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Yale College 2010
12/31/2009

*Economic Prosperity and Cultural Peril:
The Promise of Globalization*

Globalization is the most important fact of our time. We are experiencing a revolution not merely of the political order, but a revolution in the transnational order, a revolution in the way we live and do business, the way we conceive of ourselves and of mankind, a revolution, to quote Burke, "in manners, morals, and sentiments." This revolution promises a reduction in poverty and strife—and seems already to have delivered on that promise substantially—while also bringing new instabilities and economic difficulties. The most important consequences of globalization, however, go beyond the economic. A breakdown in national and cultural boundaries may reduce conflict but also threatens community. And a breakdown in community threatens character, fraternity, virtue—the ends for which we live, to which economic goods can only provide the means. In this essay I want to briefly reflect on the economic promise and cultural peril brought by globalization, and to consider how we ought to make the best of it.

Principles of Economics

The history of economic thought is in large part the history of the defense of free trade. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* attempted to destroy the mercantilist mythology which privileged state control over free commercial exchange. To use the terminology of modern economics, Smith realized that the wealth of nations was not a zero sum game—one country's gain was not another country's loss. In the same way that a buyer and seller both benefit when willingly trading, two nations both benefit through the aggregation thereof. Nations that wealth, Smith demonstrated, should spend less time plundering and more producing and trading to make everybody better off. In this he was an enthusiastic globalist.

David Ricardo can be considered the first modern economist and also history's first polemicist against protectionism. Throughout his career he was motivated by his opposition to England's Corn Laws. The principles of comparative advantage, which he illuminated, revealed precisely how all nations benefit from free trade. If our country's resources or the talent of our population allow us to produce one good relatively better than another, then both the world's total product and our own income can be increased when we produce those for which we have relative advantage, and trade for those in which we have a relative disadvantage. This allocation of production allows the greatest prosperity and is the natural result of economic pressures in free markets. Government controls to protect industries in which nations have a disadvantage only hurt that country by allocating capital to less efficient uses, decreasing the world's total supply. They also hurt the nation's total income and decrease the exports which could be used to purchase superior imports. They make everybody worse off.

Modern economics is, of course, more complicated than this, and many scholars have claimed that there are circumstances in which globalization and trade hurt the weaker party. And although trade usually helps everyone in the long run, the transition, in which once prosperous industries die and take jobs with them, is always painful. An argument can be made for efforts to mitigate the pains of these transitions. Additionally, economists have not yet achieved a complete consensus that free trade is always good for developing countries. Even so, nearly all would admit that, though there could be some exceptions, trade usually benefits all parties.

Despite this, the media are constantly concerned by economic globalization. They make us more aware of the pains of economic change than of the benefits. When a manufacturing plant closes and moves across the border, it is covered on the news and we see it; when protectionism stops jobs from ever being created, we don't see it—the costs of protectionism are invisible.

Cheaper, better-made cars, and the creation of new jobs dispersed throughout the country don't make headlines as attractive as stories of manufacturing jobs in one place being lost to China. Consequently, more attention is drawn to the bads of globalization than the goods, and politicians feel pressured to protect dying industries. But these efforts always fail. If economic forces cause a nation to lose its comparative advantage in an industry, political interference can't maintain it very long. And jobs are destroyed every time taxes and tariffs are raised for protection. Protectionism usually only *delays* painful job losses while slowing the economy's dynamic transition to new industries.

The economic calculus, then, in my view, is clear: globalization brings enormous economic benefits. It has contributed to American prosperity and dragged billions out of poverty, bringing extended political freedom with it. The process is imperfect, to be sure, but it is the best hope for the world's impoverished. And the alternative—government interference—often adds to the harms while delaying the benefits.

But economics isn't everything. Even as we celebrate globalization's material benefits, we should be wary of cultural peril.

The Us

The great humorist P.G. Wodehouse relies on a hilarious trope in creating the lovable but ridiculous dandy, Bertie Wooster. Whenever Bertie attempts to summon moral courage for some vainglorious endeavor, he speaks with pride of the heroic qualities of "we Woosters." It is a source of humor for the readers who know that the only Woosters who figure strongly in Wodehouse's stories—Bertie and Aunt Agatha—are far from courageous martyrs. Though he uses it for humorous effect, Wodehouse clearly observes what a wide variety of moral philosophers and cultural critics have noticed: moral statements are very often phrased,

understood, and felt as "us"-statements. Members of families speak with pride about the Shaffer way or the Smith way. Religious groups often phrase their moral imperatives as we-statements. And citizens speak fondly of the American way and American values. Wodehouse makes humorous use of this universal tendency. But the question arises, if our moral sensibilities flow largely from our sense of solidarity with a group, then what shall happen in a world without community identity?

We have recently seen a revival in Aristotelianism in moral philosophy. It is largely motivated by a frustration with the nihilism and contentious disagreement found at the end of reasoning from pure abstraction and individualistic calculation. This neo-Aristotelianism seeks an account of morality better grounded in the shared interests and values of a community.

In contrast to Aristotle, Plato had hoped to discover the Good by ascending intellectually to the pure forms—a perfect, mathematical reality, separate from experience. The history of philosophy shows how hard it is, for even Plato's most devoted acolytes, to grasp these forms. Frustrated with inability to get beyond experience and culture to the unmediated Platonic form or the thing-it-self, many philosophers determined to abandon metaphysics altogether, hoping to reconstruct morality around individual, material interests. Others abandoned foundational moral philosophy, advocating pragmatism. And yet even this has also proved unsatisfactory, ending in nihilism.

The best hope for moral philosophy, many believe, is the neo-Aristotelian project articulated by Alasdair MacIntyre. He hopes to avoid the excesses of Platonic celestial abstraction and the mundane materialism of individualistic calculus, by drawing on Aristotle and his communitarianism. We should begin our moral enquiry, Aristotle and MacIntyre would argue, by looking to the community around us. Morality is to be located in the shared values and

common interests of a community, rationality in their shared traditions and conversations. A morality that is abstracted from human life, existing in Platonic forms, is either impossible to discern or impossible to apply; a morality that is based on individual self-interest is no morality at all.

The insights and promise of neo-Aristotelian philosophy on the one hand provide hope for a belief in, and justification of, the good life. But it also brings a frightening implication for a globalized era. If morality and rationality are inextricable from a community, then a world without community becomes a world with in which rational morality is impossible. If the good life cannot be abstracted from the shared interests and concerns of a community or the shared conversations of a tradition, then what becomes of a world without communities, without peoples, without traditions?

The U.S.

We can perhaps address the philosophical question from a cultural perspective. Is America a community today? Is there such a thing as an American people? It becomes ever hard to answer in the affirmative. The fact that we are able to speak of a culture war indicates a broken America. Increasingly there are different sides within our own country, and we become strangers and aliens to our fellow citizens within our common borders. The rancor of our politics, the nastiness of late-night talk shows, and the varieties of political humor that concern themselves with demographic stereotypes, all seem to show that in an increasingly globalized world Americans are ceasing to consider Americanism as a primary constituent of their identity, and now identify more strongly along ideological and other demographic grounds. We are no longer bound together by common interests and sentiments as on a ship of state. Without a feeling of common interests and common enemies, we turn on each other.

And, when we no longer believe in an American people, in a distinct 'us,' with distinct character, distinct values, and a distinct destiny, what are the consequences for our political order? American liberty has in large part been sustained by the American's conception of herself—as dedicated to freedom, valuing the individual, independent and rugged. Without a belief in an American people, the values that have extended from this community may fade as well.

Comedians today like to use 'un-American' as a term of ironic abuse. Whenever we wish to demean a politician or thinker for being inexcusably backward, we adopt an ironic tone, feign a southern accent, and express their position as, 'that's un-American.' But there was a time when it was possible to use the word 'un-American' earnestly. Then, fascism, communism, and all forms of totalitarianism were sincerely rejected as un-American. And we should be thankful. For it was precisely this assertive sense of an 'us'—jealous after our freedoms, committed to our founding narratives of liberty and prosperity—that preserved freedom in America, allowing us to preserve it for the rest of the world. Long before the fall of the Berlin wall economically and politically discredited communism, it was rejected in America as contrary to the distinct values and destiny according to which the country was founded.

The Gettysburg Address is perhaps the most beautiful expression of a belief in an American people. Lincoln spoke of *our* fathers bringing forth a new nation, a metaphor in which a whole nation is conceived of as a family. And he resolves that our distinctive project and destiny as a people, "government of the people, by the people, for the people," and the American dream of liberty and equality, "shall not perish from the earth." We as a people, for Lincoln, are linked from birth to destiny. It is a sentiment which seems to be fading among Americans today.

What is to be done?

To join the reaction against globalization would be a dangerous move. Many anti-globalization efforts are based on shoddy economics, and accomplish little to protect character and community, while doing much to harm the march of prosperity for those most in need. What efforts we take to protect community from any corrosive effects of globalization must not be of this hasty and counterproductive variety. We should be skeptical of protectionism, isolationism, and any other too-heavy reliance on the state.

My proposal is to preserve character by re-committing ourselves to community and our best civic institutions. Irving Babbitt articulated a great defense of the puritans in *Democracy and Leadership*. In contemporary discourse, to call someone 'puritanical,' is to accuse her of imposing strict, authoritarian rules on others. But historically, as Babbitt demonstrates, this is unlike America's puritan founders. They were, to the contrary, extremely jealous of political liberty, and were truly puritanical only in their attempts at self-restraint and self-discipline. Babbitt goes so far as to suggest that the central political question for all time is whether restraint should be exercised by an external political order—as in totalitarian states—or whether the individual should exercise self-restraint—as for America's puritans. For Babbitt, ironically enough, true liberalism and true Puritanism depend on each other, for the best protection against burgeoning state authority is the society of self-regulating individuals.

In *The Quest for Community*, Robert Nisbet develops this idea with one important difference: Nisbet considers the central conflict to be between community and state, rather than individual and state. For him, history's particular intellectual villain is Rousseau, who hoped to 'liberate' men from the strictures of the church, the guild, the town and the community with a strong, 'rational' state.

The historical consequences of this philosophy have been grim. But the philosophical underpinnings are flawed, too. Rousseau was correct to observe that communities direct and restrain the individual as much as the state. But he was wrong, I think, to conclude that man must be liberated from these communities. Not all checks on individual autonomy are bad *per se*.

But why did Rousseau think they were? We all associate Rousseau with the phrase ‘noble savage.’ Men were, Rousseau presumed, naturally good, noble human beings. It was only the coercion of the church, of the university, of the guild, and of the community at large, that made us bad. To make us good again, Rousseau's logic goes, a strong state that will liberate us from these irrational institutions is required.

Rousseau is not alone in this. One can find points of agreement between him and Plato and Marx and even Marcuse. But totalitarianism lurks as the consequence of this premise. And this modern totalitarianism is particularly dangerous because it poses as liberalism. It can do so because it employs a Rousseau's justification of liberating the individual from the binds of community and religion. For Nisbet, this shows the dangers of exalting individualism as the highest ideal—hostility toward community and institutions can, in fact, lead to a loss of liberty.

In contrast to the tradition of Rousseau there is the story of creation in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Here it is said that man is fallen and corrupt from *birth*, not by the evils of community. Fallen man's wayward desires must be mitigated and corrected by institutions, forces and even Grace, all forces external to the individual himself.

And Aristotle, though not within the Judeo-Christian tradition, looked to his community, classical Athens, not as a corrupting or oppressive influence, but one in which to become a virtuous person through friendship, through interaction with others, and even through the judgment and shame sometimes imposed by the community. Aristotle opposed Plato, Rousseau

and Marx in recognizing that human flourishing is located in a virtuous community, not in an autonomous individual or a rational totalitarian State.

I propose a fusion of the Aristotelian and Judeo-Christian traditions against the Platonic and Rousseauin ideals. This conception acknowledges man's profound imperfection, but looks to his betterment in self-restraint and community, not in the State. Traditional goods, of community, character, and virtue, should be preserved through the institutions of family, university, church, and temple—not government fiat. As communities are threatened in globalization, our individual and collective efforts to preserve them are of ever-increasing import.

Waiting for St. Benedict?

Alasdair MacIntyre has sounded the alarm about the modern condition—the wreckage both of moral philosophy and of community. In the famous closing lines of *After Virtue*, he writes:

A crucial turning point in that earlier history [before the dark ages] occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman Imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of the Imperium...What they set themselves to achieve instead- often not recognizing fully what they were doing- was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another-doubtless very different- St. Benedict.

This reconstruction of "local forms of community within which the moral life [can] be sustained" is no doubt an ambitious task. But in some ways globalization could help provide the means for these communities.

Herbert Marcuse was, though a Marxist, thrilled by the accomplishments of modern capitalism. He saw in the surplus value created by free markets the potential for a total liberation—particularly sexual liberation—in which, thanks to our new-found productivity, we could meet all our needs with minimal work, and devote the rest of our time to the enjoyment of the libido. We could, in short, do away with the discontents of civilization and create a Marxist, post-Freudian utopia.

I won't go into full detail about my objections to Marcuse's work, but to point out that, even if his ideals were feasible, it's not clear they'd be satisfying. And his vogue has largely passed with the student revolution. But Marcuse, in his own way, draws attention to the potential brought by a new era of global prosperity. As we become ever wealthier, we are ever less tied to the land. Contrary to Marxist fears that industrialization would lead to ceaseless labor, economic data show that industrial advance has everywhere decreased the share of time we devote to labor. With this new freedom from back-breaking work comes a new potential for time and energy devoted to the good life. The liberation we should look to from late capitalist prosperity is not, with Marcuse, libidinal liberation, but liberation from the quotidian and mundane, liberation found in liberal learning and a devotion to the good life.

The prosperity brought by global capitalism should be considered precisely the condition necessary for a rebirth of the life of the mind. Philosophy itself began among those, like Socrates and Plato, affluent enough to afford the leisure of looking up to the Eternal instead of down at the harvest. Aristotle found his students and his community among Athens' leisured. In the

renaissance the liberal arts were born among those liberated from onerous duties and able to pursue the arts of free men—the *ars liberales*. And even on campuses today there is among many the concern that only the affluent can afford to dabble in literature and philosophy, whereas the less fortunate must pursue practical education to pay off loans. Global capitalism, by making free, prosperous, and even potentially leisured men of so many of us, at once makes possible global decadence, but also makes possible a greater concern for the good, for the great conversation, for the arts of free men.

Perhaps our greatest hope for the community in which moral goods can flourish is the university. Today, traditions of liberal learning are threatened by a nihilism which seeks to reduce truth to politics, a materialism which equates education with utility, and a popular culture which disdains truth, beauty and goodness. Under these three pressures, the liberal arts are suffering. But if the university can once again help students fall in love with humane learning, they can become precisely the communities MacIntyre hoped for. I suggest that in an era of globalization we cling to what virtuous communities we can find. The faithful should cherish faith more than ever. Citizens of small towns should recognize their importance to each other and commit themselves to building solidarity. And we should all, with particular energy rededicate ourselves to a robust university in which liberal education—education being far more truly liberating than libidinal release, as Plato realized—and the good life can flourish.

Conclusion

The forces of globalization are irresistible. They should not be fought, only used to the greatest advantage. Economically, globalization brings great prosperity, but also some transitional difficulties. Our goal must be to manifest the advantages as much as we can, and mitigate the transitional pains.

Culturally, things are more difficult. The breakdown in community in which solidarity and unity may flourish threatens the good life. State intervention to preserve communities is impractical at best and dangerous at worst. Our goal must be to preserve mediating institutions that we value. Those with religion should cherish it in a time of globalization. The university must recognize its role as more important than ever. And every individual should recognize that, now that our communities are no longer determined *for* us by location, class, religion, or the circumstances of birth, the impetus is upon us to actively seek out and sustain communities, even communities of our own choosing. It is impossible to tell what these new communities will look like, whether like Benedictine sanctuaries or more like online fora. But if we are to survive what MacIntyre called the "new dark ages," we need to find something to hold on to in which our best traditions of liberal learning and the good life may be preserved.