



## GLOBALIZATION – A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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**Abstract:** *The key element that redefines the community in the present intercultural context is the one that actually reshapes the intercultural context itself – globalization. Globalization already represents the big picture which integrates every intercultural context, it is the global text which encompasses every partial context, local and regional. Yet, globalization is not a new concept: universalist tendencies, urges and visions can be traced down even on the eve of human civilization. From the civilizing expeditions, more or less mythical, born from the human spirit of knowledge and/or adventure, to the theoretical reflections of the first thinkers who posed the problem of universal, the human being has been concerned about more and more comprehensive wholes. What is now new with globalization is that it is really happening, that it is a reality more and more tangible, pregnant and obvious: it is a fact. But globalization is not only a physical reality - economic, financial, military and so on - it is also a (new) mental reality, a (new) semantic frame and a (new) cultural unity, as Umberto Eco defines it. And this reality, too – and all that belongs to it –, as all realities that populate the individual and collective mental, is conveyed by signs. Given these premises, this work seeks to address globalization from a semiotic perspective, which would comprise a componential (or semic) analysis and on the other hand a symbology, a symbol analysis of the imagery that globalization raises.*

**Keywords:** *globalization, semiotics, culture, imagery, symbol*

### 1. FROM ECONOMIC TO SYMBOLIC

The economic length of globalization is so obvious that it can truthfully pass as defining, intrinsic. Actually, globalization appears, firstly, as the globalization of economic exchange and of everything that it implies: finance, work force production, intake. In his book *Globalization: Key Thinkers*, Andrew Jones observes that “most thinkers accept the fact that global economic integration was an important agent in globalization...” (Jones, 2011:22).

As an example, the perspective of one of the first theorists of the phenomenon of globalization, Immanuel Wallerstein, who, although has an interdisciplinary approach and falls into a holistic tradition, in his writings regarding the process of developing of world systems, *The Modern World Systems*, gives preeminence to the economic factor, “tries to theorize the development of a sole capitalist

world economy between the 15th and 19th centuries. The central thesis of those three volumes is that during this period a sole world economy developed, based on capitalism and an integrated society of world scale” (Jones, 2011:31).

But regardless of the importance they have given to economics in their reflections upon globalization, not even a single theorist reduced globalization to its economic dimension. The most general definition used by Andrew Jones is “the interconnection and increasing interrelationships between every aspect of society” (Jones, 2011:10, our emphasis). In turn, Anthony Giddens feels that globalization “can be found in every dimension of contemporary life” (Jones, 2011:11). Though it can be accepted that globalization was driven by the economic operator, it triggered a metamorphosis that included every aspect of human life. Therefore, despite “the debate continues

## GLOBALIZATION – A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

(almost by itself) to remain centered upon the economic aspect [...] the opinion differences are plenty regarding the importance of politics, institutions, technology, or culture in increasing the social interconnection. Theorists of globalization like Giddens or Held *et al.* consider that the process is driven by multiple transformation of human life, therefore it is hard to point a single determining key-factor” (Jones, 2011:22).

Of sociological orientation, Giddens sees globalization as a “distanciation”, considering the continuous transformation that it triggers upon space and time. Though appreciating, as seen, the importance of economic dimension, he defines globalization as “the intensification of social world relations which link different places so that local events are influenced by events occurring at many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens, 2000: 64). An important role is being played in this process by the so called abstract systems: expertise systems and symbolic tokens. Those are “the major disembedding mechanisms of modernity” that involves the “‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space” (Giddens, 2000:26). He considers that globalization promotes “cosmopolitanism” considering that in a world that is globalizing “we are currently living in contact with people with different beliefs and life styles”. This caused and will continue to cause conflicts in the 21st century, once religious, nationalist and ethnic identity fundamentalists will seek refuge in “the renewed and purified tradition”, as well as in violence” (Jones, 2011: 58).

In the definition proposed by Held *et al.* at the end of the 90s, the economic was not even mentioned, though it was clearly implied: “the growth, deepening and acceleration of global interconnections in every aspect of contemporary social life, from cultural to criminal, from financial to spiritual” (Held *et al.*, *apud* Jones, 2011: 94). Those theorists forward a transformational view upon globalization, whose extended definition is “a process (or a set of processes) which engulf a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions - evaluated

according to the extent, intensity, velocity and impact they have - which generates flows and networks of activity, interaction and exercise of power on a transcontinental or interregional level”, the flow being “the movement of physical artifacts, of people, of *symbols*, of goods and informations through space and time” (Jones, 2011: 100, our emphasis).

The known thinker Thomas Friedman, who as well gives the importance due to the economic dimension, considers that globalization represents “the triumph of liberalism and capitalism of the free market as the most efficient method of social organization” (Friedman, *apud* Jones, 2011:167), notes that along with other defining elements of globalization, such as the integration or interconnection and the dynamic character, the fact that globalization system has its “own dominant culture” and also its “own defining technologies: computerization, miniaturization, digitalization, satellite communications, optical fiber or internet” (Jones, 2011:167). In fact, in the center of his vision about globalization is the information and communication technology which lets individuals, not only companies, “to extend to a global scale”: „the dynamic force in Globalization 3.0 – the force that gives it its unique character – is the newfound power for *individuals* to collaborate and compete globally” (Friedman, 2006: 10), the ever accentuated accessibility flattening the world.

Listing the most influential thinking trends regarding globalization, Andrew Jones notes that “the vast majority of actual talks [his book appeared in 2010] on the subject of globalization make no clear reference on the cultural aspects of the phenomenon (or at least not until now), and through his work Appadurai points out this very problem” (Jones, 2011:266). Arjun Appadurai, social anthropologist of Indian origins, sees in imagination, in “*imagination as a social practice*”, the defining element of the present world: the imaginary is “no longer a mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite

## GLOBALIZATION – A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

pastime, (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for the new forms of desire and subjectivity)”, but “an organized field of social practices, a form of work and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility”, so that imagination becomes “central to all forms of agency”, “a social fact” and “the key component of the new world order” (Appadurai, 1996:31). Though globalization “involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies and clothing styles) that are absorbed into local political and cultural economies”, Appadurai affirms that “the globalization of culture is not the same as its homogenization”, nation-states needing neither to open too much, nor to close too much for the cultural global flows. Therefore the state becomes an “arbitrageur of this *repatriation of difference*” that occur in the form of goods, *signs*, slogans and styles (Appadurai, 1996:42, our emphasis).

Another writer that looks upon globalization through a cultural perspective is John Tomlinson. For him, globalization and culture are in a reciprocity relation: “In the middle of modern culture there is globalization, in the middle of globalization there are cultural practices” (Tomlinson, 2002: 9). Without diminishing the importance of the economic factor in the globalization process, Tomlinson considers that “the main road towards understanding the globalization process does not translate into the economic analysis of the transnational capitalism” (Appadurai, 1996:30). But, culture is the favorite ground of symbolic: “culture can be understood as a sphere of existence in which people build signification through the practices of symbolic representation” and “if we speak of culture, we refer to the means through which people make sense of their life, individually or collectively, through communicating between them” (Appadurai, 1996:32). Furthermore, symbolic systems are not the exclusive attribute of the cultural domain „but are visible, “interwoven” in the economic or political domain, because,

paraphrasing Tomlinson, everything that is significant can be symbolized. So would be “*the instrumental symbolization*”, which refers to a “great number of symbolization attached to economic practices, such as the technical language of the production process (i.e. technical specifications of a car’s engine), or of the market ( i.e. the daily announce stock prices). On the other hand, numerous symbolic representations found in marketing are... very cultural, even though, in the end they have an instrumental role (economic). Advertising texts, for example, even though part of what Horkheimer and Adorno (1979) called, deprecatingly, “culture industry”, bound by the instrumental goals of capitalism, remain significant cultural writings. The way in which advertising texts are used is often similar to the one in which books and films are used. And this is because they offer narrations (however suspect would it be, ideologically speaking) about the way in which life can be lived, references to common notions about identity, appeals to one’s own view, images of some “ideal” human relations, versions of human fulfillment, happiness etc.” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1979:32-33). But, as we speak of symbols linked with the phenomenon of globalization, a semiotic approach becomes apposite.

### 2. FROM THE TOWER OF BABEL TO A FLATTENED WORLD

Before talking about sign systems which support the ideational superstructure of globalization, we will talk about the actual signs of globalization.

The first signs of globalization can be tracked down even from the mythical prehistoric times of mankind. The first globalization we can identify is a proto-globalization, a propensity towards globalization: is the “globalization” which has as a climax the building of the Tower of Babel. It is the time when “the whole world had one language and a common speech” (Genesis, 11:1), which made possible its construction. Significantly, what created the condition of globalization was language, a semiotic system

## GLOBALIZATION – A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

by excellence, “the most important” sign system (Saussure, 1995: 33). Through a lucky quibble, which made possible a vertical globalization, how we could call this first globalization project, it was the understanding, mainly through language, that is a successful communication, but more thorough and wide, a trans-linguistic, an inter-subjective harmony beyond words, resulting also from the fact that the collapse, the failure of this first globalization, has its roots in the misunderstandings between people, in a dual way: the confusion of tongues, the fact “that they may not understand one another’s speech” (Genesis, 11:7), and the animosities and conflicts between them. The mythological cause for which this mythical globalization fails is also significant: human conceitedness, who wanted to “grow famous” and reach the heavens. The punitive response to this primitive form of globalization, whose impulse is a weakness, a vice, neither a value nor a virtue, is how we already mentioned “the confusion of tongues”: globalization *in nuce* is countered through language diversity firstly and subsequently through behaviour diversity, and finally through otherness disagreement. One of the lessons which we could learn from this embryonic form of globalization is that the mere juxtaposition of human diversities cannot create a proper frame for globalization. We can acknowledge of the evidence of this truth even now when “the confusion of tongues”, interpenetration or simply the adjacency of diverse cultures which are a source of tension, friction and even violence. In this frame - of multiculturalism - globalization seems to be even nowadays a failure, as some of the most important European political leaders declare.

Not even deterritorialization - a central concept of contemporary globalization - is a new concept. We find antecedents of it or other related concepts: “delocalization” and “dis-location”, since the beginning of mankind. Man seems by nature a being inclined to deterritorialization, a being that is not content with staying in one place, in the same environment, bringing always with himself the cultural heritage. This inclination is so natural that Baudelaire could define man

as a being of “farness”, and Blaga – a being of “horizons”. The most archaic stance of this trait is his nomadism, of which the best known are those of the indo-European population. Expeditions, more or less mythical - such as the famous travel of the Argonauts in search of The Golden Fleece, or those of the Vikings -, also colonizations, starting with the Greeks, can also enter this deterritorialization field. Here we can also mention the violent territorial expansion, wars of conquest which led to the birth of every empire known to man, which spread the culture and dominant civilization on the conquered territory.

If we can talk of a history, an evolution of globalization, not even the idea of globalization is new. “I am a citizen of the world”, said even in the 4th century B.C, the first cosmopolite (*kosmopolites*, gr.), Diogenes the Cynic - that “Mad Socrates”, as Plato characterised him -, being asked where he was from (Laertios, 1963: 312). If Diogene might be accused of emphasis, we cannot say the same about the stoic Marcus Aurelius, who, several centuries later will have made the same statement “All things are woven together and the common bond is sacred, and scarcely one thing is foreign to another, for they have been arranged together in their places and together make the same ordered Universe. For there is one Universe out of all, one God through all, one substance and one law, one common Reason of all intelligent creatures and one truth. Take note of the link between everything in the world! We should not say ‘I am Athenian’ or ‘I am Roman’, but ‘I am a citizen of the world’”. Therefore when Erasmus of Rotterdam, near 1500, will have said, as well: “I am a citizen of the world”, we could say that there is already a conscience of the human spirit’s universality, of humanity equally shared between all people.

Then deterritorialization and early globalization can be found even in religious misionarism and proselytism and obviously in those socio-political and military-religious campaigns that were the crusades. Religious had always had a universalist, globalizing aspiration, with a global or transnational trait. For instance, Catholicism, as the name

## GLOBALIZATION – A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

implies, “proposes a more universal alternative, or even a global vision of an international society, rather than the one represented by the westphalic system” (G. Shani, cited in Haynes, 2010:312). But the actual globalization - real, effective - does not have anything sacred within it: it is exclusively the result of profane causes - economic markets, financial, jobs etc.

But one of the most significant, from a semiotic point of view, is the communications one. It is, actually one of the first that appeared in recent history at the beginning of the 60s, when the known theorist Marshall McLuhan, referring to the stage reached by the communications industries, wrote that: “Time has ceased, ‘space’ is vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening” (McLuhan, 1964:63). This specific flavour of actual globalization – simultaneity - is being taken into consideration by Friedman’s famous metaphor: “the world is flat”.

### 3. COMPONENTIAL ANALYSIS OF GLOBALIZATION

As we could see even from this short presentation of thinking trends regarding globalization, globalization is a term that raised many interpretations. But, all agree upon some meanings which build this “cultural unit” (Eco, 2008: 102), as Umberto Eco calls the meaning.

*A. Connectivity.* A first meaning of globalization is the one regarding to the category of relation, of connection, spatial or temporal: globalization takes connectivity to a global scale. Globalization is, before everything, a global network, which creates a global proximity, in the order of spatiality, and a global simultaneity, in the order of temporality. The connectivity paradigms are the World Wide Web and the Internet, which both imply the meaning “network”.

*B. Deterritorialization.* Without trying to establish an order of causality between connectivity and deterritorialization, we can say that both are from the semantic nucleus of globalization. Globalization means the

abolishment of economic, national, cultural and ethnic borders. On this *sui generis* axis of mobility-imbility or the static-dynamic axis we could place the adjacent meanings of dislocation and disembedding.

*C. Homogeneity.* The most contested meaning of globalization is the one situated on the homogeneity-heterogeneity axis. Because on this axis the problematic clashes occur: identity-difference, oneness-otherness, peculiar-generic, (uni)cultural-multicultural, national-trans/inter-national, uniqueness-diversity, unity-plurality. This is the axis with the most opposing, the most radical terms, and which creates another, of *tolerance-intolerance*, so that there could be reached a general, or a main axis of globalization-anti-globalization, and, finally, *the violence*.

If semiotics is by itself a theory or subject with globalist tendencies (McLuhan, 1964:20), because it states that anything can be used as a sign, with the globalization concept it finds for itself one of the most challenging analysis subject.

### 4. THE IMAGERY AND SYMBOLOGY OF GLOBALIZATION

If every piece of thought reality can be signified, then globalization is thought as a sign system too, of which the most important are symbols. In fact globalization’s vulnerability comes from the fact that it has only a few signs/symbols to sustain it in an ideatic or semiotic way. In other words there is a cleavage, and a lag between economic and semiotic: economic is (way) ahead of semiotic.

There are few symbols of globalization and even those that prevail are more often negative valued. For instance, the national character is strongly symbolized, and that means every national signs (flags, clothes etc.), while the global character is far less or not represented. We consider that this weakness of globalization is caused by the fact that, even though universalist statements are made, there are not any global, or globally shared values. The symbol of *freedom*, for example, seems attached to a certain culture, the Western one, and particularly - which created even more

## GLOBALIZATION – A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

idiosyncrasies - the American culture. The globalization symbolism seems rather attached, for now, to an imagery of evil: dollars - global coin, fast-food - global food etc. There are not strong enough symbols even for regionalization, let alone for globalization! For example, just having finished consolidating the concept of “europeanism”, the crisis emerged. Neither the 12 starred European Union’s flag, nor the European institutions, do not seem enough to crystallize an European conscience. It is presumable that it would take a while until everyone or more of them would say about themselves that they are “citizens of the world”, and not Europeans, Asians, Americans or Czechs, Australians, Chinese, Brazilians etc.

Another set of symbols associated with globalization is represented by different anniversaries stated by the UN or other international organizations, such as “Earth Day”, “World Wetlands Day”, “World No Tobacco Day”, “World Cancer Day”, “World Poetry Day” etc. It is to be seen how *significant*, how consistent, how mobilizing and how wide such symbols can be, considering the arbitrariness which seems to accompany them, despite their indisputable relevance, being rather imposed, foreign, outside of the individual conscience. We can see how much hostility a world celebration, such as Valentine’s Day, can sometimes create! Because the strength of the symbol lies actually in the lack of arbitrariness, in its motivation, in the fact that there is a link, more or less obvious and/or necessary, between signified and signifier.

### 5. CONCLUSIONS

From a semiotic perspective, globalization proves to be a concept, if not contradictory, at least tense between sometimes antagonistic meanings. On the other hand, the symbolism of globalization seems, at least for now, in inferiority, in disadvantage, including or especially on an affective-emotional level, opposite to a traditional local symbolism (territorial, national etc.). We think that this

vulnerability is of axiological order: fundamentally due to the lack of global consensus upon values, to which symbols would attach naturally. Symbols cannot be empty, abstract, foreign; they have to be credible, in order to coagulate people’s faith. They live through this: through faith, through people’s trust (in them).

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