

Cultural Elements and Universality under the Process of Globalization : A Tentative Approach to a Theorization of Culture in Sociology

Tetsuo Maruyama

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual scheme for the analysis of cultural globalization in accordance with the Parsonian notion of culture, and to point out some problematic issues caused by cultural globalization: the unbalanced development of cultural elements and the prevalence of the pseudo universality of a dominant particular culture. With respect to the recent trend of 'cultural turn' in social sciences, this is a tentative approach to a theorization of culture as the center of the agenda in sociology, focusing on the globalization processes of culture as distinguished from those of the economic system.

Key words cultural elements, globalization, universality of values, glocalization, dominant particular

Introduction

In sociology, the concepts of culture or cultural system have been developed as a system of shared meaning that provides an effective means of communication among group members. As such, culture may be regarded as an essential basis for the integration of the social system. In this context, the elements of a cultural system are also considered to be integrated on the basis provided by the social system. In modern ages, especially during 19th and 20th century, units as social systems at the level of nation-states achieved a high degree of independent autonomy. Many sociologists have assumed that cultural and social systems are interrelating and corresponding with each other. In other words,

these systems can not be separated but only distinguished as analytically independent. Such sociological notion about the cultural system is very useful for dealing with relatively unified and homogeneous societies. However, we confront some difficulties when we try to adapt it to so-called advanced and informatized societies which are undergoing the globalization process.

Today, we can not live in a society which is isolated from other societies and lacking in mutual relations. In the economic area, the expansion of capitalism has made huge net works on a global scale independent of national societies. To take a simple example, the many sided activity of multinational corporations has dominated international trade and been influential in both production and consumption of all humankind. The world system theory, which originally was outlined by I. Wallerstein (1974), presents a perspective on the origins and development of capitalism as a global economic system. By emphasizing economic processes, however, world system theory has neglected the globalization process of culture. It is necessary to consider that there have also been globalization processes of culture different from those of the economic system.

The main purpose of this paper is, first, to propose a conceptual scheme for the analysis of cultural globalization in accordance with the Parsonian notion of culture, and, second, by using this conceptual scheme, to analyze and point out some problematic issues which are caused by cultural globalization. These issues contain the problem of unbalanced development among cultural elements and the pseudo universality of the dominant particular culture which have pervaded the world. At the last point, I'd like to consider, by taking Japanese religion as an example, that global elements introduced from outside were modified by local elements and, as a consequence, these 'glocalized' elements may gain some universality.

During the latter half of the 20th century, human societies seem to be transformed into a single global system, which is different from the existing international system based on nation-states. This process of globalization means that our world is becoming one united entity that shares similar technologies, economic activities and political systems. On the other hand, however, globalization reminds us that our world has not simply been unified and integrated, since it makes us recognize many different cultures to exist on the globe. Furthermore, most global elements - scientific technology, the capitalist economic system, the political system of democracy, consumer culture etc. - have their origins in Western societies that are also embedded in the local.

Originally, the term 'global' refers to 'world-wide in scale' or 'the state of world af-

fares', but it also refers to 'the general' or 'universal conditions'. On the contrary, the term 'local' refers to the state of a particularistic situation that connotes the meaning of 'very special', perhaps 'strange'. But, as I mentioned above, the phenomenon of globalization in contemporary human societies is actually the process of the human world becoming unified through those standards and frames mostly originated from Western societies which are also embedded in certain local areas. These global elements of Western societies have spread out all over the world throughout the course of human history. Therefore, it is not right to say that something 'global' always has a universal nature. To be more specific, it is necessary to distinguish the axis of 'global-local' from that of 'universal-particular'.

However, it must be noted that one of the reasons why a certain local element becomes global is that it may contain something universalistic. For example, scientific technology as a part of cognitive element of a cultural system has a universalistic nature due to its rationality and efficiency. The theory of McDonaldization by G. Ritzer (1993), who updates the rationalization theory by M. Weber, explains a convergent process of human societies based on the universal principles of such globalized elements. Another example is art as an expressive element. Unless it gives strong impressions and influences peoples' emotions, art will not be globalized. In contrast with these elements, on the other hand, evaluative elements do not always have a universalistic nature, although they may become globalized together with other elements like cognitive ones. The reason for this is that these evaluative elements are strongly associated with a certain local situation.

Then the question arises how to classify these cultural elements and how to make clear the difference among them. For dealing with these issues, we have to examine the conceptual scheme more precisely. To further this purpose, it is helpful to adopt the Parsonian notion of culture and his terminology which are still valid for the theorization of culture.

I

Most Sociologists have used the concept of culture or cultural system in their theorizing, because symbolization is very characteristic of human beings, that is, a system of meaning expressed by symbols is an essential part of human action as distinguished from animal behavior. In T. Parsons theory, the term 'cultural system', referring to patterns of symbolization, is one of his master concepts along with 'social system' and 'per-

sonality system'.

In his early period of action theory, Parsons distinguished culture, as a system of meanings expressed by symbols, from the social system and personality system. Cultural patterns are institutionalized into a social system to become a structural part of it, and internalized into a personality system to form a part of need-dispositions of the personality system. Socialization ensures that individuals internalize cultural elements as they grow up. In social-interaction, norms and values as elements of culture regulate and make predictable the action of the actors concerned. According to Parsons, there is always a normative aspect in the relation of culture to the motivational components of action, that is, the culture provides standards of selective orientation and ordering.

In this early paradigm, Parsons emphasized the element of cultural pattern as such, which forms social interaction and becomes part of social structure. In his work of the 50s, such as *Toward a General Theory of Action* (1951) and *The Social System* (1951), he regarded culture as systems of 'eternal objects'. The cultural patterns as eternal objects, he assumed, consist of belief systems, systems of expressive symbols and systems of value orientations (evaluative systems). These categories of cultural subsystems correspond to action orientations (motivational and value orientations) in his action theory. In this context, culture is considered to provide model patterns to solve functional problems in action process.

In the 60s Parsonian theory, a cultural system is explained as composed of four subsystems: 1) the cognitive system, 2) the expressive symbol system, 3) the evaluative system (value pattern), and 4) the existential belief system (orientations of meaning). As I stated above, in the 50s, the subsystems were belief, expressive and evaluative systems. The belief system was divided into cognitive system (empirical belief system) and existential belief system (non-empirical), in the 60s. To construct these four categories, Parsons uses two axes: external-internal and instrumental-consummatory. At the same time, he adopts the idea of hierarchy of control in cybernetic sense for ordering cultural elements. In the case of culture, he conceived the hierarchy of control on the basis of the levels of generality of meaning, that is, the elements at higher levels control those of lower levels.

As a major frame of reference for analyzing a cultural system, Parsons made the distinction between the meanings of objects oriented to and the meanings of orientation by actors, which correspond to the axis of external-internal. The two external oriented dimensions of a cultural system are 1) the cognitive system and 2) the expressive symbol

system: they are concerned with categories of the meanings *of* objects. The other two internal dimensions of a cultural system are 3) the evaluative system and 4) the existential belief system as concerned with meanings of orientations *to* objects. Each of them corresponds respectively to 1) adaptation, 2) goal attainment, 3) integration, and 4) latency, which are often used in the general theory of action by Parsons.

The first of the external oriented dimensions, 1) the cognitive system, concerns orientation to objects as objects of cognition in the empirical sense. The best account for this can be found in the scientific knowledge. The elements of the empirically cognitive system are ordered on the basis of levels of cognitive generality, which forms the hierarchy of control in the cybernetic sense. Within the scientific knowledge, 'data' concerning objects constitute the lowest-order level of meaning. 'Problems', then, constitute the next level, and, 'theory' at a still higher level gives the primary basis of the meaning of the problems. Finally, theory itself is under the control of 'a frame of reference (premises)'.

In this control hierarchy, there exists an obverse conditional relation. A problem can be solved on the basis of validated data. A theory can be validated by solution of empirical problems, and a frame of reference has its place in science only when it can serve as a frame for empirically scientific theory.

Another dimension referring to external objects, 2) the expressive symbol system, is that of the level of generality in cathectic attachment. The external objects in this sense gain their meanings as objects of goal-attainment when objects are regarded in terms of their significance for the immediate stabilization of a condition of disturbance or tension. This is described as the cathexis of objects in psychology.

The two other dimensions, the internal aspect of cultural system, are concerned with the meanings of orientations by actors, that is, meanings in the mode of orientations. These correspond to integration and pattern-maintenance (latency) in the more general meaning of concepts in action theory. In its reference to culture, integration is the orientation mode called evaluation. The third dimension of cultural variation comprises a hierarchy of patterns of evaluation, hierarchy of levels of evaluative priority. This dimension is 3) the evaluative system of a cultural system.

Parsons assumed that this aspect of cultural system is particularly important to sociology, because the evaluative pattern of culture provides a base of social values which means the highest-level category of the structure of social systems. It means that cultural values form the major cultural components of the structure of social systems. According to Parsons the evaluative components in the cultural system are those parts

shaped by their relation to the function of integrating the pattern of culture with the exigencies of actual interaction system. Evaluative patterns as regulating integration must themselves also be integrated in two senses, first, with the other components of the same cultural system, and, second, with the exigencies of operative effectiveness in social systems and personality systems into which they are institutionalized or internalized.

Another dimension of the internal axis, the fourth dimension of cultural variation, is concerned with the grounds of the orientation of meaning themselves, 4) existential belief system. It corresponds to pattern-maintenance or latency in terms of action theory. This aspect of a cultural system is similar to the former category of a total culture as eternal objects in the Parsonian theory.

For the highest level of meaning, Parsons presented the concept of 'ultimate reality'. This concerns the major premises in which components of a culture's total belief system are rooted. He says, "This level must be characterized as a limit of the intelligible. Logically, it involves the premises on which lower-order commitments of meaning must rest, but the relevance of any such ultimate grounding of meaning need not be confined to a cognitive context. The highest level signifies the limiting point at which cognition, cathexis and evaluation merge, because they are all somehow modes of differentiation from a common matrix." (Parsons 1961: 970-971).

As for the instrumental-consummatory axis, the empirically cognitive system (1)) shares the instrumental relation to action with the existential belief system (4)). The reason is that they do not in themselves gratify the interests of the action-system units, as both the expressive symbols (2)) and the evaluative system (3)), which are sharing the consummatory relation. (Figure 1).

Thus the idea of the four main functional differentiations of cultural systems leads to

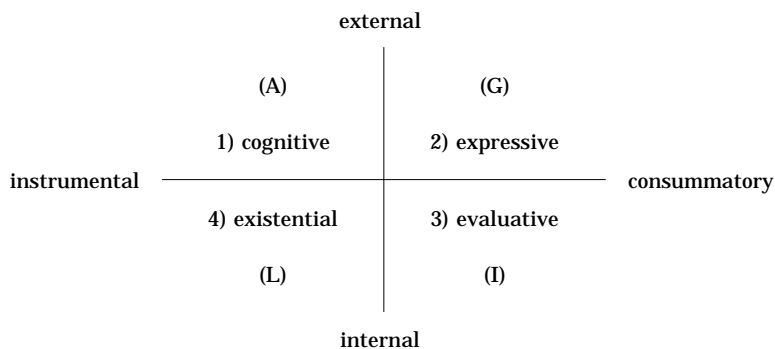


Figure 1 Classification of Cultural Elements

that of the four major types of cultural subsystems, each of which is characterized by its primacy of attention to the problems focusing on the relevant dimension as mentioned above. Cultural components of each type of cultural subsystems are ordered respectively on the level of generality of cognitive meaning, cathectic meaning, evaluative meaning, and ultimacy of the grounding of meanings.

For arranging and ordering all kinds of cultural components, both in a total cultural system and in its subsystems, Parsons provides such analytical schemata as the two axes, control hierarchy in cybernetic sense, and AGIL scheme of functional needs.

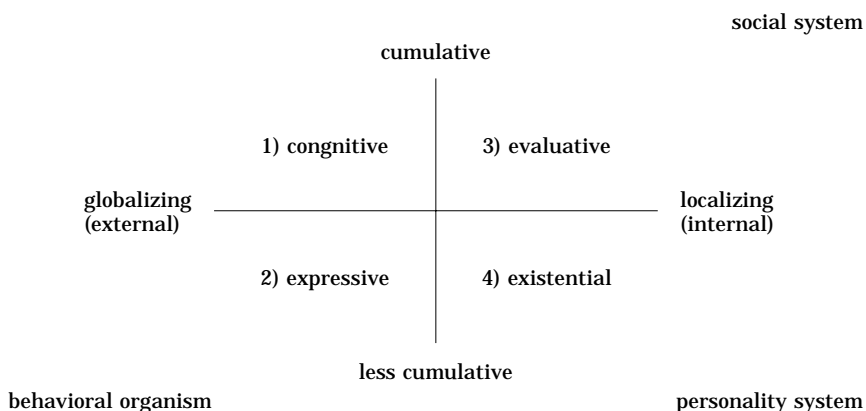
II

Having clarified the analytical scheme, we may now turn to the next subject of cultural globalization.

The major question that arises as to globalization of culture is, as I mentioned above, that of an unbalanced development among cultural elements that becomes increasingly apparent within a cultural system under the influence of the globalization process.

There seem to be two kinds of unbalanced development. The first is between those elements which are apt to be globalized and form a world-wide system, and those elements which are not to be globalized but rather remain localized or particularized. In Parsons' terminology, the former ones are cognitive and expressive elements, and the latter are evaluative and existential elements. The second unbalance is between cumulative elements and less cumulative elements, that is to say, between material culture (cognitive primacy) and institutional culture (evaluative primacy) on the one hand, and emotional or expressive culture (cathectic primacy) and existential culture (cognitive but unempirical) on the other. Using more familiar terms we can say that culture of cognitive primacy roughly corresponds to science or scientific technology, culture of evaluative primacy to values or norms, expressive culture to art, and existential culture to religion as a means of solving individualistic problems in particular situations. (Regarding the existential culture, I attach a meaning of my own to it which is different from Parsons'.)

Briefly, the schema I propose about the change of cultural elements in the process of globalization consists of two interacting axes. The first axis represents the differences between globalized elements at one pole and localized or particularized elements at the other. The second axis represents the relative accumulation of cultural elements, that is, cumulative elements at one pole and less cumulative ones at the other (Figure 2).



The position of other systems shows their relations to the cultural system .

Figure 2 Cultural Elements under the Process of Globalization

In accordance with the Parsonian notion of culture, I'd like to explain the first axis, globalization-localization as follows. By using the basic distinction of culture between object reference (external) and subject or orientational reference (internal), it seems reasonable to suppose that the former subsystems, the cognitive and expressive ones, can form a world-wide system at a cross-cultural level. Good examples are scientific knowledge and artistic style. As a matter of fact, scientific knowledge permeates the whole world no matter what kind of society adopts this kind of knowledge. The reason is that science has its basis in the objective world making it easy to understand its pragmatic utility through undeniable facts. The beauty of art is also realized through concrete materials or visible objects.

Compared to culture of objective reference, evaluative elements such as values and norms contain inevitably some kinds of desirability, which we sometimes can not explain in an objective or universal way. These elements control particular interaction patterns characteristic in a specific social system. The existential pattern of culture is also concerned with particular problems on the level of personality. For this reason, these internal elements of culture are not easily understood and accepted by the people of different societies. They are not easily globalized.

Now turning to the second axis, cumulative-less cumulative, I'd like to say the following. The culture of human beings developed dramatically after the Industrial Revolution, during the latter half of the nineteenth century. If accurately described, this refers to a development of material culture supported by scientific technology and institutional

culture together with the growth of economics and political science. On the other hand, human beings as a species do not seem to have evolved very much. Rather, various abilities given as biological features may have diminished. Despite the fact that the human culture did develop highly with material culture as its center, human nature within individuals did not change so much. Cultural patterns based on the nature of human beings as individuals also has not changed so much as material cultures. There have been no major changes in such basic desires as eating, sex or love feelings that have their source in our basic human nature.

Material culture can be defined as culture for adapting to the external environment. This type of culture has developed with the support of scientific knowledge. It accumulates and improves almost by its own nature. Institutional culture which regulates and maintains human relationships also tends to become more complicated and sophisticated and can therefore be assumed to be cumulative. Contrary to these, the other kinds of cultures can be described as emotional or expressive culture and existential culture. These cultures directly relate to the senses, feelings and self consciousness of human beings as individuals who have not changed much over the ages. Therefore, they are less cumulative. Thus, we can see a growing imbalance, or in other words, disparity between emotions or senses deriving from individual human existence and the material or technological matters which have developed to a great extent.

Observing modern cultures as a whole, we can see unbalanced development between expressive and existential cultures on the one hand, and greatly expanded material and institutional cultures on the other. Because of their inability to grasp the whole entity of the latter, people are turning away from looking at the totality of society or nature and are focusing their concerns only on surroundings which can be firmly recognized with their senses and feelings. As a result, people refuse rational and logical judgment and their interests are thus fragmented.

To sum up, I proposed two interacting axes for analyzing the elements of cultural systems under the process of globalization. The first axis represents the difference between globalized and localized elements of cultures, and the second between cumulative and less cumulative elements. In the process of globalization, unbalanced development among cultural elements becomes increasingly apparent and the discrepancy becomes larger, which results in unstable conditions of the cultural systems of contemporary societies.

The important point to note here is that, in spite of the unbalanced development among these elements, all the elements of a certain dominant culture tend to be globalized at the same time. It is a typical example that scientific technology as a part of cognitive elements of Western culture has globalized together with values as evaluative elements of the culture. As I mentioned in part I, these evaluative elements, although globalized in such a way, are integrated with the exigencies of operative effectiveness in social system and personality system which are strongly connected with local situations.

In his discussion about the issue of 'convergence and divergence', A. Inkeles shows the following elements of convergence: 1) modes of production and patterns of resource utilization, 2) institutional arrays, forms, and processes, 3) structure and patterns of social relationship, 4) systems of popular attitudes, values, and behavior, and 5) systems and economic control. Inkeles refers to the fact that there is evidence of a strong tendency to move toward increasing utilization of the mode of production based on modern technology and applied science. Managing this type of system encourages the elaboration of new institutional structure. It forms new roles and patterns of role relationships which shapes the structure of human relations. Then, this new structure is in part produced by and in part induces new attitude and values. (Inkeles, 1998). The same may be said of cultural globalization especially in the relation between cognitive and evaluative elements of a dominant culture.

III

Now, let's turn to the last argument. Here, the point I wish to make is that some global culture introduced from outside into a specific cultural system is modified and forms new elements within that system. This process can be termed 'localization of global culture' which corresponds to the term 'glocalization' by R. Robertson (1992). Later on, new global elements may be globalized again, that is, reexported to the global field. In this process, I suppose, these glocalized elements tend to become universalistic, because they contain both global and local elements. In other words, these glocalized elements have some characteristics that can easily become globalized, and, at the same time, they have factors that can be adapted to and consequently connected with a certain particular situations of human existence.

I'd like to explain this process with reference to Japanese religion as an illustration. In adopting cultural elements from the outside, the tendency in Japanese history has not

been exclusivity, but rather inclusivity. This is true also in the case of religion. The only major religion indigenous to Japan is Shinto, the core of which is formed by traditional Japanese beliefs and practices. Indian Buddhism (later, Chinese Buddhism) and Chinese Confucianism were introduced into Japan from the outside as global cultures at those times. All these foreign religions have undergone significant transformations in the process of mutual influence with the native religion. Through the long history, the features of Japanese religion were formed as follows:

- (1) Plurality of religious tradition; co-existence of the native Shinto and the imported Buddhism and Confucianism.

Through modification and localization of imported religions, each tradition, including Shinto, contributes its concepts of ideal behavior for the people. Globalized elements based on each religion are as follows; Shinto: ritual purity, sincerity/
Buddhism: compassion, liberation from desire, veneration of family ancestors/
Confucianism: loyalty to superiors, benevolence toward inferiors.

- (2) Close relationship between man and the gods (Buddhas).

In general, Japanese people believe that *Kami* (Gods) and Buddhas exist within the world of nature and in everyday life of human beings. Natural phenomena are thought to reveal extraordinary power as the sacred. Buddhism has stressed the importance of human relations, family morals, and reverence for ancestors. Many events based on religion such as funerals, festivals, weddings etc. provide an opportunity for relatives to get together.

- (3) Ancestor worship.

In Japan, religious life has been closely related to rice growing agriculture. Religious rites centered on seasonal celebrations praying for agricultural fertility and on venerating ancestral spirits who are believed to enhance fertility because the land for agriculture was received from the ancestors. The departed ancestors are called *Hotoke* (Buddhas) or gods.

Typical examples of cultural elements globalized through the influence of Japanese religions can be classified roughly into two groups according to the external-internal axis. They can also be subdivided into four categories as follows:

- (A) External elements.

- a) cognitive elements: the concept of nature according to which human beings are

not considered to be superior or opposed to nature, but harmonious with nature .

- b) expressive elements: aesthetic values such as '*wabi*' and '*sabi*' which appear in Japanese tea ceremony and flower arrangement. *Wabi*, associated with the spirit of Zen Buddhism, intends to seek richness and beauty in simplicity. *Sabi* is to find beauty in a certain feeling of loneliness.

(B) Internal elements.

- c) evaluative elements: social values and ethics such as '*wa*' (harmony) spirit, groupism etc.
- d) existential elements: values and beliefs connected with particular situations orienting ways of life.

These external elements (A) nourished and cultivated in Japanese culture may be re-exported to the outside world. For example, Zen Buddhism, which originated in the Asian global culture of India and China and reached maturity in Japan, has found a deep resonance all over the world. Today, several kinds of aesthetic pursuits such as tea ceremony and flower arrangement become more and more popular even among Western people. The concept of nature that stresses the importance of harmonious relationship between nature and human beings has also become influential with relation to the environmental issues and ecological problems of the present world.

Regarding the internal elements (B), such as values, ethics, beliefs etc., are strongly associated with local situations in Japanese society. But the variations of value patterns based on the plasticity of human beings that adapt to different situations should not be limitless because human beings share common features: their biopsychological nature and the preconditions of social life. In this context, I assume that 'globalized' values tend to have common natures because these values contain both globalized and localized elements. We may say with some certainty that the nature of these values are universal or near universal. '*Wa*' spirit nourished in Japanese society is one example.

The above discussion is only a bare general sketch of the universality of cultural elements based on personal observation. I understand that I have to establish a more adequate theory that thoroughly describe these issues. For this purpose, it is necessary to examine the analytical scheme especially for classification of values as the internal elements of culture. Arguing this point would carry us too far from the main purpose of this paper. It would require another paper. I hope to continue research on this topic. (Con-

cerning the classification of values, see Maruyama (1987) and Bell (1997)).

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(まるやま てつお 社会学科)
2001年10月17日受理