Special Section: Global Culture Revisited

Theory Culture & Society

Theory, Culture & Society
2020, Vol. 37(7–8) 169–185

DOI: 10.1177/0263276420959429
journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs
SAGE

Whither Globalization? An Interview with Roland Robertson

Mike Featherstone
Goldsmiths, University of London

Abstract
In this interview to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the *Theory, Culture & Society* special issue on Global Culture, Roland Robertson reflects on his long involvement as one of the major theorists of globalization. He recounts how in his early years as a sociologist there was strong resistance to thinking beyond the nation-state society. He comments on the emergence of the field of transdisciplinary global studies, the concern with global culture and his own attempts to extend the concept of globalization by developing the term glocalization. He also discusses the present Covid-19 pandemic and ends with a number of reflections on global history.

Keywords
global studies, globalization, glocal, glocalization, pandemic, Roland Robertson, global history

Mike Featherstone: It is now 30 years since the edited collection 'Global Culture' appeared as a *Theory, Culture & Society* special issue. It was a collection heavily influenced by your pioneering work on globalization in the 1970s and '80 s which culminated in your book *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (1992) – a book that was one of the very first, perhaps *the* first, single authored book to be published on globalization.

Roland Robertson: When I used this concept for the first time I genuinely thought that it was completely new, although I was subsequently to learn that at least one author had highlighted the word 'globalization' in his book, although not exploring in any way the substance or meaning of it. I refer to *When Gods Change* (McCoy, 1980).

MF: How did your interest in globalization develop? Could you say a little about your intellectual development and how globalization became a significant topic for you?

Corresponding author: Mike Featherstone. Email: tcs@sagepub.co.uk
Extra material: https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/

RR: I was brought up in a small village just outside Norwich at the beginning of the Second World War. I believe that my frequent encounters with US American and Canadian service men in the mid-1940s and early 1950s were of great consequence for my later thinking. Moreover, this influence continued to affect me when my parents acquired a small hotel in the city of Norwich itself. The crucial factor in this regard was that I not merely continued my encounters with Americans in particular but also with people from a variety of countries and backgrounds, particularly ones from the Middle East and East Africa. This same period is one in which I became particularly conscious of the significance of racism. I well remember the occasions when my mother felt obliged to comfort Puerto Rican servicemen who were very distressed because of the way in which they had been treated by white Americans. Undoubtedly these encounters had a great effect on me, to which should be added the influence of my paternal grandmother. She had been a highly motivated student of geography in school; and for much of my childhood and early teens she gave me book presents concerning countries and events in various parts of the world.

I should add that I was fortunate in that in the later years of my grammar school education I was taught geography by an excellent teacher, and I believe his teaching of what was then called human geography had a lasting influence on me. When I applied to university my eventual choice boiled down to reading international relations at a college of London University or doing sociology and economics at the University of Southampton. This dilemma reveals a lot about my thinking at the time, specifically my vacillation between international relations and social science. After graduation from Southampton in 1960 I went to the London School of Economics to continue what had become my sociological studies, where again I encountered people from a variety of countries. In sum, my life, until I was in my early 20 s, was much shaped by a kind of what is nowadays called cosmopolitanism. After a relatively short period at the LSE I was offered a postgraduate scholarship at the University of Leeds, and I believe it was there that I fully consolidated what was to turn out to be my more or less 'final' intellectual resting place – although I should hastily add that my interest in 'foreign' films, books and visual art also did much to push me in a global direction. Moreover, it was at the University of Leeds that I encountered two people in particular with whom I became great friends and intellectual colleagues – namely, Herminio Martins (who had been born in a Portuguese colony) and Peter Nettl (whose family had been Czech). Of almost equal importance was the fact that my PhD supervisor at Leeds was Bryan Wilson, who had an extremely wide range of interests, most particularly in religion in global perspective. Wilson's scholarship and depth of knowledge were to greatly supplement my collegiality with Martins and Nettl.

MF: Unusually for a sociologist working in the 1960s, you wanted to explore processes beyond the nation-state society. You point out that there have long been traditions in sociology interested in civilizational, international, transnational and trans-societal themes, but this focus become eclipsed. What made you want to revive it?

RR: Early in the 1960s I began to take very serious interest in international and global issues. In 1965 I gave a paper at a conference in Manchester with Peter Nettl that constituted the forerunner of the book that we eventually published three years later, *International Systems and the Modernization of Societies* (1968). Our paper was greeted with a certain degree of confusion, even some scepticism. It simply did not conform to the usual way of thinking among British political scientists and sociologists at that time. In 1966 I gave a paper at the World Congress of Sociology in Evian, France, entitled 'National Objectives, Strategic Processes and International Systems'. This had involved a great deal of research in the areas of international relations and foreign policy analysis and it was to result in the publication of an article in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* entitled 'Strategic Relations between National Societies: A Sociological Analysis' (1968). It involved the employment of a cultural approach with a substantive discussion of national strategy. It might be said that by this time I was on a roll, as is exemplified by the fact that shortly thereafter I published an article with Andrew Tudor entitled 'The Third World and International Stratification: Theoretical Considerations and Research Problems', in *Sociology* (1968). It so happens that some years later I was informed by an American enthusiast of world-systems theory, Christopher Chase-Dunn, that this had greatly inspired him and complemented his own work in that area. I was not much aware at that time of the increasing issues raised in social science by the latter school of thought. In fact, that school only came into great prominence with the publication, a few years later, of Immanuel Wallerstein's first major book on the world-system (Wallerstein, 1974).

In 1968, the book that I authored with Peter Nettl was given a three-person review in the *American Sociological Review*. (This was before *Contemporary Sociology* was separately published as a review journal distinct from the *ASR*.) Our book received a mixed reception, apparently because it seemed strange or over-adventurous for sociologists to be involved in the study of international relations. This kind of reception of my work was to plague me for some years. As late as the mid-1980s I was still encountering hostility, or at least a great deal of scepticism, concerning the idea of a sociologist dealing with extra-societal issues. I well remember the occasion when I gave a paper at an annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 'The Sacred and the World System'. The best way of describing the reception of my paper

can be summarized in one word: puzzlement – but not a particularly generous puzzlement.

Well before this I had emigrated to the USA and shortly thereafter encountered Benjamin Nelson, Vytautus Kavolis and their colleagues who were the leaders of an organization devoted to the comparative study of civilizations (International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations [ISCSC]). My involvement with this group was to greatly shape my subsequent writing career, for it more than consolidated my earlier, embryonic, interest in civilizations and the civilizing process. My involvement in this organization was rather intense and lasted for a number of years. It was around this time that I began to fully engage with the idea of 'the global', even though this concern had appeared in my work previously.

Upon the occasion of a visit to, and participation in, the relatively new section of the British Sociological Association devoted to the sociology of religion, in Lincoln, I presented a paper centred upon the idea of globalization. That, yet again, was greeted with a certain degree of hostility, notably by one of the better-known sociologists of the time who simply said 'What on earth is new?' without recognizing that I had been addressing extra-societal issues. In other words, he did not even acknowledge that I was going beyond the normal intra-societal paths that sociologists usually took. However, a fruitful aspect of that conference was that a former student of mine at Leeds, Bryan Turner, raised the possibility of my becoming a member of the editorial board of the newly founded British journal, *Theory, Culture & Society*. This I was to accept enthusiastically.

On the other hand, my audiences were becoming used to my globally inclined presentations, although it should be said that upon the conclusion of a conference in Martinique a prize was awarded to some participants for their papers. My award was a pair of rose-tinted spectacles – the implication being that, as I had talked about the world as a whole, I was taken to be a utopian and believed that the world as a whole was about to be, or had already been, unified. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. The view that the world had become, or was becoming, what I called a single place was by no means to say that it was integrated. (It is of more than present interest to note that this perspective of a unified homogeneous world now underpins much, if not all, of authoritarian populism and anti-globalism.)

MF: At one point – in a review of Jonathan Friedman's *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (1994) – you mention that the debate about globalization and globality is leading 'to a revamping of the matrix of disciplines and perhaps, in the long run, an end to disciplinarity as we know it'. What are your reflections 25 years later on the impetus towards

transdisciplinarity? Why does the study of globalization require transdisciplinarity?

RR: My review draws attention to my long-standing commitment to *trans*disciplinarity, although the latter theme had not been dealt with as such in my article in the Global Culture *TCS* special issue (1990). On the other hand, I have alternated over the years between transdisciplinarity and cross-disciplinarity. However, I have become increasingly committed to using the term transdisciplinarity with all that it entails. In this connection I wish to draw attention to the important and much more recent contribution of Steger and Wahlrab (2017). They regard transdisciplinarity as a major pillar of global studies. I am also pleased to acknowledge the significance of the recent book by Steger and James, *Globalization Matters: Engaging the Global in Unsettled Times* (2019).

With specific regard to my orientation towards disciplinarity during the last 30 years or so, I wish to emphasize that I have rarely, if ever, argued in favour of interdisciplinarity. In fact I have usually *opposed* this rather vehemently. My principal reason for this is that this word, still a much-used term, actually consolidates, virtually reifies, disciplinarity itself. In other words, even though the intention may be to overcome disciplinarity, the consequence of speaking in this way often leads to participants in any kind of discourse having to declare at the outset their own academic disciplinary commitment(s). In sum, the pursuit of interdisciplinarity is actually self-defeating. This is why the declaration of disciplinary commitments must surely come to an end.

MF: Since the 1990s there has been a proliferation of courses on Global Studies – how far have they fulfilled the promise of transdisciplinarity you refer to? How far should such courses endeavour to incorporate a critical dimension that seeks to problematize global knowledge and focus on cultures and traditions the have been erased, and search out alternative genealogies?

RR: There has certainly been, since the early 1990s, what some have observed as a proliferation of courses on Global Studies. Many of these, but by no means all of them, have fulfilled the promise of transdisciplinarity – in the process incorporating the critical dimension and problematization of global knowledge that the editors of *TCS* have practised. At the same time, transdisciplinarity is indeed erasing alternative disciplinary genealogies. However, I would like to take the opportunity here to express my great regret that religion and theology have been given relatively short shrift in the move toward transdisciplinarity in connection with Global Studies. While the latter is rapidly becoming a crucial locus of transdisciplinarity it is, in my view, lacking in appreciation of the

significance of religion. In this connection it is of great interest to see whether the present and ongoing pandemic [Covid-19] is leading toward a new or revitalized interest in religious or spiritual themes. This likelihood is the subject of perceptive discussion in Elizabeth Outka's *Viral Modernism* (2020: 167–242) – although the religiosity of the pandemic phenomena had previously been more than hinted at in Laura Spinney's book *Pale Rider* (2017), the latter's title having been inspired by the Book of Revelation and an apocalyptic African-American negro spiritual, 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider', in which the rider's name is Death.

I should state that I have constantly, throughout my professional life, been thoroughly opposed to those who have been and remain committed to the so-called secularization thesis. Indeed, I published a piece over 30 years ago entitled 'From Secularization to Globalization' (1987). I do not have the space here to unpack this implied claim, but the outlines of such should be rather obvious. I was, in a sense, following Durkheim in my conviction that without some kind of religion there can be no such thing as society. In this connection see also Pecora (2006) and Juergensmeyer (2003).

This brings me to the phases of globalization, an issue that was a central part of my book of 1992. On occasion it has been remarked that the present phase, one that I called the uncertainty phase, was so called because of my own uncertainty. I must confess that this was partially but by no means fully true. In any case, over the past 20 years or so I have often written of a phase that is presently following the uncertainty phase, one which I have called the (pre)millennial or apocalyptic phase (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2006: 76, 2013; Robertson, 2016a).

MF: In your book of 1992 you cite Hobhouse's remark that 'humanity is rapidly becoming, physically speaking, a single society' (Robertson, 1992: 54). What could society mean here? Clearly, we are a long way from a global culture and society that mirrors that of the nation-state society, given the limited progress to develop a global state apparatus based upon the twin monopolizations, the monopolization of violence (Weber) and the monopolization of taxation (Elias).

RR: It is misleading to think that the word society has any specific or particular meaning here, although I assume that Hobhouse intended this statement to mean that the world as a whole, particularly the people therein, is becoming rapidly something resembling what we tend to call a society. It should be said, however, that my use of this quotation did not have this degree of specificity. Rather, on the other hand, I meant that the world as a whole was becoming increasingly, as I have said, a single place with no particular reference to what you refer to as 'the twin monopolizations of violence and taxation'. In fact, my use of the term humanity constituted one conceptual element in my overall depiction of

the world as a whole, the other elements being nation-states, individual selves and the system of societies (international relations). Overall these constitute what I call the global field. It is more than worth remarking at this juncture that in my use of the concept of humanity I was largely following such people as Nietzsche and Simmel (Robertson, 1992).

This is the most appropriate point at which to state my differences with James and Steger (2019). What they describe as 'the great unsettling' is, in my view, more adequately captured in my central image of the global field. Over time, the four elements of the global field become increasingly differentiated from each other. This means that, for example, nation-states become increasingly loosened from individual selves. At the same time, individual selves become loosened from humanity, while humanity becomes loosened from what I have called the system of societies. To complete this image I should say that there is increasing loosening of the system of societies from nation-states themselves. I should emphasize that these processes of separation – or, better, loosening – proceed unevenly and are in a state of constant flux. As I have remarked it is my contention that this is a neater, more tightly analytical way of describing what is happening to the world as a whole than that described – I hasten to add, by no means inaccurately – by Steger and James.

MF: There is a further aspect in the Hobhouse quote, which would attract attention today – his emphasis upon humanity. More recent critics would want to decentre, stretch or reject the term human – hence we get terms such as the posthuman, the counterhuman. There are also those who want to use terminology such as naturecultures, to re-entangle and pluralize the relation between the human and nature. Radical versions of this single ontology thesis would want to see the earth or the planet as a single entity with the human place within it diminished. Yet this is also happening at the very time when the human capacity for planetary destruction is increasing dramatically. How should we conceive humanity today?

RR: Recently I have had occasion to think more deeply about the concept of humanity. I now tend to use this concept more along the lines of that used by Charles King (2019) in his book *The Reinvention of Humanity: A Story of Race, Sex, Gender and the Discovery of Culture*, although I had used it many times before but in a somewhat different way (e.g. Robertson, 1982). This volume by King is, in my view, of considerable importance. It is, above all, concerned with the work and influence of the German anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas virtually overturned anthropology as it was then practised and was to have a great impact on the extremely influential and much heralded writings of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. I should say here that I have considered other ways of treating humanity. In the recent past such concepts as the

posthuman, the counterhuman and the one that I prefer, namely transhuman, have been used in various publications. See for example the work of Herminio Martins as it is discussed in Castro, Fowler and Gomes (2018). However, this does not make any difference to my use of the term humanity in my depiction of the global field.

MF: A few years back I heard a cultural studies professor assert: 'There is no global culture – all globalizations are just localizations.' Do you agree?

RR: The question has been raised, not infrequently, as to whether there is such a thing as global culture rather than globalization involving, for example, just locations. This was of course an important issue that was discussed when it had to be decided whether the title of the book, *Global Culture* (Featherstone, 1990), should be used in the singular or the plural. We eventually settled on the singular. In any case my own belief is that all depends on the level of abstraction at which one is talking. In a very abstract sense I think there is indeed a global culture, but particularly in view of recent scholarship and the developments in the 'real world' I can readily agree that the world consists of a large series of locations. In fact, this observation has a strong bearing on the central rationale for my use of the term glocalization. In connection with this the problem arises as to why one uses the term globe more frequently than world, earth, or planet. On the whole I think it is only by a small margin that globe is in fact 'triumphant'. In any case, in one way or another globe or its variants has become a major advertizing slogan. On the other hand I myself have, according to the specific context world, sometimes used earth and particularly planet with great frequency.

King's work fits well into my own recent thinking about cosmology and the relativization of planet earth. To put it succinctly, in my view we now need to include cosmology, as well as cosmogeny, as a constituent of Global Studies – in large part because it is only through consciousness of the cosmos that we have been able to fully consider the world as a whole. In fact it should be noted that relativization is becoming a key word in the study of globalization/glocalization. Even though I myself had been using this term for a considerable number of years, numerous others, most notably Jürgen Osterhammel (e.g. 2004, 2016), are also employing it to great effect. One of the first occasions in which I used this term in reference to globalization was in an article that was published in the 1980s (Robertson, 1985). It also featured prominently in a paper that I gave in Brazil (Robertson, 1996b).

Needless to say, the present intervention is being compiled in the 'middle' of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is worth noting here that in the decades following the influenza pandemic of 1918–19, relatively little was said concerning this major global event – even though it killed between

50 and 100 million people, with the US suffering more deaths in that pandemic than in the First World War, the Second World War, as well as the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq combined (Outka, 2020: 1). It was only in relatively elliptical terms that this pandemic received much attention. In fact it was in the work of such novelists as Thomas Wolfe, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yates that it was addressed (Outka, 2020). This, of course, contrasts considerably with the focus on the much later AIDS/HIV globe-wide virus that was to sweep the world from the early 1980s onwards. This lacuna cannot be explored here but its relative absence from literature in all languages is striking. This, despite the fact that it is estimated that 500 million, a third of the population of the world, was infected, and approximately 50 million people died, and that it was described by Barry (2004) as the deadliest pandemic in history. It has on occasion been referred to in terms of an apocalypse, and by Yates it was called the Second Coming. Yates was not the only one to use this term. It is very likely that numerous books and articles will now be forthcoming on the 1918–19 pandemic, even though it has almost certainly taken the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020 to precipitate this. By this time, the study of pandemics is rapidly becoming part and parcel of the study of globalization (and glocalization). (It should be said that, in any case, there may well have been books or articles in non-English languages on the 1918–19 flu pandemic.)

Although neither globalization nor glocalization are specifically mentioned in the work of Spinney in her *Pale Rider* (2017), she nonetheless certainly has said much of relevance to both of these concepts. A few examples should suffice. The many millions of deaths in the flu pandemic of 1918–19 had a negative effect in India, then still part of the British empire, in the sense that the UK's neglect of the flu there provided a crucial catalyst to India's eventually successful independence movement. It also had an impact on the timing of the end of the First World War. The background presence of the so-called Spanish flu affected the peace conference at the end of that war, particularly in the sense that Woodrow Wilson, the US President, himself had influenza on at least two occasions and this had some bearing on the eventual refusal of the USA to join the League of Nations. In her chapter entitled 'The Human Factor', Spinney demonstrates the great geographical unevenness of those affected by the flu. However, it should be emphasized that it was not geography or space per se that was crucial but rather a range of other factors.

As far as glocalization is concerned, it might well be remarked here that responses to Covid-19 have varied a great deal across the world, particularly with respect to such issues as physical and social distancing, lengths of lockdown, and virtual denial – or at least attempts to deny the occurrence – of the virus itself. Two major examples of the latter are Donald Trump (USA) and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil). There are, of course,

others of this type. It is obviously the case that the planetary nature of the Covid-19 crisis has greatly affected and reshaped the path of globalization. As I have previously stated this is where the casting by Steger and James (2019) of such disturbance as 'disjunctive globalization' is best thought of instead as *flux* in the components of what I call the global field.

MF: How do you understand the relationship between globalization and glocalization? It would be useful if you could tell us how you arrived at the latter term, as I think you were one of the first people to use the terms 'glocal' and 'glocalization'.

RR: I first began to write about the latter in my book of 1992, but very briefly. My first two major articles on this subject were published in the first half of the 1990s (Robertson, 1994, 1996a), with a large number of subsequent contributions to this topic (e.g. Robertson, 2014, 2020). My belief is that glocalization constitutes an elaboration and refinement of globalization. In this sense they are not in any significant respect conceptual rivals. As I have briefly shown, in the case of the present Covid-19 pandemic, we find an important example of the need for the term glocalization. This need for refinement is to be seen in another crucial topic in the general area of globalization. This particular example is the vital issue of climate change (e.g. Urry, 2011), as well as the extinction crisis – the latter referring to what has been called the sixth extinction wave (Ceballos et al., 2010). The latter phrase refers specifically to the phenomenon of species and population extinctions. Ceballos and his colleagues suggest that the current episode of extinction may well prove to be the most rapid and devastating. They suggest that extinctions caused by human activities are now occurring at a rate of a thousand times more than what they call the background rate.

The concept and issue of glocalization has caused some controversy. Indeed, for many years it was literally mocked in various fora. Apparently this concept was first used, almost simultaneously, by myself (Robertson, 1992) and by Swyngedouw (e.g. 1997). Also among the early users was Urry (2003). Of these writers it is, perhaps, Urry (2003: 84) who has contributed the most interesting approach in his description of glocalization as 'parallel irreversible and mutually interdependent processes by which globalization-deepens-glocalization-deepens-globalization and so on'. Urry's work on this topic was published significantly before my own two major significant articles in 1994 and 1995. In fact, Urry refers to me only with respect to my earlier book of 1992. Even though Urry's important work took a rather different tack to my own it is remarkable that there is so much similarity between his view and mine, notably when he states that the global cannot exist without the local and that the relationship between them is symbiotic, unstable and

irreversible. Moreover, he goes on to say that 'each gets transformed through billions of worldwide iterations dynamically evolving over time' (Urry, 2003: 84). Moreover, it is certainly worth noting that Urry himself invokes the work of John Gray (2001) in Gray's description of our now living in an intractably disordered world. (It should be emphasized that Gray himself claims that globalization is over!) Here again we find a great deal of overlap between the apparent intentions of Steger and James and my own. To put this another way, there is much to be done in bringing all of these, and numerous other contributions, into one conceptual package.

As I regard glocalization as an extension or *refinement* of globalization, I see no need to take a 'final decision' as to the priority of one over the other. The only point that I insist upon making is that one cannot have one without the other and that when the chips are down glocalization is the crucial, by now definitive, term. I came to this conclusion largely because it seemed that the world as a whole could only be understood in these terms (Robertson, 2020a). It is clear from much of my work that my interest in Japan has greatly influenced the centrality of glocalization.

The Japanese word *dochakuka* and its meaning has been of great significance to me, and in this respect it is certainly worth mentioning that it is in Japan itself that this term has been particularly significant and the Japanese translation and variants thereof more than thrive to this day. In fact, institutes or university organizations devoted to the study of glocality are significantly increasing at present in Japan. However, there remains the irony that in my early visits to Japan, from 1986 onward, I had great difficulty in conveying to my audiences the Japanese word for globalization. Time and again globalization was translated as meaning internationalization and it is particularly interesting now that glocalization should thrive in Japan and, in a sense, dominate the 'globalization landscape'.

MF: The interdependencies between globalization and glocalization you refer to could be seen as deepening our understanding of global processes. How far can this relationship be applied to related fields such as history? Could you say a little about the relationship between globalization and the emergence of global or world history?

RR: It is of great interest to consider the ways in which the discipline of history has been penetrated by the study of globalization. Much of this penetration has constituted what might be called branding. In other words, phrases like 'a global perspective' are frequently added to an otherwise 'non-global' title. In sharp contrast, however, an apparently increasing number of books and articles are on historical topics and are genuinely global. An excellent example of the latter is the previously

mentioned book by Osterhammel (2016). There have also been a number of conferences and volumes devoted to global history, including ones by Osterhammel, either as author or co-author (e.g. Osterhammel and Petersson, 2005). A particularly good example of very knowledgeable and wide-ranging volumes is Sebastian Conrad's *What Is Global History?* (2016). (It is worth mentioning here that in this book glocalization is merely mentioned as a 'catchword'.) In Conrad's discussions about global history various topics are explored, including multiple modernities, post-colonial studies, world-systems theory perspectives, comparative history and transnational history. In fact, he regards these as the most important competing approaches in the field of global history. However, Conrad's crucial question concerns whether global history is a distinct approach, and he then goes on, in answer to his own question, to argue that there will be a slow but sure disappearance of what he calls the rhetoric of the global. When the latter disappears it will be, somewhat paradoxically, what Conrad calls 'the victory of global history as a paradigm' (Conrad, 2016: 235). Regrettably, in spite of the great quality of his book, this conclusion is marred by his identifying globality and globalization with connectivity or what he calls connectedness. I have consistently maintained over many years that the other main ingredient of globality and globalization is consciousness (or culture, even imaginary). This as I see it is the conspicuous mistake made by many analysts of globalization.

Global history is also discussed briefly but fruitfully by Linda Colley (2013) in her short article ('Wide-Angled') where she remarks upon the irony that global history is much more 'cosmopolitan' in the USA than it is in Europe or Asia or elsewhere. Furthermore, Osterhammel (2016) directly confronts the issue of the relationship between social history and sociology. See also Robertson (1998) in which I interrogate one of the first pieces to discuss the impact of globalization on the pursuit of historical studies (Geyer and Bright, 1995). Osterhammels's chapter, to which I have just referred, appears in a book entitled *The Prospect of Global History* (Belich et al., 2016). I have laid out my own thinking about these kinds of topics in my articles in various writings. In particular, I have in my assessment of articles by Geyer and Bright noted that the authors claimed that world history was becoming one of the most rapidly growing but contested areas of teaching. Indeed, during the last 25 years this has certainly become the case. Geyer and Bright make the point that world history must begin with new imaginings and they speak (unfortunately) about global integration being a fact! In any case they do not appreciate that the pivotal aspect of globalization has been the ongoing interpenetration of universalizing and particularizing tendencies. It should be noted here that this feature of globalization has been in conceptual form virtually identical with the concept of glocalization.

Clearly there is much that is within the purview of world or global history that is rather difficult to fit into the general 'project' of globalization. An excellent example of this is provided by the contemporary and pressing concern with epidemics and, even more important, pandemics. In fact it is safe to say that during the next few years discussion of the latter will become a dominant feature of much historical writing. Even now, many hundreds of books and articles have been published on this, and the strong possibility of a second spike in the virus would certainly increase this likelihood.

MF: You mention Geyer and Bright noted that world history needs to begin with new imaginings. At the same time you point to the way in which our preoccupations with the more general project of globalization can lead to the neglect of topics such as epidemics and pandemics, until dramatic events such as the current Covid-19 crisis bring them to the fore. I wonder if this could stimulate you to make a few concluding remarks about what you consider to be other overlooked areas which might be productively addressed to deepen our understanding of globalization and glocalization processes.

RR: An excellent example of this is to be seen in the increasing attention presently being paid to the life and the writings of Alexander von Humboldt (Wulf, 2015). The latter's exploratory travel writings are clearly of great relevance to any historical writing about globalization and the present concern with the latter is more than relevant to the present concern with climate change. As I have remarked elsewhere (Robertson, 2020b) along with others, the issue of Covid-19 appears at first glance to have overtaken climate change in its significance. However, it has been shown that the two are not at all unrelated, although the relationship as such cannot be explored here. It is now becoming clear that Covid-19 was not unanticipated, in spite of 'warnings' to that effect with the occurrence of SARS, avian flu, swine flu, MERS, Ebola and HIV/AIDS. All these have been publicized, most of them since a conference took place at Rockefeller University in 1989. Moreover, it has been argued that, like climate crisis, epidemics have anthropogenic origins. In fact it has been clear to many since the *Limits to Growth* report by the Club of Rome in 1972 that so-called natural forces might well interrupt what has been called the triumphant path of economic growth (Tooze, 2020). For example Frank Snowden (2019) begins his highly impressive book (one that was written before the present pandemic) with discussions of what he calls three plague pandemics: the plague of Justinian, the Black Death and the Bubonic Plague that erupted in China in 1855 and spread virtually all over the world.

After this discussion of various aspects of what is rapidly becoming global studies, the question inevitably arises as to the outer limits – if

any – of this domain. In my own work thus far I have tended to consider the writing of Humboldt (Wulf, 2015) as a prime example of a sphere of study that has been given very little attention to date. However, it would seem Humboldt's extensive exploration of many parts of the world must surely count as situated within the realm of global studies. On the other hand, do Humboldt and, to take another example, John Muir (see Wolfe, 1973) count as being contributors to the study of globalization, or for that matter, glocalization?

In spite of any doubts it would seem that one can hardly overlook or neglect such important producers of knowledge about the world in which we live. Lest this sound too Eurocentric, or Western, there are surely equivalents of these two in other parts of the world. Yet another way of considering planet earth, or the world as a whole, is in terms of the arguments of the classic book by Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (1964 [1936]), who argues that the 'globe terrestrial' is but 'a mean part of the whole'. In any case, we can now see that such concepts as globality, the terrestrial world and indeed planet earth are being relativized. Yet another way of considering this issue is by invoking the work of the astrophysicist Adam Frank (2011), who maintains in response to his own question concerning what happened prior to the Big Bang that human time and cosmic time had been mutually tethered and these different kinds of time had always been so. Moreover, there was never an age when they could be definitely separated.

In the preceding I have covered a lot of ground, some of it perhaps too thinly. However, my emphasis upon transdisciplinarity and all that that entails has necessitated this, largely because I have covered themes from numerous heretofore separate disciplines. In a sense this is what transdisciplinarity aspires to.

References

Barry, John M. (2004) *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*. London: Penguin Books.

Belich, James, Darwin, John, Frenz, Margret and Wickham, Chris (eds) (2016) *The Prospect of Global History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Castro, José Esteban, Fowler, Bridget and Gomes, Luís (eds) (2018) *Time, Science and the Critique of Technological Reason: Essays in Honour of Herminio Martins*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ceballos, Gerardo, Garcia, Andres and Ehrlich, Paul R (2010) The sixth extinction crisis. *Journal of Cosmology* 8: 1821–1831.

Colley, Linda (2013) Wide-angled. *London Review of Books* 35(18).

Conrad, Sebastian (2016) *What Is Global History?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Featherstone, Mike (ed.) (1990) *Theory, Culture & Society Special Issue on Global Culture* 7(2–3). Also published as: *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. London: SAGE.

Frank, Adam (2011) *About Time: Cosmology and Culture at the Twilight of the Big Bang*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Friedman, Jonathan (1994) *Cultural Identity and Global Process*. London: SAGE.
Geyer, Michael and Bright, Charles (1995) World history in a global age. *American Historical Review* 100(4): 1034–1060.
Giulianotti, Richard and Robertson, Roland (2006) Recovering the social: Globalization, football and transnationalism. In: Giulianotti, Richard and Robertson, Roland (eds) *Globalization and Sport*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 58–78.
Giulianotti, Richard and Robertson, Roland (2013) Sport and globalization. In: Andrews, David L. and Carrington, Ben (eds) *A Companion to Sport*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 41–45.
Gray, John (2001) The era of globalization is over. *New Statesman*, 24 September.
Juergensmeyer, Mark (2003) *Global Religions: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
King, Charles (2019) *The Reinvention of Humanity: A Story of Race, Sex, Gender and the Discovery of Culture*. London: The Bodley Head.
Lovejoy, Arthur O (1964 [1936]) *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
McCoy and Charles S (1980) *When Gods Change: Hope for Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon.
Nettl, John Peter and Robertson, Roland (1968) *International Systems and the Modernization of Societies*. London: Basic Books.
Osterhammel, Jürgen (2004) *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Osterhammel, Jürgen (2016) Global history and historical sociology. In: Belich, James et al. (eds) *The Prospect of Global History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 23–43.
Osterhammel, Jürgen and Petersson NP (2005) *Globalization: A Short History*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
Outka, Elizabeth (2020) *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Pecora, Vincent P. (2006) *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Robertson, Roland (1968) Strategic relations between national societies: A sociological analysis. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 12(1): 16–33.
Robertson, Roland (1982) Societies, individuals, and sociology: Intra-civilisational themes. *Theory, Culture & Society* 1(2): 6–17.
Robertson, Roland (1985) The relativization of society: Modern religion and globalization. In: Shepherd, William C. and Robbins, Thomas (eds) *New Religious Movements and the Law*. New York: Crossroads Books.
Robertson, Roland (1987) From secularization to globalization. *Journal of Oriental Studies* 26(1): 28–32.
Robertson, Roland (1990) Mapping the global condition: Globalization as the central concept. *Theory, Culture & Society* 7(2–3): 15–30.
Robertson, Roland (1992) *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: SAGE.

Robertson, Roland (1996a) *The New Global History*: *A Sociological Assessment*. São Paulo: Instituto de Estudos Avancados, Universidade de São Paulo. Available at: http://200.144.254.127:8080/english/texts/robertsonnewglobal-history.pdf (accessed 1 September 2020).
Robertson, Roland (1996b) Values and globalization: Cummunitarianism and globality. In: Soares, Luiz E. (ed.) C*ultural Pluralism, Identity, and Globalization*. Rio de Janeiro: UNESCO.
Robertson, Roland (1998) The new global history: History in a global age. In: Lash, Scott, Quick, Andrew and Roberts, Richard (eds) *Time and Value*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 210–226.
Robertson, Roland (ed.) (2014) *European Glocalization in Global Context*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Robertson, Roland (2016a) Apocalyptic global consciousness: Relativizing planet earth. In: Jerbic, V., Milardovic, A. and Spehar, H. (eds) *Globalization of Culture: European and Global Networks*. Zagreb: University of Zagreb, pp. 72–82.
Robertson, Roland (2016b) Glocality: Transcending the modernity-tradition binary. In: Robertson-von-Trotha, Caroline Y. (ed.) *Die Zwischengesellshaft*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 23–30.
Robertson, Roland (2019) Historical antecedents of the field. In: Juergensmeyer, Mark, Sassen, Saskia and Steger, Manfred B. (eds) *Oxford Handbook of Global Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 37–50.
Robertson, Roland (2020a) The glocal turn. In: Rossi, Ino (ed.) *Frontiers of Globalization Research*. New York: Springer.
Robertson, Roland (2020b) Humanity for itself?: Reflections on climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. *Globalizations* 17(6).
Robertson, Roland and Tudor, Andrew (1968) The Third World and international stratification: Theoretical considerations and research findings. *Sociology* 2(1): 47–64.
Robertson, Roland and Buhari-Gulmez, Didem (eds) (2016) *Global Culture: Consciousness and Connectivity*. London: Routledge.
Snowden, Frank M. (2019) *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Spinney, Laura (2017) *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World*. London: Jonathon Cape.
Steger, Manfred B. and James, Paul (2019) *Globalization Matters: Engaging the Global in Unsettled Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Steger, Manfred B. and Wahlrab, Amentahru (2017) *What Is Global Studies? Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge.
Swyngedouw, Erik (1997) Neither global nor local: 'Glocalization' and the politics of scale. In: Cox, Kevin R. (ed.) *Spaces of Globalization: Reassuring the Power of the Local*. New York: Guilford Press, pp. 115–136.
Tooze, Adam (2020) Forget the butterfly effect, this is the bat effect. *The Guardian Review*, 7 May. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/07/we-are-living-through-the-first-economic-crisis-of-the-anthropocene (accessed 1 September 2020).
Urry, John (2003) *Global Complexity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Urry, John (2011) *Climate Change and Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wallerstein, Immanuel (1974) *The Rise and the Future Demise of the World Capitalist System*. New York: Academic Press.
Wolfe, Linnie Marsh (1973) *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
Wulf, Andrea (2015) *The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the Lost Hero of Science*. London: John Murray.

Mike Featherstone is a Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is founding editor of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* and the *Theory, Culture & Society Book Series*. He is editor-in-chief of the journal *Body & Society*. Author of *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (2nd edition 2007) and *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (1995). He is editor of over a dozen books and author of numerous journal articles and book chapters on social and cultural theory, consumer culture, globalization, ageing and the body.

Roland Robertson is Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology Emeritus, University of Pittsburgh, USA; Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Global Society, University of Aberdeen, UK; and Distinguished Guest Professor of Cultural Studies, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China. His authored books include International Systems and the Modernization of Societies (1968); The Sociological Interpretation of Religion (1970); Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture (1992); and Globalization and Football (2009). He has edited a significant number of books, including European Glocalization in Global Context (2016). He is also the author of many journal articles and book chapters on social and cultural theory and glocalization/globalization.

This article is part of the *Theory, Culture & Society* special section on 'Global Culture Revisited' (TCS 37(7–8), December 2020), edited by Mike Featherstone.