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The Threat of Western Universalism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of world unity from the time of enlightenment to the present age. It asserts that the enlightenment conception is responsible for the perversion of human nature since it elevates human reason over human emotion which has resulted into a narrow understanding of the world and the belief that science could guarantee peace. The paper debates the concepts of space and place in relation to westernization as a form of universalism. It shows how universalism is linked to space with no respect for diverse cultures according to geographical origins as the case is for localism which is rooted in place. It analyses the United States' pursuit for market unity, a strategy which is propagated but with the ill intentions of maintaining her international superiority. The market unity project is indeed, an enemy of democracy and a threat to not only cultural diversity, but also to all life on earth. In this paper I therefore suggest that, contrary to the critics, difference and the horizontal structure of the Occupy Wall Street movement is advantageous. The fact that people are organizing in protests in spite of their diverse cultures is, of course, an act of solidarity and unity. By this they demonstrate their belief that a better world is possible and that valuing cultural diversity and difference is a prerequisite for coexistence and peace. Therefore, the main focus of this paper is to defend difference and diversity against world unity or totality or sameness.

Keywords: Unity; space and place; western universalism; localism; world unity and peace; culture; enlightenment; United States

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is divided into three main parts. In the first part I will briefly discuss the idea of unity, from the time of the Enlightenment to the present age. The Enlightenment conception of unity led to a perversion of human nature that elevated human reason over human emotion, and eventually led to a narrow understanding of the world, and the belief that science could guarantee peace. Reason, it was believed, would eventually unify all knowledge into absolute truth, which could be spread everywhere on earth.

I will also talk about the concepts of *space* and *place* in relation to Westernization a form of universalism. I hope to show how universalism is connected to *space* and has no respect for different cultures, and no longer has any geographical origin, whereas localism is rooted in *place*. In place-centered worldviews context is of the utmost importance and *difference* is respected. Also, the origins are clear and connected to geographical locations.

The second part of this essay consists of a summary and analysis of the United States pursuit for market unity as a way to maintain international superiority. This was used as a means for keeping peace and containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War. However, we will see that this project of market unity is, indeed, an enemy of democracy and a threat to, not only cultural diversity, but also, all life on earth.

In the concluding part of this essay I point to encouraging signs of emerging social movements that are motivated by disdain for the status quo and the unity of the market system. I suggest, contrary to the critics, that *difference* and the horizontal structure of the Occupy Wall Street movement is advantageous. The fact that people are organizing in protest is, of course, an act of solidarity. One could even describe it as unity. The protesters are unified only inasmuch as they oppose market unity. They believe that a better world is possible, that alternatives exist, and that valuing cultural diversity and *difference* is a prerequisite for coexistence and peace.

Diversity, after all, is a fundamental feature of life, but respect for and acceptance of diversity by itself is not enough. It merely provides a basis for the negotiation of truths, which can end in dynamic hybridity where place and context are respected while being simultaneously conscious of what is going on in the space arena. Far from advocating for isolationism, the main focus of this essay is aimed at defending *difference* and *diversity* against world unity, and what Emmanuel Levinas calls *totality* or *sameness* (Morgan, 2007). Levinas believed that “Western philosophy has been totalizing” because of its preoccupation in discovering an ultimate Truth believed to unify everything (Morgan, 2007, 95). Hence, Western philosophy has devalued difference and has resulted in what Levinas refers to as “the triumph of the Same” (Morgan, 2007, 97).

2. UNIVERSALISM: A WESTERN PROJECT

The Western utopian project of the Enlightenment was based on the idea that the unification of human knowledge and the advancement of science would eventually liberate mankind and ultimately lead to a more peaceful, rational world. All social phenomena and conflicts in life, it was believed, could be rationally understood, and thereby, solved (Dietrich and Sutzl, 2006). From this linear perspective, Europe was seen as the epicenter of progress and civilization.

Human reason became a deity to be worshiped, and in many ways, it took the place of Christianity as the central way of interpreting reality. Human emotion, on the other hand, was relegated as the lower nature and devalued as irrational being associated with nature and femininity. The Enlightenment quest of attaining universal truth is the foundation of modernity, which is “characterized by Newtonian physics, Cartesian reductionism, the nation state of Thomas Hobbes, and the capitalist world system” (Dietrich and Sutzl, 2006, 283).

Wolfgang Sachs, makes a fascinating distinction between *space* and *place* in order to facilitate our understanding of how both universalism and localism function in the world. Because universalism has “shed all vestiges of its particular origin, place and context, it belongs nowhere and can therefore penetrate everywhere” (Sachs, 2006, 219). Hence, modern universalism a product of the Enlightenment is a hegemonic project that makes absolute truth claims for all cultures of the world and measures civilization in relation to its own narrow conception of reality.

Localism, however, is rooted in *place*. In other words, it is connected to cultures consisting of “particular peoples, memories and cosmologies.” Human experience is

connected to specific geographical places. Relationships, too, are intimately related to *place*. When speaking of *place*, the context is respected. Furthermore, it is important to point out that “place is not just the intersection of two lines on a map, but a concentration of meaningful human activity which gives it a distinct quality, a distinct aura” (Sachs, 2006, 221).

Space-centered universal values have been reinvented and reformulated in various ways throughout history. The conquistadores and European settlers, for example, sought to spread Christianity often violently throughout the Americas. The Belgian King Leopold II claimed that his conquest of Africa was intended to civilize the savages, and the British Empire defined its imperialist ambitions as the *White Man’s Burden*, which claimed a responsibility of bringing Western civilization to so-called backward cultures and peoples (Dietrich and Sutzl, 2006). All of this culminated in the modern concept of development, which, at its core, aims to spread the capitalist economic system characterized by an insatiable appetite for mass production and industrialization. The capitalist system, which is a space-centered project, threatens all subsistent societies with “machine-driven, large-scale and standardized processes” (Dietrich and Sutzl, 2006, 287).

The impact of development on cultural and linguistic diversity has been devastating. “Along with languages, entire conceptions of what it means to be human have evaporated during the development decades since 1950. And yet, the death of languages is only the most dramatic signal of the worldwide evaporation of cultures” (Sachs, 2006, 209). Sachs refers to this destruction of diversity as the “homogenization of the world” (Sachs, 2006, 210). “The history of the West is the history of the annihilation of countries and the extermination of whole peoples and cultures” (Duchrow and Hinkelammert, 2004, 71).

The development period is marked by the peak of the linear belief that all cultures of the world are on the same historical path, headed in the same direction. This ideology is expressed in the UN Charter (Sachs, 2006). Tragically, in order to unify mankind by means of development, people had to be “disembedded from their stories of the past, disconnected from the context of their places, and detached from the bonds of their communities” (Sachs, 2006, 211).

3. THE UNITED STATES AND MARKET UNITY

Following World War II, the United States found itself as the major victor of the war (along with the Soviet Union) and commenced to rebuild the world in its own image. Globalization and unity of the market was viewed, by those in power in the U.S. government, as the best and only way to maintain the superiority of the U.S. and achieve peace in the world. When the Cold War began the U.S. government quickly created the *either/or* narrative of good capitalist versus evil communist. This served Washington’s hegemonic aspirations perfectly. It gave the U.S. a pretext for invading, occupying, and meddling in the affairs of other countries around the world, as well as dividing the globe into allies and enemies. Of course, the allies were always conveniently defined by Washington as those states that adhered to capitalist market principles. Since the end of World War II the driving force behind Westernization and the so-called *civilizing process* has undeniably been the U.S.

A new form of imperialism was born with its main objective being the pursuit of global market unity (Sachs, 2006). The traditional way of exercising domination over others was recast and disguised in the deceptive altruistic albeit ethnocentric language of development. Truman stated in his inaugural address that “the United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques.” (Truman, 1949).

And so it was narrowly assumed that the United States was the most advanced civilization, possessing the one truth, with a moral responsibility of helping the rest of the world to industrialize, particularly those cultures outside of the capitalist system with different ways of being and relating to the world. *Difference* continues to be seen as an obstacle to development and world economic unity. It has been noted that “the neo-liberal ideology of the absolute market is presented as the only option, and all movements that resists it and its attendant injustices must therefore be opposed” (Duchrow and Hinkelammert).

Sachs points out that this project for economic unity has actually become an oppressive force to governments all over the world (Sachs, 2006). It is precisely this type of economic competition that prevents countries from tackling more pressing problems, such as, looming environmental catastrophes and pollution caused by capitalist production.

Duchrow and Hinkelammert give a dire assessment of the effects of market unity:

The globalization of the market means that the nation-state has less and less power to intervene in economic policy when social considerations dictate. Instead capital employs every conceivable means to drive profits ever higher, without any consideration for people and the environment, and in this way evades the constitutional obligation to sustain life (Duchrow and Hinkelammert, 2004, 91).

“Not to lose ground in the economic arena has become an obsession which dominates politics down to the local level” (Sachs, 2006, 215). The world market has become, as Sachs calls it, a despotic dictator that dominates both rich and poor countries (Sachs, 2006, 215). Thus, the quest for unifying all cultures into one Western overarching capitalist system has become a threat to everyone everywhere, even to those who exercise power within the capitalist system.

The conquest of foreign markets trumped the conquest of foreign territories (Sachs, 2006). Yet, the impact has been just as brutal and devastating to the conquered local populations. As the capitalist system forces different cultures to conform to Western consumerism in its quest for market unity, it marches towards an impending abyss, facing the annihilation of all life on earth with the collapse of the ecosystem. Outrageously, the original sin, namely global unity, is now being touted as the only solution to the advancing threat to the environment. Again, the *unity discourse* has been recast, not to spread Western civilization, but to save it (Sachs, 2006). The market has connected the world in such a way that individual actions in one place may harm others living in a different place. We are now living in a time where people are linked together by “their shared dependence on biophysical life-support systems” (Sachs, 2006). Therefore, saving the planet from environmental global destruction has increasingly become a national security objective for many countries. Sachs writes, “Can you imagine a more powerful motive for forcing the world into line than that of saving the planet?” (Sachs, 2006).

Even before the attacks of September 11th, the United States was already obsessed with national security. Westernizing other cultures and those deemed as different is one of the strategies employed by Washington to mitigate hostility toward the United States and the capitalist system that it is built upon. Andrew J. Bacevich argues that after World War II Washington believed that global responsibility fell upon the United States and “the United States alone to lead, save, liberate, and ultimately transform the world” (Bacevich, 2010, 12).

The U.S. global war on terror is being used (like the Cold War) to justify its neoliberal development policies and interference in other states’ politics. This has led the U.S. government to continue and even expand its support for antidemocratic policies in other countries. The unity of the global market has always been the actual objective of the U.S. government and its capitalist partners. Using democratic language has merely served to

further U.S. imperialist ambitions of global market unity, not advance democracy. Universal democracy has never been the real goal of U.S. foreign policy because democracy entails allowing people to choose their own destinies and respects the autonomy of different cultures.

As other countries around the world industrialize and grow economically, particularly Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), the U.S. and other Western economies feel immense pressure to compete economically. Despite the remarkable economic growth of China, for example, it is still marked by many internal problems. “Though China may have one of the world’s fastest-growing economies it has also become one of its most unequal societies” (Harvey, 2005, 142).

Democratic and labor rights are extremely weak in China, and in many cases simply nonexistent. The lack of workplace regulations has enabled businesses (including Western corporations) to make obscene profits at workers’ expense. David Harvey, writing about a form of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics, notes that “wage levels in China are extremely low, and conditions of labour are sufficiently unregulated, despotic, and exploitative...” (Harvey, 2005, 148).

Yet, China has created an attractive business climate for international corporations. And since China is not a democracy it is able to make economic decisions almost by decree rather than debating issues for months and ending in a deadlock with nothing accomplished, as it happens in the U.S. In short, capitalism in China is proving to be more efficient and profitable an economic model to be emulated. The American pursuit of reshaping the world in its image specifically by unifying the market is now threatening to eliminate democratic and workers’ rights (achieved through class struggle) still remaining in the U.S. “The success of Chinese communist-run capitalism is an ominous sign that the marriage between capitalism and democracy is approaching a divorce” (Zizek, 2011).

The perceived limitation of democracy in contributing to economic growth has surely been noticed by the U.S. government and the corporate elites who wield power over it. As a consequence, politicians in the U.S. are attempting to strip away workers’ rights and all regulations that may hinder the profits of giant corporations. Charles and David Koch the fourth richest Americans have “promoted their free market ideology and business interests through aggressive lobbying in Washington DC, and financial support of political candidates” (Abeshouse, 2011). Furthermore, the Koch brothers are infamous for their support and funding of the Tea Party and rightwing organizations that oppose government at almost every level, except for protecting the profits of the super-rich. They see “virtually all regulation as interference with the free market” (Abeshouse, 2011).

The aim of the West, and particularly the U.S., is to unify all countries under a capitalist economic model; but now, as we are witnessing in the current economic crisis, all countries within the Western capitalist tent are sharing in the pain and collapse of the capitalist system. A universal solution is susceptible to error and can potentially lead to universal suffering. This is precisely the danger of space-centered universalism. It puts all of its eggs into one basket and gambles on the survival of life on earth.

It may be noteworthy to mention that the economic crisis of 2008 did not have as much of an effect on Muslim countries with Islamic financial institutions. Indonesia, for example, did not suffer economically like Western countries. “Islamic law prohibits the payment and collection of interest.

Transactions must be backed by real assets, and because risk is shared between the bank and the depositor, there is added incentive for the institutions to ensure deals are sound” (Williamson, 2009). Hence *difference* was the redeeming factor. This is just one of many examples of the failure of universalism as a dominant space-centered ideology.

4. CONCLUSION

The impact of space-centered universalism, which was a product of the Enlightenment, has been devastating to cultures on every continent. The loss of indigenous wisdom, creativity, and different ways of relating to the world, have created a dangerous unity of one absolute truth, namely, the unity of global capitalism and the belief that Western civilization is the best and only way to organize the world. Moreover, a multitude of languages that enable unique varieties of human expression have been extinguished, never to be regained. As other economies rise to rival the U.S., the universal virus of global capitalism the destroyer of cultures forces those in power in the U.S. to deregulate industries and strip away democratic rights in order to keep up with its competitors in a race to the bottom.

Despite this grim description of the hegemonic pursuit for unity, we may be comforted by the recent emergence of social movements around the world that are discontent with the status quo. From the Arab Spring to the Los Indignados in Spain, and finally, to the Occupy Wall Street movement in the U.S., people are demanding alternatives to the market-driven capitalist system that has eradicated diversity, increased the income gap between the rich and poor, and is devastating the ecosystem.

The Occupy Wall Street Movement has been criticized for its lack of unity, leadership, and ability to clearly articulate specific demands. These critics, however, fail to understand that *difference* is indeed strength. In other words, the protesters are being criticized for not being prescriptive, not having a universal solution already prepared. The discontent that is manifested in these social movements is the result of the failure of Western universalism. People are not demanding just one way for all peoples and cultures of the world, they are demanding different ways to globalization and market-driven capitalism.

I am not suggesting that the protesters should not eventually make specific demands. On the contrary, the protesters are already unified insofar as they are demanding alternatives to universalism and the status quo. "Their basic message is: the taboo is broken; we do not live in the best possible world; we are allowed, obliged even, to think about alternatives" (Zizek, 2011).

The Occupy Wall Street movement has already had an impact on the political discourse in Washington D.C. Those politicians who initially criticized the Occupy Wall Street movement are now attempting to placate and hijack it for their own political advantage. "In the same way we get coffee without caffeine, beer without alcohol, ice-cream without fat, those in power will try to make the protests into a harmless moralistic gesture" (Zizek, 2011).

The horizontal structure of the movement allows it to be leaderless and creates an egalitarian environment. This, I believe, is another important strength of the movement. Thus, the arrest or killing of a beloved charismatic leader (i.e., Martin Luther King, Jr.) will not pacify the movement. It also leaves those in power, who wish to crush the movement, confused about how to stop it.

I will conclude with this quote by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek regarding the Occupy Wall Street protesters:

They are dismissed as dreamers, but the true dreamers are those who think things can go on indefinitely the way they are, just with some cosmetic changes. They are not dreamers; they are the awakening from a dream that is turning into a nightmare. They are not destroying anything, but reacting to how the system is gradually destroying itself. We all know the classic scene from cartoons: the cat reaches a precipice but goes on walking; it starts to fall only when it looks down and notices the abyss. The protesters are just reminding those in power to look down (Zizek, 2011).

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