

LINING UP FOR THE ANTI-GLOBALIZATION CONGA — PART 1

BY

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Everybody has a position on globalization. For or against, it has gained momentum and popular currency due to an explosive “new economy”-driven stock market run-up, several best-selling books, and prime time “in-your-living-room” street demonstrations that have shut down conferences and put the World Trade Organization on the run. The protest is essential, and not merely as a check on the hubris of the power elite. But expansion is a foundation of human economic experience and is, without the complete collapse of two millennia of civilizational development, inevitable. That makes anti-globalization as typified by Seattle and that expected in Quebec City exceptionally unconstructive. Economics and history conspire against it. In this first of a series of papers considering (anti-)globalization, we’ll explore the historic context of economic and political globalization.

The anti-globalization conga is reaching fever pitch while the barricades are being erected around Quebec’s Old City. Yet apart from creating short-lived news fodder, being a police exercise, and resolving some frustrations, the planned demonstration will likely produce few tangible results. Such an insignificant effect on the unravelling of the world’s economic future will they have, that were the efforts not so sincere they would be laughable. Even “victories” such as over the proposed MAI will, one must suspect, be temporary.

Still, the tempo accelerates—as it should, and must. Despite the frenzied futility of public anti-globalization protest, discussions about how we are addressing our integrated future must continue with all stakeholders included. Moreover, the discussion needs the tension that comes from conflict and dissent. Without it, the limp second-rate ideas of the agenda-makers will succeed unquestioned. Unfortunately, the physical and emotional catharsis from the act of protest appears to have eclipsed its intellectual and practical imperatives.

At least since Classical Antiquity can one trace a pattern of formal and informal political expansion for economic growth. It follows that the logical extreme of such expansion is global integration or dominion. And, exploitation is an inevitable result of the development. The Western experience has been one of maximum economic domination over the fullest extent of the *known* world. That is a constant; technology and geographic breadth are the variables.

The Greek world of Classical Antiquity was restricted to the area around the Aegean Sea. Although Alexander did conquer a much broader swath of territory, even his world extended only as far as one dared to walk, ride an elephant, or sail. Regardless, territorial capture, pillage, and economic development grew at the relatively slow prevailing pace of conquest. It is in this period, though, that we first see the beginnings of economic exploitation. Athens in particular, because it was the center of a true empire, but Sparta as well demanded of the people in outlying areas tribute and other economic benefits for the centre. The wealthy core economies succeeded, their armies and war fleets supported by riches taken from the weaker and less sophisticated periphery.

After the Punic Wars, in the context of the same transportation and communication technologies, the Romans commanded a Mediterranean empire that extended from Britannia in the west to Persia in the east and through North Africa. The empire was sustained by expansion and the plunder of outlying territories for the benefit of Rome. Ultimately Rome fell in the west when its borders were fixed and the provinces alone could not support the empire—although mismanagement, corruption, and social decay didn’t help. Nevertheless, to the fullest extents of its world—the empire and those with whom it traded—the Roman Empire was *globalized*. And, it’s worth remembering, life was especially harsh for those not among the ruling classes.

This pattern of expansion and domination repeats itself in ever-more efficient and geographically wider iterations through the centuries. But it was the great Age of Exploration and the Industrial Revolution that materially changed both the geographic breadth and the economic nature of “globalization.” The result of these two fundamental changes to the socio-economic paradigm was an economic impact zone (i.e., locus of validly potential markets and hinterlands) that exceeded the immediate capability of Western commerce to address. The key shifts were from an intra-continental to an inter-continental focus, and from state to privately-sponsored economic imperialism under mercantilists. Companies of traders and, later, manufacturing corporations gained extensive new economic power undertaking their own voyages of development and domination in all corners of the globe.

In the 19th and, more especially, the 20th centuries wide-ranging technological advances increased the ability to economically globalize at a rapid pace. Developments in transportation and communication especially made the world a much smaller place for efficient producers, traders, and marketers. Ultimately, the 1990s ascendancy of the World Wide Web as a commercial communications medium all but erased the frontiers of international commerce. The commercial goliaths appeared to have globalized their affairs—consumerization, exploitation, and anti-democracy in tow—practically overnight.

This notion that globalization is a recent scourge is obviously wrong. In fact, the technology for communicating and conducting commercial affairs had finally caught up. Now—quickly—Western commerce could address the global markets first made viable by transportation technology’s greater advances during the previous 500 years. Without the communications technology to match transportation technology, earlier efforts at globalizing were inhibited. Today, communication technology leads transportation technology; not surprisingly, logistics is the present obstacle to truly global-market commerce. So, actually, commercial globalization of the kind we’re experiencing has been ready and waiting for about 200 years.

It’s fair to say that the Western world has *always* globalized, economically and politically, to the fullest extent permitted by prevailing technology. Moreover, to advance their own economic needs and desires, the strong—nations, states, businesses—have always abused the weak. Rich eating poor is a fundamental aspect of human nature.

Historic context allows us to surmise that today’s loud and public anti-globalization protest conga is strategically flawed, tactically bankrupt, and destined for failure. The world will continue to globalize as it always has. The fight to stop or reverse that inertia is futile. What has yet to be written, however, is the direction that this next stage of globalization will take. While an economically globalized world is practically a foregone conclusion, its development is on a (decaying, by some accounts) trajectory that can yet be recalibrated to accommodate structures and conduct that make sense for more than the prevailing economic power structure.

Opposition to these forces of globalization is neither new nor novel. Deeper study would probably uncover a pattern of protest paralleling the waves of commercial imperialism described earlier. On the other hand, assigning a pejorative name to this pervasive condition of the human spirit *is* new. Public protest itself has been around at least as long as the period we covered, with a limited and conditional record of success. Regardless, to be effective, public protest must be more than loud; it has to be concentrated, broad-based, and—often—violent. In the extreme are the examples of the Reformation, or the French and American Revolutions. Less extreme and more modern, but still fulfilling those criteria, are certain social protests of the 20th century, notably Kent State. Half measures are strategically ineffectual in this game.

An obvious, although perhaps premature, conclusion is that for the anti-globalization movement to be of practical value to more than the protestors themselves, its method needs to be rethought. If we presume that those opposed to economic and other forms of global integration—vocal or not—desire to make the future better, then we have to recommend a new strategy that is consistent both with the movement’s objectives and historic forces.

Take to the streets if you want. I have more productive things to do with my time.

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