

World

The uppermost geographical scale is the World. The World is therefore the space of human kind, that is to say the geographical level that concerns the largest numbers of human beings. It is a space formed of relationships, which today extends over the whole [ecumene](#). The World is spelt here with a capital letter, since it is a toponym, and only one of the several acceptations of the word "world". While it is often used as a synonym of the World, the [Earth](#) differs in that it refers to the whole planet, or to the physical and continental substrate over a part of which humans deploy their activities.

The World has not always existed. This specific geographical object results from the process known as globalisation. This recently invented term (in French "globalisation" in 1962 and "mondialisation" in 1964; Dagorn, 1999) refers to a long-standing trend whereby the ecumene has become space. When the generalised exchanges between different parts of the planet became patent, Olivier Dollfus described this "space of transaction for humanity" as a *système-Monde*, or world system (1990). In fact, as early as the Paleolithic, and more markedly from the Neolithic, there were interactions between societies across Eurasia, and including a large part of Africa. This former World system, from which a large part of humanity was however excluded, is the matrix for the future dynamics of globalisation, occurring at once by way of a deepening and a densification of exchanges, by the increasing integration of various types of people, activities and goods, and by the resulting integration of New Worlds (America, Oceania), and the shortfalls of the Old World.

Progress in communication, with increased speed and greater range, and with the lowering of their cost, is at once the cause and the consequence of the rise of generalised exchanges. The World cannot be reduced to a space of economic transaction as ultra-liberal and anti-globalisation militants would have us believe. The demographic, cultural and social dimensions of the World are constantly gaining substance, so that it is now possible to refer to a *société Monde* or "World society" (GEMDEV, 1999). This World society does however have one shortcoming, which relates to the political component, subjected to the tensions between international and global logics (Lévy, 1996).

The rise to prominence of any geographical [scale](#) calls the importance of other scales into question. In the geographical scale system, the consolidation of the highest level is thus a challenge for the main level below it, which is the level of the States (Badie, 1995), not only in terms of regulation of the social sphere and in terms of political legitimacy, but also as a result of the frequent perception that there is a questioning of what underpins the identity of the social group as a result of its integration into the World. Resistance, often referred to as "sovereignist" in France, consists in attempts to preserve a global organisation on an international basis. International organisations in general, in particular the United Nations constellation, are in this respect true to their name. This tension between the international and the global is one of the most marked characteristics of the present mode of functioning of humanity.

One ambiguous aspect of this "conflict" of scale between resistance on the part of inter-state systems and the consolidation of the World is seen in the tendency to form associations of States so as to form powerful blocks. These processes are generally referred to as "regionalisation processes", and one prototype can be seen in European integration. The groupings that are forming are intermediate levels between the World and the traditional States, and they take over some of their monopolies (for instance the currency for the Eurozone). This enables on the one hand a reduction in the influence of the global level, keeping it at a distance by way of economic and social policies or even, to a lesser degree, cultural, diplomatic and military policies, and on the other an acceleration of globalisation by way of a simplification of negotiations and an increase in free trade. Thus the way humanity chooses to organise itself in the coming years will hesitate between emphasis on international dealings between large entities (mega-States such as China and regional groupings) and emphasis on more global dealings, better able to accommodate a fragmentation into 200 entities.

One of the main challenges for the management of the World, whatever the terms, is the relationship between the World-system and the Earth-system. The planet is a complex [system](#), the vulnerability of which is exacerbated by the increase in number and intensity of human activities. Thus the World level is directly concerned by environmental issues, which naturally have nothing to do with national boundaries. The difficulties in the application of the Kyoto agreement demonstrate the resistance on the part of States, while the rise in demands from environmentalist groups contributes to forming a global political society.

It is in this perspective that certain places have become symbolic, such as Porto Alegre. As what the French call a "haut-lieu", or choice venue, of protest on certain conceptions of the World, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul has become a world political venue. Indeed, the global level generates its own actual and symbolic centralities, like any other spatial system, taking up the heritage of earlier accumulations. At the top of the hierarchy, literally in the centre of the World, there are a few, inter-related "world cities" (Sassen, 1996), or the archipel m@gapolitain mondial (global megapolitan archipelago) (Dollfus). The hubs of the triad formed by the three main concentrations of humans and the World decision and production poles form a chain on which the sun never sets. The world stock exchange, continuously open from Tokyo to New York via London, is the most visible manifestation of a management system, and increasingly a production system, that is clearly global, and thus works round the clock. This simultaneity is far from removing all internal distances in space, but it makes it possible to envisage the World as a place.

Indeed, the contemporary World is a single geographical space with a particular characteristic: it forms a loop. The former main geographical configurations, even those extending over virtually all the earth's surface, as was the case at the start of the 20th century for European influence, all had a main centre (Europe), margins and boundaries (the Pacific with the date-line). In contrast, the contemporary World is based on a polycentric logic, the geographical dimension of continuing activity facilitated by communication in real time. It can indeed be considered that globalisation became an evident characteristic in the 1980s, that is to say at the time when trans-Pacific exchanges began to equal the earlier trans-Atlantic exchanges, and when the loop was closed. The fact that the World is limited but has no boundaries makes its cartographic representation difficult. The World is thus a very mundane space, a "geon" like any other, except that there is no higher level of which it might form a sub-set: a very specific space covering the whole of the Earth. In this sense it is indeed the place of humanity.

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see also: [border](#)

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