

Theorising Globalisation: Roland Robertson's Theory and Its Multidimensional Framework

Vaishali Wankhede

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of Sociology,
SNDT Women's University

Abstract

Globalization is a multifaceted and constant phenomenon that affects nearly every aspect of modern day living. Despite its frequent usage, it is challenging to precisely define it due to its intricate and interconnected attributes. Scholars from various disciplines such as economics, sociology, and cultural studies offer diverse viewpoints on globalization, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of its meaning. The idea includes various interconnected activities like economic, cultural, technological, and social interactions that extend across borders. However, globalization is a complex phenomenon composed of various interconnected elements including economic unity, cultural interaction, and technological advancement. Understanding globalization means recognizing its different facets and recognizing its uneven impacts on worldwide societies, economies, and cultures.

This paper thoroughly explores Robertson's theory, examining its key ideas and significant arguments. It examines how Robertson's unique perspective, focused on studying civilizations and highlighting the interconnected relationship between the global and local levels, has expanded our understanding of the cultural complexities in global engagement

Keywords: Globalization, Globality, Glocalization, Roland Robertson, Modernity

Introduction

Globalization stands as a definitive characteristic of the contemporary era. While the term is ubiquitous in modern discourse, it denotes a profoundly complex and multi-layered reality. Its influence permeates nearly every facet of modern existence, from economics and culture to technology and social structures. This very pervasiveness and complexity, however, make it resistant to a simple, singular definition. Rather than a monolithic phenomenon, globalization is best understood as a constellation of interconnected processes. It encompasses the cross-border flow of capital and commodities, the worldwide exchange of cultural practices and ideas, and the integration fostered by rapid advances in communication. Consequently, a central paradox emerges: despite its frequent invocation, the precise implications of globalization for societies, economies, and cultures around the world remain nuanced and often contested. Anthony Giddens' assertion that "we are the first generation to live in global society, whose contours we can as yet only dimly see" makes understanding globalisation inevitable. No matter where we are, it is upending the way we currently live. Many of us experience the power of forces beyond our control (Giddens, 2002: 19).



The difficulty in defining globalization arises from two principal sources. The first is the term's inherent ambiguity; it is a multifaceted concept whose meaning shifts depending on the disciplinary lens through which it is viewed. For instance, an economist might frame it as the integration of global markets, while a sociologist may concentrate on transnational social movements, and a cultural scholar on the diffusion of ideas through media. This plurality of legitimate perspectives inherently complicates any singular definition.

The second challenge lies in the sheer volume of academic discourse itself. Despite extensive scholarship across fields like political science, economics, and communication studies, no single, precise definition or unifying theory has achieved consensus. This theoretical fragmentation means that scholars often operate within distinct frameworks, a situation that can foster conceptual confusion and dialogue at cross-purposes.

A comprehensive understanding of globalization demands an examination of its principal dimensions. Analytically separating these facets allows us to dissect its broader influence. From an economic perspective, it manifests in the growth of multinational corporations and the deepening integration of financial and trade networks. Culturally, it is visible in the worldwide circulation of media, languages, and lifestyles. Simultaneously, the technological dimension, characterized by instant communication and data flows, provides the infrastructure that makes such exchanges possible. Scrutinizing these interconnected strands is crucial to appreciating globalization's profound, yet varied, consequences. It is critical to recognize, however, that it does not operate as a uniform or monolithic force. Its benefits and disruptions are distributed unevenly, creating divergent outcomes for different nations, communities, and individuals. Consequently, a truly nuanced grasp of globalization hinges on a careful analysis of its diverse manifestations and their tangible implications for human experience.

Conventional narratives often portray globalization as a homogenizing force, spreading standardization worldwide through Western technological, commercial, and cultural dominance—a process frequently equated with Westernization. Challenging this view, alternative scholarship frames globalization not as a tide of sameness, but as a catalyst for hybridization, generating new, fused forms from diverse global elements. This conceptual divergence is compounded by the term's interdisciplinary nature. Economists see the internationalization of markets, while political scientists analyse the interconnectedness of states and the rise of global governance. Sociologists trace the contours of an emergent "world society," and cultural theorists map the complex effects of global media on identity. It is precisely this multifaceted character—evident in its distinct manifestations across different domains—that resists a single, precise definition. Consequently, globalization remains a vibrant and contested subject, stimulating robust debate as scholars from various fields bring their unique analytical lenses to bear. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues, our understanding of globalization is inherently shaped by the specific social science discipline and historical context from which it is viewed.

At the forefront of globalization studies is the work of Roland Robertson, a sociologist and theorist of globalization, whose theory of globalization has been highly influential in shaping our understanding of this phenomenon. Robertson's 1992 book "Globalization: Social Theory



and Global Culture" is considered a seminal text in the field. In contrast to more economically-focused theories of globalization, Robertson's approach emphasizes the cultural and social dimensions of this process. His work has been instrumental in establishing globalization as a distinct area of interdisciplinary research, drawing from sociology, anthropology, political science, and beyond. His extensive studies and insightful analysis have shed light on the complex dynamics of this phenomenon, particularly in relation to diverse cultural viewpoints on a global scale.

Robertson's Theory of Globalization.

Sociologist Ronald Robertson, a pivotal figure in globalization theory, provides a unique framework that prioritizes its cultural and social dimensions, setting it apart from predominantly economic analyses. Central to his thesis is the argument that while globalization unfolds within the context of contemporary modernity, it must not be conflated with it. As he clarifies, "globalisation is not equated with or seen as a direct consequence of modernity. Rather it should be seen as a very long, uneven and complicated process" (Robertson, 1992, p.8). This long-term view is structured through a historical model, which he outlines as "a phase of origination, a primeval phase, an impetus phase, a phase of fight for hegemony and phase of uncertainty" (Robertson, 1992, p.53).

Robertson's interdisciplinary approach moves beyond models of the world economy to investigate the dynamics of global culture. He famously defined globalization as "a concept which refers to the compression of the world and intensification of consciousness for the world as a whole" (Robertson, 1992, p.8). In this view, the process involves the simultaneous shrinking of geographical distance and a deepening collective awareness of the world as a single place. Although he acknowledges these processes have been underway for centuries, his work focuses on their accelerated and more visible development in recent times, making his insights crucial for understanding contemporary global cultural perspectives.

Globalisation as a dual process

Scholarly interpretations of globalization often coalesce around two principal approaches. The first characterizes it as an objective process, describing the tangible intertwining of political, economic, and cultural systems across the globe. This perspective emphasizes the growing interdependence of governments, markets, and societies, and is often regarded as comprehensive for its focus on measurable connections. Crucially, it frames globalization not as a finite event but as a dynamic, ongoing process that continuously deepens global integration. The second approach treats globalization as a subjective progression, focusing on the transformation of human consciousness. From this viewpoint, globalization is the process through which individuals and communities increasingly perceive the world as a single, interconnected social space, acknowledging shared experiences and global interdependence.

Together, these facets reveal that globalization entails not only the material reality of growing connections but also a fundamental shift in our cognitive and perceptual frameworks. This dual nature underscores the concept's complexity, portraying it as both a structural convergence and an ideological transformation. The work of sociologist Roland Robertson is pivotal here, as his



theory encapsulates this duality. He posits that globalization transforms our very perception of the world, fostering a sense of the globe as a unified place where societies and individuals interact within a shared frame of reference. This expansive perspective is essential for understanding the ongoing evolution of worldwide connections and the emerging global order.

Roland Robertson's framework offers a more human way to understand the vast and often overwhelming idea of globalization. Instead of viewing it solely through economic or political lenses, he breaks it down into four interconnected parts that shape our shared global experience. At the base of this model are national societies—the individual countries we are familiar with, each carrying its own systems, cultures, and histories. These nations do not exist in isolation; together they form the world system of societies, a web of relationships, exchanges, and interactions that bind countries to one another. Within this global web are individuals—people whose everyday lives, identities, and choices are influenced by global connections, and who also contribute to shaping those connections through their actions. Beyond these layers lies humankind, a broader idea that reminds us that, despite different borders and backgrounds, we are part of a single global community with shared concerns and a common future.

Robertson also explains how these components interact through four dynamic processes that reveal how globalization unfolds in real life. Internationalization captures the growing interdependence among societies—seen in trade, diplomacy, communication, and cultural exchange—which steadily strengthens global ties. Individualization focuses on how these global forces shape personal identities and experiences, making people increasingly aware of their place in a wider world. Generalization refers to the development of shared ideas about humanity—universal values, global awareness, and collective understanding of our world. Finally, sociotility examines how societies function internally and how they relate to one another, highlighting the complex ways cultures and nations negotiate their positions in an interconnected global landscape. Together, these components and processes offer a rich, human-centred way to grasp globalization—not as an abstract force, but as a lived and evolving experience that touches every level of life, from individuals to all of humankind.

The power of Robertson's theory lies in its emphasis on the interconnectedness of these components and processes. It moves beyond merely charting tangible links between nations to explore how these connections influence individual lives and the collective concept of a shared human identity. Consequently, his framework is both descriptive and analytical, designed to elucidate the dynamic, reciprocal relationships among individuals, national societies, the international system, and humankind. Crafted to be both adaptable and comprehensive, the model captures the evolving nature of each constituent and their interconnections over time. By integrating all these facets, it achieves a multidimensional quality, capable of addressing both the contemporary and historical dimensions of globalization. Furthermore, the model serves a structural function, illustrating how social relations are organized and established on a global scale, providing a holistic tool for understanding one of the most defining phenomena of our time.

What truly distinguishes Robertson's framework is its multidimensional architecture, which enables it to capture the full spectrum of globalization all at once. The model functions on two

key axes: synchronically, by analysing the present condition of each component, and diachronically, by tracing their historical evolution and potential future paths. This holistic design is further demonstrated in its integration of four fundamental viewpoints: the personal (individual selves), the collective (national societies), the international (the global system of societies), and the global (humankind as a whole). By weaving together these distinct yet interconnected perspectives, Robertson's model strives for a genuinely comprehensive understanding—one that mirrors the totality of real-world processes and illuminates the complex relationships between them.

Historical development of globalization:

Robertson's Minimal Model of Globalization delineates five distinct stages in the historical progression of globalization; each marked by significant developments and shifts in global dynamics. Each of these phases is marked by distinguish features.

Phase One: Germinal Phase (early 15th century to mid-18th century)

This era marked the beginning of national identities and communities in Europe, departing from the medieval system where regions were tied together under a larger religious or feudal framework. The Catholic Church broadened its influence, playing a major part in people's lives and the ruling of countries. The ideas of individualism and broader concepts concerning humanity started to develop, impacting societal and cultural standards. The heliocentric theory went against old beliefs about the universe, leading to the emergence of modern geography, which offered a more precise comprehension of the world. e. Gregorian Calendar: Implementing the Gregorian calendar uniformed time measurement globally, allowing for better synchronization in international communications.

Phase Two: Incipient Phase (mid-18th century to 1870s)

In this era, there was a shift towards the idea of uniform, homogenous unitary state with centralized governance. The creation of structured international relations set the foundation for more orderly exchanges between states. This pertains to the formulation of precise definitions that delineate the rights and duties of individuals within a state, thus creating standardized citizenry. The notion of a cohesive human race became more defined, resulting in the emergence of nationalism of humankind as a significant political and cultural force.

Phase Three: Take-off Phase (1870s to mid-1920s)

This phase indicated a time of growing globalizing trends, resulting in a singular and a more interconnected world centred on key fundamental point. This is period when there was initial discussion about modernity with the questioning of the traditional social system paving path towards a new interconnected form of living.

Phase Four: Struggle for Hegemony Phase (mid-1920s to late 1960s)

This phase was marked by major disagreements and cold wars over the terms of the domination in the globalization process. The period saw intense ideological conflicts, particularly between the communist East and the capitalist West, shaping global politics and society. There were



frequent contestation over the terms. This period is also marked by the formation of League of Nations and United Nations. The establishment of these international bodies aimed to promote peace and cooperation, although they also reflected conflicting global interests.

Phase Five: Uncertainty Phase (1960s to early 1990s)

Hegemony Struggle Phase: From the mid-1920s to the late 1960s, there were conflicts and battles over the rules of the dominant globalization process set up during the take-off period. The League of Nations and subsequently the United Nations were founded, leading to different interpretations of modernity and ultimately resulting in the Cold War.

Uncertainty Phase: This phase, occurring from the 1960s to the early 1990s, displayed crisis tendencies and a heightened global consciousness. The number of global movements and institutions increased significantly during this period, along with a rapid acceleration in means of global communication.

Classifications of world order

Robertson presents two primary classifications of world order: the Global Community and the Global Society.

Global Community: In this model, the world is structured into relatively self-contained societal groups, each possessing equal cultural significance and institutional status. This perspective perceives the world order as balanced, with societies holding similar value in terms of their cultural heritage and organizational frameworks.

Global Society: This viewpoint regards the world as a system comprised of open societies experiencing significant socio-cultural transformations. It encompasses the concept of a unified global community as well as a structured global society founded on a framework of global governance.

By examining these classifications and subcategories of the world order, Robertson seeks to clarify globalization as a process with a profound historical trajectory. He posits that contemporary globalization entails a substantial rise in global intricacy and interconnectedness, impacting both local and global spheres. This indicates a heightened level of interconnectivity and interdependence among societies, leading to a more complex global landscape characterized by diverse cultural interactions and evolving social frameworks.

Globality

Central to Roland Robertson's theory is the powerful concept of "globality"—the increasing perception of the world as a single, interconnected social space. He posits that as globalization advances, the importance of traditional borders diminishes, replaced by a growing awareness of the planet as a unified whole. This condition of globality is intrinsically linked to what Robertson terms "global consciousness", the expanding recognition among individuals and societies of their place within a global framework. He suggests that as people become more cognizant of global networks, they also begin to foster a sense of common humanity that transcends national, cultural, and ideological divides. Crucially, Robertson refutes the idea that



globality leads to cultural homogenization. Instead, he frames it as a dialectical process, a two-way street where the local and the global constantly interact, reshape, and redefine one another. This process is, in his own words, "a very long, uneven and complicated process," one that is inherently multidimensional with a distinct emphasis on socio-cultural dynamics.

Robertson's famous definition captures this duality: globalization is both "the compression of the world" into a tighter-knit system and "the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole." To analyse this, he employs a dual lens: an external perspective that examines the objective structures of global interconnectedness, and an internal perspective that explores our subjective experience and understanding of this new reality. The core of globalization, therefore, lies in recognizing this global dimension and our comprehension of the world as a shared stage.

To map this complex reality, Robertson developed a flexible model built upon four key reference points in the global arena: individuals (selves), national societies, the world system of societies, and humankind. This framework is both descriptive and analytical, designed to interpret the dynamic interactions and mutual influences among these four actors.

What truly distinguishes Robertson's model is its multidimensional nature. It operates on two analytical planes: synchronically, by capturing the present state of global relationships, and diachronically, by tracing their historical development and potential future trajectories. This holistic approach integrates four fundamental viewpoints, the personal, collective, international and global to achieve a comprehensive understanding. In uniting these perspectives, the model captures the entirety of global processes and elucidates their intricate webs of connection, offering a critical tool for comprehending a defining characteristic of modern life.

According to Robertson's theory of globalization, some examples of unicity in contemporary society include:

Declining significance of territorial boundaries: Robertson argues that as globalization progresses, the significance of traditional territorial boundaries declines, as the world moves towards a greater sense of "oneness" or unicity.

Rising global connectivity: Robertson identifies rising connectivity across the world as a key feature of the movement towards unicity. This refers to the increased interconnectedness and interdependence between different parts of the globe facilitated by advancements in communication and transportation technologies.

Development of global consciousness: Robertson emphasizes the development of a "global consciousness" - a growing awareness and sense of the world as a single, shared socio-cultural place. This global consciousness reflects the intensification of people's awareness of the world as a whole.

Emergence of generic individuals: Robertson suggests that as globalization advances, there is a trend towards the emergence of "generic individuals" - people who see themselves as part of a common humanity, rather than solely in terms of their national, ethnic or cultural identities.



Debates around universal values: Robertson notes that globalization has led to increased debates around universal values and understandings of humankind, such as discussions around gender, sexual orientation, indigeneity, health and wellness. In summary, Robertson's theory of globalization highlights how the world is moving towards a greater sense of unicity or oneness, as evidenced by the declining significance of territorial boundaries, rising global connectivity, development of global consciousness, emergence of generic individuals, and debates around universal values.

Roland Robertson's theory of globalization differs from other theories of globalization in several key aspects:

Universalization of Modernity: Robertson's theory emphasizes the universalization of modernity, which is distinct from other theories that focus on the economic or technological aspects of globalization. He views globalization as the process of universalizing modernity, where institutions and values become globalized.

Compression of the World and Intensification of Consciousness: Robertson emphasises the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole in his definition of globalisation, which he believes is the most widely recognised among academics. This viewpoint differs from previous theories that mostly concentrate on economic or technological components of globalisation since it emphasises the subjective, cultural, and phenomenological aspects of the phenomenon.

Glocalization: Robertson's theory also emphasizes the concept of glocalization, which he defines as the link between the local and the global. This perspective recognizes that globalization is not a one-way process but rather involves the interaction and interdependence between global and local forces.

Focus on Subjective and Cultural Dimensions: Robertson's theory places significant emphasis on the subjective and cultural dimensions of globalization, which is distinct from other theories that may focus more on the economic or political aspects. This approach highlights the significance of understanding globalization as a cultural and phenomenological process.

Critique of Reification of Society: Robertson's theory also challenges the conventional reification of the concept of society, which is a departure from other theories that may not explicitly address this issue. This critique highlights the need to rethink the way we understand society in the context of globalization.

In summary, Robertson's theory of globalization stands out due to its focus on the universalization of modernity, the compression of the world and intensification of consciousness, the concept of glocalization, the emphasis on subjective and cultural dimensions, and the critique of reification of society. These aspects differentiate his theory from other theories of globalization, which often focus on more specific aspects such as economic or technological changes.

Robertson's theory of globalization is also very closely tied to the concept of modernity in which he views globalization as the "universalization of modernity".



He sees the process of globalization as representing the universalization of the institutions and values of modernity across the world. According to Robertson, globalisation includes the "universalisation of the nation-state as the political form, the universalisation of the capitalist system of commodity production, a Foucaultian surveillance by the modern state, and the centralisation of control of the means of violence within an industrialised military order". These are all key features of the modern social order.

Robertson argues that as globalization progresses, the "institutions of modernity become universal". This implies that the globalisation of contemporary institutions and ideals shapes the cultural, social, and phenomenological relationships that exist between individuals, national societies, the international system, and humanity at large. The search results highlight that Robertson's theory, along with those of Giddens and Meyer, "take the view that globalization has simply radicalized or culminated the project of modernity". In other words, globalization represents the culmination and intensification of the modernization process. Robertson's emphasis on the "subjective, cultural and phenomenological dimensions of globalization" also connects his theory to the cultural and experiential aspects of modernity.

In summary, Robertson's theory of globalization is fundamentally connected to the concept of modernity, as he sees globalization as the universalization and intensification of modern institutions, values, and cultural experiences across the world. His theory situates globalization as an extension and culmination of the modernization process.

Conclusion

Robertson's versatile and comprehensive model not only serves as a descriptive tool but also functions as an analytical framework. Its primary objective is to interpret the interactions and mutual influences among the four key actors in the global arena: individuals, national societies, the world system of societies, and humankind as a collective entity.

This model is intricately designed to accommodate changes within each of these components while considering shifts in their relationships over time. It aims to encompass all dimensions of globalization, operating on multiple levels simultaneously: it is multidimensional, capturing various facets of globalization; synchronic, analysing the present state of affairs; and diachronic, examining historical developments and future trajectories. This paradigm is unique in that its four constituent aspects represent four potential worldviews: the global (humankind), the international (world system of societies), the collective (national societies), and the personal (individual self). This holistic approach highlights the model's aim to encompass all processes occurring in reality and capture their interrelations comprehensively.

Moreover, beyond its descriptive and explanatory functions, the model also possesses a structural aspect. It delineates how social relations are formed and ordered on a global scale, aligning closely with the phenomenon of globalization itself. Robertson describes globalization as a series of recent developments that have concretely structured the world as a unified entity. Individualisation, societalization, internationalisation, and humanisation are the various facets and dimensions that make up the model's depiction of globalisation. Four stages are indicated

by the hierarchical presentation of these processes, which show how our understanding of the world changes over time.

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