

Marketplace of Sameness:

The Struggle for Character and Communal Identity in an Age of Globalization

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I. Introduction

Globalization is a fierce, transformative process by which individuals, communities and nations from every corner of the planet are tied into a relentlessly expanding web of interconnectedness and interdependence. Although the world has experienced several ages of globalization throughout history, the 20th century's revolution in communication and transportation technology has propelled global connectivity to new heights. Boys in Uganda wear soccer jerseys donated in Minnesota, and girls in Shanghai sport the latest fashions from Paris. A village in Kenya slaughters a bull to honor an American politician, and the hatred of a few radicals in Kandahar leaves thousands dead in New York. Proponents of globalization contend that, as disparate peoples grow closer together, economic prosperity, dynamic cultural development and enduring peace will inevitably follow as unique and varied communities merge into a single "global community" consisting of "global citizens." However, a community requires more than the interconnectivity and interdependence offered by globalization. This paper will begin by examining the fundamental characteristics of community and the role of character within community. This paper will then argue that while globalization seems to create a global community, what results is not actually a community, but a system in which states and other actors are united solely on the basis of shared interests devoid of any universally accepted notion of character or set of binding moral values. We will further see that globalization threatens to undermine the essence of communities by imposing a homogenized and amoral understanding of character. This paper will conclude by showing that, in order to secure the benefits of globalization without sacrificing the integrity of community and character, communities must strengthen their traditional moral underpinnings and then seek a set of universal truths and binding moral values to unify mankind in a single global community.

II. The Essence of Community

The fundamental essence of a community lies in those features that unite its members within a common set of interests and values. The word “community” finds its earliest linguistic roots in the Latin word “communis,” meaning “common or general.” Although communities are often thought of as existing within certain geographical constraints, proximity alone does not constitute the commonality that unites a community. A community in rural Indiana, for example, is united by similar economic, cultural and political pursuits. Likewise, residents of Chinatown in Manhattan share a cultural heritage that distinguishes them from their neighbors in Little Italy and SOHO. While the common economic, cultural and political concerns of a community are often its most immediately distinguishing characteristics, communities are rooted in a deeper conception of character, a fundamental source of moral value and identity which maintains its integrity even in the absence of a common physical location. In the wake of the Diaspora, the Jewish state lost its traditional homeland but nevertheless maintained a considerable degree of communal integrity through the continued practice of the Jewish faith. Jews in London and Bukhara may have starkly different economic, political, and cultural concerns, yet they are united by their common faith in Yahweh and adherence to the text of the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, an American born and raised in Boston may have considerably different political leanings from his countryman in Provo, but they both pledge allegiance to the same flag and are governed by the same Constitution. Therefore, while the most obvious features of a community may lie in shared economic, cultural and political interests, the most fundamental and enduring element of any community is the concept of character that unites its members within a common set of moral values. The enduring moral character of a people is the

essence that binds their community together regardless of changing economic, political or cultural ties.

III. Globalization's Approximation of Community

To a certain extent, globalization approximates the creation of community by uniting states and individuals in a growing network of economic, cultural and political interconnectivity and interdependence. In an age of globalization, markets for goods and services extend across oceans and continents, across political boundaries and cultural differences. Whether it be the multi-billion dollar transnational corporations manufacturing products in Guangdong and selling them in Geneva or the African women selling bead necklaces online to customers in New York, globalization is rapidly uniting distant producers and consumers within a growing number of complex and improbable economic relationships. Globalization has furthermore led to a rapid increase in cultural flows from communities that previously had very little contact with each other. In his discussion of "uploading" as a globalizing force, author Thomas Friedman points out that internet technology allows for the instantaneous exchange of information and enables individuals from any culture to post music, art, philosophical writings or scholarly work to the internet ("The World" 93). Increasing economic prosperity and decreasing transportation costs have enabled a meteoric rise in academic and cultural exchange: "The number of Americans studying abroad has increased more than 150% during the past decade" (Dept. of State, "Media Note"). Furthermore, in an age of globalization, political relations among states and individuals grow in intensity and scope. The UN brings the leaders of democracies and tyrannies into the same room, and concepts of freedom and political right infiltrate the most repressed societies through the mediums of internet technology, radio and foreign travel.

The inevitable result of these increased points of contact between different economies, cultures and political systems is a rapid rise in interdependence. As military strategist Thomas Barnett notes, “globalization is a condition defined by mutually assured dependence” (122). The political, economic and cultural interests of all communities are increasingly subject to forces and events that occur far beyond their borders. Political instability in Pakistan threatens American foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan. The recent tumult in the US credit markets is reverberating across the globe as China faces the possibility of its first economic slowdown in over a decade. In 2003, the decision of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church to elect a gay bishop led to an outcry in dioceses in Africa, Asia and South America and threatened a schism within the Anglican Church. Just as the bankruptcy of a local business, the impeachment of a politician or construction of a new church can significantly impact the lives of individuals within a small community, globalization is working to unite disparate communities from every continent into one economic, political and cultural web of interdependence.

IV. The Failure of Global Community

However, globalization does not create a common set of moral values, a conception of the good or notion of character to unite the disparate peoples of the world into a single community. Instead, globalization results in a system in which states and other actors are united on the basis of shared interests. Globalization does not create a “global community” but a “global system,” an international system of economic interaction, cultural exchange and political cooperation that depends on the participants perceiving their self-interest as dependent on the survival of the system. The underlying ethical question guiding participation in the global system is not “What obligations do I have as a member of this international system?” but “How can I benefit from this global economy and political system?”. There is little room for altruism on the

global stage. At best, there develops what Tocqueville called “the doctrine of self-interest properly understood,” under which man are motivated, not by moral duty, but by the belief that “by serving his fellows man serves himself and that doing good is to his private advantage” (Tocqueville 528). International actors support the global system because their own economic and political interests are tied up in it. The justifying logic of the International Monetary Fund is that all nations have a shared interest in currency stability. Rampant inflation or sudden deflation of any currency affects the stability of economies all around the world. Transnational corporations sign deals in order to secure a higher profit and governments sign treaties in order to achieve political or security objectives. As Barnett argues, the major military conflicts in an age of globalization will not be between great powers like China and the US, but between “globalization’s Functioning Core,” the countries that are actively participating in globalization, and the “Non-Integrating Gap,” the mass of nations that remain disconnected from globalization’s expanding network (4). Despite starkly different political values and conceptions of human rights, the economic interests of the US and China are inextricably linked to the stability of the international economic system and, even more importantly, to each other: in 2005 alone, America took nearly 23% of China’s exports (Dept. of State, “Fact Sheet”). It is in neither country’s interest to engage in conflict with one another, for to do so would deny China a market for its goods and America a supply of cheap merchandise. It is in both their interests to support the continued expansion of globalization and multiplication of the economic opportunities it offers.

In the absence of a common moral bond, a universal conception of the good or notion of character, globalization will never lead to the creation of a “global community.” As argued above, community requires more than economic, political and cultural ties. It needs something

deeper, something that speaks to the fundamental spiritual needs of men. The international system of interconnectivity and interdependence furthered by globalization lacks what Thomas Friedman calls the “olive tree,” that element of human society that represents “everything that roots us, anchors us, identifies us and locates us in this world” (“The Lexus” 31). Communities cannot exist in the absence of that distinguishing character that provides “feelings of self-esteem and belonging that are as essential for human survival as food in the belly” (Friedman, “The Lexus” 31). Without the olive tree, without character, men may exist in relation to one another; they may trade, exchange ideas and sign treaties, but they will never belong to a community.

Furthermore, in the absence of character or any universally accepted notion of duty, collective moral action and obedience to laws become entirely unreliable. Kant argues that the “imperative of duty” must maintain “full authority as a self-sufficient law” regardless of its impact on individual self-interest (64). For, if obedience to duty and respect for laws are based on the individual’s self-interest, then duty and law lose all authority. The individual may simply rebel and disregard his duty as soon as it conflicts with his own personal self interest: “...the people are unwilling to give up their universal human desire to seek happiness in their own way, and thus become rebels” (Kant 83). This can be seen in the modern age of globalization as the “international community” repeatedly fails to take decisive action on moral issues when to do so would conflict with the self-interest of powerful international actors. For example, although the UN expressly prohibits genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, “a minority of [UN Security] Council members, led by China, have let their economic interests trump their moral and legal responsibility to thwart genocide” in the Darfur region of Sudan (“The Genocide”). Without character, the possibility for coordinated moral action is at the mercy of the whims and caprices of self-interest.

V. Globalization's Threat

Globalization not only fails to create community on a global scale, but also threatens the communities of participants in globalization by imposing a chaotic, homogenized and entirely amoral understanding of character and culture. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, many critics of globalization feared that “globalization” meant “Americanization” and that the rise of interconnectivity would provide avenues for American culture to overwhelm and annihilate the cultures of less powerful nations. However, although a Chinese teenager may listen to Nsync on the latest iPod while sipping a coke and shopping for a new pair of Nike sneakers, she is far less likely to quote the *Federalist Papers*, let alone promote the defining principles of American democracy as a model for Chinese political development. On the contrary, the “biggest threat” to character and communities in the 21st century are the “anonymous, transnational, homogenizing, standardizing market forces and technologies that make up today’s globalizing economic system” (Friedman, “The Lexus” 34). It is not the domination of any particular nation that threatens communities, but the morally relative economic laws which promote whatever is popular, efficient and effective regardless of traditional conceptions of good and understandings of identity. While Friedman argues that the global system offers opportunities to the “weakest political community to actually use the new technologies and markets to preserve...their culture and identity” by promoting it on the international stage, in reality, the global system values and propagates only what sells (35). Since globalization lacks a moral foundation, a unifying conception of character, participants in globalization run the risk of losing their sense of identity, their character and moral values amidst the leveling and chaotic forces of global interconnectivity. An endless variety of ideas, fashions, and products flood the global

marketplace and, in the absence of any moral guide, impersonal and amoral market forces determine value and establish norms on entirely relativistic terms.

Globalization's chaotic and valueless homogenization threatens to create a massive moral confusion that will undermine and disrupt communities everywhere. The economic, cultural and political connectivity of globalization injects chaos into traditionally stable communities:

“Markets generate both capital and chaos; the more powerful markets become as a result of globalization, the more widespread and diverse their disruptions” (Friedman, “The Lexus” 329).

The allure of international trends, new ideas, new products and new opportunities threaten to draw younger generations away from the foundational moral values and traditional roles that rooted them in a community. As Barnett argues, “the continuity of the past,” in an age of globalization, “will in most cases end with callous disregard for tradition” (122). In 21st century America, we are witnessing an alarming dearth of knowledge of fundamental elements of American historical, cultural and political heritage: A recent study by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute found that 71% of Americans failed a basic test on US heritage in 2008 (“Summary”). Thus, the great risk of globalization is that, confronted with a multitude of new cultural, economic and political experiences within an ever-expanding global system devoid of any enduring conception of the good, individual citizens may lose their sense of identity, their understanding of the fundamental elements of character that unite them within a particular community.

VI. The Way Forward

Despite the challenges posed by globalization, isolationism is not the answer. As the protectionism following World War I demonstrated, the separation of nations and peoples from one another leads to economic decline, mutual distrust and global conflict of the greatest

magnitude. For all its problems, globalization has brought increased economic growth to developed and developing countries alike and created valuable avenues of cultural exchange that bring peoples closer together while greatly diminishing the potential for military conflict among: “...where globalization has spread, there you will find stable governments that neither require our [America’s] periodic military interventions nor warrant our consideration as threats” (Barnett 121). Globalization must not be abandoned.

However, in order to preserve community and character and escape the amoral homogenization of global market forces, we must strengthen the fundamental moral underpinnings and sources of heritage that define communities and make them unique. This process of reestablishing the foundation of community is necessarily peculiar to each individual community. Instead of structuring their educational system solely around the needs of the global marketplace, the Chinese could turn back to the writings of Confucius and traditional Buddhist and Daoist texts. African communities could seek to maintain traditional systems of family networks and tribal customs in the face of rampant urbanization and emigration. In America, we must demand that public schools and private universities endow students with a basic understanding of the sources of American heritage: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the role of Judeo-Christian values, and critical historical events and figures. We must go even further and encourage popular participation in civic life for, as Tocqueville observed, “patriotism is a sort of religion strengthened by practical service” (Tocqueville 69). The net effect of these efforts must be to give all citizens a firm foundation in their traditional communities. Citizens must not search for their identity in the international system of 21st century globalization, for they will only find amoral homogenization, a set of forces that

devalues and deconstructs morality and culture, community and character, into items with a price tag.

With the integrity of communities secured, mankind can embark on a quest to establish a common conception of character, a universally binding set of moral values to which all participants in globalization may submit. Without such character, globalization will never result in a global community; it will continue as a force of growth, connectivity and chaos without every unifying men in a single moral whole. One of the many problems with the current attempts to promote “global citizenship,” is that it is promoted without any reference to universally applicable moral truths. Moral relativity rules the day as people, terrified of giving offense, resort to politically correct platitudes about the need to avoid judging others. Those who seek to create a global community must instead encourage a lively debate on the fundamental truths that define human existence. However, it is essential that individuals participate in these debates from positions of strength. Without a firm foundation in the character of our own community, without a thorough understanding of our own heritage, we cannot possibly offer anything of value to a global debate on moral truth. If we enter the global arena ignorant of who we are, of our moral identity in a particular community, we become merely passive receivers of the homogenizing forces of globalization.

Uniting a world fractured along religious, ethnic, and political fault-lines under a single conception of character is the only path to a global community that is truly communal. Technological advances have made globalization an unstoppable force of human progress, but, in this age of globalization, there is nothing inevitable about the fate of character and community. Leadership, courage and a renewed commitment to fundamental moral truths are perhaps the only hope for the preservation of communal identity in this age of globalization.

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