Globalization and Chengdu: 
A Response to Eduardo Pagán

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It may seem like the topic of globalization is somehow antithetical to the subject of regionalism, and that the notion of “comparative Wests”; that is, Sichuan as a western region in China and Arizona as a western region in the USA only could be discussed as something somehow opposing globalization. By this I mean that someone might say “as opposed to the standardization of globalization, the two regions of the west...” In other words, globalization is associated with things that are entirely the same and regionalism is associated with things that are entirely different.

Short reflection, of course, shows that such oppositions are never as pure and neat on the ground as they are on paper. For instance, in studying the rise and spread of nation-states historians have often shown that the centralizing projects of the metropolitan center not only failed to eliminate the counter trends toward regionalism in nation-states, but often accommodated and even reinforced it. For example, no one studying the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany today can fail to note the special accommodations given to regions like Bavaria. Indeed, these kind of
accommodations (as well as aggressive responses against them) have characterized internal German politics since Bismarck's unification in the mid 19th-century.

If this is true of a single country, which at least has recognized boundaries and a single capital, it will be even more true of a trend like globalization, which does not admit of simple boundaries, or an agreed upon definition of success. Here, instead of looking only at history, I think we should also look at a relevant problem in philosophy, namely what to do about "antimonies", or situations when it is possible to produce equally valid but opposing and countervailing answers. For instance, what should we do if it is equally viable to say that knowledge comes from the evidence of our senses as well as from the categories of our mind. Alternately, what should we do if globalization seems to level out and "flatten" the world, while simultaneously allowing for all sorts of differences? There is no simple answer, but one profitable suggestion philosophers have made is that when you get equally viable opposing answers it might mean that there is something wrong with the basic premise of the question. Specifically, a question that presumes that a phenomenon is either exclusively one way or exclusively another way might be badly formulated. Let's not talk about either globalization or regionalization, but about the processes that hold the two together.

Here, I want to bring up a point rightly emphasized by geographers: activity is "spikey". This means that just as most physical features tend to be clustered areas where they are highly concentrated, the "spikes" and lightly or not at all represented everywhere else, so too, human activity tends to its "spikes", e. g., much or something at some point, and much of something else at another—and a pattern or logic, natural or human, linking and connecting them. With this notion in mind, it stands to reason that globalization and regionalism fit together as part of a single process.

But how can we describe this "process" and once we do so how can we go on to discuss and teach it more effectively? Let's begin by defining globalization more carefully, and relate this definition to the "spikeyness" of things.

As Barrie Axford noted, "The fact is that there are many definitions of globalization clustered around common indicators and themes."[1] This is a valuable observation and one of the most prominent clusters is the notion of speed, rapidity and acceleration. Yet, taken in itself, the idea that the world is moving faster explains little about what globalization might mean. I dare say that people in the midst of change, no matter where they are, and when they lived, always feel that the
world is moving faster. Likewise, those that long for change, but cannot obtain it, always feel that the world is stultifying or confining. What accounts for the changes brought by globalization, and why, specifically, should we label this change as being due to globalization, and not something else? Here, I think that it is better to argue that what the cluster has in common is the notion of sharing, primarily by people who in other circumstances would not be sharing. Globalization, when you come to specify it, most commonly means different people sharing the same things.

This allows for a more succinct definition of globalization, namely one revolving around shared practices. As people in different parts of the world are linked into the same “systems”, they take up the same practices. Thus, airports tend to operate the same way the world over. They have standardized regulations for the ways that runways and luggage handling should be organized, etc., and employees tend to be trained in similar ways, and the airline companies tend to adopt business strategies from a shared suite of goals and techniques.

There is nothing unusual about this. There are ever so many global practices that link different regions together, allowing them to share basic systems. Thus, not only do ATM’s function the same way in most countries, but also people tend to use them in the same ways, even when many other aspects of their lives are different such as income level, religion, language, and so forth. In country after country you can chart similarities: the people who use the machines in a measured fashion, before shopping and after payday. Those who visit it several times when on nights that they celebrate; those who impulsively empty their accounts to visit gambling casinos, and so on. My point is that you can find this sort of behavior in country after country. The same way that you can find standardized airports in every so many places.

It is from this perspective of sharing systems that we can grasp the full implications of what it means for the world to be “linked”. For instance, when the historian Peter N. Stearns seeks to provide a pithy overview of what globalization means he provides this sketch of linkage:

It refers (in the financial crisis of 2008) to Americans who wake up at 3 a.m. to check Asian stock markets, because they know these will influence and foreshadow Wall Street later in the day. It refers to global McDonald’s, with 31,000 locations worldwide, all with common emphasis on fairly greasy food served quickly and (in principle at least) cheerfully. It refers to a quarter of the world’s population (regardless of time zone) glued to televised accounts of World Cup soccer. It refers to the millions of American kids playing with Japanese toys like Hello Kitty or (not
too long ago) Pokemon, or the charitable contributions from around the world pouring into disaster areas like tsunami-hit southeast Asia or Katrina-devastated New Orleans. It refers [...] the list is long indeed, with an impressive range of arenas and activities. [2]

The reason that there is such an impressive range of activities is that systems are shared. The stock markets not only function on similar principles, but they have become so integrated that it is difficult and impossible to tell which is influencing the other. Fast food restaurants look similar in many nations because they share basic techniques about supply chain and franchise operation and design. Children play with similar toys in different countries because toy designers understand what is appealing to children in general, irrespective of borders. When we speak about globalization in the 21st-century, we typically mean the accelerating integration of people from different countries and places into the same system.

How does this affect the overall discussion of regionalism in relationship to globalization? We can begin with an obvious objection to the notion of globalization as sharing. Perhaps “sharing” is not quite the right word, as it is clear that different people and places participate unevenly and unequally in shared global systems. Yet, the fact that we must be careful about how we use the term “sharing” does not mean that it is proportionally sharing. I never said “equal sharing,” and grasping the meaning of inequality in the notion of unequal sharing will help us formulate conclusions on the topic as a whole.

First, it must be emphasized that even if there were no globalization whatsoever, if history is any guide, we can see that sharing of systems is only likely to be egalitarian in highly limited circumstances. In every other society, no matter how isolated, sharing the system—whether economic, educational, military, social, etc., meant participating in hierarchical arrangements that were often much more severe in their inequality than the inequality in the globalized world today. I say this with a slightly polemical edge because it is common today to hear the academic opinion that inequality is at an all time high, and only getting worse. In one common version the reason inequality is only getting worse is because of the workings of neoliberalism. As the matter is so grave, and since the charges are so extreme, it is worthwhile to look at them from more than one perspective.

On the one hand, the point about high inequality must be by definition true, very poor people today remain extremely poor. However, wealthy people today have considerably more wealth than they did even fifty years ago, to say nothing about the
distant past. Indeed, from the standpoint of the past as a whole (but not from a possible happy future), the amount of wealth in the world today is staggeringly high. The difference between haves and havenots must also be staggeringly high. So far we cannot argue with the critical point. However, we should consider what it was like to be poor in ancient Greece or the Tang Dynasty. Not only was the difference between the bottom and the top enormous, but there was almost no way to aspire to even a relative increase in wealth. The middle levels were tiny, and the number of those confined to (legal) bondage, huge. In almost every society, the gap between top and bottom was immense. Even societies characterized by a high degree of egalitarianism, if you looked close, were not altogether equal, since they had outcaste groups and other permanently subordinated members of the society. Egalitarianism typically meant sharing deprivation, not abundance, and even then there were many privileges that the unpopular and non-dominant could never hope to share. \[3\]

Saying this is not meant to settle any issues about social justice. The fact that there are more middle levels in world societies today also means that there is likely to be more suffering and frustration at visible and invisible barriers to advancement. Questions and poverty and inequality are extremely important and need to be discussed in detail. But we will misunderstand globalization if we continue to speak about the current gap between rich and poor as being uniquely severe. In my own judgment, the situation in previous societies was worse, rather than better than the present age. Precisely because globalization erodes efforts to fix society into unchanging patterns. It is true that the rich and powerful can find ever so many ways to entrench themselves, but they cannot find ways to arrest change. Indeed, the more middle levels there are in the world, the more likely there is to be change. One of the key challenges of sustaining globalization today consists in ensuring that that societies do not shut themselves off from change.

Where does this leave us then in understanding globalization as a whole, as well as globalization in relationship to regionalism? The first thing that can be said about regionalism is that we no longer mean what humanity used to mean when it thought about a region. Region no longer means self-contained, and it does not necessarily even mean different. In fact, the meaning of region is more akin to what we mean when we speak of phenomena in the globalized word being “spikey”. Put differently, regions can be seen abstractly and schematically as variegated inputs and outputs. That is, from geography to culture, a different “mix” will work on the
region, as well as provide resources for continued activity. As regions by definition must be different, the process of globalization will simply accentuate the "spikey" or uneven character of the way it relates to the world as a whole.

Some of this may seem obvious, but it leads to two further considerations about the nature of globalization that are not so self-evident. First, the meaning of "standardization" in globalization needs to be treated with more sophistication. The fact that the same "system" is used in a very large number of places, almost everywhere with some key technologies, etc., does not mean that experience is standardized. In fact, the mere presence of the extensive inequalities found throughout the world guarantees that there will be divergent attitudes toward these systems. If you combine this with the fact that development is never even, then it becomes obvious that globalization's standardization does not mean "leveling".

What does it mean then? To answer this question it is necessary to think about globalization in long-term historical perspective. Here, I want to say something that is not so common in the literature, namely that globalization efforts were implicit in all large civilizations, no matter how ancient. A look at Egypt of the Pharaohs shows the intensity of the efforts to unite the disparate regions, particularly the Upper and Lower Nile, and create one "system". In another respect, China and its history is one large "globalization" attempt. The reason that we do not think of it thusly is that conditions made it impossible for these empires to realize their full ambitions. Had they been able to expand further, and maintain their authority and control, they would have. The Ming Dynasty shutting down of Zheng Ho is an example of anxieties about keeping order and authority trumping the desire for global expansion. The reason we do not think of these civilizations as global civilization is because (a) we tend to forget how far they aimed to expand at the time of their greatest reach and (b) more importantly, they simply couldn't achieve the degree of conquest, growth and organization that Western imperial civilizations obtained. This round of globalization, therefore, begins in Western expansion. Where it will end is anyone's guess.

I am now ready to conclude by giving an answer to Eduardo Pagán, and summing up my ideas on globalization. Upon giving a first version of this talk at the Chengdu conference, Professor Pagán asked in response "So is globalization always good?" This is a legitimate question, but it cannot be taken at face value because the question actually means two different things. On the one hand, it means whether or not I am somehow happy with the bad things of the world and somehow defending them. Articulated this way we can say that globalization is part of history and only a
lunatic thinks that history is always good. Indeed, one of the main points of history is the realization of how horrible it is. But my point was not the madness that history was always good, and the path we have taken the most desirable. My point is that given the horrors of history, what is the most honest and viable goal for humanity to strive for. Here, I see no better option than a globalized world, unified by the same systems and seeking to alleviate the miseries of its uneven development. This, I think, is what students should be taught about, if only to give them a worldview they can respond against.

Notes:
[1] Barrie Axford, *Theories of Globalization* (Polity, 2013), 1.
[2] Peter N. Stearns, *Globalization in World History* (Routledge, 2009), 1.
[3] I am aware that this view is disputed by some scholars. Thus, the matter is best studied in reference to specific historical examples. This is a good exercise for Chinese students.

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