

## **Regionalism in global societies: How is a contradiction analyzed?**

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The question raised above was actually the problem which first came into my mind when I started to think about Regionalism in the modern – or better: “late-modern” – world. There are confusing phenomenon to observe: New Technologies give chances to communicate “interactive” and “real time” around the world – but do not substitute the request for face-to-face contact and association. Already in the 1960’s, Marshall McLuhan pointed out that new media provoke “the extension of Man” by two consequences. We all gather – via television – in a *global village* what will cause a re-tribalization: On the one hand, the extension allows a worldwide participation in communication, on the other hand this newly shaped community is structured like a tribe. Now, we are aware that neither communication did become global nor did the world turn into a giant tribe. However, we should obviously consider McLuhan’s focus on the changing frame of communication created by the *forms* of media and its impact for social life. Similarly, there is a great deal of worldwide mobility when people are traveling around in the role of a tourist in order to either try to dive into “typical life styles” in foreign Regions anywhere or to get away from daily life by relaxing in artificially constructed “Regions” as e.g. amusement centers may stand for. In both cases, it is generally intended to pick up daily life “as before”. However, being temporal away from home, being “outside”, may increase the understanding of what is going on differently in the locale but it is very doubtful if this experience will really lead to an *internal* understanding of a foreign Region facing the thesis of Dean MacCanell that the “term ‘tourist’ is increasingly used as a derisive label for someone who seems content with his obviously *inauthentic* experiences” (1999: 94; italics by the author).

But, not only information and persons are circulating worldwide products also. These globally produced and distributed goods are consumed – of course – locally. There are some good reasons to regard this phenomenon as a significant factor to create a standardized life style. Do we not observe, e.g. a unified fashion style for young persons all over the world? On the other hand, we have to consider that the use of any products is embedded in a specific constellation of local customs and practices. So, we always have to find out whether eating with, say, chop sticks is the traditional practice or a demonstration of being familiar with different eating instruments and a means of symbolical distinction from others.

Of course, even in the most important social systems like politics and economy, it is getting more and more obvious that the global efforts for balancing political interests, laws, economical transactions, stock markets etc. have a lot to do with being able to control and observe every single local event very carefully. Moreover, the specifics of Regions and conflicts within a Region or between regional cultures are certainly a focal point in contemporary politics. One can conclude that the awareness of regional cultures all over is due to the broader perspective in a so-called “global world” which firstly allows to observe the different Regions as “Regions”, this means as a part of something bigger or as an area surrounded by something different from it.

This consideration may lead to the idea that Regionalism and Globalization are united aspects of social transformation we are nowadays witnesses of. But, it may also lead to the idea that re-thinking about Regions should include phenomenon which are represented by the terms “space” and “place”. To give an illustration of that, I would like to refer on an interesting report about “NY-LON” (Newsweek, 13. Nov. 2000). NY-LON is a “single city inconveniently separated by an ocean.” Therefore, the inhabitants of NY-LON often have to use a plane to reach their working places and homes. A characteristic of NY-LON is

its leading standard in film, television and pop music production, publishing and mainly the New Economy. Persons all over the world dealing or try to deal with these branches choose more and more NY-LON as their activity center (Besides, it is remarkable that the name NY-LON may stand for one metaphor of “modern life” as such). But, even here the image of NY-LON is confusing. The “city” is not spatially united, but united by *money*, the report points out. As a famous business man puts it: “*In terms of our business*, the cities are beginning to melt into one massive whole.” (italics by the author) This is a *symbolical* kind of unification. However, it is reported that the both halves of NY-LON, New York and London, “remain quite unlike each other in *spirit*” (italics by the author). What can we derive from these observations? As far as spatial distances are relatively shrinking because of the innovations of transport and communication technologies, “place” may no longer be defined by a correlated “space” as its condition. But, the question is if a certain space is not able to specify a Region, which could be the convenient categories? “Money” as a symbolical medium which circulates between persons and creates a certain type of relationship should certainly taken into account. Even the perceived and experienced “spirit” within a place may be considered. Therefore, it is fruitful to ask for what “spirit” stands for. Peter Burke remarks that in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the famous philosophical terms like “spirit”, “genius” and “humor” (in German terms “Geist”, “Stimmung”, “Genie”; in French terms “*esprit général*”, “*esprit humain*”, “*génie*”) were substituted by the term “culture”, firstly used by German philosophers. The term “Culture” covers - like “spirit”<sup>1</sup> - a clearer consciousness concerning interrelationships of change in language, law, religion, art and science (Burke 1998: 31). Nowadays, “spirit” refers reversibly on “culture”, but these leading categories to describe a culture are still valid. So, when we talk of the “spirit” of a Region, in the most common sense this is a synonym for the “whole of cultural objectivations”. Culture can be regarded as a

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<sup>1</sup> This statement should not be confused with Max Weber’s term “*geglaubte Gemeinsamkeit*” (1972: 237). Here, Weber stresses that the phenomenon of “*geglaubte Gemeinsamkeit*” may support the birth of a community but,

synonym for the “whole” (Burke 1998: 31) just as religion (“the holy”) etymologically refers to “the whole” and covers the objectivations a social group likes to preserve in order to symbolize its identity (Kohl 1993: 72). This identity can be conserved and even though *detected* when there is something which has to be rejected by symbolic interaction. So, in a most general term, a Region is shaped by the boundary made up of these symbolic categories which does not belong to it. Subsequently, the questions which have to be answered are: Which categories should any definition of a Region include? Who is the defining force of symbolic categories? These questions have to be considered for every single analysis of a Region. But, we should consider three general assumptions when examining Regions:

- (1) Regions should be formally subdivided in an area “inside” and “outside”
- (2) There is a steadily exchange between Regions (between the “inside” and “outside”) by communication, immigrants, consumption, financial transactions etc.
- (3) Due to the constantly exchange and due to the changing characteristics of Regions it may be very helpful to consider a local, this means: spatial, reference point to carry out the analysis.

As Maurice Halbwachs (1997) mentioned, space *conserves* the cultural memory, maybe in a better way than other media of memory like rituals or records.<sup>2</sup> A certain “space” is therefore becoming a meaningful “place” through the significance actors ascribe by their symbolic interacting. A Region is always a “place” in this sense. When Erving Goffman pointed out: “A region may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers of perception” (1959: 106) he referred definitely to situations of face-to-face communication. But, there is some richness in this definition which should allow it to extend to a

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first of all, it is a term describing that a community does not exist in reality despite of this phenomenon.

<sup>2</sup> This can be clarified for example by two phenomenon: (1) the changing of spatial conditions of life (e.g. rural reforms) are causing a cultural turnover; (2) communities which have lost or abandon their spatial roots try to reconstruct the former, even spatial, organization elsewhere (e.g. a group of emigrants).

broader concept of “Region”: The community is shaped by boundaries perceiving each other, this means by boundaries of communication. This general statement is not touched by new communication technologies. Even the most advanced technologies allowing a large scale distribution of communication in time and space create certain (new) barriers of perception compared with face-to-face situations. Moreover, we have to stress the application and specific utilization of media instead of paying attention to the mere technological scope. This may lead to the observation that regional communities should be interpreted as a result of its *imagined* boundaries. Along with this general fact, we can even point out that a (regional) culture always consist of *hybrid* structures preserving *selective* communication processes from the past. So, all *traditions* stand for the extension in time and space and the distribution of common sense in communities with imperceptibly changing from insight.

From this point of view it is not very specific for contemporary society to implicate “inside” and “outside” in observing Regions but, it is specific that “outside” may involve a global extension.

Regions may be specified by cultural pattern of former immigrants, the import of foreign products or even socio-cultural techniques developed in a distant society. Asking about „Regions” and “Regionalism” means to expose the local specifics of the social structure within an area in contrast to the social structure of its environment. But, these specifics originate not from specifics of the area or territory as such. The social homogeneity derives from cultural and behavioral pattern, habits and the collective rules of conduct which appear in the common symbols. Therefore, the concept of “Regionalism” is of special interest in Sociology because the relationship between social interactions and their embedding in a certain social structure is used to be described in connection with a local reference point. In this context, “globalization” on the one side and “localization” on the other. “Globalization” can be specified as a worldwide

spatial extension of the cooperation in economy, politics, consumption, production and the division of labor that goes along with global ecological risks and even with *unintended* consequences (Beck 1997:54). This is supported by new technologies in communication and transport systems as well as the origination of “global cities”, that are centers of international investment, communication, production and distribution (Pries 1996: 458). Societies and, particularly, cultures can not longer be seen along the boundaries of nation-states as it used to be in the most social sciences. The new development crosscuts the former socio-political systems and may newly shape both supranational and subnational areas. We are observing a dissolution of temporal and spatial constraints in communication and this distancing of time and space takes a great effect on social contacts. Social relations have now been seen in the light of continual inputs of “external” – this means: outside the local communities - information, knowledge and also restrictions. However, „(a)t the same time as social relations become laterally stretched and as a part of the same process, we see the strengthening of pressures for local autonomy and regional cultural identity.“ (Giddens 1990: 65). Due to this, social life in a “Region” is influenced by the intensification of worldwide relations and formed by events occurring many miles away. This process links distant localities in the way that even local happenings may move in an obverse direction from the very distanced relations which form them (Giddens 1990: 64).

Therefore, this process is now described as “Glocalisation” (Roland Robertson) which puts more emphasis on the mutuality of changes in regard to both global and local structures as the term “Globalisation”.<sup>3</sup>

The characteristic of “Glocalization”, therefore, is not the decline of regional cultures and the rise of an apparently convergence to a global culture – a phenomenon which is called “McDonalization” of the world (after Ritzer

brought this term in). First of all, McDonalization focuses a standardization in social interactions which got developed first in industrial mass production of goods, transferred on the organization of fast-food restaurants and from there spread over to every exchange between the customer and those offering products and services. Sometimes, the state of globalization became empirically testified by the consumption of hamburgers. A famous example for the success of the McDonald system of organization was constantly the opening of a McDonald restaurant in Moscow. But, as I have heard once during an academic lecture from a critic of the convergence thesis, a Big Mac in Moscow does not taste like a Big Mac in the USA. Ritzer, himself, gave also an interesting example for the *merging* (and *not* for the uniqueness) of organizational systems: One characteristic of the McDonalds Company in Moscow is the long queue of clients waiting at its entrance but, also, “service people” providing clients with Big Macs within 15 minutes for a serving charge. So, the obviously enormous attraction of this fast-food restaurant is more due to its image rather than its function: Getting a meal here is not as fast as the philosophy once promised in the home country; the price for a meal is now increasing, too, which is equally not coherent with the original marketing strategy of McDonalds. But, this is not causing confusion because the integrating culture has already found a means preventing persons from queuing (and providing other persons with profit). The ironical result of this example is the complete mixture of the two systems: In Moscow providing somebody with something is firstly a matter of contacts and the right relationships; here, originally “time is not money” but now, creative actors have melted the two systems which constitutes a new logic of interaction. Comparatively, before selling anything, the creative directors of companies with a global market (“global players”), are considering regional specifics and try to develop local bonds to put their products on the market. Coca-Cola and Sony, for example, describe this task as “global localization” (Beck 1997: 86). To

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<sup>3</sup> Although this process started 200 to 300 years ago, it has developed an extraordinary dynamism in the last few decades. But, we should mention and we have to keep in mind that not every part of the world and not every

assume, we are observing a powerful paradox between the need of both standardization for global organizational purposes and the search for “authenticity” within Regions that impact is not yet solved by the present scientific discussion.

This ambivalent situation may be clarified by considering the essence of what C. Wright Mills has called “the sociological imagination” or Georg Simmel has called “the sociological view” on societies. In the most general conclusion, Sociology refers to the discovery of structures in social life. These structures are created by the network of contacts among persons mostly as an intended consequence of these interactions. This strengthens the focus on communication processes which can be seen, however, as a spectrum with its two poles, local communication (face-to-face) and extended media communication, the so-called mass communication. The coexistence of these two forms of communication is not only a characteristic of late-modern societies, of course, but the interconnection or the mutual influence of these forms of communication are of special importance now.

Recently, we observe some sociological theories which can help us analyze the social effects on social life in a Region under the condition that a Region can not longer be regarded as a bounded space or territory. I like to bring in these theories along with three key-words: “Ethnoscape”, - again – “Glocalization” and “Inclusive Distinction”.

1. The neologism “Ethnoscape” (Appadurai 1991) refers to the fact that the origination of cultural identities is not inevitably connected with their presence in a certain area. On the contrary, when observing certain areas this will not be equal to observing a homogenous culture. What is of special

significance when describing an ethnic group or a culture can no longer be derived from the internal conditions of the group life only. The modern world is often regarded as a variety of transitional or mixed communities instead of a certain number of national societies. Here, the organization of the social relations and the day by day life is not based upon regional – in the meaning of spatial - classification. Furthermore, a Region is now determined by the specific cultural mixture and the specific way global events are interwoven with local structures.

2. The Region is a “Melange” between transnational and local social relations. The process of “Glocalization” firstly refers to the fact that the Region is still the place where global events and influences are intermediated and experienced. The variety of regions and cultures is not “spaceless” but persons pay special attention to the openness of the social spaces or their environments (Beck 1997: 118f.). This is a view that residents “selectively ‘appropriate’ elements from metropolitan cultures in order to ‘construct’ their own hybrid medium in which to articulate their own, historically and socially specific, experience.”<sup>4</sup> This view stresses an active, creative role of people as culture producers rather than representing them as passive victims of the Globalization.
  
3. This leads to the question of new boundaries of cultural groups after the fall of spatial boundaries? Here, we can point out the argument of “inclusive distinction”. This means that boundaries are not constructed by “exclusion” or “separation” but – more practically – by not having the chance to participate in all groups or to get all the information which is probably at one’s disposal. Furthermore, “inclusive distinction” means a certain form of observing the social life. This form does not follow logically the separation between social categories or groups but indicates the intersections, this

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<sup>4</sup> (Barber/Waterman 1995: 240; zitiert nach Ulf Hannerz 1987 Africa 57 (4), S. 546 – 59)

means the new created units between social categories or groups. According to the local social structures and the culture, the standpoint of “inclusive distinction” does not distinguish between “either ... or” but rather accentuates “as well as”.

These theories and arguments can help to find answers on how to analyze “Regionalism” or “regional cultures” within global societies.

When we are now interested in investigating a “Region”, this means most of the time that we should *not* make an “exclusive distinction” or that we should *not* look for boundaries and dissimilarities which have not yet shifted by the increasingly assimilation of cultural groups.

Due to the fact that Globalization appears in a new *crossover* of global structures and Identity; the contradictions of Globalization will be detected or will mainly be detected in the individual life courses. As Ulrich Beck said: We are living “glocal” and we experience this phenomenon in a multicultural family life, in doing business, while having contacts with friends, in cinema, during shopping and when we are listening to music (Beck 1997: 129). “Modern” biographies, therefore, give expression to a compromise between all the individual ideas about chances and challenges within an “open” environment (of actions) and this what can actually be realized. This influences the interpretation of “Regionalism”. At first, we can say that the value and the appreciation of the Region can only be developed if there is a chance to experience the “time-space distancing” of contacts or a certain “alienation” from the locale (Robertson 1998: 215). Therefore, discussing the “Region” means *at any time* discussing its *image* or how the Region is described from the point of view of its residents. Anthony Giddens wrote: “In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric... What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the ,visible form‘ of the locale conceals the

distanciated relations which determine its nature.“ (Giddens 1990: 18f.) Consequently, being aware of “Ethnoscape” requires the development of new methods which will refer to the fact that the culture of a social group combines a lot of regional and transregional criteria including changing *reflections* of what is characteristic for the Region. To put it into research questions, this means to analyze: (1) How can “Regionalism” be *experienced* in a world of “time-space distanciation? (2) How can the effects and the reflections of the “time-space distanciation” be described in connection with experiences of the locale? From this point of view, we see the need of a link between the micro and macro perspective of analysis as well as the need to emphasize the subjective interpretation patterns of the actors. Moreover, the process of “Glocalization” can only be mastered by investigating social situations, *local* interactions or symbolic tokens which *refer* to the global conditions.

There are some fruitful methods which have been identified recently in cultural studies which are based on complementary approaches firstly developed in different disciplines. Next to the classical empirical research in Sociology which is usually based upon macro-data of socio-economic structures there is a special importance of consulting methods of other sciences: Biographical researches or Oral History, interpretations of Literature, methods in Geography and Linguistics and descriptions of Ethnomethodology or Anthropology as they are now not only available for formerly so-called “exotic” cultures and regions.

In regard of the importance to consider the mutual influence of the micro and macro level of data I want to put special emphasis on two research methods. These methods stress micro data respective macro data so that they can complete each other. Both may stand for two paradigms of a sociological analysis of regional cultures.

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The first approach was developed by R.T. McKenzie who cooperated with a group of sociologists in the 1920`s and 1930`s which later became known later as the “Chicago school of Sociology”. McKenzie worked out some rules in connection with the famous theory of “social ecology” of the Chicago School which are still fruitful as a classical analysis of social space. The theory is devoted to a functional approach so that it strengthens more the macro perspective. In his concept of “social ecology” McKenzie points out that the ecological concept covers processes (created by interactions or institutions) *within* a space. More concretely, it analyzes the distribution of people and their activities in space which correspond to the special forms of organization within an area that means to forms which are not arbitrary in its spatial occurrence. Therefore, the different “ecological units” can be distinguished according to its inner organizational principles. In order to specify these principles, McKenzie describes some fundamental categories of social space:

- *mobility and fluctuation*: changing positions of residents, working places or goods due to the dynamic of technological and cultural progress;
  - *distance*: spatial expansion and transport depending on a relation of time and expense;
  - *concentration*: density of persons during a certain period;
  - *centralization*: centers of special attraction which are temporary frequented by a lot of persons;
  - *segregation*: shifting density among residential groups to shape an either more homogenous or heterogeneous community according to financial means, linguistic competence, ethnicity etc.
  - *invasion*: dislocation of residential groups as a result of a process of segregation
  - *succession*: circular process of change in making use of a space so that different types of residents or different forms of utilization of the space follow successively (even as a result of invasion)
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These categories are still valid when making out structural analysis, but should converge with a closer view on the microcosmos.

The second approach, dealing with the concept of symbolic interactionism, should be included here. Clifford Geertz (1973) worked out the method of “thick description” which can help to complete “superficial” macro data by the micro perspective of the actors. Contrary to the approach of McKenzie which stresses the social organization of space, Geertz’ “thick description” focuses the symbolical dimensions of social action or – to put it in other words – the meaning actors ascribe to any symbols while interacting. Therefore, the method is based on Max Weber’s *verstehen* approach, one of the most famous methodological foundations in social sciences. Accordingly, Geertz explains “that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” and this web can be regarded as “culture” (1973: 5). For that reason he accentuates as the main task of the researcher to *interpret* the constructed social expressions in search of *meaning*. The aim is, making an ethnographic description which covers three characteristics: “it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the ‘said’ of such discourse from its perishing occasions” (Geertz 1973: 20). The flow of discourse in every social situation intensifies the web of significance and the analysis should sort out its structure. But most of the time, the ethnographer is faced with “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another” (Geertz 1973: 10). Geertz interprets the data collection as a text what implies that the method approaches a literary critic (1973: 9). The difficulties included here result most of all in both determining the social ground and import of the textual interpretation and – in connection with this task – being aware or at least keeping in mind that the *observation* and the *interpretation* can not be separated ideally and practically. So, the conclusion is, that *thick* description

means “the writing out of systematic rules... which, if followed, would make it possible so to operate, to pass ... for a native” (Geertz 1973: 11). At the same time, gaining this competence validates the method of approach and is an expression for the overcoming of the mere subjective point of view of the interpretative description.

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These two approaches can be used parallel to complete each other. But moreover, they may help to hybridize local experiences and global impacts methodologically.

When Robertson explained the process of *glocalization* he found out that within this process *particularity* is becoming a *global* value (1992). This fact can be identified in all the – paradox at the first sight – phenomenon described above. But moreover, it means that the identity becomes a complicated construction. On the one hand, people are claiming for local loyalties and for reassurance of the familiar in a *globalized* world. On the other hand, following cosmopolitan ideas and participating in cosmopolitan life styles is highly appreciated among them (Beck 1997: 91; Giddens 1990: 140). Here, I want to quote an interesting passage from an empirical research:

“I have been working with several colleagues to try and understand why Christmas has managed to expand around the world ... We noted that this festival is both beloved of folklorists, who constantly find parochial local customs associates with it, and yet has also developed as potentially the first truly global festival encompassing many non-Christian countries. ... While philosophers struggle with the question of what is called ‘being at home in the world’ the celebrants of Christmas take this phrase literally. The festival enshrines the home as pure domesticity, the only place one should really be at Christmas time. It then uses the domestic microcosm to encompass the sense of a globe, that is envisaging the peoples of the world all conducting the same rite at the same time, as a global family. As such the festival both symbolically and actually creates commensurability between the largest social (or for the religious – cosmological) universe we are called upon to imagine and the smallest social universe we tend to assume.” (Miller 1995: 18)

This observation may be in contrast to the popular theory of Joshua Meyrowitz which he compressed into the words: *No sense of place*. Meyrowitz underlines this statement by explaining how the information distributed by mass media influences face-to-face relationships<sup>5</sup>. Certainly, e.g. the huge production of films and series carried out in the Hollywood studios and transmitted all over the world has to be considered when valuing interactions and experiences in the locale. But, in this context empirical researches give us fruitful hints on the specific *perception* of media contents. Therefore, I want to bring in the results of a project about “crosscultural readings of Dallas”. The authors Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) intend to explain the “export of meaning” by the popular series *Dallas*. But, what they are proving is rather the impossibility of exporting of meaning via television. Concretely, they are the accentuating characteristic of *perception* (which first of all constitutes meaning) which can be diversified by social group membership. When Liebes and Katz tried to find out what people of different ethnicity (Russians, Arabs, Japanese, Americans and Jews living in a kibbutz) “have seen” when they watched *Dallas* they became aware that their interpretations were contradictory. To give an example of that, in one of the series “Sue Ellen” leaves her husband “JR” in order to go back to her former lover and to live with him in his father’s house. When the authors discussed this event the Arab group confirmed each other in having watched to Sue Ellen escaping from JR and returning to her own father’s house. This “misinterpretation” shows the dominance of both the local readings and the stability of forming shared experiences in social groups.

The slogan “no sense of place” can be discussed even in a more macro-structural way. Blakely and Snyder remark that “(u)sing physical space to create social place is a long and deep American tradition” (1999: 1). This tradition is applied to a modern form of residentship, the “gated communities”. That kind of community preserves a characteristic of social organization insofar as its

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<sup>5</sup> Even he does not follow McLuhan in his assumptions.

residents look for distinction when segregating their real estates. On the other hand, the regionalization of gated communities shapes a somewhat new characteristic even though the community is dissolved. Actually, the segregation as such (for whatever reasons) is the bond which unites the residents and furthermore allow them to live incognito as singles or isolated family (as far as they respect the long list of rules and prescriptions of how to style the front of their houses and even their own behavior outside their own walls). In short, gated communities in their specific organization of space allow life *without* contacts to the people living around them. However, this leads to the question of if the residents of gated communities arrange their social relationships with no regard to physical space (as NY-LON stands for), only supported by spatial mobility and “cyberspace” communication?

Yet, living according to *no sense of place* in an old-fashion manner follows the European tradition of creating social distinction. Instead of segregating the (more limited) space social distinction is organized by different practices or the demonstration of consumption patterns<sup>6</sup> which symbolically indicate the commitment to a certain status or class among people within a spatial unit. Even here, an investigation of the impact of glocalization would be an extremely attractive topic for – further – research.

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<sup>6</sup> See the still instructive work of Thorstein Veblen (19..)

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