

“An Apology for the City: Place in the Global Era”
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There is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening...the dispatches announcing to us the collapse of the last enemy troops, from defeat to defeat, and flakes of wax of the seals of obscure king who beseech our armies' protection, offering in exchange annual tributes of precious metals, tanned hides, and tortoise shell. It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which has seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin.

-Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*¹

Globalization, whether it turns out to be our great utopian triumph or the very whore of Babylon, is not so different than many other topics in the following respect: “there is a great deal of heat, and hardly any light on the subject.”² Part of the problem is the difficulty in pinning down exactly what globalization is—what is its essence? To investigate isn’t idle augury; it’s the work of scholarship, the surgery of separating and cataloging types and forms. The prospects of a sharp definition are not good, but this need not be worrisome. By simply understanding the sorts of things globalization is and is not responsible for, we are more prepared to make accurate axiological claims about it, careful to separate judgments of its essential features from those of its attending circumstances. In this essay I aim to isolate one aspect of globalization I suspect is essential: the disintegration of locality, or place. I will motivate reasons for thinking such a disintegration problematic, but also reflect on how to preserve environments that are conducive to human flourishing in the midst of our planet’s rising political, economic, and cultural convergence.

¹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1974), p. 5.

² Peter Kreeft has used this well-turned phrase to describe sex in contemporary culture. See Peter Kreeft, *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Heaven... But Never Dreamed of Asking* (Fort Collins, Colorado: Ignatius Press, 1971), p. 117.

I

Consider the popular aphorism: “The world is getting smaller.” This phrase is not an expression of a change in the mass or volume of the fourth planet from the sun, but rather an observation of the new capacities available to humans: a capacity to quickly move from continent to continent, a capacity to partner financially, legally, and culturally with people of wildly different surroundings, a capacity to view live broadcasts of war being waged on the other side of the globe. Development is hardly odd, but the recent rate of acceleration is extraordinary. While ease of travel has presumably steadily increased since time immemorial, the internet has collapsed in a decade the difference between communicating with someone the next city over and someone the next ocean over. Yet the recent publishing explosion of books about globalization, even books that simply have the word in the title, makes it easy to overstate the advent of a smaller world.³ It was more than fifty years ago that Heidegger declared a new era of “distancelessness” and the “abolition of every possibility of remoteness.”⁴

The flowering of technology and the glut of trade have certainly played large parts in allowing greater access and familiarity with the world, but globalization suffers no lack of ideologies. In order to facilitate the demands of larger and more diverse markets, institutions tend toward abstraction and generalization. No longer are the distinctive values and textures of places preserved through cultural memory—unless that cultural memory is particularly quaint and can turn a profit—otherwise, homogeneity serves efficiency. For a burgeoning international corporation, expansion allows an extended reach into reservoirs of cheaper labor, foreign investment, and the cushion of

³ Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), p. xxiii.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), pp. 165-88.

predictable aggregates, advantages which exponentially reward those able to capitalize. Distance, setting, and spatial relationships pose one of the largest impediments to this extending, particularly due to their static nature. Shipping can be expedited with better technology, but the distance between London and Tokyo is less negotiable than tariffs and language barriers.

On the question of place, globalization can be understood as an actualization of the conclusions of rationalism and the Enlightenment. Even as early as 1651, William Gilbert declared “There can be no place whatsoever in nature.”⁵ According to Edward Casey, by the seventeenth century, most philosophers, dazzled by the prospects of a scientific revolution, considered place as “nothing more than pure position, or bare point, simply located on one of the XYZ axes that delineate the dimensionality of space...”⁶ The Western conception of space was not always devoid of a sense of place. Aristotle considered the cosmos to be teleological, with aims and intrinsic features of ordering. “Where” is one of the ten indispensable categories of every substance. Aristotle explains place to be “some such thing as a vessel.”⁷ He has in mind a surrounding, or setting. Quite unlike space, which is infinite, place implies a limit; it is rather like a receptacle, or an environment.

Such a conception, with any notion of the distinction between local and distant, is getting short shrift in contemporary discussions. Due to growing distance between boardrooms and the actual sale of commodities, transborder corporations and NGO’s appeal to more “universal” values. Kofi Annan offered a fine example of such an

⁵ William Gilbert, *De mundo nostro sublunary philosophia nova* (Amsterdam, 1651), p. 144.

⁶ Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 199.

⁷ Aristotle, *Physics*, 209a27-28.

encomium to the World Economic Forum in 1998: “Let us choose to unite the power of markets with the authority of universal ideals.”⁸ Surely there is nothing wrong with this, persons ought to be treated with dignity wherever they are found. Aristotle once again reminds us with particular vivacity, however, of the necessary contextualization of virtue through prudence, “practical wisdom.” Measuring the golden mean is *not* an ethereal calculation but the application of wisdom gained through experience. That is why reference to universal ideals, while rhetorically powerful, is fundamentally skewed. Justice and mercy are both reflections of the highest universal, but just and merciful relationships between people are fundamentally particular and incarnate: *embodied* in a place. Aristotle explains that young men can easily gain facility with the principles of mathematics or geometry, but only older men can rule the city with skill. Only the wise understand themselves and their place well enough to know which particular most echoes the universal.⁹

II

Supposing globalization does in fact neglect the history (time extended) and surroundings (place extended) of the particular, can it account for these wrongs? McDonald’s in India have a mutton “Maharaja Mac” to accommodate the uniqueness of their locale; is it clear that globalization is bound to trivialize place?¹⁰ Tyler Cowen is not convinced it is. He defends the benefits of globalization against its critics with typical aplomb, arguing that while the French citizenry’s high gastronomical standards forced French chefs to learn how to make delicious food, global recognition of this fact and

⁸ Kofi Annan "Markets for a Better World", delivered January 31, 1998 at the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland.

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (6.5, 7-8, 13)

¹⁰ Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), p. 60.

subsequent international demand has ensured, to *everyone's* benefit, the preservation of delights like pâté and escargot.¹¹ Cowen distinguishes between *intensive* and *extensive* consumers (or more colloquially: *hobbyists* and *channel surfers*, respectively), reasoning that the two benefit one another indirectly; hobbyists spur improved quality and uniqueness in their preferred niche markets, and channel surfers encourage more options and breadth. As a market grows, whether by slow local expansion or international exposure, more of each type of consumer pushes progress in both directions. Hobbyists in particular benefit from the long arms of the internet; niche online communities, spanning the globe, allow the like-minded to trade boutique interests without leaving their computers.

Cowen's analysis is impressive, but it neglects reference to human teleology. Without any consideration of what humans ought and ought not do, and whether these market conditions will enable their flourishing, Cowen never asks the most important questions. Joshua Hochschild, in a superb essay, notes that while certain human ends seem bereft of the strong phenomenological hallmarks that influence markets (perhaps due to an eroded collective memory), they are nonetheless real.¹² I appeal to such a notion to defend the value of place in human experience. Niche online communities have perhaps exploded into unanticipated popularity, but the forum is fundamentally dehumanizing. This fact has pushed technology to better mimic the experience of actually being with someone, although hugs have resisted the fiber optics. As Hochschild reminds us, Aristotle's definition of man as *the political animal* implies a certain view of the

¹¹ Tyler Cowen, *Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing the World's Cultures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 102.

¹² Joshua P. Hochschild, "Globalization: Ancient and Modern" in *Intercollegiate Review* Vol. 41 No. 1, (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006), p. 43.

organization of relationships (the glue of politics); the three globalisms can be understood as varieties of perversion of this genuine political teleology. Just as significant, however, is the aspect of the definition so obvious it is nearly forgotten, as though any noun could be modified by “political” for a similar result. Hochschild notes that animals need freedom and protection, but even this statement can too quickly neglect their most elemental features. Animals occupy space: they are extended. Animals have mass. They are one of many types of medium-sized dry goods. Animals are sentient; human ones are bombarded with raw sensory data through the five senses, and if one is persuaded by Husserl, their perception is tightly indexed to a sort of phenomenological memory. This perceptual memory, and the continuity Husserl identifies there, now illustratively referred to as a “*stream* of consciousness” finds odd juxtaposition in all sorts of common contemporary human experiences. Consider a flight from Los Angeles to Minnesota in December, as I am about to enjoy. Despite the fact that I have made the trip many times, nothing short of some dark art can prepare me for the icy blast of air exiting the airport, the sudden change in vocal inflections, the different topography and plant life, and all the quirky Minnesotan charm Garrison Keillor makes a living observing.

Continuing from this very physicality of humans, and related, is the nature of their relational dispositions. Nothing said so far necessitates anything directly opposed to what Cowen defends. It strikes us as delightful to eat different ethnic foods, tour the world, do business in Brazil and go on religious pilgrimages in Tibet. Habitual travel reduces discontinuity, and exposure to different forms of life is fascinating. But to consider once again the teleology of humans, the ends for which they are intrinsically patterned, it is not hard to recognize dangers in perpetual change. As Hochschild so aptly notes, the growing

ease and uniformity of travel does corresponding damage: “it makes it easier *not* to go home” and in turn brings about “the weakening of tradition, the loss of individual and cultural memory, the fading of those forms by which transcendent order has heretofore been made incarnate in daily life.”¹³ Human persons, bound by their finitude, can only enjoy a limited number of relationships. Here I take intrapersonal relationships as the bedrock of humane living, but also of a stable political state. Rather than explicate the notion, a stark contrast will better bring relief to what is meant by the term:

Modern nation states which masquerade as the embodiment of community are always to be resisted. The modern nation state, in whatever guise, is a dangerous and unmanageable institution, presenting itself on the one hand as a bureaucratic supplier of goods and services, which is always about to, and never does, give its clients value for money, and on the other as a repository of sacred values, which from time to time invites one to lay down one’s life on its behalf. As I have remarked elsewhere...it is like being asked to die for the telephone company.¹⁴

MacIntyre delivers a hard word, too hard in my mind, but helpful for our purposes. In the current milieu of globalization, it is unclear when, and by what right, *any* life is owed to anything—certainly a saddening state of affairs. The nation is certainly still the agent of military provocation, but national borders are slowly being replaced by trade organizations, global corporations, and transborder NGO’s. Perhaps more than replacement, however, is the total splintering of anything like what Socrates considered his duty to Athens. Globalization, both by making it harder to go home, and making home more like everywhere else, must abstract out of any context (sans “human”) the duties once grounded in neighborhoods, cities, reasonably-sized businesses, churches, and identification with local art. To travel, or even replace locally shared forms of life

¹³ Joshua P. Hochschild, “Globalization: Ancient and Modern” p. 42. Tangentially, it seems an unfortunate result of all this travel is a muddying of local uniqueness, particularly when the industry is apparently unflinching in its determination to make every airport and hotel look the same.

¹⁴ Alastair MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to My Critics,” in *After MacIntyre: Critically Perspectives on the Work of Alastair MacIntyre* eds. Horton, J. and Mendus, S, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 303.

with remote or foreign ones, is to briefly tolerate fragmentation of the self's identity. Perpetual tourism, the archetypal activity for the channel-surfer, or also the obsession with increasingly divergent niches, can fracture any element of a shared identity, insofar as a common heritage, mutual commitment, and shared place were instrumental in shaping the individual.

III

Any contemporary campaign to reinvigorate acknowledgement of the distinction between limitless space and distinct places is well-served to consider the work of two eminent thinkers: Wendell Barry and Pierre Manent. Barry and Manent are particularly helpful as two bracketing extremes of the form of human place I will champion: the city. Pierre Manent's defense of the nation-state, while quite philosophical, makes no claim to isolate the most appropriate political organ for human teleology. He seems to have a romantic affection for the Greek *polis*, but is attempting to effect change in present-day Europe. In this sense, Manent is quite reasonable to observe "The modern state, if it wishes to be free, requires a large and diverse population. It appears then to be city that is deliberately and artificially spread out and diluted."¹⁵ Manent recognizes the natural form that is the city; it is utility that *artificially* spreads out a city to preserve its survival. In fact, to advocate for a return to the city is not to decry the office of the nation, as this would be ridiculous, not to mention ineffectual. The defender of the city recognizes this state of affairs; prudence clearly calls for nations to play the role of the political placeholder, in the contemporary sense, for defense and broad administration. However, if we conceive of politics in the Aristotelian sense, in which the referent is the whole of

¹⁵ Pierre Manent, *A World Beyond Politics? A Defense of the Nation-State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 47.

the local economic, familial, religious, and cultural relational network, cities are most appropriate to preserve a sense of place.

Wendell Barry of course believes otherwise, and with persuasive charm: “this leads us, probably, to as good a definition of the beloved community as we can hope for: common experience and common effort on a common ground to which one willingly belongs.”¹⁶ Modern cities, while maintaining perhaps *some* semblance of common ground and experience, do not seem to be what Barry longs for. What has happened to our cities, are they ruined? Here we face not just a difficult question, but an entangled one, for one might wonder how many real cities still exist. A metropolitan area of millions of people appears to only preserve the value of common place, and decreasingly so. Many smaller cities, if even deserving the name, are really more like enormous neighborhoods—residences dominate these “bedroom communities.” But to speak of the metropolitan areas we live in and frequent as anything other than cities is also odd; what is the pure form we compare them to?

To ask such a question is to immediately evoke the history of the West, so brilliantly described by Russell Kirk as a story of five cities: Athens, Jerusalem, Rome, London, and Philadelphia.¹⁷ The city is also a rich Biblical image: the Sermon on the Mount references the “city on a hill,” and also the New Jerusalem of Revelation:

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.¹⁸

¹⁶ Wendell Barry, *What are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), p. 85.

¹⁷ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2003)

¹⁸ Revelation 21:10,11, *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books 2001)

Something about the current character of cities is unhealthy, but a Renaissance is perhaps ahead:

The healthy cities movement only makes sense if we are prepared to acknowledge that cities are enough like organism that we actually speak of them as healthy or unhealthy. But the essence of organisms is that their wholeness cannot be captured by adding together all their parts. When individual cells evolve into an organism, something new emerges that cannot be described simply by adding together all the cells.¹⁹

Here we arrive where we started: the political teleology of persons and collections of persons. A city is a mean between the shared localized forms Barry praises, and the agent of global political activity Manent recognizes as unavoidable. Cities play host to the variegated cultural icons of humane life, yet cluster commerce around a shared place, preventing the fragmenting of relationships and denying the human needs of incarnation: proximity, touch, and shared experience. Modern cities are larger than they used to be, but this need not worry us, for the diversity of occupations necessitate more inclusive groupings, and the evolution of technology ameliorates living conditions. It is still a cosmopolitan place, large and diverse enough to satisfy aspects of both the hobbyist and the channel surfer. Furthermore, by providing a forum of common place, the city can aid in the reintroduction of two lost relics of our history: a commitment to the sacred trust of shared modes of living, and the importance of roots. When Crito tries to persuade Socrates to flee Athens to save his life, Socrates remarks that “it is impious to bring violence to bear against your mother or father; it is much more so to use it against your country.”²⁰ Such a sentiment strikes modern ears as foolish and shrill, but it is not so very far from the solidarity of the American revolutionaries, especially when we carefully examine what Socrates means by country. Socrates imagines the laws speaking to him:

¹⁹ Daniel Kemmis, *The Good City and the Good Life*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 198.

²⁰ Plato, *Crito*, 51c.

“we have given you birth, nurtured you, educated you...”²¹ The break from English rule and an esteem for state sovereignty is born out of such a value; to share life, to gather around a place, and to commit to the same land is to unite under the bond of a common law. Perseverance yields that most uncommon of modern society’s pleasure: roots.

Simone Weil considers the value of a grounded life:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important need of the human soul...Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.²²

To live such a life, marked by a careful employment of the goods made possible through globalization, but also being grounded in one place, is a noble thing. To die for the liberty necessary for such a life, the opportunity for others, seems the furthest thing from dying for a telephone company.

²¹ Ibid., 51e.

²² Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (New York: G. P. Puttnam’s Sons, 1952), p. 43.