

People Who Need People

Why Global Capitalism is Man's Destiny

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For Southgate and MacGilvray.

We are not a contented species. We clamor for more with all the immediacy and insistence of a 2-year-old from her highchair – more food, more sex, more stuff. There is virtually nothing we do not want, or desire, or need, at lowest possible cost and effort. And it is precisely this urge for more which distinguishes humanity from the animals, who require nothing more than bare subsistence. Man’s relentless desire for material fulfillment also coincides with an innate human longing for metaphysical satisfaction – more joy, more love, more peace – and propels him out into the world for satisfaction of these needs. He discovers in things and in people a partial satisfaction of his desires, but not with exhaustive fullness. For his heart and soul yearns with indefatigable perseverance for the infinite, for the furthest reaches of existence. From the very beginning of time, man has proceeded with capitalist determination to conquer and possess the world. It is his quest, his destiny, and his end.

Capitalism operates by a naturally creative impetus which is disarmingly compelling. It promotes private property, ensures economic incentive, and preserves market freedom, all with an unrelenting energy which urges and impels men forward, bidding them learn, invent, acquire, and prosper. The results don’t lie. Capitalism has won an unprecedented economic victory over the ravages of global poverty, particularly in the last century. But while this unrivaled economic engine makes loud progress on behalf of man’s material wellbeing, another parallel process spurs the quiet disintegration of families, communities, and localities. Anything of marginal or negligible economic value has been rudely dismissed by a culture of consumption which announces, with harsh electronic glare, the triumph of material over immaterial.

Many enemies, and even a few of capitalism’s friends, mutter darkly about “creative destruction,” insinuate that global capitalism has perpetrated these evils, and offer, as an antidote, effusive paeans to nature and farming and families. Since virtually no one, including globalism’s staunchest defenders, vehemently opposes any of the above, one is only left with a vague feeling of irritability. We cannot precisely identify the point at which capitalism ceases to be harmlessly “creative” and becomes “creatively destructive,” or globalism passes from harmless international commerce to blatant subversion of local character and community. Therefore we are enjoined, with typically conservative disagreeability, to hold them both in suspicion, to keep them on a short leash, to muzzle and defang, and take appropriate precautions to guard against “excesses.” In short, we can have global capitalism, just not too much of it.

Are these objections fair? Is global capitalism really to blame for materialism? When Aristotle leveled fierce criticism against the communism of Plato's *Republic*, he warned that arguments in favor of socialism would always be given more favorable audience than they deserved, "especially when someone is heard denouncing the evils now existing in states, suits about contracts, convictions for perjury, flatteries of rich men and the like, which are said to arise out of the possession of private property. These evils, however, are due not to the absence of communism but to wickedness."¹ No economic system is perfect, and some are clearly more ideal than others. But care and caution must be taken to attribute dysfunction to its proper origin. It is possible, for instance, that the rapid dismantling of character and community is the result of neither capitalism nor globalism, but of wickedness, plain and simple.

As for the accusation of materialism, economics is certainly the study of the acquisition and allocation of material resources. But it is also more. In a discussion on education, American author Neil Postman deliberately classified *The Communist Manifesto* as a sacred text, along with the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Christian canon, because it embodies "religious principles to which millions of people have been so recently devoted."² Few economic systems are quite so self-consciously materialistic as socialism, and yet even this order stirs the imagination and compels us to reflect on the nature of the soul, in Plato's case, or perhaps human injustice. It makes specious promises about *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, and confidently assures us that "everybody will become everybody's friend,"³ given the correct manipulations of production and its means. Despite its reputation for crass materialism and economic reductionism, socialism shamelessly appeals to the metaphysical principles which govern human nature, and also demands a devotion from its acolytes of high-pitched religious fervor and enthusiasm.

Capitalism and globalism deserve at least the same courtesy. Either they explain and enlarge on principles of humanity, or distort and inevitably destroy those principles. Either way, there is a metaphysical and theoretical component to economics, on which basis it can be judged true or false, and predicted a success or a failure. Capitalism and globalism hardly sprang fully

¹ Aristotle, and Stephen Everson. *The Politics, and the Constitution of Athens*. Rev. student ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print. 37

² Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: the surrender of culture to technology*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print. 198

³ Aristotle, *The Politics, and the Constitution of Athens*, 37

formed from the head of Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill during the last couple of centuries. These men discovered, they did not invent.

In the beginning was economics. Before community or church or state there was one seminal transaction, a principal “union of those who cannot exist without each other, namely of male and female, that the race may continue.”⁴ The very first man and woman in the world were driven together because they needed something. Neither was entirely complete in himself, but they could trade what they each had, and together generate what they lacked: completion, or at least its symbol. For already there was a metaphysical exchange behind the material one.

Love is a transaction. It reaches out, with greedy urgency, for something that is needed. In contrast to other splendid deities, Plato argued that “Eros is always poor...his resources are always running out.” He is less than beautiful and less than wise. None of the other gods “searches for wisdom, or tries to become wise – they are wise already.” They are full and complete and self-sufficient and aloof. But love searches, pursues, and desires that which is lacking, for “you cannot desire what you do not realize you lack.”⁵ Deficiency impels men toward each other, to acquire that which is lacking. “A city comes to be,” according to Plato, “because none of us is self-sufficient but we all need many things.”⁶ Those things are both material and immaterial.

Masculine and feminine need each other, not merely to procreate the species, an overtly material concern, but also for more subtle spiritual and emotional reasons. And in this last profound metaphysical exchange, mankind outgrows the simplicity of the old economic model detailing various principles of rudimentary bartering, the sort of graph which shows up on page three of economics textbooks demonstrating the advantages gained by Rancher Bob, who produces beef but no eggs, when he trades with Farmer George, who produces eggs but no beef. But what if perhaps they both produce beef and eggs? There is a graph for that scenario as well.

Long before David Ricardo, a man and a woman began to specialize according to comparative advantage. Gender stereotypes are helpful and understandable, but simplistic. It is not entirely accurate, for instance, that all men hunt, emotionally and physically brave, nor that

⁴ Ibid., 12

⁵ Plato, and Tom Griffith. *Symposium ; and Phaedrus*. London: Everyman Publications, 2000. Print. 54-55

⁶ Plato, G. M. A. Grube, and C. D. C. Reeve. *Republic*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1992. Print. 44

all women gather, emotionally and physically nurturing. Nor is it fair to insinuate that men have no capacity for compassion, or women for courage. Many women enjoy absolute advantage in showing courage – they exhibit greater reserves of daring tenacity than all the weaker men around them, with all the splendor of the mythical Amazon warriors, who burned off their right breasts in order to draw back their bows and hurl spears with greater efficiency.

But the principle of comparative advantage does not ask about *rates* of production, it asks about *costs* of production. What was given up? If a man gives up some capacity for sensitivity by specializing in courage, if he becomes perhaps even more emotionally distant than he was before, prone to greater outbursts and ruthless indifference, then that is his opportunity cost. If a woman severely compromises her capacity for compassion, vigilantly preoccupied with draconian measures that suppress and subdue her otherwise sympathetic nature, then that is her opportunity cost. If together they consider each other's potential for the physical and emotional nurturing of a dependent child, and weigh their various costs and benefits, always thinking on the margin, and finally determine that he should specialize in courage, and she in compassion, it is quite likely that they have made a sound and economically rational decision, and are now capable of even greater courage and compassion than either would have been singly.

Love destroys self-sufficiency, and so does comparative advantage. One would think that a farmer and a rancher, who produce the same goods, or a man and a woman with roughly the same characteristics, would have managed to achieve enough self-sufficiency to render trade unnecessary and irrelevant. And yet all parties still gain through specialization and exchange. Comparative advantage throws open a world of limitless opportunity and potential by demanding that we merely ask whether or not this or that exchange will allow us to acquire or accomplish more at less cost, or whether this or that relationship or interaction will enrich us, broaden our perspective, empower us to live more creatively, reflect more profoundly, or love more deeply.

Plato tried to limit this limitlessness. He initiates his discourse on political justice with the description of an ideally self-sufficient city, one in which all economic activities merely serve to meet the requirements of basic subsistence, along with a detailed menu of approved food products specially suited to the minimally adequate sustenance of human life. But his interlocutor, Glaucon, objects to this inhumane approach. "If you were founding a city for pigs,"

he asks, “wouldn’t you fatten *them* on the same diet?”⁷ Plato protests a bit that a city absorbed in mere necessity is “healthy” and ideal, but without much of a fight agrees to “enlarge our city,”⁸ to include various “unnecessaries” such as art, music, luxury, and culinary delicacies.

It is human to want more, and it is human to need. Aristotle wrote that he “who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.”⁹ Animals stop acquiring when they have satisfied their basic complaints for food, copulation, and sleep. And God does not need to acquire or search for anything outside Himself, for He is completely self-sufficient, the source and master of all. But man is not satisfied, nor is he ever complete. He imagines, he hopes, he yearns, for something else, for someone else, relentlessly pursuing that holy grail of self-sufficiency. Until he can say that not another object could improve his lot, for he owns everything, nor could another human add to his happiness or satisfaction, for his soul is perfect, he is not truly self-sufficient.

Isolation is costly. No one gains, and almost everyone loses. When men decide that they don’t need to exchange with others, that they don’t need to creatively adapt themselves on behalf of a greater good, or alter their established mode to accommodate a more desirable order, they frustrate a natural dynamic, and deny their own humanity. Economists call this “protectionism,” and it is a result, not of market failure, but of deliberate intervention, usually of the governmental variety, provoked by the loud agitations of small pressure groups. The American car industry has struggled for decades to successfully compete with their foreign counterparts, but focused advocacy campaigns on their behalf have procured federal “protection,” insulating American manufacturers from their own inefficiencies, and artificially raising the price on all vehicles. When sugar cane producers in Louisiana or Florida succeed in convincing the government to erect “protective” tariffs which shield their industries from otherwise inevitable collapse, all Americans are forced to pay significantly more for their sugar (small cost), and entire national economies in the third world, such as Haiti or Mozambique, are completely devastated (huge cost).

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 47

⁸ *Ibid.*, 48

⁹ Aristotle, *The Politics, and the Constitution of Athens*, 14

These pressure groups often receive a favorable reception from advocates of American isolation and “exceptionalism,” who assume that “saving American manufacturing” will preserve national self-sufficiency and allow us to continue in the ways we always have, an attitude at best foolishly immature, and at worst dangerously egotistic. Importing various manufacturing or agriculture products from other countries, while exporting to them technological goods and services they couldn’t begin to engineer, benefits them immensely, and always improves, more than it diminishes, our own economic position. It is conceited to refuse trade, eschew cooperation, or insist upon a more closed economy, just as it is equally boorish if a narcissistic man never extends himself in love to another, or a mother neglects her child because, after all, she needs the child less than he needs her. These are humans who make up a city of truly selfish and self-absorbed, not to mention deluded, pigs.

Love is a risk, just as trade is a risk. The principles of free-market economics express materially the inner dynamic of human relations and interactions. Plato has argued that this correlation suggests an immaterial reality which is represented, however imperfectly, by a material order of forms and shadows. John Donne, famous for his statement “No man is an island,” also wrote, in prayer to God, that “thou art a figurative, a metaphorical God, in thy word, and in thy works too...types and figures overspread all.”¹⁰ The Christian scriptures are rife with symbols, allegories, and analogies, and Jesus Christ constantly refers to himself in overtly material terms – he is a light, a gate, a vine, living bread, and eternal water. The Roman Catholic Church has always insisted upon a sacramental and liturgical understanding which strongly emphasizes the role of the material in revealing and channeling deeper immaterial realities.

And if the Protestants gave us their work ethic and a capitalist spirit, Roman Catholicism also gave us globalism. In contrast to a Protestant proclivity for internal and individual fixations, Roman Catholicism epitomizes universality, and projects a decidedly outward, rather than inward, orientation. The Church’s deliberate liturgy of one voice, and one language, proclaims a formal expression of catholic unity all over the globe, but generally without doing violence to the peculiarities of individual parish identity within their respective localities and nations. Globalism need not destroy local character or community, and may actually be capable of fostering both.

¹⁰ Donne, John, and Anthony Raspa. *Devotions upon emergent occasions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987/1975. Print. 87, 100

Need, even global need, implies otherness. If Nicaragua or Brazil has nothing different to offer the United States, they have very little incentive to trade. But with specialization, exchange is immediately beneficial to both parties – they have agreed to be different, and even to accentuate those specific differences in order to achieve more together. On a personal level, this is similar to having little need for someone else that is exactly like you in every regard. But you are instantly attracted to that person who surprises you with a different way of seeing the world, a unique outlook, another approach, who has something and stands for something that you lack.

Our global trading partners are more than commercial business representatives, and it is crassly materialistic to assume otherwise. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote that “nations are the wealth of mankind, its collective personalities; the very least of them wears its own special colors and bears within itself a special facet of divine intention.”¹¹ International commerce, like a good liturgy, serves as a prelude, a pretense, and a promise of something deeper and more significantly human, represented every day in the prosaic experiences of plain old Americans with names like Doug and Pete, perhaps recently arrived in Tokyo “for business,” clumsily fumbling with a guidebook, acutely aware that the success or failure of their commercial objectives may very well depend upon their respectfully appropriate participation in an intricate Japanese tea ceremony.

As transportation costs plummet, humans begin to roam farther, engage in expanded economic exchange, and discover rich new human connections. Industrialization sharpened and enhanced America’s regional identities in the last century, giving the nation a new appreciation for the coolly productive charm of the North East, the quiet modesty of the Midwest, the warm agrarian leisure of the South, and most significantly, the fruitful benefits of their union. America’s modern economy is now overtly global in scale, compelling her to discover and appreciate aspects of the world culture and character which can only enrich and improve her own. We need Asian reverence, and African exuberance, Northern European responsibility, Southern European liberality, and Scandinavian cheer. The world also needs American confidence, strength, and independence. Globalism makes this exchange possible.

¹¹ Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr Isaevich, Thomas P. Whitney, H. T. Willetts, and Anne Applebaum. *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: an experiment in literary investigation*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007. Print. 571

And as for objections, neither capitalism nor globalism holds a monopoly on materialism. When we care more about a tireless pursuit of monetary wealth rather than the enrichment of human friendship and love, that is materialism. When we consider ourselves better people because we don't own a car, and we churn our own butter, that is materialism. When a Christian thinks he's upright because he was baptized and he goes to church, that is materialism. When a man regards his wife as a domestic servant or an opportunity for sexual release, that is materialism. And it is also materialism when a gum-chewing teenager, iPod in, ignores her actual friends, who silently watch as she texts something inane to one of her 637 Facebook "friends" she never sees. It's not the phone's fault. We all have one. These evils are due, not to objects or persons, liturgy or institutions, capitalism or globalism or any other economic order, but to wickedness.

To be sure, Aristotle frowned upon communities bound to each other on no other pretense than economic, and argued for communities "of families and aggregations of families...those who live in the same place and intermarry."¹² But to read Aristotle as if he was advocating some retreat to a physically defined locality, or insisting upon activities and interactions exclusively circumscribed by family and farm, is perhaps to interpret him too literally, or at least without appropriate creativity and imagination. Is Aristotle not simply cautioning us against materialism, entreating us to regard the economic bond of "exchange and alliance" as an inadequate *substitute* for the immaterial exchange and alliance of human friendship, and urging us to seek community wherever that social benevolence is most manifest? Or perhaps in the words of our most cheerfully confident financial guru – people first, then money, then things.

The economics of the family has undergone a momentous shift over the last two centuries, perhaps irrevocably altering traditional modes and roles. The commercial liturgy has moved out over the globe, leaving the family exposed and vulnerable, like a magnificent lion shorn. Theoretically, women no longer need men to provide for them, and parents no longer need to procreate farm hands or laborers for the family business, provoking tough questions about the utility of mankind's most venerable institution. It's not surprising that so many have turned sadly away, like the rich young ruler.

¹² Aristotle, *The Politics, and the Constitution of Athens*, 74

But this modern crisis is a profound opportunity for those willing to reflect deeply. The family now represents a gloriously capitalist triumph over materialism, by forcing us to behold it in all its naked Platonic splendor – people who need people, not necessarily for any material or economic purpose, but in love, because they satisfy and fulfill unique and specialized needs which are more spiritual than physical in nature. Although a rigorously demanding challenge, arguably this is globalism’s greatest gift to us. We are so lucky.

There is no shame in material need. We lead with the material in all our human interactions, like an infant who shrieks for his mother, not necessarily from any finely tuned metaphysical appreciation of her admirable qualities, but simply because he needs milk. The immaterial connection of soul to soul, in friendship and in love, follows. Man’s economic progression from one person, to a family, a village, a community, a region, a nation, and out to all the world, merely illustrates and reveals the natural yearning in his soul for completion. What he truly needs is beyond sustenance, luxury, and convenience, beyond family, farm, and community, beyond life, love, health, and hope. He may perhaps sense a disturbing feeling of isolation as he wings from New York to London in less time than it took his ancestors to wheel their merchandise to market, or profound loneliness in a crowded room, a dissatisfaction which provokes him to exclaim, with James Bond, **THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH**. And then he must have God. But that’s another story, and another paper.