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Commentary

Replies to Jim Chen, “Globalization and Its Losers”

Democracy Should Not Have Losers

*Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn**

The application of Darwin’s scientific theory to human society has such a notorious history of justifying brutish economic exploitation and gross social inequalities that its newest incarnation should be cause for alarm. While University of Minnesota legal scholar Jim Chen gives a brief nod to social Darwinism’s less than inspiring former life, he goes on to formulate his own version as a lens through which he asks us to view current-day economic globalization. Beyond just a helpful interpretative framework, Chen thinks, Darwin’s discovery of natural selection was—in words he borrows from another scholar—“the best idea anyone has ever had.”¹ Chen blusters: “If there is a concept that, in a single intellectual stroke, can unite human knowledge even as it cures the gravest crisis facing humanity, it is evolution.” Charles Darwin’s undeniable contribution to our understanding of biology aside, Chen’s application of Darwinism to globalization should be seriously questioned. To transpose a theory intended specifically to explain variation in nature to the

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1. Daniel C. Dennett, quoted by Chen, at 217.

understanding of current economic trends and then to employ such a theory to buttress a particular set of policy proposals is, I believe, sheer folly. The implications of this thinking for American democracy—to say nothing of social justice throughout the world—are disastrous.

Just as late-nineteenth-century American social Darwinism was pressed into service to help the ascendant “robber barons” justify their unfair gains, in Chen’s work the concept serves to cast globalization as an unstoppable force whose progress is predestined. In dubbing globalization “the American steamroller,” which decimates languages, traditions, and the environment at whim, Chen seems to have his admired, personified globalization singing the James Taylor lines: “I’m a steam roller baby/ I’m gonna roll all over you.”² While globalization might have seduced Chen to the point of willing prostration before its advances, many of the rest of us are not so eager for the kind of self-immolation he takes for granted as the cost of progress. Those who question globalization as unmitigated progress, of course, are simply dismissed by Chen as “losers”—like the appendix, the dinosaur, the dodo, and the family farm, critics are destined for extinction according to the inexorable laws of evolution.

Chen thinks that globalization as currently practiced will inevitably lead to the homogenization of culture across the globe, the end of a whole host of economic practices and livelihoods, environmental depredations, and the eclipse of thousands of languages. While the loss of languages and threats to the ecology disturb him enough that he can envision some exceptions in these areas to the general rule of unbridled trade, he makes it clear that no consideration should be given to issues of culture or jobs. In pretentious language, Chen cites his bible (one cannot help but imagine Darwin rolling in his grave):

Darwin’s dangerous idea counsels enormous reverence for genes (especially those from nonhuman sources) . . . and little to no regard for jobs. Behold then the unholy trinity of international trade law, the three remaining lines of argument by which trade liberalization can be derailed. Now abide labor, culture, and ecology, these three. And the least of these is labor.

Even if one agrees with Chen, as many of us do, that if the choice comes down to job in the short run or environmental protection, the urgency of environmental deterioration demands that protection come first, the offhand way in which he dis-

2. James Taylor, “Steamroller,” Copyright 1970, Country Road Music, Inc./Blackwood Music, Inc.

misses concerns for jobs and culture betrays genuine lack of heart.

Chen's argument is not without its merits. He is at his most persuasive when he mounts a passionate defense of biodiversity, and here is where his use of Darwin is legitimate and appropriate. And his warnings about arguments for trade regulation in which economic self-interest is masked by phony environmental concern are well-taken. The idea that environmental and economic issues need to be disentangled, given the grave and immediate environmental crisis we face, rings true. He rightly stresses the need for an immediate turnaround in the world ecology. Quoting environmentalist declarations of our obligations to engage only in practices that can be sustained over time and ensure the safe transmission of the natural world to subsequent generations, Chen waxes eloquent. Even his urge not to over-romanticize all agricultural interests as virtuous agrarianism, in tune with nature, can only be seen as valid, considering the well-known agribusiness revolution of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries spelled out some time ago by environmentalist-farmer Wendell Berry.³

That said, Chen's cavalier approach toward all he sees as "losers"—as if globalization was some kind of cosmic game—seems to dismiss nearly all farming, except perhaps the largest conglomerates (as long as they engage in environmentally sound practices), as an endangered species that should just be allowed to die. He grants that small farms are crucial repositories of precious "ethnobiological knowledge" and serve a vital role in protecting "rare animal breeds and heirloom seeds," but would prefer they be replaced by "publicly owned experiment stations." This is just one example of the limits of Chen's vision when it comes to human social life. It may well be true, as he says, that smaller units agricultural production are more guilty of poor environmental practices than larger ones, but this is an argument for more universal regulation, not for forcible extinction. Whether talking of the family farm, or worries expressed in Canada and Western Europe about the incursions of American media, Chen reduces all criticism of world corporate dominance to economic self-interest, the special pleading or "whine" of those whose backward-looking ways are simply being eclipsed. His own words strike this note best: "Like all other organic beings, human institutions must adapt or die."

3. WENDELL BERRY, *THE UNSETTLING OF AMERICA: CULTURE AND AGRICULTURE* (1977).

Despite Chen's clear intelligence, his glorification of globalization is wholesale and seemingly unquestioned. He sees it, in its current form, as the one true way. To him, it is the answer to all social and natural questions facing us in the twenty-first century. Worldwide interest in trade will keep worldwide peace. The Internet, by making the flow of information so cheap and accessible, has brought unprecedented democratization. The global economy has enhanced the creation and dissemination of "memes," which he sees as the units of culture and equates with democracy. Globalization is the key to the magic kingdom, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the fountain of youth, nirvana: it increases worldwide wealth.

There are several fatal flaws to this thinking. Rather than worldwide peace, what we are witnessing throughout the world at present is a ferocious and terrifying ethnic and social balkanization. Military conflict, rather than Chen's peace dividend, "*pax mercatoria*," is a fact of daily life in vast quadrants of the world. The Internet, while it has indeed cheapened information exchange for many, has created a host of new problems concerning such issues as copyright, facticity and illegitimate authority, furtherance of the media's longstanding cheapening of the cultural environment, and exactly the mistaking of information exchange for knowledge and for democracy that Chen shares. Whether aggregate world-wide wealth has indeed increased, drastic inequities of wealth and attendant social divisions, together with tremendous economic instability, is a fact of globalization to date.

The problem of Chen's perspective derives in large part from his starved conceptions of democracy and culture. To him, culture is nothing more than a random conglomeration of "memes," which compete like natural species for existence. Those that win out deserve to; those that do not are destined losers. As for democracy, to Chen it is the free flow of "memes." Without any conception of a world beyond the market—the political or civic or cultural world in which ideas, beliefs, traditions, even innovations have meaning beyond their salability—Chen is trapped into market-definitions of everything, including democracy. Certainly with Chen's diminished notion of culture as a collection of commodities vying for consumption, one could possibly agree that restricting free trade to protect one set of commodities over another is a mistake. Chen has no conception of the deep importance of culture to human life. Culture is more than a practice here or there, some of which might clearly cry out for destruction in their own right. It is the whole set of ideas

and practices that help create the basic sense of social loyalty necessary for anything like a human society to persist.

Chen's values are those of the global marketers he reveres. He dismisses any urge to protect cherished customs or practices and nearly all attempts to articulate areas for regulating trade as misguided economic self-interest. Yet he fails to see that globalization itself is—despite the worthy pioneering, hard work, and adventurousness that is also a part of participation on the personal level—a massive movement of economic self-interest. And though its proportions have multiplied, the movement itself is not even all that new. Its new name has merely been shorn—for the purposes of marketability no doubt—of the negative connotations of earlier ones: multinational corporations. Its main weapon is capital mobility. Searing and compelling criticisms of these business practices, put forth nearly a generation ago, have gone all but ignored despite their basis in reality. Barry Bluestone and Harrison's *The Deindustrialization of America* (1982) and Richard J. Barnet and Ronald E. Muller's *Global Reach: The Power of the Multinational Corporations* (1974), for examples, contributed cogent and far-reaching analyses of the dangers of uncontrolled business expansion and the now well-known devastation of communities resulting from the unchecked power huge corporations enjoy. The only difference between earlier capital mobility and current practice is that Americans (and now other world elites) have taken their show on the road. Barnet and Muller proposed that corporations be held to a code of behavior that would not only ensure the sustainability and transmission of the natural world that Chen desires but ensure the sustainability and transmission of communities and nations—including the democratic U.S.—and the sustainability of human beings themselves, who still require jobs to subsist.

The voice of these critics of unrestrained corporate dominance still ring more true than anything in Chen's crass attempt to apply Darwinism to social life. And they certainly sound more balanced and humane. One does not have to be out to destroy the free market to believe that the choices we make as we try to sustain the economy need to be more carefully considered than a mere shrugging, smiling acceptance of the law of survival of the fittest. The first step in that consideration must be profound deliberation of what properly belongs in the market—and what does not.