of its unique socio-culture and political context and the time becomes important because of its specificity.

We are getting into a proper social science analysis that would get into this nitty-gritty of time and place, context and space and therefore, providing any simple definition or any overarching definition of globalization is a very difficult task. So, that is why it is a contested topic from a diverse disciplinary and political perspective— a point that I have been talking about from the beginning. For example, if you want to understand—what is the impact of globalization in India? It is an impossible question because it is too broad a question. You will have to narrow it down, cut it, make it more specific and to the point to understand what aspect of globalization, what aspect of Indian society at a given point in time, in a given place has impacted. Only then we will be able to understand the gravity or the situation, the complexity of the situation and then try to understand that.

This particular essay as I mentioned is a summary of the essay written by Roland Robertson and Kathleen E. White who tried to answer this question of what is globalization with an argument that it is neither an 'it' nor a 'thing', rather it requires more complicated conceptual analysis to make sense of that. So, I will stop the class and meet you for the next class. Thank you.