

## Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Globalization

*A critique of globalization's inherent materialistic humanism and its effect upon character and community*

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### I. Introduction

Globalization is a notoriously difficult topic to discuss. This is largely on account of the near un-definability of the term. Indeed, one of the greatest victories of those who are in favor of the socio-politico-technologic-economic force known as globalization is the coining and dissemination of a term which denotes nothing more than a type of motion, but which is masqueraded as signifying a particular, and innately desirable, and, what is more, inevitable end. As Joshua P. Hochschild says, “The term [globalization] is intended to name a process of *change*, but note that this change is without any definite *terminus a quo* or *terminus a quem*. The very grammatical structure of the name ‘globalization’—an adjective, converted into a barbaric verb, then forced into service as a still more barbaric noun—conveys the sense of an incoherent stasis-of-change.”<sup>1</sup>

It is uniquely characteristic of the modern man to create an ambiguity and then to fight for it as if it were a concrete ideal—why this is so is necessarily beyond the scope of this essay, but undoubtedly it is so. It is another characteristic of the modern man to present this ambiguity as if it were also an inevitability—a frustrating habit of thinking adopted both from Hegel’s idea of the historical dialectic, and from the Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest: a habit of thinking that, while at times deigning to allow for the freedom of individual men, makes no provision for the freedom of the human race. For just as Hegel foretold as inevitable the overcoming of the master-slave dialectic at the ‘end’ of history, and Darwin foretold as

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<sup>1</sup>Hochschild, p. 40.

inevitable the dominance of the stronger species, so too are we now told that the process of globalization is inevitable; he who stands in its way is but a reactionary gnat, to be crushed under the unswerving steamroller of progress. This gives globalization, as Hochschild puts it, a certain “resistance to criticism.”<sup>2</sup>

Reactionary gnats are, however, hatched from time to time, and do occasionally manage to make their voices heard, like Dr. Seuss’ “Who” in *Horton Hears a Who*. Typically these voices crying out in the wilderness condemn globalization for its destructive effects upon those very things around which this essay is to be framed—the fundamental human goods of character and community. Such figures include men like G.K. Chesterton (*The Outline of Sanity*), Hilaire Belloc (*The Servile State*), Pope Leo XIII (*Rerum Novarum*), A.F. Schumacher (*Small is Beautiful*), Alexander Solzhenitsyn (Harvard Address and “Repentance and Self-limitation in the Life of Nations”), Wilhelm Ropke (*Economics of the Free Society*) and many others. This essay however, will largely focus on the thought of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, especially his critique of materialistic humanism as it relates to globalization.

## **II. Solzhenitsyn’s critique of materialistic humanism, and globalization defined**

On June 8, 1978, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the exiled Russian author who had gained international fame for his courageous opposition to the Soviet regime, stepped soberly up to the platform at Harvard University. In his strong, commanding voice, and with eyes flashing, he began to deliver that year’s commencement address before a crowd of some ten to fifteen thousand listeners, who stood outside under a drizzly sky.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, p. 460.

A hint of what was to come is found in his greetings to those gathered to hear him speak. “Truth seldom is sweet,” he began, “it is almost invariably bitter. A measure of bitter truth is included in my speech today, but I offer it as a friend, not as an adversary.”<sup>4</sup> Under the evidently invigorating vehemence of this friendship he then proceeded to lob a series of metaphorical hand-grenades into the crowd, sending shockwaves throughout the Western intellectual world.

“[Solzhenitsyn] looked at times like Lenin, at times like Fidel Castro,” relates Solzhenitsyn’s biographer, D. M. Thomas, “punching the air to hammer home his points. The numerous pacific, irreligious humanists in his bedrizzled audience became punch-drunk; they weren’t used to being harangued. Especially by a dissident whom they had, at a distance, applauded and deeply admired.”<sup>5</sup>

“A decline in courage may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West,” Solzhenitsyn began, adding forebodingly, “Must one point out that from ancient times a decline in courage has been considered the first symptom of the end?”<sup>6</sup> He continued, denouncing the West for its lack of personality, legalism, moral decadence, intellectual and social shallowness, enslavement to fashion, passivity, short-sightedness, and more. At the conclusion of the speech, relates Thomas, “Harvard’s liberal intelligentsia, most of them furious as well as wet, stood up and cheered him.”<sup>7</sup>

Upon his exile from the Soviet Union liberal Westerners, such as those present in the Harvard audience, embraced Solzhenitsyn as one of their own, admiring him for his powerful critique of the inhumane authoritarianism of the Soviet Union. But the Russian author evidently

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<sup>4</sup>Solzhenitsyn, p. 562.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas p. 461.

<sup>6</sup>Solzhenitsyn, p. 564.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas, p. 462.

did not wish to reciprocate the embrace merely because he shared a common enemy with the West. A common enemy may be a powerful unifier, but it does not necessarily imply a common ideal. In the case of Solzhenitsyn v. Harvard, it was made abundantly clear that in their ideals the West's intelligentsia and the Russian author were worlds apart.

Solzhenitsyn made it especially clear that anti-communism does not translate into rabid pro-capitalism and pro-democracy-ism. Indeed, he criticized as practically identical in moral significance and effect democratic capitalism and communistic socialism: "We have placed too much hope in politics and social reforms," he said, "only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life. It is trampled by the party mob in the East, by the commercial one in the West. This is the essence of the crisis: The split in the world is less terrifying than the similarity of the disease afflicting its main sections."<sup>8</sup> Both communism and capitalism, suggested Solzhenitsyn, are offshoots from the same trunk: the trunk of anti-spiritual, materialistic humanism—a theme that he (and I) will return to often.

Obviously Solzhenitsyn's Harvard address was not devoted to denouncing globalization, at least not under that name, which is somewhat of a recent coinage. What Solzhenitsyn discerned and called out in his address was the force that drives the socio-politico-technologic-economic life in the West. With his penetrating mind he saw at the very heart of the West a disease, a disease which it shared in common with the communist East. He did not attack globalization under that name, but he did attack the underlying disease that is the proximate inspiration both for communism, and for the inhumane globalist ideal.

In particular, Solzhenitsyn denounced the West's enthusiastic embrace of the materialistic humanistic program that largely came out of the Enlightenment. This program is based on the supposition that man is an entirely material being; as such it excludes any non-

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<sup>8</sup> Solzhenitsyn, p. 575.

material aims, and therefore necessarily deprives us of “our most precious possession: our spiritual life.” This ideology of humanistic materialism gave life to the communist ideal of creating an earthly paradise entirely through social reform. It is also the ideology that drives the globalist ideal.

The term globalization is almost always invoked by those who wish to push technological advancement, universal political unification, expanding social networking and international trade forward at breakneck speeds. It is considered a given that such “progress” is the *de facto* good of the human race. In this way globalization, like communism, seeks to institute an earthly paradise through progress in the material realm; like communism, it either ignores or outright denies man’s spiritual nature—and thereby his deepest desires and needs. Globalization is not (as is so often claimed) merely the subjective sense of a shrinking globe; the sense of a shrinking globe is only one side-effect of a more comprehensive ideology. Globalization is, in its essence, nothing other than the West’s trademark version of the ancient ideology of materialism.

“If, as is claimed by humanism, man were born only to be happy” Solzhenitsyn concluded, “he would not be born to die. Since his body is doomed to death, his task on earth evidently must be more spiritual: not a total engrossment in everyday life, not the search for the best ways to obtain material goods and then their care-free consumption.”<sup>9</sup>

### **III. Character and community defined**

The word character is used in several disparate ways. In one sense it means that the thing which is being described is unique; in this sense a venerable old building is said to “have character.” Another sense of the word, equally common, signifies the sum total attributes of a particular person, place or thing. For instance, one might remark on the “character” of a certain wine—thereby signifying the sum of its flavors, colors, textures, etc.

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<sup>9</sup>Solzhenitsyn, p. 575.

These two uses of character are superficial in meaning. The third usage of the word is what I will call the mystical usage. “He is a man of true character,” one might say about some principled statesman or religious figure. Character in this sense strikes a much deeper chord than mere external uniqueness. It bypasses superficialities and plunges into a thing’s innermost depths, striking at the very source of the uniqueness that a thing has. At the very center of a man, of course, is his soul, that integral, inexplicable thing that allows a man to call himself a complete, unified “self”.

In this sense “character” becomes a word signifying spiritual things. Hence this use of character is typically used only in describing a human being, or in describing something created by a human being—usually a work of art that seems somehow to have within it something of the soul of the artist. Character in this mystical sense refers to the strength of the fundamental principle from whence springs the diverse external attributes and actions of a man. At the very least, character denotes the nobility and strength of a man’s most dearly held principles and beliefs—but more so it denotes the strength and integrity of his very essence: his strength of soul.

In this sense the term character also returns us to Solzhenitsyn’s critique of materialistic humanism, and as such, his critique of globalization. In his Harvard address, the word that Solzhenitsyn uses (at least as translated) is not “character” but “personality”. Clearly, however, what Solzhenitsyn is speaking of is precisely the same thing that I have defined as the mystical meaning of “character”. “A fact which cannot be disputed is the weakening of human personality in the West while in the East it has become firmer and stronger,” said Solzhenitsyn.

Six decades for our people and three decades for the people of Eastern Europe; during that time we have been through a spiritual training far in advance of Western experience. The complex and deadly crush of life has produced strong, deeper, and more interesting personalities than those generated by standardized

Western well-being.... After the suffering of decades of violence and oppression, the human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits...by the revolting invasion of commercial advertising, by TV stupor, and by intolerable music....<sup>10</sup>

By this point it should be clear why Solzhenitsyn focused on the virtue of courage in criticizing the spiritual weakness of the West. For what other virtue, in its possession, reveals so absolutely that the interior of a man or a civilization is strong, well-nourished, and full of vitality?

It is yet somewhat unclear how this relates to globalization; however, before drawing the connection it is necessary to define community. The word "community," in its weakest form, is used to describe a group of people situated within a particular geographic area. The problem with this definition is that, like the first two definitions of character, it is open to a broad—indeed almost arbitrary—interpretation; this is witnessed in the fact that we now speak of the global community, or the "global village," a phrase which Hochschild calls, "a metaphor stretched beyond sense."<sup>11</sup> If community is defined only geographically, then the geographic boundaries that define the community can be arbitrarily contracted or enlarged, in which case the word loses almost all meaning.

Obviously community is something more than this. A clue to its nature is found in the etymological root of the word. As the conservative Luigino Bruni explains, community "comes from '*communus*,' meaning 'reciprocal gift'."<sup>12</sup> Community, therefore, is based upon a two-way relationship, and in particular the relationship of the giving of a gift.

The gift that communion—and, by extension, community—ultimately demands, is the gift of self. As Hochschild writes, community "involves genuine obligations—that is,

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 569-570.

<sup>11</sup>Hochschild, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup>Bruni, p. 464.

commitments, rights and responsibilities that are not the product of, or terminable, by choice.”<sup>13</sup>

In a true community one is bound in obligation to another; one’s very being is, therefore, practically bound up in the other. This “gift of self” that is necessary for—that, indeed, *is* the very nature of—community is most properly achieved in love. Love is the most intimate, and the most complete form of communion; it is the form of communion which all legitimate forms of communion in some way resemble and strive towards.

Of course, community can also be achieved through laws; but these contrived communities are also only really communities insofar as they demand a mutual gift of self. Here it is necessary to invoke Hochschild again. “Plato’s political philosophy is *organicist*,” he says.

The word implies literally an *organ*-ized body—a body with organs. A political entity, on this view, is a unified body whose purpose is to serve and to be served by parts—individual human beings—which have their own functions and ends....On this account political association is not to be understood merely as the effect of human will—either the incidental outgrowth of individual decisions, or the intentional effects of coordinated self-interest. Political associations are rather outgrowths of human nature: not just what human beings want and decide, but what they *are*.<sup>14</sup>

This treatment of political unions calls to mind Aristotle’s definition of man as the “political animal.” Man is a being whose nature is gregarious, whose very purpose and fulfillment demands the giving of himself to another. In the Christian world-view, man’s eternal end is nothing other than the eternal, mutual gift of self in the ultimate communion of the Beatific Vision.

But, as was pointed out in the discussion of character, the “self” is most properly a spiritual thing, the soul. Community, therefore, is based upon a communion of souls. It cannot be otherwise. If community is not understood in this way than it is only a meaningless accident

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<sup>13</sup>Hochschild, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

of proximity or mutual inclusion under a certain legal code. This definition of community signifies little more than the proximity of Epicurean atoms, bouncing into one another and careening off on a pre-determined, meaningless course. No matter how violently the atoms may collide, nothing meaningful can ever be exchanged between them; no communion can ever occur.

In a world that makes no room for spirit, neither character nor communities have any significant basis in reality. In a materialistic universe, character is only the sum total of a number of external accidents unified into one being in the mind, while community is little more than the accidental proximity to other human beings.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The West has forgotten, or has outright denied, the spiritual nature of man, without which there can be no true character, and no true communion. Solzhenitsyn understood this. He understood that when the spiritual nature of man is denied or forgotten, man will devote himself entirely to natural pursuits; he will attempt to define himself by what he achieves, and how he expresses himself externally, or materially.

Nowhere in the West is this more clearly made manifest than in the globalist ideal. Its adherents typically deny the intrinsic spiritual freedom of man by asserting that globalization is inevitable, as though the units that drive globalization forwards are indeed blind, Epicurean atoms, and not free, spiritual human beings. At its root, globalization asserts that men should seek economic, technological, social, and political progress, with no thought for their own individual spiritual good, or for the spiritual good of their civilization. Material progress is the whole good, the *de facto* good of the human race. The result is that men expend all of their energies on expanding outwards: all of their energies are concentrated on the periphery of their

personal life and of the life of their civilization. Never do they think to turn inwards and nourish the spirit, which is the truest and only source of strength and meaning that a man and a civilization has. If the spirit is neglected, individual men will day by day weaken in spiritual strength, and their civilizations will rot and decay from the inside.

In a materialistic civilization, driven by material progress, it may very well be that the market will flourish; wealth increase exponentially; technology advance rapidly; governments grow and become more unified in purpose; and international communication and travel be made easy and efficient. But it will also be true that greed will abound; boredom, restlessness, and anger flourish; and wealth become concentrated in the hands of the few. The many will become dehumanized cogs in the wheels of the market; technological companions (T.V., iPods, computers, video games) become the replacements for friends and family; and a sense of alienation become commonplace. Government will take upon itself the position of the nanny state because its citizens no longer have the internal strength or will power care for themselves; and communication will undergo a quantitative increase, but not serve its proper end of engendering true communion. True character, the character of a strong, moral, youthful civilization that has cultivated its spiritual core, will die. With it will die all sense of, all desire for, and all ability for true, selfless, spiritual communion, and true community will become a relic of the past.