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Globalization: for nature or against nature

Jaan Kaplinski thinks about globalization – its advantages, disadvantages and its history. The diagnosis leads him to propose an utopian concept of rural life that is linked to the positive achievements of the present.

The word "globalization" has a very vague meaning, thus it is not easy to understand what the demonstrators are demonstrating against or what the politicians and economists are advocating. The word is an attempt to describe the advancing integration, but also standardization of the world, vanishing of borders and shortening of distances. But globalization is also the growth of corporate power, the expansion of multinational companies. The problem with globalization is that – as many phenomena – it has never been planned in advance. What we are witnessing today and what we call globalization is the result of the invisible hand of market and technological forces that have given us both technical means and motivation to move towards a more integrated and uniform world. Globalization is something that we have met in our hunt for bigger profits and new gadgets, as well as new weapons.

Globalization is practically a creation of only one of the many cultures and societies of the planet – the Western culture (or civilization), first of all – of Europeans and North Americans. This means that for many other peoples globalization is nothing else than the expansion of the West, a continuation of a process that began with the Crusades and great geographical discoveries. It means spreading Western products and Western way of life. Such a process is not unique in history: the planet has witnessed many similar processes of cultural expansion in the past: the expansion of the Sumerian–Akkadian culture, hellenistic culture, Chinese Han culture and Arabic–Islamic culture. All these processes were connected with building of empires and subjugation of other peoples. The beginning of the Western expansion has been similar, the Europeans too created their empires. However, there is a difference between the big empires of the past and the present world. Nowadays the expansion is primarily not political or religious, but economic. The merchant, the manager, the banker has replaced the soldier and the missionary. The power of money has replaced the power of the gun, advertizing has replaced sermons, pin-up girls have replaced icons.

Thus globalization also spreads the Western modern system of values, is based on what Ernest Gellner has called "consumerist scepticism". This system of values and world view is not acceptable to many people in other parts of the world, especially in the Islamic countries, but even in the West it is not approved by many dissidents, as for example the anti-globalization activists, the Greens and members of some traditionalist religious communities.

In the empires of the past, unprecedented power was concentrated into the hands of their rulers, kings and emperors. This was, first of all, power over people. The emerging global empire of our age is characterised, first of all, by an unprecedented concentration of power over nature, natural resources into the hands of the modern kings and emperors – governments, dictators, but also CEOs of big companies. On the modern world scene, the traditional statesmen have to share power with today's businessmen. Often these two types of power are interconnected, even mingled. Big business finances and supports rulers who often come from its ranks and remain loyal to its interests. In both financial and political domains, the power becomes concentrated into the hands of one or a couple of superpowers, megacompanies and corporations. The system mankind has created is to a great extent ruled by its own logic, it has become a god we must serve and worship. Following the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright we can call this god of our times technosystem. Its logic is the inexorable logic of growth, efficiency, economy and concentration. Globalization is a necessary, unavoidable logical step in the history of this technosystem whose symbol was the World Trade Center in New York, destroyed by the Islamic kamikazes.

We human beings and everything we create are necessarily part of a larger system that is most often called nature. Nature has undergone a process of evolution of probably more than ten billion years. Its evolution as its present functioning has followed a certain logic. This logic has also determined the evolution of life including that of mankind as all other living things. One basic element of this logic is that the development and functioning of a subsystem, for example an ecosystem or a species must conform to the logic of nature, otherwise it will not survive. Nature is a system that can survive even if several or many of its subsystems, be it species, populations or societies (including our own) become extinct.

Life is a state of dynamic balance, it is a self-regulating homoeostatic process. But this homoeostasis is not perfect because of its dynamism. It contains the features that can lead to self-destruction, primarily through the destruction of the environment. This can happen to animal populations. This has happened to human populations including probably some great civilizations of the past in Mesopotamia, Northern India and Central America and on the Easter Island. Despite this, humanity as a whole has survived, thanks to the fact that it too was organized in a "natural" way, being divided into relatively autonomous tribes, societies and cultures. Even if civilizations perished, barbarians and savages survived. This means that parts, subsystems of nature are not necessarily capable of homoeostasis; Life, the living nature is homoeostatic as a whole. Nature is a self-regulating, self-preserving system that consists of subsystems that are often not self-regulating. Life achieves its homoeostasis, is capable of self-regulation because of its enormous diversity. It consists of millions of species, populations and billions of organisms. The homoeostasis is the result of their interplay.

During the last couple of thousand years human beings have achieved an unprecedented command over their environment, especially over other living beings. We are less and less subjects to the natural homoeostasis, to the regulating rules of nature. At present, mankind is drastically changing the nature itself due to the demographic explosion and the increasing exploitation of natural resources. In particular, human activities are diminishing the diversity of nature and accordingly impairing its self-regulating mechanisms. As a result, nature, both animate and inanimate, is becoming more unstable, prone to bigger vacillations. As we humans are always a part of nature, we

cannot escape these vacillations, we are more exposed to droughts, storms, famines and epidemics. The world has never been an especially friendly place for us, now it is becoming more unfriendly. We have succeeded in building our oases in the middle of its turbulence, but there are not enough of them and keeping them needs more and more effort and resources.

From this point of view, the process called globalization is a double-edged sword. Insofar it is connected with concentration of economical power and resources, with increase in uniformity, less restrictions to mass travel and transportation of goods over state borders, it contributes to potential instability of nature and society. Examples are not difficult to draw. The recent outburst of foot and mouth – and mad cow disease in Europe are a direct result of concentration of animals in big farms and transportation of cattle and cattle products from one country and region to another. The spread of damaging computer viruses is the result of the *de facto* monopoly of Microsoft programs (As I don't use them, I have so far had no problems with computer viruses).

The terrorist attack on the Pentagon and the WTC has shown us once more how vulnerable the modern world can be. The skyscrapers lodging thousand of offices with tens of thousands of employees and visitors were an extreme example of concentration of power and decision-making, but also of economy of space in the capital of the Western world. Here the stability was clearly sacrificed to efficiency and economy with a catastrophic result. Such places of high concentration of political and economic power as headquarters of big companies, parliaments and government residences or huge factories having the monopoly of some products will certainly be targets of future terrorist attacks. Concentration, mass production makes products cheaper, but increases the possibility that one error, one toxic substance, one computer virus will have devastating effect across the globe. If the terrorists had struck the Microsoft headquarters in Redmond, Washington, it would have paralyzed the development of the monopolistic MS Windows software. In contrast, the development of the rival Linux operational system that is wholly decentralized, cannot be seriously damaged by any terrorist attack.

Physical concentration of people and facilities, monopolies, mass travel and unrestricted transportation of goods are a potential source of danger in the unpredictable and insecure world. And in many cases, as in the examples above, these processes have clearly surpassed all reasonable limits. This is true of the Western way of life, especially of its American variety as a whole. This way of life has effectively abolished most of the cultural diversity of the world, spreading from country to country, continent to continent, making more and more people dependant of the products of a few corporations (Microsoft, Boeing, Intel and others). Now we know better than ever that all people of the world cannot be lodged into one skyscraper, but there are politicians, missionaries, businessmen and writers who are making an effort to lodge all humankind into one culture, one religion, one language, one system of values.

Cultures, languages and religions are survival strategies in a world that is very much a Darwinian one, and if we wipe out most of them, we diminish our chances of survival in extreme conditions, be it in a new ice age or in a world shattered by a new world war. We should be more aware that world wars too have been made possible by the globalization, by the worldwide processes of integration and concentration.

Is the globalization then an evil that we should fight against, a fatal error in the history of mankind and perhaps even of nature itself? This is possible, if the

negative aspects of globalization prevail, if it means more concentration of economical and political power, abolition of biological and cultural diversity in the name of economical efficiency. But there are some other ways open to globalization. In theory it's perfectly possible to have globalization that preserves most of the diversity and instead of concentration supports dispersion, decentralization.

This is a chance given us by the combination of the advances of modern information technology with the existing cultural diversity and strong bond of many people to their culture as well as to their home and homeland. We could have a world where people prefer to live in small communities, many of them in the countryside, cultivating their gardens, buying mostly locally produced food and other essential consumer goods, and not travelling much. At the same time are closely interconnected with other people all around the world thanks to the efficient means of communication grown out of the present internet. This world would in fact be two worlds, in one of them space and place are of central importance, in another there is no space, no distance. People live in both of these worlds, partly in their home village, partly in the global village, the cyberspace. In this utopian world there are many borders and restrictions to the movement of people and goods from region to region, but little restrictions to the free flow of information.

This hypothetical utopia is close to the one expressed already in ancient times by one of the first theoreticians of self-regulation and decentralization, the half-mythical Chinese thinker Laozi. As to the political organization of the possible diverse, dispersed but still globalized world, it should be a decentralized power network. It remains to be said that the first man who created such an organization, not a state but a network of communities was nobody else than the Indian Gautama Buddha, one of the great organization men of the world history.

One of the few ways of life that have proved stable, highly adaptive and capable of surviving in very adverse conditions is the traditional peasant way of life, the traditional peasant culture, be it European, ancient Peruvian, Chinese, Indian, African or Central Asian. We have no reasons to idealize the peasant life that has never been idyllic, although it has often been idealized. The classical Chinese literature has many clear analogies to the antique and later Western Arcadian, bucolic and pastoral motives. It is harder to find in traditional Chinese literature contempt for the "idiocy of the rural life" of the Marxist tradition, but I am sure it can be found too. Town, at least city is usually a more interesting place than village. But village is simply much more adaptive than town, and because of that village has served as a refuge, a shelter, a place where people could return after disasters that destroyed towns.

My first childhood memories are memories of bombardment, taking refuge in shelters, but also of fleeing to the countryside, to our relatives living there. This probably saved my life because the house where we lived in 1944 was hit and burnt with all our belongings. But our relatives could give us shelter and feed us. Where can nowadays flee people living in cities, in the high density residential areas or close to risky industrial plants and other installations? The modern civilization is destroying the village, the traditional peasant life, the farm, the garden, the field. The modern agriculture is becoming more and more efficient, but also more and more dependant on the whole fabric of the modern society, industry and transportation. We can say that it is also dependant on the conviction (belief) that no major disasters are possible, that the emancipated nations need no refuges, no shelters, no local-regional self-sufficiency, that

the history as a Darwinian process of selection has ended.

The tragic events of 11 September indicate that this can well be an illusory belief. It's commonplace to compare the present Western world with the Roman Empire. After becoming rich and powerful, Rome got rid of its peasantry, its agriculture becoming based on latifundia. A lot of grain was imported to Italy from Egypt. The Empire wasn't a nation of peasants. The nations who conquered it and the nations that later emerged from its ruins were nations of peasants. After the Empire had fallen, people grew grain and kept cattle on the Forum and other expanses of the eternal city that had for centuries ceased being a city. The pendulum of history has already many times swung between town city and village. Isn't it wise to presume that this will not happen again? Isn't it wise to abandon a tradition, a way of life and a know-how that has helped us to overcome big crises? Perhaps we should give some financial and moral support to people who are willing to preserve this tradition, to return to field and garden as is a traditional saying in Chinese, immortalized by the great poet Tao Yuan-ming.

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