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**The World Is Still Round,  
And Sociology Is Still Flat\***

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\*This is an expanded version of the keynote address for the annual meeting of the Georgia Sociological Association, St. Simon's Island, October 21, 2005. The views expressed here are those of the author. Thanks for Greg Fulkerson, Bob Moxley, and Ken Swartzel for suggestions on earlier drafts. The survey findings reported on perceptions of globalization were supported in part from USDA Multistate Project S276 and the Farm Foundation. Please send any inquiries or comments to [Wimberley@ncsu.edu](mailto:Wimberley@ncsu.edu).

The theme for the 2005 meeting of the Georgia Sociological Association is, "Sociological Accessibility: Making Connections with Global and Local Politics." I have been asked to talk along these lines about how sociologists and particularly state sociological associations might play into the process of making sociology accessible through global and local connections.

This theme provides a lot to think about, much less talk about, in an hour. But I shall try to do this under the title, "The World Is Still Round and Sociology Is Still Flat." This title is inspired by a current best-seller by journalist Thomas Friedman (2005), *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*.

Since taking a journalism course and then majoring in sociology as an undergraduate, I have often observed that journalists should ask questions more like sociologists, and sociologists should write more like journalists. Since my undergraduate years in the early 1960s, my impression is that journalists have become more sociologically sophisticated in their work. Friedman's book is a good example of how far the journalists have come in recognizing and describing important social issues. Yes, the journalists are becoming more like sociologists. If only sociologists could learn to write.

When I first heard the title, *The World Is Flat*, I was reminded of the Flat Earth Society that was active in the Raleigh-Durham area when I first moved to North Carolina in the 1970s. Had someone in that group written a book?

But then I saw a review of Friedman's book and heard him give a speech on his thesis. I realized that it had nothing to do with the flat-earth proposition Columbus and his fellow travelers empirically tested and refuted in the late 1400s. Instead, the book and its title explain how the process of globalization has spread with the advent of rapid, high-tech communication and transportation across great distances.

According to Friedman (2005: 7-11), and since the voyage of Columbus 500 years ago, the competitive playing field for work among nations, then companies, and now for individuals shrank from large to medium, from medium to small, and finally from size small to tiny. The last stage began around the time of the Twenty-First Century and has flattened the global playing field for knowledge-based jobs. Friedman's conclusion: the world is flat.

He (Friedman 2005: 8) writes, "The journalist in me was excited at having found a framework to better understand the morning headlines and to explain what was happening in the world today." The sociologist in me agrees. Perhaps sociologists of globalization had already discovered the same thing, but Friedman suddenly popularized the idea in four words: "The world is flat."

While I also agree that high-tech communication and quicker transportation distances around the world have leveled the competitive playing field for information and knowledge-based jobs, my take on the flattening has a slightly different emphasis. It's a spatial emphasis. As I think of it, the high-tech communications and transportation distances have shrunken to the point

that people and places around the world appear so close in time and space that the social world seems flat. We—perhaps except for a few flat-earthians still scattered around the globe—are aware that the world is geographically and physically roundish. It is the local parts of the world we can see—with the exception of nearby and local valleys, hills, or mountains—that appear flat.

Sociologically, the reductions in communication and transportation time required for global social interaction to occur also make global seem close and local. The greater the distance and time required for us to interact with each other, the more it appears to us that the world is round. The shorter the time or distance, the more local—flatter—our interactions with each other appear to be. Global appears round and local appears flat. Therefore, unlike Friedman's title and proposition that the world is flat, I'm taking a risk of being wrong and saying the world is still round. Due to improvements in the speed of communications and transportation, however, it's the sociology of the world that is flat—and largely experienced as if it were local.

Later into this talk, I shall use a ball and a board in hopes of illustrating the metaphor of how the round, global world works with flat, local sociology. Please watch for clues.

### **January 2, 2005, a Day of Global Epiphany**

My global epiphany, that is. Early in the afternoon on the second day of the 2005 new year, I went to a local Target store to replace for my very worn out slippers. The ones I got for Christmas did not fit, and my old ones had

finally fallen apart a few days later. To the delight of my wife, fishing line would no longer hold them together. I went to Target because I had seen some leather, moccasin-type slippers for about \$10 while I was there a couple of weeks earlier looking for a chair cushion that I could not find elsewhere.

On principle and despite its cheap prices, I did not go to Wal-Mart that day because of its negative reputation for out-competing locally owned and operated retailers (see Renkow 2005). However, I did compromise to the point of going to Target thinking it to be the lesser of the markets of competitive imported goods that displace domestic and local workers—or was it? Is any store that different anymore?

Leading up to New Year's day, I had been hearing and reading a lot of news about how trade restrictions on textile imports would be lifted on January 1 and how U.S. textile manufacturers would likely be driven entirely out of business in the process. This is a serious local issue in North Carolina like it is in Georgia and many other southern states and local communities.

**In Target.** I proceeded to the shoe section and found the \$10 slippers. Except, they were no longer \$10. This week they were \$5. They fit; I put them in my cart. As I was leaving the shoe department, I saw a pair of loafers on the top shelf where size 12s were reachable to people who might wear size 12s. Twelve narrow, in fact. I tried them on and they also fit. As I recall, the tag said that the comparable price for the shoes was about \$65. That was believable because I had recently paid much more than that for a similar pair

that was made in the United States. The tag also said the regular Target price was \$35. But the further-reduced sale price was \$14.99.

I was sure that they were made in another country but rationalized that this was the type of shoes that I liked to wear and therefore I could use another pair. Despite my severe case of global-local dissonance that I was putting American if not North Carolina workers out of their jobs, I put the shoes into the cart. Not that I really needed another pair, but at that price I couldn't pass them up.

On the way to check out, I passed through the men's clothing department. They had a rack of t-shirts—long-sleeved black t-shirts that are good to layer beneath regular shirts and sweaters on Raleigh's 40-degree and rainy Winter days. Just \$3 each. I got a couple. It turns out they were made in Alabama. That bit of information made me feel a little better until I realized that they might have been on the clearance rack to make way for more foreign goods.

Nearby, I saw a black baseball cap without a logo and priced for another \$3. It was made in Bangladesh. Into the cart it went with the rest of my loot. By now, my cognitive dissonance was still pounding, but it was becoming easier.

I checked out and carried away a large bag of stuff—the slippers that I originally came to buy plus the shoes, t-shirts, and cap. Altogether they cost about \$30. At a non-global-discount store, these goods may have cost well

over \$130. As I walked out of the store, I pondered how I had saved so much money on my purchases and felt guilty about it at the same time.

Reaching the door, I looked up and saw a former graduate research assistant and recent Ph.D. graduate entering the store. Holding her right hand was her six-year-old redheaded son. In her other arm was her cute, newly-adopted, one-year-old daughter—her newly-adopted Chinese daughter.

Whoa, I thought! Not only is it our shoes and clothes; even our babies are coming from China! I greeted young William; met Clara; congratulated Ruth; and sent regards to husband-and-father Will. I wondered, where would a sociologist with a specialization in demography go to adopt a daughter? China, of course! It was a rational choice.

On my way to the car, I kept thinking, “The world has changed; the world has changed; the world has changed.” Indeed it had, and I had too. I realized that maybe globalization was no longer really a choice, rational or otherwise. Indeed, my epiphany tells me that our world has become very global, and that I and others are acting globally in our local community.

### **Global Comes Local, from Round to Flat**

Although the world went global for me that day at Target, global also came local. Since then, I have been attentive to other examples of round becoming flat.

**LA litter.** During a recent visit to my mother’s house in what was once rural North Louisiana, for instance, I picked up the trash thrown from vehicles



traveling the busy, two-lane, asphalt, state highway down the hill from the house where I grew up.

The place has been in the family for three generations. When I lived there, the road was only a graveled road. An uncle who grew up there prior to World War II told me that when, as a boy, he helped people push their wagons and cars out of mudholes when it was a dirt road that intersected highway 80—at that time only a graveled road—that was less than a mile away. Now, the hard-surfaced road in front of the place has more traffic than the two-lane, concrete strip of highway 80 did when I lived there. The spatial isolation has essentially disappeared.

The roadside litter was mostly beer and soft drink cans and bottles and fast-food bags and wrappers. An array of noisy vehicles from large tractor trailers to motorcycles passed by in pods of traffic as I stuffed the litter into large trashbags. It did not take long to fill the first bag. As I was about to close it, I spotted some newspaper pages tangled in vines beneath a tree. I pulled them out and stuffed them into the bag. But wait! There was something different about these pages. I could use them in a talk I would soon be giving to the Georgia Sociological Association and maybe for talks in other places as well. So I retrieved the pages from the local domestic garbage because this was no ordinary newspaper. It was in Chinese! I wondered, how did it get there? If only that paper could talk.

When I returned to my university office in Raleigh, I asked my colleague, sociologist Feinian Chen (2005)—my new colleague who had been born in

China and whose first language was Chinese—if she could make sense of it. She told me it was a Chinese business newspaper. By now—and where a generation ago was a fairly remote rural area—Louisiana litter had also globalized!

**L.A. eggs.** An economist friend, Guido van der Hoeven who recently spent a leave in New Zealand, tells me another rather awesome story about how globalization has entered our food supply. Organic eggs are difficult to produce in the United States but can be more easily produced from chickens raised on farms in northern of New Zealand. Even at several times the price domestically-produced eggs, there is a market for them in the United States. Therefore, the organic eggs are packed and placed on airliners departing from New Zealand. They arrive in Los Angeles the next morning seven hours before they were laid. That's fresh!

Imagine, eating food for breakfast that may not have been produced many time zones away around the world when you ate the previous day. That's global coming local!

### **Local Goes Global, From Flat to Round**

**VT hard scrabble.** Moving from scrambled eggs to hard scrabble, sociology doctoral-student Josipa Roksa of New York University tells of a community she studied in rural Vermont where workers who made the hardwood letter-tiles for the game of Scrabble were displaced from their livelihoods. The raw materials and their jobs were exported to China to be

processed there and imported back to English-speaking consumers in the United States and other countries. Ironically, the local word as reported from the displaced workers was that their rural Vermont plant was too far out of the way for the manufacturer to remain there.

The Scrabble game's rules do not allow the use of foreign words. But the game apparently does allow foreign-manufactured hardwood tiles bearing English letters. That's local gone global.

**Jobs, jobs, jobs.** One of the most commonly used examples of things moving from local places in the United States to other countries globally is the jobs of U.S. workers. Friedman's (2005) book is built of these examples.

Investigating the local effects of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) since the mid-1990s, sociologist Leslie Hossfeld of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and her research colleagues Mac Legerton and Gerald Keuster (2004) have documented the loss of jobs by North Carolina workers. The losses were primarily associated with manufacturing and, in particular, textile manufacturing. They also looked at how the ripple effects of job losses decrease the socioeconomic well being of the people, families, and communities of Robeson County, North Carolina where such losses have been severe.

Consequently, candidates for political offices in the state and region often see the local issues in terms of jobs. As successful U.S. Senate candidate Elizabeth Dole said it, the issues were "Jobs, jobs, jobs." That's local gone

global and back again to local well-being and local politics with national implications.

**Degrees.** Not only is it jobs that are seen to disappear locally and go globally, it is the jobs and everything that goes with them including the improved standard of living for the workers that the Hossfeld research team describes so well. The global losses also include higher-education degrees.

Many students from other countries still come to the United States for their higher education. The National Science Board (2004; 2006) of the National Science Foundation finds that competition for foreign students has been increasing for two decades. Overall, numbers of foreign students in the U.S. have declined in recent years although the United States still has a 40 percent share. But foreign enrollments in other countries have increased and especially for Canadian, German, and Japanese universities.

Where are undergraduate or first degrees in higher education being produced today? The latest National Science Board data show that, in 2002, Asian universities accounted for about 3.224 million of the world's 9.057 first degrees of which over .930 million were from China and .549 million from Japan. European universities produced about 2.682 million. North America graduated 1.827 first degrees of which 1.306 million were from the United States.

Furthermore, most science and engineering doctorates are now produced by non-U.S. universities, and this trend is also increasing. Globally, 78 percent of the science and engineering doctorates are earned outside the

United States with the trends increasing in China, South Korea, and Japan. By the late 1990s, Asian universities produced more natural science and engineering doctorates than did the United States, and China now leads the Asian nations with the sharpest upward trend.

The National Science Board also reports that from 1994 to 2001, graduate science and engineering enrollments in higher education declined by 10 percent for permanent U.S. residents. But, this was balanced by a 35 percent increase in such foreign enrollments. About three-fourths of the foreign students who graduate in the United States plan to stay.

Nearly one-third of the science and engineering doctorate holders do stay in the United States, but this is beginning to show signs of change. Among the nations from which many graduate students pursue science and engineering doctorates in U.S. universities, most Chinese and Indian doctoral recipients still stay, but most South Korean and Taiwanese doctoral students leave the United States after graduating. Whether staying or leaving, these data indicate the increasing globalization of the most highly educated highly-educated science and engineering specialists.

Clearly, the United States today has significant global competition for undergraduate and graduate degree production both within the United States and globally. Other countries are now major players in higher education.

After specialized degrees, come global jobs. What are the global implications? The origins of the students and their degrees implies heightened

global competition for high-tech and related jobs as well for the global economy in general.

### **Local Goes Global and Back Local Again, Flat to Round to Flat**

**Lost luggage.** Some of these examples of globalization involve going from local to global and coming back local again. Here's another one. Leaving the American Sociological Association meetings from Philadelphia last August, my flight schedule was suddenly delayed and changed due to thunderstorms. I wound up spending the night in the Atlanta Hartwell airport before reconnecting to Raleigh. Unknown to me, my luggage stayed in Atlanta. The global story goes like this.

I checked my luggage in Philadelphia.

I lost it in Atlanta.

They found it in Bombay—in a manner of speaking.

My luggage finally reached my front door in Raleigh.

Actually, my luggage did not go to Bombay, but that's where the people who found it were. I know because when I called the agent at Delta's lost-luggage number, he spoke as if he could see my bags from where he sat. So, I naively asked if he could see them. "No," he replied, "The bags are in Atlanta; I'm in Bombay."

**Your experiences of global and local?** How have you experienced globalization? No doubt you have your own favorite examples of globalization affecting your cars, clothing, food, jobs, politics, education, information, family,

religion, and government. Examples are everywhere. Yes, our social institutions represent basic ways in which our needs and wants are met, and institutions are typically slow to change. However, they have changed rather suddenly and continue to change with technological changes that increase the ease and speed of communication and transportation—changes in the basic patterns of our social interactions with other people near and far.

In the beginning of his century, William Ogburn (1966 [1922]; 1964), the leading sociologist of social change in his time, explained to us about the social and cultural adjustments that lag behind the changes in technological and material culture. Among other things, he analyzed the extensive social and cultural impacts of the automobile, air flight, and nuclear energy. In the beginning of our century, the cultural lags between technological developments and their social and cultural consequences are still happening.

We can expect that social and further cultural changes will continue to occur as a result of our turn-of-the-century bursts of technological development in communications, transportation, and in other areas. With theoretical understanding and research, we may be able to anticipate at least some of these changes in our society and culture such as we are already seeing with globalization.

## **Globalization**

I began doing research on globalization in 1995. I did so reluctantly, at first. For at first, I thought that globalization may be just another happy new word that was sociologically faddish to use. But that changed too.

In these comments, I shall not try to review all the definitions of globalization that can now be found in the social scientific literature. There are plenty of definitions of globalization that some of my global research colleagues and I (Burmeister, Fulkerson, Vander May, and Wimberley 2004) have reviewed.<sup>1</sup> The range of definitions for globalization is so vast that Neil Smelser (2003) says globalization is a messy concept. It may also be a messy process. Social change often is. However defined, it is difficult to escape globalization. Here, I would just like to share some of my sociological thoughts that began my interest in globalization and why I think globalization is worth studying sociologically.

Globalization, what is it? I see globalization as a process and pattern of social interaction. It is an emerging form of social interaction around the world that has grown so different in degree that it has become a different kind of social interaction. It is a form of social interaction in which high volumes of communications, goods, services, or people rapidly cross international borders.

Actually, international borders have relatively little to do with globalization other than the fact that they are crossed. In fact, globalization

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<sup>1</sup> For a couple of general reference works on the social science of globalization, see Held and McGrew (2003) and Lechner and Boli (2004).



usually tries to bypass international borders rather than to officially cross them. Although not as free as the wind, globalization tends to ignore national boundaries as best it can and directly links persons or organizations among the nations. Still, nations often attempt to limit globalization by restricting immigrations of people; restricting the trade of goods and services; and, in some instances, limiting or censoring internet communications.

Globalization has emerged into its present form primarily because communications and transportation now occur at great speeds and high volumes as compared to how such interactions transpired in earlier decades. For example, contemporary global communications and some services often occur essentially instantaneously, and other services, goods, and people can be transported across international borders in a rapid fashion and at a very high volume. What was once far away is now fairly immediate.

Communication is symbolic; transportation is physical. Communication transmits symbols including language, voices, written information, numbers, music, pictorial images, and some services. Transportation physically carries goods, some services, people, plant and other animal species, and elements large and small. This includes viruses, diseases, invasive plant and animal species, and environmental conditions. People may travel across great distances for brief periods of time or migrate permanently. Recognizing neither national, state, nor community borders, nature also transports environmental conditions from one global area to another. These conditions include storms, global warming, and pollutants.

All of these topics—communication issues, transportation developments, human travel and migration, the transmission of diseases, environmental factors and more—represent issues and problems that sociological research, theory, and outreach can, should, and probably soon will be covering.

For once upon a time, as I see it, nearly all the needs of people and families were provided from within their remote, local, and often rural communities to the extent the needs of the residents of these places could be met by anyone, anywhere. Little was obtainable from outside one's local community itself. Food, medical services, education, employment, entertainment, religious services, raw materials, many finished products, and much of one's extended family were found within a local community's physical and social resources. Communication with the outside world was infrequent and slow, and transportation lines in and out of local communities were inefficient and time consuming. That was then.

While transportation technologies and systems have not closed much of the actual physical distance of travel and shipping, the journeys have readily decreased in time. Travel distances that once required months have been reduced to days or hours. As with their communities, individuals and their goods are no longer as isolated in travel time from others.

Now, many local communities still remain remote in distance from other places urban and rural. But now, neither rural nor urban communities are so socially isolated. Both short- and long-distance interpersonal communications

take place readily. Communications are instant or near-instant with any place near or far around the globe, and transportation is close behind.

Many services that once required physical transportation of documents or other items of information are now transmitted symbolically and electronically. Today, of course, many needs of local community residents are still met locally. That is what communities are supposed to do in the social order of things.

**A global division of labor.** Global communications and transportation also make local deliveries of specializations from a global division of labor. In the late 1800s, French sociologist Emile Durkheim solidified the term, division of labor, into the sociological vocabulary and into sociological explanations (Durkheim 1933 [1893]). Durkheim credits the concept to August Comte, the French sociologist of the early 1800s who is often acknowledged as the first sociologist. Durkheim also drew the concept from English sociologist Herbert Spencer, a generation ahead of Durkheim, who further developed the idea of the division of labor from Comte's work.

In addition to the basic concept, Durkheim (1933 [1893]: 262) built upon a proposition from Comte and Spencer that he stated as: "The division of labor varies in direct ratio with the volume and density of societies...." Or, as I prefer to state the proposition from Durkheim's elaboration and interpretations of Spencer and Comte: the greater the population within a given spatial area, the greater is the division of labor.

The main point here is that, although the area of the world has not essentially changed, the population and therefore the population density of the world's societies have increased to the point that they have become a single global society. Consequently, the division of labor specializations—differentiation—has also increased globally.

Very importantly and sociologically, one of the oldest propositions in sociology helps us to understand what may be the essence of contemporary global social interaction. With the help of communication and transportation technologies—themselves the products of advanced technological and organizational specializations—specializations in the division of labor that were once unavailable locally may now be conveniently accessed from far away so that what was distant may now appear close or locally available.

Such immediate access to specialized goods, services, and the people who provide them was not the typically pattern of interaction that we experienced 100, 50, 20 or even 10 years ago. The internet and the World Wide Web—which emerged and established themselves into our culture during the 1990s as the dominant means of global communication—saw to that. So did technical and organizational developments in air transportation, the use of technologies such as standardized shipping containers, and the organization of high-speed parcel delivery services at the global level. Basically, access to specializations that provide goods and services has changed levels from being available only locally or nationally to being available globally.

It has long been known that sociology is the science of interpersonal relations, of intergroup relationships, and of the communities in which these social interactions take place. Now, we come to realize that sociology is likewise the science of globalization. Both local and global are sociological territory. It's our area; it's our scientific turf.

Once, almost all of one's needs had to be met by the division of labor that existed within the confines of his or her own local community. Later developments in communication and transportation enabled a local community resident's needs to be met by a wider circle of specialists in the larger division of labor spatially located elsewhere in one's state, region, or nation. Now, an even wider scope of people's needs can be met by the division of labor at the global level through electronic communications and services and because of more rapid means of ground, water, and air transportation.<sup>2</sup>

The "local ecology" of resources from which a community meets most of the community residents' daily needs—that Ken Wilkinson (1991:102) described as an essential purpose of an interacting community—has expanded into an added dimension with globalization. Many needs that cannot be met within the more limited division of labor in a local community can now be met through the broader range of specializations in the global division of labor.

This is not to say that reliance upon a division of labor beyond that found in one's local community makes our local interaction ties obsolete. It

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<sup>2</sup> For a similar view of how globalization has expanded the resources of local communities, see a discussion by Bonanno and Constance (2003).

does not. For meeting most daily needs, our local community is still the base. But to fill the gaps that a local community cannot provide, global resources for goods and services have become more readily available.

### **Sociology, Communication, and Transportation**

Social interaction—as sociologists and their textbooks tell students—is the substance of sociology. I like to classify social interaction along the lines of communication and transportation. Sociologists spend most of their time studying social interaction in terms of communication. As examples, there are communication-oriented theories of symbolic interaction and social exchange. However, sociologists have not studied the transportation of people and goods as thoroughly as they have conceptualized and researched symbolic communications and exchange.

Ironically, a sociologist who early-on pointed out the importance of social interaction via transportation was symbolic interactionist Charles Horton Cooley (1930: 76-83). He observed that cities and wealth spatially accumulate at breaks in the transportation system where goods switch from one means of transportation to another such as from rail to trucking.

With trains and later with automobiles and planes, spatial travel distances have been effectively converted into reductions in time. Along with this, other technological breakthroughs have enabled the speed of communication to outdistance the speed of transportation. For in centuries past, the speed of communication was limited by the speed of transportation.

Limited exceptions over short distances included communications by hollering, trumpets, smoke, mirrors, lights, and semaphores. Runners and carrier pigeons also carried communications over modest distances, but they represented the speed of transportation.

During in the Mid-Eighteenth Century and with the Morse code and the telegraph, communications began to move over great distances and faster than the speed of transportation (About.com; Public Broadcasting System). Western Union and related companies began doing business in the 1850s, and an intercontinental telegraph system crossed the United States by 1861. And in 1877, the invention of the telephone began to compete with telegraph messaging.

Internationally, in 1858 an undersea cable between Newfoundland and Ireland temporarily linked the North American continent with Ireland (Gordon 2002). Other efforts were more successful, and by the end of the 1800s, the North American and European continents were connected by several cables (Hearn 2004). Prior to these linkages, the news from overseas came to us by boat—weeks after it happened. Most recently, of course, came fiber optic cable and microwave satellite transmissions and then the internet and mobile phones.

Therefore, globalization emerged as a new form of social interaction, perhaps first, as communications across national boundaries began to be transmitted by electronic symbols and ceased to be transported in material

documents and, second, as the actual transportation time for physical goods, for various services, and for people decreased significantly as well.

Interestingly, what telephone communications could not displace, the internet did. In early 2006, a little more than a decade after the internet became popular and firmly established itself as the dominant means of long-distance written communication, the Western Union telegraph company's message service ceased operations except for its "wired" transfers of money.

**Pre-global, international relations.** When local communities were both remote and isolated in time and space, countries themselves—whole societies—were fairly remote and isolated from each other as well. When such societies did interact, they interacted through international relations. Although many nations—like their local communities—are still spatially and physically remote from each other, they are no longer so isolated in communication and transportation time.

As geographic and communications distances have been reduced in time, our perspective and the concept of international relations have changed. What was once perceived as international relations—among spatially remote and isolated countries—is now perceived as global interaction due to the low degree of symbolic and transportation isolation among countries, organizations, and individuals today.

**No more World Wars?** The type of large-scale social interactions we knew as wars that involved many nations around the world were once characterized as world wars. The early Twentieth Century transportation and



communications developments of social interaction preceded what would be known as World War I and World War II.

In a world war, one nation could invade another nation and fight only on the invaded space. With Twentieth Century organization and technology for transportation and communication, physically isolated and therefore distant nations like the United States could invade other distant nations with little threat of direct retaliation. Yes, at the beginning of the United States' involvement in World War II, Japan conducted a brief although internationally significant air invasion of Pearl Harbor hundreds of miles away from U.S. mainland, and a few German submarines reached U.S. shores. But neither World War I nor World War II was fought within the continental United States.

Today, however, and after 9/11, the social organization and technology for communication, shipping, travel, and migration have advanced to the degree that all nations are readily accessible in time across whatever the physical distance. Two-way globalization—not merely unilateral international relations—has emerged as the new pattern of social interaction across the planet.

The good news is that we shall no longer have world wars. The bad news is that, unlike the world wars of the Twentieth Century, the wars of the Twenty-first Century may become global wars. That is especially bad news, because global wars can involve more countries and more of the world's peoples. Of course, the optimistic view is that globalized social interactions in

communications and transportation may somehow serve to prevent global wars.

In a global war, no nation's space is isolated from attacks. Not even that of the United States. In the age of globalization, war can intrude upon any nation however isolated by distance. Therefore, we now have globalization and global wars rather than international relations and world wars.

As noted earlier, intercontinental world wars did not occur until after intercontinental telegraph communications were possible. This does not mean that the better communications technology were necessary conditions for the two world wars. These events also corresponded with a lot of other factors. But would the United States' involvement if not success in the world wars have been possible without wired communications among nations on different continents? This leads us to the next question: what new levels of conflict might be enabled—or prevented—by fiber optic and satellite communications systems, telephones, and the internet?

What all of this means to sociology is that social interaction has gone to a new level, and that many things about which we theorize or do research have taken on new dimensions as well—global dimensions. Not only do globalized communities have a greater range of goods and services for meeting the needs of their local residents. Globalization also locally affects our jobs, consumer preferences, families, education, religion, health, environment, and other factors in social and economic well being.

**The end of globalization?** Just as technological and organizational developments in communication and transportation have brought about globalization as a new form of social interaction, disruptions of communication speed and/or transportation time could limit or reverse the trends of globalization.

Could the end of globalization as we know it be in sight? Globalization by means of advances in communication and in transportation can be vulnerable to both natural and social risks. Global communications are susceptible to war and terrorism as well as natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes.<sup>3</sup> Transportation is subject to the same risks plus fuel shortages.

Although symbolic communication and physical transportation are both forms of social interaction, they operate differently. Communication is obviously easier to accomplish quickly over great distances than is the physical transportation of goods, services, or people. Therefore, globalization via symbolic communication may continue to be more robust while globalization via transportation may be at greater risk.

For the global transportation of goods, services, or people to work, it also has to be cheap relative to the labor for producing goods or services or for shipping raw or unfinished goods. It is these low costs and the speed of global

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<sup>3</sup> See Hedley (2002: 169-171) for a similar discussion of the risks of globalization.

transportation that cause products, services, and people to be moved competitively.

Should there be a scarcity of petroleum fuels, for example, transportation costs may be expected to go up and/or modern transit systems may no longer be feasible at all. Furthermore, should costs for petroleum fuels begin to offset cheaper labor costs or other import-export costs, global shipping would be expected to decline. This could slow or reverse the process of globalization—at least that involving transportation—unless, of course, we can organize ourselves to learn or relearn technologies to ship with energy sources such as wind, sunlight, or ocean water as fuels.

Energy alternatives are largely technological. But social organization—global social organization—is also a factor in the continued progress or decline in globalization. Organizationally, for example, globalization dependent upon transportation would also be expected to slow or cease if the foreign labor costs increase relative to the transportation costs.

Already manufacturers of heavier products have shifted some of their global operations to be nearer the end consumers. Automobile manufacturers are one example. And, regardless of cheap labor costs, it amazes me how items such as hammers, anvils, and other heavy finished or unfinished material goods can be produced in one country, shipped at great distances, and still sold more cheaply than the domestically-produced goods in another country.

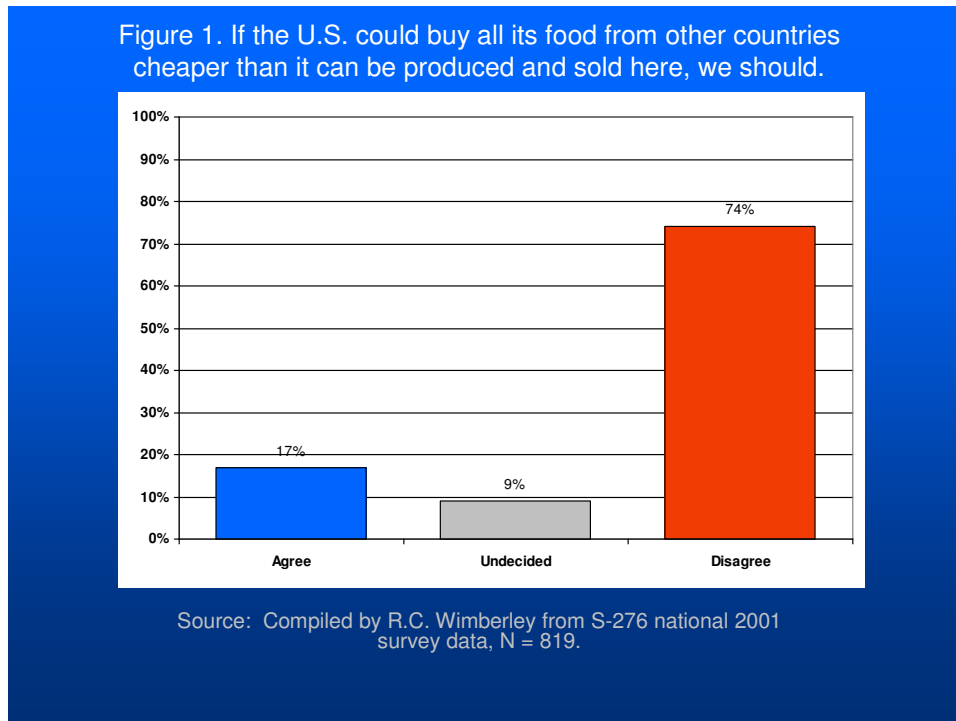
If shipping does decline due to the costs or scarcity of petroleum fuels, it will occur after much of the productive capacity of the United States has gone

offshore and after other global societies have become dependent upon global trade. Either way, this would affect the socioeconomic well being of people in local communities in the United States and abroad. Just as these communities and peoples have had to adjust to change brought about by the increase of globalization, they would have to adjust again to changes from the disappearance of globalization. This means there would be a need for local sociological solutions to help fill the gaps at each end of the process. These solutions may be quite different from the ones currently needed for local adjustments to changes that emanate from increased globalization.

### **How Do Americans React to Globalization?**

In a national public survey conducted with my research colleagues (Wimberley et al. 2003), our findings suggest that many Americans would not be very sad to see limits, if not the end, to certain kinds of globalization. At least that is what they appear to believe regarding their food sources. In 2001 and 2002, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of adults about their attitudes on the globalization of food. Presented with the statement, “If the U.S. could buy all its food from other countries cheaper than it can be produced and sold here, we should,” 74 percent of the respondents disagreed. Only 17 percent agreed while the rest were undecided (Wimberley et al. 2003: 1). These findings are shown in Figure 1. Further analysis of these results reveals that many of the 17 percent who preferred that the United States buy

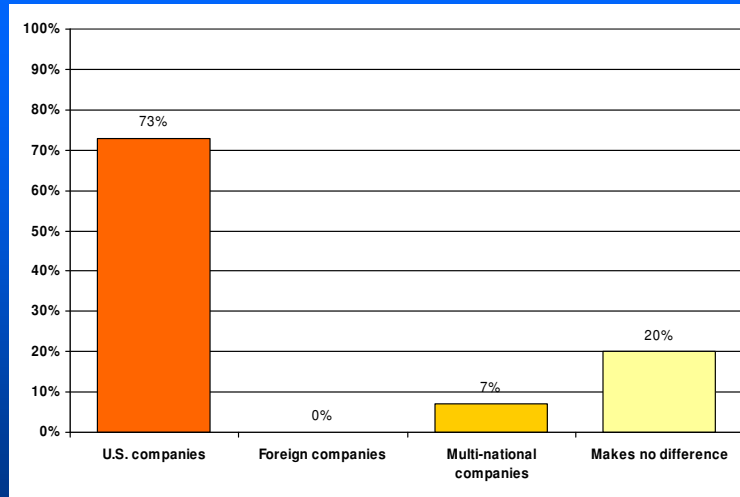
cheaper food from other countries tended to be people who could not easily afford to buy food.



On another measure, 73 percent said they “...prefer that our foods be processed and distributed by U.S. companies...” rather than multinational companies. One fifth of the respondents said it did not matter. As shown in Figure 2, no one responded that he or she preferred foreign companies to process and distribute food.

When it comes to food—one of the most essential consumer goods—Americans indicate they clearly favor domestically produced, processed, and distributed goods over global sources for what they eat.

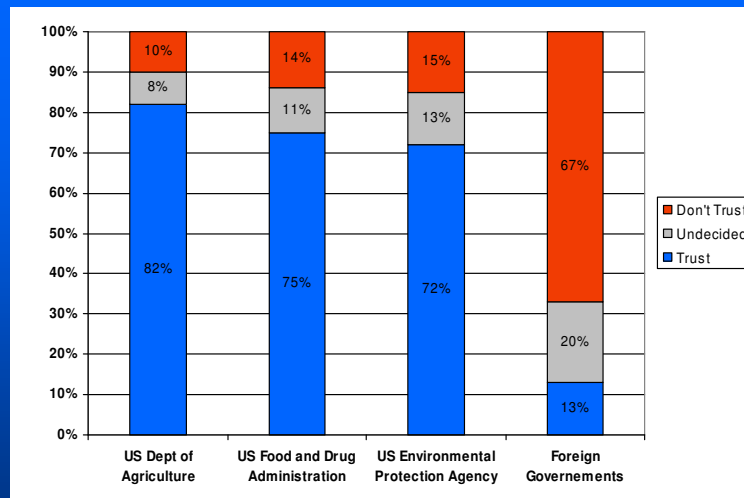
Figure 2. I prefer that our foods be processed and distributed by...



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national 2001 survey data, N = 819.

Asked who they trusted for "...knowledge about the safety of the foods you eat," 82 percent said they trusted the U.S. Department of Agriculture; 75 percent trusted the U.S. Food and Drug Administration; and 72 percent trusted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. See Figure 3. Only 13 percent trusted foreign governments.

Figure 3. Who do you trust for knowledge about the safety of the foods you eat? (Organizations)



Source: Compiled by R.C. Wimberley from S-276 national survey data. Sample N = 819.

### **A Demonstration of the Round World and Flat Sociology**

Earlier, I noted that the idea that the world is still round and sociology is still flat can be demonstrated with a ball and a board. The ball, of course, represents the global world; it is round. Transportation—including shipping, personal travel, and migration—as well as communications take place around the global world. The board represents sociology. It is flat. And today, around the globe, sociological relationships can be so fast and direct that round global space becomes more like flat local space.

Operationally, by holding a board at an incline and placing a ball at the top, it can be seen that the round ball rolls on the flat board. That's the demonstration. What does it prove? Actually, nothing. But the ball rolling



down the board is a visual metaphor for sociology's place in relationship to the world.

Conceptually and metaphorically, therefore, we can infer that the world rotates around sociology and sociology touches—applies itself to—the local places around the globe. While the operation of this demonstration, in and of itself, is only an illustration of the principle, its meaningfulness for the role of sociology in the world is not easily denied—at least by sociologists. For sociologists, I believe the global implications for local sociology are profound.

### **Implications for Connecting Global and Local Sociology**

So, what does globalization mean for sociology and particularly for local sociology?

A few years ago, I gave a talk at the meeting of the North Carolina Sociological Association about how we as sociologists should apply sociology locally and what local sociological associations might do to apply sociology more publicly (Wimberley 1998). The title of that talk was, “Applied Sociology? Even Musicians Give Concerts”

In my analogy of sociologists with musicians, both are observed to teach their disciplines to students. However, musicians often give concerts and perform for public audiences, and some musicians apply themselves fulltime to making music for the public and not just for other musicians.

For the most part and except for service courses taught to undergraduates and courses for undergraduate sociology majors, professional

sociologists teach sociology to others who, in turn, do the same thing. Beyond some sociologists in research and government jobs and a few who make careers of applied sociology outside universities and government, sociologists do not often give sociological concerts to their public constituencies that—whether the constituents know it or not—are in need of sociological information and solutions.

The most local of professional sociological associations are the state-level associations that exist in most U.S. states. For sociologists in states without their own sociological associations as well as for sociologists with state associations, there are various regional sociological associations as well.

Here, I would like to use some of the suggestions from the earlier applied sociology article and to add some suggestions on how local state and regional sociological associations—representing sociologists who live in their local communities and who work in the local colleges or universities, other organizations, or on their own—might connect with the global happenings in our local spaces.

We might refer to this as public sociology. Public sociology, a concept championed by former American Sociological President Michael Burawoy (2005), is an effort to help move professional sociology beyond its academic settings into the public.

Like in medical practice, sociological practice involves both diagnosis and treatment of social problems. Unlike medical practitioners, however, sociologists specialize in diagnosis and rarely seem to try to develop ways for

treating the problems. With some imagination, sociologists could become more applied—go public—by providing not only diagnoses of social problems, but also by developing more effective treatments in efforts to resolve the social problems they diagnose. I hope this will become a major initiative for Twenty-First Century sociology and sociologists.

The public experiences problems produced by globalization and related social changes across local flat spaces here and abroad. These problems need solutions. Sociology should be able to help. As I have tried to say this previously (Wimberley 1998: 19):

If human beings have anything, it is practical social questions. The demand for answers outruns the supply.

There are audiences for applied sociology that we have only begun to discover and develop.

The earlier ideas for how state-level sociological associations might promote applied sociology are also applicable to this meeting's theme of making sociology more accessible making local and global connections. Therefore, here are several suggestions about how we might improve our efforts at applying sociology at the local level and some things that local state and regional sociological associations may help facilitate (Wimberley 1998: 12-19).

First, volunteer to work on issues in our local communities. This will give us experience in devising solutions from our research findings, methods, and/or theories. Volunteering will also give our communities a better idea of their needs for sociological solutions.

Second, consult. Consulting is volunteering and getting paid for it when we apply findings, methods, or theories to social issues. Sometimes, volunteering for free leads to consulting for pay. Otherwise, it has the same benefits. It helps us to improve our insights and skills for handling real-world problems, and it should help the public to better appreciate sociology's value. Consulting can also help us to improve our skills for diagnosing and developing solutions to social problems.

Third, identify nonacademic jobs for our bachelors, masters, and doctoral-level graduates. This will further the benefits of sociological knowledge in the public and private sectors. It should open doors for further sociological applications as well as providing employment for those who can do sociology beyond our campuses.

Fourth, and in concert with volunteering, consulting, and helping to create a nonacademic market for sociology graduates, we can help make sociology more visible to nonsociologists by better informing them of what we know and do. Doing these things at the local levels can and should broaden our base of constituents along with how to serve them.

Local and regional sociological associations can facilitate this process by linking local sociologists to local issues and publicizing our successes in ways that national associations cannot do as effectively.

### **Organizing Sociology for Global and Local Connections**

Ken Land of Duke University makes an important point about the role of sociological associations at the national and local levels. He notes that while the American Sociological Association has about 13,000 members, the ASA estimates there may be about two or three times that many sociologists in this country. As he sees it, "...the important niches that state [sociological] associations can fill need to be recognized (Land 2004: 7)."

We may surmise from this that the national-level sociological association in the United States—and the major global association of sociologists—does not reach many sociologists who it could help represent within its own national borders. Furthermore, many of these sociologists work at local levels and are not well linked to sociology nationally. No doubt, the ASA would welcome these sociologists as members. But based on my observations, many of the sociologists who choose not to be affiliated with the ASA are involved in regional, specialty, or state sociological associations.

In addition, and in my opinion at least, the national-level and globally dominate ASA is not well organized to link global and national opportunities with local sociologists. ASA staff members and officers do frequently participate in the annual meetings of regional, state, and specialty sociological associations. However, the ASA is not formally affiliated with the regional, specialty, or state sociological associations, and the other associations are not represented on the ASA's governing council.

The effect of this lack of formal ties between the ASA and regional and local sociological associations is illustrated in the recent example of the ASA-

initiated study (Footnotes, 2005) of the Hurricane Katrina Disaster along the Gulf Coast. The area at point is clearly the area where sociologists are served by the Southern Sociological Society and the Mid-South Sociological Association. Although Louisiana and Texas have no state-level sociological associations, the Alabama-Mississippi State Sociological Association also exists in the hurricane's impact area.

As president-elect of one of the regional groups, I checked with the current presidents of the other regional and state sociological associations to see if their associations had been invited to collaborate with the ASA's initiative. They had not. I did find that several individual sociologists in the hurricane-impacted area—presumably members of the ASA—had been contacted directly by the national association. Left not contacted are other concerned if not well-qualified sociologists who were not ASA members but who might have been reached through their state and regional associations—including sociologists whose own local communities were the victims of the hurricane.

While the efforts of the ASA are to be commended in seeking to apply sociology to the needs of the hurricane areas, we might wish that the ASA were better and formally structured to link the other sociological associations and their members in these efforts.

If we are to connect local sociology with global sociology, an organizational linkage is missing. Of course, it would be possible for local state, regional, and specialty associations to directly establish formal

organizational ties with national or global sociological associations located in other countries. The technologies of globalization make this easier than ever.

The American Sociological Association does appear to have workable organizational ties with other national and international sociological associations. But unless the ASA develops more formally connections with the local, regional, and specialty sociological associations in North America, it cannot as effectively serve to help link them to the other national and global associations. As it stands now, the vertical network of sociological associations is unduly round; it arcs at the ASA level. In other words, sociology is still flat, but its organizational structure is bulging. We need a flatter structure of sociological associations from local through regional, national, and global.

Basically, the American Sociological Association is not organized to have formal linkages with the regional, specialty, and state associations nor do the regional, specialty, and state associations have formal representation on the governing board of the ASA. To me, there are opportunities in this structural gap that have not been realized to the advantage of all sociological associations and the range of sociologists they try to represent.

If global and local sociology are to be connected, as this meeting theme suggests, certainly it would help to develop formal linkages and representation of the state, regional, and specialization levels with the national-level association. As sociologists, we, of all professions, should know how to organize. This would broaden the professional inclusiveness and organizational strength of the American Sociological Association. And just as

importantly for the many locally-oriented sociologists who are not members of the ASA, it would strengthen sociology at the local levels.

There is work to do if sociology is to catch up with the newly emerged process of globalization and to address the social storms of globalization's impacts on local people and communities all around the world.

Therefore, in order to link more sociologists across all levels, to better promote the benefits of sociological knowledge and practice from the local to global levels, and to help sociology to be more accessible to the public, I would like to propose that the American Sociological Association enact formal procedures to represent state, regional, and specialty sociological associations in its governing council, programs, and services. While the ASA executive office does work to serve sociologists at all levels, these efforts should be more effective if the Association itself were to formally include representatives from other sociological associations in its governing structure.

For that matter, regional sociological associations should include formal representation from the state sociological associations in their respective regions as well.

### **A Concluding Example of Connecting State, Regional, and National with Global Implications**

To end these thoughts on the theme of "Sociological Accessibility: Making Connections with Global and Local Politics," I would like to use my favorite example. It is based on local and regional research and outreach that,



I believe, has national and global implications. The topic is the longstanding conditions of the Black Belt South.

The Black Belt of the southern United States is this nation's largest region of impoverishment (Wimberley and Morris 1997). The Black Belt is a crescent of counties that have higher than average concentrations of African-American people. These counties stretch across the nine Old South states of Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. Most of these counties are rural. In them, race, region, and rurality all combine to the disadvantage of the people and places of the Black Belt.

The Black Belt South continues to lag behind the urban New South and the rest of the nation in socioeconomic well being despite the social, technological, medical, communications, transportation, political, and other innovations of the Twentieth Century. None of these factors have changed the historic course of poor quality of life in the region. In addition to efforts to improve conditions for people in their local communities, regional-level policy and program solutions are needed as well.

The Appalachian Regional Commission led to such improvements in that region during the decades since the 1960s. We advocate a similar regional-commission approach for the problems of the Black Belt South. The Black Belt commission should emphasize human resource development and community development challenges in the region. Our research and outreach experience suggests that political officials from local to congressional levels will welcome

sociologists and other social scientists who bring them information on the region's conditions and on potential solutions for Black Belt problems. In addition, we have observed that our sociological findings will also be used effectively by other interest groups including local, grassroots groups, in the political process—local, regional, and national—to advocate policy and program initiatives for the region.

Hurricane Katrina provided a momentary public glimpse of the region's persistent impoverishment and long-term needs. Without immediate and comprehensive regional efforts to improve the quality of life in the local communities and states of the larger region, many among the current and future generations of Black Belt children will be unable to compete successfully in the high tech, global society.

If the conditions of the region can be improved, the standard of living for the entire United States will be significantly improved, and the sociological knowledge to do that should be useful for improving other impoverished areas globally.

No doubt, you also have your own favorite research and/or theoretical examples of sociological issues that bridge local, regional, national, and global needs.

With the organization and technological advances in communication and transportation, globalization has rapidly emerged to a new level and kind of social interaction. The world has changed. Because of this, local places have changed as well. Beyond the goods, services, and the division of labor that

were once accessible only within our local communities, there are broader resources that can be accessed globally. Global communications and the transportation of goods, services, people, and everything that moves with them have become a significant part of our local communities.

Sociology must become more accessible to the public in order to more effectively understand the new form of global social interaction and to help effectively devise the many solutions that are and will be needed. Finally, professional sociological associations should better organize themselves to become more accessible to each other and to flatten social interactions with other local spaces around the globe.

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