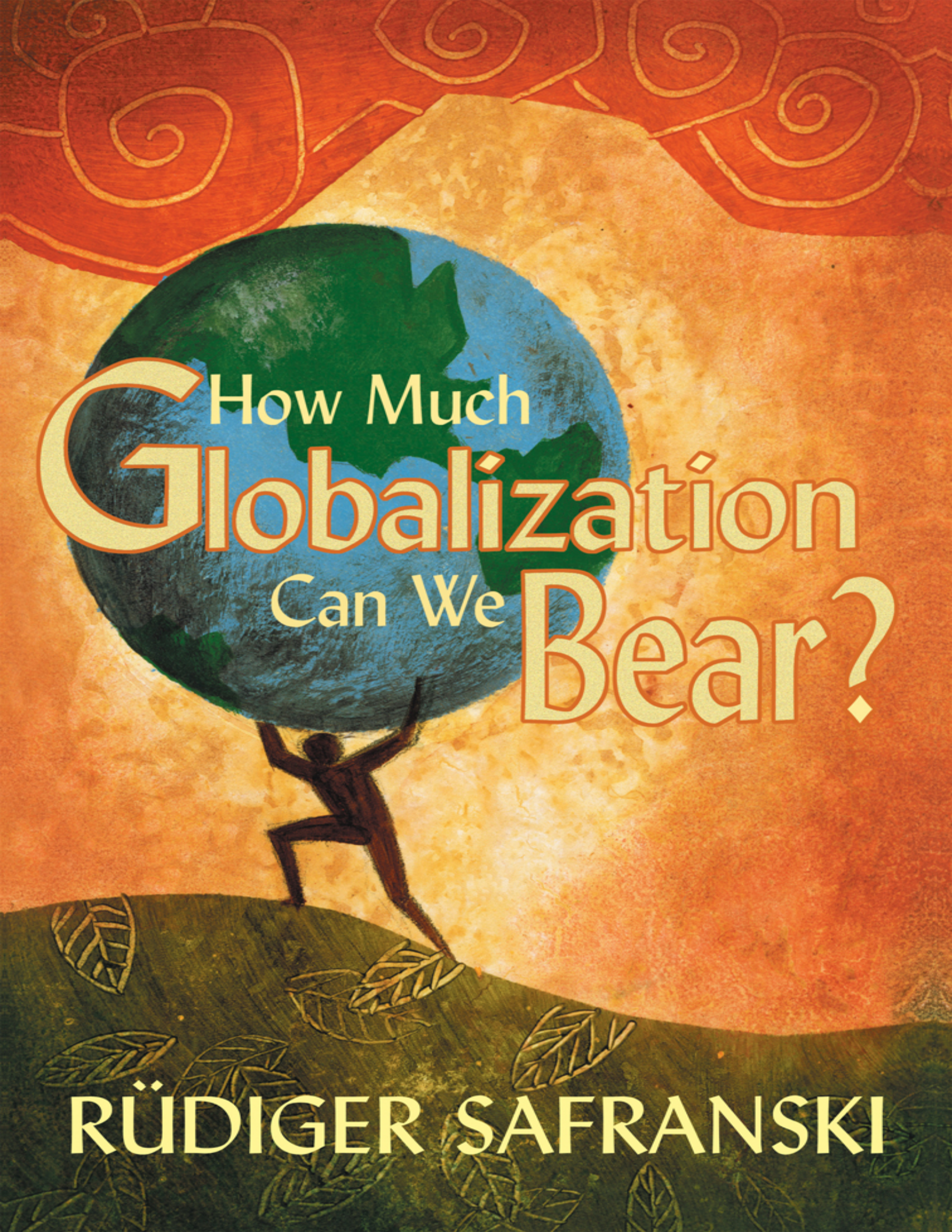
How Much
Globalization
Can We
Bear?
RÜDIGER SAFRANSKI

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Preface: Understanding Globalization – Between Sociology and Philosophy

Globalization is certainly one of the most widely debated topics of our time. The issue arises wherever one looks, and one wonders whether anything new remains to be said. Rüdiger Safranski's account of the issue leads to the instant, if surprising, realization that the answer to this question is most definitely 'yes'.

'Individualization' has frequently been proposed in sociological debate, as the conceptual counterpart to 'globalization'. It has often seemed that, once these processes were fully developed, all that would be left would be individual human atoms dispersed on a globe without any political, economic or cultural structures. But regardless of whether that theory is based on any good and valid observation, nobody has drawn the conclusion that suddenly emerges as evident after reading Rüdiger Safranski's exploration of the issue: globalization, if it occurs, means a radical change in the human condition. It brings human beings into direct confrontation with the world in its totality – indeed, one might say that it returns to such a confrontation, after centuries of attempts to build institutions that mediate between human beings and the world. Almost unnoticed in the broader debate, the scenario of globalization entails areturn – in new and radical guise –

of the time-honoured question of the ways of being-in-the world of human beings.

Globalization means that we humans, as self-relating animals, must also learn to relate to the whole. But what is this ‘whole’, out of which we cannot step, but in relation to which we nevertheless need to gain some distance, in order to exercise our powers of reason, our claim to make things around us intelligible? This question is the point of departure for the short, but provocative intellectual journey on which Safranski takes his readers. The adventures on the journey are plenty, and rewarding, and the author is the only guide we need. It is useful, however, to pose two questions briefly at the outset: why is it that much of the better-known literature on globalization fails to address this possible novelty in the human condition? And: how does the account that follows relate to the broader debates?

Action, reflexivity and boundaries under conditions of globalization

When it emerged almost two decades ago, the topic of global-ization was a disturbing one. It questioned established wisdom both in the intellectual sphere and in the realm of political action. Associated with the diagnosis of the decline of the nation-state and the dissolution of boundaries in all walks of social and political life, it even challenged the very idea of human agency, be it individual or collective. That is to say, action seemed to presuppose not only an actor who somehow stands out from the world upon which he or she acts, but also a rather solid structure for that world, so that any intervention in it would have somewhat predictable effects. A globalized world, however, appeared at best fragmented in a disorderly way and at worst in a permanent state of flux and out of reach. In turn,

the inhabitants of that world, who were previously seen as easily identifiable members of a class, nation or gender, were now seen as ‘individuals’ in the radical sense that they could be certain neither of their ties to other human beings nor of their own self and identity.

Such a world is, however, uninhabitable. And that insight seems to be the main reason why this early, disturbing perspective on globalization has gradually given way to a more orderly intellectual landscape. Broadly and somewhat schematically, there are three major ways of diagnosing the global constellation that started to emerge after the end of the Cold War and, let us not forget, after colonialism (chapters 2 and 3 below address the global situation and the way in which it is usually interpreted). Most closely associated with the very meaning of the term ‘globalization’ are, first, the observers who hold that we are in the process of creating actual global structures for all major social practices – most importantly an effective world market for many products and a relatively homogeneous global (mass) culture. Significantly, this view is held in two versions, an affirmative and a critical one. The former is dominant among proponents of neoliberal deregulation projects; the latter points to an increasingly globalized resistance to such projects, most prominently voiced in the works of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

Second and similarly consistently, other diagnoses insist on the persistence of cultural particularity in the world, often even suggesting that globalization tendencies may provoke the hardening of such cultural forms. As used to be the case with theories of nationalism and the nation-state, such reasoning is most often accompanied by the idea that cultural communities should give themselves a political form. The rise of communitarianism in political theory pre-dated the globalization debates and indeed at its outset was related solely to national communities. From the early 1990s onwards, however, this theme was integrated into a new

culturalist diagnosis of the time, finding its most widely debated contribution in Samuel Huntington's idea of a 'clash of civilizations'. While this concept has rightly been criticized as intellectually and politically conservative, more innovative uses of what may be broadly understood as cultural thinking have also emerged in the context of the globalization debate, the most interesting of these probably being Johann Arnason's renewal of civilizational analysis in his recent *Civilizations in Dispute*.

Despite the richness of reasoning in both these points of view, and particularly in the latter one, what is most characteristic of the current debate is that the basic theoretical positions adopted can be criticized relatively easily on conceptual grounds. It is, after all, not very difficult either to show that numerous social practices, even many economic ones, hardly globalize at all, or to raise doubts about the idea that social life naturally occurs within relatively closed and coherent cultural containers. As a consequence, a third position has emerged and consolidated as something like a critical mainstream – for reasons I will explain, this is not an oxymoron – in the globalization debate. It might be said that this third position emerged as the globalist take on the sociological debate about reflexive modernization, most strongly associated with Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck (and discussed as the third variant of 'globalism' in chapter 3 below).

From this perspective, modernity was seen, according to the sociological tradition, as an institutional constellation that had triggered a particular dynamics of societal development. Deviating from the sociological tradition, however, Giddens and Beck recognized that this institutional constellation did not incarnate modernity *tout court*, but could itself undergo further transformations.[1] Significantly, some recent transformations have been seen as a reinterpretation of the modern project in the light of the preceding experiences with the institutionalization of the

modern self-understanding. That is why the term ‘reflexivity’ has become central to this diagnosis.

Thus, the otherwise so-called decline of the nation-state was regarded as part of the general reflexive reinterpretation of modernity, even though possibly as that part that touched the very institutional pillar upon which the original modern project was founded and the boundaries by which it was protected and made viable. Rather than seeing this development as a mortal danger for the modern project, however, the theorem of reflexive modernization accepted the idea of social bonds increasingly being constructed and reconstructed through flexible networks rather than formal organization. To uphold the normative commitment of modernity to democracy hitherto incarnated in the nation-state as the organ of societal self-determination, the approach made way for the parallel revival of cosmopolitan political theory. Basically, the hope and expectation was that, if the reflexive approach was suitably understood and embraced by political actors, the newly emerging problems could potentially always be reflexively addressed and successfully dealt with.

Following its globalist approach, the theorem of reflexive modernization has become, in political terms, something like the intellectual wing of global social democracy. The position it takes is critical of both neoliberalism and ‘neoculturalism’, and thus of many of the powers-that-be. At the same time, however, its acceptance of the diagnosis of the dissolution of boundaries and of flexibilization (moderate though it is when compared to some other contemporary diagnoses) has also entailed an increasing vagueness in the way in which key questions of social and political philosophy can be addressed. Put very crudely, the globalist version of reflexive modernization theory marks a politico-intellectual position with which one can too easily agree from too numerous particular viewpoints because it is both broadly reasonable and at the same time insufficiently precise. That

is why it has attacked many followers and has intellectually turned into a mainstream position.[2]

‘Irresolvable contradictions’ and the overstretched ‘we’: a persistent struggle for freedom, meaning and recognition

One way of describing Safranski’s essay is to say that he insists that more needs to be thought and said about the challenges globalization poses to the human condition. Clearly, he, too, is strongly critical of both neoliberalism and ‘neoculturalism’ (see chapter 3 below). But all versions of ‘globalism’ – the summary term he uses for all approaches that embrace the processes of globalization – are seen by him as evading the crucial issues. Even though he does not address the theorem of reflexive modernization in any greater detail, and although there is reason to assume that he would reject it less strongly than the other contemporary diagnoses, his analysis nevertheless suggests a quite different take on the current situation. Had he used the language of the contemporary sociology of global modernity, he might have said something along these lines: it is not humanly possible to live in a widely extended world by constantly monitoring and reflexively reconsidering one’s own position in it and linking up flexibly to whatever other beings and objects there are in that world. And that is why there is no gently critical perspective on globalization. Rather, we must keep asking the question that guides the essay that follows: how much globalization can we bear?

As noted at the outset, many readers who are broadly familiar with the general debate on globalization will find the interpretation Safranski offers unusual and possibly sometimes difficult to relate to. The reason is that the author found it necessary to change genre. While the