Comparing the Local in the Open Global System*
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The theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the globalizations of our era are major challenges to comparing local political, social, and economic systems. The old paradigms that defined the units of analysis, theoretical questions, and policy alternatives have to modified and justified in the context of the dynamics of globalization processes. Included in this re-thinking is relegating states—the primary force for human change, conflict, and development for over two centuries, the very rationale for a modern political science—to one of several levels of “locals” in a developing global system.

The main consequences of globalization are a re-structuring of the world system, from one fundamentally divided into “sparsely populated, “isolated areas, rural settlements, and urban areas and centers within countries and a conflictive international system topping those population distributions to a global system of unfolding multiple, conflicting levels and of rapid urbanization and aggregations into mega “cities”.

The year 2009 is the sesquicentennial year of the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* and his 200th birthday. Evolution and development have remained the most influential theories about what shapes our knowledge of change in both living and social systems, carrying over recently to changes of the physical world. Comparing local systems was the mainspring of this theory. Evolutionary concepts were grounded on the empirical study and comparisons of a wide variety of local systems around the world. Those comparisons emerged in the middle of the 19th century with J. S. Mill’s explication of the “experimental method” and “natural experiments.

The core of evolutionary theory is that living systems adapt to local conditions over a long period. The general laws governing the nature and the relationships of living systems within those local systems, niches, explain an astonishing range of variety among living systems. Studies of past and present human systems continue to reveal ever-increasing configurations of possible variety. Today, nearly all human systems have become interacting, even those hardened by strong barriers of political force. The closing of the first decade of the 21st century is an appropriate time to reflect again on the relevance of the logic of comparing local living systems in a world of human systems that have all become in some “developmental” ways part of a single global system.

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The dynamics of the emergence of global living and social systems involve interacting processes of aggregation and de-aggregation of overlaying localities. Two important consequences of globalization are the emergence of an incipient global political economy of massive scale and the de-aggregations of large localities into units of all kinds, a new “localism” that embraces condominiums, neighborhoods, residential associations, political groupings, and fluid affiliations in local and global networks. These processes also include the formation of new regions, or the re-shaping of old, within countries and across national borders. Globalization is the process that generates a world system of great scale, not simply an open ecumenical world of the many together. As the world as a single social system becomes integrated, it becomes the incubator for generating variety at increasing speed through the rapid distribution of variety of things, ideas, and peoples of all kinds across all localities. As this global system continues to integrate, it de-aggregates into smaller and smaller units, indeed, making possible individual identities of everyone. Those de-aggregations, although often problematic and messy, expand local opportunities for democracy by expanding choices of personal lifestyles, based on either shared similarities or preferred differences. These processes constitute a “dialectic” of conflicts between the new and obtrusive global and the democratic and engaged local, whose resistances to the global mimic those of the local against the past intrusions of conquerors or the ascendance of state institutions.

The Local and the Global: Evolutionary/Developmental Perspectives

Lessons from the study of the local in evolutionary theory can be useful in comparing human localities. Unfortunately, one of the early participants in that process was Herbert Spencer who wedded 19th century ideas about human races to human evolution and invidiously compared them. The interpretations Spencer offered led to strengthening political and social polices that were so negative that modern social sciences ignore the influence of the dynamics of adaptation and change on contemporary theories of human development at a significant loss in understanding global change. Fortunately, population genetics have been applied successfully to microbes, creating a body of knowledge that has nurtured means to prevent millions of deaths. Although the speed the change at the local social and political levels is much longer than at the microbe level, it is certainly faster and more adaptive by several orders of magnitude than the species studied by Darwin. Indeed, the rates of changes in social systems are increasing. Because of more readily observable change of human local, systems, studies of the local invite analysis of both local and macro change as co-determined. There are frameworks of analysis to look at the impact of different rates of change at macro (global), micro (local units within localities), and intermediate levels (states and regions) at the same time. One such macro change is nearing a point of being transformative, over half of all local human settlements becoming urban. That rapid change is integral to the emergence of the dynamics of globalization of our era that began in the middle of the 1970s and is now shaping institutions of a global political economy that provide stability.

The idea of linking local and global dynamics in both international political science and sociology followed the collapse of communist political systems in 1989-90. The International Sociological Association (ISA) at its XII World Congress in Madrid in
1990 began the process of changing its governance from one totally controlled by country associations to one of co-determination by international research groups and countries, something that happened later in the International Political Science Association (IPSA). In 1994 at another XIII World Congress of ISA in Bielefeld, a research group (thematic group on local-global relations was recognized and a few weeks later, a local-global group petitioned for recognition by IPSA at its XVIII World Congress in Berlin. The general atmosphere at Berlin was to invite in many perspectives into the organization of the Association for a re-conceptualization of the “international” and after the collapse of an international relations of a Cold War. What follow is based on the development of local-global relations as an essential part of globalization processes.

Globalization’s Challenge to the Study of the Local I: Changing World Structure

One of the “gifts” to the emergence of a modern political science at the beginning of the 20th century was the development of modern, secular states in Europe, North, and South America, and in scattered parts of Asia and the Middle East. That processes was substantially aided by the end of the World War I that led to the demise of several empires: the Ottoman, the Austria-Hungarian, the German, and Russian. What remained were the French British, some US, and a morphed Russia as well as a new empire of Japan. By the end of the 20th century, all institutionalized empires had faded and only aspirations to empire of a few elites remained. It was the world of the 1920’s finally completed, a world of independent states, even if often fictionalized, and cities and capitals, along with a relatively competitive international system with an incipient global political system centered in the United Nations.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 jumped stated the globalization of this “era”, relying on trade, influence, and organization rather than carrot and stick persuasion or political subordination. What happened after the financial globalization that followed the Yom Kippur War in the fall of 1973 with its massive transfer of monetary wealth was an unfolding of a new, multi-layered world with urbanization that was speeding up. What resulted was a mosaic as follows in a process of continuous change:

1 Global System;
10-11 Cultural/historical global neighborhoods, based in some ways on religion;
27 Mega cities of five and more million people
40 Economic agglomerations producing more than 60% of measured wealth;
192 Officially recognized states;
500 Cities of over one million, with additions each year;
1,000 Regions that are politically identified within and across state boundaries; and
2,000,000 Villages and rural settlements, and more.

These “units” are a mix of territorial aggregations and “systemness”, ranging from simple past interactions reflected in legacies and shared cultural symbols, to tight hierarchical systems of strong states down to agricultural societies that shared common fates through similarities in patterns of production and consumption.
In addition to these territorial entities are organizations, associations, and networks emerging with ambiguous and fluid spatial connections. Some of these have sunk territorial investments in mines, oil fields, refineries, or educational buildings and laboratories. The territorial aggregations, the traditional meaning of the local, are now interacting systems but more importantly, their components are interacting globally whether through intermediaries of regions, states, or large, regional governance systems like the North American Trade Association (NAFTA) or the European Union (EU).

Taken together the “local” is a mosaic of interacting systems. Whether there is sufficient closure for “comparative analysis” of any unit as a system is an empirical question whose answer depends on what is being explained and in what theoretical context. It requires a framework of multi-level systems, or multi-layered hierarchies, with dynamics that include changing levels of determination of variances observed. The anthropological mode of analysis of studying and comparing whole, closed systems used into the middle and late 20th century is no longer viable. Those societies no longer “exist”. So the local unit of analysis—cities, states, universities, states, regions—has become a “variable” and is no longer a parameter, a constant that can be assumed as a point of departure in theory or research.

Globalization’s Challenge to the Study of the Local II: Interacting Systems

To compare local systems in order to learn theoretically about alternatives, choices, and impersonal forces of change, the structures and activities within the local systems must be a consequence to a substantial degree of within system interactions. System closure must have persisted long enough so that the interactions of the components can be determined to “cause” local variations in order to confirm, modify, or, indeed, discard hypothetical theoretical knowledge about the limits and possible varieties of living and human systems. The main theoretical operators in comparing any living systems in localities are the laws of random variation, survival through adaptation, and historical sequencing. Recently, living and not only human systems are being re-conceptualized as “purposefully” changing their local systems, their physical and, indeed, social environments, even at the risk of their survival.

Galton’s problem, named after a relative and collaborating researcher of Charles Darwin, was a core concern, in 19th century research on evolutionary change through comparisons of localities. To what extent was what was being observed a consequence of invasion or common origin, or, for human systems, emulation, and to what extent was it autonomously generated? Galton’s problem is still a challenge for the study of the origins and spread of microbes: where do they originate, where do they mutate, and how do they migrate. All human local systems in the era of 21st century globalization, however, must be assumed to be “infected” by all others. There are no system specific items, except temporarily, between the moment of its local debut to the time taken to copy it—something that can happen anywhere in a few moments. Even the best-kept secrets, nuclear weapons, are known “everywhere, although access to reasonably “priced” means to produce them is controlled, if not carefully.
The problem of “interacting” versus separate, closed systems is aggravated in comparisons of localities in compacted areas. Globalization means that all local systems are interacting and hence observations of the local are contaminated by external variables. The solution is to estimate the relative influence of higher order systems, “neighbors”, and “reaching in” systems that penetrate from afar. This is both a theoretical and empirical problem: estimating how much of the observed local patterns result from within system interactions, as well as certain kinds of interactions with specified other systems both and at higher and lower levels—localities within cities, the metropolitan centers, regions, countries, etc—and, then, assessing the amount of within system variance that can be explained by within locality “out of the local” factors. The problem with compacted localities is their level of neighbor influence is so high that they may be better treated as a single system rather than separate ones. One example is the Benelux countries in Europe.

A new reality of the global in the first decade of the 21st century is the accelerating speed of change in local human systems. Those rates of change certainly outpace the capacities of humans to adapt genetically. Insulation of the very young from “outdoor” allergens contributes to increased incidence of asthma among those whose bodies have not developed appropriate immunities through exposure. The growth of local economies spinning off from regional and national markets produces congestion and generates pollution that contributes to poor health. The level of communication and participation in local political democracies simply outruns the capacities of neighborhood political party organizations, based on residences to absorb citizen pressures for change. New occupations and living arrangements lead to lower voting and other “traditional” forms of political engagement as well as the search for a “new politics” by the young.

These examples are to suggest the dynamics of local change that emanate from changes happening at higher levels, here the rate of change of the global, national, and regional “higher levels” occurring faster than that at most local levels, but speeding up local change. Although cross-level dynamics, mostly dialectical, are central to the multilevel patterns of change in this global era, there are others, including invasions of specific items from neighbors as well as the traditional predators that destroy localities by supplanting or moving out their local populations for more “global” purposes. In the globalization of this era, these “external forces” can be coded as borrowing, importing, copying, and adapting rather than invading. The point is that Galton’s problem is no longer something that must be isolated, estimated, and treated as an “error” term. Interacting, interdependent systems are a variable in the reality of the globalized world of the 21st century, present everywhere, rarely to be discounted and treated as exogenous.

Development and Democracy: Globalization and Localization

Globalization, as discussed, impacts the world system in two fundamental ways. The first is massive human aggregation as a force of developmental change, creating the foundations for a global economy and institutions. The second is a de-aggregation and re-configuration of human communities, increasing the range of human choice of localities. The local in both cases loses its exclusive power to encapsulate and control its members.
The first has to do with the dynamics of human development, including the construction of “good” environments not only for production but also for better health and human autonomy that comes with globalization as the development of systems of scale. The second is an expansion of local environments for human creativity and opportunities for democratic participation in open societies and communities, providing for more human choices, enhanced by the right to exit and choose localities rather than adjust to them.

Globalization as human development means that at some point the world of human societies becomes a single system. It integrates all known human variety in a single niche and that niche rather than national, regional, or local ones is the cutting edge of innovation, change, and processes of integrating yet new forms of variety both in technologies of production and human consumption for human betterment. Globalizations in the economic domains since roughly the 1970s have expanded from global integration of finances, to markets (1980s), to production systems (1990s), and now to innovation systems (research and development in the first decade of the 21st century), and, finally, to all forms of consumption (global culture). Economic globalization provided pre-conditions for the decentralization of production and improved opportunities for global democracy. Economic globalization opened up localities and provided choice to those living within them.

Local democratic choice expands by making more variety available locally and across new globally based institutions and organizations. Variety is distributed both within and across the neighboring local units. As the global integration of diversity proceeds, each local unit and the individuals within them will have easier access, both to migration to other localities (mobility) and to variety that exists anywhere. Globalization involves not only the production and creation of new items and ideas but also the continued decrease in the time/distance cost constraints of accessing them through faster and more reliable communications and technologies of moving goods and people.

One threatening consequence of globalization is the potential destruction of human variety necessary to retain human capacities, both learned and, perhaps, genetic, to survive as a species following an unexpected intrusion from outer space or the catastrophic internal breakdown of the planet. The main social consequences of concern about globalization promoting homogenization are that everything is everywhere the same, stagnating human innovation and reducing local choices dampening local political participation. Neither of those outcomes is likely. Even if globalization shrinks local variety in the short term, linkages to the global should stimulate innovation and further efforts incorporate locally variety created anywhere.

Globalization, as increases in scale of social systems, integrates an expanding variety of localities, both those that are based on “similarities” and those on based on differences, diversity. In addition, globalization makes information available about the distribution of variety within and across localities and provides efficient means for accessing it. The greater the variety of localities, the more probable are both communities based on similarities—special life style preferences or tastes in art, including those considered offensive by large segments of the world’s population—and localities that
specialize in aggregating diversity, as is now visible in larger cities and the high consumption areas centered within them. Some of these concentrations of concentrated diversity historically have been and continue to be places for the exchange of unstandardized information in science, art, literature, and fashion. The important factor for development, however, is not place but access to variety, including variety that is not coded in standard languages, vernacular or universal. Density of variety in a place is a means to reduce costs of face-to-face exchange of variety, indeed, to provide subtle information available in the eyes and gestures that can only be communicated by direct contact. Perhaps “You Face” type web pages will begin to substitute for having to travel or pay high-density costs rents of casual access to unexpected, unknown variety.

**Globalization and the Evolution of Local Differences**

Informed access to readily available variety anywhere in the world makes importing variety especially easy for human entities that are newly forming and require rapid adaptation to a broader environment. Indeed, the greater accessibility to variety, the more likely new kinds of localities will form and achieve global viability. The proliferation of condominiums, residential associations, and neighborhoods as well as associations of those residential units, reflect the new “localisms” that are responsive to globalization and improved access to variety. Importing variety is a long-standing practice of local and national political systems to generate their capacities to join larger, more encompassing systems. The openness of a country’s economy has a positive impact on its economic growth and, perhaps, its stability, especially smaller ones that face difficulties of ramping up their economies to sufficient scale for global engagement.

National and local economies that import variety have been able to mix it with enough local variety to retain much of their unique histories as well as to evolve in ways that are different from others. The stimulation of the local to produce variety for local diversity comes from the probabilities provided by the practically unlimited combinations of things that follow from simple additive increases of items of variety that are new to the locality. Producing cars in different places has expanded the variety of cars, even under the heavy engineering, cost, and political constraints on production. There are many ways of combing a variety of standard building materials and the more building materials that are available, the more those ways. That relationship, however, is not simple. Localities with little variety that import variety look initially like the places they are importing from and existing local relationships can be disrupted sufficiently to cause instability.

A major political issue of globalization concerns its impact on local political development. On the one hand, the global constrains local choices by integrating the local globally. On the other, at the very least, globalization provides localities or groups and individuals within them the choice of bypassing national and regional levels of governance and control. The expansion of local bypasses to regions was one of the surprising developments accompanying the processes of the formation of the European Union. Regions emerged between the local and the EU and were eventually recognized as a special level in the governance of the EU. Responses of the local to intrusions of the global, of course, mimic the traditional range of local assertions of resistance to an
expanding empire or the expansion of the state control: overt resistance, hiding/deceiving, and withdrawing/subverting. The fundamental difference in this era of globalization compared to the previous period of state formation and colonization is that powerful globalization entities do not “need” any particular locality, certainly not their incorporation. There are other localities easily accessible around the world as well as organizational alternatives—contracts, special associations, as well informal arrangements—to occupation and subjugation.

The Global, National, and Local: Local Autonomy for Comparisons

Isolation of human societies was never what it appeared to be to observers and anthropologists during world explorations in the 19th century. What is remarkable is that the normative assertions of modern states in the 18th and 19th centuries aspired to create a Darwinian world of closed systems with development, culture, and social order being a product within “national” territorial niches. Indeed, national histories and national social sciences began to dominate thinking in the early 20th century. US political, social, and economic science associations, although seeded in the late 19th century, came into their own in the early 20th century. Since the 1970s and the beginnings of this era of globalization, regional and global histories have re-emerged along with the growth and institutionalization of international/global social science, not only by the formation and strengthening of international scientific associations but also by national social science other scientific associations commingling with scientists and scholars from everywhere.

The globalizations since the middle of the 1970s are marked by a shift from hierarchical controls of the local to integration without political subordination or subservience. The constant question about most change is, for example, whether changes in employment in a city are a regional, national, transnational matter, or, indeed, a global phenomenon, a bubble or bust. Global integration is reflected in concern about the time lags between change at the transnational level and its impact on localities. Hypotheses about change are routinely extended beyond national level explanations. By 2008 the extent of the integration of financial markets were fully acknowledged by brutal facts the global flows of credit being disrupted, necessitating the re-calculation of national assets.

Looking back briefly to the comparative study of the local in political science, the relationship between the national and local was central concern. Strong national-local linkages were foremost among the “integrations” that were essential for state formation. The others were centers-peripheries, classes, regions, ethnicities, and religions within countries. Research on the local showed the stresses between the local and national levels of government, enmeshed in a complex of conflicting political relationships whatever the degree of formal, institutional centralization of authority within a country. From that perspective, even European countries failed to complete their state formation after long-term involvement in those processes through development of law, political parties, and bureaucracy.7 Surely, states were not “complete” in federal systems, often seen as necessary compromises among conflicting groups. By the time European type of states achieved substantial national economic and cultural integration and effective state structures, in a few cases, perhaps, mostly as façades, along comes the European Union.
and the end to the centrality of the problem of national-local linkages in the processes of state formation.

Before the “completion” of state formation in industrialized countries and before it got a good start in the new states—although a world system of states covered the entire globe along with at least the accouterments of state constitutions, courts, rights, and legislatures—an incipient global system came to the fore and created a competing multiple level politics between the local and the global. This break point of world change has been recognized with a familiar “post” term for what is recognized to be different but not understood—the Post Westphalian system. The concept of a failed state today is passé as the states that are seen as failed perhaps never really “were” and now are unlikely to be what was thought to be a success as a state. Those that approached the fruition of state structures of control are now caught up in transferring “sovereignty” not only to institutions of a global political economy but also downward to localities to assure their legitimacy as democracies.

For over a century, established states were able to amass huge amounts of resources. They were able not only to assert but rather actually to increase their control over locality, society, and economy. Those states that had early industrialization and sustained economic growth for the better part of more than a century had central governments that were able to take a larger percentage of national wealth, more or less on a steady basis, than their national economies grew. The processes by which the centers of states became ascendant over localities began to slow down around the end of the 1970s. By then many states had half or more of the measured economic production of their countries. That shift to de-accelerate governmental growth came from the electoral ascendance of governments in wealthier countries (OECD) committed to contain governmental growth, followed by adjustments in central government tax policies.

From a world historical perspective, the most important political development of the late 19th and 20th centuries was the ascendance and spread of the state as the dominant and then triumphant form of political organization around the world. That system of states fought and overcame the challenges of the last great empire toward the end of the 20th century and then it too receded. By the end of the 20th century all major empires had been replaced by states and what was left of empire was repressed fear about Russia, Iran, and China following a course of political development leading to another kind of empire seeking an expansion of territory under their direct control.

Looking at territorial systems constrained by legitimate authority or economic/cultural regions defined by trade and history, the world of the first decade of the 21st century is an open system comprised of a mosaic of overlapping local systems. For each area of research or policy, at least five layers of systems must be considered in addition to the global one. The global system must be assumed to be pervasive and have influence at least in terms of setting conditions of global prosperity and stability for change at nearly all local levels. The other levels are transnational regions, the EU, other larger and smaller Europes, Southeast Asia, North America; regions within countries as examples; countries with different capacities; intermediate levels of government,
provinces and states; metropolitan areas and cities; and, finally, in keeping with the push toward local democracies, communities, neighborhood associations, condominiums. These levels do not address other kinds of locals, such as large corporation, universities, public economic entities, and others with substantial capacities.

Looking at the world of many layers and types of localities, which systems are now too loose to treat as closed and which are bonded sufficiently for comparisons? The following is a general set of hypotheses about “systemness” of specific types of units at the beginning of the 21st century. These general, suggested parameters must be calibrated to the theories of change being examined.

Coherence of Local Systems for Comparisons

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The Democracy and Local Governance Research Program: An Example

In 1990, a group of researchers initiated a collaborative research program called Democracy and Local Governance. It is based on an examination of aggregative effects. It is based on a selection of a targeted group of 15 local political leaders in now 28 countries and looks at the impact on locality and country as systems versus the aggregations of regions within and across countries and the world as a whole over several points in time since 1992. This multi-level, cross time, and cross-system research design has now interviewed over 16,000 individual local leaders in samples of about 700 localities (local governments) in about 30 countries from one to four points in time. The localities are aggregated into about 120 national regions and the transnational regions of West, Central, and East Europe, Central and East Asia with the additions of Brazil and the US. This structure enables observations to be organized across levels as aggregations, across time, and systems. It is an example of a way in which small “N” and large “N” research can be brought together for testing hypotheses derived from macro political and social theories of change.
Final Thoughts

Globalization is a challenge to re-think our assumptions and methodologies of comparing systems, including those long applied to what were considered relatively strong systems—local and national governments. Uses of new and better world histories, both long and recent, as well as models of global change help this effort. Part of problem of studying local change in a globalizing era is made more tractable by the fact that changes of local systems are speeding up, allowing direct examination of those changes in years rather than decades. It is also now possible to access better data about global change and at the same time national and local change.

The analysis of the local in the global will be more complication, but globalization has also made possible unprecedented opportunities for continuous collaboration among researchers everywhere. Global collaboration makes possible the integration of local studies into macro structures that reflect the complexity and dynamics of change of our times.
Notes

1 This is the author’s third paper reflecting differently nuanced approaches to this question of the local in the global. The first was “Comparing Systems: Are We Studying Components of the Same System?” Paper presented to the XV World Congress of the International Sociological Association, Brisbane, July 2002. The second was “Opening Systems: The Challenge of Globalization to Comparative Research”, Paper presented to the International Conference on Comparative Social Sciences: Applications and Methods, Sophia University, Tokyo, July 2006. This is a theoretical, empirical, and methodological issue with potently major implications for our understanding of the world on the order of the focus on the state and its development for nearly all of the 20th century.


4 The relationship between globalization and local democracy was the “grand hypothesis” of the research program, Democracy and Local Governance that was started in 1990 and is ongoing. For references see, www.ssc.upenn/dlg and below.

5 See Richard Florida. Cities and the Creative Class. New York: Rutledge, 2005. This connection between cities and innovation is a long-standing one in sociology, including assertions about the special place of port cities and the diversity of their populations and their creativity. Of course, globalization contributes to the expanded diversity of cites.


9 See Betty Jacob, Betty, Krzysztof Ostrowski, and Henry Teune (eds.). Democracy and Local Governance: Ten Empirical Studies. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii: Matsunaga Institute for Peace, 1993. This was the first general publication of the project. See web page reference above.