

The Globalization of Nothing

George Ritzer

Globalization is not a singular process with uniform results, but a term that encompasses a number of transnational processes. This essay distinguishes between two broad sub-processes under the larger heading of globalization—glocalization (the integration of the global and the local) and globalization (the imposition of the global on the local). It also explores the distinction between nothing (forms that are centrally conceived and controlled and largely lacking in distinctive content) and something (forms that are indigenously conceived and controlled and comparatively rich in distinctive content). The article focuses on two pairings that result from relating these sets of concepts—the globalization of nothing and the glocalization of something. In the realm of culture in general and consumption in particular, the conflict between these two processes is a central issue in the world today. The triumph of the globalization of nothing promises cultural homogeneity, while the glocalization of something offers at least some hope for cultural heterogeneity in a world in which the truly local has almost entirely disappeared.

While social theorists have long been interested in globalization, there has been an explosion of work on the topic in recent years.¹ The flowering of such theories is a reflection of the fact that globalization is of great concern to, and enormous significance for, much of the world's population. Globalization is transforming virtually every nation and the lives of billions of people.² The degree and significance of its impact is visible everywhere one looks, in the shopping malls that increasingly dot many areas of the developed world, the vast array of franchises found in them,

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and the goods and services offered by those franchises, as well as in the protests against key international organizations such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. The frequency and geographic dispersion of these protests attest to the fact that people throughout the world feel very strongly that they are confronting matters of great importance.

Attitudes toward globalization depend, among other things, on whether one gains or loses from it. Those in developed nations who clearly gain from globalization voice less opposition to it than those in developing nations who feel disadvantaged by it. Opponents not only feel disadvantaged by globalization, they also balk at the control that international agencies (such as the IMF) and other nations (especially the United States) hold over their lives. They fear that global, or U.S., culture will destroy indigenous cultures.

Given the public furor, and the enormous academic attention to the topic, the title of this essay may seem counterintuitive. Since globalization is so clearly something of great importance, how can I discuss the globalization of nothing? The wording is important here. I am not arguing that globalization *is* nothing, but rather that

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there is a globalization of nothing, and that this form of globalization, like the process in general, is of enormous importance. Most attention, particularly from op-

ponents of globalization, has ignored the fact that globalization is not a singular process with uniform results. This essay will define and explore some of the main processes within what is popularly called globalization, in an attempt to better understand its spread and impact.

This discussion will focus on globalization in the realm of consumption, but similar arguments could also be made about other areas of the economy (especially production), as well as about politics, religion, medicine, and so on. Consumption is an integral

part of these other social institutions (e.g. the consumption of medical services, the voter as consumer, etc.), and of growing importance in the developing and the developed world. However, issues of production are important in this analysis as well, especially the difference between mass-produced goods and services and more small-scale, localized, artisanal production.

Defining the Terms of Debate

Before proceeding much further we need some basic definitions. As the title suggests, consumption can be arrayed along a spectrum from *nothing* to *something*. Nothing is defined as *a social form that is, generally, centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content*.³ Something can then be defined as *a social form that is, generally, indigenously conceived, controlled, and comparatively rich in distinctive substantive content*. Nothing and something do not exist independently of the other: each makes sense only when paired with, and contrasted to, the other. This implies a continuum from nothing to something, and that is precisely the way the concepts will be employed here—as the two poles of that continuum rather than as a dichotomy.⁴

Thus, for example, in the realm of consumption, the Mills Corporation and others like it create and control shopping malls (e.g., Potomac Mills in Virginia, Sawgrass Mills in Florida) as forms or structures that, in themselves, have little or no distinctive features except for comparatively minor variations in structural design and architectural nuance. The content of any given mall depends on what particular shops, goods, restaurants, employees, and customers happen to be in it. A mall in London or Hong Kong may be structured much like a mall in Chicago or Mexico City, but there will be innumerable differences in their specific contents. More importantly, people use the mall in different ways, many of which may not have been anticipated by the mall designers and owners, and people's behavior will vary greatly in different parts of the globe.

If the shopping mall lies toward the nothing end of the continuum, then we can think of a local farmers market as something.⁵ That is, it is locally conceived and controlled and each one has a great deal of distinctive content. To this day, a farmers market is created anew each time the farmers, who happen at that particular time to have produce to sell, arrive at the appointed place. The farmers do not fit into a pre-set structure, although they may by

custom, sell particular things in particular spots. Which farmers participate, and what they offer for sale, will vary greatly from one time to another. Most importantly, once the market has ended for the day, whatever structure was created will be dismantled and then recreated again somewhat differently the next market day. The farmers' market is no mere throwback to an earlier time period, but remains an important institution not only in many areas of the United States, but also in most other parts of the world, including the highly developed countries of Western Europe.

Opponents of globalization, fearing the homogenization of culture around the world, object, mainly, to the spread of what would be defined as nothing. Yet globalization does not designate only one kind of process. Globalization can be defined as "the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole."⁶ As it has come to be used, however, global-

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ization encompasses a number of transnational processes that, while they can be seen as global in reach, are separable from each other. This essay focuses on two of the most impor-

tant of these—glocalization and grobalization.⁷ The concept of glocalization gets to the heart of what most contemporary theorists associated with globalization theory think about the nature of transnational processes.⁸ Glocalization can be defined as *the interpenetration of the global and the local resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas*. The concept of *grobalization*, coined here for the first time as a much-needed companion to the notion of glocalization,⁹ focuses on *the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like, and their desire and need to impose themselves on various geographic areas*.¹⁰ Their main interest is in seeing their power, influence, and, in many cases profits grow (hence the term *grobalization*) throughout the world. These definitions should not imply a value judgment: there can be negatives associated with the glocal, such as a lack of openness to useful grobal inputs; and positives tied to the grobal, such as the delivery of new medications and medical technologies.

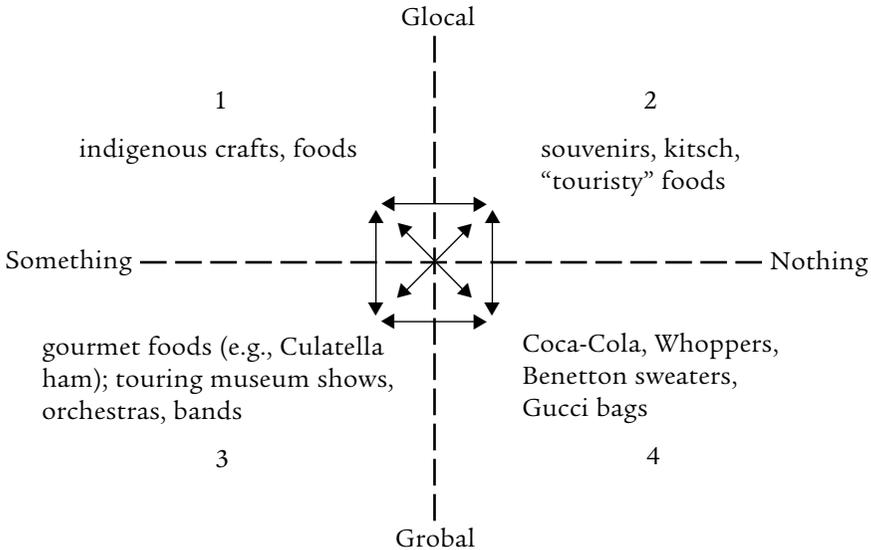
Grobalization tends to be associated with the proliferation of nothing (e.g. the shopping mall), while glocalization tends to be tied to something (e.g., the farmers' market) and therefore stands opposed, along with the local itself, to the spread of nothing. These two processes co-exist under the broad heading of globalization, and because they are, to some degree, in conflict, globalization as a whole does not have a unidirectional effect on the spread of nothingness. In its grobal aspects, globalization favors the spread of nothing, while its glocal aspects support the dissemination of something.

Those who emphasize glocalization tend to see it as militating against the globalization of nothing and leading to the creation of a wide array of new, "glocal" forms of something. In contrast, those who emphasize grobalization see it as a powerful contributor to the spread of nothingness throughout the world. The concept of grobalization is at odds, to some degree, with the thrust of globalization theory—especially glocalization—that have the greatest cachet today. At the risk of being reductive, this divide amounts to a difference in vision between those who see a world that is becoming more homogeneous, Americanized, codified, and restricted, and those who view it as growing more heterogeneous, diverse, and free.¹¹ Of course, this is a matter of emphasis and both processes are occurring simultaneously and in varying degrees in different parts of the world.

While our focal concern is with the globalization of nothing, that linkage can only be dealt within the broader context of a discussion of the relationship between grobalization and glocalization and something and nothing. Figure 1 offers the four basic possibilities that emerge when we cross-cut the continuum from grobalization to glocalization with the continuum from something to nothing. While this yields four "ideal types," there are no hard-and-fast lines between them.

The relationship between grobalization and nothing and glocalization and something, as expressed in quadrants one and four, can be described as involving what Max Weber called an *elective affinity*. In neither pair does one of the elements "cause" the other, but the development and diffusion of one tends to go hand-in-hand with the other.¹² Glocalization creates favorable ground for the development and proliferation of something—and something is easily glocalized. Similarly, grobalization creates favorable ground for the development and spread of nothing—and nothing is easily grobalized. This analysis focuses on the globalization of

Figure 1. Glocal-Grobal and Something-Nothing continua with representative examples



nothing and the glocalization of something because their relationship to one another represents a key point of tension and conflict in the world today.¹³ Clearly, there is great pressure to grobalize nothing, and the glocalization of something is often all that stands in its way in terms of achieving global hegemony. We will return to this conflict and its implications for our analysis below.

More and More Nothing

Grobalization, by its very nature, involves wide dissemination of innumerable goods and services. Going back to our original definitions of nothing and something, a “bare bones” model with minimal content—nothing—lends itself to this kind of mass distribution. That is, a minimalist phenomenon is far easier to centrally create, reproduce, and disseminate widely than one that is rich in content. Once one has constructed the basic model, then all iterations that follow from it are easy to produce since there is so little substance to the model. The proliferation of nullities (goods or services at or near the nothing end of the something-nothing continuum) obviously assumes the existence of entrepreneurs in the broadest sense of the term (e.g., corporate executives at McDonald’s or Gucci; government leaders) who are interested

in the expansion and exportation of such minimalist creations to other parts of the world, whether for corporate profit or national power. Some entrepreneurs do create or develop phenomena that are rich, elaborate, distinctive, and idiosyncratic, and export them successfully (the globalization of something). But, the very nature of these complex phenomena serves to limit their numbers and hence their global proliferation. There are only so many world-class ballet companies, gymnastic teams, and rock groups, and the profit potential of such groups is limited because they cannot be mass produced.

In contrast, things derived from the glocal are an idiosyncratic and spontaneous mix of the global and the local, making them more complex to reproduce in large numbers. By their nature glocal phenomena are produced and marketed in limited geographic areas and in

small batches, which means that low levels of production may be hard-pressed to satisfy even the local demand, let alone a global market. Thus, the most famous restaurants in Provence are booked long in advance and the Provençal food served in most French res-

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taurants throughout the world has little resemblance to that served in Provence. This limited area of production may also mean that demand may be minimal for such idiosyncratic products; to continue with the example of Provençal cuisine, only a small number of people outside France are likely to be interested in, able to identify, and able to afford, Provençal food.

In terms of dissemination, nullities are easier to extract from the given locality in which they were created and to export to other, sometimes very different, locales because they lack content. In contrast, elaborate and distinctive phenomena are often tied to a specific locale and the tastes and demands of that locale, making it difficult for them to take root in other locales, or at least limiting their geographic adaptability. While Italian Parmigiano Reggiano, a distinctive cheese product of a particular region of Italy, is avail-

able globally on a limited scale, it has narrow market potential in locales outside of Italy. How well does such a distinctive cheese go with a Tex-Mex dish, an Indian curry, or a Chinese stir-fry?¹⁴ Coca-Cola, on the other hand has proven easier to extract from its American roots; it goes well with virtually any cuisine (Tex-Mex, curry, or stir-fry), and has, as a result, been exported successfully throughout the world. In other words, cola, especially Coca-Cola, has been globalized.¹⁵ As an advertising campaign in the 1990s proclaimed, “If you don’t know what it is, Welcome to Planet Earth.”¹⁶

For many of the same reasons, nullities are also easier to extract from the given time period in which they were created. Coca-Cola, for example, was first produced in an era in which there was greater tolerance, and less awareness, of drugs and the problems associated with them, and it originally contained small amounts of cocaine. But, as times changed, and it became clear that such a drug had no place in a soft drink, and it was removed. Coca-Cola with cocaine would be impossible to sell today, but with the offending drug removed, it is saleable almost everywhere.

Products do not necessarily start out as nullities, but become nullities as they are modified over time, with much of what makes them distinctive removed so that they can be marketed in a different time period or place. The taco may have deep roots in Mexican culture, but much of what was originally involved in the creation of tacos—the way they were made, the hot chiles used to give them their traditional spiciness—has been removed (at least outside indigenous areas where the original taco is still made and consumed) to make it the kind of timeless, generic product that Taco Bell markets today around the world. It is far easier to distribute such products globally than to distribute those that retain deep ties to a specific epoch and local area.

The fast food restaurant is a good example of the placeless and timeless nature of nullities, and a prime model for the process of globalization. The basic model was developed in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, but it has now been exported to every corner of the world, proving adaptable to many different locales. For example, McDonald’s sells a few different things in various settings (e.g., beer in Germany, McFalafel in Egypt, Teriyaki Burgers in Japan),¹⁷ and adapts its functioning in various ways (customers in Asian settings are encouraged to linger), but the basic model remains intact and seems to function quite nicely all over the world.

The fact that there is a basic model, and that translation to a new place requires only minor adaptations, means that the costs of producing and modifying settings and products can be kept to a minimum in comparison to creating such things anew in many different places and times, allowing higher profits (where the entrepreneurs are corporations), and easier dissemination. Many technologies, procedures, and recipes that work in one place (or time) can simply be reproduced in many other places (and time periods), creating

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economies of scale. The simplicity of the model keeps personnel costs low because relatively unskilled and poorly paid workers can be fitted into the system and perform at reasonably high levels. For example, automatic french fry machines turn out large numbers of perfectly cooked fries no matter who happens to be operating them. For all these reasons, the grobal has a huge competitive advantage over the glocal.

This means that there are great problems involved in seeking to grobalize the glocal, and that even if efforts were made to grobalize the glocal, they would be at a great cost disadvantage. But, the success of any new glocal phenomenon may attract the attention of entrepreneurs interested in expanding the market for it. In order to reach other markets, perhaps even global markets, a familiar dialectic proceeds: the entrepreneur creates a pared-down version of the glocal phenomenon in an effort to make it attractive to a broad clientele in many different geographic settings. In the process, of course, the glocal is transformed into the grobal and something is transformed into nothing.

Finally, nothing is simply easier to create than something. A fine, gourmet restaurant is difficult to establish, and relatively few

succeed for very long. A model that captures all the important details of a successful gourmet restaurant and can be exported to other places is that much more difficult to create. Unlike fast food restaurants, each gourmet restaurant is expensive to create and maintain. More importantly, creating a chain of such restaurants and managing them from a central location while maintaining the high quality has proven almost impossible. It has been done—famous chefs like France’s Alain Ducasse have opened gourmet restaurants in several different cities—but the presence of such “chains” in the global marketplace is insignificant in comparison to the global proliferation of fast food restaurants.

Fighting Globalization with Globalization

Central to this essay is the argument that a key dynamic under the broad heading of globalization is the conflict between globalization and glocalization. Many observers have tended to see the defining conflict as that between globalization and the local, but globalization does not represent one side in the central conflict. It is far too broad a concept, encompassing as it does all transnational processes. The definition of the term needs further refinement to be useful in this context. The argument made here, which distinguishes between globalization and glocalization, makes it clear that the broad process of globalization already encompasses important conflicting processes. Since globalization contains the key poles in the conflict, it cannot represent one position in that conflict.

The conception of globalization discussed above relegates the other side of the traditional dichotomy of conflict—the local—to secondary importance. The local, to the degree that it still exists, is increasingly insignificant, and certainly not an important element in the dynamics of globalization. Little of the local remains that has not been touched by global influences. Thus, much of what we think of as local is, in reality, glocal. The truly local, untouched by the global, is increasingly pushed to the peripheries and interstices of the local community.

In community after community, the real struggle is between the more purely global versus the glocal, because, as noted above, very few places or things remain untouched by globalization. The major choice facing communities seems to be between that which is inherently and deeply globalized (globalization) and that in which global and local elements intermingle (glocalization). This clearly implies the near total triumph of the global throughout the world.

Ironically, then, the hope for those opposed to globalization lies in an alternative form of globalization. Those who oppose the global form of globalization must support the glocal form of globalization. Important vestiges of the local remain in the glocal. And the interaction of the global and the local produces unique phenomena that are not reducible to either the global or the local. It is even conceivable that the glocal is, or at least can be, a significant source of uniqueness, diversity, and innovation.

Those who oppose globalization can continue to support the local as an alternative to the global. However, the thrust of this analysis leads to the conclusion that this effort is likely to fail because of the progressive disappearance of the truly local. Supporting the glocal as an alternative to the global may be a more successful strategy, recognizing the fact that the glocal is an increasingly important source not only of cultural diversity, but also of cultural innovation. Globalization, while deeply troubling to many, is neither monolithic, nor uniform in its impacts, offering hope to those who see menace in the hegemony of global phenomena.

Notes

¹ A number of leading social theorists have addressed the issue of globalization, including Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2000); Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Douglas Kellner, "Theorizing Globalization," *Sociological Theory* 20 (2002): 285–305.

² As we will see, the meaning of this concept is not unambiguous. An effort will be made to sort this out in the ensuing discussion.

³ That is, for example, by the headquarters of a multinational corporation or a national government.

⁴ For a critique of dichotomous thinking, see Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, ed., *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures, and the Challenge of Globalization* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

⁵ Flea markets, craft fairs, and co-ops are other examples of something.

⁶ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage Press, 1992), 8.

⁷ For an excellent overview of globalization processes generally, see Robert J. Antonio and Alessandro Bonanno, "A New Global Capitalism? From 'Americanism' and 'Fordism' to 'Americanization-Globalization,'" *American Studies* 41 (2000): 33–77.

⁸ Roland Robertson, "Globalization Theory 2000+: Major Problematics," in George Ritzer and Barry Smart, eds., *Handbook of Social Theory* (London: Sage Press, 2001), 458–471. Globalization not only goes to the heart of Robertson's own approach, but it is central to that of many others, most notably Arjun Appadurai. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of*

Globalization (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). While John Tomlinson uses other terms, he sees glocalization as “friendly” to his own orientation. See John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁹ I feel apologetic about adding yet another neologism, especially such an ungainly one, to a field already rife with jargon. However, the existence and popularity of the concept of glocalization requires the creation of the parallel notion of globalization in order to emphasize that which the former concept ignores or downplays.

¹⁰ I am combining a number of different entities under this heading (nations, corporations, a wide range of organizations, and so on), but it should be clear that there are profound differences among them, including the degree to which, and the ways in which, they seek to globalize.

¹¹ However, almost everyone recognizes that globalization, and more generally globalization, play themselves out differently in various local and national contexts. See Mudimbe-Boyi, *Beyond Dichotomies*.

¹² Robert Herbert Howe, “Max Weber’s Elective Affinities: Sociology Within the Bounds of Pure Reason,” *American Journal of Sociology* 84 (1978): 366–385.

¹³ While the other two quadrants are of secondary significance, it is important to recognize that there is, at least to some degree, a globalization of something (quadrant three), and a glocalization of nothing (quadrant two). Some examples of the former are art exhibits that move among art galleries in many different countries, Italian exports of specialty foods like Parmigiano Reggiano and Culatella ham on a large scale, and touring symphony orchestras and bands that perform in venues around the world. The production of local souvenirs and trinkets for international tourists is an example of the latter. While some examples exist, empirical manifestations of quadrants two and three are not nearly as common as those associated with the other two possibilities, nor are the tensions between them as significant. It should also be noted that something can be transformed over time into nothing, and vice versa. On the one hand, traditional works of art (for example, *kokopellis* from the American Southwest [images of a traditional hump-backed flute player] and stacking or nesting *matryoshka* dolls from Russia) that were once something have been transformed into mass-produced kitsch for the global consumer and tourist. On the other hand, the toys given away or sold by McDonald’s over the years have, in some cases, become collector’s items.

¹⁴ New, eclectic cuisines and cookery do involve the combination of the most unlikely of foods. Nonetheless, such combinations are unlikely to be attractive to a large, global population of consumers, or at least one as large and global as that for, say, Coca-Cola.

¹⁵ An apparent exception is the uproar over “Coca-Colonization” in France after World War II, but that quickly died out and today Coca-Cola is only one of many non-things widely accepted in France. See, for example, Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Jane Pavitt, “Branded: A Brief History of Brands: 1. Coca Cola,” *The Guardian*, 9 July 2001.

¹⁷ “Kiwi Burger to Go, Hold the Fried Egg,” *Washington Post*, 2 December 2002.