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The Sociology of Globalization

Theoretical and Methodological Reflections



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abstract: Although the word 'globalization' is widely used, its sociological meaning needs clarification. The aim of this article is to achieve that, while returning to the basic premise that sociology is the primary discipline that charts changes within the world-society. Two typical subjects for the sociology of globalization can be distinguished: defining what is 'global' at first sight and the identification of similar changes in (almost) all countries. However, can national-born concepts help to explain these subjects? This is debated by considering the sociology of social movements (Touraine) and the sociology of the elite (Aron and Rocher) to explain power in the study of alterglobalist movements. The authors conclude that in order to understand world metamorphosis, there is an urgency to make available accurate and reliable data and match universally recognized definitions. Both of these suggestions bring us to the broader yet fundamental issue of the specific principles required within the social sciences.

keywords: alterglobalist ♦ elites ♦ globalization ♦ international comparisons ♦ social movements

Introduction

The growing use of the word 'globalization' as a 'reification of concepts phenomenon' works to prevent observers from asking relevant questions¹ instead of helping them to understand social reality. To speak freely of globalization tends to show that, due to expanded (economic, financial, informational, human) inflows, we are aiming at an integrated world, and

that this evolution is new and unavoidable. It is not the result of action by any particular actor, but rather operates as a stand-alone process, almost automatic and remote-controlled. As a result of economic trade, it appears to manifest itself through standardization or, at least, homogenization of practices and cultures. Still, there is no such thing as a world government (the number of countries keeps growing), or a world army (as seen in the UN failure to secure peace in several recent conflicts), or even world law (the difficulty of bringing former and current dictators to justice is a testament to that). There is no such thing as a world tax collector, or a world police force, or even a unique world elite with coherent representation acting with a class consciousness.² Need we be reminded that identity and separatist claims, some leading to armed conflict, are numerous?

Generally speaking, while over 2 billion people live with no electricity (Agence Environnement Développement, 2002), the world is far from being a global village! This does not suggest that parts of it are not permanently intertwined, notably through the consequences of conflicts (refugee movements) or human activity (pollution, pandemics). However, this type of interconnection, by the crisis it entails, is simultaneously the cause of long-lasting severances (let us think about the social and political realities of Argentina, Indonesia, the Philippines, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo or even Ethiopia).

It therefore is paramount, as Cooper (2001) claims, to establish independent thinking in order to understand the world we live in, by distinguishing in particular between what stems from myth, rhetoric or self-fulfilling prophecy.³ This means identifying contemporary realities, an analysis that can take us further in our understanding of globalization. To achieve this goal, we focus on a particular methodological premise in this article, while keeping in mind sociology's primary interest in the world-society. We then attempt to specify what the sociology of globalization should be by proposing a definition of its subject and the global framework of related issues. This is followed by an examination of the extent to which 'classical' sociological concepts – more often than not wrought to give an account of social phenomena in a national context – must be systematically abandoned or, if they stay, become relevant for the subject globalization and the 'multiple' streams of the analysis of modernity. The study of alterglobalist movements will help us to find answers. Finally, we tackle the issue of access to scientific 'world' data.

Sociology and the Study of the World-Society

Actors from developed countries in the past comprised social groups, whereas contemporary actors appear more and more willing to free

themselves from society and, rather than cultivate one citizenship, want to profit from the improved flow of social interaction due to the development of new technologies. This brings us to the question: how can we still build a sociology where people's capacity to act collectively and perhaps even society itself are threatened with extinction? If a globalized society turns into a system, does it threaten the very discipline of sociology (Caillé, 2004: 27)? We have become accustomed to thinking that the demise of the discipline of sociology is equated with globalization, but perhaps a more useful starting point is to remember that the formation of world-society was precisely what constituted its original steps (see Martin et al., 2003: Ch. 1).

The founders of the French School of sociology (Durkheim and his successors) and German sociologists at the beginning of the 20th century have indeed often carried out comparative analysis between different contemporary societies as well as between societies of different eras in order to account for social phenomena. The discovery of the inherent division of activities and organization, coupled with the necessity to compensate for the resulting lack of solidarity, allowed them to define a tendency to universality within societies as they developed. Beyond their infinite diversity, social issues in their entirety were considered as divisible into simple elements (structures, shapes) that could be classified into universal categories (family, hierarchy, religion, solidarity, lawful power and so on).

Hesitating between enthusiasm and caution, Durkheim (1978b: 401) nevertheless underlined the importance of analysing the world-society: 'people hope and pray for an existence where . . . all men collaborate in the same work and live the same life. . . . [Because] inter-social conflicts can only be contained by controlling the action of a society that includes the others. . . . That societies of the same species group, this is the path our evolution seems to tread.' But it is mostly in terms of abstract and theoretical notions that humanity (the globalized world, in fact) could serve sociological knowledge in the form of the end of a series (in a mathematical sense) that would confirm and demonstrate the thrust of these social issues (Durkheim, 1975: Vol. 1: 111).

Mauss (1969) contributed to the identification of the subject world with his writing on the themes of nation, nationalities and internationalism. He had previously drawn attention to the paradox of social evolution, the dissemination of an identical society model that runs parallel with the increase of distinctive identities. Considering that in the 1920s we could already talk about a 'global human civilization', the author inferred that it was henceforth crucial to take into account interdependencies between nations (notably from the angle of financial markets), even when (and mostly so) we study 'local' societies. As he states (Mauss, 1969: 578): 'It

is precisely these relations between them that shed light on numerous phenomena of inner life in societies.' We can add that, for Mauss, two categories were capable of embodying these constraints: scientific and technological innovations, on the one hand; and international legal agreements, on the other.

Similar thoughts were formulated by the early German sociologists. In his *Histoire économique*,⁴ Weber, comparing different civilizational eras to different times, defines the evolution of what resembles a world-society as before all else a rationalization process concerning economic and financial⁵ arithmetic, religion, law, labour, technology and so forth (Weber, 1991). The author places particular emphasis on the internationalization of companies, underlining the role of the state and a certain philosophy. Sombart (1932) also tackles modern companies' development in terms of rationalization, stating that it combines a financial concentration of 'companies in a network' with industrial engineering. Although the combination of financial concentration into networks with industrial engineering seems to have no limitations (even regardless of the location of factories), Sombart underlines that the success of these implementations remains largely reliant on the intervention of an entrepreneurial state.

On the whole, even if the subject world and its transformations were not, in the strict sense, at the heart of the concerns of the founders of sociology, these thinkers have nevertheless acknowledged the ideal reality of a growing interdependence among societies, the intensification of exchanges and loans (and not only economic ones, but also social and cultural ones), under the impetus of privileged parties (economic entrepreneurs, public decision-makers, philosophers and scholars, lobbies).

More recent sociologists, such as Parsons or Elias, show that a true world-society is being built, either through the extension of a 'civilization process' that comprises struggles for dominance between world-level powers (Elias, 1975: 283), or by the fulfilment of a universal history design aimed at transforming national society into part of a supranational system (Parsons, 1973: 2).

This conception, often linked to evolutionary thinking, has never been shared by other sociologists, such as Aron (1984: viii), for instance, who 'does not think the international society formula or, preferably, the global one, is a true concept'. However, in order to understand social issues, this author advises that we operate on the level of the world-society (Aron, 1969: 310), as sociology's founders themselves do.

Defining the Subject for the Sociology of Globalization

Discussing globalization effectively relates back to a sociological tradition that encourages us, before all else, to view it as *social change* of a particular type that relates to nothing less than *the world*. But the meaning we give to this word varies according to our particular perspective: the chances that 'the world' does not have the same meaning for the political sciences, cultural anthropology, economy or urban geography are fairly significant. Thus, according to the way in which we tackle globalization, care should be taken to specify the type of identity that appears relevant (states, nations, towns, continents, linguistic eras, companies, individuals, etc.).

Thus, when globalization is mentioned, it is more often than not referring to 'liberal globalization' (the current type⁶), considered as the (dire) possibility of ubiquitous competition around the globe from the products and employees of fiercely competitive multinational companies.⁷ The relevant entities accounting for the phenomenon are thus the consumer and the company (its shareholders) that invest, delocalize and restructure. Globalization also forces us to examine the rationality of actors. But we can see as well the string of 'decisions' taken over several decades by states and international institutions were intended to extend the merchandising of social activities and to increase international exchange. With this in mind, the relevant entities are leaders (of states, international institutions, national companies) and analysis relates just as much to the genesis of these converging decisions as to their impact, which is not solely limited to the economic and financial fields.

More generally, it thus appears that the sociology of globalization has two subject-types:

- We try to identify, then explain, social processes common to (almost) all countries of the world (or more accurately, common to all relevant entities) and which are 'going in the same direction', i.e. that convey a common evolution, leading to the thought that things are evolving towards standardization (e.g. does the percentage of women leading the biggest companies evolve in the same manner in all countries and if yes, why?).
- Second, we refer to the social phenomena that immediately present themselves as global (that touch – almost – all relevant entities of the world) and, surely, themselves result from prior globalization processes. From this perspective, and provided we demonstrate their real global nature, we can think of international institutions (UN, IMF, WB, ILO, WTO, ISO), alterglobalist movements, transnational companies that are global, global terrorism, but also the climate (we know it is influenced by human activity) and so forth.

In order to better characterize these two subject-types, we can establish indicators of the level of globalization (on what percentage of entities does the phenomenon have a direct effect?). It is also possible to define the general framework that relates to the issues pertaining to these subject-types.

In reference to the *social processes evolving in a convergent manner*, the idea is to make international comparisons over several years and, more specifically, compare their evolution. These comparisons may relate to relevant individual characteristics (e.g. the percentage of individuals not having access to drinking water) as well as to relations maintained between entities (migration, commercial, financial and warlike flows). This approach can highlight (partial or total) convergences⁸ as well as divergences. Yet it is only an acknowledgement of the phenomenon at this point. The development of the phenomenon as a problem can begin from here. We then need to ask ourselves, entity by entity, to what extent this assessment is related to direct or remote 'causes', accountable actors, or decisions (and with what intention). This can consist of, for example, explaining why decisions taken by very different regimes, or even complete opposites, are similar (for example, sociodemocrats, socialists and then even Chinese communists and Russians 'converting' to economic liberalism). Then, we must attempt to identify the local, national, supranational and global consequences of these processes (notably, the risk of future splitting up, or, on the contrary, of totalitarianism). For example, we can seek to understand the extent to which the process becomes more autonomous and reacts to the overarching situation (for example, will the likely increase of top female executives in companies favour an improvement in the working conditions of female workers and more equality in the workplace between genders?).

In relation to *direct global phenomena*, that is, concerning all relevant global entities, it is necessary to evaluate the real expansion of the phenomenon. In other words, to engage in a thorough inventory of its parts. For example, this could be the study of the national origin of the members of a self-proclaimed global organization; or even the inventory of all site locations of an alleged global company. We must then also specify the part played by the different national parties, their ability to make structural decisions, their competency to fulfil this role and the criteria necessary to become a global entity, etc. This amounts to analysing each part's structure and operating mode, showing the eventual emergence of an entity in its own right, independent of local cultures (e.g. to what extent do the civil servants and soldiers of the UN experience a change in their original national consciousness?). Finally, we need to question how the entity or the global phenomenon affects the national societies as an overarching reality deprived of territory and how it interacts with other direct global

phenomena, such as alterglobalist movements, and global and international NGO organizations.

Different as they may appear, these two types of subjects in fact relate. For example, we can try to understand to what extent the common increase of inequality in all developed countries (on the social processes dimension) stems from the action of world financial markets (the global dimension).⁹ In other words, what is called *the globalization* refers to the set formed: on the one hand, by confirmed globalization processes (there are several partial globalizations), on the other hand, by direct global phenomenon, and finally, by the interaction between these parts. Accordingly, we can argue that globalization resembles a complete social phenomenon, in line with Mauss's (1997: 147) position, meaning the place where 'all types of institutions express themselves in one go: religious, legal and moral – at the same time political and family for the latter; economical – and they suppose particular forms of production and consumption . . . ; not to mention the aesthetic phenomena these facts lead to'.

This way of proposing a foundation for the sociology of globalization partly answers the aforementioned concern to distinguish myth from fact, and thus better situates contemporary social phenomena as coming from within an analysis in terms of globalization. It indeed enables the identification of partial globalization processes (e.g. phenomenon, dimension, number of countries concerned) and *un-globalization* processes (comparisons between countries showing not convergence, but some divergence). This is a way to situate entities of the world that are excluded from international exchanges (be they a continent, a country, a town or a district). By looking for the cause of these evolutions, the observer can highlight the consequences of financial globalization (a crisis that destroys a country's economy leading to a long-lasting exclusion from exchanges) as well as the governmental choices to control the level of openness of national financial markets.

Inventing New Concepts: A Necessity?

Martinelli (2003) underlines how contemporary transformations call for new concepts, new theories and new stories, or even a new paradigm. We would like to place this point of view in perspective by showing that the concepts of current sociology can account for a number of characteristics of direct global phenomena. For this, we draw on the alterglobalist movements, using the sociology of social movements (in line with Touraine) and the sociology of elites (in line with Aron and Rocher).

Alterglobalists and the Control of Historicity

Touraine (1965: 125, 461) focused on 'social movements, which one would more accurately call historic movements' that 'are spurred by multiple claims . . . against all social alienations'. More precisely, an action group engaging in protest, by using conflict, will constitute a social movement, provided the aims of its action are: 'social control of society's models and resources, i.e. its historicity' (Touraine, 1993: 18). In other words, social issues are explained by society's inner workings, and the group that manages to curb society's evolution and its complete development, identifies itself with the *historic subject*. To be more precise, acting as a historic subject suggests the ability to intervene at three levels: economic accumulation, the cultural model (as a basis for a society that can surpass itself) and the learning mode (science).

By employing this matrix, what can we say of so-called alterglobalist movements (once called antiglobalist)? We can describe them as the practical experience and actions of local, national and international NGOs that have united. This is achieved selectively at first in specific subject areas (such as the fight against the greenhouse effect, international protests against unemployment).¹⁰ It is followed by activities that may attain world recognition (e.g. by managing to 'freeze' negotiations on MAI [Multilateral Agreement on Investment] in Paris in 1998), but mostly by those that seriously disrupt what should have occurred (e.g. WTO's millennium summit, in Seattle, November 1999). Since then, these movements have renewed and reinforced their capability for collective action, either by attempting to curb the decisions taken during international meetings,¹¹ or by creating events of which the consequences are rather elusive. These 'new actors', whose members may simultaneously belong to political parties and/or associations, without necessarily representing these organizations, appear as the main bearers of an alternative to the 'merchandizing of the world'. A revolution from the streets gives citizens the feeling they are being involved in the decisions through the unwanted 'noise' of an apparently enduring order. This revolt reveals the 'democratic' paradox, underlined by Beck (2003) in the preface of his last publication, for a number of 'antiglobalist' demonstrators: 'those we have elected have no power and those who have the power, we did not elect them'.

In what sense, however, do they represent protesters across the whole world? And what is their *representativeness* in each state? Despite the great number of parts that are included, there are densely populated areas of the world where these social movements (virtually) do not exist, such as China, Russia, most of the African countries, countries of the Near and Middle East and of Central and Southern Asia (except India). Pouligny (2001) indicates that the alterglobalist action is strongly endorsed by

European NGOs. This does not mean that, as Dwivedi (2001) proposes, movements from the South are focused on survival concerns: they are often concerned with world-level issues and enable encounters between people who live in the country and intellectuals. We must therefore acknowledge that the emergence of a truly global movement is hindered by the persistence of authoritarian regimes that utterly repress all free will (sometimes with the help of governments of northern states). But even in developed countries, 'civil society broadly reflects social hierarchies. . . . Many leaders of citizen organizations . . . belonging to a kind of political activism jet set, . . . used to the dominant culture, . . . have access to these premises of power and have a sense of etiquette . . . precious in the tiny circle of global elite' (Sommier, 2001).¹²

The more positive outcomes of their actions fall into three categories:

- *To take part in the realm of knowledge*, by showing the persistence of critical thinking, by justifying a position opposed to merchandizing and productivism and encouraging contestation, at least in their speeches, against the hegemony of liberal propositions. Here they play the part of 'popularizer' of previously unvoiced ideas and thus provide a coherent body of arguments to justify a collective action.
- *To strengthen the ties of solidarity* between the numerous contributors. Each collective action first provides the opportunity for common agreement on how it will be organized and how it will progress, to overcome obstacles related to differences of approach, ideological postures, goals and means (human, cognitive and financial). The result is, as Martinelli (2003) notes, a singular political culture, expressing new identities. It is a form of non-permanent organization (for fear of appropriation by the policy apparatus) and privileges modes of action that are 'seamless, stealthy, inspired by subversive street theatre'.¹³
- *They draw in older, more structured organizations* (Amnesty International, Oxfam, etc.), to include the fight against liberal globalization into their own priorities. And, while local farmers' unions in South America gather into international associations like Via Campesina, national unions take part in alterglobalist rallies.

What is the capacity of these movements to control the historicity of the transnational society if they consist of only a very small fraction of the world population, and if their action does not yield any effects? We can acknowledge that they are aiming to influence the field of knowledge by providing, thanks to their skill in the media game, a tremendous platform to voice opinions opposed to liberal globalization. But we can hardly conclude that they have influenced economic or cultural control, so far.

Indeed, *if the strength of the alterglobalist movement is to succeed in reuniting a heterogeneous group of collective actors*, isn't it precisely also its weakness? This diversity is characterized by multiple, often contradictory projects, ranging from liberal alterglobalist supporters of a 'world republic of experts' to antiglobalists favouring a local¹⁴ refocus. We can certainly see, as Frazer (2003) advocates, that behind the increase in the number of public discussion arenas lies also a way to increase the number of the participants in the public debate and thus to 'balance, partly, the privileges of participation that profit members of the dominant social groups' (Frazer, 2003: 120). But, as Alexander (2001) notes, the contemporary movements of social criticism have not yet succeeded in discovering the references that would unify their action: 'A new theory, critical of social issues, has not yet emerged.' Moreover, outside the majority counter-forums emerge other counter-forums who dispute the legitimacy of the main alterglobalist trend (Singleton, 2004).

While refusing to intervene in transnational undertakings, don't they forfeit an efficient way to act on globalization? Even though protest movements are composed of many unionists, the latter seem to act outside their 'factories'; experience tends to show that unions (related to international associations or even global ones) are not in the habit of working together and are incapable of collectively designing an alternative, not even within the same transnational company.¹⁵ One would have thought that the action of the alterglobalist movements would exert pressure or provide a resource to transcend rifts (ideological, national, etc.). But if alliances are regularly established between associations and social movements,¹⁶ no agreement seems to emerge to unify diverse claims: it is as though the alleged disrepute of the Marxist ideology had completely invalidated critics and banned all chance of putting together an alternate society project (Sommier, 2001).

Don't they repeat, in the form of their actions, *what globalization transmits*? Refusing the rigidity of the bureaucratic apparatus and its permanence, systematically using (sometimes as pioneers) ICTs, and regularly renewing the forms of their action, they rediscover the tools of the liberal approach they are attempting to ban, but with much more flexibility. This seemingly reproduces the market model whereby the built-in power of goods fosters the impression that permanent innovation is the only way out. Do alterglobalists repeat the pattern in the sense that the archetypal figure of the globalized human is one who lives in the GMT era, fosters transparency of exchanges, equality (of access) and liberty (of speech) and does not wish to advance in anything other than a new non-hierarchical or cybernetic 'reality'? Finally, don't alterglobalist movements risk overshadowing national civil societies, the only ones that could restore the collective belief in the power of the political way and bring citizens of the

wealthiest countries to defend, at home first, more equitable policies (Généreux, 2002)?

Can these movements form a counter-elite if they do not succeed in controlling the historicity of the world-society (or, more precisely, if they do not succeed in acting to change permanently the progress of certain global processes and the action of certain global entities)?

Alterglobalist Movements: A Counter-Elite?

In order to understand the notion of the counter-elite, we need first to make a detour by way of the elite. Aron considers it preferable, to avoid any ambiguity, to talk of elites (plural) and to distinguish two categories therein. On the one hand, there is the political community, consisting of those who effectively hold government political mandates. On the other hand, there is the ruling class comprising 'the privileged ones . . . who can exercise any influence on those that govern and those who obey, either because of the moral authority they possess or because of the economic or financial power they possess' (Aron, 1988: 150). More accurately, the members of the elite(s) are those who make 'great decisions, irreversible, the consequences of which can extend near infinitely and be felt by all members of the collectivity' (Aron, 1988: 64).

Rocher (1968) suggests another dimension: the importance of counter-elites. He maintains that the action of the elite aims to oppose (or adapt) the profound change(s) elaborated by the counter-elite. In this struggle, the elite has an advantage: its capacity to impose its definition of the situation – whereas the counter-elite is only able to position itself vis-a-vis the situation. In brief, if the members of the elite are permanently working on their own production and reproduction, it is also in reaction to the counter-elite's attempts to question the elite's hegemony.

Returning to the alterglobalist movements, their actions are aimed at controlling the 'power circles' where the national elite express themselves and converge to perform their strategic decision-making. In the inner ring, we find members of the governments of the most developed states, but also the leaders of powerful 'Third World'¹⁷ states and those of the former USSR. Certain state groupings (European Union) and international institutions (IMF, World Bank, WTO) are part of these decision-making circles. We also need to include the staff of the most powerful transnational companies, organized or not in lobbies, and not solely of the US, EU and Japan triad.

What is peculiar to these elites – still acting on a national level even though they frequently travel, speak several languages and seem to share a common 'cosmopolitan' way of life¹⁸ – is that they produce 'historical' decisions or that which is 'peculiar, non-reversible, which foster long term

consequences borne by all members of the organization' (Aron, 1988: 65). Fine tuning, through a series of trials and error, the broad outlines of their strategy,¹⁹ they control the implementation of their decisions even if it means ensuring the collaboration/complicity of others, for instance the local middle classes (this group can benefit from globalization, as is the case in China where 'the numbers of those living lavishly has greatly increased: close to 200 million Chinese earn over one thousand dollars per year' [Domenach, 1998: 262]). Nor do the elite hesitate to effect a tactical withdrawal, without necessarily giving up.²⁰

In the face of these elites, do the alterglobalist movements constitute a counter-elite, in the sense that they could force elites to take strategic decisions to fend off their critics? Admittedly, we can say that they have succeeded in forcing national elites and international institutions to modify their form of interaction with societies (notably by consulting with representatives of NGOs, for instance) and to take into account previously ignored issues. However, it would be an exaggeration to state that the WTO, IMF or the European Commission, for example, have recently made significantly *different* choices. Their 'advances' seem to comprise a modification of their institutional communication, which in the end just seems to reinforce their legitimacy. Furthermore, there are tensions between new and old NGOs for access to representative association status (i.e. being summoned by an international institution). Some (and some of their members) are coopted by the elites of 'liberal globalization': experts in particular are sought after because of the extremely high technical level of debates. The decisions that elites continue to take do not seem to be curbed by the alterglobalists' action: mergers, layoffs, relocation, privatization, construction of large dams (with deportation of populations), priority given to individual transport means, increase in inequalities, a reaffirmed will to liberalize services and the agricultural sector, launching of NEPAD in Africa, all punctuate the first years of the millennium.

All things considered, two sets of reasons can explain why alterglobalist movements cannot form a counter-elite or impose themselves as a subject of historicity. On the one hand, one of the most relevant ways to maintain control over historicity on a worldwide scale is to dominate the arenas that are inaccessible to other social groups, areas where rules sap the strength of collective oppositions.²¹ Thus, while making very similar decisions that aim to increase the merchandizing of activities (privatizations, creating competition between nations considered as enterprises, questioning of labour laws and/or of the welfare state, fighting the unions, etc.), national governmental elites, sometimes helped by their access to a supranational level (the calculated construction of the European Union, international institutions used as rhetorical tools),²² weaken the local actors of social movements.

Furthermore, for several years, the possibility to curb the decision-making capacity of circles of power lies less and less in the lap of democratic collective action, because of the multiple modes of expression of violence (calls to hatred and mass murder, terrorism, wars on terrorism, civil wars and more generally a competitive spirit) that drive local interactions as well as international relations (and that supersede national actions).²³

Resistance of Classical Concepts

Generally, the mobilization of classical concepts of sociology (social movements, historicity, elites, power, counter-elites, to name but a few) seems to account for new direct phenomena presenting themselves as global, and consequently, coming under the auspices of the sociology of globalization. Of course, we need to ensure that it is the same for other kinds of subjects such as international institutions, global transnational companies, or even diasporas.²⁴

This does not mean that we do not need to improve the classical concepts or invent some new ones. However, this quest for perfection and invention is not specific to the sociology of globalization: it can result from the usual work of sociologists to understand world metamorphosis, whether it is related to an analysis of globalization or not. But if the urgency is not about inventing concepts, what of the access to the basic data (quantitative and qualitative) necessary for the identification and highlighting of globalization processes?

Highlighting Convergence Processes: What Data?

As mentioned earlier, one of the objectives of the sociology of globalization is to highlight convergence/divergence processes on strictly limited phenomena and concerning a type of entity relevant on a worldwide scale. In this respect, the setting up of databases (not necessarily electronic) that allow one, first, to assess these convergences or divergences and to interpret their meaning, poses the greatest problem.

Indeed, there are many tools to study how production models differ (depending on the countries, the cultures, the epochs), already identified by the researchers, as well as by those who, in international organizations, produce yearly reports, e.g. on political behaviour (European Commission²⁵) or development inequalities.²⁶

Sanders (1994) has drawn up an inventory of various kinds of international comparisons, among which the analysis of globalization corresponds to the empirical verification of systemic hypotheses that transcend borders. Here, the author emphasizes that by comparing global data the

study might only yield fictitious correlations. He thus recommends engaging in this type of comparison only if one has a 'strong, deep and detailed knowledge of comparative systems', which can only be achieved by multinational teams.

More generally speaking, the various thoughts on the issue underline the limited availability of data in countries,²⁷ limits that are linked to collection²⁸ systems and institutions, but also to the exploitation of results by the experts in the field.²⁹ We must also take into consideration the difficulties related to a common definition of indicators (quantitative or qualitative). It implies a standardization, not only of the jargon, but also of the collection and presentation methods, not to mention of disciplines. Moreover, any common and universally admitted definition is not necessarily relevant, as shown by Morah's (2003) work on global development indices: 'how can one be certain that the variations we observe between nations at a given time, or for the same country at different times, convey social evolutions or [are] the result of different methods or even methods applied differently?'

However, this type of issue is not without a solution. During the past decade the way inequalities (in development) have been defined and evaluated has tried to get closer to the conception of equality advocated by Sen (2000a). According to him, an individual is poor as long as he or she is deprived of his or her 'fundamental capacities' to access: the labour market (non-slavish) and products (economic opportunities); education and healthcare (proscriptions aimed at girls and women are explicitly targeted); but also participation in political decision-making, not forgetting equal access to information and protective protection (not to be undernourished in a wealthy economy).

Once only taking into consideration the GDP per capita, development experts began from 1990 to formulate the Human Development Index (HDI), including, first: the mean length of life, the level of education (for adults and children) and the level of income. From 1995, the gender-related human development index and the women involvement index were added, the latter making it possible to show how, on an identical level of human development, women (or young girls) fare.³⁰ In 1997, the human poverty index was added, taking into account lifespan (risk of mortality before 40), access to knowledge (adult literacy rate) and living conditions (the percentage of those who have no access to water or health services and of children under five years of age who are seriously underweight).

We have now at our disposal indices that enable us to observe that, in certain ways, districts of western capital cities experience conditions of inequality and poverty much higher than in certain Indian or Chinese regions – so discarding the idea of an irreversible convergence and

introducing what Giraud (1996) calls 'a new era of world inequality'. Whereas liberalization of economies, improvements in the fields of information and communication technologies and reductions in transport costs have notably opened up new opportunities for certain elites of southern states to take a genuine part in the world market (for them, there exists a partial or complete globalization process), simultaneously, inequalities widen in so-called 'developed' countries (allowing us to talk of an un-globalization, or exclusion from the previous process for a growing percentage of ordinary individuals). The casualization of labour, structural unemployment, the crisis of wage-earners and the inability of welfare states to provide answers all broaden the rifts (Martin et al., 2004). Generally, the adaptation of indices to assess the comparative developments between nations is already a common practice; that they will never stop having to be adapted does not diminish their use in our understanding of the world.

Conclusion

To summarize, we have demonstrated how the analysis in terms of globalization must be approached with caution in order to understand contemporary social phenomena (and this perspective has not yielded everything). Moreover, current concepts of sociology are not necessarily obsolete and a paradigm shift is not systematically required. This is not to say that social issues, regardless of the study of globalization, do not need more relevant concepts. Wieviorka (2003) looks to theorize violence, or even the cruelty, for instance, that has been observed for the past 30 years in our societies, where outright violence seems to replace conflict. He thus seems to find himself faced with a new subject calling for the elaboration of ad hoc concepts.

On the other hand, if one admits that globalization is showing the traits of a complete social fact, one must make methodological attempts to assess it completely: 'to better understand a social fact, one needs to comprehend it wholly, i.e. from outside as an object, but an object with subjective perception (conscious or unconscious) as we, as humans, would experience the fact as being native' (Mauss, 1997: xxviii). It seems likely that this capacity to put oneself simultaneously 'outside the world' and 'inside all its relevant entities' will come more easily from a cross-national body of research, taking into account, however, dominant relations between nations, as they appear in the social science realm. But the constitution of a global scientific community brings critics of 'cultural incompatibility' into collision, or even threatens to colonize minds, and Kozlarek (2001) echoes this perspective by arguing for a Euro-centric conception of the critical thinking (the so-called philosophy of the School of Frankfurt),

i.e. he is convinced that Europe is the bearer of the most progressive values and possesses the strongest potential for universality.

However, the issue is not as novel as it seems. Gurvitch (1947), listing 'sociological studies in various countries' (Europe – Russia included – the US and South America), allowed us to appreciate the level of exchanges and interdependency of this still greatly scattered international scientific community. Two decades later, Aron (1969: 6) stated that 'concepts of American sociology, on the verge of becoming those of the global sociology . . . apply to the social man, whatever his activity, whatever the organization he belongs to'. Over thirty years on, Sen (2000b) denounced the notion that 'focusing on publications from one sole culture hinders the freedom to discover other ideas'. Appadurai (1999) notes that the internationalization of the social sciences consists of 'improving the way others apply methodological precepts of occidental communities of researchers', increasing the gap between this conception of research and 'more general traditions of criticism and discussion as far as social issues are concerned'. But, as Eisenstadt (2004) proclaims, the West does not have a monopoly on ethnocentrism: for example, in Japan there is an inverted orientalism (*nihonjinron*), defending the notion that only Japanese concepts can explain Japanese society.

The issue thus seems to be: how can one favour a confrontation of interpretations, on a worldwide scale, without any accusation of cultural bias? Some authors have suggested answers. Akiwowo (1999) draws on concepts from Yoruba (Nigeria) traditional poetry that allow a local transposition of principles of the explanation of social issues developed in the West and enrich the global sociology. Park and Chang (1999) discuss the genesis of the maturation (by un-Americanization) of Korean sociology, which henceforth considers the West as a subject of study, at least to test the relevance of its own theories.

We should not, however, too rapidly reduce this interrogation to an intercultural issue, for which a solution would be a variation of multiculturalism. In truth, within each national community, researchers and 'paradigms' do not rise to the same level of knowledge, not to mention the extreme divisions within the social sciences field itself.³¹ We should therefore refer to a 'project of scientific knowledge of society, . . . an ambition of systematic and critical analysis [that, admittedly] is an invention and an enterprise of modern democratic countries thinking about their own society'. But, 'universalism is not solely French and is not only intended to hide, and consequently justify inequalities of the social order and of the power relations' (Schnapper, 1998: 18, 28).

As the capacity to distance oneself from one's own culture and one's own history (hence to become aware of the context in which we think but did not choose), this sociological conception of universalism allows, not

only the inclusion of all experience, all modalities of socialization, but also primarily reminds us of the power of the original principles of sociology to understand the world, be it globalized or not.

Notes

1. More generally, as Mattelart (1999: 351) exclaims: 'Thanks to free trade, non-critical usage of promoted or revised terms has proliferated.' We bear 'witness to a real deregulation of conceptual universes that help us refer to the world'. This deregulation leads to, as Delaunay (1997) writes: 'putting social actors and subjects on the same level . . . humans and non humans, and dissolving everything responsible for classical sociology's great moments, even the questions of our time'.
2. This does not mean, of course, that there are no elites in globalization (Metzger and Pierre, 2003).
3. Cooper (2001) identifies three positions on globalization. The first one (the bankers' position) encourages rich countries to retrench the welfare state and poor countries not to establish it. The second position (the social democrats' position) aims to soften the brutality of economics by moderating the intervention of political aspects. The third that global aspects reconfigure local ones everywhere and that people, more mobile than before, are paradoxically more conscious of their cultural characteristics and promote them.
4. The complete title is: *Histoire économique. Esquisse d'une théorie universelle de l'économie et de la société*. The author truly has the ambition of achieving universality, considered to include millenniums and continents, as well as an eventual evolution common to humankind. As Raynaud (1987: 65) points out, this desire is expressed throughout Weber's work.
5. In *Philosophie de l'argent*, Simmel (1987) also recreates the movement, considered in its global totality, by which money slowly freed itself from its reality in order to symbolize pure economic value.
6. Several authors remind us that other globalizations preceded the current situation, notably in terms of the extroversion of the economies (Wallerstein, 1980; Boyer, 1997; Thompson, 1999; Bordo et al., 2003), of the organization of work on a worldwide scale (Braudel, 1979), or even of the construction of a transnational alternative to capitalism (Berger, 2003). Lévy (2000) reinterprets humankind's history as a succession of interconnected periods of growing intensity.
7. Instead of talking about multinational companies (a word implying inter-state cooperation and multiple territorial ties and allegiances), we henceforth use the term 'transnational' in the text, implying the idea of going through and passing (to transcend). We feel this term is best suited to describe the decisions and actions of company-actors for which the frontier between national territories is not an obstacle to their projects and whose actions build flow networks (assets, competencies and knowledge, capital) depending more on their strategic decisions than on nationally determining factors. We discuss 'global' companies when the enterprise: (1) aims immediately at a 'global' market, in

- the sense that the enterprise does not consider its original national market any different from the foreign market; and (2) looks to organize its various duties regardless of the territory.
8. If we see convergence for a subset of entities, we can talk of 'globalization', a word that carries the idea of integration and generalization (by country, by sector, by gender, by issues, etc.).
 9. This is what Alderson and Nielsen (2002), for example, are researching.
 10. Let us recall that the critique of globalization is not new. Pouligny (2001) reminds us that NGOs have got together during parallel sessions to international institutional forums since the food summit in 1967.
 11. See Losson and Quinio (2002: 309–11), who present a list of 20 major summits where alterglobalists have spoken since Seattle.
 12. Sommier (2001) also notes that the NGO executives involved in alterglobalist movements are individuals with strong social and cultural capital.
 13. As Aguiton (2001) points out, for now at least, the increasing number of meetings between alterglobalist associations (such as the Porto Alegre forum) has the sole goal of 'thinking about the possible alternatives to neoliberalism' and before all else of acquiring the 'tools necessary for the coordination of actions and thought'.
 14. For an overview of the competing theses, see, for example, Martin et al. (2003: Ch.16). Alternatively, the reader is referred to *Revue du MAUSS Semestrielle* No. 20 (second semester; 2002), Aguiton (2001), Walzer (2001), Habermas (2000) or Castells (1998: Vol. 2).
 15. This is illustrated by Rehfeldt (2000), in his study of the closure of Renault-Vilvorde, or by Delaunay (2000), in the case study of the Comité de Groupe d'Electrolux. Caire (2000), Grumbrell-McCormick (2000) and Di Ruzza and Le Roux (2000) confirm this symptom on a larger scale.
 16. The association Jobs with Justice, founded by American unionists, specifically aims to link student movements, the unemployed and wage-earners together.
 17. China, India and Indonesia, among others, did not wait for the injunction of the US or international institutions to commit to processes that constitute and reinforce globalization. See, notably, Stiglitz (2002), Bergère (2000), Cytru (1999), Domenach (1998), Raillon (1999) and Zins (1999).
 18. Lifestyles and decisions that separate them, each day a bit further, from individuals who have *no* access to strategic decision-making processes. On the issue of the globalization outcasts, among numerous publications we refer to Castells (1998) and Bauman (1999).
 19. Thus, as Mattelart (1996) claims, Pinochet's Chile was used as a laboratory to restructure the economy during the 1970s. It devised operational measures derived from the theses of Milton Friedman. The model was subsequently extended to Great Britain (after a narrowing of the gap between Thatcher and Pinochet) and to the US.
 20. As shown by the will to renegotiate an extension of the liberalization of exchange to the realm of services, for example (i.e. General Agreement on Trade in Services, GATS), after the former project (Multilateral Agreement on Investment, MAI) was temporarily withdrawn.

21. See Castells (1998: Vol. 1, 467). See also Fitoussi and Rosanvallon (1996: 124) in particular, as well as Metzger and Pierre (2003).
22. Gobin (2002) shows, for example, that the construction of the EU was a containment process against the unionists.
23. Among an abundant literature on the effects of 9/11 or on the world as it appears since, see Battistella (2003), Hassner and Marchal (2003) and Wiewiorka (2003).
24. That is what Dubet (2004) advocates. For him, each of the logics associated with the contemporary era (identities and the market) can be widely explained 'objectively' by processes that classical sociological theories have established: socialization, limited rationality, subjectivation.
25. See the special issue of *Revue internationale de sciences sociales* (No. 142, December 1994) on 'Databases for Social Sciences in Europe: Their Use in Research'. Contributions to the issue examine interactions between political, technological and scientific choices on the possibility of comparative studies.
26. We are thinking about the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP), which each year provides data helping to assess the extent and the evolution of inequalities between as well as within countries. We can put into the same category studies on the analysis of the causes for the increase of inequalities in developed countries (Alderson and Nielsen, 2002).
27. Which, as Sanders (1994) notes, is not specific to comparative studies.
28. Appadurai (1999) reminds us that the globalization movement of economies 'causes a fragmentation and an uneven distribution of the resources necessary' for its study.
29. Goussault and Guichaoua (1993) denounce the fact that experts who share a common liberal conception of the economy have controlled research on development or the increase in the discrepancy of the means of analysis in the South and the North (this reinforces dependency). Rothenbacher (1994) shows how much the production of demographic data is linked to the political history of nations.
30. We borrow most of the information and thoughts in this paragraph from Bret (2002).
31. See the issue of *Revue du MAUSS Semestrielle* No. 24 (second semester, 2004) on the theme 'Is a General Sociology Theory Thinkable? Of Social Science'. Caillé (2004) gives an edifying presentation.

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