



Globalization, Industrialization, and Social Change: Conceptualizing Macro Process in Micro Terms Using Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism

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Herbert Blumer was born in 1900 and led a remarkably rich and varied life, one filled with exceptional accomplishments both inside and outside of academia (Morrione, 2007). Outside the academic world as a young undergraduate at the University of Missouri he worked as a roustabout setting up tents for traveling Chautauqua speakers. Later, he played professional football for the Chicago Cardinals (1925-33) to earn money for his graduate school tuition. As a maturing scholar interested in contributing to the public good he served during WWII with the Department of State's Office of War Information (1943-1945). And, he became a charter member of the U.S. Board of Arbitration. After the war, he put his knowledge and analytic expertise to good use chairing boards of arbitration for The United Steel Workers of America and for the US Steel Corporation (1945-1947). In the academic arena he is acknowledged for having left a significant legacy of pioneering social thought (Morrione, 1988; 2007) in the form of a discipline-shaping sociological perspective called "symbolic interactionism." He was the first chair of University of California at Berkeley's sociology department (1951-67), and as president, presided over The Society for the Study of Social Problems (1954-1955), The Pacific Sociological Association (1971-1972), and The American Sociological Association (1956), which recognized his life's work with its "Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award" in 1983.

While he did not write directly on the topic of globalization, Blumer's contributions to sociology cover an exceptionally wide range of topics and his insights have a great deal of relevance for understanding globalization as a causal factor in social, technological, economic, political, and cultural change as well as a consequence of these "forces." Because Blumer's life and works are not so well

known among scholars dealing with globalization, it seems appropriate to comment further on his contributions and interests.

Some of the subjects that he investigated during his lengthy career are race relations (1939, 1958), collective behavior and social movements (1946, 1955, 1958, 1959), fashion (1968, 1969), labor relations (1958), social psychology (1937), social development (1966), social problems (1971), research methodology (1969), and modernization and industrialization (1989). While his views on race relations, social problems, and collective behavior broke new ground and set the agenda for scholarship and research for decades, he is most well known for his (Blumer, 1969) codification of symbolic interaction theory in, Symbolic Interaction: Perspective and Method and for coining the term. He continued working on his scholarly writing until just before his death in 1987. He left in his notes and unfinished papers a host of promising lines of inquiry. As executor of his literary estate, I have co-edited (with David Maines) Blumer's, Industrialization as An Agent of Social Change (1989) and edited Blumer's, George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct (2003). I am currently editing a third volume of his unpublished work; it presents his thoughts on social processes.

I met Blumer for the first time in 1970 at a Pacific Sociological Association meeting in Honolulu, where I presented a paper on differences between his version of symbolic interactionism and Talcott Parsons' 1937 theory of social action. My paper focused on the nature of situations. As it turned out, Blumer and I shared an interest in the subject, had a lengthy conversation then and, subsequently, we began a life-long correspondence and became close friends. The core idea that we explored on that first meeting relates to our shared view of social reality as an emergent ongoing stream of situations. In this frame, social reality is continuously accomplished or constructed through acts that are shaped by processes of individual and collective definition. Although he did not espouse ethnomethodology's fundamental assumptions, Blumer's interactionist view of social reality as an ongoing accomplishment shares points of similarity with ethnomethodologists who portray social life this way. Consonant with George Herbert Mead's perspective and W.I. Thomas's contention that if a person defines a

situation as being real it is real in its consequences, Blumer asserts that processes of individual and collective definition intervene between actors taking note of something and constructing their acts to handle that which they take into account. Conservative as well as change-oriented responses to situations are, in this manner, “built up” and are not reflexes or “automatic.” Thus, emergent features of social life, of institutional operation and change, as well as broader more complex social structures of societies and global networks of cultures and societies are all shaped through individual and collective acts built upon an interpretive process.

This cardinal premise is never far from my thoughts and informs my consideration of the nature of globalization as a process in its own right as well as an effect of economic, political, social and technological change. D. Stanley Eitzen and Maxine Bacca Zinn (2012:1) define globalization as “a process whereby goods, information, people, money, communication, fashion (and other forms of culture) move across national boundaries.” Quoting other scholars interested in the subject and expanding on this definition, they offer a comment that might well have been written by Herbert Blumer; they (Eitzin and Zinn, 2012:1-2) say,

Globalization is not just “something out there,” but is intimately connected to the everyday activities of institutions, families, and individuals within societies (Hytrek and Zentgraf, 2008). And, . . . not everyone experiences globalization in the same way. It expands opportunities and enhances prosperity for some while leading others into poverty and hopelessness. Periods of rapid social change, we know, “threaten the familiar, destabilize old boundaries, and upset established traditions. Like the mighty Hindu god Shiva, globalization is not only the great destroyer, but also a powerful creator of new ideas, values, identities, practices, and movements” (Stegner, 2002:ix).

Scholars stressing the “intimate connection” between globalization and everyday life also underscore the fact that interpretive processes shape

the character and the pace of the outcomes of globalizing forces as well as globalization's constituent or formative elements, such as international trade, investing, cultural borrowing and diffusion, foreign aid, transnational labor migration, and tourism. (See: Pankaj Ghemawat's "Why the World Isn't Flat," *Foreign Policy*. March/April 2007, pp. 54-60; quoted in Eitzen and Zinn (eds.) 2004: 24-29.) What this means, in more direct terms, is that much like industrialization, as Blumer (1989) argued, globalization actually plays a neutral role in the change process and its effects occur in a selective, non-uniform manner because of individual and collective definitions of it as it impacts their lives. While often overlooked by macro economic and political theorists, this point is easily made by empirical references to well intentioned changes that have gone awry as they are introduced into social and economic life.

The neutral role of globalization is made more meaningful in the light of symbolic interaction theory, which describes how individual and collective acts are constructed and how actor constituted social structures, emerge, are maintained, and change. As Fred W. Riggs (<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~fredr/glocon.htm>) notes in the case of globalization's "uneven" effects,

While the earlier popular discourse on globalization seemed to suggest-at least implicitly-that globalization and world economic growth occur in tandem, a closer look reveals that the various aspects of globalization became accentuated in the phase of long term sluggish economic growth (1973-1992) as compared with the earlier long term economic upswing (1950-1973)... Adjectives such as "uneven" and "limits" have increasingly appeared in the titles of academic works on globalization. This not only reflects a critical stance, but also the obvious need for theoretical clarity and empirical research... How are the different aspects of globalization related to one another?

While we await a definitive answer to this question, Blumer would have us attend to the fact that the consequences of macro-scale processes such as urbanization, modernization, industrialization, and globalization are, in the last analysis, and in an essential way, shaped through individual and collective action. Such action is, in turn, predicated upon individual and collective definition. Blumer's view of social reality rejects reified interpretations and deterministic social, political, and economic models of macro phenomena such as industrialization or globalization when portrayed as determinative forces operating, somehow, independently of the action and definitional contexts that constitute them and that they encounter subsequently. This interactional perspective presents a view of causality that is antithetical to positivistic models of social processes in general, and to institutional social change (ex. economic, familial, political, global), in particular.

Blumer's (1989) contention that industrialization is a "neutral agent" in social and cultural change captures this non-positivistic view of social causality (Maines and Morrione, 1990; Morrione 2003) and is relevant to understanding how globalization operates and impacts social structures, institutions, and cultures. A closer look at symbolic interactionism and its treatment of industrialization and change addresses this point.

In 1937, Blumer coined the term "symbolic interaction" to capture the essential feature of human social life that pragmatists John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, William James, and others asserted shaped human thought and action. Blumer took their insights to signal the key fact that human beings construct meanings and attach them to whatever stimuli that they point out to themselves. These stimuli with meanings attached are symbols of what is noted in the course of experience. People, then, use these symbols in interaction with themselves and each other to make sense out of the world and to construct individual and collective acts – to build, sustain, and change relationships or social structures of all sizes or complexities. In this manner, we act on the meanings (definitions, interpretations, understandings) of stimuli and do not simply "respond" to them.

Blumer warns against reifying social structure, culture, or “forces” of change and views them as generated through the ubiquitous element of self-reflexive interpretation and as indeterminate emergent processes. As Dimitri Shalin (1986: 13) says, “Interactionists accepted pragmatists’ thesis that the world is not inherently determinate, that it is open to multiple determinations, which led them to the pioneering view of society as the pluralistic universe continually produced by the collective effort of individuals.”

Thus conceived, global networks of complex social worlds in interaction exhibit a continually constructed character as well as a potential for non-predictable individual and collective responses to new elements. The latter appear inevitably as consequences of social interaction essentially predicated on the social self’s ability to note and to define objects in a field of action in non-predictable ways. This indeterminate nature of social life is featured in Blumer’s portrayal of change as emanating from a tension between persistence-oriented and change-oriented elements that are different, or out of “sync” with what is already “there.” His interactional perspective addresses the full range of scale and complexity of social phenomena.

Blumer articulates the basic symbolic interactional tenets in two oft-quoted passages found in his seminal publication, Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method ([1969] 1986: 2,50); the three main premises are:

Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. . . . [And,] [t]he third premise is that these meanings are handled in and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

And, symbolic interactionism's 'four central conceptions' of human association and group life are:

(1) people, individually and collectively, are prepared to act on the basis of the meanings of the objects that comprise their world; (2) the association of people is necessarily in the form of a process in which they are making indications to one another and interpreting each other's indications; (3) social acts, whether individual or collective, are constructed through a process in which actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them; and (4) the complex interlinkages of acts that comprise organization, institutions, division of labor, and networks of interdependency are moving and not static affairs.

Following this reasoning, such phenomena as "modernization," "urbanization," "industrialization," and "globalization" do not "cause" certain outcomes in societies they contact. Rather, the interpretation of elements of these phenomena as they are encountered in physical, cultural, social, and emotional contexts prompts individual and collective actors (persons, families, communities, businesses, governments and legislative bodies, for example) to move in ways that *they* consider appropriate, given their interpretations of the meaning of what they encounter that "causes" the outcomes, whatever they may be. This actor-situation oriented argument explains processes associated with globalization effects.

This point prompts a closer examination of Blumer's view of industrialization as a neutral agent of change and the connection between industrialization as a neutral agent of change and globalization.

Blumer's view of industrialization as a neutral agent of change:

The late sociological theorist and social historian Stanford Lyman (1991) said of Blumer's posthumously published book on industrialization,

Quite simply, this is the most important sociological work on industrialization to be published in the last half-century. However, it is even more than this: for the late Herbert Blumer, it is a crowning achievement in theory and method, as well as a vindication for macrosociology. The issues raised in this slim volume are veritably Baconian in their potential. . . . Most sociologists have treated industrialization as an independent variable. Once introduced, so the conventional argument runs, industrialization sets in motion a chain reaction of definite effects on population size, household composition, structures of work, the quality of social relationships, the bases for ascriptive solidarity, and, in the most general sense, on the architectonics of the traditional order that preceded it.

In my judgment, Lyman's concluding comment about treating industrialization as an independent variable may be applied to most conceptualizations of the impact of globalization. Considering industrialization as an independent variable shaping social worlds it contacts, Blumer defines it as involving an economy based upon machine production with "a nucleus of mechanical production; an attached network of procurement and distribution; and an attendant service structure (Blumer 1989: 32)." And, as Lyman (1991: 174) concludes, "His central critique aims to show that the bare framework of industrialization at the time and place of its point of entry does not determine the social response to it and that the latter "indeed . . . is indifferent to its character [Blumer, 1989:58]."

Blumer's theory attends to interactional dynamics in local situational contexts and stresses reasons for anticipating varying responses at what he sees as industrialization's nine major entry points into society. These points are, in my judgment, sites of what contemporary globalization theorists call "glocalization" processes; they are: "the structure of positions and occupations, the apparatus for filling positions, the new ecological arrangement, [the] regimen of industrial work, the new structure of social relations, new interests and interest groups,

money and contractual relations, goods produced by the manufacturing process, and [the] patterns of income of industrial personnel (Blumer 1989: 58-75).”

As he surmises, “The nine points of entry can be thought of as constituting a framework inside of which any people undergoing industrialization have to fit. The people with their modes of life and institutions, must adjust to the demands, the functioning opportunities, and the arrangements that are laid down by the industrializing process along the nine lines (Blumer 1989:47).”

At each of these points the intruding element of industrialization is, if you will allow me to say, “*glocalized*.” While analogous, the nature and operation of industrialization and globalization are not isomorphic. Nevertheless, the salient point remains valid, “While the social changes along each line may be extensive and profound, the industrializing [*or, globalizing, ed.*] process does not explain or account for their nature. . . . [It] does not determine the given alternative that comes into being (Blumer 1989: 75-76).” What, then, does? Blumer’s answer is that the changes that occur in response to industrialization are consequences of individual and collective processes of definition. This is precisely the point made by theorists who champion the use of the concept of “glocalization” as a tool for making sense out of how globalization operates.

Thus, in a parallel fashion to what I argue occurs in the case of globalization, Blumer (1989: 117-118) says of industrialization that,

. . . [T]he people on whom the industrializing process impinges meet it with schemes of interpretation that shape their responses to it. Their position is not that of passive organisms who are coerced into fixed lines of action by an inherent stimulus quality of what is presented to them. Instead they define the presentations in terms of their established ideas, compare them with other areas of their experience and are influenced by suggestions and definitions given by their associates. Accordingly, interpretations and responses dependent on the interpretations vary greatly in the face of the same kind of situation. This can be documented in the case of each of the

major points of entry of the industrializing process into pre-industrial life.

Drawing more directly upon his symbolic interactionist perspective to describe what occurs as people confront elements newly introduced into their lives, Blumer (1989:121) reiterates his main thesis, saying,

Of more importance than the makeup of the situations introduced by the industrializing process is the way in which situations are interpreted and defined by the people who have to act in them. The definition and not the situation is crucial. It is the definition that determines the response. The situation does not set the definition; instead, the definition comes from what the people bring to the situation.

Thus, the role that Blumer assigns to individual and collective definition puts these processes in a critical causal position as determinants of the character of emerging behaviors and social structures. Indeed, Blumer puts this process at the center of the social construction of reality.

Connecting industrialization as a neutral agent of change and globalization.

To date, I've found no mention in the literature of the relevance of Blumer's interpretation of industrialization as an agent of social change (1989) to an analysis of the role played by individual and collective definition in shaping impacts of globalization. More specifically, it appears that no one has commented on the fact that his views of industrialization as a neutral agent of change are applicable to processes of "glocalization." Arguing that industrialization plays a "neutral" role as a change agent means that, logically, one cannot assert that there is only one way in which it will be received, and will, therefore, eventually affect the institution or society into which it is introduced. The same may be argued in the case of globalization. In my judgment, Blumer would contend that glocalization embodies a

process of individual and collective interpretation and action or adjustment molds globalization processes to fit “local” situations or contexts. These situations have no intrinsic meaning and are, simply put, open to interpretation. I hasten to add, however, that Blumer would, I believe, accept the notion that there are situations outside of one’s awareness and/or one’s control that have the power to effect, even compel one’s action. Nevertheless, his point and general perspective remain critically relevant in that they address the construction of reality and individual and collective acts from the point of view of the actor.

From this frame of reference, the variability in effects of what is introduced stems, fundamentally, from differences in interaction-constituted cultural and social structural situations into which change is introduced. Consider, for instance, empirical cases of the emergence of newly structured social relations and substitute “globalization” in the following quote where Blumer (1989:68) speaks of “industrialization.” To further demonstrate this point, where you read “owner,” “managerial,” or “worker” groups, think of purveyors of “globalizing forces” (governments, media, communication technology, financial institutions, markets, etc.),

If one surveys differing instances of early industrialization [or early globalization, ed.], one will note quickly that there is great variation in the makeup of owner groups, managerial groups, and worker groups [governments, media, communication technology, financial institutions and markets, etc., ed].

[More concretely, one might here picture also the variable responses or different effects of globalizing international banking strategies and tactics upon those encountering industrialization as Blumer describes it, ed.] Industrial owners [or those encountering globalizing forces, ed.] may be petty entrepreneurs with small establishments or industrial magnates controlling huge enterprises; they may be an alien group or a native group; they may come from, and be identified

with established elite classes or, instead, classes with lesser status; they may be recruited from the landed aristocracy, commercial groups, tradesmen, professional people, politicians, or craftsmen; . . . *[These examples, ed.]* are sufficient to indicate that in terms of social makeup the ownership group that emerges under industrialization *[or globalization, ed.]* is in no sense uniform *[across societies, ed.]*.

The same observation has to be made in the case of . . . worker groups. The variation in composition of the laboring class under early industrialization *[or globalization, ed.]* is pronounced. The industrial workers may be tribesmen, dispossessed landowners, members of rural proletariat, villagers, city dwellers, or imported aliens. They may differ greatly in ethnic makeup, caste membership, religious affiliation, and cultural background. In a given instance of industrialization they may be socially homogeneous or markedly diverse and differentiated. They may be united by virtue of a common community membership or torn apart by ethnic and cultural discrimination. They may enter into industrial employment with widely different images, intentions, and expectations . . . the new worker groups that arise under industrialization *[or globalization, ed.]* differ greatly.

Blumer's assessment of the impact of industrialization directs us to examine the "local." The "local" is the nexus of industrialization and existing social arrangements because it is precisely where actor-engaged social reality is created, maintained, or changed. The "local" is where elements of industrialization and globalization operate. As sites of ongoing interaction, they embody points of contact where we, individually and collectively, handle situations. Empirically, in these interactional moments we render decisions. Sites where new experiences are encountered and where change is either accepted or rejected may exist anywhere: at work, in the home, alone, or with others. The meanings of these newly encountered out of the ordinary change-bearing

elements are formed locally in a present, as people individually and collectively draw upon their images of the past, present, or future to make sense of what they face.

Thus, as glocalization occurs, the abstract, heretofore un-encountered “force,” becomes concrete. We put it in its place, “contextualizing” it in a potentially sharable universe of meaningful discourse and action.

“Glocalization” characterizes the playing out of self and interaction–mediated globalization-related forces in local everyday life. Among the many scholars writing on the subject, sociologist Anthony Giddens’s (1998) interpretations reflect clearly key elements of interactionists’ views. Melanie Smith (2007) sums up his and George Ritzer’s views, saying,

Giddens (1998) suggests that globalization was originally a political and economic term. It could be argued that glocalization, on the other hand, represents the intersection of political economics and sociocultural concerns, with its emphasis on the local and community impacts of global structures and processes. [George] Ritzer (2004: 73) defines glocalization as “the integration of the global and the local resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas.”

Glocalization can thus represent the consequences (both tangible and intangible) of globalization, e.g., the creation of heterogeneous or hybridized cultures, communities, and identities. In business terms, it might represent the local orientation of global product marketing, taking into consideration local social and cultural characteristics and traditions. In postmodern architecture, it may include “organic” approaches to the construction of new buildings (i.e., taking into account local environmental and historic features). In the context of global tourism, international visitors are brought into contact with local environments and their communities, thus influencing cross-cultural exchange. Tourism can also sometimes help to strengthen the importance of retaining place identities and local character.

In an article on evolving uses of the term “glocalization,” Habibul Haque Khondker (2004:5) offers five key propositions that are “. . . not too different from the main arguments of a sophisticated version of globalization [;]” They are:

1. Diversity is the essence of social life; 2. Globalization does not erase all differences; 3. Autonomy of history and culture give a sense of uniqueness to the experiences of groups of people whether we define them as cultures, societies or nations; 4. Glocalization is the notion that removes the fear from many that globalization is like a tidal wave erasing all differences . . . [*and,*] 5. Glocalization does not promise a world free from conflicts and tensions but a more historically grounded understanding of the complicated – yet pragmatic view of the world.

In my judgment, Herbert Blumer would accept this understanding of the term, but would also emphasize the need for analysis of emergent local outcomes as being contingent upon individual and collective definitional processes.

Using symbolic interactionism’s perspective inoculates one against a disturbing academic penchant to accept unquestioningly the operation of abstract forces such as suggested by “the invisible hand” of economic determinism or the play of reified cultural or social structural forces (such as class, race, gender, or power). Blumer’s symbolic interaction theory urges us to place temporally circumscribed situated interpretive and definitional processes on center stage and to not lose sight of the human potential to shape social reality. To put it another way, Blumer would have us “Think global.” but ground our studies in appreciation of the fact that, inevitably, we “Act local.” He would counsel us to never forget that definitions of situations shape our interactions and affect the outcomes of our activity. They frame our socially constructed reality.

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