

# A theoretical framework on how to approach globalization and social practice

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## Summary

Globalization sometimes strengthens existing patterns of social interaction and sometimes changes these patterns. In both cases the empirical outcomes can be of homogeneous as well as of heterogeneous character. This means that the process of globalization is 'double edged'<sup>a</sup> and impossible to forecast. At best it can be exposed through theory informed empirical studies of social practice. This paper is a draft of a theoretical and methodological framework to achieve this. The notion of *social fields* together with the abstractions of *culture*, *interaction* and *agents*, is suggested as theoretical and analytical concepts enabling us to grasp some of the many relationships between globalization and social practice.

## Introduction

The process of globalization can be characterized both as homogeneous and heterogeneous. It is 'double-edged'<sup>a</sup>. On the one hand the world tends to be more and more homogenized through changes of technology, involving nations, communities and people in a globalized system of knowledge and information exchange and markets for goods and finance (Knox and Agnew 1998). In this process the world is shrinking in physical terms with respect to flows of knowledge, goods and finance through the world-wide operation of communication systems and of transnational corporations. It makes it possible to enjoy a Coca-Cola, operate Internet on your computer and follow your favorite 'soap'<sup>a</sup> in almost every corner of the world. In general, this spatial compression implies a limitation of physical barriers to the diffusion of commodities, technology and information, and the homogenization of physical space as a potential consequence.

On the other hand, the process of globalization can also be characterized as heterogeneous referring to the plurality of socio-cultural embedded practices and interpretations people express and apply in an increasingly globalized everyday life (Giddens 1990, Giddens 1991). Socio-culturally based action in communities or social fields of different spatial scale influence and mediate in the course of globalization. Globalization seems to mean that our actions, rooted in horizons of understanding and knowledge, reconstructed over time in continuously changing local micro-macro contexts (Simonsen 1994, Werlen 1993), are changed, but not necessarily homogenized. In other words spatial compression and homogenization of physical space do not automatically imply homogenization of social space. On the contrary, the compression of physical space seems to sustain and even stimulate heterogeneity in social space.

This means that there is no fixed relationship between globalization and practice. It differs in time and space. It also means that the 'double-edged'<sup>a</sup> nature of globalization can only be analyzed by discovering people's cultural and social space in their on-going social, political and economic practice (Beck 1992). This paper is a draft of a theoretical and methodological framework for this purpose. The framework is constructed on the theoretical notion that

economic, political and socio-cultural change in connection with globalization does not mean replacement of old practices with new ones, but integration of old and new meanings in continuously changing spatial practices.

Methodologically, I pay special importance to relational space. A methodological approach that connects social practice to systems of meanings and social fields is presented. It is argued that a deeper understanding of the 'double-edged' nature of the process of globalization presupposes a focus on the dialectic between processes of modernization and social practice that can be exposed empirically in social fields of an agent or in social fields of an interrelated group of agents.

### **Globalization and modernization**

The term globalization is hard to define. Social scientists will normally hold that the achievement of an understanding of globalization is dependent on an examination of the relationship between the compression of physical space and economic, political and social processes of modernization in society. The process of globalization can then be specified by referring to different forms of change or modernization linked to economic, political and socio-cultural events and processes that influence and are influenced by activities in communities.

First, communities take part in economic modernization. Economic modernization deals with the establishment of more efficient technology of in the production of resources. Traditionally this process has been connected to industrialization and the subsequent building up of Fordism and large scale production as the dominant modes of organization under Western capitalism. In recent times, increased international competition and liberalization in world trade have opened for more customer and niche adapted production. In this process small and medium sized enterprises make use of flexibility and local creativity, alone, or through collaboration with other firms. Regional and institutional flexibility of production (Storper and Walker 1989, Amin and Thrift 1994) seems attainable through relations at different geographical levels, in small and peripheral as well as in central communities. Flexibility and competitiveness have been strengthened in industrial clusters consisting of producers and sales companies, financial and research institutions, backed up by official authorities and others (Porter 1990). The strengths of these clusters are then able to influence the economic practice in even the most peripheral community through for example remote ownership, international division of labor and labor migration

Secondly, communities take part in political modernization. Political modernization refers to the many-sided tendency towards more political steering of more activities in modern society, while at the same time decisions in political and economic relations are rearranged to regional and international geographical levels and in recent years especially to the regulations executed by market transactions (Lash and Urry 1987, Jessop 1990, Sayer 1995). Thus, there is a close dialectic relationship between political and economic modernization, and between political and economic practice.

Finally, communities take part in cultural modernization. Production of culture and identity to a large degree have changed from being a concern of communities to an individual affair characterized by reflexive individuals in search of economic and political power and cultural identity (Beck 1992, Giddens 1991, Jackson 1989). In some communities cultural modernization implies that the majority of the youth prefer to leave. Thus, in many cases it is

a process that implies cultural change in other communities, dependent on the cultural difference between place of origin and destination of the migrants. But also if youths and people decide to stay in their community of origin, the integration of communities and people into a world wide system of knowledge, information exchange and markets for goods and finance, can imply changes in cultural norms and values, thus influencing on-going economic, political and social practice. This implies that there seems to be a dialectical relationship not only between political and economic modernization and practice, but also between all the three above mentioned modernization processes and forms of practice.

### **Community and Post-modernity**

When globalization is defined in relation to modernization it becomes clear that the question of the relationship between globalization and practice and development is a classical one within social science. The concept of community can be traced back to Tönnies (1912) dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Inspired by his work the dichotomy was used by Durkheim (1974), and Simmel (Wolff 1950) among others, to theorize and describe the passage from traditional to modern society caused by modernity. Summarized, this theorizing defined 'community'<sup>a</sup> (*Gemeinschaft*) as a spatially bounded group of social persons with a collective understanding, and opposed it to modern society (*Gesellschaft*) composed of interacting individuals and their impersonal relations of short duration and of rational nature.

The links between this community tradition and present theorizing on globalization and post-modern culture seems obvious. Post-modern culture is, as I see it, frequently presented as a counterpoint to community in the notion of *Gemeinschaft*. Post-modernity is interpreted with basis in agency of individuals and ethical concepts like 'in flux'<sup>a</sup>, 'fragmented'<sup>a</sup>, 'ambiguous'<sup>a</sup>, 'multiplicity'<sup>a</sup>, 'non-linear'<sup>a</sup>, etc., and opposed to *Gemeinschaft* oriented social practice and traditional adaptations. The argument is that the production of identity no longer is in charge of communities. Post-modern society is presented as a counterpart to a situation where stable culturally defined *rites de passage* made individuals pass from one identity to another through the agency of the family or the community, and as a counterpart to a situation where the community mediated between culture and the individual. The present situation in post-modern society is described as much more complicated (Giddens 1991). In its extreme, it is held that individuals themselves are in charge of the production of their identities, and that the mediation of culture has become individually orientated. If we accentuate this, the argument is that the production of culture and identity has changed from being a concern of communities to an individual affair characterized by reflexive individuals in search of who they are going to be, what they are going to do and how they are going to act in a culture marked by subjectivism.

However, neither a culturally deterministic (the community tradition) nor a culturally subjectivistic approach (the post-modernity approach) give an adequate theoretical basis for studying relationships between globalization and social practice. Among other things, a culturally deterministic approach rules out the existence of reflexive agents, meanwhile a culturally subjectivistic approach rules out the existence of intersubjectivity. In the following an intermediate theoretical position will be presented. In this I presuppose the existence of a dynamic intersubjective system of meaning and with that, dynamic interacting agents.

### **Intersubjective system of meaning and social practice**

My point of departure is that even if no community or group of interrelated agents is independent, but part of much larger and complicated systems, the members of a community or group of interrelated agents need to share common ideas and values in order to keep the interaction between them going. The notion of culture can then be a helpful theoretical abstraction in the analysis of social practice. *Culture* can be defined as an intersubjective system of meaning composed of categories and symbolic codes that people use to interpret experience and social practice and to generate new practice and meaning (Fløysand 1997). If this definition of culture is connected to Geertz' (1973) division between culture as a 'pattern of behavior<sup>a</sup> and as a 'pattern for behavior<sup>a</sup>, it can be argued that an intersubjective system of meaning contains 'pattern for behavior<sup>a</sup>.

This means that culture becomes an abstraction that can support our interpretations of economic, political and social practice (from now on referred to as social practice), but it also means that social scientists are confronting a problem of observation. In the first place we have a problem of observation because an intersubjective system of meaning turns out as an abstraction which characterize invisible relations (Bærenholdt 1991). In the second place we can be confronted with a problem of observation because an intersubjective system of meaning can be embedded in systems of meaning that are unknown to the researcher (Collin 1985, Wadel 1991). Thirdly, we have a problem of observation because social practice becomes embedded in the tacit part of culture expressed by Bourdieu as 'the universe of the undiscussed<sup>a</sup> (1977) and by Giddens as 'unconscious<sup>a</sup> and 'practical consciousness<sup>a</sup> (1979).



Figure 1: Interaction between two agents.

Instead of going into a deeper discussion of these problems of observation, it will be assumed that such problems can be surmounted by different methods of data gathering. The challenge then is to integrate reflexive and dynamic interacting agents in a theory of social practice and thereafter a methodology for operation of the theory. For this purpose we first need to define what is meant by interaction and agents. As a start, social practice can be defined as *interaction* between two or more agents that is characterized by overlapping processes of transaction and signification or interchange of 'goods<sup>a</sup> and 'signs<sup>a</sup> (figure 1). The purpose of interaction can for example be to interchange goods and signs that confirm the agents' gender identity, the agents' identity of profession, the agents political or economic position, etc.

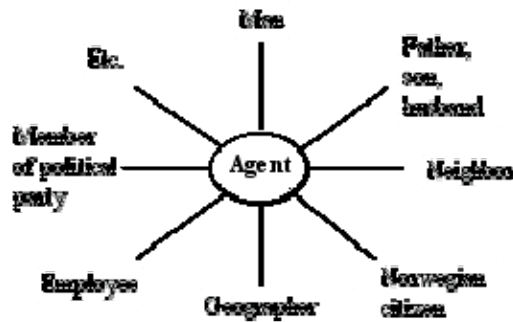


Figure 2: Agent and statuses.

An *agent* can be treated as synonymous with a social person, which per definition equals the total number of statuses an individual possesses (figure 2). A status is a social position of rights and duties that function as incentives and limitations on role conduct (Linton 1936). That means that, to a given status combination like father-son, neighbor-neighbor, employer-employee, etc., there exist social roles that are legitimated through shared expectations of role conduct. Such expectations are based on intersubjective agreement (meaning) on what is appropriate role conduct in the interaction or on agreement that regulates how goods and signs should be interchanged.

On this basis *social practice* can be interpreted as interaction between agents operating in status combinations, in which they construct, maintain and change the processes of interaction in line with the role conduct they can legitimate in a given socio-cultural, political and material context (Aase 1997). Among other things, agency then is regulated by the number of statuses an agent possesses, intersubjective meaning governing role conduct, and the agent's performance of the role. This means that a social unit like a community or group of interrelated agents might be highly complex in the sense that it rapidly produces new statuses and/or creates changes in the intersubjective ideas about role conduct related to existing statuses. In such situations a post-modern description of identity formation seems reasonable. In cases of stability in the number of statuses and role conduct of the agents, the notion of *Gemeinschaft* developed within the community tradition is a more appropriate description of the situation. This means that we need empirical examinations to decide levels of complexity.

Another question to be answered in this setting is how changes in agents' statuses and changes in agents' role conduct can be linked to globalization? Taking up this methodological problem, I will start by clarifying the abstractions of social fields and scale.

### Social fields and scale

A deeper understanding of globalization presupposes, as I see it, a focus on the spatial scale of social practice. Social practice can be localized in social fields of a community or of a group of interrelated agents. A *social field* is defined by Grønhaug (1974, 1978) as a relatively bounded system of interconnection stretched out in socio-space. Further, a social field is an aggregate of social relationships which are sets of complementary statuses. Social relationships are interconnected in the agent in the sense that a number of statuses are combined in the agent forming part of the totality of fields making up her relational space (Grønhaug 1974, Grønhaug 1978). The scale or size of a social field is the number of people involved and their extension in social space.

If we link the abstraction of social fields to our definition of an agent, it implies that an agent normally takes part in various social fields of for example family relations, neighbor relations, community relations, working relations, market relations and so forth. In these fields agents participate in status combinations performing social roles that are legitimated through shared expectations of role conduct.

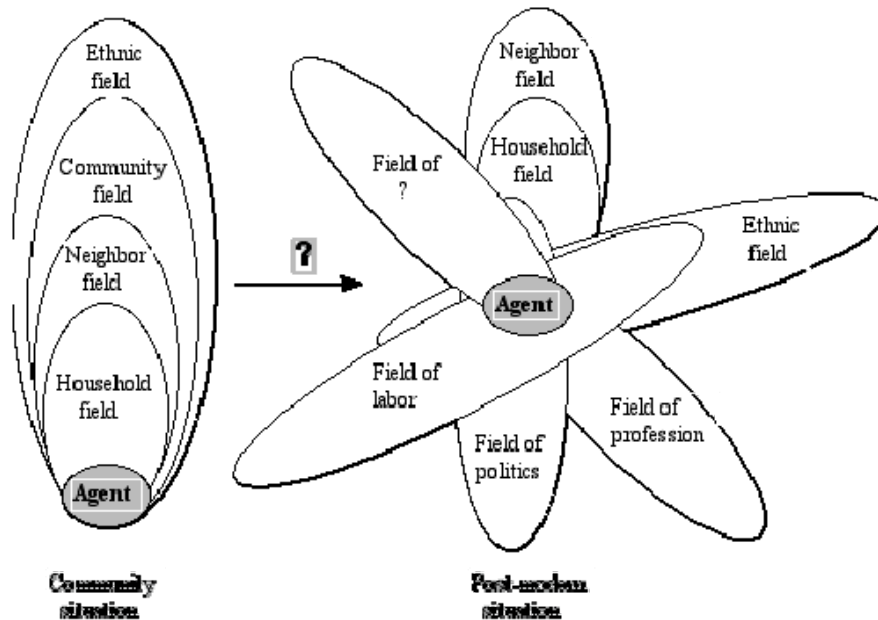


Figure 3: The field system of a 'community'<sup>a</sup> situation and a 'post-modern'<sup>a</sup> situation.

If we return to the question of identity, the construction, maintenance and change of agents' identity have traditionally taken place in social fields at household scale and community scale, but as the discussion under the heading 'Community and Post-modernity'<sup>a</sup> pointed out, this has changed during the epoch of modernization (if it has ever been the case). In general we would expect that globalization implies that production of identities in a group of interrelated agents takes place in social fields at wider spatial scale than the mentioned family and community field. If we add that the interpretation of present (post-modern) society puts weight on the agency of individuals and the subjectivistic aspects of the dominant culture, we would also expect that the production of identities are increasing in complexity, among other things, because people participate in a greater number of social fields at different scales, that are less interrelated in comparison with a community situation (figure 3).

The number and scales of an agent's fields, and the characteristics of processes of transaction of goods and processes of signification within these fields, will vary both at individual and community level. This poses an empirical problem. It means that it is the task of the researcher to discover the totality of fields of an agent or of a group of interrelated agents, the interactions going on within the fields, and the interrelations between events and processes in different social fields. Then, the relevant question to ask is: can the presented abstractions inform us about the general relationship between globalization and social practice?

### Globalization and social practice

At empirical level it is obvious that there must be some connections between globalization and social practice. Changes of technology have speeded up and twisted the flow of

information, goods and finance. In this process new technology and impulses of knowledge are mingled with locally embedded technology and knowledge. New spaces of social interaction emerge, and sometimes this results in innovative action and technology that again diffuse throughout the different world wide systems of knowledge and information exchange and markets for goods.

However, it is a difficult task to link such empirical assumptions about globalization and practice to practical research. An extension of our definition of globalization might help. Globalization can be seen as the different processes that contribute to the compression of physical space, opening up for a world wide exchange of 'goods<sup>a</sup> and 'signs<sup>a</sup>. In relation to this definition and the definitions of culture, agents and interaction presented earlier, we should be able to establish an analytical principle with which to connect globalization and social practice within the empirical system of social fields in two main directions.

Firstly, the process of globalization can be manifested in the maintenance, construction and deconstruction of social fields and status combinations and thereby social practice, in the social fields agents take part in. If we treat the exchange of goods and signs separately (even if it always will be processes of signification related to a process of transaction (Lash and Urry 1994)), increased integration of agents in a world-wide system of exchange of goods (system of markets for goods and finance), should normally imply that the relational space of the members of a community is changed both in relation to the totality and the scale of the fields agents take part in. Thus, by introducing social fields as an analytical category, we are able to map changes in the agents' number of statuses by comparing present and passed social field situations of the agent or the group of agents, and by relating such changes to the world wide exchange of 'goods<sup>a</sup>. On the other hand, increased integration of agents in a world-wide system of sign exchange (knowledge and information exchange), should normally imply that people reorientate their intersubjective system of meaning, which again means changes in the social practice they take part in. By introducing social fields in our analysis we are able to discuss the relation between globalization and changes in intersubjective meaning/role expectations governing the role conduct of statuses within the fields of agents or a group of agents, by comparing ongoing flows of signs in social fields with the flow of the past.

Both in the case of world wide exchange of goods and world wide exchange of signs, we would expect the empirical outcome of globalization to be heterogeneity in the form of increased complexity in the relation to numbers of statuses, accepted framework for role conduct and in the number of allowed social fields of different scale. But, before making any general statements about the homogeneity and heterogeneity of globalization, we have to examine the second analytic implication of our theoretical abstractions. Only a short glance at the battles over social space in the world today demonstrates that increased complexity of statuses, framework for role conduct and social fields at the level of (post-modern) society, has its counterpart in 'dominance<sup>a</sup> both at an individual and community level. In short we can argue that even if the numbers of statuses, the frameworks of role conduct related to a status and social fields seems to increase in the course of globalization, the same process also seems to imply specialization at individual level and processes of regionalism or traditionalism at community level.

Thus, the second way of operating social field as an analytic tool in our studies, is linked to the way the world-wide exchange of goods and signs is manifested in the maintenance, construction and deconstruction of dominance in inter-field relations. A social field becomes dominant when the field integrate the agents in an especially effective way and the statuses of

the field affect status allocation in the other fields of an agent or a group of agents in an especially effective way (Grønhaug 1974, Grønhaug 1978). In some cases the dominant field can be of economic character, in other cases of ethnic, religious or of household character. This means that information about dominance and change of dominance in social fields of an agent or a group of agents has to be found in the contextual setting.

One way of approaching this task is through systematic registration of changes in inter-field relations by comparing the inter-field relations of the past with the present. This can for example be done through the examination of interrelations and dominance of various forms of economic, social and cultural capital accumulation in the fields of an agent or a group of agents (Bourdieu 1984). An alternative approach to discuss dominance in inter-field relations is to link observed events and processes in fields of different scale and against this background reveal dominance in inter-field relations. Agents or groups of agents participate in various fields. This sometimes implies dominance in inter-field relations, for example when an event or a process in one field is influencing with especially strength on events and processes of other fields (Fløysand 1996). Once again it has to be stressed that such multiple-field approaches are of analytic value, and not instruments to settle the discussion on the nature of the relationship between globalization and social practice.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have discussed the relationship between globalization and social practice. The argument has been that the relationship between globalization and social practice is 'double-edged'. The objective of the paper has been to suggest a theoretical and methodological framework for the study of this relationship. First, globalization was connected to different processes of modernization. This led us to the concept of community, to the dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and finally to post-modernity and a notion of culture marked by subjectivism.

In contrast my suggested approach is neither cultural determinism nor cultural subjectivism, but that culture must be understood as an intersubjective system of meaning composed of categories and symbolic codes that people use to interpret experience and social practice and to generate new practice and meaning. On this basis social practice is interpreted as interaction between agents operating in different status combinations, in which the agents construct, maintain and change the processes of interaction in line with the role conduct they can legitimate in a given socio-cultural and material context.

Further, I have introduced the term social fields as an analytical tool to clarify socio-spatial contexts. I have argued that relationship between globalization and social practice can be analyzed by using the abstraction of social fields in two main directions. First, by using social fields as an analytical category, we have a tool with which to map changes in the agents number of statuses by comparing present and past social fields of that agent or group of agents, thereby a tool to discuss changes in social practice in relation to changes in flow of goods and signs. Second, social fields provide a tool for analysis of how processes of globalization are manifested in the maintenance, construction and deconstruction of dominance in inter-field relations. Once again the point is that information on dominance and change in dominance in social fields of an agent or a group of agents has to be found in the contextual setting, either through systematic registration of changes in inter-field relations by comparing the inter-field relations of the past with the present, or by discussing the interrelations between different field specific events and processes.



In summary, we can say that the compression of physical space, which is opening up for world-wide exchange of 'goods'<sup>a</sup> and 'signs'<sup>a</sup> sometimes strengthens existing patterns of social fields, status combinations and dominance in inter-field relations, and sometimes changes these patterns. In both cases the empirical outcomes can be of homogeneous as well as of heterogeneous character. This means that the process of globalization is 'double edged'<sup>a</sup> and impossible to forecast. At best it can be exposed through empirical studies of social practice operating in continuously changing, socio-cultural, political and material space. In an attempt to achieve this, the notion of *social fields* together with the abstractions of *culture*, *interaction* and *agents*, can function as analytical concepts enabling us to grasp some of the many relationships between globalization and social practice.

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