

Can Character and Community  
Survive In An Age of Globalization?

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Culture of Enterprise Essay Contest

To arrive at the core at answers that speak the core of the question at hand, we need to possess consensus by what we mean when discussing character and communities and its relationship to globalization as a concept. Too often ambiguity and bias definitions favoring specific ideological agendas cloud clear conceptualizations and subsequent debate on the subject.

Character according to the *Merriman-Webster Online Dictionary* refers to “moral excellence and firmness”<sup>1</sup> while community can be said to be “persons with a common interest living in a particular area”<sup>2</sup>. Under the process of globalization communities are coming to be redefined beyond their geographic relevancies, presenting us with questions not only of their survival, but also of their type.

Globalization is the process, according the Acton Institute’s Dr. Sam Gregg, of the unparalleled and rapid expansion of trade and relationships beyond the family, community and nation state levels<sup>3</sup>. Globalization should be understood as outgrowth of trade between nations, a process explained via the basic economic premise that man seeks profit maximization, be it for himself, his family or other causes to which he places value. Such a pursuit given country-specific specialization is realized in trade between nations where new markets afford expanded opportunities for meeting the needs of new consumers.<sup>4</sup>

Globalization, as a result of the laws of economics, cannot be countered anymore than the laws of physics. To understand globalization’s moral dimension through a normative

view of economics is problematic since a descriptive understanding of existing economics laws needs to be comprehended apriori our value judgments. An attempt to counter economic law on account of an apparent value judgment is akin to positing that it is unfair a good person fell to his death because he did not deserve to die. Economists such as the Austrian School's Carl Menger argue that economic law is universal and accessible to reason.<sup>5</sup> As economics is the best developed branch of praexology, or human behaviour, it is fitting that this essay shall view the question of character and community sustainability via as assessment of the individual person centering on man himself being the agent responsible for ushering in the age of globalization as a consequence of participation in economic pursuits. .

The core of my argument presented here is that capitalism as an economic system fosters virtues conducive to character and community, indicating that globalization with its market emphasis is indeed a benefit, not a hindrance. Far from existing as construct pushed by corporate and material interests, I also intend to advocate that much of the thinking, absorption and initiation of the economic phenomenon exists, and will increasingly proliferate, at a localized community level. This is evidenced by explosion in independent policy institutes which are emerging as seeds taking root in multiple regions and producing readings, approaches and policies of global trade conducive to local context and community understandings.

Finally, I posit equal importance to the capitalism itself, the expansion of which is inevitable in our new age of globalization. However, when applied beyond the economic

sphere is problematic to the extent that growth occurs, when it does, without the moral cultural system that is crucial to the characters of individuals and the communities they exist in. Both markets and morality are equally important in our age, as they always have been, for the survival of personal and collective virtue.<sup>6</sup>

We know from the descriptive analyses of economics that increased international transactions are at the core of the natural human quest for profit maximization, which is, as Pope John Paul II describes it, “an indicator that a business is performing well”<sup>7</sup>. Human action implies choice to which cost is an integral part.<sup>8</sup> Human beings will pursue their most highly valued ends. It is on this point that we must dwell if the frequently identified threats of consumerism and materialist hedonism are to be properly understood. For the core problem here is the valued end itself that undermines character and community, not the process of trade expansion which serves to facilitate further economic choice and growth for individuals within the collective.

Character is developed in institutions, principally the family, school, church and voluntary associations.<sup>9</sup> As globalization - with its characteristic of upward economic mobility - brings greater autonomy to individuals, persons can focus and rely less on government, leading the focal point to shift from the state to the individual's community. A key component of character is self-discipline and independence. Both virtues are greatly enhanced through the inherent virtue of work and reliance of self, which affords human being an individual dignity and internal respect that the external policy of the state cannot foster.

Globalization will ensure that values be embraced on the basis of choice and less on social pressures. Character will not be eroded, but rather truly develop on a basis of morality given the fact of choice which exists at the core of the market system. With less dependence on the state and existing institutions that are not conducive to growth and the expansion of human liberty, the ordering of society will shift in favour of institutions that are embraced voluntarily in a democratic framework within open economic systems. Milton Friedman showed the link between economic liberty and political freedoms.<sup>10</sup> The existence of the former, which inevitably is expanding in the present economic context, will ensure the growth the latter. Such a move results in the values of character and community being authentically strengthened given that they arise on the basis of voluntary adoption. Anthropology, theology and common wisdom acknowledge that deep within the human being is the search for meaning that transcends the material. The soul of the person continues to pursue truth, even if such search is conceptualized in alternative dimensions. The fear that globalization will bring Western consumerism to wash away the human search for meaning within his/her own history and heritage is a misunderstanding of human nature and an unfortunate neo-Marxian sociological assumption; its unfortunate basis on the premise that our consciousness is a mere material social construct.

Some allege that globalization is undermining communities, not only morally, but culturally too as new chain stores providing cheaper goods cause older local exit the market. This point, however, conceptualizes the survival of character and community on

the existence of present day economic outlets, negating other factors. Throughout the ages local economies have been in a constant state of change, sometimes being barely observable, at other periods – such as our own - being more profoundly visible. There is no reason to suggest that a change in economy should entail an undermining of the virtues of character and community. Culture is not static as an artifact to be frozen and preserved to reflect its practicality at a specific point in time. Through institutions of memory, such as museums and civil society organizations, cultural preservation can be treasured. Indeed here it is honored and history is more consciously understood. The stifling of economic growth and resistance to a phenomenon which has lifted millions out of poverty - and which will prove to do the same in the future -cannot be justified on the basis of understanding social and commercial culture as static.

To place man at the center of trade, it is vital that behind every new commercial endeavor, we recognize our fellow man - human beings with authentic personhoods who require as much moral and spiritual guidance as those called to any other profession. Today, via the internet, young entrepreneurs and business people are being exposed to a variety of moral and religious ideas that give their spirit of enterprise a dignity and purpose that may not exist in their local contexts. With businesses often scorned and seen as a materialist entity incompatible with higher values, a new sense of thinking around business and economic growth is expanding outside of the scope of Protestantism and Judaism, both faiths which have traditionally, but not exclusively, been known to foster a healthy view of commercial life.

The need for such education has been met in the market place of ideas with organizations like the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty which serves as notable case in point. Bringing together a host of individuals from around the world, the institute is one of an ever increasing number researching and applying the links between free market economics on the one hand, and the promotion of an authentic socio-cultural, religious and ethical on the other. Modestly budgeted organizations like Atlas Economic Research Foundation support a great multitude of intellectual entrepreneurs in local communities the world over. <sup>11</sup>

The not yet acknowledged facts that mainstream history will attest to, is perhaps the notion that, far from spreading at the force of exploitative minority corporate power - as its critics contend - globalization is occurring and being integrated into a wider moral context by innovative thinkers who are adapting and integrating economic laws with the social, cultural and religious mores that exist within their local contexts. Rabbi Daniel Lapin encapsulated the compatibility of economic change and sustained transcendent values with the quotation, “the more things change, the more we need to rely on that which stays the same”. In light of global change, it is values that will be our stronghold, not resistance to economic processes. Globalization is occurring and will continue to, as a phenomenon of the natural market, even if we artificially attempt to place stoppages on the invisible hand which guides the process. Character and community can survive in age of globalization when we conceptualize the problems of globalization correctly, understanding the just divergence between economic actualities and the moral agency of market participants across the globe.

The late Pope John Paul II, our age's much respected ethical and spiritual leader to millions, spoke of materialism and the consumer mind-set, not as problems born of capitalism, but as defects of a socio-cultural system in need of strengthening and reform.<sup>12</sup> Attempting to stand against the economic process of globalization will not change the essence of characters or communities which exist internally to the individual and community.

On a discussion of character we do well to note that the social dimensions of capitalism encourage inventiveness, creativity and the responsibility of the individual. It depends on a culture of creativeness and innovation that is coupled with openness to change, cooperative effort and voluntary participation. It brings social institutions and companies to work together towards common goals.<sup>13</sup>

Scholar Michael Novak notes that legally entrenched traditionalism and socialism have represented rigid and closed societies that stifle individual growth and creativity. The market nature of global capitalism converts the individual's private ambitions into the creation and distribution of wealth.<sup>14</sup> Economically liberal democratic countries do not go to war with each other. By contrast communities across Africa are frequently torn apart by bitter warfare and internal conflict owing to a lacking rule of law which allows leaders to peddle to tribal loyalties when it comes to the allocation of resources and provision of rights. As globalization sets rule of law as critical if one is to enter into the

global market economy, by virtue on invisible force the capacity for stabilization in these troubled communities is greatly enhanced.

Countries, if they are to succeed in the global economy, need an effective rule of law and impartial justice system which ensures private property rights. Because low investments in countries are a result of low confidence in the courts and legal system, government are recognizing that law and order and keys to economic development. Corruption which has been at the core of unjust political set-ups, especially in Africa, is detrimental to character of the individual who is required to purposely break the law, Transparency International reports that 36% of respondents reported paying a bribe, while Latin America stood at 17%. With the growth in trade and globalization in recent years, organizations within developed countries have naturally have grown an interest in reforming corrupt judiciaries. Such a state of affairs is certainly not conducive to an environment that fosters community and character. As the invisible hands pushes for more transparency, such the economic forced requiring justice are of benefit to the citizenry, who can further themselves authentically with a system of openness and rule of law.

Today in the knowledge based economy the decisive factor is often man himself. To trade with fellow humans from different cultures requires an attention to their values and attitude of service. Developing oneself is linked to developing one' character if flourishing is to be assured. People are increasingly called upon to rely on themselves; the evidence is abundant. With a flexible market, flagged by change, attention has moved from satisfying the needs for acceptance to a company or industry towards attention to

self and personal skills development so as to possess the abilities and understandings conducive to financial betterment in an age where career change means one set of skills is usually no longer sufficient. Important virtues underlie this process such as prudence, industriousness, openness to change, the pursuit of education<sup>16</sup>

As globalization brings a reduction in the state as a source of social guidance owing to their economic power, religion in civil society increases. Today we witness that once individuals have reached a certain level of prosperity there is an interest in religion and life meaning which is present. After critics early nineteenth century projected our material understandings of phenomenon would diminish our desire for God, the opposite has proved true. Yet again showing that material change does not restructure the essence has occurred. There is no reason to believe globalization regardless of the availability of new products, services and opportunities to derive greater financial benefit in the market

This growth in religion has many positive spin offs for social welfare and moral values. The permissive cultural media from the West has spurred a return to the traditional moral values within and outside the Western World, using the very same technology of internet and television used to propagate the rejected model to begin with.<sup>16</sup> As Patrick Fagan notes, “religious practice benefits not only individuals, but also communities. Arthur Brookes of Syracuse University demonstrated that religious practice correlates with a higher rate of concern for others. He also found that the positive effects of religion occurred across political boundaries of left and right. Fagan’s research also showed the positive impact of religion on community cohesion.<sup>17</sup>

Providing an outlay of why the free market is most beneficial does not answer sociological matters raised in the theory of relative deprivation. When wealth increases amongst all, but more drastically amongst the upper classes, the offers made by advertising to those who have less may make them feel more inadequate than they did even prior to their actual economic growth. Surely the problem here again is in materialism, and not the economic. Religion and spirituality here provide transcendent values that look beyond what the market can give. The assumption that traditional morality and economic liberalism is incompatible has often led to the false conclusion that the United States is a paradox. However, as DeToqueville noted many years ago, it is the American self-reliance birthed of economic freedom which has led to community – religion and culture – are respected and protected by the populace.

In conclusion, community and character have the capacity to develop and thrive amidst economic changes being brought in at this point in human history's trade relations.

Globalization is succeeding given that at its core are the free market principles supported by the rule of law are creating a context of freedom for socio-cultural strength. The story of globalization is that of peoples adopting economic benefits and integrating financial change into new social and cultural contexts. Individual communities via independent public policy institutes also referred to as think tanks are responding effectively from the bottom up to first hand realities that the Western academic elite has only been able to study through what are essentially second hand accounts. By the reports of many remarkable policy innovators across the world, globalization is strengthening

communities as and when they transform at the grass roots level. Concurrently character gains vitality amongst market participants who develop important virtues through their activity in the industriousness on offer via trade engagements at a variety of levels.

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