



# Global anxieties

## Concept-metaphors and pre-theoretical commitments in anthropology

Henrietta L. Moore

*London School of Economics and Political Science, UK*

### Abstract

This article begins by interrogating the problem of the global and the local in anthropology, and asks how their interconnections might be theorized. When anthropologists call for an examination of the global in concrete terms, they often fail to appreciate the place of 'concept-metaphors' whose purpose is to maintain ambiguity and a productive tension between universal claims and specific historical contexts. 'The global' is just such a concept-metaphor, a space of theoretical abstraction and processes, experiences and connections in the world, important not only to social scientists but now part of most people's imagined and experienced worlds. In this article, I examine pre-theoretical commitments common in anthropology that emphasize 'the local' via participant-observation, which becomes elided with ethnography. I suggest that anthropology begin to 'methodologize' the relation between the global and the local by reviewing several approaches to these problems.

### Key Words

anthropology • concept-metaphor • ethnography • globalization • local theory

Somewhere on the road between the globally uniform coke-can and the roadside refreshment stand in Ukraine or Bangladesh, the supermarket in Athens or in Djakarta, globalization stops being uniform and adjusts to local differences, such as language, local culture, or, for that matter, local politics . . .

Eric Hobsbawm (1998: 2)

### INTRODUCTION

It now seems to be widely agreed among all scholars of 'globalization' and 'the global' that the one thing that has not resulted from their impact is homogenization. Whatever the global or globalization might consist of, they have not managed to produce 'sameness': local cultures and ways of life accommodate to these processes, resist them and shape them for their own purposes. Some scholars have gone further and argued

that homogenization could never have been the outcome because globalization feeds on difference and is produced through it. What in fact globalization does is to commoditize difference, and seeks to turn it into profit (see also Harvey, 1990; Hannerz, 1996). Anthropology as a discipline has been much in the forefront of intellectual work that seeks to demonstrate the value of the local; its creative powers of reformulation and resistance. This is not surprising since micro-context is very much the domain of the anthropologist, and because however great the forces may be that are pushing and tying us together, lives are still locally lived. An insistence on the value of the local has none the less produced a problem for anthropology, and that problem falls into two parts. What exactly is the interrelation between the local and the global, and – since there must be an interrelation – is it possible to study the global anthropologically?

Critics have pointed out that much anthropological writing invokes notions of the global or globalization, rather than empirically analysing them. The result is ethnography situated within an imagined, if not imaginary, global context or studies of globalized processes that lack ethnographic detail, the texture of lives lived and identities constructed (see also Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999). Underpinning such criticisms is a perfectly understandable intellectual tension. On the one hand, there is the persistent question: 'is an ethnography of the global possible?' And on the other, a clear recognition that the question does not make much sense since it is no longer feasible to fully separate the local from the global (cf. Marcus, 1998: Ch. 3). It thus logically follows that if an ethnography of the local is possible, and if this local cannot be completely separated from the global, then an ethnography of the global must be possible also. What this problem draws attention to is the fact that we have a long way to go in understanding exactly how the local and the global are connected or inter-connected. The fact that such connections or linkages exist is indisputable, the problem is how to theorize and operationalize them.

### **HISTORY, METHODOLOGY AND COMPARISON**

Problems with conceptualizing the relationship between the local and the global may appear new, and seem to require new reflections on methodology and theory. To a considerable extent, this is true, but it is equally the case that any reflection on these matters is beset with issues relating to the history of anthropology, the historicity of anthropological data, and problems of comparison and methodology – all of which are familiar problems in the discipline. One area in which this is particularly clear concerns the question of the imaginary project of anthropology itself. As has often been remarked, anthropology works through a continuous process of contextualization – things and people make sense in their contexts – and the result is both an implicit and explicit categorization of space and time (see also Fabian, 1983; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). Anthropology is, of course, not unique in this regard. In the history of western social science, data have only had relevance in relation to objects of study, and objects of study have become entities through subsequent processes of reification. In simple terms, we might say that intellectually in order to foreground something it is necessary to have a background, so that smaller things are revealed only in relation to and as part of larger ones. Robert Thornton has made the point well:

Reference to some ulterior entity is always implicit in holism: we merely choose between the moral imperative of society, the 'spirit' of history, the textile-like 'text' which is no text in particular, or the 'nature' of Man. Like the imaginary 'frictionless space' in Newtonian mechanics, these ulterior images of wholes are not directly accessible to either the author's nor his subject's experience. They can only exist in the imaginations of the author, her informants, and her readers. This is the 'essential fiction' of the ethnographic text. (Thornton, 1988: 287)

This point is well taken in contemporary anthropology, as in all the other social sciences, where scholars no longer imagine themselves as studying bounded entities, but none the less recognize the essential intellectual and cognitive value of concepts like society, nation and the self. It is impossible to delineate or describe a society in its entirety, but without such a notion it is impossible to make sense of the ethnography of people's lives and social relations. It is on this basis that various scholars have argued that the global and the local are no more than heuristic devices, and as such they do not exist as empirical realities; they are contexts for making sense of data, experiences, and processes – both for social scientists and for their subjects. This point is a good one, as far as it takes us. One version of this argument is that the global is no more than a trope, an expansive metaphor that adumbrates a conceptual domain, but has no explanatory power. The critical point seems to be that one should not refer to the global, use it lightly, without being able to specify what it means in concrete terms (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999: 294). In anthropological terms, this would clearly mean to provide some sort of ethnographic facts or details. There is nothing wrong with such an aspiration – this is after all what the intellectual activity of anthropology demands – but it fails to capture the complex nature of concept-metaphors within the discipline, and within the daily practice of people's lives (see Moore, 1997: 139–42, 1999).

Concept-metaphors like global, gender, the self and the body are a kind of conceptual shorthand, both for anthropologists and for others. They are domain terms that orient us towards areas of shared exchange, which is sometimes academically based. Concept-metaphors are examples of catachresis, i.e. they are metaphors that have no adequate referent. Their exact meanings can never be specified in advance – although they can be defined in practice and in context – and there is a part of them that remains outside or exceeds representation. Concept-metaphors are, of course, as important to science as they are to social science: think, for example, of the notion of the mind. One of their very important roles is to act as a stimulus for thought – precisely because they do exceed representation – and to act as domains within which apparently new facts, connections or relationships can be imagined. At such a stage, their existence is posited and not proven. The problem with concept-metaphors – or at least some of them – is that by their nature they continue to have a shifting and unspecified tie to physical objects or relationships in the world. It is, for example, impossible to argue that bodies have nothing to do with physiological entities, that gender is completely independent of the sexed body, and that selves are unrelated to individuals (Moore, 1997: 140). It is constantly being asserted in contemporary feminist writing that the sex/gender distinction cannot hold, just as it is now asseverated that the global/local distinction cannot be maintained, or that if it is then it must be concretely specified.

However, the role of concept-metaphors, like gender or the global, is not to resolve ambiguity, but to maintain it. Their purpose is to maintain a tension between pretentious universal claims and particular contexts and specifics. They are the 'spaces' in which details, facts, and connections make sense (cf. Strathern, 1991). More than this, the role of concept-metaphors is to open up spaces for future thinking. What has a discussion of gender done for all the social sciences and humanities, and indeed for many hundreds of thousands of people not concerned with academic debate? It has opened up a space between sex and gender for contestation, debate and action. Whatever happens to gender in feminist theory, sex and gender will never be together again (Moore, 1997: 140). This is what has happened also to the distinction between the global and the local. The distinction between them has opened up a space for future thinking and practical action, and this is true not just for social scientists but for millions of others. As social scientists, it therefore makes sense to argue that what the global means or is in any context should be concretely specified, but it is foolish to rue the fact that it is a metaphor.

The global, like other concept-metaphors in the discipline, has an indeterminate status both as a theoretical abstraction and as a set of processes, experiences and connections in the world; and, as such, its use requires rigorous critical practice. The need for such rigour comes not just from what we might think of as the standards of intellectual activity, but from the fact that the relationship between an imaginary or hypothetical construct and a concrete set of processes and connections in the world is important to ordinary individuals. A notion of the global is now part of most people's imagined and engaged worlds. This is one of the consequences of the processes and experiences of mass migration, mass media, the electronic economy, flexible capital, global consumerism, diasporic identities and transnational communities.

It is a feature of the social sciences that concept-metaphors are shared – to greater or lesser extents – between practising academics and the individuals who are the subject of academic enquiry. Obvious examples include the notions of society and the unconscious. In order to understand how these concept-metaphors inform the imagination and the practice of both academics and non-academics, and the degree to which understandings are shared, diverge and differ, it is necessary to subject these concept-metaphors to critical scrutiny. The result, of course, is that not only do ideas from the academy enter the popular domain, but that theoretical concepts developed in the academy are directly influenced by ideas and assumptions prevalent outside it. There is no purely academic space or theory. This is manifestly true in anthropology where it is impossible, for example, to have an academic theory of society that is uncontaminated by other people's views of what a society is. Part of the process then of subjecting both academic and popular concept-metaphors to critical scrutiny involves examining not just the concepts or theories themselves, but their pre-theoretical commitments.

Pre-theoretical commitments are underlying assumptions and principles. Principles are, of course, linked to methods. However, examinations of anthropological methodology are often reduced to a discussion or reassertion of the importance of participant observation. For some anthropologists, participant observation is the defining feature of anthropology, and its easy elision with the ethnographic accounts for much of the anthropological commitment to the 'local'. In some sense then, participant observation, the ethnographic and the local make up a methodologism: a procedure that is a theory. What this suggests is that the notion of the 'local' is a pre-theoretical commitment, and

one that, in spite of recent experimental ethnographies (cf. Marcus, 1998: Ch. 2) and the critiques of bounded entities, takes much of its analytical and emotive value from earlier pre-theoretical commitments to 'wholism' (society, community, ethnography). The local exists in so far as it is defined in contra-distinction to something that is not local, now commonly referred to as the global. The term global – sometimes refigured as globalization, globality, globalism – replaces earlier grounding figures, such as world system and centre/periphery. The mutual imbrication of the global and the local are subject to debate within the discipline, both conceptually and empirically. However, in most of the theoretical writing to date, the problematic term is assumed to be the global. An ethnography of the local is by definition possible – otherwise how could anthropology exist as a discipline and a practice – but an ethnography of the global remains in doubt.

There are, of course, many good reasons for this assumption, not least the problem of scale, and the fact that many of the processes, experiences and connections that make up the global do not involve face-to-face interactions, and are extended over space and time; for example, flows of capital and financial transactions. None the less, the fact remains that the concept-metaphor of the local is under-examined in terms of its pre-theoretical commitments. While assumptions about wholism have come under scrutiny within the discipline starting with the critique of representation and authority in the 'writing culture debate', the contemporary use of the term local is elided with participant observation and ethnography in a way that effectively suggests that we know what the local is. The local is thus presented as permanently and naturally linked both to empirical detail and the ethnographic perspective in a way that makes it difficult to examine its pre-theoretical commitments.

One issue here is the way that methodology itself is reduced to participant observation as method. The term methodology actually has two meanings, the first being the system of methods as used in a particular discipline. This is essentially the definition that is used in practice in anthropology. The second is a branch of philosophy that analyses the principles and procedures of inquiry in a particular discipline. This last, properly speaking, defines methodology as an analysis of the underlying principles and assumptions of ways of thinking. Both meanings are frequently elided in contemporary uses of the term methodology in anthropological writing. However, more attention to the second definition would have the advantage of denaturalizing and subjecting to critical scrutiny the notion of participant observation as the defining method of anthropology and its connection to an unproblematic notion of the local.

What this points to is the idea that rather than simply seek, as many authors do, to conceptualize the relation between the local and the global, we should perhaps begin by 'methodologizing' their relation: in other words, examining the pre-theoretical commitments that underpin their putative connections and interrelations. Of interest here is the implicit view of the world contained in the local/global distinction, where the local is associated with the empirical and the concrete, while the global is seen as more abstract. In point of fact, both are abstractions, in the sense that they are models. As concept-metaphors they act as framing devices, and as such they are perspectival. The fact of perspective is evidently intrinsic to their definition since they are viewed as acting at different scales. One of the purposes of concept-metaphors in the social and natural sciences is to facilitate comparison, to frame contexts, levels or domains within which

data – however defined – can be compared for similarities and differences. But, the nature of comparisons alters with changes in the types of models of the world used and kinds of explanation sought: comparison is extrinsic rather than intrinsic (Holy, 1987; Howe, 1987).

It is almost a truism of contemporary anthropology – and certainly part of its ethical commitment – that perspectives and voices are partial, and that phenomena can only ever be partially described by analytical models. This is a view that finds favour in many parts of the social sciences, and is evidenced, amongst other things, by the breakdown of barriers and disciplinary boundaries between the social sciences themselves. However, reflection on the pre-theoretical commitments of the local/global debate suggests that partiality may not always be truly partial! In other words, for every scholar who emphasizes that partiality and perspective do not presuppose a totalized and totalizing vista just out of view (cf. Appadurai, 1996; Marcus, 1998; Strathern, 1991), there are others seeking to understand what is happening to the ‘new economy’, the ‘new feudalism’, and the ‘new political economy’. In other words, partiality becomes part of a part/whole relationship, where comparison will reveal how local situations fit into larger wholes, how new structures are taking particular shape in specific contexts, and how the global connects to the local. In anthropology, this form of pre-theoretical commitment is most evident in the ‘resistance and accommodation’ theorists who emphasize how the local either resists or adapts to the global (cf. Miller, 1995). In such writing, the implicit image is of a system, and of parts that together make sense within a whole. The global is the result of many local exemplifications, and by the same extension, the global only makes sense in the context of its local appropriation, as it becomes part of a local system (cf. Englund and Leach, 2000).

However, the picture is much more complex than this because the local is imaged both as a context – perhaps culture, less often society – just out of view or off the analytical scanner, and as a non-bounded entity, a fictive construct. This ambivalence gives rise to a dominant image, one of fragmentation. It is a commonplace now to read that the world we live in is fragmented; that our lives, and even our selves, are fragmented: this holographic imagery suggests that our selves are now modelled on our world. It’s fragmentation turtles all the way down. The holographic in this context is another version of the part/whole relation. The actuality of fragmentation could be the result of translocal lives, time/space compression and the complexity of knowledge working, consumer choice and interest group politics, but is this really the case? It seems unlikely that what is imagined as fragmentation actually comes from a world of fragments, any more than the traditional notion of culture or society came from a world that was already a totality (Strathern, 1992: 22). The notion of fragmentation – and the imaginative work it performs within the contemporary social sciences – is intrinsically connected to pre-theoretical assumptions about wholism and the associated notion of the local. In this view, what globalization has done is to break the whole down into parts, but without us being able to tell how the parts could be fitted back together again. The fact that we are no longer sure how parts fit into the whole probably accounts for the current popularity of the notion of disjuncture in anthropology and elsewhere, as it slowly shades into the associated sentiment of dysfunction (see also Appadurai, 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000; Derrida, 1994; Lash and Urry, 1987).

### **ALTERNATIVE IMAGES OF THE GLOBAL**

George Marcus (1998: Chs.1–3) has suggested a way forward beyond a notion of the local/global based on a pre-theoretical commitment to wholism towards an ethnography of the global:

I want to consider an individual project of ethnography whose main ambition is to represent something of the operation of the system itself rather than to demonstrate continually and habitually in the spirit of pluralism the power of local culture over global forces of apparent homogenization. The point is to reconceptualize through ethnography such forces themselves, to efface the macro–micro dichotomy itself as a framing rhetoric for ethnography that seriously limits ethnography's possibilities and applications in the context of so-called postmodern conditions of knowledge. (Marcus, 1998: 34–5)

Marcus draws his own inspiration from the work of social scientists who are trying both to make sense of global cultural diversity and to imagine and model the complex, pluralistic, multifaceted and labile nature of contemporary capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000; Lash and Urry, 1987). Models based on pre-theoretical commitments to wholism are simply not appropriate for the task which, broadly defined, is one of understanding how commonalities are built upon asymmetries, how processes and connections that are not part of a totality can be conceived and how their function and future development can be modelled. One of the key problems is that globalization builds on diversification, and yet global processes and structures can be identified. Broadly speaking, key processes include the refiguring of temporal and spatial relations through technology and new forms of communication and production; growing inequality within and between nations; the increasing power of transnational networks and connections; the mounting pressure on nation states and the increasingly international nature of national economies; the cultural transformation of the economy and the increasing commodification of culture; the explosion of identity politics and the ethnicization of civil society. These processes are underpinned by key structural changes, including the enormous growth in service industries; the relative decline of factory industrialism; the importance of knowledge as a form of wealth creation; flexible accumulation and the enormous increase in the speed and volume of capital flows; mass migration; the feminization and ethnicization of the labour force; and the growth of mass media and consumerism.

The pressing question is what kind of concept-metaphors do we have at our disposal to provide a context for thought and action? The local and the global remain the foundational tropes, but in seeking to explain how they are interconnected authors have developed alternative concept-metaphors. Some scholars, for example, have moved towards trying to characterize the nature of contemporary or 'late' capitalism, and to look at the specific ways in which it differs from earlier forms of capitalism: for example, disorganized capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987), millennial capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000), the global economy (Greider, 1997), the new capitalism (Sennett, 1998), and virtualism (Carrier and Miller, 1998). Others are concerned with the effects of globalization on the nation state, and views differ as to whether the state will survive or wither (Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Sassen, 1996). These debates are about how the

local and the global are interacting, and how we can understand the process of simultaneous integration and diversification that seems to be at the core of their interaction.

Part of the underlying argument here is about the dominance of the 'market' or the 'economy'. Views differ: some scholars have argued that capitalism was never the sole influence on globalization (Giddens, 1994; Robertson, 1992), while others have seen the economy as a 'cultural dominant' under neo-liberal capitalism (Jameson, 1991). These debates are an attempt to come to terms with what drives the processes of integration and diversification, and to understand exactly what the interconnections are between the local and the global. One very dominant view that is widely shared across academic disciplines is that cultural production and issues of identity are now at the core of a new political economy. Culture has become increasingly commodified, and it has also become the means through which diversification is replicated through globalized processes, experiences and interconnections. As workplaces and organizations become less relevant to identity formation and a sense of place, processes of subjectivity and subjectification become increasingly cultural, bound up with images, aspirations, identifications, lifestyles and forms of consumerism that are not based on locale, but on interconnection, and forms of time-space compression. Homogenization and fragmentation are the products of the transnationalization of production and the global economy (cf. Dirlik, 1994), because difference itself has become a commodity. Economic profit is gained through the commodification of difference, and through the active and conscious production of that difference, hence the importance of culture. As Jameson argues, cultural production and innovation are at the basis of the expansion of the economic system, and suddenly what is for sale is the production of everyday life (Jameson, 1998: 67).

The peculiar interpenetration of the cultural and the economic is the site of the interconnection between the local and the global, and it presents anthropology with both a challenge and an opportunity: the production of the global is the production of everyday life. However, the challenge lies in the fact that in this new political economy, the economic, the cultural and the political interconnect, but do not coincide in fixed structural fashion(s). The result is a complex set of interconnections and processes through which meanings, goods and people flow, coalesce and diverge. Recognizing this not only transforms our notion of the global, but our notion of the local. The local is not about taxonomies, bounded cultures and social units, but about contested fields of social signification and interconnection, flows of people, ideas, images and goods. Both Marcus (1998: Chs 1–3) and Appadurai (1996: Chs 2–4) have tried to capture these sets of shifting interconnections between the local and the global, the former by developing a notion of multi-locale/multi-sited ethnography and the latter by advancing the notion of 'scapes'. In both cases, the authors had to proceed by problematizing the notion of the local, and prying it away from a pre-theoretical commitment to wholism.

Appadurai characterizes the 'new global cultural economy' as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, and identifies five dimensions of global cultural flows: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples and ideoscaples. The suffix 'scape' indicates the pre-theoretical commitments underpinning his vision of the relationship between the local and the global. He sees them as fluid, irregular landscapes that far from providing a rigid taxonomy look different from every angle of vision, and are perspectival constructs, inflected by context, and experience and aspiration. The notion of 'scape' as

a concept-metaphor explicitly moves away from part/whole relationships to focus on flows, processes, interconnections and experiences. It provides a space for action and thought not only for anthropologists, but also for nation states, multinationals, diasporic communities, interest groups, villages, neighbourhoods, families and individuals. 'Indeed, the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer' (Appadurai, 1996: 32–3). Appadurai does not see these 'scapes' as the parts of the global system. He emphasizes that the relationship between them is 'deeply disjunctive and unpredictable' because each is subject to its own constraints and incentives (Appadurai, 1996: 35). This point is a good one although much rests on what is actually meant by the term disjuncture and how we might be able to operationalize it in relation to understanding how the local and the global are interconnected. Appadurai points out that what he is attempting to characterize is a set of global flows – images, people, goods, money, ideas – that occur in and through the disjunctures between ethnoscapescapes, technoscapescapes, financiescapescapes, mediascapescapes and ideoscapescapes. In other words, people, money, images, technology and so on now follow increasingly isomorphic paths, and thus their interconnections cannot be predicted. Underpinning such interconnections is a mutual contest and cannibalization of sameness and difference (Appadurai, 1996: 37, 43).

One of the great strengths of Appadurai's new concept-metaphor of 'scape' is its pre-theoretical commitment to the idea of processes, interconnections, experiences and imagination at the expense of units, entities, systems and sub-systems – although there are moments in his writing when systemic, part/whole thinking appears to reassert itself. This may be inevitable since in the social sciences however processual our models of the global economy might be there is always a little bit of Marxism struggling to get out – or perhaps in. Appadurai emphasizes in his work the importance of the imagination and the imaginary: the fact that people and groups around the world live in an imagined relation to the global and the local. It is not just academics that use these concept-metaphors, and part of any anthropological study should surely be to investigate how people themselves live in relation to these grounding tropes.

### IMAGINED WORLDS

An emphasis on imagined worlds and/or the social imaginary is hardly new in the social sciences, but what is characteristic of contemporary global/local relations is the degree to which issues of individual and collective identity – of persons, groups, nations – are at the core of the new cultural political economy. Individual and collective identities can no longer be understood as produced within defined locations, and their study can no longer be confined to observable activities and ideas within one locale. The identity of any one person or group or nation is produced simultaneously in several locales or contexts, and connected to many that are not physically present, and to others that have never been directly experienced or engaged with. In this sense, the methodological interconnections between the local and the global are already evident in the way that such subjects as ethnicity, gender, race, nationality and postcolonialism have become key topics of anthropological analysis. Kinship systems, family structures, communities, rituals, cosmologies and political structures are all studied still, minutely observed and recorded, but they no longer provide the key conceptual frameworks of the discipline.

'Cultural difference or diversity arises here not from some local struggle for identity, but as a function of a complex process among all the sites in which the identity of someone or a group anywhere is defined in simultaneity. It is the burden of the modernist ethnography to capture distinctive identity formations in all their migrations and dispersions' (Marcus, 1998: 63). Diversity arises from engagement with a set of simultaneous processes – as, in fact, does homogenization or integration – and not from a defined cultural tradition or given community or social location. Thus it is in beginning to transform the local that we come to terms with the global. Anthropology's commitment to a reformed and renewed understanding of the local is ultimately what qualifies it for the study of the global. This does not mean the global in all its dimensions and ramifications, just as anthropology has never been able to study gender, the body, the self, economics and politics in all their dimensions either.

The local and the global as concept-metaphors are not just important in the social sciences, but also in the practice of people's everyday lives. But, if concept-metaphors are to be relevant in a disciplinary context then they must connect to the construction of composite theories. Composite theories are those that contain ontological, epistemological and empirical claims. Concept-metaphors that merely act as a descriptive gloss or posit causal forces that remain unexamined are essentially suffering – at the very least – from under-theorization. The local and the global are important social realities that call for comprehension and detailed specification. In order to understand how the local and the global are interconnected through processes, structures and aspirations, it is necessary to produce detailed and careful analysis of such things as economic and technological change, language usage, shifting understandings of terms and identities, forms of communication and connections between images, among many other things. What results is a view of the local and the global that is modified through a process of critical reflection based on empirical data. This is in effect a description of scientific method, and at earlier moments in its own development anthropology used such methods – arguments about subjectivity/objectivity, emic/etic, qualitative/quantitative notwithstanding – to investigate the nature of 'the social', 'the person', 'the family' and so on. Such procedures are at the basis of a comparative method to which anthropology is committed, and underpin a modernist conception of science.

However, as many social scientists – notably feminist, postmodernist and postcolonial theorists – have pointed out, the comparative dimension in an earlier anthropology was between cultures, and more specifically between 'the west and the rest'. At the basis of this was a dichotomy based on a set of particular differences between the context of the anthropologist and the context of Others. Contemporary work on the local and the global breaks with this dichotomy, hence the importance of the radical questioning of the notion of the local. But much contemporary work continues to maintain the fiction that concept-metaphors such as the local and the global are academic categories of analysis. There is insufficient direct engagement with the fact that the people studied by anthropologists now make use of the global/local distinction, or other sets of concept-metaphors that organize thought and action around similar sets of processes, structures and aspirations. Social scientists and their subjects are now part of one world, a coeval world. This is not the same thing as saying that the worlds of anthropologists and subjects are exactly the same world or that they share identical views, circumstances, and opportunities. This would be idiotic. It is simply to argue that the self/other, academic/popular

dichotomies, which were at the basis of earlier views of the local, and of the academic as the expert in theoretical comparison, are no longer valid (Moore, 1996, 1999).

It is this very fact that makes the question – ‘is it possible to do a study of the global?’ – a misplaced one. The global/local distinction and the vocabulary of globalization are found not only in the discourse of academics, but in that of politicians, corporate executives, journalists and media workers, advertisers, and civil society activists. These groups still receive remarkably little attention from anthropologists, possibly an historical legacy of the discipline’s commitment to non-elite groups and localized communities. When one writes of the global being part of the everyday, some sceptics still view this as referring primarily to elite groups of individuals, whose lifestyles or circumstances are necessarily globalized and who, for whatever reason, already cross boundaries, cultures, and contexts. To take this view is to misunderstand the nature of what the global is. Of course, there are individuals, groups and communities who are more directly engaged with global flows and information technology, with media images and communication strategies, and with travel and consumption than others. However, the notion of ‘home’ was as transformed, for example, for those members of the Bangladeshi community who remain in Bangladesh as it was for those who went to London to settle and work (Gardener, 1996). The key point here is that the global is not just about how globalization operates as an alien and inexorable force, but it is also about how people – individuals and groups – engage with the global and make themselves both global and local. Globalization, like modernization with which it is inextricably intertwined, is a discourse about the present and about possible futures (Gaonkar, 1999).

### PEOPLE IN FOCUS

How can we as anthropologists study the process, structures and aspirations that form the interconnections between the local and the global? One way is to study how people themselves form those interconnections and to understand that process within specific contexts – economic, political, technological, symbolic. Recent work on sexuality and identity provides a very good example of exactly how an ethnography of local/global interconnections is possible. For example, Mark Johnson’s work on the Southern Philippines shows how the notion of America and ideas about American love relations provide the conceptual space and the vocabulary for the articulation of local Philippine gay transgendered identities (Johnson, 1997, 1998). This vision of America is not about a shared homosexual identity and solidarity with American gays, but about the possibility of true-love relations that would transcend the relations of exchange on which sexual encounters for transgendered gays in the Philippines are based. It is also about how the association of Philippine gays with America in the local community defines them as sexually and ethnically deviant: not real Muslim men or real Muslim women (Johnson, 1998: 707). The America referred to here is an imaginary one, a constructed one, and is not directly experienced as such. The distinction between the local Muslim world and that of America works in various ways to express distinctions between Christians and Muslims, normal and deviant sexualities, commoditization and true love. These distinctions form the basis for a set of locales in which identities, personal and collective, are formed. Identities and identifications are thus both global and local in character.

Much has been made in recent years of what Dennis Altman (1996) called the invention of gay as a global category, but comparison of Johnson’s work with that of Jackson

(1999) on Thailand and Donham (1998) on South Africa shows how an understanding of what the emergent category 'gay' means requires detailed historical, political and ethnographic analysis, and how each situation shares similarities, but is also very different. Altman has misleadingly implied that in analysing the global category gay, one is permanently caught between political economy – universalizing tendencies – and anthropology – cultural specificities (Altman, 1996: 87). This is not the case. What ethnographic analysis is about is how and in what form this newly imagined community becomes available to people across the globe, and part of that analysis will include such things as economic circumstances, legal rights, political support, technological provision, and the impact of print and mass media, as well as detailed symbolic and cultural analysis. In other words, the local and the global are not separate from one another, tied into a system of part/whole relations, or linked through simple differences of scale. Altman, like the anthropological authors criticized earlier in this article, posits an incommensurability between political economy and anthropology because he mistakenly assumes that the analyst's and the informant's grasp of cultural specificities is more secure than their understanding of the larger context.

The formation of the global gay community does not necessarily involve travel or direct contact between individuals, although tourism, media and information technologies clearly play an important role. But in the commodification of the everyday and of cultural authenticity that is increasingly part of the phenomenon of globalization, more direct forms of contact and mediation are also taking place. These situations provide key contexts within which individuals and groups construct themselves as both global and local, as both having authentic cultures, and knowing how to cross cultural boundaries. Some of the most dramatic examples come from work on tourism, material culture and the arts (Marcus and Myers, 1995; Nash, 1993). Ecological and cultural tourism is on the increase, and tourists not only want to buy cultural artifacts, but to experience local – tribal, exotic – life in all its details. This form of consumption is a key part of identity formation for the tourists concerned and may be linked to other ideological commitments and involvement in activism in their home locale – political or religious. On the part of the cultural producers themselves, they are extending their culture into the global market, and may be using this process of extension to make the global flows of people, income and knowledge work towards their own social and cultural reproduction (cf. Phillips and Steiner, 1999). Little (2000) describes how Kaqchikel women in the Mayan site of San Antonio Aguas Calientes have adapted to the tourist market by putting on performances of daily living for tourists, and Krystal (2000) describes how the revitalization of ritual performances for tourists in San Miguel Tonicapán is stimulating artisanal production. In many cases, the forms of cultural production entered into cannot easily be glossed or dismissed as the destruction of traditional culture by commodification. There are many examples where production for tourists and indeed for international art markets has extended ways of reflecting on core values and symbols, allowing artists to imaginatively broaden and rework cosmological and symbolic understandings and forms of representation (cf. Marcus and Myers, 1995; Phillips and Steiner, 1999). This process of cultural extension, which remains deeply implicated in unequal power relations and access to resources, is none the less part of a process of reimagining the local and its value in a global context. It is part of a process through which people make themselves simultaneously global and

local. In understanding this process, it is important, however, not to fall back on originary categories. The local that is reimagined is always already global; it has no originary starting point.

At first sight, this process of creative extension can be contrasted to what appears to be an emerging process of cultural reappropriation. There have been requests and declarations by a number of Native North American tribes, Australian Aboriginal, South American and Pacific groups, as well as others, for museums to restrict access to anthropological field data and cultural property – including all field notes, drawings, photographs, music, songs, stories, and representations of the culture or cultural knowledge – to those with written authority from the group concerned. In some cases, requests to repatriate materials to the group have been made, and in more recent developments attempts have been made to have cultural material treated as a form of intellectual property (cf. Brown, 1998). These requests could be seen unreflectively as a form of ‘relocalization’ of culture, the opposite of participation in a global world. In point of fact, they are a reasoned response to the reality of the local/global relation, and very much part of that relation. They are a clear recognition of the importance of flows of people, information and technology, and the ways those flows are part of broader economic and political power structures. The debate here is a clear extension of attempts by native people to extend rights to land and resources in many contexts around the world, but it is also a way of rethinking and seeking to act upon the interconnections between the local and the global. Cultural activism itself also provides forms of collective identification at another level, as groups around the world unite in recognition of common struggles, and is therefore another example of simultaneous diversification and integration as a product of the global.

One of the key issues in the processes of reimagining identities within global/local relations is the use of language, concepts and images. The very same language, concepts, and images that are used by activists to try and preserve the ozone layer and prevent environmental catastrophe are employed by multinational corporations to promote images of global responsibility. One of the more frustrating problems faced by advocacy groups, like Oxfam and Greenpeace, is that the language and concepts they deploy in their work are rapidly recolonized by others with quite different aims and political agendas. The language of the political right and left converges and diverges, exploiting images, brands and associations, and mixing them with political agendas that can seem frustratingly similar. Hilary Cunningham’s study of the Sanctuary Movement in the United States, a church-based activist group concerned with illegal immigrants and US government policy on Central America in the 1980s and 1990s, demonstrates how an interest group defined itself as transnational (Cunningham, 2000). She shows how members of the group deployed the Christian imagery of brotherhood to redefine their senses of self, and their relations to family, Church, State and citizenship. Cunningham also documents how over time the increasing use of information technology and the internet transformed access to information and allowed members to redefine contexts for action as well as knowledge.

Two very important points emerge from Cunningham’s work. The first is that in studying an activist group that is self-consciously part of a global civil society, the global is both about structures and technology, and about symbols, identities, mindsets and beliefs. In other words, her work demonstrates very clearly the particular nature of the

new cultural political economy. However, such a demonstration is dependent upon detailed ethnographic work. The second important point to emerge is the mingling of academic and popular language and concepts. Cunningham bravely describes her own unease when on returning into the field in the 1990s, she suddenly found her informants talking like her: 'there were times during this phase of research when I experienced fieldwork as indoctrination into my own categories of analysis' (Cunningham, 2000: 585).

As Cunningham points out, contemporary anthropology finds itself working in a world where the lines between theoretical analysis and cultural production are now blurred. Social science concepts and language are no longer, if they ever were, confined to the academy, and are routinely used by civil rights and environmental activists, political lobbyists, journalists and media workers, business leaders and analysts, and a whole variety of individuals. University students trained in anthropology and the other social sciences become involved in all areas of commercial and cultural production, political and economic activism: many of them are from indigenous and minority communities themselves. New forms of conjuncture between academic, professional and popular discourses mean that social scientists are studying worlds created, to a certain extent, in their own image. It also means that academics are only one of many 'expert' elites, and that the analysis of cultural productions and their engagements with political economy based on detailed empirical data for comparative purposes are not confined to the academy. Ironically, where anthropology might once have been a local discourse, it is now definitively a global one, and professional anthropologists are far from the only 'native speakers' to be involved.

### GETTING A GRIP

Although one's grip on a tool is no less secure because on an infinitesimal scale skin and wood do not touch, the knowledge creates the sensation of there being something else to explain. Certainty itself appears partial, information intermittent. An answer is another question, a connection a gap, a similarity a difference, and vice versa. Wherever we look we are left with the further knowledge that surface understanding conceals gaps and bumps. (Strathern, 1991: xxiv)

Anthropology, like the other social sciences, is being reconstituted as it reworks its relationship with the world it studies. Part of studying the interconnections between the global and the local is the study of this process itself: the social sciences in the world, as players in a modernizing global project. What then is the problem about anthropologists studying the global? Why does the question 'is an ethnography of the global possible' cause so much unease? The anxiety seems to arise from the notion that there is nothing – no theory, no appropriate method – between a micro and a macro anthropology, between the local and the global: the difficulty appears to be one of scale. But this perception is itself a consequence of particular pre-theoretical commitments, which posit the idea that the local and the global are linked as parts to wholes, as internal divisions to a single holistic entity. There are two types of pre-theoretical commitment that haunt much of the current work on the interconnections between the global and the local, including many contemporary accounts that emphasize fragmentation and

disjunctive. The first is the notion of a system, and the related possibility of a world-view. This idea comes into anthropology through, amongst other things, organic metaphors drawn from the biological sciences and from early cybernetics. The paradox is that recent commitments to fragmentation, positionality and perspective all reinvolve this notion even as they appear to work against it. The very notion of perspective implies the idea of a totalizing view, even if it is one that is constantly substituted for by others – other people's views, other voices, other ways of looking (cf. Strathern, 1991). When we can no longer adequately specify how parts link to wholes, then we produce ideas about fragmentation and disjuncture: perspectives multiply and there is no one way to characterize the system.

This argument may appear strange given anthropology's current pre-theoretical commitments to doing away with bounded entities and wholes, but the very idea of globalization invokes an idea of different parts becoming part of some larger whole or process. This idea itself is, of course, much reinforced by discussion of capitalism, even though we now speak not of the capitalist system, but of capitalisms, just as we now talk of multiple modernities. Marx may have been proved to be prescient or finally shown to be irrelevant depending on one's perspective, but in current work on global relations the spectre of Marx flits in and out of the picture. This links to the second type of pre-theoretical commitment that haunts much contemporary work on the interconnections between the global and the local. This pre-theoretical commitment is to the notion of dialectics: the unavoidable push and pull of convergence and divergence, integration and diversification. Dialectical thinking contains an ultimate implication of synthesis – via thesis and antithesis – and thus connects intellectually to notions of resolution and holism. It also relates to the notion of contradiction: where a contradiction between conflicting forces or ideas serves as a determining factor in their continuing interaction. This particular idea seems to capture the process that drives globalization forward. However, perhaps the time has come to ask ourselves more forcefully than we have to date whether our current models and their pre-theoretical commitments – fragmentation, disjuncture, positionality, perspective, and dialectics – serve us appropriately. Do they provide sufficient purchase to understand the complex and rapid set of interconnections, processes and aspirations through which meanings, goods and people flow, coalesce and diverge? Are we looking for some sort of structural-causal order? Both Appadurai (1996: Ch. 2) and Marcus (1998: Ch. 2) seem to suggest not, or rather that we need to move beyond historical determinism and take more account of contingency, improvisation, and non-isomorphism.

If this is true then new concept-metaphors might be to hand, and interestingly they are emerging through ethnography: through ethnographic work on physics, biotechnologies, computer technologies, biomedical sciences, engineering, mathematics, and simulation technologies. These ethnographies are exposing social scientists in a variety of disciplines to new imaginaries: ways of imagining the world and its connections. Biotechnological work produces images of replication rather than reproduction; computer technologies provide images of interacting and learning that break down the boundary between mind and machine; quantum mechanics deploys notions of undecidability; and fractal mathematics breaks down ideas about binaries. All these models are based on pre-theoretical commitments quite different from those currently employed in thinking about global/local interconnections in anthropology. These models are,

however, already rapidly entering the domain of the social and transforming it. This occurs sometimes through direct interaction, as in multinationals' attempts to exploit bioinformation for profit or in people's engagement with virtual reality and its impact on notions of self and sociality, and sometimes indirectly as immunology, scanning technology and informatics provide images through which to construct new versions of inner worlds and social lives. It seems likely that our current concept-metaphors and models may be inadequate for understanding the interconnections, processes and aspirations of global/local relations, non-isomorphic patterns of change, and flows that coalesce and diverge along constantly changing lines of fracture. New concept-metaphors and models may emerge from the bio, medical, and information sciences, and as they do they will entail new pre-theoretical commitments: they cannot be maintained or even thought on the basis of the existing ones in the social sciences. However, when these new concept-metaphors, models and pre-theoretical commitments do emerge, we will subject them to critical reflection in the way we have always done, by looking at how people themselves deploy them in their imagined and engaged worlds: that is, ethnographically.

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HENRIETTA L. MOORE is professor in the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interests include gender and social theory and the relationship between anthropology and psychoanalysis. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in Africa, including Kenya, Zambia, and Mauritius. Her books include *Feminism and Anthropology* (1988), *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender* (1994), *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge* (editor, 1996) and *Anthropological Theory Today* (editor, 1999) among several others. Her future work will involve a project on Africa and the internet, and the impact of digital technology on notions of self, identity and agency. Address: Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. [h.l.moore@lse.ac.uk]

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