

Globalization and Its Discontents

An African Tragedy

If man were to begin by studying himself, he would see how incapable he is of going beyond himself. How could it be possible for a part to know the whole? But he may perhaps aspire to a knowledge of at least those parts which are on the same scale as himself. But the different parts of the world are all so closely linked and related together that I hold it to be impossible to know one without knowing the other and without knowing the whole.

—Blaise Pascal, *Fragment 72*

David E. Apter

ALTHOUGH PROTEST against globalization continues to mount, most of its foes' indictments are so sweeping as to render real solutions nugatory. Undiscriminating critiques undermine the opposition and distort its purposes. This is a pity. Fringe violence aside, such protests are the only way to register serious objections to a process that proceeds under its own steam, yet generates discontents of great practical and moral importance.

To blame all developmental ills on globalization is to demonize it rather than to understand its complexities. The truth is that if one can't live with globalization, one can't live without it either. Its consequences are many and diverse. But the devil is in the details. And details are not the concern of most protesters.

The same criticisms apply to most supporters of globalization. Their Olympian spirit keeps their heads in the clouds. Despite professions of pragmatism, they are swept along by hubris regarding the benign effects of the market. Their market models ignore the social overhead costs of global development and its impact in real terms: population displacement and dispersion, loss of patrimonies, marginalization of sectors of the population, social polarization, fragmenting institutions, increased corruption, and criminality. Globalization poses a host of problems for education, training, and the constructive use of human talent. All this is particularly visible in Africa.

Africa is an extreme case in degree rather than kind. It illustrates many of the negative consequences globalization has for vulnerable people, with few public or private resources at their disposal and virtually no access to economic or political redress. The continent demonstrates how people can catch it both ways. On the one hand, Africans suffer from a declining share in the globalization process. This lack of participation leaves them further and further behind economically, poorer in both relative and real terms. The result is fewer political opportunities to address social needs with any likelihood of success. On the other hand, where globalization has occurred, poverty and social cleavages have been exacerbated (especially in such capital cities as Abidjan, Nairobi, or Lagos). The gap between rich and poor becomes more socially complex and politically serious. There are good grounds for asserting that however poor a country is, its rich will continue to get richer.

In short, globalization has negative effects both in its presence and absence. Similar dilemmas can be seen in parts of Latin America, the Middle East, the Philippines, Indonesia, and elsewhere, often accompanied by violence and terrorism. But in Africa the dysfunctions of globalization are particularly sour, coming as they do on top of the effects of postcolonialism, rapacious one-party regimes and military dictatorships, the erosion of educational and professional standards, government decay, and dilapidated institutions. Things are very bad, and proposals for debt reduction, institution building, and other rem-

edies won't bring real improvement.

Marginalizations

Africa has undergone what can be called double marginalization. The continent has experienced an absolute decline in relation to the global economy. Within countries, there has been social polarization between a relatively concentrated sector of functional elites (most of them working for global firms or in government or educational institutions) and a growing sector of the population that is "superfluous." The result is a kind of social distortion. With the growth of the "superfluous" sector, governments face increasingly unmanageable overload problems.

The paradox is plain enough. The African economies need to be more securely integrated into global markets, primarily through private investment, yet it is this very integration that accentuates the problems globalization is supposed to solve. If that private investment is in high technology, it will employ relatively few workers, and so the new ventures will increase rather than decrease the "marginals" in countries with strikingly asymmetrical patterns of social inequalities. There are, in other words, unintended social inefficiencies of the market. Even with economic growth, they are likely to work at cross-purposes with political democracy. For although it may be possible for globalization to promote growth and democracy simultaneously, it is very difficult for it to do so in the face of expanding social inequities. This suggests an underlying logic:

- Growth depends on increasing productivity;
- Increased productivity depends on innovations that take form as capital-intensive industry at the expense of labor-intensive industry;
- This leads to redundancies in the labor-intensive sectors, especially among the unskilled and poorly educated. Their prolonged unemployment turns an economic condition (lack of a job) into a social condition of marginality;
- "Marginals," as a sector of "functionally superfluous" people, have few prospects for improvement. Life is risky for them, and their marginality individualizes risk because

collective options for change seem nonexistent. Schools and training programs become useless, tending to validate failure rather than success. Something happens to people who have minimal access to facilities and resources for a sufficiently long time. Although they need the most, they receive the least and wind up as unwitting co-conspirators in their own demise.

- The result is a type of social "pathology" demanding vast state expenditures on compensatory and welfare programs that themselves are invariably inefficient.
- Rising social overhead costs reduce the state's ability to balance equity and growth.

One unhappy, dangerous result is what can be called "cleavage politics," the social consequence of dividing societies into technologically literate and technologically disadvantaged populations. Among the disadvantaged, globalization's social and economic cleavages produce a politics that highlights differences of religion, caste, race, language, and other categorical affiliations. They promote conflict rather than mediation and lead people to stress "principles" rather than interests. All this reinforces the negative rather than the positive aspects of diversity and pluralism. The institutional framework required of a democratic political system is weakened, and political parties cannot function properly. It becomes very difficult to devise strategies to promote growth without exacerbating marginality or to induce innovative reforms without intensifying social polarization.

All this may be summarized in a contrarian hypothesis: market-driven economic growth in Africa will produce marginality, social disruption, and political turbulence, expanding opportunities for the few without a corresponding enlargement of opportunities for the many. These conditions will prejudice future democratic possibilities. In other words, drawing Africa deeper into the global economy will ensure that it will remain what it has become: a graveyard of failed projects and failed democracies.

Complexities

Africa's social problems are complex both in kind and in pedigree. Hopes were high at in-

dependence that the new states would finally be able to transcend externally imposed economic, political, and social limitations. But the postcolonial situation was aggravated by social and political experiments that aimed to jumpstart economies. They were practically all failures, leaving behind problems that plagued succeeding generations of political leaders. The long-term legacy of colonialism was very mixed. It is patronizing to assume that postcolonial African leaders, whatever the pressures on them, were not their own agents. Despite an understandable reluctance to hold themselves accountable much of what went wrong, they were in fact not simple proxies or clients of outside powers. Many were complicit with those powers and thereby bolstered their own positions and feathered their own nests. Experience demonstrates that despite repeated calls for “transparency,” globalization provides new opportunities for bad government.

BAD GOVERNMENT includes overvalued currencies, heavy indebtedness, inefficient investment, inadequate services, poorly performing state corporations, low labor productivity, urban unemployment, declining agricultural output, inadequate (costly and minimal) social services, weak administrative and health facilities, and drastically eroding educational standards. All these lead toward increasingly fragile infrastructures, corruption, technological backwardness, a dearth of skilled workers, and poor economic diversity. Take the case of Zimbabwe. Land reform there stalled, inflation is 40 percent, the university is closed, and the organized opposition has been brutally repressed. Corruption extends to the highest places.

Africa's share of the global social product declined radically in the 1970s and 1980s. Africa accounted for only 1.6 percent of international private capital flows by the first half of the 1990s. The total gross national product for sub-Saharan African countries is less than 10 percent of the GNP of the United States. Add broken-down road, rail, and communication facilities; heavy indebtedness; AIDS; and ethnic and religious conflicts, which range from civil unrest to genocidal violence; and it is hardly surprising that African civil societies don't function and political institutions are in-

adequate.

Worst of all, generations of children have been sacrificed—that is, maimed psychologically, physically, and educationally. Excepting South Africa, virtually all African countries are worse off today than at independence. If one finds hopeful signs it is mostly due to diminished expectations.

The Politics of Negative Pluralism

One way to consider the scope of Africa's tragedy is in terms of the “social pathologies” to which I have pointed. It is only at the extreme, where marginality becomes a permanent condition, that it becomes a social pathology. People have little faith that work will be appropriately rewarded. Cause and effect appear to them to be something random. Daily life is so precarious that individual survival becomes the sole object, and the means may easily include violence.

If such circumstances extend sufficiently, marginals become a “class,” but not in a Marxist sense. They become a category made up of people forced out of the labor market and struggling for basic survival. These people create their own ways of life and subcultures that are very different from and threatening to the “functional” elites. The latter then seek physical boundaries to protect themselves. In most parts of Africa, the elites live in worlds that are physically and socially apart from the “marginals.” The elites and their children have access to education, knowledge, and expertise together with funds; their physical space is ordered and sheltered.

The marginals tend to random violence, an individualized enterprise; but when risk does get collectivized and turned into social movements, it can lead to group violence ranging from terrorism to genocide (as we have seen in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and the Sudan). Because economic marginality begets social marginality, people turn to other affiliations—religious, ethnic, linguistic, ideological—to protect themselves. The reinforcement of collective identities, a propensity to parochial rather than citizen commitments, can sunder societies, communities, and institutions. Hence globalization, a universalizing phenomenon, generates damaging

particularisms and negative pluralism.

NEW FORMS OF organization and power—with distinct types of membership, jurisdiction, and obligation—are one consequence of this untrusting world. Power becomes defined as an ability to sustain loyalty and punish betrayal. These are the preconditions for the organization of anti-state movements that encourage people to act in concert, to transcend individual limitations and engage in violent acts, to create both symbolic and moral capital (in the absence of other kinds). The tolerance and flexibility one associates with positive pluralism are absent.

In Africa, free-market efforts to remedy the economic distortions produced by government interventions and fiscal manipulations have resulted in growing polarization, cleavages, inequalities and conflict. Apart from Ghana, Senegal, Botswana, and a few other countries, democracy is mostly a façade. Few institutions—administrative, educational, health—are in practice what they pretend to be. Elites struggle not to be overwhelmed by those below. They build barriers to protect themselves, rely on guards, private networks, and personal clienteles (often based on ethnicity). Associates don't trust one another and live their lives under scrutiny. They are vulnerable to racketeers, and their children are permanent targets for kidnapers. The more powerful a political leader, the more shuttered, sheltered, and monitored his life. Political leaders become remote from reality (but they know how to plunder the treasury). Patronage and favoritism become means of access to them, rather than knowledge and capabilities. In short, power produces its own vulnerabilities. The higher someone rises in the hierarchy, the more he or she becomes an object of suspicion, jealousy, and anger. In such circumstances it is easy to justify pursuit of more money, power, and the use of secret police.

Because of these sorts of conditions, many of the most principled and best educated Africans leave to work abroad. Many of those who stay are underused, their abilities and knowledge wasted. Just when globalization demands innovative knowledge, Africa has fewer and fewer resources. In the meantime, those in the

population who are superfluous to globalization and lack skills for capital-intensive industry often move into the cities. There they become large, miserable squatter populations.

Most people seem to accept these conditions. But not everyone does, and the result is an economic underworld of brigandage and violence. For those on the bottom, negative pluralism means that the world is a gambler's universe. In it, most people are losers. So a desire emerges to change the odds by changing the rules. It is one short step from parochial affiliations to local mafias that rely on clanishness, clientalism, and identity politics. Boundaries are tense throughout today's Africa. Outsiders are feared, and this encourages xenophobia. With "identity" reconfigured as a power base, the path opens to ethnic civil wars and crime.

These conditions favor the rise of authoritarian, capricious political figures. By ignoring its own social consequences, globalization intensifies, directly and indirectly, conditions that turn people away from the idea of common citizenship. Negative pluralism overwhelms governments whose institutionalization is already weak. Leaders become unwilling or unable to deploy political power for useful purposes. When there is enormous economic scarcity on the bottom of the social pyramid, pluralism can undo democracy. Mutual hostilities among groups intensify, narrow interests are promoted, and competition among political parties becomes war by other means. Old political conflicts are reinvented in new contexts. Institutions that should bind society and help it to transcend narrow affiliations become sites of intense competition and rallying points for the mobilization of parochialism. Social and cultural cleavages are reinforced just where mediation of differences is most needed. The sort of civic obligation, discipline, and forbearance required of public and private life in a democracy can't be sustained.

The central premise of positive pluralism—which is essential to democracy—is free choice. In contrast, negative pluralism is based on group loyalty and the explicit limitation of choice. Or, to put it another way, positive pluralism defines the terms and conditions of freedom and choice. Negative pluralism, however, defines terms and conditions of identity and

affiliation. In circumstances of marginality, identity becomes more important and there is less tolerance of others. When choice is limited to those who are functionally significant and identity defines the functionally superfluous, state and society will come into conflict. Negative pluralism downgrades commonalities among human beings and elevates differences, turns claims into rights, interests into principles, and maximizes cleavage politics. Difference becomes the priority and the basis for representation and accountability. The result is universal sectarianism and stalemate.

Implications

Today, most African countries are façade democracies. Most of them hold elections, even when one party dominates (often representing a dominant ethnic group), and others are prevented by various means from coming to power. Elections are not the sole gauge of democracy, but they are, of course, important, substantive milestones. As Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle point out in *Democratic Experiments in Africa*, the number of sub-Saharan countries holding competitive elections quadrupled between 1990 and 1995. The number of seats held by opposition parties rose from a paltry 10 percent in 1989 to a more robust 41 percent by 1994. Twenty-nine “founding elections” were held in thirty-eight countries between 1990 and 1994. That is, elections paved a route out of authoritarian regimes. “Not a single de jure one-party state remained in Africa” by 1994, write Bratton and van de Walle. “Governments instead adopted new constitutional rules that formally guaranteed basic political liberties, placed limits on tenure and power of chief political executives, and allowed multiple parties to exist and compete in elections. To all appearances, the African one-party state is not only politically bankrupt but, at least as a legal entity, extinct.”

Unfortunately this has turned out to be more wishful thinking than fact. In the last few years African political leaders in some countries—for example, Cameroon, Gabon, and Kenya—have turned democratic institutions into a charade. In Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, the Central African Republic, Angola, and else-

where, the state itself is a precarious institution. In Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan, bandit warlordism saps the institutions of civil society, and torture, sexual abuse, and abduction of child soldiers remain common. There has been a decline in military coups at the center, but a rash of other forms of military upheaval.

INDEED, IF my hypotheses about globalization and its consequences are true, even if democracy may be accepted in the long term and market principles embraced by some political leaders, these will be insufficient to ensure a steady growth of substantive democratic politics and civil societies. The problems posed by globalization must be attenuated. Platitudes, hortatory admonitions, and boilerplate solutions proffered by such international agencies as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund won't take Africans very far. It is fine to proclaim the need for restored self-confidence and mutual confidence, for greater transparency, and for institutional reform and human rights. But good intentions are likely to be eroded in the daily grubbing around of political and social survival.

Platitudes make it easier for protagonists and foes of globalization to confront each other in mutual incomprehension. Leaders in the industrial countries now talk about the environment, and the plight of the poor in “emerging” economies and exhibit sympathy for the effectively disenfranchised. But their chief concern is sustaining economic momentum. For them, globalization is the main road to social improvement. Their solution to the problems of globalization is more globalization. For some of globalizations's more radical opponents, however, class struggle is simply being resuscitated in modern dress. They see globalization as the same old capitalism with global appurtenances. Theirs is a lonely position, for they are left with a socialism that is all critique, rather than a socialism of solutions.

If placating gestures by leaders in industrial countries are largely just that—gestures—and if the zeal of their opponents is often accompanied by knee-jerk radicalism, then what can be done? It might be useful to establish civic responsibility as a criterion for dealing with governments—in the same way investors

look to the management of a company in evaluating their options.

Most important, however, is to push everyone to refocus. Much greater attention must be paid to how people are affected locally by distant globalization policies. Greater complexity must be introduced into policy calculations by Western or global development institutions. Policy makers need to go and see for themselves the consequences of their decisions; they need to spend time living in the circumstances they help create. They need to recognize the value of knowledge in detail, of specifics. What may work in one setting can be a disaster in another.

Even though democracy in Africa is often a façade, politics has in fact become more populist. People have become more vocal. In the most remote areas, life dances more and more to its own tunes and pays its own pipers. Still, the African experience teaches us that there are many strategies for the use and abuse of power; it doesn't just work through familiar political channels, but it also works through countless ordinary strategies of life based on everything from blood ties to healing rituals, from the role of women to that of soothsayers. Territoriality and property disputes can be linked to ancestral rights. Self-constituted domains of meaning are, increasingly, also self-constituted domains of action. Boundaries, jurisdictions, and affiliations are the raw materials of power and conflict, not to speak of proscriptions.

So if globalization is not going to stop—and it won't—what is needed is far more at-

tention paid to its vicissitudes. New theoretical and practical approaches are needed to deal with them. Communities, local and national, differ drastically. At a minimum, far greater care is needed in the preparation and organization of developmental projects, as well as a better sense of how to anticipate problems down the road. The whole concept of basic preparatory research needs to be enlarged, and the boundaries of what is regarded as relevant knowledge exponentially expanded. Most general theory rides roughshod over particularities of place and circumstance in ways that almost guarantee failure. Moreover, it becomes impossible to learn from mistakes. We need site-specific information in the social and cultural as well as the economic senses, rather than formulaic solutions.

If the African experience demonstrates in extreme form some of the problems of globalization, it also highlights the fact that solutions are yet to be found. They won't be until it is recognized that global knowledge requires local knowledge; and local knowledge requires adapting both market models and policies to situation, circumstance, and place. I am suggesting that globalization compels a second information revolution. The first was technological in every sense of the term. Now we must tell those who are remaking the world just what they are really doing. ●

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1. The World Bank's *World Development Report* for 1997 speaks convincingly of the need to reinvigorate "the state's capacity" and calls for an activist rather than a minimalist state. But how to accomplish this remains something of a mystery. See *The State in a Changing World* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 27.

2. Not so long ago many things said today of Africa were said about China, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

3. Nigeria provides one example. North-South relations remain tense. Despite a nominally democratic regime, the country remains hostage to northern military officers. Cor-

ruption remains rampant with the concentration of wealth in the Abuja area largely a rake-off from oil revenues extracted from the south. Meanwhile, Makoko, a Lagos slum, is pitched on a swamp. Most people who manage somehow to survive do so with few of life's basic necessities. It might as well be on the other end of the earth. No wonder that the Yoruba and Ibo peoples in the south of the country began talk of secession. *New York Times* (July 20, 1998).

4. See Andrew Apter, *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).